

Maggie Pinhorn
Edited LCVA interview
Interviewer: Zoe Kinross

"Masses of Art by Masses of People"

Portrait of Maggie Pinhorn
Born 1943 London (UK)
Lives and works in London
Creator of Photomonth
Community Video Activist

Growing up. School.

I was born in London during the Blitz. My mother always told me it was during an air raid. I think it was in north London, Hendon, somewhere around there. And so the early part of my life was in London but in West London. And then we moved out to the countryside and I lived in a very tiny cottage on a farm, which was great because I could run wild and get as muddy as I liked, and that was fantastic. Then we moved to a town when I was 11 and I was sent to a girl's school. In those days you had to pass the 11 plus to go to a good school, all that kind of thing, it was a highly academic school and I was completely miserable.

Going to Art School

But then I managed to escape back to London just before I was 18 years old and go to art school and that really was the making of me.

Recently I was watching a film about Keith Richards, one of The Stones, he went to art school, and I feel very akin to people like him. He was going on about when he went to art school, he said there were a lot of bad artists but some very good musicians. And I would say that's absolutely right.

I compare notes with other people who finally found themselves at art school, and felt aah! I am not a misfit, after all there are plenty of people like me, who feel like I do, and you belong somewhere with all these strange and different and wonderful people from different parts of the world. And it's a brilliant education, there's no question about it because in your foundation year you learn all different aspects of art, and then you choose your subject. I went to the Central School of Art & Design which is now Central Saint Martins and I started off painting, but I ended up doing theatre design which I completely loved and I did that because I wanted to work in film.

Youth Culture & Soft Power

Out of that era came lots of remarkable fashion, music, design ideas that actually ploughed the way forward to liberating the whole youth culture generally and young people being able to express themselves, and say what they thought and felt. That was the politics. The politics of culture and culture is a soft power. So you know it has that whole idea of moving forward. It's something that I'm very interested in.

Getting work as a production designer

The wonderful thing about film is that it brings you everything from everywhere in the world. I can remember one day playing truant going round to a friend's house and watching a television programme. And it was about being a designer in film production design and I thought to myself, yes that's the sort of thing I want to do, I want to work in films and make the sets and do all that - yes! So I held that with me. At the time there wasn't a great thing about Film Schools where you could go, and indeed when I stopped being at Central I went to the Royal College to go on a film course, but I couldn't really afford it because I'd have to spend another couple of years not really earning anything. And I'd worked my way through college completely, I'd always had a job in the evenings, in cafes or restaurants or somewhere like that, because you also got fed, which was the great plus of working somewhere like that, and I thought I must get a job.

Changing my look

At the time I had very long blonde hair. And so I decided that the best thing I could do was to cut it off because I thought that was not helping me at the time. It was too Marianne Faithfull, you know, that kind of look. So I just went and had a real Vidal Sassoon cut, very short, lopsided and everything. And it was amazing actually, the difference in attitude that people had to you.

Meeting Ken Adam

I was very lucky because I went to see a guy called Ken Adam who was the production designer on the Bond films and he really liked my work. He was a really nice guy and he said yes, yes, you have very good idea of colour so you can work with me. He was a very black and white designer and did these huge great sketches all black and white. And so it was my job to build the model from the drawing and introduce colour into that.

The only woman on the crew

I got the job. But I soon discovered that I was the only girl, it was completely frightening because there were no girls in any other art department in the entire of Pinewood studios. Also I got paid the lowest, I got paid union minimum. I found that out as well. And I thought that was fairly outrageous because there was another guy who was also younger than me, who's sitting there draughting away on drawing the sets and he was paid more than me. I just thought this wasn't good enough and so I asked around, how do I get my wages up? They said you just have to ask for them.

So on the next film I asked, I said I want this amount and it worked. So you know you just have to find out. But it sowed a very strong feeling in me to see how women weren't really having the opportunity to do this sort of work, and also weren't getting paid equally. And those are things that have stayed with me for the rest of my life and I still fight for them.

Becoming a film director

There was a great boom in the film industry when I began. It was very good but then a recession came and it began to get difficult to get work. I'd had a fantastic run working on all sorts of different films and it was really great, but I could see that this was not going to continue.

I thought that it would be really interesting to begin to make my own films. One of the

things I'd found frustrating in the feature film industry was the departmentalisation of work.

I was in art department but

I was very interested in editing and being in the cutting room and putting the film together.

I made friends with editors and I would go and sit in the cutting room. But I was told you can't, you're Art Department, you can't work in editing. I thought why can't I?

And again what I discovered, when I thought I would do this, was just how male dominated it actually was. That was also quite worrying, I felt like I was always the odd person out.

So there I am being an independent filmmaker now, and making a film with Steven Dwoskin called Dynamo, which we made in a strip club in Soho and you know all sorts of things like that. And also getting into discussions with other people who were wanting to make independent film, and at the same time sort of thinking/feeling my way towards what it was I was going to be doing.

Tunde's Film (1973) : How it began

I was asked by a guy who was working here in East London. He'd heard about me as an independent filmmaker via a long route round. When you asked me earlier if my family had any connection with the East End, the answer is yes. Because my father always worked in Stepney and so people knew about him. So this detached youth worker had heard about him and put the two together and asked me if I might be interested in perhaps making a film with a group of young people who said that's what they wanted to do.

Now what he didn't tell me was that this was a group of young people who were chronic habitual truants. And it was quite an interesting group, because they were sort of mixed race, Black and White, and also Irish, you know, a real East End mix. And we had this whole sort of discussion about what it was that they wanted to make a film about. What was interesting to me, and something I really liked, was they wanted to make a narrative film, not a documentary. For me that was hooray!, because I like narrative film. I like film where your imagination can roam and go to places, where you can create images and ideas that hopefully some people have never seen before. It's just really to use one's imagination. So they want to write a story, obviously this story is based in their own real life, not surprisingly. But, anyway, it had a degree of violence in it and a lot of reality in it about things that they were up against in their lives. And I felt it was good because it was true.

Tunde's Film: Community Production

So we managed to raise some funds from the Rowntree Trust, who were very interested in the idea of supporting people working in the community. They'd supported another filmmaker making a film about a playground up in Islington somewhere, and he came down to see me and talked to me about what I wanted to do, and then the Rowntree agreed to give us some money.

A lot of people, when they make films with a community group they think the group have got to do everything. I, as an artist didn't view it that way at all. I felt that they had this idea, that they had wanted to make a film, and that they therefore deserved to make it in the best possible way they could. So we engaged a cameraman and a sound engineer and lighting guy, in other words we were also producers and had good technicians.

Tunde Ikoli wrote the script, and I then wrote it up again as a film script with a basically a synopsis of each scene because you weren't going to be able to write dialogue because people weren't going to learn lines, they were going to be given a situation and talk, you know improvise, like Mike Leigh does, that kind of feeling. So we did a lot of preparatory work like that going through stuff, and also not everybody in the group could read, so it

was really important that we said everything out loud and that everybody felt part of it. So that was an important part of the process.

There's a well-known scene in 'Tunde's Film' in a cafe and they are all talking about their future and about getting a job and doing things like that. Now this was a scene where I had to concentrate very very carefully because I had to remember what everybody had been saying so that I could do some extra shots afterwards and move the camera around a bit, and this scene just took off. Absolutely brilliant. And then as I said I had to remember exactly what had happened, so I said OK Mickey you were sitting there and you were doing this and now I want to shoot this again. Can you just do that bit, and can we just shoot Errol again, because there's a wonderful bit where he goes "I can't get no quali-fuck-cations" and I just thought ahh thats brilliant and this is a really nice way of... I was just sort of in this café with them, with the cameraman and the sound, getting this whole scene together, then when we put it together we just let it run because it's just a wonderful scene. And it's so true, even now, this whole idea about how you get a job where will you get it. And all of that.

We chose to shoot the whole thing during a week in April and there was a really beautiful grey light that was absolutely consistent. We were very lucky in that week. We wanted that feeling and that whole look. We discussed everything like that, about how it would look, what the atmosphere would be. All of those things were very important and we researched all the locations, the whole film was shot in about four streets around Cable Street and Cannon Street, the geography of it was like that. And we took a whole set of photographs of all the places, we went together to work this out, about where the shots would take place, where certain scenes would take place. This all came from my own experience and all of that was put into the film, and we worked at the highest level we possibly could. We even had Call Sheets. I made the call 10:00 a.m. each day but nobody turned up before 12.00! So the technicians and I had a very long breakfast most mornings. Anyway once we made it, then everybody came up to the cutting rooms in Soho to watch and see how it was being put together and talk and argue about the title of it. And then it was, OK, so once we've made this what we're going to do next?.....

The Basement Project

When I began working in the East End with this group of young people we founded a project called The Basement Film Project which became the Basement Community Arts Project. At that time I had no knowledge of anybody else working in film with any other community project, so I had really no point of reference to anyone else. But of course there were plenty of independent filmmakers going out and making all sorts of films in all sorts of ways, but because I was actually working with this group and getting them to help direct the film, and edit the film, be part of the film, definitely all the way it was very much their film, with me yes in charge of making sure it happened, but they had ownership of it. And I would like to digress and say that I know these people to this day. And if ever we meet up, particularly around a film showing, they behave as badly as they ever did which is great fun.

East End Channel One

Whilst we were working on this whole film project we were approached by the BBC to make an Open Door programme. This was a brand new thing that had been started up by a guy called Rowan Ayers, who'd been running a program called Late Night LineUp and he decided that he was going to run a Community Programmes unit because he'd been doing his research and finding out about independent filmmakers and people like me who were

working in communities making stuff, and that was obviously quite interesting. And so they approached us and said "would you like to make a film?" And so there we all were, I was saying to the guys that we'd made Tunde's Film and that we'd done other things, and so... we'll make a television programme, no problem at all.

The programme that we made for the Community Programmes unit was called East End Channel One, because we thought what shall we call it? Right we'll have our own... we'll make our own TV channel. And as a result they made all sorts of wonderful things but we did it. We had to go to the BBC and we did some pre-filming of various things, but nearly everything was done in the studio. We sort of rehearsed up bits and pieces, and that night at... I don't know what time it went out, quite late. Yes, it went out about 11 o'clock at night this programme. Obviously got to tuck it away you know! And we started it and we had our own weather report which was hilarious. We had reviews, we got Clive James to come in and he reviewed Tunde's Film, and told people to go and see it, he was quite happy to do that. We had all sorts of people in who were hanging around the studios. This programme was planned for half an hour and an hour later it was still going out because people who were in the Television Centre at the time heard this programme was going on and started popping into the studio and we were having a discussion, and they came and joined in. I'm sitting in the control room, and they're going 'is it OK if Marty Feldman comes in?' or whatever people come in, and I said yeah, yeah. So you had all these people coming in saying hello to these guys. And what was so lovely about that was, because if you can imagine being young and black in that period of time and working class and having this opportunity and being on the telly, I mean, and it not being a comedy programme about you or anything else like that. That was a revelation, and it was always my mission that if OK, fine, we make community video but it didn't have to just stick in that community. You don't have to just stay in that street. It could go anywhere if people wanted it to and if it was good enough, and I felt that it was really important to inspire them to be able to make whatever it is they want to make, to express whatever they wanted to express and to make sure that it was good enough. So should the media wish to come along and find out about it, or know about it, they could and they did. Which was fortuitous because I think that it was also a gift because the young people I was working with were fantastic characters.

Reflections on The Basement Project

I worked with the Basement Project in film and video for 10 years and worked with all sorts of different young people during that time. And it was very enjoyable, it wasn't the only thing I did mind you. It was part of what I was doing, I was doing other things like starting a street theatre in Covent Garden, or you know, doing lots of other arts events. But I worked on that particular project for 10 years. I was very pleased to have founded it. And the film project really ended when I left. But the project itself continued, the education side of it carried on for some time afterwards and during the time that I had been working there, we began to gather other people to come and do other aspects of the arts, so a guy called Chris Searle, came and started a writers workshop which was very successful. And again we worked with some of the young people who were the writers, with film projects, and so on, a print workshop started up where we did lots of silk screen printing. And there was a darkroom, lots of photographers came in and worked with young people as well. All of us knew each other and we were a whole group of artists working together with young people in the community, many of us still knowing each other to this day.

What I got then, and earlier on, was this whole idea, that because these young people had opportunity to express themselves, they therefore began to develop a sense of identity and

a sense of place, and therefore build up their confidence in who they were, and felt that they were somebody, and that I feel is really very important. And they've always been people who have got jobs and done things you know and stuff, worked in the market or whatever. But it's a great confidence building exercise for all of them to feel that something special happened in their life and they've been in a film and made it. And I think that that is one of the great strong reasons for working in this way. When I was working with film and then started to work with video, there began to be other people that I heard of that were working with the community also, and this wasn't just with video but with theatre and with visual arts, with paint in all sorts of ways. And these artists began to realise that it was really a valuable thing to work in communities and start up community arts projects and a lot of them were great fun. And so we began to meet each other from all over the country and then we began to make demands upon the Arts Council and say there needs to be money for this kind of work. Why isn't there? How come you only ever support bourgeois culture? Why not this kind of culture, why not these people? Well they couldn't possibly be artists, but why shouldn't they be artists? And why can't we be working artistically with them? We can! And it's not about sending an artist over to some housing estate to create a piece of sculpture and plonk it in the middle. That's not community art, community art is about creating masses of art by masses of people. In fact investing in the imagination of the people. This is of course dangerous, because people might have ideas and when they have ideas you never know where that might lead, might lead to a change in regime even. Who knows?

The Product

I was always on about the product because I felt that it wasn't good enough just to make videotapes. What were they like? What was the content? What was it about? Where was the analysis? And don't believe that people can't sit down and criticise their work and understand it and get better. They can, and it can be fun you know, and you can be as rude as you like, but you do it with humour and camaraderie and you just go "this is rubbish" or "yes that was good" or "he looks great in that one"

But you have to have form. The reason for that is because once a film is actually made whether it's video film or film whatever, and it's shown as a product then people can feel proud of it, and their work is up there. And they're recognised and it's a very important part of the process. And even if I'm working in any other medium, whether it's photography or wherever. There comes a point whereby it needs to be shown, and it goes up on the wall and people feel validated that 'I did it'. It's very important that people's work is validated and isn't just brushed off as being, well, it can't be any good because it's just a community video. And I felt it was really important to aim high and to have a high standard of endeavour whatever one is working on. I think I'm going to give it my all, whatever I'm doing, because I feel that's what people deserve and they should have, and they should expect and they should demand from me.

Alternative Arts. Photomonth.

All the time that I'd been working on this project I had also founded an organisation called Alternative Arts, and Alternative Arts began in Covent Garden. And the whole idea for it was looking at the art world and saying to yourself, there's an awful lot of people who are really creative that never have an opportunity to express themselves. And so we founded this organisation that would give an opportunity to new artists, new ideas, and also make the arts highly accessible to the public. So these two things went together.

And it's that idea, that there are still a lot of underprivileged people, and people who do not have enough rights, and when I'm working on Women's History Month for instance, here in

the East End, I'm working with a lot of groups of local women in the Bangladeshi community. It's really important for them to understand their human rights and that fact that they are also equal. And this is like starting all over again. But it's really very important for them. And you can see how over the years that one's been working with them, how they have built up their confidence, and demand things and really make a contribution to community life which is good, it's good. It takes a lot of patience, a lot of time.

In praise of community arts

At the end of the day I would say that working in the community or with a community and enabling them to express themselves whether it's through film or video or music or theatre or whatever, is infinitely worthwhile because as I said earlier, culture is a soft power and you can work gently and softly, but ultimately very powerfully with this.