

Nicola Field
Edited LCVA interview
Interviewer: Jeff Cole. Siobhan Schwartzberg

Framed Youth: Creating a Counter Culture

Portrait of Nicola Field
Writer, Artist and Activist
Living in Peckham, South London

Joining Framed Youth

In 1982 I was living in a shared flat in Hackney with three other people. And I was doing a PHD in Henry James. I wasn't getting on terribly well with it... I was one of the people in the flat, we were all socialists, that's something that I had discovered, socialist ideas, when I'd gone to university, because I came from a very, very conservative sort of background and one of my flatmates, Chris, he was gay, very outgoing man, very much on the scene and had a kind of very confident... it seemed to me confident kind of gay identity. And I was questioning my own sexuality. I had had one relationship with a woman when I was an undergraduate. And he saw this advert for the gay video project or gay youth video project in Capital Gay and he showed it to me. And I went along with him, for something to do I think, and because I was interested and I think I took my friend who was staying with me at the time, Stella, I think she came along, suddenly comes back to me, anyway she was straight. But I went along to sort of just see what was going on and immediately started to feel that there was a group forming. and I think at that time in my life I really needed a group because I came... I did come out. It's difficult to get it in right. Yeah, I wanted to be part of this group it seemed really exciting. People were playing with cameras and sound and pictures, and I was very interested in photography, and I was very interested in writing and literature and films. I was seeing a lot of independent films, art films, international films and I'd become very opened up to all different sorts of culture, because I'd grown up in such a conservative mainstream sort of atmosphere. And so it appealed to me to kind of explore this, explore these things that people were doing. I was very taken with the idea of gay identity. I'd wanted to not label myself before, but it started to become something that I did want to embrace, was a lesbian identity. At the time I knew I was bisexual but I could see that you couldn't be bisexual if you wanted to be in this group. So I kind of adapted to that and I came out as lesbian, and I had a relationship with somebody in in the project and I came out as a result of that, in the process of Framed Youth, to my family. And I got rejected quite severely. It was very, very traumatic. And I really had nowhere to go but this group, to get support and people who understood. And so it became very much part of my survival strategy, being in the group and taking part, and playing a part in it.

03:43: My Role in the Group

I was never in the lead of experimenting with ways of doing things. I remember once filming somebody interviewing somebody and I was on the camera and I started filming their hands, their feet and the way.. and their body and their face as they were talking, and realizing that it was good to a certain extent but you couldn't keep doing that. It started to become fetishized, it started to become voyeuristic. But it was interesting up to a point and I started to realize that I...I couldn't really... I wasn't really sure how to handle that environment. I was very interested in reflecting the oppression that people were facing. So I'm talking about people coming out, problems with family and the process of becoming pleased to be lesbian or gay, rather than apologetic about it. That was something that's very important. Because I'd already discovered socialism. I was incredibly excited to find that this whole idea of sexuality and politics could come together in one kind of concept, or one kind of way of thinking. I now know looking back, you know I'm a writer and I've written about LGBT politics and history, that the group that made Framed Youth was very much a product really of the 1970s gay movement, which had had a very, very radical revolutionary heart to it. It had protest at its heart and it had social transformation as a goal, not just getting rights from an existing society but wanting to challenge the whole of that society. Its one of the things I find most exciting about looking back at Framed Youth, and seeing that we need those sorts of politics now, we need to look back into what was produced in the 70s and 80s and draw on it, so that we can reclaim that sort of radical revolutionary approach to sexual liberation. So for me it was a sort of sexual liberation...creative...discovery, political discovery and lots of personal changes for me at that time as well, so it was a very, very powerful experience. I do think that there were people in the group who were more confident about visual experimentation and I'd like to honour them really for what they achieved in terms of the experimentation and the daring that took place, people who were prepared to take risks and experiment.

Gender in the Group

It's funny looking back on it. I know that when I joined the project there was a purposeful emphasis on bringing more women in, and making it a genuinely inclusive project to women and men. Don't forget, that as well as not being bisexual inclusive, it wasn't really transsexual inclusive either, so it was very much lesbians and gays and so I became...I'll tell you what, to be quite honest again see... I didn't take the lead in that, and that was something that just I watched happen. I became part of the group that was really angry with all the men in the group, and wanted to make a stand about having aspects of the film that were generated by women and the women did autonomously, they didn't want to always be doing things led by men. You know the gay scene itself was quite male-dominated. And the women's clubs were very much, you know, they weren't such commercial settings. Women were seen as a kind of oppressed minority within the lesbian and gay community. And within that group as well, and that they needed to have some space in order to articulate and firm up what they wanted to say in the group. They needed to have their own space to decide how the women's issues were going to be presented. And again I was, I don't think I really fully understood what that meant, but there were women in the group, Claire and Jill, Kim, Rose, Trill, Pom and I think they had a

clearer idea, that if you were going to make a strong women's presence in the film women needed to work independently to create their own voice. And I think it's done brilliantly. I think they succeeded really well in presenting a really in-depth and rich kind of impression of what the lesbian and gay community was up against.

Group Process

Lots of arguments, there were lots of disagreements. There were lots of... there were resentments in the group. There were ongoing tensions, there were debates that went on and on and on, which I found a great strain and I often didn't really understand, but, you know, looking back on that that, that's quite extraordinary that a group of young people could stick together through that, and come through all those debates and find common ground to make something creative together in a group, and it was a genuine group effort. There wasn't one person in charge and if there was a desire at the beginning, or a plan that Philip Timmins and Andy Lipman would produce and direct something about young lesbians and gays, that was absolutely turned on its head. And Philip became the sort of facilitator for what the group wanted to do. And I think that that's really an important moment in film making, it is possible to make something collectively. But it is... it takes blood, sweat and tears to do that, but the rewards are huge.

Production Process

I can remember near the beginning we were talking about what we were going to be making because Philip said, I remember him saying this.: they've given us this money, it's for development, we can just give them back a pile of crap. There won't be any comeback. We could give them a pile of crap, and they would say okay we spent the money and you've given us a pile of crap and that's fine. But I think there was a decision, there was a decision made, that we wanted to make something, we wanted to finish something, we wanted to unify what we were doing and have something to show for it. And I think that was an extraordinary sort of commitment and it meant that people went...they worked really hard, worked really hard over that year. People worked full time on it for nothing and wanted to produce something that was finished, and that they felt proud of, and that they felt spoke the truth and that they felt was genuinely... they wanted to be creative. They wanted to create something and they wanted it to be really provocative, and what would we would say now, edgy or interventionist, something that would be a surprise that would that would be unexpected, that would be unconventional and... be surprising and wake people up.

Mainstream Event

But then the film won the Grierson award. We were all, What? It's done what? What's that mean? And we didn't know it had been put in for it and it was very surprising, and a bit alarming that it won this award and become like a mainstream...event in a way. I can remember, we all went along to the screening at the NFT as it was then. School kids, we were quite unruly, we were a very colourful, unruly bunch of people. But there were some people that didn't like the fact that it

won the Grierson award. Edgar Ansty, who was one of the judges, said it was one of the worst, something like, it was one of the worst exhibitions of the worst type of navel gazing. Just homophobic statement dressed up as some kind of clever criticism, but not everybody wanted Framed Youth to win the Grierson award.

Resource for LGBT History

I think that Framed Youth is a wonderful resource for LGBT history. I think it does expose a little bit about what it was like being lesbian and gay at that time in London. What we were concerned about, how we felt, how we behaved. And I think that it's got something to say. I think you know I'm proud that it's very political, that, you know, it was made in the time of Thatcher, it confronts the state, it talks about the interests that the state has in dividing and ruling the population. It relates that to privatization and it relates it to brutal policing. And of course we have the miners strike to come. Thatcher was actually, you know, preparing for the miner's strike at that time and I think that comes across in the film, that there's a confrontation brewing. And you know, I hope people watch it, and find it an insight and also an inspiration about how we do need to keep... to keep the fight for sexual liberation as a political protest.

Getting Clearance for the Channel Four Broadcast

Basically once Channel 4 decided that they wanted to screen it, they not only had to buy it from us...but the whole question of all the copyrighted material that we had used in it, with absolute abandon. We had had no holds barred, we filmed off the telly, we used pop songs, we used whatever we liked. And it all had to be gone through moment by moment, second by second, identifying where clips had come from, because we didn't even remember where clips had come from. So Channel 4 put us in touch with a film researcher who is now a very successful documentary film maker, Clare Beavan, and she had to go through, split second by split second every little bit of Framed Youth, making sure that every little bit of...and there was also the music that was playing in the bars where we were interviewing people, that had to be cleared as well. It was a really a tremendous process of unbelievable detail.

BFI Screening

So it was screened at the BFI. And I didn't go, but I got my dad and my stepmother to go and I don't know why I did, I thought that they should see what I've been doing. So they went and they saw it at the BFI, and when I spoke to them afterwards, my dad is terribly homophobic, they're very homophobic. And my dad said: Well the subject matter was obnoxious but it was a very well-made film. And my stepmother said it could sell ice to the Eskimos.

Channel Four Screening

It was screened after hours, as a kind of X-rated material in a way, not actually but you know, seen as something that wasn't family viewing. And it reflects the kind of contradictory nature of a group of people that are seen to be...at the time gay

sexuality was equated with paedophilia. You know we were seen as perverts, we were seen as corrupting, and, you know undesirable and so on. But it kind of creates an underground, it creates a counterculture, it creates something that although it's hidden, grows and grows in confidence and so on. Very different from now when Framed Youth would be very much something that would be shown in mainstream viewing time. And it just really makes me realize you know the effects we really have to confront, the effects of austerity on young LGBT people, who are coming out maybe in hostile family environments or feeling, lacking in confidence and if they haven't got access through public libraries and through public services and facilities to get support, to create networks, to find information and so on. This is a real attack, a material attack on a minority group in society. And I think that is something we really need to, if we're going to take the spirit of Framed Youth into the future, then we need to fight austerity and make sure that you know the rights of LGBT people are maintained and defended in terms of access to information and access to support in society.

Political and Social Intention

Both Framed Youth and the LGSM (Lesbian and Support the Miners) video were made on the hoof with no proper funding or budgets. They were like really low budget, people working for the love of it with an intention. A political intention, a political and social intention.