Terry Flaxton LCVA Interview 3/4/25
Full Transcript

Intv
Terry Tell us a bit about where you were born, where you grew up, and your early life.

Terry Flaxton
I was born in Hackney in 1953 in Hackney hospital. And I had an early life for about five years where I played on my own. And we were in a street with all the houses were bombed out. And by the time I'm 8 a tower block, not maybe like five, six stories high, gets built and we get moved into there. But I moved into a floor with some kids from another street, from Hackney Wick. They all knew each other, and I was the one on the end. So my experience at the very beginning was of being an outsider. Later on, I had some trouble in primary school because I managed to head-butt the chief bully's jaw when going up for a football and he held that against me. So life was really tough for a bit. My dad also insisted on taking me off to meet his relatives in Hoxton, and leaving me outside the pub, dressed as a little French school kid with a beret and short trousers and little brown shoes, eminently punch-able by any thug that was going past. And so that was happening every Sunday. The first school, primary school, I got through the 11 plus and ended up going to a place called Sir Thomas Parmiters Voluntary aided Grammar School for Boys, so I experienced a shift in class, culturally, not in terms of money, but in terms of culture.

Intv
Did that affect your relationship to your parents at all?

Terry Flaxton
My parents were very ordinary people, I mean, in the sense of, well, my mum really just read the basic newspapers and watched TV and stuff. My dad was a bit more complex. He gave me the Ragged Trousered Philanthropists when I was about 14/15, it took me a long time to read it. I mean, I put it aside because my dad gave it to me, basically. And so they were a little bit perplexed by the kid that was growing with them, because I was coming across all sorts of influences. There's a caveat too that my mum bought an encyclopaedia from a door-to-door tradesman. It was the Children's Encyclopaedia by Arthur Mee. Did you come across that? There were chapters on archaeology, chapters on cosmology, chapters on Greek literature, and so I was getting the cultural input that way.

Intv
So you're at grammar school and you've got the children's encyclopaedia at home, and you're suddenly aware of a slightly different world. How did that progress?

Terry Flaxton
So when we first sat down in the very first class in Parmiters we were told, in short trousers on the first day, that we were expected to get 10 O levels and 5 A levels. So no pressure there then. As I went through school, I also thought I'd escaped the thugs. No, no such thing. In fact, thugs have kids too, and if they're intelligent criminals, they also have intelligent criminal children. So our school was full of those. So my plan for getting through it was to punch the first one that punched me. But I didn't realise they were even bigger thugs than the ones I've come across before. So I got a hiding quite a few times there. So all of which meant that I developed a sense of the outsider, you know, a sense of, and later on, at the age of 14/15 I came across books by Herman Hess and Damian and Siddhartha and all of that stuff. So as I progressed along the cultural route through, because I did like learning. I liked learning! I was also defending myself against the outer, outer aspects to my life as well. And that went on for some long time.

Intv
And then so you got, you got your O levels?

Terry Flaxton
Obviously, I'm scarred by school (laughs). So I got the O levels, and I got 10 O levels, and it was the kind of school where you went for a ‘cheap’ O level, something like Greek literature in translation, because you didn't have to read a load of books. You just read one and just memorised it basically, who did what to whom. So there's an O level! So, it's no, it was no great thing. We just learned that there was a way to play the system. Whatever the system was, there was a way to play it. By the time we got to O levels, one of the kids started going to the UFO club, he came from Covent Garden, because kids came to Parmiters from all over London.

Andy Porter
The UFO club, what was that?

Terry Flaxton
Yeah, well, it was called the UFO club, I mean, an unidentified flying object! It was set up as a hippie joint like Gandalf's garden, there were several of these things in London. This was in Covent Garden, but it was the time before Covent Garden changed. So there was a war between some of the fruit sellers and the hippies, then anyway the point is, of knowing this kid who went to those things. There was a tinge of drugs on the horizon, and I smoked a joint when I was 14. And I thought, like everybody does when they smoke a joint, there's nothing happening. And then when I got back to school we were playing a Bridge match with the headmaster and the vice headmaster. So when my partner said, Seven, No Trumps, I thought, well, yeah, why not? That's the highest you can go for. And so, so consequently, I also learned that I could ride an experience and present as normal. So play the game, learn the system, also know how to present in different situations.

Intv
And so you left school.

Terry Flaxton
Okay, so I was the only kid that had ever gone to art school from Thomas Parmiters, because basically everybody was a surveyor or a lawyer or whatever, one of those types. And of course I couldn't be doing with any of that stuff, so went to art school, went to a foundation course at Wimbledon, and I wouldn't say I had my mind blown. In fact, what I come across was the same thing, that the system didn't want me to play outside of it, so I learnt that art teachers try to teach their students to be ‘little me's’. And from going there I then applied to Chelsea and Hornsey, and all of those things that seemed cool at the time.

Intv
What kind of art were you into at the time?

Terry Flaxton
Oh, I was just doing, I would do abstracts I would use perspex. I used stained glass. I was doing photography. I was doing anything I could lay my hands on, because it's all incredibly mind-broadening. And I suppose that's what being hunted or bullied actually develops; it depends who you are, but it can be that it helps you develop your inner self, I suppose. And that's what the whole experience did. When that year of Art School finished, and I didn't get in, because I was very dilettante at this point, I didn't give a shit whether I got into the next phase of art school, I did a lot of sound, so I was in a lot of studios. And for instance, we, it's always a ‘we’, you never do it on your own. I mean, not often, I mean, you're always with a with a group of people. So I ended up at one point recording the Liverpool Philharmonic at the age of, like, 22 or something. I didn't really know what I was doing, but I was up for going

for it, but my exchange with technology had begun, and I wasn't afraid of it, because basically, you just stick a thing in. Does it work? No, it doesn't - right. Why doesn't it work? Stick the other thing? Does that work? No, that doesn't work. You know, it's just that you go through a methodological relationship with it. So after four or five years of this, after four or five years of being outside, recording albums, all sorts of stuff., and then I thought, because gigs were not happening in some of the bands that I was playing in, a friend of mine said, and we were playing chess for like, six months at the end of this, no gigs happening. His name was Henry, and he was …

Intv
You were in a band, you haven't told us about playing music.

Terry Flaxton
Okay? So from the from the age of 14, I was playing in bands, and I had a black friend, well, he's mixed race guy, black friend, and he picks up a guitar, and within three months, he was as good as Hendrix. It was absolutely mind blowing. I was like, you know, I'd done a bit of Spanish guitar, and I was like, thudding around on bass, but Mark was just fantastic. I mean, just absurdly fantastic. And we didn't know about improvisation at the time, so what we did is we learned some Spoonful, and Crossroads that the Cream played, but we learned them, note for note, not realising that the Cream had improvised them. And we did this gig where somebody said, you got that wrong, and that's when we'd slotted into improvising ourselves. We didn't get it wrong at all. We basically learnt how to do it. So basically, I had all of this experience doing music for a long time, wrote an album, recorded an album. At one point, we took all of the band's equipment and pawned it and went to a car auction and bought an E-type Jaguar, all had a drive, threatening each other to not crash it, because we'd lose all of our money and our kit. And we managed to get out with the thing in one piece, took it back to another auction and got a grand more than we paid for it! Then we gave that grand to a bass player who used to play with Hawkwind, and we went off to Wales to record an album. We did the mix there. I came back and went on the underground (tube train), which wiped all the top frequencies. So we had to do a remix of the album. But it eventually ended up in Virgin Records. And I swear to God, this is true, but we're outside the office when Mike Oldfield was getting taken, because we had loads of tubular bells all over our thing, we had timpani, we had the works. It wasn't the same thing, but it was like, Oh God, we missed it again, missing it, always bloody missing. So I'd had that, all that musical experience, and went to back to art college because there were no gigs, no money to be had. And this friend of mine, Henry, who I played chess with for six months, he announced one day that he was going to the Berlin Film school to learn to be a spark. And later on, I questioned that, like, why would you learn to be a spark? You'd learn to be a cameraman or a lighter or a director or whatever. Anyway, then there was just me, and the next week, in a paper, I saw an advert saying: Do you want to learn video? And I rang up a friend, and I said: You've got Latin what's video. He says, it means to see, to look. And I thought, That's great. I'll go and learn to see. And I went in there, I had, you know, I'd blown all my A levels. And they said: Well, I tell you what, go, go away for three months, take a load of pictures, bring them back, and if we think you've got an eye you're in. And I did, and they did, and I got in.

Intv
Where are we talking about?

Terry Flaxton
Oh, now, by now, we're at North East London Polytechnic, which is laughingly called the University of East London, which always strikes me as an impossibility, but there you go. So I spent three years…it was called Communication Design. It was a BA Hons and all of their teachers that had sat-in with the students at Hornsey, and they'd not been able to work for years.

Intv
What was Hornsey?

Terry Flaxton
Hornsey was the place, I can't remember the date, but basically there was a sit-in, and everybody got sacked and so on, but they were all followers of Buckminster Fuller. So the people that were teaching us were people who knew Buckminster Fuller. They had a principle that they could take anybody off the street, anybody, to be able to design in two dimensions, to teach them the Golden Mean. They'd teach them how the divisions of frame could work. And then once they taught us to be able to design, or at least do something that looked like it was designed, we would then abstract that capability and place it into radio, because the golden mean can work can work in a radio programme in terms of how what the parts are is the 1/3, 1/3, 1/3. Yeah, that works. See what I mean, and film and so on. So we applied that learning from two dimensions. Great course. We ended up suing them, though, because we had, half the course were people from Chile, and they'd been hung upside down and tortured in Chile, not for political reasons, but for religious reasons, because they were all in a thing called The School. There was a mystical school that was operating across South America at the time, and the dictators and the politicos feared that, more than the politically-oriented people, so we sued the college. We agreed with the CNAA that we would give up all the firsts, providing everybody got a degree. So first big political choice to give up something for yourself, because I'd got one and a few others had got one, and we gave it up for the whole So, okay, so that was the education phase, and…

Intv
Was that, learning video or was that, what were you doing? Was it film, video? moving image?

Terry Flaxton
Oh yeah, of course. Okay, so in in North East London Polytechnic, we had been taught the principles of design, but we also started to get plugged into video. And by about ‘76 which was the first year of the thing, I started editing a thing that was called **Opening Up**. And I started to realise the principles of how you organise material in durational, in time. You could have the same principles as designing in two dimensions, that in that you can 1/3, 1/3, 1/3, or two thirds to 1/3 or whatever the principles you might play. And at uni, we made four or five programmes, one of which we took to the BBC to show them, called **Inside Comics**, and they said they weren't interested, but within six months, they'd flown over to the US and basically nicked the idea that we had.

Andy Porter
Tell me a bit about Opening Up. Can you remember much about it?

Terry Flaxton
Opening Up was, where was it? Was it like Millwall? I don't know. It was a school. I mean, that was when we were beginning. Always ‘we’. There were three of us, and we were, this is just before we formed Vida, because we had a group called Vida, and we were aware, became aware that people's lives were of value, and very quickly learned you couldn't drop, just drop into a place and take it and run, that you had to give respect to the people who were there. They were giving you something so, you know, pay respect. So that's what I primarily learned from Opening Up, plus the fact that when we edited it was on the old Portapak system. What that meant is, you had one Portapak ready to record. We had one Portapak playing back what we'd already recorded, and we would give a five second countdown, so spool it backwards, set it off going and slam that one into record. And that was an edit, and we'd edit it. The whole of that programme was slam-edited, crash-edited. And it's, it's amazing. There aren't many glitches. I mean, there are glitches, but, I mean…

Intv
And it was, I always think, in some sense, quite early for its time. I don't know what you thought about that at all. The way it dealt with racism, with young people talking about it, it was quite… I'm surprised its not got more recognised. I suppose I'm saying I'm very pleased that it's now going to be in the LCVA archive.

Terry Flaxton
Oh, well, I had a friend at university. No, when I went to Wimbledon, his name was Eden Charles, who's a black guy, and we used to hang out all the time. And at the end of the year, he said, my name is not Eden Charles. My name is Charles Eden. I'm never going to talk to you again, but I've enjoyed being with you, but I've got a different path to tread now. He was a black guy, and he was my mate, and he was never going to talk to me again.

Intv
Because he wanted to play white? Play the system? Or because he was rejecting your whiteness. Do you know?

Terry Flaxton
Oh, I don't think it was particularly rejecting my whiteness. We had a hoot. We had such a hoot, actually. But I think you see then, okay, so having met Eden, Charles, Charles Eden, this guy that changes his name at the end of my knowing him. As soon as I got out of uni, we did actually go to America. There's a story about going to America. When we got back, we started working for, with people like Darcus Howe. And there was a publishing company, something Rose publishing. It was a black publishing company, and we shot their stuff for them. We were not, I'm very aware that there is such a thing as Negrofilliacs In other words, people that were like, you know, want to cosy up to black people because it gives them cred and all the rest of it. But we were just, we're just getting stuck into the politics. It just seemed fucking, excuse me. It just seemed really obvious that we should really get stuck in and help where we could, so that led into quite a lot of small p, big P, political work.

Intv
How did you develop that? Who did you get the work from? What kind of work was it?

Terry Flaxton
Okay? So during the period of the being at uni, at North East London Polytechnic, we actually formed a company called Vida, and we thought that it meant, look at this in Latin. You know, one of us knew a bit of Latin, and so that's what we called ourselves. But what we did is we started doing political projects. We did a thing about Chinese comics and how the party message was conveyed along, yeah, along that line. So soon as we got out, the first thing we did is we went to America, we drove across America. We did the road trip. We shot a thing called Towards Intuition. And we got to the other side and got to San Francisco, this is three months later, whatever it was, we showed it to Video West, which was a happening thing at that time, and they said: We don't understand it, but we'd love you to come in and do something. So we did a thing overnight, which they lied. So we're in San Francisco with KQED, and they shack up with KABC and Los Angeles, and then WTTW sin Chicago all join up altogether. So suddenly, we're broadcasting to half the United States, and our little piece is about how documentary only documents the attitude of the makers at the time of making. And so here we are, and we're in your face. And this is how it is America. So that's what we did. But when we got back here, we hit the British brick wall. You think you're good, you're no good. You're not going anywhere. So get in line.

Intv
So who's that from what you're saying who's giving you that response?

Terry Flaxton

Um, anybody we talked to, because we were full of ourselves, because we'd gone and done stuff and got it on and showed stuff to people. I ended up working for Zakya Powell Associates who were Merchant Ivory's publicists. And I started meeting those kind of people and seeing how the the industry was working, and then I got a gig doing teaching at London International Film School. I was about a week ahead of the students, and I'd get old BBC people to come in and talk about turret cameras and stuff like that. In fact, it was a guy called Ron who worked at London International Film School, who had worked with Marconi, and he told me about turret cameras and alignments and then I could tell the kids about that. So that was a bit of work. Zakya Powell Associates was a bit of work. And then I heard about a job going at an editing place called Green Man Productions. And at first I did a bit of shooting for them, and the very first thing we did, and I'm shooting it right. I mean, like I'm ready for anything and it was the Grace Jones one-man show. I don't know where the guts for this came from, but we would just, nothing would phase us, and yt was always a communal activity.

Intv
And a lot of that work in Hackney. Can you talk about that in Hackney? What was your commitment to Hackney? I'm talking about was that later, was that Triple Vision?

Terry Flaxton
That would be Triple Vision. I mean, my attitude to Hackney at the time was, get the fuck out of here, well, it's hardcore. It was hardcore. Hackney was a really dangerous place. It was not, you know… Before university I remember when the Stamford Hill Mob came down and the people from Green Lanes, there was cavalcades of cars turning up for a big fight, and we'd scatter and run. It was a really dangerous place in Hackney at the time, so I didn't want to be there. So after my year in Art school I moved to Kings Road, then West Hampstead, and places like that. The boy wanted to see the other places. And so at uni we'd started Vida and we then realised we could actually approach trade unions for work. We just had to convince them to get their head out of Gutenberg and start realising that the opposition was using TV. It was very hard with them, the first one we did was about decentralisation with Birmingham City Council, and we learnt about working with non-actors. How, when you said: Look, we're going to follow you. You need to go from here to here. They went from there to there, and they kept walking. And so we were running along after them. So we were complete amateurs at that point, but we managed to do something that the council liked.

But the biggest thing, I think, at the time, was Making News, where we were employed by the campaign itself…but we had NUPE,NALGO,COHSE, ACTT,NUJ, and the campaign itself, as our editorial board, and we're saying to them, if we do what looks like television, it will be television, and will give the opposite message that you wish to give to your memberships in how to understand how the press works. So we had to talk them into tricks, if you like, of the trade that we would do. We'd hear there was a BBC shoot going off. We raced down there. We shot them shooting, and interviewed them and the people they were interviewing. And then we got back and we shot the broadcast of it on the TV, and then we did an analysis of the actual facts that were in the BBC report. And basically there weren't any, well, it was one, one, and it was on the second report we looked at and there was one fact - that there was going to be less eggs available for breakfast. However, the report was saying that the ambulance men were causing deaths and a variety of other things. So we realised that the the media was basically just an extra arm of the system. So our politics were hard then, and we started, but we kept going after work. We did Brent Health Emergency. A tape in Brent about a sit-in of a hospital, and we just got in touch with groups, and groups and groups got in touch with us. And we were, you know, we were scraping around for anything.

Intv
Bad Neighbours?

Terry Flaxton
Ah Bad Neighbours was okay. Bad Neighbours was a tape that we did with Hackney Council. But the breakdown of the racism group, anti-racism group in Hackney council was so bad that nobody came to the meetings. So on the meeting that we were supposed to be agreeing what we were going to put in our tape to be Hackney's anti racist policy, they were all punching it out, and they weren't coming and we're talking to Turks, Nigerians, Brits. I mean, you name it. That there was a council, but nobody came. So we wrote their, we wrote their anti-harassment policy: Anybody that puts great racist graffiti on another person's house will be evicted in a week. And really hardcore stuff. But it went out because there was no, that was the policy. Somebody wrote the policy. It must have been… It was us!

Intv
Did it get used, did it get shown around?

Terry Flaxton
Yeah, yeah. It was used

Intv
Okay, you want to say a bit more about the news?

Terry Flaxton
So whilst, getting work, political work, I'd also just joined this studio, which we renamed as Video Makers, and we had a full studio in there. The money came from casting sessions for America, but we also suddenly picked up the job of being stringers for MTV. And this was when MTV didn't even exist. It was basically a little outfit in, I don't know, in Wisconsin or something. And after a while, we realised that they were - it was a racist, a bit racist, because we weren't being asked to do any black acts. And then it turned out that that was the story. When they got sold, it became a bigger thing and opened out.
The point was, at that stage of the game, whilst I'm doing the political work, we're out, we're going out, and we're shooting for MTV. Anybody all the time, can you go and do the Stones tomorrow morning? Oh, the phone call would come in at three o'clock in the night as well, because the Americans didn't recognise the time thing. But we did loads of big bands, Def Leppard, The Who I don't know, just loads of them, so I was really used by this point in time to pulling something out of nowhere on a shoot. Turn up. Get in quick. Set it up, direct it, shoot it, edit it, and send it back to America. So we were doing that all the time. At the same time, um because we were shooting on the American system, NTSC, people were saying, "Do you know any crews in London that can shoot NTSC?" because if you got it wrong, you'd get flicker all over the pictures from the lighting system, 60 hertz, 50 hertz, all of that sort of stuff.
Then we picked up doing a commercial for Tony Scott, not doing the commercial, but doing ‘the making of’, because so much money was being spent on these, 700 grand that would be, at that time, that was a lot of money. And then we got a call from Apple to do a thing with Ridley Scott and we’d done some casting sessions for Ridley Scott associates. And basically what we’d try to do is light well, not just do a blank casting session, you know, give it some atmosphere. So we ended up shooting the Making of Apple's 1984 commercial, which was the one that launched the Mac. So there are a huge crew on there, 50 or 60 people. It was on H stage at Shepperton, the biggest one that there is.
There was an interesting class thing observable through tobacco, in that the grips and the er riggers did roll-ups right, and Silk Cuts for the lower camera crew, up to Benson Hedges with a filter, and then the AD, first AD would have cheroots (a small cigar), and Ridley Scott would have a big fat cigar. There were a 100 Neo Nazis on the shoot from the Bovver Boots Agency who you could hire as debt collectors, or go break an arm, or be an extra, because all of the extras needed their head shaved, so they were happy to as skinheads to do that. And there was, you know, an odd bit of violence going off. This lot had come off The Wall,

and there'd been a riot on The Wall (the 1982 Pink Floyd Film). There was a stabbing, a rape. I mean, it was a pretty dodgy place. But during this melee, I noticed that the First AD was going around yelling, where's my cheroots? And about day later, I go up into the rigging to get a high shot over the big tunnel in the in the opening sequence of 1984, and I found a 75 year old rigger up the top, happily laying on a bale of felt, smoking the cheroots as a piece of class revenge, which was so funny. I mean, even in that kind of heated atmosphere, the politics were redolent, you know, anarchist video crew, film crew, shooting for an American ad agency, you know, in Thatcher's Britain and so on. And then, of course, the next thing that came up from after that was the miner's tapes, I think. And we're all involved doing the miner's tapes.

Intv
Were you doing this kind of work because you wanted to do it? How did it play into your political or your artistic ambitions? Did it ever, did it take over? What was the balance? Was it a hard, was it about survival? Was it about learning? Or…

Terry Flaxton
Okay, so back in 1976 when I first came across video, we'd started going to London Video Arts, which was an artist collective, and it dawned on me that everybody there… are a bit au fait with the kit, but they weren't really across it. And what I say about this is that if you were a medieval artist, or a 16th century artist, you'd have to know how to mix your pigments and how to make a n prepare a canvas to work for you, how to prepare it, and so on. So I decided it was very, very important to me to learn my medium. So by the time I got out of Uni and was doing all of these shoots for the commercial industry, Universal International, you know, Apple and all the rest of it, is every time I went on a shoot, I thought I was the one that knew the least. And by the time the shoot ended, I realised that most people didn't know what was going on at all, even the people that are supposed to know what's going on, and that actually I should have a lot more confidence, because I knew exactly what was going on. If you know what I mean. When you first go on to a big set with a big cinematographer, and if you're there for a few days, or say you come in in the middle of the shoot, you see it all laid out. You think, how the hell did they get there? The truth is, they put that one light up, then they put that light up, then they put that light up, then they put that and they build it. So if you go in there thinking you've got to know it all, you disadvantage yourself, because actually you've got as much intuition as the next person, and maybe you've got that touch that they haven't got.
So doing all of the commercial work I was also to then exercise that knowledge in the political work. Having learnt about the technical constraints of the medium to some great degree, at least we thought so, we got a gig doing Brent Health Emergencie's sit-in and take-over of the hospital. And for some reason or another, Channel Four decided, because it's early, really early days of Channel Four. It hadn't even started up yet. We got rung up and they said "we'd like to buy that tape," and they bought it for three times what it cost. And we were blown away. We were absolutely blown away that somebody would give us proper money for it because I was earning a wage just being a cameraman, editor and all the rest of it.

Intv
How did that job start?

Terry Flaxton
Okay, so we're talking about 1983/84 and we've been working with the person that advised the GLC on health issues, called Jeanette Mitchell, and she was tending to put us forward for stuff at the GLC, for stuff that seemed difficult or more complex. And so she came to us and said: "Look, there's this thing, this is going off and we need to cover it". And we said, "we'll do it for free. It's not even an issue. Of course we will." And then she managed to get some money from somewhere, so we got a little bit of payment out of it. And then we made

the thing. And then Channel Four got to see it, God knows how, because it's early, really early days of Channel Four, it hadn't even started it up, and said they'd like to buy it. And they paid us three times the amount that we made it for in the end.

Intv
I suppose one of the questions is, how important was product? How important was the look of things to you? And how important is it in the community stroke political context? Because, frankly, a lot of the community stuff was very rough. But your stuff was quite sophisticated. I think. Do you recognise that at all?

Terry Flaxton
Yeah. But okay, we had a principle whenever we did a new project, which was that we believe that articulacy in the form of making programmes would make us at least on a par with the programme makers that are giving content to the populace, at least, and if we got it right, we could actually speak against the message that was being conveyed all the time. So we had a principle that whatever job we did, we always got in a piece of kit we'd never used before. So when we got to doing a thing on one-person busses, and we'd learned that, you know, a lot of it gave a lot of people illness. You know, you get crick necks, and I mean, more than the crick neck. I mean, you'd have to be retired because of the doing the work. We got a Simon platform. We didn't know what we were doing, but we got on the bloody thing, and it rose up like 100 feet, and we did a drive-by of the bus as we sunk to the ground, because we because we thought, well, there must be some reason why cinema, television and so on, are using these techniques, apart from them being impactful on a dramatic level. What could we say with these techniques? Could we say anything? Could we subvert the techniques? So we had that principle of learning that stuff and trying to make product. Because what happened next was that Channel Four was suddenly giving money out to lots and lots of people, and we were getting a lot of phone calls from people saying, filmmakers, saying, what do we do with this stuff? How do you expose it? And you know, all of that stuff. Suddenly, product was becoming a thing because people had to produce an hour's worth of product or whatever it was. So it become implicit in what we're doing that product was a necessity. At the same time to recognise that product in itself, if you just do product, that may well subvert the political message you might be wanting to give.

Intv
I just thought, can you say a bit more about not ‘I’, it’s a ‘we’. Just expand on the I/ we thing for you in terms of making, and is that particular to doing political community work, or is it just to filmmaking or what?

Terry Flaxton
Okay, so, all right, it became very clear from the beginning of working with video and film that you'd need to be in a group. There was so much to do with just one person, so you couldn't do it. I know that it's turned around, so that people have to shoot and do sound at the same time, all of that stuff, but the support and there's something about the grouping behaviour, which is supportive of political gestures, especially when things get really tough. So cutting to the moment when Channel Four actually did ring us and said: Look, we got this project. It's gone a bit wrong. Somebody's doing it, but they don't seem to be able to finish it, or don't want to finish it, or whatever. Will you take it up and we hear you're into video art. As it just so happened, I joined LVA (London Video Arts in 1976) and we had an office above, it was the Anne Summers Sex shop, yeah, in Soho and they're all the people there, by the way, at the beginning there was Abramovich and Mona Hatoum and quite big names coming through, because a lot of performance stuff had to be videoed. So that was durational, and that became important.
So vis-a-vis the issue of video art and us getting rung to complete a series of three programmes. In fact, what we did is we ditched all the previous stuff, and we got about half the budget left. So we made the three programmes on half the budget. And what we said is

that we knew that another series was going off, which was John Wyver's Ghosts in the Machine and his series was concentrating on American product, not British, not European. So we said, right, well, we're going to do the British video art scene, and we're going to create the context. We're going to talk about why people are into this. We're going to talk to the people about why they feel that they're into this. And we did the three programmes and pulled it off. And it felt that because we were talking about art, it was also subversive, because for me, one of the most subversive things you can do is art, because you're actually trying to jostle the contemporary mind if you get good art. So yeah, we got that commission. We did three. And then they came back to us and they said, 'Will you do two on European video art?' And we went, 'Yeah, got anything else whilst you're at it?' And then we were also working on projects. We met Rennie Bartlett at the time, and Rennie was the coordinator of the Independent Film Association, and the Independent Film Association didn't want the Independent Video Association to join with them, but when Channel Four came along and they all needed to know how to operate video, then they wanted to know, then we became the Independent Film and Video Organisation. And there was people ringing us all the time about, how do you do it? Because at the time, there's was so much fear in the filmmakers' minds about getting it wrong. The irony about film is, as the head of BBC Natural History told me, you give a chimp a film camera and still get something out of it. Doesn't matter what you do with the iris, it'd still come out as something, so there was an irony about that. But with video, at the time, you had to get it pretty spot on, pretty right. Let's get it exposed just right. We completed the video art project, and then Rennie, who we'd met when he was running the IFVPA, had written a project that was about American foreign policy in the third world, and so he joined Triple Vision, and we went off and started shooting that. And he introduced me to this bloke called Noam. He says, 'This is Noam, Terry.' and I said, 'Hello, Noam. What do you do then?' It was Noam Chomsky. You know, it's another one of them. What you're kidding me? But I didn't realise that till after. But what happened was, so vitriolic was our attack on American foreign policy that Channel Four said, "we can't put this out. You're gonna have to do one on Russia to balance it. Here's another 160 grand.' And we went, 'Okay,'

Intv
Was that a sort of a launch of a career on Channel Four for a time? Or?

Terry Flaxton
Well, it was growing. The video art thing there was not very much in it, and then the European video art thing helped. And then the doc on American Foreign Policy, because that was £160k so, you know, we'd never seen money like that before, but we were aiming at putting most of it on the screen, that was for sure. So the thing that happened with Rennie's project, the Cold War Game, which is what the overall name was, the next was the Soviet Union, is that Rennie didn't want to direct it himself, because he was an accredited Soviet tour guide. And at that time, people like Sally Potter, I think she was a tour guide. And a friend I've met later in life called Frances Howard Gordon, she was too, you get that, and you can lose it real easy. We didn't know how it was all going to turn out with Russia at the time, but what happened was, after interviewing directors for a year and nobody meeting Rennie's needs, we did the thing that we should have done right at the start, which is either I or Penny should have directed it, and so consequently I ended up directing it (and Penny producing).

And we got together with Jonathan Steele of The Guardian, and we effectively wrote a thesis about Russian, about the Mackinder issue, which is that Alfred Mackinder drew a map from the Arctic downwards, looking at the world like that. And then when you did that with Russia, you could see that America had eventually surrounded Russia with nuclear missile bases. It was really obvious what was going on. We were not being apologists for Russia. What we were trying to do is understand the Russian mentality. So basically, we did. We shot all of the drama because we had drama inserts into it in black and white, because all of the documentary footage shot by Eisenstein and Vertov was in black and white. And by the end

of the programme, we went into the Kremlin and did an interview with the Department of Strategic American Studies, or something like that, and we got the guy to speak about the future. And during that bit, what we did is we asked him to do the whole question and answer again, and what we cross faded him from colour to black and white he spoke first in English then on transition to BW into Russian. It was basically to raise the issue of fiction and documentary. So, so when we finished that we were really proud to get Pick of the Day. We were always going after Pick of the Day in the tabloids and in the broad sheets. And things went on like that. And we got to about 9 large docs. We did the whole health service thing. We did two programmes on health. We always got big, big, big names in. We thought, if we want people to watch this, we're going to get, you know, like Billy Whitelaw to do the voiceover, or Bob Peck or Bernard Hill or Jonathan Price or Tilda Swinton, all of that lot. We get down to the very last stages and of doing the documentary thing. And this is just before I moved to Somerset, and we got given another one of those, because we did female genital mutilation as well in Harley Street, and they gave us the animal rights subject. Now, for some reason, the British establishment does not like anything near animal rights. It gets really freaked out around land ownership. You know, who's that theatre group? 784, 7% own 84% of the value of the country and land. The thing is, to cut a long story short, we were given a group of not hunt sabs (sabateurs), they were basically lab, lab sabs. And we were hearing tales at the time. I have to be a little bit careful here, but I'll try and say it as best as I can. Basically, we were discovering from sources in Oxford that nobody was putting poison in Lucozade bottles. Nobody was putting bombs under scientist cars, which led to only one conclusion. Who was doing it for PR? …and then we got a piece of evidence about the death of a hunt saboteur, and the morning that evidence turned up, our office got raided.

I mean, we were basically, you know, we had a hard time sometimes, because we required profit to carry on. We were a professional company, like not having any politics, and yet we did. We did have, of course we had the bloody politics. Course we did, but we needed to make a living as well, and we weren't in the grant sector, so we couldn't do that.

Intv
Just going back, what was the interview with the union guy Walter Greendale. How did that come about?

Terry
Oh, okay, yeah, so a friend of mine is a New Zealand guy called Joel Cayford, and he had been teaching torpedoes to hunt their targets, then he had a nervous breakdown when he realised what he was doing, and he became very political. And Joel said to me, one day, I got a line on Walter Greendale. Who runs the TGWU and he’s coming up for retirement. Did you want to come, come up and do a freebie and just shoot, shoot him talking you know for posterity. So that's what we did.

Intv
Tell me what a Sony Rover Portapak is, why it was so different, and when did you first get your hands on it and realise its potential?

Terry Flaxton
So in 1976 one of my teachers at North East London Polytechnic was the lead actor of Whiplash, which was an Australian Gunsmoke or Rawhide tv programme. So his partner was a guy called Tony Nichols, and there's another one called Ron in liberation films. So when we first got our first our hands first off on a Portapak, which is a heavy, lumpy thing that you hang over your shoulder with a cable and a weirdly pointy camera thing at the front, which wobbles all over the show, that was 1976 but we were being taught with intent by people from Liberation Films. So they were already portraying the technology, even though it was made by the American war machine, as being a tool for liberation, yeah.

Intv
Did you see it as? Did you recognise it as, such as a tool for liberation? when you, when it, when it landed on your….

Terry Flaxton
So when we first got hold of video, and there was the ‘we’, Vida, there was me, Tony, Anthony Cooper and Penny Deadman. And we realised right then and there that we had to be a group. None of this you, you know, I'm the director and you're, you know, all of that stuff. We all, we all joined together. We'd all done film, and film was about waiting for tomorrow when it came back, likely with a scratch on it or something. But the thing about video was I could shoot you and I could play you back, and I could put a TV next to you, and it'd be right here, right now or a minute ago, it was imminent. Max Hastings from the Telegraph said, video is like a telephone call from a box around the corner, whereas film is a long distance telephone call..Oh, wait a minute. Wow, there's a there's some French theory about this, surely….

Intv
I was gonna ask about this sort of 70s going into 80s moment in London. And, I mean, like, I'm aware of, like the photographers, like The Half Moon people are doing a sort of grassroots, bottom up, a bit inflected with Marxist theory. You know, we take photographs as part of a sort of social mission and work. It's a working classy thing to do. Were you aware of any kind of landscape of other people in other visual cultures doing that whilst you were doing what you were doing.

Terry Flaxton
Well, some of the student experience of the world is via the visiting lecturers, and they're by far the most interesting, because they're the oddballs. Basically, they can't get a proper job. And so we had Tony Nichols, who was good. And we also had Peter Kennard. And Peter Kennard is par excellence, the kind of, you know, the guy that cut up photographs. So in terms of photography, I'd be going down to the photographer's gallery, but I can't remember when that started even, but I was aware of all the other mediums, but when I saw video, it's like, knocked everything out of the ball park. I can see how their politics can be incorporated into all these other things. But this, this thing, had it in it, was inherent in its being. You didn't have to wait for two days for it to come back to be something or it didn't need to be fetishized. That was the other thing, because there's a lot of fetishization around film. Video took that away, and admittedly and arguably, a lot of people had a, you know, they held it in a very bad respect, because you could turn it on and run it for hours. But actually, one thing we learned very quickly when shooting all of our documentaries is we'll shoot as little as possible, partly because the grief of finding stuff, because we'd be, you know, there was the issue of, when you spool down an hour on the tape, you're certainly got time to think about the edit after that. But actually it cuts your rhythm up, whereas with non-linear, which we got later, yeah, you could anyway…. video, video, basically was to me, like, there's something special about this. What in the species consciousness brings forth video at this point in time. How did we call this forth and why?

Intv
Okay, I've got a couple more questions. Thinking about particularly the community/ political work. What was its great successes and what was limitations at that point?

Terry Flaxton
That’s an interesting question on the on the grounds that, if you knew what you're doing with film, you could actually achieve quite a lot of what video did? You had to be brave enough to know that it would come out if it was low light or rather, you had to be competent. But the thing about video over film, at that time, are we talking over film? Are we talking as a thing in itself?

Intv
Both

Terry Flaxton
As a thing of itself? Video gave you, there was no issue of confidence. You turned it on, you saw what you got and you got what you got, so it was not even an issue, and you could roll past all of the constraints that were false constraints with film, where you could only record for four minutes on this medium, or 10 minutes on that medium. So you were outside the boundaries. And there were significant moments when that was a useful thing, even though many of the people who filmed didn't like it, because you could do that.

Intv
And looking back now at what from that period, is there anything that's relevant to today in any form whatsoever, whether it be media or politics or whatever?

Terry Flaxton
I don't, I don't think anything changes politically. Really, there's, there's power, there's money, there's the populace, there's what power wants the populace to do using money. I mean, all of those things can be manipulated, and we certainly see them being manipulated now. But if you just watch the average BBC report, you will find very few facts to back up the assertions. I suppose what video did for me is it enabled me, by spooling it back, to check it. Did they say anything? They said nothing. And yet they claim that! What's going on? The sheer assertion level that power believes it has on its side to argue about stuff is still as potent as it ever was. But we could be taking it apart. We should be doing miner's tapes, regular miner's tapes, all the bloody time. It should be people's tapes for, for what's actually going on.

Intv
How much of what could be archived has been destroyed?

Terry Flaxton
The thing about video is even if most of the video has been destroyed, if we could, we infinitely copied it, like in my studio, I've got a copy of everything I've ever done. I know how to migrate it from medium to medium to medium. So yes, archives are thrown away, like the Arnolfini, threw their whole video archive away, including a tape that Rod Stoneman when he was there, bought of mine, but I've got that tape so I can, I can, you know, even if I haven't got the one inch originals and the two inches and the digital format, so I can put together something reasonable to look at.

Intv
It is a sad fact that a lot of it's gone because not everyone is as thorough. I mean, I think I was as cavalier as anybody. I always undervalued what we'd done, you know, I didn't, didn't see its significance at all,

Terry Flaxton
But you know about,Bob Monkhouse, I mean, he had about 40 recorders, and he recorded the entire output of everything that ever went on British television, from the point that he started to the point that he died. He was Howard, the Howard Hurst of video everything on TV. It's recorded on VHS and betamax.

Intv
I've got a question about the process of editing that what you were talking about, the sort of dubbing on the fly. How did that dubbing on the fly affect how you would make a narrative of something?

Terry Flaxton
I knew about film editing, which was - here's a piece, here I'm going to put a slice in it, and I'm going to get another piece of film join it together, that's a cut. That's Eisenstein's montage of attractions. If you put the right things together, you know, put a meat cleaver and a bull, it's a terrible thing, because I'm a vegetarian, but if you put the two things together, it means the bull is going to get it: right? There was that kind of thing. But when I first came across the actual truth is, when I first came across video, I saw two inch tapes being sliced, cut em, they cut em, and they used them the way they could rock and roll it on the reels to find out where the frame was, so that they actually sliced a frame at a diagonal. So the film edit, which was a clumsy thing at the time, and the video edit, were not too different as a conceptual thing. So okay, so we roll this one back, spool it back, and then you do an edit. Oh, fuck. We've cut the end of that one off, and we've gone in too late on that one. Now I've got to go back to the previous edit to do that one again so that I can do this one again. We actually won an award for the first continuously dissolved 20 minute drama in 1982 called Circumstantial Evidence, and it starred Gina, a 17 year old Gina McKee, who's now got a BAFTA. And what we did is we got three machines together and a vision mixer, and we would say, right, you ready? Everybody ready? You know what you've got to do? Spool tapes up to it's like, go in the first shot when, and we did a vision mix. Meanwhile, somebody's rolling up the next one. And we did that. It took us a lot of goes to get 22 minutes worth, because you get 18 minutes in and you have to start again, Ah! And then come the premiere, which was going to happen at the Southbank, the BFI (the British Film Institute), the big theatre. I don't know how we got in there, but we did that. We were having an argument about it and we were supposed to be down there at seven o'clock to line the tape up, and about five o'clock, we decided to make a change. That meant doing the edit from five o'clock to 5:20 and not messing it up. And we went for it, and we got it done. But when I was carrying the machine up the stairs, it fell off my off my shoulder and it went down 12 stairs. Boom, boom, boom, boom. So we turned up at the BFI with this remix tape and a machine that might not play, but God smiled and it played. So, you know, we were on the edge of living on the edge of things, but also trusting that stuff would work. I

Intv
What is the definition of product? I've heard this word in this interview.

Terry Flaxton
What was product? A product is for consumption, right? So products actually a malign, a malignant description of what we were doing, because we actually believed that the more access that the audience had and recognised as television, as long as we got all of that stuff and subverted it at the same time, then product was not, is not, it's not a fair description of what we were trying. We were trying to understand the medium and subvert the in-built politics that would work against us. At the same time we weren't theorising this stuff too much. We had mad conversations like: Is video TV when it's broadcast, and is TV video when we play it back? Like it matters, we would have all that sort of conversation. We were, you know, it's more of a trippy hippy, I'm sad to say, more of a cybernetic or an anarchist position on things.

Intv
But you knew definitely in your heart of hearts there was this sort of slightly pernicious drive coming from the powers-that-be that were using media for their own ends and you were subverting something….

Terry Flaxton
We had to subvert television as a medium, because it was basically the dominant value system portraying its own values to everybody. So everybody could be in accord. At the same time we had to sufficiently make a form of work that people recognise as watchable,

because some video art, for instance, you know, it's 24 hours long, and you're not gonna watch it, whereas some community video would be rangy, but I mean, basically its so punchy that you'd forgive it, you know, on the content level. But we wanted to sit in that place where we could get as big an audience as possible. And still ask political questions.

Intv
And at the same time, on the side, you did this sort of work with pop stars.

Terry Flaxton
Do you know what? I actually believe this stuff! Yeah. But we would when we were doing the pop star stuff, we were, it was, it was good fun. It was all good fun because we were on, could we, knowing who we were, go in there, in our masks, and deliver the product as they knew it, sufficient to their ends, because we needed the income. I mean, we were working for a studio that expected money, and we were letting all of our video art mates come into the studio to make work for free.

Intv
And also, you were, my opinion, you were learning as well. That's one of the things

Terry Flaxton
…and learning.

Intv
So what do you think of things like the Turner Prize and stuff like that? When video art, contemporary video art is in that lane?

Terry Flaxton
Okay, so when the Turner Prize artists started using video, we'd already been dismissed as a generation. We were the second generation. So the first generation of video artists were typified by like Wolf Vorstell and Nam June Paik. And then the second generation came along, which was us, and then the third generation came on, which are the YBA. So the YBA got known as video makers because Gillian Waring used it, but our generation was absolutely eviscerated from the canon. It's just we were just removed from the canon, or made so little of, like the fact that John Hopkins died without there being Op-Eds on every newspaper, because he made the '60s, and he made in a very psychedelic and cybernetic way, he made video come into being in this country, but nobody celebrated it.

Intv
Why do you think that is? How do you think that happened?

Terry Flaxton
There are a lot of levers that were, have been pulled all the time in terms of the funding of video for instance, because the Film and Video department was called the Film and the Video department, it wasn't Video and Film department. It was the Film and Video department of the Arts Council for a reason. So there was, it was believed that there was this inherent quality to film. There's an inherent beauty in film, whereas for video, you really had to work to get it. And it's significant that we were super hated on film shoots. When I went on to the Ridley Scott shoot, we were the hated video crew. But by the end of it they loved us, but that was for a different reason, because we enabled something to happen that they'd never seen before, like seeing what was going on, on the set, because the crew never saw it.

Intv
Like so, how did the YBA end up walking off with the title? We invented video art.

Terry Flaxton
Well, I don't know that it was we invented video art, but we did the first best use of it.

Intv
Hey, how do they walk off with that then?

Terry
Because the attitude is that early video art in this country, we do not own it. We do not like it. We'd rather forget that it even existed in the first place.

Intv
Who's the we there?

Terry Flaxton
Well, the conglomerate hegemony that supports culture in this country, supports a certain set of narratives to the construction of why stuff is valid and why stuff is not. In America, they love, they love their video artists. They love their video artists, and they're very happy about video, art and community video. It wasn't called Community Video, as they didn't have that term there. There was just video, and some of it was about, there's a sit-in here, there's a protest. And some of it was about, have you seen my daft, daftest idea? You know. But here we've got this class-based system for everything, don't we, and it's very useful for eradicating histories.

Intv
So you think it's a class question as to why the YBA were given this kind of like, you're the video art people.

Terry Flaxton
There were people from my generation that made video art that write about the history of video, and it's a very picky history. I was known as a psychedelic artist in one book. I'm called a sometimes psychedelic video artist. Like, as if I didn't write a script on Russian foreign policy in the third world, but I'm absolutely eradicated, and the TV programmes that we did are attributed to other people, not attributed to us by people who are supposed to be scholars and check their facts.

Intv
So how come, that's what I don't understand. If you've been in the academy how come you weren't part of writing up the history that you were part of

Terry Flaxton
Well, they say that if you want to, if you want to, if you want to have a cannon, that includes you, you write a book. I mean, I was fucked if I was going to write a book, because I was making programmes. I was making the bloody stuff

Intv
We'd got to the end of Channel Four. You've had quite a long career since that. Would you see yourself primarily as a video artist now who does, who did cinematography on the side? Or what?

Terry Flaxton
When I came to Somerset, after the end of Triple Vision, which is in ‘93 I become an itinerant director of photography, shooter, whatever. And I'd go to London. Not much work in Bristol,

because the BBC crew was still up there. When they went freelance then, and they held the freelance work up there for some time. So I didn't get work. I had to do London, a lot, lot of driving. So I carried on shooting and kept my head low. By the end of the 90s, I was writing feature scripts. I wrote about 10 feature scripts. One of them got made. That's another story altogether. I was never accredited for it, of course, because it's the way things happen. By1999 I formed this, another small company, got some money out of ITV and did Skin Deep, which is about racism in the army. That was a half hour thing. I was writing, writing a lot, and I started to make video art again.
I didn't do a lot of art or politics between 93 when we got busted, all the way through to about 2003 and then then I made a sci fi thing called Forever, yeah, which was made on five grand and then a friend said: Why don't you try academia? So I pitched up, and about 2005/2006 I pitched up and I won an Arts, Humanities Research Fellowship, a creative research fellowship. And the money was 350 grand, which all went to Bristol University, then I had to negotiate what I'd be paid after that, and I started getting a good wage, finally, and by 2010 I started researching high resolution imaging in a big way, and higher dynamic range imaging. And by 2013 I was offered a professorship at the University of West of England, running a research centre called the Centre for Moving Image Research.
By 2015 I'd set up a cinematography festival. We got, you know, did a week at the Arnolfini two years running with, Oscar winners and Chris Menges and you name it, all of that stuff. But also what we achieved, we did it on stage, live and in front of an audience, we achieved the first capture of Higher Dynamic Range images as we know them today in television sets. And this is the killer, I was invited to go to the American Society of Cinematographers annual summit, and I found myself getting a mic stuff stuffed in my hand and starting to talk about higher dynamic range. And I started to realise that there was, who was there, Vittorio Storaro, who lit Apocalypse Now, a lot of the big cinematographers of all the big movies, and it suddenly hit me that I was talking to them about their game, but it's the mic here, and it was hitting me, and it was slowing me down, and I had to chuck it out my head, because I had basically the world's best cinematographers listening to me, and I ended up consulting on the Academy's Science and Technology Committee on high dynamic range capture and display.

Intv
And doing your video art a parallel to that?

Terry Flaxton
Okay, oh yeah, fuck I forgot all of that….so I'd made video art from the very beginning. In 1977 we made a video art piece called Presentments. And about three years ago (2022) I made Presentments 2 which used the same footage from back then to make a new piece. But about 2015 I was rung up by a company called Sedition that, and they sell to collectors editions of work which the collectors can get to on the cloud - so they can't own the data - just it's streaming. And basically, over the last 10 years, I've been releasing work, video artwork on Sedition. And over this amount of time, I've become one of the most collected artists on there.

Intv
What about projects? The Somerset project and the Dinners.

Terry Flaxton
The dinner party. Okay, well, that's a different thing, isn't it? So, all right, so when I started doing my research on Higher Dynamic Range and High Resolution imaging, I devised a set of projects in terms of practice as research, and I then set up a set of portfolios so each portfolio have would have a different thrust, objects near you, objects far away, in other words, ubiquitous objects in the world. What could I do with an ubiquitous object? A table, I could set up a dinner party, and I could shoot it overhead in standard definition, and I could do the same thing in High Definition and see what the engagement time was when the

results were projected onto a table. And it turns out that four times the resolution meant twice as much time audience engagement. And so that was portfolio one. I won't go through the portfolios, but I was looking at how, you know, high dynamic range…There's a sweet spot where we can actually now generate an image that gives you, we achieved this on stage in front of 200 people, ridiculous. We basically achieved such high quality high dynamic range, with sufficient frame rate, resolution and dynamic range that we could imitate the eye-brain pathway, and you saw instant 3D you didn't need anything on. Didn't need any kit, no glasses, binoculars, stereopsis, or whatever it's called, where you trick the brain into seeing it. But because we produced what the eye sees, luminance and all the rest of it, you see, depth. Got a bit mad about Dolby, because Dolby wanted to get it out there before we could actually manufacture the TV sets that would then produce that experience. So now we've got this pony version of HDR that everybody sees, but what it's actually capable of is incredible. HDR. That means just brighter. People were saying, what do you need this for? You just get a bloody sun tan. Well, actually, you actually see, you actually see in 3D it's incredible. But it was binned because, because Dolby wanted to get its money back in paying for the patent, because they didn't invent it. Dolby Vision, right? It's that stuff. In fact we saw the whole thing.

Interviewers: Andy Porter and Maria Andrews

Audio Recordist: Maria Andrews.