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Interviewer: Alison Marchant

Interviewee: Gary Stevens

Date of Interview:

Can you say your name and spell it please?

Ok, my name is Gary Stevens, with one R in Gary, and Stevens with a V.

And what year was you born?

And I was born in 1953. The 8th of December.

And what year did you move into the Leyton/Leytonstone area?

Well I was a student at Goldsmiths and I think I probably moved in there um, from Hackney, I was living in Hackney with some ex students from Goldsmiths, I think probably about 82 was when I moved into 281 Grove Green Road with Minna Thornton, at the time, we were a couple then and it was the first kind of proper house I had, everything else had been a student model and this actually looked, resembled an ordinary house, we played house for a bit.

And when did you actually move out of the area completely?

Well I did a sort of a hop, um, we um, we broke up in about 89, um, we got married and the marriage went bungle almost immediately (laughs) and then I went to Iceland for a couple of months and then lived on Julian Maynardís floor for a couple of months in Wandsworth and then moved back to Fillebrook Road, Sonya Boyce had just moved out, I was working with Cornelia Parker and she was living in the flat at the top of 161 Fillebrook Road, and Sonya moved out of the basement so she suggested I move in, which as very convenient for me, so I had two addresses on that kind of main drag where the M11 was, but after that I moved out of there and lived in 1a Moyers Road which was just around the corner a bit actually, just slightly out of the area, not in line with the M11.

Oh, was that an ACME house as well?

No, that was a little flat that I bought and I just about managed to buy it, I had um, I had no money really, and we were all moving out of this, these kind of short life housing, we all lived in short life housing and I couldnít afford to buy anything and the market was going up, and I do remember going out and thinking I needed a car and I needed a house and I looked in an estate agentís window and it was impossible, I couldnít possibly buy that, even think about buying that, I couldnít really pay proper rents and I couldnít afford a car either and I remember sort of coming away with a pair of good boots and a Swiss Army Knife and I thought I would have to become some sort of nomad, and um, it was a) because I think I either got some money, it was the Paul Hamlyn award, I think I got a Paul Hamlyn award and that gave me a lump sum of money which I could use on a small deposit on a flat, so that is how I managed that move. But that must have been, that was about 95, eventually, so I was in Grove Green Road probably between 82 and 87, and then and then um, with a bit of a gap, 87, 88 to 95. In Fillebrook Road and then two years in Moyerís Road and then I left the area for Manor House, where I am now, in about 95, 97.

When you applied to ACME did you send slides and go for an interview-

No, I donít remember doing all that at all.

What do you remember?

I donít remember anything about it actually, about the process, I remember applying for it, and being on a list but I donít ever remember sending in slides, certainly didnít attend an interview. I canít remember actually what the process was, they either knew of me, or had some way of knowing you were an artist or was endorsed by someone, I donít know. I canít remember.

When first lived there you were at the Slade werenít you, doing your MA?

That was sort of 81 to 83. I was there.

Oh right, when you moved to the area, it was 82?

Yes, o it- when I first moved into Grove Green Road it was coming to the end of that.

Do you remember ACME offering you the house and you going to see it for the first time? The first house you lived in?

No, I was just, I just jumped at it really, um, I had always done short life things as I was just kind of grateful that anything showed up really and if it did have a leaky roof I was happy, there was not much of a kind of, ooh I donít like the colour of that one, I donít like the look of it. I mean it is quite funny that now, I ended up buying a place with Minna, we got back together again, and um, very happy about that, um, and now, one is kind of fussy. I ended up buying really because it was far cheaper than renting and we could do, we had the deposit to do it, so it made sense really in the end, although I did quite like the community of people living there, and it made working possible then, because it really wasnít, nobody was actually earning money then, doing what they were doing, so the only thing that made it really possible was that your standard of living was, it didnít cost you very much to actually live, unlike now.

Can you describe the first house that you lived in from memory?

Well actually it was a terraced house that actually is pretty similar to the one I am in now, sort of must have been 1930ís sort of terraced house, kind of a blue front door, hallway, um, small living room, bay window and there was a kind of tiny tiny kitchen with a plastic um, lean to which sort of blew away in the storm, 87, or something like that.

Was that Hurricane Henry or something like that (both laugh)?

Something like that, a hurricane anyway, we lost our lean to there, and it had a small garden and it was just a very nice place. And it does bear a resemblance to the place we are in now, I suppose that is partly because Minna has a part Danish connection, so everything has a slightly sort of Scandinavian (laughs) feeling to it. Independently of the IKEA furniture, it does have that feeling.

So when you first moved in, did you arrive with furniture?

No, I had virtually nothing really, but Minna had inherited some of the old, had some pieces of furniture, her father was Peter Thornton he was kind of at the V and A and you know, was a director of the Soames Museum, so he had lots of quite nice bits and pieces that, so Minna had some nice furniture and what I had actually, I furnished most of my houses with the props for shows. You know, I would go down Brick Lane boot sales and auctions and buy this furniture for stage shows, chairs and tables and that kind of stuff and then I didnít have any storage space, and I needed a table, so it doubled as my furniture, or the other way round, I needed plates in a performance so I used all my own plates to smash and then I didnít have any plates, so generally my furniture was interchangeable with the props in the shows.

Where did you have your studio in your house, or did you not need a studio?

Well the first things I did in Fillebrook Road actually, one of the first things I set up doing was I would rehearse in the house, they were small scale things, two hander things, so I could do that, but when I started to get a bit bigger, the first show I did was called Invisible Work and that was sort of 84 and then um, the next one, and that was with Julian Maynard- Smith (?) and the next one was If the Cap Fits and with Caroline Wilkinson and that was 86, and went on from there, but you know, mainly made at home, but the next one was about 6 people and was quite an elaborate thing and that was working with Cornelia Parker on the collection of objects because I hated shopping at markets and things really and she loved it, so that was great going with her, and um, I needed, we got a disused Woolworths on the Old Kent Road, but the- I have always been based with Artsadmin who have always moved around but they are now in Aldgate East, so they have always administered me, and of late, they have got rehearsal spaces so I tend to use those rehearsal spaces now, but at that time I would apply for an Arts Council grant, and in that grant would be the cost of hiring a space, and you know, at that time there were lots of derelict spaces, they are all about to be developed and converted and so on, but at that time um, so many exhibitions and residential places were available to artists really, loads of shows, I saw loads of rehearsal spaces all in disused derelict spaces.

Youíve described the Grove Green house, what was the other house like in Fillebrook Road?

Yeah, that was larger scale, it had a tile path going to the front door hallway, you know, it was a dilapidated grand house and it was divided, the stairs were blocked off, so after you went through the front door of the house, there was another door which led up to Connieís top floor flat and that, the stairs were boarded in so it was self contained and I had the whole front room, um, which had a kind of hoop skirt that was part of If the Cap Fits costume hanging on the wall and you know, various bits of peeling wallpaper, um, I didnít have a bed, I just had a mattress in one corner and it was a bit like camping actually in there, to be honest and there was a large, I went down the corridor which was down the side of the stairs into a small bathroom on the right and then the back was a black painted kitchen which was, and there was a kind of lean to and quite a big garden out the back and it was quite good because you could sort of hose this place down so it was used quite a lot for parties, my place was used for parties, Connie and John Smith had birthdays fairly close to one another, so they used to have a joint birthday and because it was my flat we joined in, I called it mine and we split it, but it was never mine, all the people who came into my kitchen didnít know who the hell I was (both laugh) they all knew Connie, and Jeff. So there was a great hoo ha, I always ignored mine, but that was quite, it was fantastic for that, so you could just clear it out completely, and one year there was a disaster scene or something, because I had done a show called Animal with lots of small soft toys and I just had them in bin liners out the back and we just filled cabinets with them, all these kind of squashed animals trapped in these cabinets hanging from the light fittings.

And why was it painted black, do you know?

I think Sonya Boyce did that but it, Connie had painted hers grey I think but it was a way of dealing with floorboards, so all the floorboards were just painted because they were fairly kind of rough so rather than standing them down and varnishing them, everything was painted black and nobody had carpets-

Oh ok, you were talking about the floors, I thought you meant the walls?

No the walls on the whole were just white, whitewashed over wallpaper, so there was wallpaper under there but they had just been painted white.

Which house did you prefer?

Well I canít answer that question because there was two quite distinct lives really, um, you know, I was reasonably happy most of the time with Minna and then we split up, it was unhappy at the end there, and then I was pleased to move into 161 Fillebrook, and that was exciting you know, being there with Connie and doing, busying about there. But I was pretty miserable. I was on my own and sitting there, so that was more like camping, but it was less of a commitment to it, to live so I wasnít planning to go anywhere else at the time. I didnít really care actually, too much about it, I was busy working, and I cared about work, and I poured all my energy into that, and not so much into the place I was living in.

So do you think it was more like a studio with a bed in it?

It was a bit, yes. Yes, I would have a kind of typewriter and a small chair and a table, it was all very Spartan and that is how it was really.

What about the street, Fillebrook Road, can you remind me again about the period that you was in Fillebrook Road? Was it the latter part?

It was, yes, it was a mixture, it was interesting, because there was a large arts community, um, so there was two pubs, there was the Northcote and the Heathcoate, and the Northcote was actually taken over more or less by the arts community, um, and the Heathcoate was more the local people, and on the whole I enjoyed both really, and got away with going into both, um, but it was, it was a kind of split community, everyone kept to themselves really, kept their heads down and it seemed the road was divided, one side of the road, one side of the road was due for demolition, so all the artists lived on one side of the road on Fillebrook Road, and on one side of the road it wasnít, so they were all the kind of people who had lived there for a long time, so it was a kind of peculiarly kind of split community, but it was absolutely mad when it was 95, when it was going, um, because of the sort of tribes. You know, all the artists they were kind of interesting, became the most boring group of people living in the area, because there were people living in the trees, you know, they were definitely wild, you know and I remember going to work, going to Goldsmiths with my bag, you know, and (laughs) it felt like I was, and if anyone started up a chainsaw to cut down a tree, the trees would come alive with these people heading towards the noise, and then there was a sort of labouring hard hat people, who were slowly demolishing, systematically demolishing the place, but they would have to go into a house, there would be an exchange of keys, they would go into the house, smash the plumbing, smash the facilities in the place and then brick up the front doors and windows and then put a guard on the door, until the cement dried, because if they didnít do that, people would just take the walls down and then kind of occupy it, but someone somewhere had the brilliant idea of employing this group of guards, they were all black and all in there and would have bonfires in the baths, and they didnít know what the hell was going on, so the people in trees didnít feel so aggressive towards them, if they had all been sort of white they would have felt very happy to abuse them, but no, it was a kind of interesting way of diffusing that um, but no, it was mad, so there would be an exchange of keys and then they would be this sound of someone digging their way through the adjoining wall or something. When I finally left 161 Fillebrook Road there wasnít kind of any saying goodbye to the house, because Terry Smith was in there carving something into the wall, he was stripping off um, the plaster off the wall. And um, so there was this late kind of flowering use of the property.

So were there tree houses in Fillebrook Road then?

Yes, there were a few people in the trees, and there was kind of towers in Claremont Road, and um, Graham Miller was, I donít know whether he is on your list either and he was living there and had a disabled son, and he allowed one of the protestors who was living in the towers, living in the trees to sleep on his floor, one night. And the next morning, or it seemed like the next morning, maybe it was the day after, the police broke down the door at six oíclock in the morning and told him to get out, with his son and everything. No warning whatsoever, he had to leave. And you know, I think he is still fairly traumatised by that, you know, heís, there is lots of people making films, John Smith, Graham, Ian Bourn, all making films about being in that area, it was in the end pretty devastating and difficult and depressing, everybody was struggling with the loss of this place.

Do you think that artists were emotionally attached to their houses?

Yeah, I think they were, and it was quite difficult because the most militant people were you know, the people against the motorway and so they didnít have any emotional investment in the places, at all, you know, for them it was a kind of local but political issue, um, and they were kind of really aggressive and assertive, putting road blocks and, but you know, the actual people that lived there and cared about it, really were sort of sidelined, so we were all rather forlornly sort of put our heads down and went off to the station and came back again, it was pretty miserable, a pretty miserable time in lots of ways. It had been incredibly exciting, as I say it was a, it wasnít so much a community where everybody lived in each othersí pockets, it did make lots of art activities possible that wouldnít have been, that nobody would have afforded to live that way otherwise.

Yes, because I remember you, Cornelia Parker, Terry Smith, John Smith, and Ian Bourne, and I always thought that you guys had been there a little bit longer than say I had been there and you seemed to be, getting lots of work done, and do you think maybe being there together was like a catalyst for a generation of ideas, you know, the opportunity of being in a place to engage with artists so readily?

I donít think, you know, we werenít down the pub discussing, having debates about work we just all took it for granted that we were all artists I think and that is what we cared about, what we thought about, and um, um, it was a sort of model for a way of kind of living really, but as I say, I didnít really care about anything else, I was only focussed on the work, so that was why I was doing so much of it. It wasnít so much, looking back, it is sad we didnít make more of it, that we werenít a kind of cohesive group of people, but I suppose we sort of supported each other in just being a kind of strange group of eclective people doing this thing, it became normal that is what you did, so it was supportive in that way I suppose.

Do you miss that environment in any way, now that you live here for example? Are there bits that you miss, or bits that you are relieved to have gone?

Well I donít think, if I hadnít lived like that I donít know how I would have survived doing what I do, you know, I just about make money now doing what I do, but it is still break even stuff, um, but it is on a slightly higher level, um-

How did you survive day to day there? What did you do for a living?

Well I was doing part time teaching, and I was doing regular teaching at Goldsmiths, I was sort of teaching from about 1988. And that was, I started off doing one day a week, I only wanted to do one day a week because I was so focussed on my own work, you know, to interfere and I was worried that I was offered two days a week, thought they were starting to encroach-

(Laughs) It is usually the other way round, that is why I am laughing because most people think, I have only got one day a week, so I really want two, and then that means I have got enough to live on?

No, I really didnít (laughs) I really didnít want a job. But in the end, it sort of backfired really because um, I ended up taking on other jobs, you know, asked to do a day here and a day there, and although I had refused to have a proper job, a more kind of senior job, um, I ended up working harder than I probably would have done if I had got a senior job by doing all these bits, you know, I didnít feel I could turn anything down, because it was just one off things, wasnít a long term commitment, wasnít a regular commitment, I felt I could do it, but actually they kept coming and um, quite often getting the balance right between working and teaching was always a bit tricky really. I mean I have always spent most of my time doing work, and if I try and recall um, my domestic situation or my personal things, quite often it is a blur, because actually I wasnít focussed on that at all, I wasnít thinking about that very much, um, but I can reel off shows and you know, do all the kind of work stuff, and I almost kind of construct everything on that basis and I sort of disappeared somewhere, so I personally donít appear in my own sort of history, I just pop up in shows, but I think one of the big differences, of course I do think I wouldnít be doing as I say, kind of repeating myself really, but I wouldn't be doing what I am doing now if I hadnít kind of worked on it then, I couldnít have afforded to have done it, um, and it sort of enabled, and in a way I felt a lot richer then. I could have a meeting between people and meet every Wednesday and slowly put something together, so the first shows I did, If the Cap Fits and the Invisible Works, you know, for a year I would work, re work them, try things out, play with them, talk to either Julian or Caroline about those things and develop it slowly, and now of course if you get a grant and you are paying people specifically for doing a job, you are paying them by the week and it sort of, every Wednesday, you have to use that week efficiently and so that sort of process changes by the funding so I feel poorer by the funding in a way, than I did without it, but you know, I couldnít have carried on without the funding but it felt like that to some extent and I think one of the things also at that time was also there was kind of a healthy arts centre circuit, so there was the ICA showing live work, Cardiff was showing live work, you know, you could tour round, most art centres had a theatre attached, and I would kind of tour in those places, and those places in the whole have gone, and thee was this certain point around about, yes it does coincide more or less from moving out of that area, and kind of coincidentally really, that um, um, most of the live work, the stage work I was doing fell off, because there was no longer a place for it, there was a kind of point where the Arts Council was funding Bowgamalan Ensemble (?) and Stationhouse Opera and me as theatre, and then someone looked at us and looked at that and decided we werenít, so there were other kind of categories, other attempts to sort of say what we were and then it was called combined arts and then it was called something else and then we were all kind of pushed out, but those things change, so I have been struggling ever since to try and find a way of you know, doing video installations, small scale things in galleries or trying to find another way of doing it, but in a way that circuit, what was building up at the time, and people like Rose English were very kind of active too then, and there was, it was quite a lively area that small scale theatre you know whatever you all it, performance area. And there was interest in the hybrid, you know, crossing boundaries and we were all sort of operating in and around art schools, but there was people coming in from different directions and I quite liked that mixture of different things coming in, but that has really changed now; it is no longer like that.

You were saying about living in Leyton/Leytonstone, that it kind of seemed to give you a luxury of time, in a way.

Yeah, yeah, because I was, I think we were all living like kids, really, none of us were having children, the only person who had had a child had a disabled child, and so we were all pretty reluctant, that ,made us even more inclined not to do it, so none of us were living, none of us were wanting kids, we were all, that was another way, we were supporting one another, or not supporting one another depending on your point of view, um, that our model was being artists, and that meant you didnít, you werenít measuring success by kids and houses and cars, and you were measuring success by respect and interest in this peculiar activity.

So I remember your work at the Slade, which is very formal, and then when did all that slapstick comedy stuff come into your work? Because I missed that! I suddenly knew it was there.

It was there hiding actually, always, but I had gone through Goldsmiths and the Slade, not doing any performance, but I had been very interested in it, but I was sort of making films and doing various bits and pieces and doing installations and lots of the stuff I was doing was describing performance events and I was trying, I learnt a lot by how not to make a film actually, I have still got the suitcase of old bits of film, 16mm film, which cost me a fortune, but it never quite got to be a film, partly because I would shoot very wide shots for as long as the film lasted, you know, there was lots of people shooting, kind of truth to material idea that you would shoot for as long as the film lasted and I would do take after take of some elaborate thing that I would set up, but really what I would do would be filming a staged thing, and it might be in a park, but it was still a sort of staged thing, um, and so I kind of slowly learnt that I didnít have much of a feeling for film, you know, as soon as I left, um, the Slade, I did a funny show for the Slade, I did a sculpture show, that I hadnít done at all, and I did it as a kind of joke really (laughs) and it was a complete surprise, and I had never done that before this, or since, but at the same time I was showing fragments of films, there was a long monologue that I was doing, and actually the monologue was something I was going to give to Julian Maynard Smith to do, because I really didnít think of myself as a performer, and I had always sort of hated performance really, you know, hated the idea of me doing performance, I was much too obsessive and you know, couldnít, didnít dream that I would be a performer. Although I was at school doing lots of karate so I was quite fit at the time. Um, when I left (dog barks) I think that is Minna coming in, so you might as well switch it off for a sec. Ok, I think I can pick up from where I left off, it was, so I left the Slade and I was talking to Julian Maynard Smith about doing this monologue and he was doing um, his shows, he was doing a new show called Ultra Mundane and a kind of revival of something called Sex and Death, and he wanted a performer, and he asked me if I wanted to be in it, and we sort of swapped each other, because neither of us had any money, so he did something for me and I did something for him, and it is sort of a relationship that I have kept all these years.

Because actually you mentioned obsessive qualities, and that is absolutely ideal for a performer really?

Well it was quite interesting this idea of being able to, it was very much part of you know, of the time really, that I could work obsessively on some structure, make it very carefully and there was no object in the end, it had a brief life, so it was kind of ephemeral, so it was rather like making this elaborate firework and then lighting it, somehow, no trace of it, once it had gone, it had gone, and at the time, I quite liked that idea, you know, I destroyed my Goldsmithsí degree show, I didnít keep any of it, I broke it all up and took it- but now of course in my 50ís I am, someone says and what do you do? And (laughs) I wish I had some kind of record of it that I had kept and a better kind of document of these things. But that was very much of the time, that you werenít, no one wanted to make, no one was interested in commodities, didnít actually come up really. Um, but everyone was interested in minimal conceptual things and you know, if you did a good show, that never meant you sold anything, and anyway, I think if people had sold something it would be looked at with some suspicion somehow, there is something wrong with that somehow.

It was very thinking based, wasnít it? The kind of intellectual side?

Yeah. Yeah. It was linked to the philosophy at the time, now it is linked to fashion orÖ..

Yeah I think so too actually.

It is certainly not linked to philosophy (laughs).

And also people were very particular about documenting their work now, they have always got evidence of their work, that was something that Terry Smith mentioned as well.

You mentioned Fillebrook Road, what was Grove Green Road like when you moved there? You mentioned in Fillebrook Road being there when demolitions were taking place was Grove Green Road demolished after Fillebrook Road?

No, I moved in, so I moved in with Minna to Grove Green Road, and spent some years there and they were nice and quiet really, I just, it was rather like a boring living. And but a boring living in a nice way, it was, it was enjoyable, and it was the first time really that as I say that I had a proper model of how most people would live in a house, and then that went bung and there was a moment of absolute chaos after that and then I went into Fillebrook Road as a kind of retreat.

Do you think looking back, that anything in that environment had an effect on the work that you were making?

Um, yes and no I suppose, I mean I never actually have done anecdotal things although lots of people think that I do, you know, people are endlessly saying that would make a good performance, things they have observed, but I have never actually done anything like that, but the, I suppose the kind of short term provisional nature of it enabled lots of things and lots of activities and there was something about that kind of stripped back dilapidated environment that produced lots of work that was a bit the same, it was I suppose all kind of related to um, you know, Arte Provera, the idea where you are kind of making something with impoverished means, kind of poor but itís you know, from that you can make something which is kind of rich and interesting and I think everybody felt that, and if you had politics it was in that area you were making something with limited means.

And I also thought that piece that you did years later called Slow Life made me think about those houses actually, like the staircase piece and people coming slowly down, moving so slowly like almost a frieze, maybe because I saw those projected interiors like live work spaces-

Well it was, that was done in January 2004, it was shot at the end of the previous year and um, and I you know, I was living in Manor House here, at that time, and one of the interiors is this room we are recording in.

I thought it looked familiar (laughs)

But actually shot other people in it. Normally I shot, I was kind of interested to shoot normal people in their own home and it started off being a bit like that, but I didnít want the piece to be about happy families, so there is a number of them where you canít quite tell what is going on, there is two people passing each other on the stairs, you know, you donít quite know whether they live with one another, whether they are lodgers, what they are in relation to one another, and that was me and Julian actually. Um, and I quite liked the contrast of showing something in a kind of minimal like industrial art space, featureless art space and then have this domestic spaces just look extraordinary in that environment you know, they look somehow strangely excessive, and um, so it was quite nice just seeing colours and cushions in these places. Um, and really it was a radical shift for me, because I had always done stage shows, I kind of liked that staging and in a way I had always had trouble with the image and the great thing about doing live performance is it is not an image, it wasnít primarily a visual image for me, it was a sculptural thing to encounter, not something that had a clearly defined boundary or outline, it was you know a kind of complex object. And one of the things I liked about Slow Life was this kind of slow slippage of of, movement, so it was something about the creaking and cracking furniture and this movement that um, sort of attacked or undermined the idea of the still image, although the still image was kind of the norm.

Yeah, and also somehow it brings forward this kind of house as a dysfunctional space in a way, where you are not sure if people are actually engaging, or as you say, what is interplayed in the house, it has got a very kind of weird-

Yeah, yeah. Well I quite like, what I quite like doing is making um, sort of models of something that really donít, tell you about life, they are not really about life, they you know, the curious kind of objects, and um, it was important to me that it was recorded real time and they were performing very slowly, they were performing simple actions that normally would take about 30 seconds but took about half an hour to do, to pass a glass of wine, or go out the door, so a glance would turn into a long look, or someone would hold something for a very long time. So that notion of intention or reading someoneís mind from their behaviour kind of gets thwarted because you canít quite tell what it going on in the mind of someone who is doing something that slowly, that they are kind of concentrating hard, and they are not trying to look like it is a slowed down film, they are trying to look like any moment that they are completely stable and they are sort of at rest, everywhere in that journey so it is rather like they are preoccupied or absent minded and you canít tell which one it is, but there is an isolating effect that that has, but I did want the, most of the actions in it are an encounter at some point between two people or a meeting of some sort that then goes away again, so there is something about that crossing over. A bit. But there is anxiety in it, because there is this slow, but I also quite like the idea that my idea, if someone says whatís heaven like? What is the best thing that can happen? Itís not going to be your wedding day or a big event, a kind of unremarkable event, so there is something about that just living in a place, an unremarkable thing extended (both laugh) that becomes remarkable because that is all you have got, those kind of things you donít record, incidental things of life, passing a cup of tea to someone or-

Do you think when you look back at Leyton and Leytonstone do you think there was something remarkable there, in-

Well looking back it has gone, I mean what is remarkable about it now is that way of life, has absolutely gone. You know, every bit of property was available for some kind of creative intervention, or some kind of short moment of something peculiar has gone, and everything is turned into flats or has been sewn up in some way. So it is definitely a way of life that has kind of been erased really.

What did you think, in terms of the protestors, because that was extraordinary in your street there were tree houses and chainsaws and all that going on?

Well as I say, you know, we were all very sympathetic of course and we were supposed allies in all of this, we didnít want the road to go through. Um, but it was a kind of problem because what I was saying about that sort of emotional investment, they had none, they kind of moved in to do this thing, so that was that, but we had actually lived there and had a community there in some ways, and it was tough, it was tough, we werenít kind of being as militant as these people, we were just the kind of victims of this thing and there were lots of people staggering around trying to come to terms with like a ghost (laughs) and it, you know, I think most artists struggle with kind of degrees of depressions, but it was a sort of devastating thing.

Because you left that whole area quite late really, so you must have seen this slow progression?

Yeah, it was really getting kind of destroyed when I left, I was glad to leave actually, when it finally went.

Can you remember say a period when a lot of ACME artists left, before you left when you were still there, I mean how did it feel that period in time?

Well most of the people, I still left when there was people, it ended with a bang with me in the end, everybody I knew was kind of moving out, I had moved out, there was this thing, I mean Graeme had been turfed out, and everything seemed to get ugly and uncomfortable to say the least and lots of things were starting to get kind of difficult, people were putting barricades up on the road and things. But I had gone before the police moved in and stuff, there was a kind of a second wave of people who hadnít been there very long who just kind of moved in quickly to the places in their last gasp.

What, squatting do you mean?

More or less, yes.

So you actually felt a kind of build up with these barricades going up and you thoughtÖwhat did you think?

I think you know, I didnít have quite the emotional um, engagement with it as I think Graeme Ian Bourne and John Smith had.

Yeah, I was going to ask you about that.

You know, they really did do work that was about the area and about loss and about memory and they were addressing that, it was very effecting for them, but I have always been pretty alienated, I have got better in my old age, but I was always slightly detached and sort of walked about, almost camping really.

The safest way to be.

But it was then.

Do you think in a way you were protecting yourself? Did you think ok, I know this is happening but-

Yeah, I think I did that with everything though. Everything personal, I did that. You know, I ended up wearing all the Christmas presents my aunts bought me for you know, the hideous jumpers they bought me, and I would wear them sort of knowing they were hideous, but it was a sort of, no one else knew that I was wearing these things ironically, they were just jumpers, but um, thatís how I approached lots of things, slightly slightly odd, slightly alienated behaviour. Sort of funny if you found out about it, but most people didnít (laughs)-

Because even that description of you going to Goldsmiths with your briefcase and the protestors in the background with a chainsaw going off, there is a sort bizarre thing about that really. I mean, I am just thinking that whole idea of play that comes up in your work. Do you think there was an element of that at Leyton at that time, or am I reading into it, because you said as artists, we were all just like a bunch of children in a way?

Well that was our model, we had very little kind of responsibility, we didnít have mortgages, we didnít have commitments that would have meant we had to do something and sensible to earn money, we were avoiding those ties and because we werenít having kids there was no kind of new generation of kids that would define us as the older group, its happening to us now hurrah and no but I think that one of the things that does come up in my work a lot that is related to that time is a sort of sense of em a sense of belonging or slight doubt about belonging.You are not quite sure whether these people live in this place or not or occupy this place or not they donít feel comfortable in this place

And bit kind of dysfunctional as well

Yes

Laughs I donít know if I should say that/

It is important to say that but it is important that there are not meant to be literal pictures of social behaviour so if you do see I as behaviour it does become kind of just mad but in a way I quite like the idea of sort of constructing something kind of knowingly odd that does something about consciousness or something its much more kind of structural than that so you can kind of inured what you like but it is not meant to be seen as actual people living with one another but I quite like doing something that you are not quite sure of the nature of the minds of the people that you are looking at that it is something like a bit animal about what they are doing or but not in any kind of straight forward way they are just not making the normal facial expressions or so it makes a space where they are not confirming they status as part of your community or part of your world you donít know where you stand with them you donít know weather they are outsiders or they are part of your group pr whatever and I quite like that em where you can not empathise with these people you are not supposed to and you know

Thatís really interesting

But for me it is sculpture so you have to work quite hard to work with real people and think of that group of people as some kind of sculptural so you have to sabotage there personality and the ordinary way of relating to them in order to find this kind of peculiar way of thinking about what is going on

And the people you knew in Leyton/Leytonstone you have mentioned Ian Bourne, John Smith, Cornelia parker and Terry Smith , do any other artists that come to mind?

There was sort of through Graeme Impact Theatre and I got to know those people through Connie more

And they lived down there?

Pete Brooks and Joss puke and those people they were living in and around that area and I know Georgina Carless as well

What did Georgina do?

At the time what was she doing at the time she was doing a theatre design course she had been at Goldsmiths and had done various things and she had a very strong visual sense so I think she was doing bits of painting painting backdrops in theatres she had a strong design sense good colour sense and I think she could have gone into interior design in different areas in a way we all supported each other in being artists but actually could work the other way I think she could have gone into interior design or some where else and I think she would have been very happy in that area but because we all wanted to be high flouting artist she didnít feel that was a noble thing to do so it could work against people I think but she is happy now she is doing painting and things now

So you are still in touch with those artists?

I see one or two people it is kind of odd the people that I do see and the people I donít see before I moved in there I was sharing a house with Terry Smith and John Molitan and terry and I was regarded as mad twins we were pretty inseparable actually early on we could never understand why people would mistake each other mistake us for each other quite often

Oh ok

Quite often I would get called Terry and he would get called Gary we felt we actually different we could not comprehend why it was but we were both kind of short working class blokes who talked fast and actually now it makes sense that people just saw us as the same strongly actually it was funny living in

You have the same colour hair that is about it

Yes I am trying too understand it but that is my way of understanding it but when I was living in Hackney its quite funny because Terry is about 5 foot 4 and I am about 5foot 6 both short legs but in Hackney in the market we were probably you know some of the taller people when we were living there in that late 70s there had not been much mobility of people around that area so the population was all pretty stunted post war working class people all pretty short we were doing well actually 5 ë4 and 5í5 and what was interesting with this influx of artists that all did change quite quickly but when I first moved in there it was amazing it was like Lilly put (laughs)

So when you first moved into Leyton did you feel really excited by all the artists being there?

Yes but I suppose that was were I had lived anyway my whole life was about being an artists and being with artist I was either in college or being there I had escaped Essex where there were no artists

Are you from Essex originally?

Yes well curiously my Mother grew up in Lesley road which was one of the little roads off of Leyton station so very close and my dad curiously came from round the corner here so it is sort of accidental that I have moved back into these area suggested that they a re cheap areas to live in but it just happened to be that

And I just like to ask you were you around when John Smith was filming his house or had you left by then?

Yes

Or had you gone back?

Yes we would quite often sharing John would come round and we would have these joint birthday parties so he was there so we would quite often see we would see each others work of we had a shows we would defiantly see each others shows I donít know how I saw his films there was private screening and different things going on that we got to see each others work so you know

Was you there when he was filming his house being knocked down or?

I think I had gone at that point or I was on the way

Ok

But I did see that film in and around there and I helped him move out actually I helped him move into his new house so you know I was around I think I was probably in Moya Road by then I ant quite remember where I was I think I had left Fillebrook at that point

Do you think John was attached to his house?

Yes very yes again we are different but there was sort of thing that we could look at the squalor and the state of the toilets and then do an amusing commentary on the state as if it was the surface of the moon or something (laughs)

You mean Johns house (Laughs)

Yes he did this funny film of the house this funny joke

I have heard of this film

Yes you should defiantly see it I donít know whether he has censured it now he might have now that he is respectable

He lingered quite long on his toilet - is that the one?

Yes it kind of lit a light or played a tune or did something there was something interesting about it there was someone who was doing something that had a formal aspect but in an extremity sort of environment that combined these two things

You werenít involved in the public enquiry or anything but did you know anyone who wa?s

No I think not really we did know they were ear marked for demolition when we took the places on and I felt that generally that building more motorways was not the way to go and that area has been ruined now if you go down there it is really kind of sad it has been cut off its an ugly nothing quite fits together really anymore down there it is horrible but no I was not part I think that most of the battles were kind of personal ones really

How do you mean?

With someone like Graeme who was battling with the kind of police and his treatment by the police you know he was really treated like a criminal really and the fact that he was living there with a disabled child and you know struggling along and completely innocent of anything and that was partly his argument that he advent actually all he had done was to put this bloke up on his floor and that was enough for him to be through of as a kind of a part of the protest group

It sounds like it got really paranoid like almost the authorities were getting really paranoid

Well it costs a fortune in the end because they really didnít know what to do and it is a difficult thing to do to evict people but you know I felt that I had agreed to the short life contract so there was not a great deal to complain about really one can complain about motorways em but that was a general complaint it was not kind of a local complaint

Where you lived can you remember any local characters or anything?

No Iím ashamed to say not really I didnít really

I would have somehow (laughs)

No I dent but Iím pretty terrible at sort of having anything to do with anybody I keep my head down it is a horrible thing to confess but that is kind of what I do I had a very funny approach to living in places and I suppose I still have this idea some how if it is an idea but of not actually intervening to much I tend to cover my tracts or leave no tracks in the first place I tend to move in with things as they are and keep them I mean similar with this place really it is something about the kind of iron grate on the door or the way things are we inherited those things and quite often if people are visiting us they are not quite sure if we are living here because it does not quite look like an artists house and that is how I have always sort of operated I sort of kind of adopt what ever is there and I donít feel if it is really ugly I do change it we have changed this place a bit just to make it slightly more practical but actually I try to do as little as possible not out of laziness but there is a part of me that does not want to start knocking down walls and re designing a place and fundamentally I quite like but I always remember coming out of Hasslet road and it had slightly snowed and I walked down the road and looked back and there was my footprints going all the way up the road and being slightly astonished that I had kind of left that trace going so I have always felt slightly that not really there that I always put things backs as I found them leave no evidence of my kind of existence (laughs) it was not quite covering tracks but it was close to that

Cause I suppose the artists down Leyton and Leytonstone we were almost filling in werenít we, as they were all short-life houses which had been empty. We were almost like security for the people who lived there long-term because our houses were empty for quite a few years before?

Oh yeah it did suit them if it had been derelict for the past few years they would have been occupied by somebody and it would have been unruly so we did actually do a good service in the whole everyone got a long fine no one was antagonistic to each other the two main groups of people who live there I felt though I has lived in and around that area anyway

When you said that you moved out did you feel like you when you were there in the early years that it was quite comfortable and then it just seem too change at the end?

It was there was a feeling that it was just an ordinary place at first for me and it was nice to know people down the Road I had always lived in London as if I was always supposed to bump into anybody I knew so I always felt anonymous in London I have sort of liked that but just to kind of contradict that it was nice that feeling that you could say hello to people that you knew around the area and also know that they were like minded in lots of way so it was not like being in Essex it would defiantly where it would have been peculiar thing to do or an incomprehensible thing to do I mean that was one of the important things for me is that I moved from a place even now no one know what it is that I do my parents donít quite get what it is that I do to this area where everybody was perfectly happy with what ever mad thing anybody did so it kind of did take so it felt like you belonged somewhere

And was it say in the last year or the last couple of years that you felt that you really wanted to move from Leyton?

Well I would have stayed on I suppose I quite because I was so concentrating on work that on eth whole of it is comfortable and it was thee I would have just stayed you know circumstances would have had to have happened to have forced me to go

So was it after what happened to Graeme that you thought, I am going to go?

Well we all new we were going to go we all had warning that we were gong to go and had to be prepared to go

You had warnings?

Yes and we all new that we were having to move out you know there was an exchange of keys and then someone moved in

So when you had to leave did you just go down to ACME and hand your keys in?

No No someone came to the door no one had the luxury of doing that because the houses could not be left empty for half a hour if someone new you had moved out someone would be breaking the door in to get in they just lived there they new they werenít going to stay they were not quite squatting they were just making a point they were just making it more difficult to knock the place down really

So where did Terry Smith come into it because he came in your house to install Sight Unseen, didnít he?

He had been living in Bow for a long time he was at the time he was stripping plaster off walls and making kind of shapes or slightly figurative or architectural things and I donít know he either proposed or I offered my wall and he came in with his hammer and Cole chisel and he was banging the plaster off that wall and someone else was breaking off banisters off the stairs and you know it was being stripped as I was going out the door so there was no kind of found fair wells

So you came back and waited with your keys for Acme?

Yes I remember this kind of exchange of keys and then people just moved in a wreaked it to give you an idea of the kind of camping idea I had I had an answer machine that was at the time everything was running on cassette tape recorders and that was my sound system as well and I would play just play tapes on this really tinny answer machine but I quite liked that it is the sort of thing you would do camping rather that get a decent sound system which you would have done but I preferred this cobbled together system

Well at least you had a telephone/

Yes I did

Did you have a TV?

Yes I had a small TV yeah

The end

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