

MASS OBSERVATION AS A RELATIONAL ART PRACTICE

Caroline Edge – University of Staffordshire/Bolton Museum

29/08/2014 14:53:34

THE WORKTOWN OBSERVATION CENTRE



‘photographs are both images *and* physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience’

(Edwards and Hart 2004: 1)











Photo by *Observe Bolton* participant

PHOTOGRAPHS WITHIN SOCIAL PROCESSES

Photographic historian Elizabeth Edwards (2011: 47) has suggested that we should 'stop thinking of photographs and their archives simply as passive 'resources' with no identity of their own' and instead understand them 'as actively 'resourceful'—a space of creative intensity, of ingenuity, of latent energy, of rich historical force'.





Humphrey Spender, 1937



Michael Wickham, 1937

MATERIAL ENGAGEMENTS WITH THE MASS OBSERVATION ARCHIVE

Moor and Uprichard (2014) have suggested that the sensual and material characteristics of the MO archive prompt subjective encounters. They argue that it is as important for researchers to pay attention to the form as the content of information: to be aware of the 'materiality of method' throughout both the process of research and in the collection new data from respondents (Moor and Uprichard 2014: 2).

Annebella Pollen (2016: 11) argues that thinking about what the photographs in the *One Day for Life* archive are for' or 'do' is a more productive method of accessing photography archives than subject based quantitative analysis, which cannot account for the ambiguities and excess of photographs. The photographs may then be understood as 'tangible and purposeful performances with work to do as well as images to show' (Pollen 2016: 13).

ETHNOGRAPHIC SURREALISM

‘ethnography as collage’

‘leave manifest the constructivist procedures of ethnographic knowledge; it would be an assemblage containing voices other than the ethnographer’s, as well as examples of found evidence, data not fully integrated within the work’s governing interpretation’

(Clifford 1991: 563-4)

‘the creation of a plural text, the questioning of ethnographic authority, the recognition of the need for reflexivity, the realization of the subversive potential of anthropology, the irreducibly literary nature of ethnography, the study of Western industrialized societies and the recognition of the essentially contested nature of the codes and representations which compose culture.’

(MacClancy 1993: 510)

THE ARTIST AS ETHNOGRAPHER – RELATIONAL AESTHETICS



JEREMY DELLER'S 'SOCIAL SURREALISM'



WORKTOWN OBSERVATION CENTRE

26 JULY - 2 AUGUST 2014

www.worktownobservation.co.uk
BECOME AN OBSERVER
UNIT X7, KNOWSLEY STREET, BOLTON

PHOTOGRAPH BY HUMPHREY SPENDER, COPYRIGHT BOLTON COUNCIL

WE ARE OPEN 12-5PM EVERYDAY

SATURDAY 26 JULY

THE WORKTOWN ARCHIVE

An exhibition about the original Mass Observers in Bolton, featuring photographs by Humphrey Spender. Find out about the remarkable Worktown project and everyday life in 1930s Bolton.

SUNDAY 27 JULY

THE MUSEUM OF TAKEAWAY MENU ART

Artist Mark Page presents the world's only Museum of Takeaway Menu Art. The museum will be accepting submissions of takeaway menus from Bolton. Get involved with takeaway menu origami.

MONDAY 28 JULY

OBSERVE BOLTON

Young participants from the Observe Bolton project showcase their urban surveillance photographs and films documenting life in the town's public spaces.

TUESDAY 29 JULY

MASS OBSERVATION

Photographer David Dunnico's exhibition explores surveillance culture in Bolton and the UK.

CAMERA OBSCURA

Artist Liam Curtin's secret camera obscura will be out observing on the streets of Bolton. Can you find it?

WEDNESDAY 30 JULY

IN AND AROUND BOLTON PHOTOS

Local photographer and collector Gene Watts presents some of his remarkable collection of historical photographs and albums from Bolton.

THURSDAY 31 JULY

GANDER

Robert Parkinson of Preston is my Paris presents an exhibition and workshop about exploring, documenting and representing place. **THE WORKSHOP IS FULLY BOOKED.**

WORKTOWN PUB TOUR

A guided tour round some of the Bolton pubs featured in Mass Observation's Worktown study and the book 'The Pub and the People'. **THE TOUR IS FULLY BOOKED.**

FRIDAY 1 AUGUST

EXPERIMENTAL OBSERVATIONS

South Manchester Arts Collective experiment with sensory methods of documenting everyday life in Bolton's public spaces.

SATURDAY 2 AUGUST

THE NEW WORKTOWN ARCHIVE

An exhibition of photographs submitted by the public in response to daily themes set by the Worktown Observation Centre.



SURREALIST RESEARCH

Fact is urgent- we are cogs in a vast and complicated machine which may turn out to be an infernal machine that is going to blow us all to smithereens

(Madge and Harrisson (1938: 8)

Visitors, born in faraway climes or at our own door, are helping us design an extraordinary machine which is for killing what exists so that what does not exist may be complete. At 15, rue de Grenelle we've opened romantic lodgings for unclassifiable ideas and revolutions in progress. Whatever hope remains in this universe of hopelessness will cast its last delirious glances at our ridiculous street stall: *"It's all about coming up with a new declaration of human rights.*

(Aragon 2003 [1924]: 10)



Photos by David Dunnico



BECOME AN OBSERVER!

WIN £50

**SUBMIT YOUR PHOTOS IN RESPONSE TO OUR DAILY THEME
BEST PHOTO OF THE WEEK WINS £50 PRIZE**

Find out the day's theme by visiting www.worktownobservation.co.uk or looking in the window of the Worktown Observation Centre, Knowsley St.

SUBMIT YOUR PHOTO:

EMAIL: worktownobservation@gmail.com

SUBMIT ONLINE: www.worktownobservation.co.uk

OR BRING YOUR PHOTO INTO THE CENTRE AND SAY HELLO!

We are recreating Mass Observation's 1937 study of everyday life in Bolton and inviting the public of Bolton to become observers. Visit our changing daily exhibition at the Worktown Observation Centre and get involved. Winner of the photography competition announced Saturday 2 August.

Full terms and conditions online at www.worktownobservation.co.uk

LEISURE

TAKEAWAYS

SURVEILLANCE

RELIGION

PAST & PRESENT

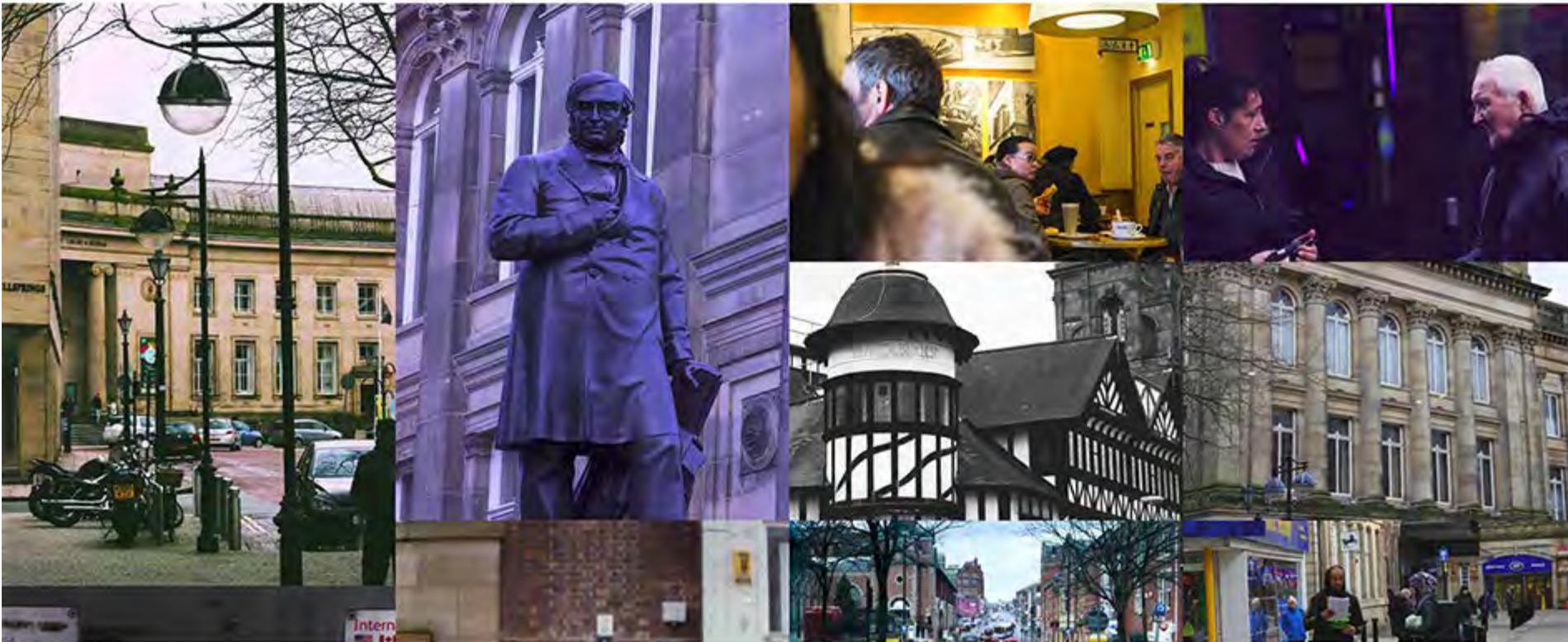
**PUBLIC SPACES &
PUBLIC HOUSES**

PLAY

WORKTOWN OBSERVATION CENTRE

A collaborative visual archive of everyday life in Bolton

About Leisure Pubs Religion Surveillance Past and Present Public Spaces Takeaways Play Autumn Random Archive Search



www.worktownobservation.co.uk

'My statement is a personal one, with which some members of the group may agree, but is not binding for all.'

Charles Madge (1937: 36)





















STILL LIFE PHOTO

1944



SAT 26TH

1600-1700

WOMAN (30'S) + MAN (30'S) STAND IN THE LOCKED DOORWAY OF THE SHOP. THE MAN LOOKED AT ME AND IMMEDIATELY LOOKED AWAY. A FEW SECONDS LATER, ANOTHER MAN ARRIVED PUSHING A PRAM¹. THEY ALL DISCUSSED THE INCONVENIENCE OF HAVING TO WAIT AROUND FOR SOMETHING.

THE 1ST MAN ASKED THE 2ND MAN FOR HIS PHONE NUMBER. THE WOMAN SAID "I'VE BEEN WAITING SINCE 1030 THIS MORNING" AND PRODUCED SOME MONEY. THE SECOND MAN TOOK SOMETHING FROM THE TOP OF THE PRAM AND HANDED IT TO HER, CONCERNING WHAT IT WAS.

THEY ALL SAID GOODBYE/NICE ONE & LEFT.

¹PRAM CONTAINED CHILD OF N2



Artist Johny Byrne studies the anthropometrics of gait



Artist Liam Curtin's camouflaged camera obscura

7-9 PM, 31 JULY 2014

Worktown Pub Tour

worktown
observation
centre

BOOKING: worktownobservation@gmail.com



The removal of the
photographer

FLIPPING COINS

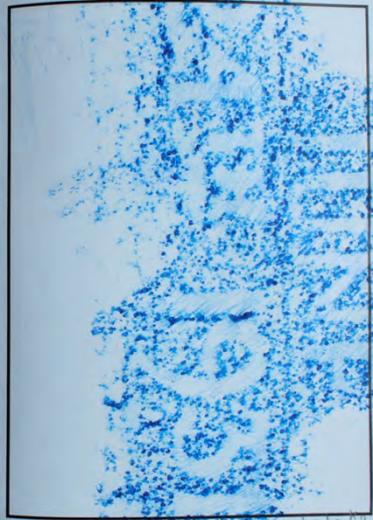
Everyday routine can become a burden of exploring urban landscape. Introducing the element of chance can highlight disregarded subjects. By flipping a coin you can dictate what direction you point your camera.

- 1. Street View (Head = 0.5)
 - 2. Street View (Tail = 0.5)
 - 3. Cobblestones (0.5 x 2)
- 6.11.15-00.15



SURFACE RUBBINGS

Textured details within the landscape can be overlooked, but they can often reveal more about a space than a photograph. It can also be seen as a more 'authentic' document as the result has physically interacted with place.



Outside of
refurbished
marker



Gander Workshop, Robert Parkinson (Preston is my Paris)



Northern Work Town

*Beneath the gas lamp's glow we meet, to walk another cobbled street.
Down terraced streets we turn and gaze, to see our childhood bygone
days.*

*Fathers working, grandmas shopping, mums at the dolly tub, scrubbing
and washing.*

*Children playing in little groups, with spinning tops and hula hoops.
Memories of streets in a northern town, with mills and chimneys all
around,*

*were once the stuff of our proud town, like Dibnah's chimney, came
crashing down.*

*Industrial melting pots frozen now, as spinning cotton's gone over the
brow.*

*And coal has spluttered through the fog, as trainers replace our northern
clog.*

*That once sparked lives on cobbled stones, now interface with mobile
phones.*

*The butchers, the grocers, the co-op and more are now in every super
store.*

*Re-developed to be less fuss, whatever would grandmother think of us.
Up in the morning another day gone, and here we are starting another
one.*

*Kettle on gas with tea in the pot, and butter on toast that's melting hot.
Gazing through windows beholding the sight, coloured in cold grey
northern light.*

*Hard working, honest northern town, they've knocked your factory
chimneys down.*

*And tarmacked over your cobbled streets but the soul of your people still
gently beats.*

DW Purdy

Hard working, honest
northern town, they've
knocked your factory
chimneys down

And tarmacked over your
cobbled streets, but the
soul of your people still
gently beats

MAKE THE INVISIBLE FORCES VISIBLE

‘[MO will] get written down the unwritten laws and to make the invisible visible’

(Madge and Harrison 1938: 8)

Sarah Pink (2015: 5) similarly describes sensory ethnography as a practice which ‘does not privilege any one type of data or research method. Rather, it is open to multiple ways of knowing and to the exploration of and reflection on new routes of knowledge’.

Your Ticket To Success
Shahaadah - Testimony of Faith
Ash-hadoo al-laa ilaaha il-Allaah
Wa Ash-hadoo an-na Muhammadar Rasool Allaah
I Testify That There Is None to Worship But Allaah (God)
And I Testify That Muhammad (peace be upon him) Is A
Messenger of Allaah

For Additional Information & Support Contact Us At:
info@exploresah.org.uk - 07845 000 497 / 09732 14603



'the best place to hook up with girls in Bolton in the 70s', photo by Gene Watts

CONCLUSIONS

Sensory, physical engagement with place – a type of methexis:

‘an actual day’s work on Mass-Observation seems to exhaust to an unexpected extent, and yet, I am told, they come up for more’ (Huxley 1937: 6)

The development of knowledge which is ‘emergent, rather than prefigured or planned’ (Schneider and Wright 2013: 1)

Hidden practices of everyday life are revealed, and particularly the ways in which photography is used to constitute community memory

This understanding returns us to the idea of the ‘image’ as conceived by Madge and Jennings in the early application of MO as ‘the knots in a great net of tangled time and space’ (Jennings 2012: xiii). As such ‘images’ photographs make the entanglements, the meshwork of past and present movements through place, clear (Ingold 2016; Pink 2015).

And how to develop these methodological experiments further...