Mass Observation as a relational art practice

Edge, C

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MASS OBSERVATION AS A RELATIONAL ART PRACTICE
Caroline Edge – University of Staffordshire/Bolton Museum

29/08/2014 14:53:24
‘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)
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’.
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
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 Fage 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.
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)
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
‘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)
SAT 25TH
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 pram. They all discussed the
inconvenience of having to wait around
for something.

The first man asked the second 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, concealing
what it was.

They all said goodbye, nice one.

Pram 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

BOOKING: worktownobservation@gmail.com
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.

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.
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’.
‘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...