

CREATING A COLLABORATIVE WORKTOWN ARCHIVE

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This practice-based research explores the potential of photographic methods to understand how photographic archives constitute community in relation to place. It develops a case study of the Worktown photographs, taken by Humphrey Spender during Mass Observation's 1930s experimental study of everyday life in Bolton, and now held in Bolton Museum's Worktown archive.

The first phase of research combined methods including archival research, material analysis, re-photography, and a crowd-sourcing campaign on Bolton Museum's social media accounts to catalogue the archive and locate where the photographs were taken. This collaborative process revealed multiple factual inaccuracies and many undocumented visual artefacts created during MO's study. These discoveries challenged the hegemonic critique of the Worktown photographs as exemplary social documentary photographs which construct history as a false national memory of community and consensus (Macpherson 1978; Samuel 1994; Highmore 2002). Outputs included a collaborative online archive making the photographs publicly accessible, an exhibition at Bolton Museum and a book chapter.

The second phase responded to these insights by drawing on ideas of materiality and photographic agency derived from recent scholarship in visual anthropology (Elizabeth Edwards, Sarah Pink). In particular James Clifford and Jeremy McClancy's concept of ethnographic surrealism was key to reimagining MO's experimental use of creative research methods as a relational art practice. Practical investigations initially took the form of a participatory photography workshop which then informed the development of a collaborative reenactment of MO's study by 39 participant observers. Outputs included my PhD thesis, conference papers and an online archive documenting the research.

This research demonstrated that processes of taking, documenting, and sharing photographs generate new meaning in relation to the contingencies of place. Photography is then understood as an experiential form of knowledge, and the photographic archive may be reactivated as a medium creating new understandings of past and present communities.