20 MINUTES!

**Mass Observation as a relational art practice**

The visual artefacts and documents created during MO’s early incarnation seem to be possessed of a kind of latent energy which has continued to shape their function and interpretation. In particular, this quality can be traced through the history of Humphrey Spender’s Worktown photographs, which have always seemed to function at the vanguard of culture— pre-empting the visual dominance of a social documentary aesthetic in the 20th century and exemplifying the concerns of nascent photographic theory in the 1970s. In the established critical narrative these photographs function as historical documents. This paper asks whether it is possible, instead, to harness the potential of this innate mutability, by developing methods of responding to the photographs as active resources.

The paper draws on a series of artistic and experimental responses to place developed in collaboration with communities in Bolton and Aberdeen between 2014-2016, and funded by the AHRC. The outcomes of these practical explorations suggest ways in which MO may be reframed and deployed as a creative research methodology and relational art practice.

Through active engagement the photographic archive is reactivated as a medium for understanding and developing relationships between local communities and past and present place.

**Biography**

Caroline Edge is a photographer and lecturer at Staffordshire University. Her PhD uses photography as a research method in order to explore and develop relationships between Bolton Museum’s Worktown archive and the local community.