What they think in Worktown: Using photography to create a participatory archive.

Using photographic research to investigate the relationship between community and archive in response to Mass Observation’s Worktown study of everyday life in Bolton.

In 1937 Mass Observation went to Bolton to study ‘the cannibals of the north’. Photographers and artists worked alongside trained and untrained participant observers to create an ‘anthropology of ourselves’. Whilst artists were accorded the status of visionaries able to illuminate the confusion of society, the camera was used as a “scientific instrument of precision” to collect factual data. Photographer Humphrey Spender was asked to take the role of an “exploring ethnographer in a foreign country” documenting everyday life in the town’s public spaces. Although MO intended the mass to create ‘a collaborative museum’, in 1930s Bolton a 35mm rangefinder camera ‘seemed almost a sci-fi contraption’ marking Spender as a privileged observer. Critical debates arising from his photographs have been informed by post-colonial theory; condemning the subjugating gaze of the photographer whilst admitting the potential of MO’s surreal, multidisciplinary methods to transcend the politics of representation.

This paper presents visual research informed by these theoretical responses. It evaluates the outcomes of photographic methods used to explore the relationship between Bolton’s community and Spender’s photographs, now held in the Worktown Archive at Bolton Museum. The research has been undertaken in collaboration with people in the local community and has employed a range of techniques including digital repatriation, rephotography, photo-elicitation, sousveillance, and street photography. Within the research photography is understood as a creative and performative process. The mass accessibility of digital photography and shifting theoretical perspectives on photographic truth may enable participants to reactivate Spender’s photographs as a participatory archive.