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The Poetic Archive: Photography, Everyday Life and the Tactic of Self-Publishing

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Based on a paper co-authored by Adam Murray and Diane Smyth presented at the Photography & the Artists' Book seminar held at Manchester Metropolitan University on Friday 21st October 2011

Abstract

Preston is my Paris was co-founded by Adam Murray and Robert Parkinson in June 2009. The project originally began as a photocopied zine specifically focussing on the city of Preston but has since developed into a multi-faceted photographic archive consisting of 40 self-published works that address themes relating to everyday life and social consciousness. In contrast to other photographic investigations of everyday life which often result in gallery exhibitions or lavishly produced books, Murray and Parkinson intentionally appropriate vernacular methods of production and print materials such as photocopying and newsprint with the aim to produce an archive that deliberately intends to engage with an audience beyond the conventional art world. This paper discusses this body of work and the role that the tactic of self-publishing has in a contemporary photographic context.

Introduction

In June 2009 Robert Parkinson and I produced a printed publication the contents of which featured: one found 6x4 inch colour photograph, one letter bought from Preston Market dated, 'Paris le 26 Mai 1934', four Polaroid photographs, the lid of a metal tin digitally scanned, one black and white medium format photograph, one black and white 35mm photograph and two colour 35mm photographs all of which were related in some way to Preston, Lancashire, the city where we both lived and worked. The publication was put together using desktop publishing software, printed in black and white on an office photocopier, hand stapled and folded, then an edition of 50 was distributed for free around the city.



Adam Murray & Robert Parkinson, *Preston is my Paris 1*, June 2009

Although originally motivated by far more modest intentions, this publication was to become the first entry into an archive of original work consisting of printed publications, live public events and digital applications all produced under the title of *Preston is my Paris*. Eclectic in terms of subject matter, aesthetic style and methodology, the body of work has sought to investigate themes relating to everyday life and social consciousness. This paper will discuss this body of work and the role that the tactic of self-publishing has had in a contemporary photographic context when dealing with subject matter of this nature.

Art and the Archive

Everyday life has provided artists, writers, scientists, historians, ethnographers and philosophers with countless points of enquiry throughout history. Admittedly, the approaches taken by these different disciplines vary considerably and it would be wrong to make a direct comparison between a scientific study and a subjective body of photographic work. There are though points of crossover that link this catalogue of study with the central common motif being the concept of the archive. (Sheringham 2006: 352-353)

Founded in 1936 by Charles Madge, Stuart Legg, Kathleen Raine, David Gascoyne and Humphrey Jennings, the Mass-Observation project is arguably the most appropriate example of what is possible when a variety of disciplines collaborate with a shared focus of exploring, depicting and understanding everyday life. The combination of backgrounds in poetry, journalism, painting, filmmaking and photography that the originators of Mass-Observation came from, blended with approaches more akin to anthropology and ethnography, resulted in a comprehensive archive of everyday life in Britain that, rather than being celebrated

for the scientific achievement, is revered by some as producing a complex body of work that is 'at one and the same time mundane and poetic.' (Highmore 2002: 75)

It is more than simply the ambitious scale and extraordinary nature of Mass-Observation that has proved influential to more contemporary practitioners. This was one of the first projects of this kind to be aware that the responsibility of gathering data and material should not simply be the preserve of an elite few. Highmore describes how the general public were recruited to act as 'what an anthropologist at the time would call 'native informants' and 'participant observers'.' (Highmore 2002: 87) This awareness of the need for a variety of voices to be involved in the project is central to contemporary approaches to archives and consequently links to more post-modern concepts relating to originality, authorship and hierarchy within projects, a topic that is dealt with in an essay by Hal Foster. Focussing more specifically on work produced in a contemporary art context, Foster makes the link between artists, Thomas Hirschorn, Sam Durant and Tacita Dean, by describing them all as having 'an archival impulse' (Foster 2004: 3) that underlines their practice. Although predominantly discussing French artists such as Sophie Calle and Christian Boltanski, British academic Michael Sheringham shares Foster's observation about the archival methodologies that can be found in some artworks, suggesting that the projects share 'a fondness for inventory and enumeration, a love of constraints, and a fascination with objects, space and identity.' (Sheringham 2006: 343)

This fascination with space, detail and observation is a topic that can be traced through the work of French writer Georges Perec, who is also identified by Sheringham as having influence on contemporary artists such as those listed above. Although renowned for his experimental approach to literature such as the book *A Void* (1969), a novel written entirely without using the letter 'e', it is his obsession with the 'infra-ordinaire' (infra-ordinary) (Perec 1989) that is most relevant to theme of this text. In essays such as *Approaches to What?* (1973) and *The Street* (1974), Perec passionately describes a very practical, almost inventorial approach to exploring that, which is normally ignored in everyday life.

The concept of actively exploring the world through process and practice that Perec advocates, relates to a number of photographers, including the work of Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama. Although the work may initially seem to be a very subjective interpretation of the world as he encounters it through practical exploration, occasionally emphasised by book titles such as *The World Through My Eyes* (2010), Moriyama's *Record* series owes much to an archival method of working. By adopting the prosaic terminology 'record' followed by a straightforward numerical system as a title, a contradiction is created that encourages the reader to see these highly subjective photo-stories as individual entries into a larger archive of images. The decision to then initially publish the work as printed books rather than in an exhibition context means that readers are able to build their own archive of Moriyama's work and begin to create their own narratives and meanings as the collection builds.

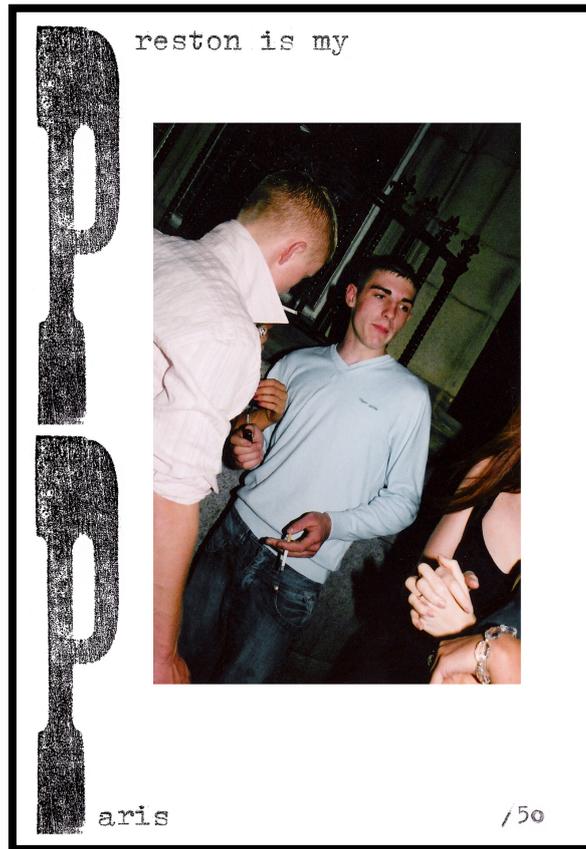
Moriyama's engagement with the photobook is often cited as being an influence on a contemporary group of photographers who have chosen the printed book as the primary outlet for their work. In an essay titled *The Drive to Archive: Conceptual Documentary Photobook Design*, Melissa Miles discusses the work of photographers such as Stephen Gill, Mathieu Pernot and Matthew Sleeth and suggests that the work they produce 'mirrors documentary photography's increasingly fraught but tenacious relations to the 'real' world to produce equally paradoxical archives.' (Miles 2010: 66)

It is important to acknowledge the significant influence that these practitioners and writers have had on me throughout producing *Preston is my Paris*. In some cases they have provided conceptual and methodological prompts, others relate more to aesthetic or practical processes and ideas. What has been significant throughout the work however, is that although informed by often quite complex, academic ideas, the intentions to produce work that is able to be engaged with by a diverse audience is paramount.

The Tactic of Self-Publishing

The act of self-publishing has seen a large resurgence in recent photographic practice and is very much in vogue. This has resulted in a mixed collection of work; in some instances the decision to realise the work in printed book format is entirely appropriate and not involving established publishers in the production process has meant that the work often has an immediacy and innovative approach that is missing from a lot of 'coffee-table' art books. There is also the group of practitioners who seem to have tagged on to the trend for self-published work as an easy way to promote their practice rather than as an informed decision about this being the most appropriate way to present their work.

The decision to produce self-published printed matter should always relate directly to the context that the work is being produced within and when I began the original *Preston is my Paris* zine series, although I did not describe the work as being self-published, I was making a virtue of the circumstances I was in: small city, small arts culture and small production budget. Photocopying and producing the publications ourselves was simply the most cost effective way of getting a publication out to the local audience that we were directly aiming the work at.



Adam Murray & Robert Parkinson, *Preston is my Paris* 3, August 2009

As *Preston is my Paris* has developed, the decision to self-publish has become a much more conscious one, something I would describe as a tactical decision. Referring to the publication *The Practice of Everyday Life* by Michael de Certeau, Ben Highmore describes de Certeau's interpretation of the concept of the tactic:

Tactics is the inventive employment of possibilities with strategic circumstances: disguise, surprise, discretion, secrecy, wit, play, bluff and so on. Crucially, tactics don't operate outside a strategy that they can confront; to do this would require a counter-strategy, they are in the ambiguous position of being inside but 'other': 'they escaped it without leaving it' (xiii) (Highmore 2002: 159)

I am very aware of the rich heritage of photographic publishing and the power and opportunity that working with a mainstream publishing house may offer and that when any photographic publication is produced, it is likely to be considered within this wider context. However, deliberately eschewing these publishers has meant that I am able to set the agenda with regards subject matter, production time, format and distribution, yet still function within a strand of photographic publishing; as de Certeau describes it, I have 'escaped it without leaving it.' (de Certeau 1980: xiii)

I believe that self-publishing is more than simply the latest stylistic novelty and it is intrinsically related to the fundamental conceptual intention of *Preston is my Paris*, that can be succinctly described as a project of engagement, a term I use to describe a number of facets of the work. From a personal point of view I use photographic projects to engage with a variety of subject matter; I aim to encourage audiences to engage with subject matter that they would not necessarily normally pay much attention to; I aim to engage with audiences both within and beyond the traditional art

world and as a consequence of all this draw attention to that which is so often overlooked or forgotten.

This desire to explore engagement, I believe, is a direct result of circumstance. Living in Preston for a decade played a crucial role in the development of my work. To begin with there is a definite sense of anonymity within a city such as Preston. Although Preston does have a history of it's own, to a national and international audience this is less obvious than other towns and cities in the North West of England such as Blackpool, Manchester and Liverpool. These other places have a distinct identity to them whereas for the majority of people Preston is simply a place to pass through on the West Coast Mainline. This lack of awareness is something that I wanted to change.

Within the city itself there are also issues relating to the engagement of local residents with art and cultural practice that I do not think are addressed effectively. There is the established Harris Museum and Art Gallery which stages a variety of exhibitions and is a significant institution, however, such spaces can feel quite intimidating to someone who is not familiar with art practices and little alternative is offered. The cultural world that exists in other major cities is also not prevalent in Preston. Whereas in somewhere such as London there is an audience that would not hesitate to pay £50 for a photographic publication, this is not the cultural norm in Preston. By saying this I am by no means making the assumption that local residents do not want to engage with art and photography, I believe it just needs a different approach which is where the tactic of self-publishing and live public events plays a role.

Choosing to produce the original *Preston is my Paris* zines as affordable photocopies was effective in that Robert and I were able to give them away for free with minimal personal cost. We did however discover that there are issues though in terms of who would actually pick up a publication of this nature. In order to address this we organised a live event that was to act as both a form of initial retrospective for the project and also as a way of engaging a general audience with the work that we were doing.

In February 2010 Robert and I set up a temporary gallery and project space in an unoccupied shop in the Guildhall Shopping Centre in Preston. On the walls we displayed all the imagery, photographs and found items that had been featured in the *Preston is my Paris* zines, we had copies of the zines available for audiences to read through and we also set up a photographic studio. By deliberately setting the space up in a shop that is located on a thoroughfare to the main bus station, a diverse variety of people became aware of the project that would not necessarily deliberately seek out an exhibition of this nature. The photographic studio was used to take portraits of visitors to the space that were then used in future editions of the publication. I also collaborated with photographer Jamie Hawkesworth to produce a fashion-based project that featured clothing sourced entirely from Preston and models scouted from the city over a specific weekend. This resulting publication from this project, titled *Denim*, has since functioned to make the project better known amongst a professional photographic and art community.



Adam Murray & Robert Parkinson, *Preston is my Paris Guildhall Project Space*, February 2010

Arguably the most well known and critically celebrated of the publications that we produced during the first eighteen months of the project has been *Preston Bus Station*. Although not part of the original zine series, this body of work encapsulates all the significant factors of the practice behind *Preston is my Paris*: everyday subject matter, engagement, collaboration and printed matter.



Adam Murray, Robert Parkinson, Jamie Hawkesworth, *Preston Bus Station*, October 2010

The initial motivation behind the work was to focus on the one building that provides a constant source of debate not just in the city, but also national and international contexts. Built in the late 1960s, Preston bus station has the capacity for 80 double decker buses and parking for over 1000 other vehicles. Celebrated by some as an example of utopian modernist architecture whilst reviled by others as having completely outlived the initial purpose, it has provided subject matter for a number of photographic projects. These projects have tended to focus very much on the architectural structure of the building and not the people that use the bus station on a daily basis.

Over a weekend in September 2010, Robert, Jamie and I set up a project space in an unoccupied National Express ticket office based in the heart of the bus station. Throughout the weekend we spent time engaging with staff, commuters, shoppers and diners, learning about their opinions about the building and producing a photographic archive of our experiences. This approach was very much informed by the 'native informants' (Highmore 2002: 87) concept that Highmore discusses in relation to Mass Observation.

When deciding the most effective method of output for this project, it was important to return to the more fundamental intentions of *Preston is my Paris*. We knew that we wanted people who actually used the bus station to be able to acquire the publication that we produced; therefore choosing the appropriate format was essential. The collaborative nature of the project and aesthetic styles (colour, black and white, medium format, 35mm and Polaroid) meant that a photocopied zine was not appropriate. This was work that demanded colour and larger dimensions than A4. We also wanted a general audience to feel comfortable engaging with the work and not feel that it was too precious or intimidating. For these reasons we decided that using a newspaper format was the most appropriate. Large scale, colour and affordable to produce were all very practical considerations that meant we could afford to give copies away in the bus station and then sell copies for a cheap price without relying on an external funding body or publisher.

There were also strong conceptual intentions behind using newsprint. A newspaper is something that audiences engage with on a daily basis and a format that does not require another machine such as a laptop or iPad to read. By appropriating the vernacular format of newsprint, it was our intention that people would feel comfortable engaging with the work in a way that they may not do with a more hand crafted artist book. This commitment to producing affordable publications and appropriation of vernacular print format is something that has continued throughout the rest of the *Preston is my Paris* projects.

The Poetic Archive

Since completing *Preston Bus Station*, the subject matter of the publications that Robert and I have produced has diversified beyond Preston. We have completed work in other English towns and cities such as Carlisle, Brighton and Derby as well as more ostensibly exotic places such as Berlin, Paris, Tokyo and America and as of December 2011 have produced 40 individual publications. As the collection of work builds up, the concept of each publication being a small part of a larger archive becomes more apparent and the way the work functions develops.

Throughout the existence of *Preston is my Paris*, collaboration has been an important part of the creative process. This has been realised in a number of ways,

for example, collaboration between Robert and I, working with other practitioners such as Jamie Hawkesworth and actively engaging with residents and users of places such as in the Guildhall Shopping Centre project space and *Preston Bus Station*. Beyond this direct face-to-face collaboration however, the role of the audience has been crucial. Each practical intervention is edited and disseminated for interpretation by an audience who are viewed as a significant part of the authorial process. Foster suggests that it is this 'call out for human interpretation, not machinic reprocessing' (Foster 2004: 5) that makes artistic work informed by archival practices different to traditional databases.

When considering how an audience may interpret the work, the focus changes depending on whether projects are viewed individually or as a whole. As individual projects or photo-stories the main focus of thought is drawn to the paradox that is inherent in the subject matter of everyday life; even the most mundane scenes for insiders will be fascinatingly exotic for outsiders. If someone who has lived in Preston for a number of years was to read one of the original zines, then they may interpret the work with a sense of everyday familiarity or possibly nostalgia. For someone living in another part of the world, seeing this depiction of English life may be as exotic as me viewing a photo-story in a publication such as *National Geographic*.

This focus of interpretation shifts as individual projects and publications are juxtaposed with others from the *Preston is my Paris* archive; now the concept of montage become much more apparent. This is a concept that is dealt with in great clarity by Highmore, who argues that 'montage is the most appropriate form for representing everyday life as the pell-mell of different worlds colliding.' (Highmore 2002: 93) The 'charge' that is released by different 'elements', 'unanticipated coincidences' and the 'attempts to see the world as a network of uneven, conflicting, inassimilable but relating elements,' (Highmore 2002: 93-95) are all concepts that I recognise in the archive of photographic publications that I have produced.

I believe that the decisions that have been made throughout the project in relation to self-publishing are crucial for the success of this approach. The rapid turnaround time from taking the photographs to producing a printed publication (on some occasions less than a week) and the frequency at which I have been able to release new publications means that collectors of this prolific body of work are constantly being given the opportunity to develop new interpretations, identify new relationships and consequently develop an increasing consciousness about everyday life today.

The other joy of this approach is that it seemingly has no obvious conclusion. Appropriating some elements of an archival methodology and maintaining fundamental ideals has given the project a form of structure, but allowing for inconsistency with regards specific subject matter, aesthetic style and publication format has meant that the body of work is seen as a continuous exploration of everyday life; 'it falls on the side of unfinished business, of becoming rather than being.' (Highmore 2002: 146)

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