

photobrightmet





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Bolton Museum & Art Gallery
19 February to 23 April 2011

preface

I've lived in Brightmet for more than thirty years. It really is a place that I hold close to my heart and with very fond memories.

Whenever I am asked what makes Brightmet special to me I say, without hesitation, the people. Brightmet is a place made up of steadfast individuals who live in an area which has the same struggles as of many of the communities and estates across the country.

The vibrancy and sense of community is, in my opinion, unrivalled. There is no better example of this than when I was appointed Mayor of Bolton in 2010. It was the support of

the people in Brightmet that enabled me to become the Queen's representative in Bolton.

I am living proof that someone from Brightmet can go on to achieve their goals, from aspiring childhood dreams of becoming a train driver, to being elected as Mayor of Bolton town. From working on the turnstiles at Bolton Wanderers one day, to meeting with Bobby Charlton in the directors suite the next – it shows that a working class man from anywhere can achieve great things.

*Mayor of Bolton,
Councillor John Byrne,
January 2011*



context

In November 2009, Bolton at Home's Neighbourhood Management Team (Bolton East) commissioned photographer Les Monaghan to spend six months in Brightmet as the Photographer in Residence. Funded through Bolton at Home's Housing Percent for Art service, the photobrightmet exhibition brings together a selection of images produced during this time.

The aim of the project was to document the physical and social neighbourhood and the work of Bolton at Home in the Brightmet area. The project also aimed to challenge perceptions of the neighbourhood among local residents and those from outside the area, and to reflect how residents see their environment, their community, and their place within that community.

During the six months residency, Les engaged and worked with tenants and residents, schools, community groups, and other agencies and organisations active within the Brightmet area, and developed ideas for a number of participative activities.





‘passports’ photography workshops

In 2009 and 2010 Les Monaghan ran photography workshops with children at the five primary schools that chiefly serve Brightmet.

These images are a selection from around 200 passports produced with Blackshaw Primary School; Bolton St Catherine’s Academy Primary School; Leverhulme Community Primary School; Red Lane Primary School; and SS Osmund and Andrew RC Primary School.

Upon entering the classroom Les declares ‘Great Brightmet’ to be an independent country and announces himself

president. Therefore, in order to leave Great Brightmet and re-enter the United Kingdom, each child must produce a passport. As president, the artist decrees that the usual passport detail is not important and instead he needs information such as “What is your favourite smell?”; “Which football team do you support?”; and “What do you want to be when you’re older?”

The children contribute ideas about what things are important to them rather than what is important to the authorities. In a Great Brightmet passport you don’t have to use your real name and you can change the way you look. A passport

control is set up at the end of the session where the passport (and its holder) is scrutinised by an official. This is assuming that ‘Pres Les’ and his officials have not been overthrown in the interim – in these workshops revolution plots usually begin in the classroom after only fifteen minutes.

The aspirations expressed by the children influenced the ‘Aspirations’ series of portraits.

Les was assisted by University of Bolton MA Photography students Richard Gaskill and Anna White







‘aspirations’ photography sessions

Inspired by children during the ‘Passports’ photography workshops in local primary schools, Les wanted to explore how the environment shapes life chances in Brightmet.

Les planned the photography sessions with Deb Schofield, Pastoral Co-ordinator at Bolton St Catherine’s Academy Primary School; Tony Cottam, Manager of Brightmet UCAN Centre; and Nigel Saunby, Dad’s Worker for Bolton at Home’s Neighbourhood Management Team (Bolton

East). Local parents and children were invited along to the school’s weekly Family Learning Session.

Fathers and children are photographed in the library of the primary school. At the moment the photograph is taken, the children are being asked “What do you want to be when you are older?” and the fathers are asked to recollect what they wanted to be when they were the age of their child.

The images document the aspirations of children

compared to the realities of life, transporting the viewer back to a school environment where they reflect on their own childhood aspirations and subsequent achievements. The viewer may also think about family relationships portrayed through the body language and resemblances of the parent and child in each image.

Les was assisted by photographer Moira Lovell and University of Bolton MA Photography student Anna White

bolton’s social documentary photography legacy

Worktown was Mass Observation’s pseudonym for Bolton during their late 1930s to early 1940s study of the inhabitants of the town. Tom Harrisson led the Worktown study and invited the photographer Humphrey Spender to Bolton. He was to photograph the ‘masses’, to record their everyday behaviour. Because of the way he worked, remaining un-observed and thereby not intervening in what was happening, the identities of the subjects in the photographs were not recorded by him. He never knew who he was photographing (or even precisely where he was) so that the subjects in the photographs are more or less incidental. It could be anyone populating the images: as long as they were acting naturally (that is, without awareness that the camera was trained on them), they were

worthy of recording and study. The recording process was objectifying, reducing subjectivities to images. Spender in later years spoke of his discomfort with this method of work. Yet the photographs feel warm towards the people recorded in them, and Spender’s desire to see them returned to Bolton reunited the pictures with their context. Curators of the collection have recorded the identities of some of those pictured and added personal details, helping restore the lost subjectivities.

When I first met Les I was the curator charged with looking after the Worktown collection at Bolton Museum. It struck me that Les’s approach to the project – portraiture – could not be more different to Spender’s. At the time Les was still uncertain what the final form of his project

would be in precise terms, but the nature of his project (a wide brief), subject matter, and his short stays in Bolton, were very reminiscent of Spender’s experience. Les was also well aware of the long shadow that Spender casts over anyone who picks up a camera in Bolton, so that Spender was already involved. Without even seeing his work, I suggested that Les put forward an exhibition proposal to the Museum – the dialogues between the two projects were too interesting to let slip by. As it turned out I had a new job by the time the photobrightmet exhibition opened, but what I saw of the project as it developed kept me very interested. His work appeared no less documentary than Spender’s for the awareness of his subjects of the camera trained on them. Les’s interest and engagement in the community he was recording was also showing through in the photographs. I hope these records of Brightmet will also become part of the Museum’s collections, and that Bolton Council and other local authorities and institutions around the country will not let austerity Britain get in the way of recording everyday life as it unfolds.

Daniel C. P. Smith, Collections Manager at Akaroa Museum, New Zealand (formerly Curator of Local History at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery)



beyond us and them: participatory photography after mass observation

Humphrey Spender, under instructions from Tom Harrisson of Mass Observation (MO), photographed Bolton ('Worktown') in the late 1930s with the aim of capturing everyday life. From a position of simple faith in the ability of the camera to provide objective records, he used a concealed camera in pursuit of "unobserved observations". Spender wrote, "I believed obsessively that truth would only be revealed when people were not aware of being photographed. I had to be invisible." Although these photographs have come to prominence and are valued now as part of the history of Bolton, and as part of what was a groundbreaking attempt to document the then-unrecorded everyday lives of those denied

the privileges of power or fame, Spender's photographs were mostly unused, and in some cases, even undeveloped, until the 1970s. Although there had been aborted attempts during the Second World War to encourage Mass Observers to make their own photographic records of daily life (as they were simultaneously observers of 'the mass' and representatives of it), the technical considerations that concealed photography necessitated at that time were found to be impractical for those without training. MO considered it imperative that everyday life be apprehended unawares and this covert approach famously led to accusations of 'snooping' that dogged the original project (and were, at times, courted by it).

It is telling that the revival of interest in MO in the 1970s corresponded to developing interest in new practices of self-representation, whether in terms of 'history from below' or the upsurge in radical 'community' or 'committed' photographic projects. Such projects were keenly aware of the unequal distribution of power and a sense that endeavours ought to be participatory (even if facilitated by an 'outsider') was key to their non-objectifying approach. It is out of such historic foundations, and their roots in earlier, socially ameliorative practices of documentary photography, that projects such as photobrightmet emerge. Informed by the long-standing belief that the bringing to visibility of that which is usually ignored can create shifts in social attitude, new participatory photography projects aim to offer a means of empowerment for people, such as those in Brightmet, who may be economically or socially marginalised.

In an age of 'participatory media', when the means of self-representation are purportedly



no longer held only by those with access to specialist equipment and training, what is the relevance of allowing 'outsiders' (like 'Pres Les') to 'colonise' the independent country of 'Great Brightmet'? Camera ownership may be widespread in our own times, and the photographic coverage of everyday lives in what is sometimes described as a 'surveillance society' may mean that people may feel that they are over-represented visually, yet much rests on who is doing the looking, and how. The ethical landscape has certainly changed since Spender concealed a camera

beneath his overcoat in Bolton more than seventy years ago: photographs of children in the public domain, for example, are often the source of moral anxiety, while notions of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', elites and 'the masses', can seem rather dated. Yet inequalities remain, and the opportunities for so-called 'ordinary people' to declare their aspirations and to take to the walls of an art gallery are few, and that still matters. Les's photographic approach to the people of Brightmet is not as a spy, but as a Northerner raised on similar estates, who builds up relationships with his subjects

that allow them precious opportunities to speak their own identities. By bringing these voices and the resulting images to the audiences of Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, Les's work fits within the democratic ambitions of the original Mass Observation movement, with their aim that observations would be of ourselves, by ourselves, and for ourselves.

Annebella Pollen is a Lecturer in the History of Art and Design at the University of Brighton and a former Research Fellow for the project Methodological Innovations: Using Mass Observation (2009-10).





contemporary community art practice

Working as an artist, commissioned to make work in and with a community, had been seen for a long time as a staid context within which to make work. For some reason it was ignored as a critical context, and not even considered to be an area in which an artist could make any kind of contribution to a debate within contemporary art practice. This is despite historically significant contributions from conceptual artists such as John Latham

(and the Artist Practice Group), Hans Haacke, Alan Sekula, and John Berger. With the re-evaluation of documentary lens-based practices, and their significance to a debate about realism in art, the relevance of an artist working in and with communities has begun to change. The possibilities within this area to explore contemporaneous issues relating to veracity and the photograph, and complex issues regarding

the relationship between subject and author, are being (rightly) viewed again as being extremely rich and fertile. All documentary-based practice is fraught with issues relating to accusations of exploitation, and in this sense it provides for me a context in which real-life ethics can be explored; the work can have a primary audience other than the art world.

Mark Neville, lens based artist

photographing brightmet

Two of the first people that I met on beginning the commission were Elaine and Ken Dolan. Returning to Brightmet after years away they experienced vandalism and abuse from local children. Their response was to set up a series of football teams, Brightmet Wanderers, to combat the boredom that they felt had contributed to the bad behaviour. This level of engagement and commitment to hard work was inspirational to me.

Despite knowing that attitudes have changed dramatically since the time of Spender, I resolved to photograph on the street in all weathers, setting myself the target of overcoming the difficulties associated with photographing children and adults alike in modern Britain's slightly paranoid atmosphere.

I aimed to talk to as many people as possible. In the pubs, clubs, shops, schools and streets I discovered a wealth of knowledge, history, local pride, continuity, contradictions and sense of community that perhaps defied description solely within documentary

photography. After trying a series of methods, many of which failed to succeed, I hope that the approaches shown in this exhibition go some way to reflect the vibrancy of the Brightmet way of life.

Les Monaghan, photographer



acknowledgements (in no particular order)

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Bolton at Home is responsible for the management of Bolton's 18,200 council properties and is committed to the regeneration of its neighbourhoods.

In partnership with Bolton Council and numerous agencies, Bolton at Home is using the Neighbourhood Management approach to improve the social and economic conditions of both the estates where our houses are located as well as other disadvantaged areas in the Bolton borough.

Bolton at Home is also committed to the use of creativity in regeneration through the work of its Housing Percent for Art service. Housing Arts Officers work within each of the Neighbourhood Management Teams to develop and deliver arts projects that focus on the Neighbourhood Renewal themes, providing opportunities for Bolton at Home to creatively engage with its customers and for residents to improve their communities through the use of arts in regeneration.

Bolton at Home

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