

Curating as Critical Inquiry:  
*Reframing Shirley Baker's photographs and theorising their  
interpretation in exhibitions*

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## Acknowledgments

Working with the photographs of Shirley Baker has affected me more than I could have imagined. I have mined photographic history and theory, this was predictable. What were not, were my excursions into fields of which I knew nothing. Expeditions into the unknown territories of visual and sensory anthropology, ethnography and Grounded Theory felt at times unsettling. But looking back from the destination of *this page*, I am deeply gratified to have travelled on these uncertain routes, in great part stimulated, stretched and tirelessly supported by my supervisor Professor Griselda Pollock. I am enriched by the experience of being challenged by and learning from her.

I have shared my life for many years with a woman photographer whom at the start of my journey with her was relatively unknown. Working with Shirley Baker, albeit posthumously, and her photographs has been one of the emergent pleasures of my life. I am fulfilled in knowing that as a consequence of our ‘encounter’ her photographic contribution is now recognised, with her work in private and public collections, and thousands more people having been ‘touched’ by her images. I thank all of Shirley Baker’s family for supporting my work over the years, in particular her daughter Nan Levy.

My ‘relationship’ with Shirley Baker unexpectedly took me into my own life history. Moving back to Leeds, ostensibly to benefit from the university culture, would highlight a previously unacknowledged personal relationship to Baker’s 1960s photographs. How had I not ‘seen’ in her photographs a life-world I had childhood experience of, growing up in an inner city working-class neighbourhood poised, as in Baker’s work, on a great social and planning upheaval? The children in her images, well, “*they could have been me.*” Reconnecting with early childhood family friends has been expanding. Thank you Lillie and Lewis and Liz.

There are many people to thank for being companions during the course of my work. Sincere gratitude goes to all the Shirley Baker Oral History Project and ‘Tea with the Curator’ participants. This thesis would have no content without their generosity. There is a supportive quorum without whom this thesis would not have come to fruition: Peter Barrett, Sean Doherty, Kerry Harker and Gérard Mermoz — thank you for believing in my resources.

I cannot express enough gratitude to my mother, who has travelled with me every step of the way. And Rosie, for her furry companionship.

## Abstract

At the intersection of photographic history and theory with curatorial theory and practice, this thesis proposes a model for analysing an expanded method of *exhibiting* photography as a research practice. Using qualitative research methods, based on solicited public participation, the thesis examines the co-production of emergent and experiential knowledge, of how viewers understand what photographs *do*, and how to understand what such viewers *are doing* with photographs encountered in an exhibition.

I focus on British photographer Shirley Baker (1932-2014) who photographed (1961-1981) in working-class districts of Manchester and Salford, and my exhibition *Women, Children; and Loitering Men* staged in London, 2014 and Madrid, 2016. Its adaptation for Manchester Art Gallery in 2017 is the core of this research project. I authored the first biography of the photographer, situating her as an agent within a personal and broader cultural matrix in post-war social history and photographic practices. Analysing the limitations of the sparse literature on her work, the thesis contests the generic framing of her images as historical records and/or social documentary.

In Manchester, I devised preliminary and concurrent methods of soliciting and analysing public participation in order to research and theorize what viewers were *doing* with Baker's photographs, and what the complex processes of meaning-making was *doing* for the viewers. Two innovative participatory practices photo elicitation and 'Tea with the Curator' conversations, generated recorded oral archives. Using Grounded Theory Method, I analysed and coded this oral material and deployed the concepts of 'compositing' and 'composure' as contributions to photographic and curatorial theory. This research project re-locates photographic exhibitions as a unique form of public research inquiry, taking place in a space of sociability and mutuality. I provide evidence that an expanded curatorial practice activates, for contemporary audiences, rich discursive, imaginative and affective opportunities, restoring to Baker's historical photographs what John Berger described as '*a living experience*'.

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## **Abbreviations**

DPA - Documentary Photography Archive

DRY - Democratica Real Ya

GTM - Grounded Theory Method

LLO - Life Less Ordinary

MAG - Manchester Art Gallery

MPL - Mary Evans Picture Library

MRO - Manchester Record Office

SBOHP - Shirley Baker Oral History Project

PE - Photo elicitation

SN&SM - Saturday Night and Sunday Morning

TWTC - Tea with thee Curator

TA - Thematic Analysis

TPG - The Photographers' Gallery

## Introduction

I discovered the work of a British photographer, Shirley Baker (1932-2014) whilst researching women involved in street photography in the post-war period. I was initially interested in who and what is ‘Shirley Baker’ as a body of photographic work, and also as a photographer. As a result, I created the first archivally-based biographical study of her life and practice. It was also necessary to address how Shirley Baker’s photographs had come to be described, framed and categorized, circulated in exhibitions and in print, and valued—or not—and what effect this has had on how her work had been understood or belatedly recognized. The effect of these processes has been to situate Baker’s photographic work within the field of documentary practice.

As a curator of photography exhibitions, I sought to challenge this classification, posing the question of how curatorial practice could itself become ‘re-search’ and generate both new knowledge of Baker’s practice and an expanded understanding of her photographs. Additionally would it be possible to research both what her photographs do when engaged with by viewers in the present, and to find out what viewers themselves are doing with these images?

To answer these questions, this thesis combines historical, theoretical and practical research in the broad field of ‘photographies’, photographic history and photographic reception. I introduce and analyse the results of two methodologically innovative participatory practices, the *Oral History Project* and ‘*Tea with the Curator*’ which I devised in order to revise and enrich the analysis of Shirley Baker’s work, and also as importantly, to remodel the practice of curating photography more generally.

The three strands of this thesis can be formulated as the following research questions:

- How can curating and exhibitionary practices engaging historical photographs activate rich discursive and imaginative opportunities for contemporary audiences?
- Can a curatorial practice produce new ways of understanding Shirley Baker’s work addressing not what they are of, but what do they do, and also what viewers are doing with the photographs?
- Are alternative forms of knowledge generated through new and expanded forms of curation that solicit different ways of *experiencing* Shirley Baker’s work and photography?

## **Shirley Baker, photographer**

Prompted in 1961 by one of the largest urban clearance programmes in Europe, Salford-born Shirley Baker began taking photographs in the working-class districts of Manchester and Salford, continuing to do so over the next twenty years. Although the best known, these are not the only photographs she made. She photographed throughout the North West of England, the South of France (where she had a holiday home), in London during the mid-1980s and in Japan (on the occasion of a business trip with her husband). What these photographs share is an attention to ‘the extraordinary’ in the lives of ‘ordinary people’. The Manchester and Salford photographs show the everyday world of working-class communities — children playing, housewives working and chatting, and to a lesser extent men, often pensioners, or demolition men working in the area. Buildings also feature, as do the vast ‘crofts’ and demolition wastelands, littered with abandoned cars.<sup>1</sup> At this stage in the history of British documentary photography, images in black and white were the norm. Baker was one of a handful of post-war British photographers who experimented with colour. In 1965, she photographed in Hulme in inner-city Manchester and for the first time ‘saw’ in the reds, blues, greens and yellows of her chosen Kodachrome film, colours that enriched her subjects and their location, and may, perhaps, be read as signs of life and optimism in what might otherwise be seen as a bleak urban environment. Shirley Baker did gain a local reputation and had an affectionate following in the Manchester area. Nevertheless, when she died in 2014, neither had she had a solo exhibition outside the North West nor were her works collected by any national institution—a situation that has changed as a consequence of my research and curatorship.<sup>2</sup> The only exception is the interview with photo-historian, Val

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<sup>1</sup> A croft is a Mancunian and Salfordian term referring to bomb damaged urban wastelands.

<sup>2</sup> Between 2000 and 2012, Baker had two solo exhibitions in Salford (The Lowry in 2000, and Salford Art Gallery in 2011). Despite these shows, selected by Baker, the photographer still received no critical nor historical attention from any national institutions.

Williams (1992) for the British Library's Oral History of British Photography Archive, analysed in Chapter 2.<sup>3</sup> How could Shirley Baker be so present yet also absent?

### **Curating Historical Photography: My Early Practice**

My curating with historical photographs is not a heritage exercise. Conceiving curation as a creative practice, I have been inspired by what art theorist Hal Foster identified in 2004 as 'the archival turn', in which artists work with archival materials to 'envision alternative pasts or futures, proposing, "new orders of affective association"'.<sup>4</sup> Literary and image scholar, Marianne Hirsch has also been drawn to archive-responsive artists in her writings on gender and memory notably in relation to the Holocaust and migration. Hirsch focusses, however, on 'archival artists' who engage in what she describes as a 'reparative move', namely artists who 'assemble collections that function as correctives and additions'.<sup>5</sup>

My own exhibitions lie between these two positions. I bring together 'decontextualised images and objects' that in the display become associated relationally through conceptualising 'the exhibition' as an 'installation'. Like Foster's artists, I curate to generate affective as well as historical responses to photographs for imaginal affect. In my exhibitionary practice, I am also concerned to introduce viewers to counter-narratives that reclaim historical specificity and context.

For example, *Life Less Ordinary: performance, photography and race in contemporary South Africa* formed a dialogue between the so-called 'anthropological' photographs by the Irish-born South African photographer Alfred Duggin Cronin (1874-1954) with 'performative' artworks by a post-apartheid generation of artists in an exploration of the myth of racial difference and the idea of 'performing' racial identities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Oral History of British Photography Archive*, British Library, <https://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/photography/021M-C0459X0020XX-0100V0>. Accessed 9 May 2020. Interestingly Val Williams published a women-focussed photography history but omitted any mention of Shirley Baker. See: Val Williams, *Women Photographers: The Other Observers 1900 to the present*, (London, Virago Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Hal Foster, *An Archival Impulse*, (October 110, Fall 2004), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Marianne Hirsch, (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory*, (New York, Columbia University Press), 227-249.

<sup>6</sup> My curation of Duggin-Cronin's work was the first time it had been publicly exhibited in Britain since the 1920s. *Life Less Ordinary: performance, photography and race in contemporary South Africa* was commissioned by the Djanogly Gallery, University of Nottingham (2009) and included works by twelve contemporary artists.

In 2012, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning: 'the authentic moment' in British Photography* addressed the visualization of British working-class culture in post-war documentary photography and social realist literature and film.<sup>7</sup> Incorporating a great variety of photographic genres (family photographs, industrial and commercial photography, film stills, and press photos) the exhibition posed questions regarding notions of realism, class, regional identities and personal memory.

With each exhibition, I invite audiences to engage imaginatively with and revision both historical and contemporary visual materials and cultural objects. These shows are historically focussed on specific locations and require extensive material analysis of photographic materials from public and private archives and collections. In assembling, arranging and designing my exhibitions, I am acutely conscious of the ways in which viewers might navigate the works on display, and how, in turn, this might affect their relationship (spatially, visually, receptively) to the works on show. Yet the concept of 'exhibition design' is relatively under theorized in curatorial practice, and its links to modes of interpretation and reception are not well understood or developed.<sup>8</sup>

Since my exhibition, *Marc Riboud: Leeds 1954-2004* (2008), I have made a strategic sideways move. Instead of a 'didactic' model of curating, in which the curator presents a custodial narrative, I have been developing a model of practice that engages oral history methods to introduce the voices of people who are the subjects in the images or are surrogate subjects. I have additionally taken this method into participatory non-gallery based projects. In 2014, I curated a participatory oral history of a 1960s housing estate *Westpoint* in Coventry. This overall approach incorporating working with people, was fully explored in the Manchester adaptation of *Women and Children; and Loitering Men (WC&LM)* and produced a new excitement around the visual image. In addition to my own thoughts about Baker's photographs, discovering 'ordinary peoples' — a term used by photography theorist Ariella Azoulay, to refer to people not considered experts in photography — 'ways of seeing' and 'ways of telling' about and with photography, not

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<sup>7</sup> "A sensational new exhibition inspired by Alan Sillitoe's groundbreaking novel". See: <http://britishphotohistory.ning.com/events/saturday-night-sunday-morning-the-authentic-moment-in-british>. Accessed 5.5.20.

<sup>8</sup> A point by Paul O'Neil in his PhD *The Cultural of Curating and the Curating of Cultures* (Middlesex University, 2007). Accessed: <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/10763/>.

only added to my knowledge but introduced a collective spirit into the process of curating.<sup>9</sup>

As with the visual/narrative experiments with people undertaken by Berger and Mohr, these experiences have helped me to understand that ‘photographs do not [always] work as we had been taught’.<sup>10</sup> In one of the chapters in *Another Way of Telling*, photographer Jean Mohr showed five of his photographs to ten people — ‘is it a game, a test, an experiment’? —and asked them to explain what they saw. In ‘*What did I see?*’, Mohr relinquished the position of the knowing photographer, as I would later relinquish control of being the knowing curator. The results of Mohr’s experiment, surprised him, for the viewers saw neither what he saw, nor what he intended. This ‘phenomenon’ led Berger and Mohr to explore this ‘gap’ in interpretation further and forms the ‘new way of seeing’ and ‘new way of telling’ of photography that they present in the rest of their book.

### **Curating and Reframing Shirley Baker: London 2015 and Madrid 2016**

When preparing for the exhibition and book, *WC&LM* in London in 2015, I asked a practice-centred question: How could I present the work of this relatively unknown photographer in ways that might be made relevant to contemporary audiences? This would require a re-conceptualization of Shirley Baker’s work and through curatorial practices a (re)framing of the ways in which her photographs had been hitherto defined. I sought to contest the view that Baker’s images were concerned with urban privation, depicting the lives of the downtrodden. Instead, I wanted viewers to see the humanist values and humour that I perceived in her images, to recognize its relevance for today and to secure for Baker a place in the history of British post-war photography.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Azoulay perhaps draws on the writings of Raymond Williams in his challenge of the hierarchies of High Culture versus mass or people’s everyday culture as being no culture at all. See, Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989) 3-14.

<sup>10</sup> See John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, (London, Granta, 1982), 84. Ariella Azoulay also draws on Berger and Mohr’s experience, highlighting her own ‘feeling of ‘discovery’ in asking what ‘ordinary people’ think about photography. See Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, (London, Verso, 2012), 85.

<sup>11</sup> Val Williams curated Baker’s photographs in *How We Are: Photographing Britain* at Tate (2007), with an accompanying catalogue. In it, she describes Baker as a ‘lesser-known figure(s)...who produced [colour] photography of living conditions in the urban contexts of Manchester and Salford...’. It is not that Williams is wrong, however, but that here is evidence of the persistent idea of Baker as a ‘recorder’ and ‘documenter’. Moreover, in his catalogue essay for the same exhibition, ‘Our Back Pages’, Keith Jackson claims Baker a photographer of ‘deprivation’, see, *How We Are: Photographing Britain* (London, Tate), 194.

I turned to John Berger (1926-2017) whose writings on photography from the late 1950s onwards presaged the arguments of many later theorists on the polysemy of photography and the mutability of meaning (semiotics); on photographs as actants with latent energies (Actor Network Theory) and the importance of discursive contextualisation.<sup>12</sup> In ‘The Ambiguity of the Photograph’, Berger identified the tension in analogue photography between its indexical inscription of the world and the image’s always violent separation from the originating ‘event’, which in his view defined all photographs as ‘historical’.<sup>13</sup> Berger argued that this ‘discontinuity’ (in time, event, place, people) results in ‘ambiguity’, with certainty of meaning restored only through words.<sup>14</sup> It was in this way that I re-conceptualised Baker’s images not as historical/indexical records, but as ambiguous images charged with a range of potential meanings, echoing Berger’s belief that, ‘it might be that this photographic ambiguity, if recognized and accepted as such, [that] could offer to photography an unique means of expression’.<sup>15</sup>

With his collaborator, the photographer, Jean Mohr, Berger explored ambiguity in a series of photographic essay experiments including, *If Each Time*, comprising a sequence of 150 images. Their experiment informed my own sequencing of a similar number of Shirley Baker’s photographs (see Chapter 4). Like Berger and Mohr, I addressed the latent ‘energies’ of the photographs by employing techniques of image equivalence and

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<sup>12</sup> John Berger started writing seriously about photography in the 1960s and was a pioneer in photography’s critical appraisal, yet his contribution, I suggest, is inexplicably under-acknowledged. Alternatively, the canon comprises: Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1979), Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1981), and Walter Benjamin’s *A Short History of Photography*. (1972). An audit of my own photography history and theory books reveals only two references to Berger: in John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption* (1998) and Ariella Azoulay’s *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (2014). Sontag’s essays written for the *New York Review of Books* (and collected in *On Photography*) commenced in 1973-1977 after Berger’s. So why is this?

<sup>13</sup> John Berger, ‘Appearances’, in John Berger & Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, (London, Granta, 1989), 85. All photographs are historical, in the sense that they are temporality-linked to a moment from when the image was ‘taken’. Whether, however, a photograph is judged and or valued as ‘historic’ or ‘historical’, as opposed to just being ‘old’, is a cultural value that has as much to do with, as historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki argues, the *relationship* between the ‘past’ event, the people who recorded the event, the institutional framings (including professional interests) of the photograph/event, and the viewer for whom the photographic image and object is tasked to take on the function of *being* of history or of historic significance. The question of what constitutes ‘the past’ or more specifically what constitutes an ‘historical’ photograph is not a given and is open to interpretation. See, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us*, (London, Verso, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Mary Price also draws attention to the anchoring function of text. See: *The Photograph: A Strange Confined Space*, (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> John Berger, ‘Appearances’, in John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, (London, Granta, 1989), 92.

juxtaposition to ‘extend narrative range’ in which ‘meaning is discovered’.<sup>16</sup> In 2017, when I substantially adapted *WC&LM* for Manchester Art Gallery (MAG), I returned once more to the writings of Berger in which he draws on ‘the laws of memory’ to theorize the multi-narrative, trans-temporal dimensionality of photography.<sup>17</sup> Seeking to address how a photograph, severed from its originating context and, thus, ambiguous, can ‘be put back into the context of social experience, social memory’, Berger identified two features: ‘narrated time’ — the ‘Now’ time of (re) presentation and viewing, and the latent energy of photographs.<sup>18</sup> For Berger, any photograph ‘may become such a “Now” if an adequate context is created for it’.<sup>19</sup> Not a single methodological approach, or even one that Berger pragmatically defines — ‘there is never a single approach to something remembered’ — the method should be ‘constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic’.<sup>20</sup> It is this constellation that forms what Berger names a ‘radial system’.

Berger’s radial system guided my adaptation of *WC&LM* by introducing a variety of participatory projects and events which expressed the continuities of time for the photographs. For instance, in advance of the exhibition opening, I initiated the elicitation of personal memories through an *Oral History Project*, and during the exhibition, a novel experiment, ‘*Tea with the Curator*’ (detailed in Chapters 6 - 9). Berger’s radial system might also be applied to the framing of this thesis, one of its aims is to draw together multiple threads for understanding the photographic work of Shirley Baker in terms of three dimensions: her career and project her place in British photography history, the debates regarding documentary photography, and the impact of her work for exhibition visitors.

As the first scholar to have studied Shirley Baker’s work in detail, I based my primary research on her own personal archive. Although my exhibition in London concentrated on Baker’s photographs of Manchester and Salford, my primary aim at this

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<sup>16</sup> John Berger, ‘Appearances’, 8

<sup>17</sup> John Berger, ‘Understanding a Photograph, in Geoff Dyer, ed. *Understanding a Photograph: John Berger*, (London, Penguin Classics, 2013), 60.

<sup>18</sup> John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph: John Berger*, 105.

<sup>19</sup> John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 60.

<sup>20</sup> John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 60.

stage was to challenge the existing assumptions of the few writers who had written about Baker's work. I wanted to argue curatorially that treating her photographs as historical documents and social documentary radically constrained their potential meaning.<sup>21</sup> Whilst acknowledging Baker's photographs as historically revealing insights into Northern working-class life, I also believed they had something to communicate about the 'now-time'.<sup>22</sup> The exhibition was not to be a history lesson. My purpose was instead to activate the viewers' 'historical imagination' in order to make recognizable previous lives and even to suggest points of empathic affiliation in the present.<sup>23</sup> In Baker's work, I saw more potential for contingency in ways that echo Walter Benjamin's claim that 'no matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now'.<sup>24</sup> Such sparks of contingency were researched systematically through the Manchester case study (see Chapters 6-9). Furthermore, I argue that the existing framing of Baker's photographs as historical documents obscured the photographer's aesthetic concerns and failed to engage with her witty visualisation of the absurdity of the everyday which might reposition some of her images as surrealistic (see Chapter 3).

How had Baker come to be described as a 'documentarist' with all its associated connotations? By the mid-1980s, we should note that the term was applied as an almost derogatory label. Throughout this thesis, I argue that the term and practice 'documentary', whether understood as a style, genre, approach, or discursive formation, is itself subject to meanings changing over time. The visual content may stay the same

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<sup>21</sup> I am aware that in focusing on Baker's 'street photographs' I gave preference to this series within a much larger oeuvre and, thus, contributed to an extant understanding of Baker's photographic preoccupations as located in, for instance, working class culture *per se* — which it is not. See Joan M. Schwartz, 'Negotiating the Visual Turn: New Perspective on Images and Archives', *American Archivist* (Vol. 67, (1) for a brief overview on the issue of assigning taxonomies as if fixed for all time.

<sup>22</sup> Whilst I am drawing here on John Berger, in *About Looking*, (Bloomsbury, London, 2009), 65. Berger drew his theory from Walter Benjamin's 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History', first published in English in 1968, and later in the collection *Illuminations* (London, Pimlico, 1999), 247.

<sup>23</sup> Vivienne Little, suggests that the 'historical imagination', of the historian *and* the reader is critical to making history a present experience of the past. The function of this past knowing (history) is not only to understand the 'marked' difference between 'then' and 'now', but is *also* to arrive at empathic connections based on a continuity of human experiences. See Vivienne Little, 'What is Historical Imagination?', (*Teaching History*, Historical Association, No. 36, June 1983), 27-31.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in Tim Dant and Graeme Gilloch, 'Pictures of the Past: Benjamin and Barthes on photography and history', *European Cultural Studies*, 2002, (Vol. 5 (1), 9.

but the way we see and relate to this visual arrangement of ‘realist’ content is culturally and historically shaped. As photography theorist, John Roberts has pointed out, counter-intuitively, realist codes are themselves historical, as are the ways of *seeing* that pre-determine any photograph.<sup>25</sup> The question of what we are seeing in Shirley Baker’s photographs of Manchester and Salford, and how we might define them forms a major line of inquiry in this study. It is, therefore, necessary to revisit, in Chapters 2 and 3, the history of the concept of documentary and to analyse the ways in which Baker’s work has previously been categorized in relation to this unstable and contested term.

In 2016 *WC&LM* was re-staged in Madrid for *PhotoEspane*, one of Europe’s leading photography festivals. The installation changed slightly. Yet audience responses were radically different, with viewers reading Baker’s works as politically-charged images of their own ‘Now’. I offer a close analysis of this installation in Chapter 5, one of three case studies. In 2017 *WC&LM* was adapted for the Manchester International Festival. Shirley Baker’s photographs had now come home, offering new challenges and opportunities.

### **Learning from Practice: New Research Questions**

The preparation and activities undertaken during the Manchester Art Gallery exhibition emerged from the discoveries I made through spending time in the galleries in London and Madrid. It is unusual for a curator to be in the gallery observing and talking with viewers. Institutionally, and indeed as a consequence of hierarchies of knowledge production, being interested in what audiences think, feel, say or do is typically the preserve of the education or participation team, or external audience evaluation and interpretation consultants.<sup>26</sup>

In London, both the staff of The Photographers’ Gallery (TPG) and I were struck by the deep engagement spectators had with the photographs on display. Not only did visitors stay longer than average attendance time, but the gallery was intensely animated

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<sup>25</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>26</sup> This is certainly my experience. Recently attending a workshop on ‘photography and interpretation’ for museum and gallery professionals, of the hundred or so attendees I was the only art curator. ‘Photography and Interpretation’ presented by interpretation consultant, Steve Slater, for the *National Photographic Collections Network*, 22 May 2020.

with conversation.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, each time I visited, I was drawn into eager exchanges with visitors, wishing to tell me about their experience of the exhibition, and what individual works meant to them. As already mentioned, in Madrid a younger Spanish audience subjected Shirley Baker's photographs to what I term a 'political gaze'. Such reactions demonstrated the capacity of Baker's photographs to generate diverse affects that were neither historical nor nostalgic. Like Shirley Baker herself, I was suspicious of nostalgia, fearing it might 'articulate[d/s] space and time in such a way that it robs others of their histories (their stories)'.<sup>28</sup> Before the advent of affect theory, as film historian Annette Kuhn and others have pointed out, decades of Marxist, post-Marxist, structuralist and post-structuralist readings had aroused suspicions about feelings, emotion and experience. As Kuhn cautions, feelings can sometimes be regarded as 'the last word of personal truth forestalling all further discussion, let alone analysis'.<sup>29</sup> So, as a curator, how could I research potential affects and potent emotions at the same time as exploring Baker's place in the history of British photography?

The London and Madrid exhibitions furnished evidence that historical photographs can resonate beyond their inscription in a particular time and place, confirming my belief that curatorial practices can inspire different readings of Baker's images. In the words of John Berger they become, 'a living experience ... instead of an arrested moment'.<sup>30</sup> Such experiences also registered a shift in my own focus from an interest in how photographs can produce different readings, to a concern with hitherto untheorized activity of viewers. Rather than considering 'what do Baker's images show and mean, I asked new questions: what do photographs *do*, how are they *experienced*, and what are viewers *doing* in this encounter with these images? Thus, I shall argue that elicited meanings, as well as affects, are a consequence of the social practices that make up what I have termed for my curatorial practice as the 'exhibitionary complex'.

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<sup>27</sup> The average viewing time for any one painting is estimated at between 7-30 seconds a figure that is used to benchmark interpretational methods. Reference sought from attending online the 'Visual Observation' workshop organized by the Thinking Museum, Amsterdam on 12 May 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Dawn Massey, *For Space*, (London: Sage, 2005), 124.

<sup>29</sup> See Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, (London, Verso, 2002). However, as Elizabeth H. Brown and Thy Phu, point out, the awareness of photography's particular relationship to affect was always present in the early critical writings on photography — in Kracauer, Benjamin, Barthes, Sontag and Berger, see *Feeling Photography*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>30</sup> John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 57.

At the heart of this thesis is my understanding that the visual economy of photographs can in substantive part be reordered and I have sought to achieve this through my exhibitionary praxis. The way that I curate involves primary historical research that brings new information to bear on the photographer and their photographs. More recently, I have developed a new approach to curating: through engaging with people and photographs new knowledges emerge that generate multiple and expanded histories. Curating with photographs and *with* people de-centres the process of meaning-making to become a dialogical process that arises in intertextual exchange between a photograph, the curator, the exhibition and the viewer. My curating practice now fuses aesthetic effect (aura), the social, cultural and historical dimensions (context), the materiality of images (object properties), and their affects (on people, location, other photographs and objects). Curating, I suggest, can be both a creative practice and a knowledge-making praxis comparable with other forms academic research.

**Theoretical Frameworks:** *Photographic meaning as embedded in practices*

Over the last twenty-five years the ontology of photography and its meaning-making capacities have been theorized in new ways. Content and discourse analysis — a ‘blending’ of semiotics and Foucauldian theories of discursive formations of knowledge-power— informed the first stage in my archiving of Baker’s photographs across her entire corpus, and primed my research into the economic, social, and political relations, institutions and practices that surrounded both Baker’s images and her working life.

To expand lines of inquiry and theorization, I employ more recent theories of photography drawn from visual anthropology. Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Pinney have integrated earlier discursive and historical methods with a materialist approach that addresses context, use and meaning. They argue that photographs, once regarded as two-dimensional images, should be conceptualized as material objects whose meaning is located both in its imagery and its affordances (‘the design aspect’ of an object that determines how it could be used) that arise through social processes. Edwards came to this materialist paradigm through her own work as an archivist.<sup>31</sup> Accustomed to handling and ‘watching’ photographs, she concluded that both image and object are ‘socially salient objects, enmeshed within a visual economy that reflect[ed] complex and

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, (Oxford, Berg, 2001), 13.

wide-ranging scientific and social networks'.<sup>32</sup> Her scholarly work, influenced by the anthropological writings of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, offers ways of thinking about photographs as having a 'social biography', drawing attention to their physical trajectories (where and how they are shown, collected and used) and the intellectual transformations (interpretations) of the photographic image/objects across time.<sup>33</sup> In addition she suggests that in considering or working with photographs as objects and as imagery, attention should be paid not only to the customary 'image content' — 'indexical inscription' — but, also to the wider technical apparatuses that enable any visual display to be experienced as 'meaningful'.<sup>34</sup>

This notion of the social biography of photographs complements, I propose, Berger's 'radial system', by addressing the multiple social practices which surround the collecting, showing and study of photographs. This approach opened up my way of understanding how genres themselves may be more accurately understood as discursive frameworks that arise not only through sites of power and knowledge as in a Foucauldian model, but relationally, contingently, and intertextually.<sup>35</sup> For researchers and curators alike, the social biographical perspective highlights the potentiality for 'recontextualisation'. An 'ontologically alive' photographic image-object emerges through new kinds of 'formal kinships', made possible as the photographic image-object journeys across time/space and comes into contact with different disciplines and new audiences so that each in turn have the capacity to generate 'new kinds of intimacies and political reverberations'.<sup>36</sup> Although this theoretical position has unlocked new avenues of inquiry, we need to remember that the boundaries of the image object are not

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<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, (Oxford, Berg, 2001), 13.

<sup>33</sup> Arjun Appadurai, (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), and Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process', in Arjun Appadurai, (ed.) *The Social Life of Things*, 64-91.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, 'Material beings: objecthood and ethnographic photographs', *Visual Studies*, (17:1, 2002), 67.

<sup>35</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, (London, Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>36</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography, Part 1*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015), 11.

limitless. As both Nicholas Thomas and Christopher Pinney have noted photographic materiality makes ‘specific doings possible and others impossible’.<sup>37</sup>

Anthropologist James Helva extends the model of the ‘social biography of photographs’ to evolve a framework he terms ‘the photographic complex’, that draws on the Actor Network Theory proposed by French philosopher, Bruno Latour.<sup>38</sup> Helva engages Latour to suggest that photographs emerge and become ‘thinkable and meaningful’ at a given historical moment. Furthermore, how they are given ‘shape’ arises through the ‘network’ of relationships formed ‘between both human and non-human actants’.<sup>39</sup> Thus, photographs have ‘performative trajectories’ as actants, that both effect meaning and are in turn, effected in ‘mutual constitution’.<sup>40</sup> The ‘idea’ of a photograph thus arises as a consequence of a ‘whole system of values’ and practices including the camera and film, its material output and circulation that involve its production, communication and dissemination. Likewise, I concluded that genre itself might be defined as a ‘culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and reclassified into culturally constituted categories’.<sup>41</sup> Thus, I am arguing that the genre of Baker’s photographs is itself an unstable, cultural construct that requires performing to come into being. This leads to a question as to how an exhibitionary praxis both may account for this classification (as a form of interpretative intervention), and act as one element in a ‘chain of event[s]’ that intervenes in the social biography of the photographs so that Shirley Baker’s photographs are never curated and exhibited *untouched*.<sup>42</sup> This also raises the matter of curatorial ‘responsibility’ in addressing photographic ‘naming’ and interpretation as both mutable and analyzable. Put simply, how we frame and present photographs affects how people relate to them and in turn are

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<sup>37</sup> Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography*, 20.

<sup>38</sup> James Helva, ‘The Photography Complex’, in Rosalind C. Morris, (ed.), *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2009), Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> James Helva, ‘The Photography Complex’, 79.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Performative trajectories’ is used by Joan M. Schwatz in ‘Negotiating the Visual Turn: New Perspectives on Images and Archives’, in *American Archivist* (67:1), 21. The term ‘mutual constitution’ is used by Gillian Rose in, *Doing Family Photography*, (London, Routledge, 2010), 20.

<sup>41</sup> Igor Kopytoff, ‘The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process’, in Arjun Appadurai, (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, 68.

<sup>42</sup> Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography*, 20.

affected by them, and it is this duality of effect and affect that transforms the field of meanings generated within specific curatorial contexts of display. Beyond the inevitable projection by a self-reflexive curator of what responses might be expected or indeed desired—for example, my aim to reframe Shirley Baker’s work as richer than conventional social documentary, or as the work of a photographer who should be integrated into the history of twentieth century British photography—and beyond any general theories of photographs as actants—I recognized that the reactions taking place had yet to be theorized.

**Theoretical Frameworks:** *Doing, Meaning-making in Practice, and the Gap of Experience*

My analysis of the oral history accounts identified that Baker’s photographs were performing as rich memory objects for the participants, whilst my ethnographically-informed participant observation suggested that viewers in the context of the exhibition space were experiencing profound, embodied and affective reactions. As a consequence I found myself asking a question that belies its simplicity: what is going on? It was clear that exhibition viewers were responding both to the image content and to the formal quality of Baker’s photographs. This alone could not, in my view, entirely account for their responses. Although it provided a broader framework for understanding the meaning of photographs, the social biography model did not offer ways of understanding viewers’ actual behaviour and feelings when looking at Baker’s images. Seeking a way to research and theorize this I initially considered Marianne Hirsch’s theory of affiliative looking. Hirsch claims that the particular intimate viewing experience of family photography derives not only from the content of the image, but from a unique relay of performative looks that she has called the ‘affiliative look’:

Recognising an image as familial elicits ... a specific kind of readerly or spectatorial look, an affiliative look through which we are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative. Akin to Barthes’s move from the studium to the punctum, it is idiosyncratic, untheorizable: it is what moves us because of our memories and our histories, and because of the ways in which we structure our own sense of particularity’.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Marianne Hirsch has continued to refine her theory of ‘affiliation’ in later writings. Nevertheless, the term, and furthermore its actual phenomenological occurrence, is rather vaguely demonstrated across Hirsch’s writing. See further definitions in *Family Frames*, (Cambridge, USA, Harvard University Press, 2012), 93-94, 254-256.

Hirsch's theory evokes the close bonds of family intimacy, nevertheless, she claims it neither requires the viewing subject to possess actual knowledge of or about the photographed subject. For so long as there is sufficient resemblance or surrogate likeness of subject (of physiological characteristics, events, people, place, etc.), and/or resonance in the photographic tropes (poses, staging, presentation of photo-object), familiarity and intimacy can, she argues, be secured, with the viewer sutured into the image.<sup>44</sup> For Hirsch, the 'affiliative look' is characterised by a desire on behalf of the viewer to be enfolded into the experience of intimacy of a 'familial look' beyond any obvious desire for recognition of identity:

It may be that self — or family portraits are images of a particular kind, eliciting specifically relational forms of reading, a specific form of what Victor Burgin terms "intertextuality".<sup>45</sup>

Hirsch's characterisation of the affiliative look has been influential since its publication, nevertheless for my research, her theory raised certain problems. Baker's photographs are not family photographs in any obvious meaning of the term and it was also difficult to see how Hirsch's theory, translates to actual phenomenological photographic 'behaviour', as opposed to being a theoretical hypothesis, based in her own experience and extrapolated from psychoanalytic theories of the gaze, trauma and memory. It was necessary for me to find a way to research not only what was being seen and remembered, but also what was being felt and experienced.

The participant research project, 'Tea With the Curator' ('TWTC') involved self-selecting participants choosing two of Baker's photographs and entering into conversation about them, with me, in the exhibition space. By subjecting the transcribed conversations to Grounded Theory Method (GTM) (summarised below) I identified the narrative complexity of participants' accounts that were not tied to the specificity of place and that blended temporalities — past, present and future. Focusing on this

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<sup>44</sup> In *Collective Visions*, artist Lorie Novak substantiates Hirsch's proposition that the family photos of others can be imaginatively and creatively assimilated into one's own life. Novak's interactive art project website invited participants to contribute personal stories about family photos using either their own or those posted to the site by other people. She found that most website participants recalled photographs, now lost, that were never taken or that they had never possessed, whilst others chose to write about photographs posted online by strangers. See: Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 112-114. Lorie Novak, see: <https://www.lorienovak.com/projects/collected-visions/>. Accessed: 20 May 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 93-94.

phenomenon led to my unanticipated ‘discovery’ and theorization that what participants were ‘doing’ with Shirley Baker’s photographs involved both *compositing* and *composure*.

*Compositing* I adapted from the computer sciences and digital visualization, refers to the compressing and layering of data, to capture the trans-temporality of participant narratives. *Composure* is a theory developed by the oral historian, Graham Dawson to explain the responses of his interviewees.<sup>46</sup> Dawson pinpoints two dimensions to composure: firstly, participants seek to present a coherent story by drawing on shared discourses, and secondly, the individuals strive to compose accounts with which s/he is psychically comfortable. Even though Dawson does not identify the actual structural and content mechanisms of narrative and psychic composure, his theory is useful in two ways. It led me to think of Shirley Baker herself as a deviser of coherent (pictorial) stories that arise from a shared culture and also met her own needs for psychic composure. Additionally, composure offered an explanation of why her photographs are so resonant across a range of audiences, in that viewers are themselves able to locate their own composure through relating to her work, entwined as it is with their own varied experiences.

A number of observations arise from my emphasis on ‘doing’. It facilitates the consideration of audience behaviour and reception as a process of meaning-making and affective work in social praxis. Additionally, it provides a practice-based framework for conceptualizing Baker’s photographs as image/objects whose meanings are not only contingent and relational and that also emerge through the practices of being an exhibited photograph, defined by certain affordances, though not limited by these due to the particularities of the contextual and temporal/spatial ‘event’ that is an exhibition.

### **Methodologies**

In this thesis I have used a range of art historical and qualitative research methodologies at different stages of my work with Shirley Baker’s photography and in the preparation of the exhibition *WC&LM* at MAG. Watching and talking were core ‘methods’ employed in this research: oral history, photo elicitation, participant observation and

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<sup>46</sup> Graham Dawson, ‘Heroes of history, heroes of phantasy,’ (*Soundings*, 3, 1996) and Graham Dawson, ‘Soldier Heroes, British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities’, quoted in Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 66.

‘TWTC’.<sup>47</sup> There are, in my view, two core units of original research in the thesis. I have researched and written the first biography of Shirley Baker, using both art and historical research. Secondly, I developed a method of enquiry into how viewers make meaning with photography: the ‘TWTC’ conversations and my adaptation of the social science qualitative method, GTM to investigate exhibitionary practice, photography, and viewer activity. As far as I am aware, my research is the first time GTM has been used in the study of the curation of an exhibition devoted to photography and forms the basis of Chapters 7-9. Below I summarise my core methodological approaches, as deployed over three Parts of my thesis.

### *Methodologies I: The Photographic Complex*

In the preparation of the London exhibition, I engaged a Material Object Analysis to methodically identify the form as well as descriptive content of hundreds of Shirley Baker’s printed photographs, contact sheets, negatives, slides. With a privileged access to the deceased photographer’s home and studio, I was the first person to gain a complete overview of Baker’s oeuvre. By contrasting Baker’s images, plotting out her range of subjects, I built up a picture of her sixty-year corpus of photographs, leading me to identify not only their content but also to discover the themes within over three thousand images. Using online censuses and directories, and conducting oral history interviews with Baker’s family and friends, and taking into consideration her personal effects (her college notebooks, book collection, wedding telegrams and letters, etc.), I present a biographical account of Shirley Baker in the opening chapter of this thesis.

Armed with substantial knowledge of the extent and variety of Baker’s work, I conducted Thematic Analysis (TA) of two formative essays written by the social historian Stephen Constantine and Shirley Baker herself in 1989 and an oral interview by Val Williams for the *British Sound Archive* in 1992. My analysis reveals how a consensus emerged that has remained pivotal in the reception of Baker’s work, defining it as a ‘historical record’ of social change, and a form of ‘social documentary’. Significantly, however, I suggest there is additionally an intersubjective tension in and around the work. Despite Baker’s, Constantine’s and Williams’ view of the photographs

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<sup>47</sup> Ariella Azoulay proposes that we ‘watch’ photographs rather than simply look. ‘Watching’ is for Azoulay an intentional act of viewing that ‘reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of ‘the injury inflicted on others as a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation’. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civic Contract of Photography*, (New York, Zone, 2008).

as a record of changing circumstances and society at large, I noted how a potent mobilization of affective, sensory memories, and feelings is ever present, threatening to ‘leak out’.

At the time of the London exhibition in 2015, John Berger’s theory of ‘ambiguity’ both provided a theoretical framework for re-conceptualising historical photographs, and guided my initial photographic selection, and their subsequent wall arrangement (sizing, framing and spatial arrangement). In Manchester, Berger’s ‘radial system’ influenced the adaptation of the display in which I introduced many new elements, most substantially the audio exhibition guide. In 2015 I was unaware of Kopytoff’s theory of the ‘social biography of things’, and Helva’s idea of ‘the photographic complex’ but together, these two conceptual frameworks retrospectively augmented what was at that time an art historical motivated account of the ‘performative trajectory’ of Shirley Baker’s photographs as object/images in visual and material culture. Helva’s thesis of the ‘photographic complex’ advances a more detailed model for understanding photography’s ‘on-going moment’ that for me builds on Berger’s theory of the ‘radial system’. It provides an approach for articulating the material context I constructed for Baker’s photographs in the exhibition design in London and Madrid (the display of Baker’s cameras, contact sheets, magazines, letters, photographs that were not printed up, invitations), and later I expanded in Manchester with the addition of maps, postcards, and oral history participants’ personal objects.

### *Methodologies II: The Exhibitionary Complex*

As previously mentioned, in the preparation of the Manchester exhibition I initiated an Oral History and Photo Elicitation Project with former residents of the streets that Shirley Baker photographed. Theoretically oral history has become a sophisticated method that acknowledges the connectivity of narrativization and identity construction.<sup>48</sup> My use was initially, and quite simply, a means to discover more information about the ‘sites’ of Baker’s photographs. The oral history testimonies, however, were so rich in terms of subjectivity and in supplying historical and social context that I incorporated the verbatim material (to be heard as ‘authentic voices’ of the participants, in contrast to scripted actor recorded audio) into the audio guide. Approaching photography in this

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<sup>48</sup> See Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, (London, Routledge, 2010), 2, and Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life: 2, an invitation to a critical humanism*, (London, Sage, 2005).

creatively historical way fulfils some of the ideals of Berger and those expressed by photography theorist Ariella Azoulay. Both, in their different ways, are concerned with reconstructing the photographic situation (the moment of taking the image) to allow for awareness of continuity in experience and existence—that for Azoulay is a ‘civic skill’.<sup>49</sup>

Photo elicitation is not a singular method so much as an approach whose point of departure is characterized by ‘inserting a photograph into a research interview’ not to just elicit more information’, but to evoke different kinds of information’.<sup>50</sup> Photographs once routinely engaged as ‘social documents’ to complement oral history methods, were widely thought to ‘prod latent memory, to stimulate and release emotional statements about the informants’ life...’.<sup>51</sup> Photo elicitation has now been enthusiastically taken up by a range of scholarly disciplines as way of exploring the construction of memory itself through photography. Usually though not exclusively, the approach uses personal photographs as prompts. My use of professionally authored photographs by Shirley Baker therefore represents a contribution to the still emerging field of photography, oral history, and memory work.

#### *Methodologies III: The Curatorial-Dialogical Complex: Using Grounded Theory*

Following the exhibition opening in Manchester, I took up a position as ‘curator-in-residence’ for six weeks with, as stated above, a two-week period of participant observation. I noted that Manchester visitors stayed in the exhibition for between a minimum of thirty minutes and up to two and half hours; repeat visits with new friends and family were commonplace.<sup>52</sup> Whilst there were solo visitors, many more went around the exhibition in pairs and small groups, each characterized by animated conversation, affective responsiveness, and embodied behaviours with both the photographs and each other. In thinking about engaging with photography, sensory ethnographer Sarah Pink suggests that there is no such thing as a simple visual representation:

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<sup>49</sup> See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civic Contract of Photography*, (New York, Zone, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Douglas Harper, ‘Talking about Pictures: a case for photo elicitation’. *Visual Studies*, Vol 18, No. 1. 2002.

<sup>51</sup> Douglas Harper, ‘Talking about Pictures: a case for photo elicitation’, 14.

<sup>52</sup> Statistics drawn from observation and the audio guide analytics that tracked the user time of listeners with the audio device. 17,000 people used the guide and anecdotal evidence suggests many repeat visits.

Photographs are the outcomes of multi-sensory contexts, encounters, and engagements. The act of taking a photograph involves the convergence of a range of different social, material, discursive, and moral elements in a multi-sensory environment, rather than being a solely visual process. Likewise its presentation in a public domain involves much more than simply visual representation.<sup>53</sup>

As Pink implicitly acknowledges, ‘viewer’ in some contexts seems an impoverished word to account for photography’s complex intersubjective performance. Certainly in Manchester the term was inadequate to describe audience response, that involved the pointing to and ‘touching’ of photographs, the laughing and sometimes crying, the selfie-taking and group photos alongside Baker's photographs. Each of these phenomena might form the basis for further qualitative research, but I have chosen to focus on the conversational atmosphere in the gallery. For me, conversation came to define the distinctiveness of what was happening in the exhibition: people wanted to talk. They talked to family, friends and strangers alike. What were they talking about? Would their conversations indicate what they thought Shirley Baker’s photographs were about? What did particular photographs mean to participants, and how did they make them feel? Why did these photographs incite so much animated discussion in what is conventionally a relatively silent gallery space? These questions were explored through ‘TWCT’. It was initially conceived as a creative practice in its own right, to enrich viewers’ experience of Baker’s photographs—in John Berger’s phrase, putting ‘the photograph back into a context of experience, social experience, social memory’.<sup>54</sup> The transcripts of these conversations however were subsequently subjected to Ground Theory Method (GTM) analysis. I adopted this research method because instead of beginning with a pre-existing theory, the aim is to engender new concepts through the solicitation, coding and analysis of the words of the interviewees who are the subjects of specific experiences or social practices, (in Chapter 7-9 I provide a detailed account of the method). In GTM analysis texts generated through open-ended interview practices are subjected to different stages of coding (of the spoken then transcribed words) in order to generate an understanding of

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<sup>53</sup> Sarah Pink ‘A Multisensory Approach to Visual Methods’, in Eric Margolis and Luc Pauwels (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, (London, Sage, 2011), 602. I should also add here that the exhibition itself was a multi-sensory environment in other consciously orchestrates ways too, with the inclusion of a specially commissioned soundscape by Derek Nesbitt, and the audio guide in Manchester. The two photo elicitation methods also introduced other sensory behaviours that included handling, listening to each others’ stories in a dialogical exchange that made photographs also an aura experience.

<sup>54</sup> John Berger, ‘Understanding a Photograph’, 59.

people's recounted experience (see Chapter 7). By using GTM I came to discover that what was happening in the intersubjective encounter of participant, photograph and myself went beyond discussing Baker's photographs as images in terms of their content and mode of representation. Codings yielded a means to analyze both what was being said and what was happening, allowing a qualitative process to reveal both meaning and affects in the viewers' often complex readings of and relations to the images. Having undertaken a second level of coding, I was able to isolate three recurring participant responses that I termed: *Drawing on Experience*, *Subjectivising*, and *Storying*. These (re)actions did not explain what Baker's photographs were of but revealed what the participants were doing in responding to their chosen images. To further make sense of these processes, I undertook further stages of coding to address how participants blended these discursive, narrative strategies. Thus I arrived at, as previously discussed, the concept of compositing and the theory of composure.

GTM disclosed that viewers were forming relationships with Baker's work that far exceeded its status as social documentary and historical record. It addressed how meanings of an image are reflexively produced, managed and negotiated; are influenced by personal experience, emotion and memory; the ways in which context of viewing and speaking contribute to meaning; and, finally, how the intersubjective encounter of participant, photograph and myself contributed to meaning-making. This has implications for how to re-conceptualize what Shirley Baker's photographs *are*. Can we think of her photographs as a 'practice'—rather than as a type of image—that is perpetually in a state of 'doing'? Can we say that audiences 'do' the photography of Shirley Baker? So that rather thinking in terms of *seeing*, is it more accurate to refer to *encountering* and *experiencing* her photographs? Cultural geographer, Gillian Rose has proposed that:

Thinking about photographs as visual objects embedded in practices demands careful empirical research, watching what particular people do with those objects and exploring the consequence of those doings. This research tends to be intensive, close-up and detailed. What it lacks in extensive coverage, it makes up for in its fine-grained analytical understanding'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography*, 4.

## A Perfect Metaphor: the Thesis as a Crystalline Structure

Re-reading an essay by Shirley Baker, I was struck by her final sentence in which she identifies a tension. On the one hand, she expresses confidence in the value of her photographs as historical record; on the other, she acknowledges their incompleteness, claiming her images as ‘fractions of a story’.<sup>56</sup> I found myself handling one of her photographs, turning it around and over, like a prism in my hand.<sup>57</sup> Searching on-line for information on prisms, by chance I discovered the sociologist Laurel Richardson who, in *Writing: A Method of Inquiry*, proposes an epistemological framework that she calls ‘crystallization’. By this Richardson means that rather than accepting one piece of knowledge or idea as more valid than others, multiple faceted knowledges may be adopted simultaneously:

The central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach... Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know.<sup>58</sup>

Crystallization highlights the role of intersubjectivity and interpretation in the research process and shares with other constructivist qualitative methods, a recognition of ‘truth’ as being situated, subjective and contingent. Crystalline projects span ‘multiple points’ on the qualitative spectrum, enabling the researcher to ‘maximise the benefits of contrasting approaches’ to emergent knowledge, analysis and representation.<sup>59</sup> It is committed to ‘depth’, ‘thick description’ and multiple ways of producing *and* representing knowledges (commonly deliberately juxtaposed). It surrenders any ‘all-powerful stance’ by attending to multiple genres of representation, forms of dissemination, as well as the self-reflexivity of the researcher. Crystallization offered me

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<sup>56</sup> Shirley Baker, *Street Photographs; Manchester and Salford*, (Newcastle, Bloodaxe Books, 1989), 18.

<sup>57</sup> On the properties of crystals see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crystal>. For how the conceptual metaphor/framework has been used in psychology see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crystallized\\_self](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crystallized_self)

<sup>58</sup> Laurel Richardson, ‘Writing: A Method of Inquiry’, in Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd. ed. (Thousand Oaks, California, Sage, 2000) 923-48, 934.

<sup>59</sup> Laura L. Ellingson, *Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research*, (London, Sage, 2009), 11.

a way of not just conceptualizing the ‘wholeness’ of my research project, but also a way of communicating it in this thesis.<sup>60</sup>

Educational theorists J. Gary Knowles and Sara Promislow have argued that doctoral research may not only be methodologically arts and humanities-based, but that a thesis itself is open to creative methods. My work is, I propose, not writing on photography or about photography. Adapting Knowles and Promislow’s premises, I suggest that curation ‘may be or is [are] the thesis’ and, therefore, my text can be considered itself part of the curatorial inquiry method:

To become a researcher who fuses the arts into research processes and representations is to possess a creativity and artfulness. It is to have a willingness to be creative and to not be bounded by the traditions of academic discourse and research processes, but employs artistic methods reflexively... Risk taking, courage, openness to unknowing, and tolerance of ambiguity - on the part of both emerging scholars and their supervisors - are prerequisites for developing an art-related project... Indeed, research projects drawing on the arts, are likely to be entirely idiosyncratic endeavors, especially with regard to process, form and representation.<sup>61</sup>

The challenge has been how to manifest this in the very writing of this thesis.<sup>62</sup> Many of the chapters include contextualising vignettes written from field notes made at the time, and my memory today — and, in this sense, are written imaginatively rather than as ‘reports’.<sup>63</sup> *They are differentiated by my use of italic and size of font.* These serve to situate the reader through their imagination, in my own research practice. These short texts also serve as an alternative register that acknowledges ‘the everyday’ and ‘the ordinary’ in moments of curating that otherwise slip away in the exegesis of ideas.

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<sup>60</sup> Crystallization also acknowledges that research is manifested across many ‘distributed platforms’. As such all the forms of my research — including conference papers, seminars, workshops, exhibitions, and so on — cannot be narratively communicated in this document except by account or by trace (or appended as text based documents).

<sup>61</sup> J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole (eds.), *The Handbook of Arts Based Qualitative Research*, (New York, Sage, 2008), 511.

<sup>62</sup> Moreover, what is the *status* of this writing and its form? — a question that is at the heart of the crystalline arts-based research method. See Laurel Richardson, ‘Writing: A Method of Inquiry’, in Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd. ed. (Thousand Oaks, California, Sage, 2000) 923-48., 934.

<sup>63</sup> I am aware that ethnographic writing is made up of different genres. I like this idea from Stephen A. Tyler: ‘A post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of common-sense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. It is, in a word, poetry—not in its textual form, but in its return to the original context and function of poetry, which by means of the ethos of the community and thereby provoked hears to act’. Quoted in *Writing on Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984), xiv.

This thesis is, therefore, both an analytical narrative and a theoretically-informed account of what I call an arts-based crystallized curating method.<sup>64</sup>

### **Thesis Content and Structure**

As I have explained earlier, the thesis is presented under three broad headings: *The Photographic Complex*, *The Exhibitionary Complex* and *The Curatorial-Dialogical Complex: Using Grounded Theory*. Each relates to ways of framing, knowing and understanding Baker's work and now I provide an overview of each of the chapters.

In Part 1 *The Photographic Complex*, I consider how Baker's photographs came to be understood as historical, primarily valued as historical records, 'performing' the genre of 'social documentary'. In Chapter 1, I introduce the life of Shirley Baker. Why attempt a biography when, as J. R. R. Christie and Fred Orton have argued 'the social history of art, especially recently, worked against the monograph'<sup>65</sup> By placing the biographical chapter at the beginning, I am not suggesting that it holds the key to the understanding of Baker's work but neither do I believe that the issue of agency can be entirely ignored.

In Chapter 2, I present the Thematic Analysis of three formative texts which discuss Baker's photographs and her working method, unquestionably characterizing the photographer as 'a social documentarist', 'a historical recorder and 'a street photographer'. These framings belong to a wider historiography of twentieth century photography to which I turn in Chapter 3. Here, I situate these terms within three selected periods of photographic history: the nineteenth century when photographs were used as tools of evidence, surveying, and classifying; the 1930s when photographic realism was shaped through a prevailing 'structure of feeling' regarding 'the people' and 'the everyday', and French humanist photography identified with the emergence of the reciprocal gaze. Highlighting these traditions into which Baker's 'documentary' photographic practice may have been placed, I tease also out how problematic is this classification of her work as 'social documentary' and how it has limited the capacity of her photographs to exist simultaneously in several modes of representation.

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<sup>64</sup> Laura L. Ellingson, *Engaging Crystallization*, 10.

<sup>65</sup> J. R. R. Christie and Fred Orton, 'Writing on a Text of the Life', in Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, (eds.), *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996), 295-313.

Part II of the thesis focuses on *The Exhibitionary Complex*. In Chapters 4-6, I present three case studies that provide a critical commentary on *WC&LM* in its three iterations in London, Madrid and Manchester (structured chronologically). Each case study addresses the intertextuality of the exhibition medium and considers the ‘audiencing’ of viewers at the exhibitions.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, I analyze the differing interpretations of the photographs that were established in their various locations. Thus, I consider the effect of my exhibitionary praxis on the subjective and situated meanings elicited by Baker’s historically-indexed images. In Chapter 6, I summarize the innovative process of the oral history project and the subsequent production of the experimental audio guide. I elaborate the types of new knowledges co-produced about and with the photographs that resisted many of the received notions of the meanings of her work. In conclusion, I consider the use of professionally authored photographs in memory work.

In Part III *The Curatorial-Dialogical Complex: Using Grounded Theory*, over three chapters, I investigate what Baker’s photographs are *doing*. Chapters 7-9 take the reader through the time-consuming procedures (recording, transcribing, coding, synthesizing, analyzing) through which this new theorization emerged and provided ‘provisional but resonant, useful, original and rigorous answers’ to my entwined research questions of ‘what are Shirley Baker’s photographs doing?’ and ‘what are viewers doing with Shirley Baker’s photographs?’<sup>67</sup> The concept of compositing and theory of composure explain the resistance of Baker’s photographs to existing frames of theoretical-historical classification, and enhance our understanding of the self-conscious stylistics, specific contents and aesthetic formulations of the photographs as photo-historically created compositions.

All these elements become intelligible as simultaneous actants in a ‘complex of complexes’ that constitute the basis of my claim that curatorial practice can function as a form of research that produces relevant, resonant, rigorous, useful knowledge. At the same time, my thesis tests a model of exhibition practice that has implications for curation, photographic theory and history, as well as for the study of the works of Shirley Baker.

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<sup>66</sup> The concept of ‘audiencing’ describes the intersubjectivity of the exhibition and its performance in constituting a viewing public. See Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*, 132-133.

<sup>67</sup> These four principles are the fundamentals of the GT method as defined by Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, (London, Sage, 2014), 1-21.

## PART ONE: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPLEX

### Chapter 1

#### Shirley Baker: A Biographical Story

It is not my intention here to promote an ‘overly individualised account of artistic creation’ nor to attempt to arrive at explanations of Shirley Baker’s ‘talent, or genius’. The fact that Baker was operating at a time when photography was not a welcoming field for even middle-class women, makes her aspiration and ambition remarkable. Despite being ‘hugely problematic’, as Orton and Christie have pointed out, biography is virtually ‘unavoidable’, for we cannot get around the fact that (most) cultural artefacts are produced by humans, and humans are ‘irreducibly narratable’.<sup>68</sup>

In the main, ‘my story’ follows the key stages that might be expected of a conventional ‘life story’: birth, schooling, education, family and key artistic events and stages of development. My research draws on conversations and correspondence with Shirley Baker herself, the life story interview between photography historian Val Williams and Baker, and my own oral history recordings with her family and friends. This is not to be read as amounting to ‘*the Biography*’ of ‘Shirley Baker’, but as ‘patterns of possibilities’ and ‘connected meanings’ that form an understanding of how an inquisitive young woman came to become a photographer post-war, and the ‘idea’ of photography she subscribed to.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, given that life stories, including those stories we tell about ourselves, are forms of narration that are both culturally contextualizable and constructed to narrate acceptable versions of the person, my narration here, in an echo of Baker’s own words, is *my* observation of one person and it tells only a fraction of *her* story.<sup>70</sup>

As mentioned in the Introduction, I first came across the work of Shirley Baker in 2011 whilst researching another exhibition, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning: the authentic moment in British Photography*, for the Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham. In the course of my research, I was perturbed by the lack of any women photographers in my

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<sup>68</sup> J. R. R. Christie and Fred Orton, ‘Writing on a Text of the Life’, in Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, (eds.) *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996), 295-313.

<sup>69</sup> J. R. R. Christie and Fred Orton, ‘Writing on a Text of the Life.’

<sup>70</sup> Shirley Baker, *Street Photographs*, (Newcastle, Bloodaxe, 1989), 18.

show. My request to curators at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Media Museum, Bradford regarding women photographers working outside of the photographic studio in the late 1950s and early 1960s was met with deafening institutional silences. This only made my work appear more urgent, finding post-war women photographers became something of an obsession. My doggedness kept me entering new search terms into Google, until the search engine finally turned over a website reference to a ‘Shirley Baker’ in an exhibition at The Lowry in Salford in 2000. Upon contacting the gallery, I was thrilled to find that the photographer was living in Wilmslow, Cheshire. I arranged a visit and subsequently selected a handful of her Salford and Manchester photographs to include in my exhibition. On that visit, however, I was astonished to discover the prodigious output of the photographer. There were some nearly 700 photographs alone in her Salford and Manchester ‘series’ and hundreds more across other themes. Yet Baker’s name was absent from histories of British photography. I decided there and then to work with the photographer to bring about recognition for her contribution to post-war photography.

### **1.1 A Box of Photographs**

Arriving at the family home on the day of Shirley Baker’s funeral on September 2014, a handwritten note greeted me:

*Dear Anna, I hope you might find some of these photographs of interest for the exhibition. I have put aside those that are signed, you never know, they might be valuable some day.*

There was also a list of themes which the photographer had been exploring for nearly 70 years<sup>71</sup>. The inventory not only pointed towards an artistic programme that Shirley Baker was retrospectively constructing for herself, it also provided clues for ‘bodies’ of work that I would later discover in cupboards around her home.

Over the next four months, as Shirley Baker’s widower prepared the house for sale, I unearthed photographs, photographic equipment and accessories and personal ‘memorabilia’ from every corner of the house. Aided by a young assistant Natalie Wheen, we poured through boxes of loose photographs Shirley Baker’s daughter Nan Levy had been directed, prior to her mother’s death, to “*drag downstairs*” into the front spare room. In the dining room, photographs spilled out of the 1950s bureau, with hundreds more tumbling from the cupboards in the photographer’s darkroom, a loft conversion fitted out by her cabinet maker father, in the 1930s bungalow in Wilmslow, Cheshire. As one box was emptied and reviewed, another was discovered. We sorted the photographs using the following criteria: ‘good’ prints or ‘duff’, signed or unsigned, verso notation or blank reverse, damaged or intact, wet or digital - and assigned a ‘rough’ category - according to my own spur-of-the-moment descriptive taxonomy. The task seemed endless, daunting and pressing as we raced against the mounting of the estate agent’s ‘for sale’ board,

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<sup>71</sup> A verbatim record of the email list sent to the author, December 14th 2012.  
Northern/Regional life - 1960’s and 70’s and later (Manchester, Salford, Stockport, Wigan, Blackpool, Bolton, Chester, Cheshire, Lakes, Wirral, N.Wales etc.)  
Manchester airport  
Streets  
Events  
Boats  
Docks  
Street portraits  
Children  
Children’s hospital  
Games  
Bowling  
Eating and drinking  
Beaches/seaside  
Markets  
Antiques  
London streets - 1980’s  
Couples  
‘The look’ - clothes, punks etc.  
Music  
Sleeping  
Parks  
People with animals & birds  
In conversation - communication  
Photographers  
Landscapes  
Elsewhere - France, USA, Malta, Japan.

additionally being mindful of the roaring garden bonfire that Shirley's widower was tending in the back garden, purging the house of decades of "*stuff that Shirl never threw away.*"

As self-appointed 'photographic detectives' Natalie and I were enthralled with each new discovery and felt privileged to be handling the work — much of it being seen for the first time in decades — of a photographer who despite her cult status in Salford and Manchester, was otherwise on the periphery of critical, academic, and public consciousness. With the evidence of the photographer's fertile production before us, the 'mystery' of Shirley Baker's obscurity grew, as did my resolve to bring her work to public and professional attention. Given the volume of work and the longevity of her career, how and why had eminence eluded her?

## 1.2 The Early Years

Shirley Baker was one of identical twin daughters, born to Alex and Josephine (nee Kalis) Baker on the 9 July 1932. Though her parents married in 1930 in Rochford, Essex, the couple settled in Salford, where Alex managed his father David's furniture-cabinet business.<sup>72</sup> Alex's firm prospered during the post-war era, with substantial contracts for fitting out kitchens for the newly built council estates<sup>73</sup>. The small factory was located on Great George Street in Salford, whilst the family home was in the more affluent middle-class and predominately Jewish suburb of Kersal. According to Shirley's twin sister Barbara, the Baker household was secular, with their father visiting synagogue only annually, probably for Yom Kippur. Despite this, associations with local Jewish cultural and social organisations, as well as participating in extended family events, were enthusiastically maintained. In 1934, the family left Kersal for Nursery Road in Prestwich, one of the principal Jewish communities of the North West.<sup>74</sup>

Shirley and Barbara had a close bond, each being the other's best friend.<sup>75</sup> With an uncanny similarity in voices, they regularly dressed identically (a habit that endured

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<sup>72</sup> Josephine Kalis, one of three children, was born to Jacob and Annie Kalis in 1909. Her father Jacob (earlier known as Kalisky) came from a line of Jewish tailors with his family living on Cable Street in the East End of London in 1881.

<sup>73</sup> Shirley Baker in conversation with the author, June 2014.

<sup>74</sup> The migration of Jewish families, mainly from the nearby Cheetham Hill area of Manchester and Broughton Park in Salford, began as early as the mid nineteenth century.

<sup>75</sup> Shirley Baker in conversation with the author, June 2014.

until their respective marriages). The twins took delight in tricking friends and family into misidentifying them<sup>76</sup>, and were always accused of ‘flashing signals at each other that other people couldn't understand’.<sup>77</sup> The girls received a non-Jewish education.

According to Shirley Baker, they “*seemed to go to quite a few schools, at least four*”, including a convent school. During the Second World War, Manchester and Salford, like neighbouring Liverpool, were targeted by German air raids due to their strategic role in mercantile shipping. It was perhaps a fear of being bombed that in 1939 led to Shirley and Barbara's mother and her sister moving temporarily to live with their grandmother at her holiday bungalow in Colwyn Bay. For a time the twins were evacuated to North Wales and attended the Penrhos Girl's Boarding School, which in turn was relocated to Chatsworth, Derbyshire.<sup>78</sup>

Growing up the two girls were encouraged by their parents to be independent and ‘sporty’ and they were keen members of local sports clubs, preferring gymnastics, tennis and swimming to teenage dances and concerts. Their parents supported the twins’ decision to study applied creative subjects at college later in their teens. Their father, according to Baker, was “*completely artistic*”, her mother less so, “*interested, but nothing specific.*” Like many middle-class women of the day, Josephine owned a camera to record days out, family holidays, and her daughters growing up.<sup>79</sup> Shirley Baker was enthralled by the *Coronet camera* which “*they were not allowed to touch.*” In her interview with Val Williams in 1992, she describes “*still remembering the smell*” and being “*desperate to touch it.*”<sup>80</sup> However, it was not until she and Barbara were both given their own *Box Brownie* cameras by an uncle that she started to take photographs herself. Despite being only eight years old, Shirley took to the medium: “*It's something I can always remember wanting to do*” she told Williams, adding that to her the camera

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<sup>76</sup> Shirley Baker in conversation with the author, June 2014. Email communication with Pat Seddon, college friend of Shirley Baker's in the 1950s, March 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview, British Sound Archive: British Photographers*, (London, British Library, 1992).

<sup>78</sup> Shirley Baker in conversation with the author, June 2014.

<sup>79</sup> From the 1920s Kodak marketed cameras to the emerging middle classes. By the 1930s this included special ‘point and click’ cameras for women (famously the *Box Brownie*), not as serious amateur photographers but as emergent custodians of ‘family photography’.

<sup>80</sup> Shirley Baker in conversation with the author, June 2014. Author's oral history interview with Shirley Baker's sister Barbara Btsh, September 2014. Val Williams, *Life Story interview*.

“*was like magic.*” As a child she would eagerly await her pre-paid films returning in their Kodak envelope containing the palm-sized square format photos of her family.<sup>81</sup>

After the war, the twins returned to Prestwich and attended the local grammar school. Here, Shirley joined the school’s photographic society where she learnt to mix photo chemicals and develop and print her own black and white photographs. By fourteen years of age, photography had become a serious hobby, though her camera’s eye was still principally trained on her day-to day surroundings; “*nothing specific, just teenage life.*” She would regret never photographing her own family. Unlike her sister, Shirley Baker was uninterested in homecraft, “*If anything needed sewing I passed it on to her.*” Despite photography being an unusual hobby “*for a girl,*” Shirley’s father supported his daughter’s interest and talent and constructed a darkroom from the redundant coal shed of the family home. She would spend hours in the barely heated bunker of a space, under the red glow of the developer light, making small prints she neatly stored in a child’s small leather suitcase that she kept all her life.<sup>82</sup> Nobody in the home knew about photography and the young Baker taught herself “*the technical side of things,*” claiming years later to have “*felt on her own in this respect*”; nevertheless, she was so interested, “*it was an obsessive thing*” that she just picked it up, “*rather like people did at that time with electronics.*”<sup>83</sup>

Shirley Baker’s love of photography was only matched by her fondness for her father’s factory. The teenager would often accompany her father to work, enjoying being around the machinery and the men working. Sometimes he would ask her to photograph specific things, items made in his factory, pictures she later would describe as ‘nothing pictures’. Decades later, Baker regretted never having photographed the factory building nor its workforce: “*Sometimes when things are close to you, you don’t see them.*”<sup>84</sup> When the time came to leave school Shirley Baker asked her father if she could in time take over the running of the factory. It was the only occasion he refused to support his daughter. For Alex Baker, running the factory was a man’s job, however, his resolve would

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<sup>81</sup> Shirley Baker in conversation with the author, June 2014, also Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*.

<sup>82</sup> The author discovered this suitcase whilst clearing Shirley Baker’s studio and office. Inside were neatly arranged glass negatives and matchbox sized photographs along with the Box Brownie. Was this evidence of the ‘uncle story’ that Baker recited to the author and Val Williams, and that would thereafter be recalled in most future accounts of the photographer’s life?

<sup>83</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*.

<sup>84</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*.

eventually mark the end of the family firm. With qualifications in chemistry, physics, scripture and art, and already knowing an *'awful lot'* about photography technically, at eighteen years old Baker enrolled at the Manchester Municipal College of Technology to undertake a City and Guilds in 'Pure Photography', whilst her sister attended Manchester School of Art, where she studied the arts foundation course and then garment fabrication, in preparation for work in one of the numerous textile firms at that time still located in Manchester.<sup>85</sup>

#### 1.4 College Years and Working Life

In the early 1950s, photography was still largely regarded as a technical subject in Britain, with most art schools not yet offering it as an option alongside the acknowledged fine art mediums of painting and sculpture.<sup>86</sup> Enthusiasts, even those who would go on to work professionally, largely learnt either through apprenticeships on newspapers, in high street portrait studios or regional camera clubs—the status of which had been fundamental to photography's development in Britain since its inception. There were two influential degree courses available at Guildford College of Art, and London College of Printing and of Graphic Design, whilst Regent Street Polytechnic, offered a very technical two year City and Guild and evening classes. Some men took up photography through the Royal Engineers and the Royal Navy attending their formal training programmes at RAF Farnborough or Chingford.<sup>87</sup> It was also a professional world dominated by men, with few women entering press photography and the emergent field of photojournalism, though studio photography was more open to women practitioners.<sup>88</sup> Working in a studio did not

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<sup>85</sup> The photographer Dorothy Bohm (1924) studied photography at the Manchester Municipal College of Technology, receiving a City and Guilds certificate in photography. Setting up a Manchester studio in 1946, this suggests that the MMCT was offering photography training as early as the early to mid 1940s, making it one of the first to do so in the UK.

<sup>86</sup> See Jack Tait on photographic education: <http://britishphotohistory.ning.com/forum/topics/british-photographic-education?id=2680769%3A27897&page=2#comments>. Accessed: 9 April 2019. A superbly detailed account of the RAF training can be read on: <http://www.rnpa.org.uk/background-to-phot-training/>. Accessed: 9 April 2019.

<sup>87</sup> A comprehensive history of women working in British Photography in the post-war era is yet to be written. Women had long worked in studio photography as 'toucher uppers' of photographs, particularly in hand colouring, indeed I have recently learnt of extended family members who were employed in this profession. A handful of women photographers combined studio portraiture with social documentary as the basis of successful careers (see below). It is probable that there were women who ran or owned regional commercial studios post-war, however, they go unresearched. Photo historian John March has made a scholarly contribution to the field in his MA Thesis focussing on emigre women photographers post-war. See John March, *Women Exile Photographers*, (University of Leeds, MA Thesis, 2017).

appeal to the young Shirley Baker, telling Val Williams years later, “*to this day being in a studio gives me a pain.*” Her desire to go into photography was therefore a somewhat bold ambition for a young woman. At the Manchester Municipal College of Technology, photography courses had been taught from 1947. The *Certificate in Photography*, a two-year course, was dominated by men and was a somewhat hostile environment for Shirley Baker and one fellow female student Pat Seddon.<sup>89</sup>

Whilst Shirley’s sister Barbara learnt about “*the exciting world of art,*” Shirley was unprepared for the “*dryness*” of her own course: “*Barbara would bring her work home and I had a second education through her,*” recalled Baker. The photographer’s own course was a great disappointment. It was headed by George L. Wakefield, a man known nationally for his weekly articles for *Amateur Photographer*, where he wrote on his favourite topics: optics and the mechanics of the medium.<sup>90</sup> The cameras at the college were, Baker recalled, “*so old and heavy that they were pushed around on wheels.*” They were light years away from her own compact 35mm Leica that had been revolutionising photography since the 1930s, and that she took with her to college.<sup>91</sup> The eight students on the course received little creative direction and Baker felt she learnt nothing about the aesthetic potential of the medium in her two years of study. She recalled knowing straight away that she was in the wrong place, and that “*there were other things going on elsewhere.*” Pat Seddon recalls being “*Left to our own devices pretty much...I don’t remember getting any information about important photographers such as Cartier-Bresson.*” The students attending Wakefield’s course were being prepared for jobs in industry with a curriculum that included colour theory, applied science, retouching, general and commercial photography, portraiture and accountancy. Even as late as 1966, another student, John Hannavy remembers the course still being taught by Wakefield aided by Frank Wardlaw and Duncan Backhouse in the Department of Printing and Photographic Technology, “*which says it all really. Actually taking a photograph was,*

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<sup>89</sup> Pat Seddon recalled only one other female student Hazel, who was in the year above. Oral history interview, September 2018.

<sup>90</sup> George Wakefield was a prolific author of technical photography and camera manuals and books. He also wrote column in *Boys Own Paper* in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>91</sup> From the mid 1920s, the German optics company Leica marketed an innovative compact and portable 35mm camera for hiking and fieldwork. The camera would be taken up by a new generation of European photographers who wanted to break out of the formality of the studio and tripod based street work to capture ‘spontaneity’ and to go close into the subject. Baker herself describes being impressed by Bill Brandt’s images, the photographer who ‘broke the three foot barrier’. The lightweight yet optically sophisticated Leica is particularly associated with ‘candid’ or ‘street photography’.

*with hindsight, really only done to prove the science worked! So, quite Victorian in its philosophy.*"<sup>92</sup>

This was a dispiriting experience for Shirley Baker and led her to question her own passion for the medium, wondering whether to give up photography altogether. The newspaper work and journalism that she had imagined for herself now also seemed off-putting, with people warning her of "*its unsocial hours,*" particularly for a woman. Instead, upon graduating Baker decided to try 'industrial work', hoping it might be interesting. She joined a small electrical firm, CEG, photographing their equipment. It was by her own account "*pretty uninteresting work.*" She next moved to Courtaulds, then one of the world's leading manufacturers of man-made fibres, where she was again employed to photograph industrial processes for company reports: "*...the work came in and it came out,*" but she did at least acquire a new skill in learning microscopy.

When in 1954 she met her husband-to-be Anthony Levy, then a house junior doctor, at a mutual friend's birthday party, Baker was working at AVRO, now British Aerospace. The job, however, was still not her "*idea of photography.*" Nevertheless, the young photographer was befriended by one of the aircraft photographers, Paul Colleras, who mentored her. It was a professional relationship that she would later look back on as being hugely influential. "*I probably learnt more from him than anyone...how to get the right kind of print...to work with negatives, his general way of working. It was professional.*"<sup>93</sup> Work was certainly more satisfying than before: however, she still knew this was not what she had "*... gone into photography to do... I was thinking, why am I doing this?*" Outside of work she started "*playing about and doing things,*" gradually coming to realise what she really wanted to do with photography and what type of work she enjoyed - "*Work quite different to anything work or money orientated.*" In this respect Shirley Baker was fortunate. In 1957, she married Tony Levy and the couple set up house for two years in Kersal, not far from her parents, later moving out to Wilmslow, Cheshire, where Baker lived for the rest of her life.

Although she continued to work for AVRO during the first year of her marriage, in her Kersal home she set up a darkroom in the loft. Perhaps due to her technical training, Shirley Baker was "*always trying to experiment with new equipment*" that she

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<sup>92</sup> British Photo History ning: <http://britishphotohistory.ning.com/forum/topics/british-photographic-education?id=2680769%3ATopic%3A27897&page=2#comments>. Accessed 9 April 2019.

<sup>93</sup>Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*.

would purchase in Manchester or have sent to her by specialist suppliers who advertised in the back pages of her photography magazines. Her letters of enquiry, would in turn receive responses addressed 'To Mr Baker', and 'Dear Sir', the assumption being that serious equipment could only be purchased by a man. Although at that time she would have been expected to take her husband's name, the photographer kept her maiden name Baker throughout her life, reserving the name Levy for domestic and family functions. In 1958, she gave up working for AVRO: "*I really got very bored with that*" and went to London to undertake a one-year certificate in Medical Photography.<sup>94</sup> It is unclear exactly where Shirley Baker studied during this year and why she undertook the course at all, given that she found the first technical course a great disappointment. According to photography historian David Drury, the London School of Medical Photography began operation around this time. However, the course may have been offered through Regent Street Polytechnic or the London College of Printing and of Graphic Arts, both of which offered short professional courses.

### **1.5 London, Manchester and the 'Black Hole' of British Photography**

Going to London in 1958 could have been exciting for the young photographer. Writing of the immediate post-war period, photo-historian Mark Haworth Booth referred to the 'Black Hole' of British Photography, but things were starting to change.<sup>95</sup> Influential figures including Dutch photographer and author Hugo van Wadenoyen (1892-1959), and the influential Marxist art critic John Berger, were challenging the long-standing prejudice against photography in the British Fine Art establishment. Van Wadenoyen's book *Wayside Snapshots* (1947) marked a decisive British break with Pictorialism that still persisted in the Royal Society of Photography and the country's amateur photography groups well into the 1950s.<sup>96</sup> In a series of polemical articles Berger challenged the way a generation thought about and critically looked at photography. He himself had at first been hostile to the medium, championing social realist painting. As a trenchant critic of

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<sup>94</sup> See: <http://britishphotohistory.ning.com/forum/topics/british-photographic-education?id=2680769%3ATopic%3A27897&page=2#comments>. Accessed 9 April 2019.

<sup>95</sup> Mark Haworth Booth, *The Street Photographs of Roger Mayne*, (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1986).

<sup>96</sup> Hugo van Wadenoyen led the *Combined Societies* a progressive group of local photographic societies (Hereford, Wolverhampton, and Bristol) that in 1945 broke away from the Royal Photographic Society. He was later joined by the young photographer Roger Mayne and together they organised CS national touring exhibitions.

the Art Establishment, however, photography came to represent a more democratic medium that could connect with present-day experiences. Berger was in part responding to a generation of young photographers such as Terence Donovan, Don McCullin and Roger Mayne, all of whom had started to gain reputations in leftist magazines including *New Left Review* and *Time and Tide*, as well as ‘Chelsea set’ society and fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, *About Town*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Queen*.

By the time Shirley Baker arrived in London, there had already been a number of influential exhibitions of photography including *Henri Cartier-Bresson* at the ICA, London in 1952; *London Photographs, Roger Mayne* at the ICA, London, 1956; *This is Tomorrow*, staged at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London in 1956, and *The Family of Man* presented at Royal Festival Hall, London in 1957.<sup>97</sup> However, the emergent new world of photography and its exhibitions appears to have remained unknown to the photographer who by day was working at Great Ormond Street Children’s hospital, returning at night at first to the Womens’ YMCA, later to digs in Golders Green. Every Friday night, the young photographer returned to Wilmslow, where she found herself enveloped in married life despite being “*not very interested in domesticity*”; this inevitably limited her time for photography. In later years she remarked, “*Unless you are singleminded you know that as a woman, whatever you do, you're going to be interrupted... you don't make the same plans as a man.*”<sup>98</sup>

Following completion of the one year course she returned to Manchester and despite this additional training did not seek employment in a hospital. Manchester in the late 1950s and early 1960s did not provide the same opportunities for experiencing photography as the capital. There was no equivalent of the ICA or the Whitechapel galleries. There were, however, numerous serious amateur photography clubs and societies who mounted exhibitions and provided lectures and opportunities to see each other’s work. Sefton Samuels (1931), known for his photojournalistic portrayal of Northern England and portraits of jazz musicians, was born in Manchester. Though not

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<sup>97</sup> For further reading on the post-war British Photography scene, see: Mark Haworth-Booth, *The Street Photographs of Roger Mayne*, (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1986); Martin Harrison, *Young Meteors: British Photojournalism, 1957–1965*, (London: Cape, 1998); Victoria Walsh, *Nigel Henderson: Parallel of Life and Art*, (Thames & Hudson, London, 2001); David Robbins, *Aesthetics of Plenty*, (MIT Press, 2009); Anna Douglas, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning: the authentic moment in British Photography*, (University of Nottingham, Djanogly Gallery, 2012); Anna Douglas, *Roger Mayne*, (London, The Photographers Gallery, 2017). See: [http://www.macba.cat/uploads/20091019/This\\_is\\_Tomorrow\\_eng.pdf](http://www.macba.cat/uploads/20091019/This_is_Tomorrow_eng.pdf). Accessed 9 April 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*.

professionally trained like Baker, he was active on the local camera club scene and would later become professional himself working for the local newspaper. There were at least six amateur photography groups in the city, each with a different photographic orientation, but Baker attended none of their meetings, stating, as Samuels put it, “*why should she, she was a professional.*”<sup>99</sup> In this respect, the photographer’s college education — and perhaps her gender — appears to have set her apart from the ‘serious amateurs’ in the city, the majority of whom would have been men.<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, it was on returning to Manchester that Baker’s creative photographic education commenced. She began looking at photography books, later citing Cartier-Bresson’s *Decisive Moment* as influential, as well as the magazines *Amateur Photographer*.<sup>101</sup> and in particular *Photography*, then under the picture editorship of Norman Hall, an influential figure in post-war British Photography who later became the picture editor at *The Times*.<sup>102</sup> Although they never met, Hall was to play an influential role in the evolution of Baker’s photography; and they corresponded. The prestigious magazine had a *Readers’ Spot*, an opportunity for the non-professional to get work in print. Following a holiday in Majorca, Shirley Baker sent Hall a set of photographs, “*they were perfect technical pictures, great sunny pictures and I felt sure he would publish them.*” To her dismay, the editor sent them all back writing, “*they made him feel like going on holiday.*” Undeterred, Baker concluded that buried in Hall’s otherwise sarcastic comment, was a recommendation, “*of course, what he was talking about was me doing something rather more personal, doing what I really want to do.*” Following Hall’s veiled advice, she began to photograph more as she saw

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<sup>99</sup> Sefton Samuels in conversation with the author, March 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Derek Seddon, a young Manchester photographer organised monthly junior branch meetings of the Institute of British Photography (IBP). Pat Seddon remembers it as ‘*quite a social occasion with not much in the way of critical work*’ and that only one or two women attended. Shirley Baker was not one of them. Pat Seddon, email correspondence with the author, March 2019. On describing the loneliness of being a woman photographer Grace Roberts said, ‘*I often wished I had another woman photographer to talk to. Just to get the feminine point of view. I never had.*’ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/photography/7918495/Grace-Robertson-interview-with-the-1950s-photojournalist.html>. Accessed 9 April 2019.

<sup>101</sup> It would be incorrect to consider these magazines as ‘amateur’ in the cultural sense we might today bring to this term. In the late 1950s, both the *Amateur Photographer* and *Photography* magazine were considered photography magazines of the ‘serious amateur’ (well informed, actively taking work, perhaps freelancing) and those who considered themselves professional. Moreover, these magazines were loosening the grip of ‘pictorialism’ that still dominated much of the camera club photography in favour of a more ‘candid’ or ‘snapshot’ aesthetic that had been evolving in France and the USA from the late 1940s.

<sup>102</sup> Hall was instrumental in bringing the first exhibition of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s work to London in 1957.

things, “*people doing things,*” and would send Hall more pictures, that he occasionally published. It was to Hall she sent her first photo essay, *Dog Days in Manchester*, in which she photographed the interaction of owners with their show dogs at the then famous Manchester Dog Show, a forerunner of the national dog show *Crufts*. Hall published the three-page essay in February 1966, in an edition that also included photographs by the celebrated Robert Doisneau (1912-1994) and George Brassai (1899-1994).

It had once been Baker's ambition to join the *Manchester Guardian* (later to become the national *The Guardian*) as a staff photographer. Despite having one-off bits of freelance work for the paper, Baker was never able to get the union card necessary to become a full-time press photographer: “*They had a rule that you had to earn a certain amount to get in the union.*” The problem was that without a union card, getting the work to make up the hours was difficult, if not impossible, and getting work particularly as a woman photographer was virtually unheard of: “*People did get into the union... (they) were fearful of losing their jobs (so) they just wanted to keep people out, and they kept me out.*”<sup>103</sup> So instead of becoming a ‘staffer’, she would take on small jobs or pitch photographs of her own, but always under the fear of the union finding out, “*I would just drop the photos off to the picture editor in a brown envelope.*” Occasionally, she would receive threatening phone calls from union members, but the final blow to the photographer’s ambition came when the paper sent her a cheque at well below the union rate for a job she had worked on until four in the morning. “*Nobody seemed that interested in what I wanted to do because I wasn't a union member,*” she recalled decades later to Val Williams. She stopped freelancing for the paper round 1965, and although she claimed the union policy had to some extent kept her out of journalism, she also blamed herself for her own lack of initiative, “*I hated going to see people...being refused and shown the door.*”

## **1.6 The illusion of self-ownership**

Thwarted as a newspaper staff photographer, in 1960 Shirley Baker responded to an advert in the local paper for a photographer to join the Department of Graphic Design at

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<sup>103</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*. In conversation with the author Baker described the newspaper culture as being hostile to women, and that the union did not accept women members, but this view cannot be substantiated, March 2014.

Salford School of Art. She applied and found herself employed in another very male world, despite it being a higher education institution. Teaching photography in 1960 puts Shirley Baker at the forefront of modern photography education and, I propose, amongst precious few women lecturers prior to the 1980s. The part-time hours teaching photography to graphic design students seemed to suit her predisposition to become a “*free spirited photographic recorder*” and a new way of understanding herself as a photographer emerged. Her role at Salford College was to let the students “*see some potential in photography*” and she would occasionally “*send them out on to the streets*” to explore a more “*candid*” and “*spontaneous*” approach to making photographs. It was a job she did for ten years, before deciding teaching was not really for her, claiming that she was never confident enough about her judgement to “*tell a student their work was rubbish, like some of the lecturers.*” The period between 1960 and 1970 was, however, productive for the photographer. Teaching seemed to afford her the security to take photographs without the pressure of selling them, though she did sell work very occasionally to national magazines.<sup>104</sup> She now approached photography on the basis of what *she* wanted rather than what she knew a picture editor wanted to see. From this period the photographer was active with ‘freelance work’ that should be understood not as commercially driven commissions, or reportage assignments, but as self-directed and prolonged photographic ‘investigations’, that she came to refer to as “*open ended series.*”<sup>105</sup>

Following the advice she had received from Hall, Baker moved towards more “*candid*” photography “*a la Cartier-Bresson*”, although she declared that she preferred ‘*the more spontaneous work*’ of the Americans, Robert Frank (1924-2019) and William Klein (1928). She also admired the work of Bill Brandt (1904-1983) that she came across shortly after leaving the Manchester Municipal College of Technology and bought his book *Shadow of Light*, in 1966. Over the mantelpiece of her first marital home she pasted up Brandt’s nudes: “*people visiting thought that very different.*” A year after starting

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<sup>104</sup> Including *Amateur Photographer*, *Photography*, *SLR Camera*, as well as society magazine *The Lady*, various travel and yachting magazines and the regional magazine *Cheshire Life*.

<sup>105</sup> Baker used this term in conversation with the author. Extended thematic investigations including photographic tropes and patterns of concerns are observable within Baker’s corpus over fifty years and illustrate how the photographer worked with a temporal model quite different to that of the photography journalist producing short-term assignments or the newspaper photographer’s daily newsworthy photograph. It is, however, almost impossible to delimit one thematic category from another, e.g. the category ‘older women’ might also be a sub-category of ‘the beach’, or indeed the other way around. This interweaving also makes for infinite curatorial interpretation and exhibition.

teaching, she began to photograph the ‘slum clearance’ programme in the streets not far from college, over the years extending her ‘survey’ to include inner city neighbourhoods of Manchester.

When Baker started her photographic ‘investigation’ she had no intended distribution for the photographs nor did she know for how long she would photograph the streets. Years later she stated: “*Homes were being demolished and families were being uprooted, due to a huge slum clearance programme and nobody seemed to be interested in recording the face of the people or anything about their lives.*” Baker was intrigued by what was going on and “*realised that it was all changing.*”<sup>106</sup> Her colleagues at the college did not take much notice of what she was photographing, and she doubted that “*anyone thought much about what I was doing...people thought it was such a potty thing to do.*” She never imagined she would return for nearly twenty years, ‘investigating’, ‘mapping’, ‘surveying’, ‘recording’ the phenomenon of change, as well as the mundane aspects of life persisting under the spectre of social and environmental clearance: “*I would go every week... a few times a week, I became fairly obsessive I think... I just couldn't leave it alone.*”<sup>107</sup>

Two years into the ‘project’ she had already amassed sufficient photographs that when invited to take part in the exhibition *Nine Photographers* (1963) she submitted a portfolio of works including two taken in the clearance streets of Salford and Manchester, along with other photographs. *Nine Photographers* was the first, and possibly only exhibition of the group of the same name. The initiative of Dennis Btsh and Neil Libbert, it was intended to raise the bar of photographic exhibitions in the city and to provide a context for photographers ‘unwilling to be bound by the conventions and arbitrary standards of most societies and groups’.<sup>108</sup> Members were invited by Btsh

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<sup>106</sup> The urban clearance programme of Manchester responded to a Ministry of Housing report conducted before the war that stated that in 1945 69,000 were unfit for human habitation. In 1962, 90,000 houses were without baths. When Sir Keith Joseph became Minister of Housing he set up a regional office in Manchester to assist the Local Authorities in the North with their clearance programmes. By 1963, 4,000 houses were being demolished each year in the city. In the 1960s and 1970s, 70,000 houses were demolished with 44,000 being built. See John J. Parkinson-Bailey, *Manchester an Architectural History*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000). Salford’s poor housing has been highlighted in classic works including: Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole* (1933), Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey* (1958), and Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum* (1971).

<sup>107</sup> In the oral history project conducted during the Manchester Art Gallery iteration of the exhibition *Women and Children; and Loitering Men*, one participant referred to ‘the clearances’ as a form of ‘social cleansing’.

<sup>108</sup> *Nine Photographers* press release. In this respect founders Dennis Btsh and Neil Libbert offered a critique of the amateur scene that even into the 1960s was still under the ‘tasteful’ domination of the Royal Photographic Society (RPS).

and Libbert and included a number of city-based photographers who had already ‘made it’, such as Ray Green, working for *The Observer* and Granada TV; Neil Libbert, a staffer for *Manchester Guardian*; and Sefton Samuels, *Manchester Evening News* Photographer of Year 1960. Also participating Alfred Gregory, the official photographer to the 1953 Everest expedition; Ralph Marshall, Head of Creative Photography at Manchester College of Art; Howard Ward, who would later set up his own commercial studio; Keith Ingham, a local architect, and Dennis Btsh, who considered himself a ‘serious amateur’, but who had nevertheless already had a solo show in the Manchester Central Library in 1962. Shirley Baker was the only woman in the group.

Whilst at this point professionally unknown, she was friendly with Btsh (who would later become her twin sister’s husband) and he respected her ‘training’ and ‘freelance’ status, which by his account made her ‘a professional artist’ unlike himself.<sup>109</sup> In the exhibition notes she is described as a “*free-lance photographer and part-time lecturer in photography at Salford College of Art.*” The exhibition was staged from November 18th to December 6th at the Manchester Design Centre on Portland Street and was designed by Keith Ingham. Bearing in mind the limited regional opportunities to exhibit contemporary art, let alone photography, a show at the Design Centre signalled a clear message to the Manchester amateur photo clubs, as well as to the public who visited the Centre, about how photography might be regarded. The press release boldly announced, ‘Although there is no particular theme, the photographers have in common the desire to express themselves freely without restrictions in the kind of photography with which they are associated’— a dig at the Royal Photographic Society (RPS). Baker exhibited her black and white photographs she printed in her home darkroom and mounted on board in a larger than standard 10 x 8 inches press print format. Pinned directly to the walls, her images included two portraits of children: No. 6 *Indian Girl* and No. 7 *Three Boys in Hulme*, both of 1962. Baker’s display using unframed prints mounted directly to board was in keeping with modern trends for displaying combined arts and photographs being explored at the time by a range of artists.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, it is likely Ingham was aware of the admired ICA’s Independent Group’s seminal exhibition *This is Tomorrow* held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1956). The Manchester

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<sup>109</sup> Dennis Btsh in conversation with the author, September 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Photographers such as Ida Karr at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1960), and Roger Mayne at the Arnolfini, Bristol (1964).

exhibition was favourably reviewed in *The Manchester Guardian*. This was Baker's only exhibition until 1986, when she had a solo show at Salford City Art Gallery of her 'street' photographs. By her own admission, exhibiting at that time had not been her goal, "*the object then was really to be seen in print,*" an indication that for Baker photography was less an artistic practice and more a form of investigation and ultimately communication: "*There were more magazines then than now, many more opportunities to get work in print.*"

Despite the proliferation of new magazines, forms of publishing and even galleries interested in showing photography, Baker did not capitalise on these opportunities. Was this because she lacked the cultural context and necessary social contacts to frame and promote her work?<sup>111</sup> Moreover, the photographer worked in a manner that tested available frames of reference for her photography: "*It is hard to imagine it today,*" she told Val Williams. "*Nowadays people are working towards something, an exhibition or a book, and they can't imagine just photographing without a particular ending in mind.*" Shirley Baker's phenomenological work was, then, driven more by personal curiosity and the need to comprehend the social world around her. What she lacked, however, was a context through which to evolve an alternative appreciation and engagement with photography; and years later she recalled that, "*There wasn't a great deal you could do with them.*"<sup>112</sup>

Occasionally, she would get her photographs published. In 1964, for example, *The Economist* illustrated an article on Manchester's developing economy and its 'slum clearance' programme with, quite peculiarly, a photograph of West Indian children playing cricket in the street, as well as an 'artistic' image of a newly built tower block juxtaposed with an old-fashioned ornate gas light. How the magazine got hold of these images is a mystery, as Baker at that time did not work with a picture agency. Some of her photographs were also "*used by the local Building Department to try to put a face on it, employing them in their pro-'slum clearance' publicity.*" The photographer also recognised the popular appeal of images of children and submitted her work to various amateur photography magazines in the 1960s and 1970s, both for specialist features on child portraiture and as competition entries. In 1969, she won the *SLR Camera*

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<sup>111</sup> For further reading regarding the expansion of publishing and exhibiting opportunities for a new generation of photographers see: Anna Douglas, *Roger Mayne*, (London, The Photographers Gallery, 2017).

<sup>112</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life story interview*.

magazine's 'Children Portfolio Competition'.<sup>113</sup> Overall, however, the vast majority of her images, taken over twenty years of the housing clearance programme, as well as those shot at regional country fairs and produce shows, in the streets of North West towns, on the beach at Blackpool and in the South of France, were not known nor made public until decades later.

In 1965, Shirley Baker responded to a national colour photography competition organised by *The Daily Telegraph*. Between April and August, the photographer took to the 'grey' streets of Hulme, an inner city neighbourhood of Manchester, for a five month-long 'expedition' into colour, though "*there was very little colour in the scene, mainly brickwork and sun and not even green grass.*" It is not clear why the photographer limited herself to this multi-ethnic working-class neighbourhood, for it was not near the college where she taught. Her black and white repertoire of contrasting forms, dark and light, gesture and movement was now enriched by new visual detailing and exuberances. The photographer was now, for the first time, seeing in colour: a toddler's yellow shorts made for a stark contrast against a burnished black shop frontage; the Pre-Raphaelite radiance of five red-haired girls sunning themselves in a back alley or the joyfulness of brightly dressed toddlers paddling in a turquoise washing up bowl would have been unrealisable in black and white.

In mid 1960s Britain, unlike in America, black and white photography was still the primary palette for serious documentary photography, though colour had entered into advertising and leisure photography, epitomised by the Butlin postcards of John Hinde. In using colour, Shirley Baker, along with photographers John Bulmer and Roger Mayne, was in a vanguard introducing an alternative naturalistic language into British Photography. Certainly in the case of Bulmer and Mayne, this was consciously adopted as a look-of-the-'now', as opposed to the use of grey tones that, as critical theorist, Stuart Hall has suggested, may always have been understood by photographers as conveying a 'dimension of historicity'.<sup>114</sup> As a photographer for the newly launched *The Sunday Times Colour Supplement*, John Bulmer would switch permanently from

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<sup>113</sup> Including: *The Economist*, 1964, *SLR Camera*, 'Children Portfolio Competition', (May 1969, vol 2. no. 12), 62-63. *Photo News Weekly*, 'Beautiful People' (11th August 1971).

<sup>114</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Social Eye of 'Picture Post'', in Glenn Jordan, *Down the Bay: Picture Post, Humanist Photographer and Images of 1950s Cardiff*. (Cardiff, Butetown History and Arts Centre, 2001),70. In conversations with this author, both John Bulmer and Roger Mayne insisted that their use of colour was absolutely about the 'now'.

grey tone to colour, whilst for Roger Mayne and Shirley Baker colour was a temporary departure that they regarded as a failed experiment.

Shirley Baker's use of Kodachrome slide film (colour print film was not yet available in Britain) proved, by her account, difficult to grasp technically. It required a high shutter speed and, due to its complex processing, film had to be sent away for printing. Despite working between April and August, with the best natural daylight available,

Baker found the 'slow' slide film difficult to control, "*it was a real pain to use, I kept getting the wrong exposure,*" and she thought her images either under or overexposed and shortly afterwards went back to black and white, not resuming colour until her photographs of punks in the 1980s.<sup>115</sup>

In 1963 Shirley Baker had her first and only child, Nan. Childbirth brought with it post-natal depression and although she tried to not "*let it affect how she saw things,*" nor to "*let it show outside*" the photographer came to see that depression probably did affect her photography in some way: "*I'd go out and see these kids and I'd be terribly, terribly depressed about seeing it all... and I would wonder why I was doing it (photographing) ...because it upset me so much.*"<sup>116</sup> Despite her despair, sometimes "*not knowing what happiness was and feeling guilty for every cruel thing that happened in the world,*" she continued to make the work: "*I had had my child, and I used to leave the precious little thing at home, well looked after, and then go out.*"<sup>117</sup> Years later and in talking for the first time about her post-natal depression with Val Williams, she described being '*moved*' by what she interpreted as "*people suffering,*" yet persevering. She particularly noticed the children and mothers, and conceded that this focussed attention could well have been the consequence of her emotional state. Motherhood, she claimed, had lead to a compassionate gaze, telling Williams, "*you do look at children in a different way.*"<sup>118</sup>

In 1970 she decided to give up teaching at Salford. She transferred to the Manchester Polytechnic for a further few months, and although she was now teaching

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<sup>115</sup> On Baker's use of colour see: Anna Douglas, *Women and Children, and Loitering Men*, (London, The Photographer's Gallery, 2016).

<sup>116</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life story interview*.

<sup>117</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life story interview*.

<sup>118</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life story interview*.

photography degree students, she decided teaching was not for her and gave it up altogether. Her husband had his own GP practice and there was no financial incentive to secure paid employment. In summer 1970, the couple holidayed along the French Riviera. Away from the affluence of Cannes and Monaco, they found and bought an apartment in Port Grimaud, later acquiring a holiday home in La Lavandou, where the family returned for almost 50 years, holidaying and sailing with her twin sister's family, who already had a house there. They enjoyed the kind of holidays far beyond the average British family in the 1970s, eating outdoors, relaxing on the beach and yachting along the Mediterranean coast. Perhaps with Norman Hall's words still resounding and despite the 'unbuttoned' ambiance of the South of France, the photographs Baker took whilst on holiday eschew that 'holiday feel' and focus instead on "*people doing things*," principally in the streets not far from her holiday home and in local villages or on the beach.

Over the decades, and taking her camera with her everywhere, Shirley Baker amassed hundreds of photographs, and as in the streets of Salford and Manchester, she quietly observed the 'everyday': small rituals, everyday absurdities, quiet exchanges between people, between women and dogs, which overall mark the changes taking place socially and culturally along the Mediterranean French coastline, a regional rural culture giving way to tourism. Her photographs might be said to be about the phenomenon of *being* on holiday, certainly more than they are 'holiday photographs'.

One August in the mid-1970s, the photographer visited Blackpool, a seaside town just a day-trip away from Wilmslow. It is doubtful that she knew of Mass Observation's 1930s study of the 'liminal' and 'carnavalesque' town nor the photographs taken by Tony Ray-Jones in 1968.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, the photographs she made there are expressions of the same intuitive feeling for the town's 'marginality' and 'strangeness', and its unique place within a particular understanding of Englishness<sup>120</sup> and are in marked contrast to the sensuous pleasures of the South of France.<sup>121</sup>

During the 1970s, Baker continued to 'survey' the streets of Salford and Manchester with her camera, though she was less prolific than a decade earlier. She

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<sup>119</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007).

<sup>120</sup> As in much of Tony Ray-Jones' work, there is a feeling of observing and recording a working class culture on the wane.

<sup>121</sup> This contrast between these two bodies of work formed the focus for my exhibition *On the Beach* curated for the international PhotoLondon 2016 festival and Grundy Gallery, Blackpool (2017).

found the slowness of demolition and the rehousing of families dispiriting and “*blamed the Town Hall.*” In any case, by the mid 1970s “*a lot of it had come down ... and things were coming to an end despite, never thinking it would.*”<sup>122</sup> The fact was, that the clearance programme, demolition and resettlement would continue well into the early 1980s. Young photography students Daniel Meadows and Martin Parr also found their way to Salford’s working-class neighbourhood in the 1970s.<sup>123</sup> Unlike Shirley Baker, they established a rapport with families, entering their homes; something Baker would later regret not doing and that, perhaps, contributed to her feeling that her work was becoming repetitive. Her photographs of this later period portray the squatters and traveller families who moved into the derelict houses and set up their caravans on the wasteland of the once lively neighbourhoods now in ruins as if bombarded by a devastating air raid.<sup>124</sup>

The photographer never stopped being ‘fascinated by the street’, but alongside this interest she always had other ‘ideas on the boil’. She photographed in places where she felt sure of finding obsessive and all-consuming ‘parochial’ behaviour, people so absorbed they were unconscious of their actions and deportment, let alone being observed by Baker: “*cat shows, dog shows, traction engine shows, holiday places ... you can’t possibly know until you get there and you can’t possibly know what it is that is going to attract you to take a photograph,*” she told Val Williams. Occasionally, some of these photographs would be sold to magazines such as *Cheshire Life* (a regional leisure magazine), whilst photographs taken in the South of France were sold to the emergent travel magazines. A handful of ‘candid photographs’ featuring people ‘caught’ by Baker asleep in public, featured in a double page spread in *Amateur Photographer*.<sup>125</sup>

### **A Dynamic New Present**

If Shirley Baker’s photographs of 1960s and 1970s Salford and Manchester can be characterized by a sense of loss, her photographs of the early to mid-1980s respond to a dynamic new present: punk. The urban streets through which she liked to wander now

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<sup>122</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life story interview*.

<sup>123</sup> Daniel Meadows and Martin Parr studied photography Manchester Polytechnic (now Manchester Metropolitan University) from 1970-73. The two student collaborated on a project in 1973 *June Street* in Salford. See: <http://www.photobus.co.uk/daniel-meadows>,

<sup>124</sup> For further reading about the ‘appeal’ of ruins and bomb sites to artists and photographers after Second World War, see, Lynda Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke*, (London, Yale University Press, 2017), 55-94.

<sup>125</sup> *Amateur Photographer*, 22 November 1976.

took on a new colour and this would take her work into new territory, that of urban youth culture. At first she photographed the self-conscious and provocative posing in the streets in Stockport, not too far from her home. When her husband started working for a pharmaceutical company in London in 1986, the couple bought a flat near Camden. Baker then captured young men and women hanging around Camden Lock. Her photographs appear to capture their jubilant defiance, yet the photographer also draws out the ennui of displaced youth. This period marks a shift for the photographer not only from black and white into colour, but a dramatic use of low, wide-angled framing, breaking what she called “*the three foot barrier*” that she had so admired in the photography of Bill Brandt.

Until 1991, Shirley Baker would stay in London regularly. The Conservative government was in power. Baker saw the burgeoning ‘service sector’, with its bars, cafes and fast-food outlets “*mushrooming all over the city*” as a metaphor for over-consumption and societal excess: “*the gulf between rich and poor widened (and) ... a host of society's most pitifully underprivileged found themselves living rough and begging on the streets.*”<sup>126</sup> She tried to capture “*the street level of this reality and the spirit of the time,*” photographing ordinary people consuming fast-food takeaways in a number of high streets, notably, Argyll Street, Camden High Street, Charing Cross Road, Oxford Street and Shaftesbury Avenue:<sup>127</sup>

*But, in this dream-world, where the boundaries between fantasy and reality often seem blurred, I was brought to my senses by the aching reality of young dossers and the pathetic, grizzled old bundles of human rags slumped in doorways - some behind Zimmer frames carefully parked to protect a paltry few inches of personal space - and the tattered scarecrow-like figures who were shuffling from bin to bin foraging for the tossed away half-eaten leftovers that had defeated other fuller stomachs.*<sup>128</sup>

Most particularly the photographer “*was struck by the loneliness among the crowd*” and her work of this period calls to mind the American documentarists, Robert Frank and

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<sup>126</sup> Shirley Baker email to the author, December 2012.

<sup>127</sup> These photographs would be drafted for a book titled *Grazing*, but the photographer was unable to secure a publisher.

<sup>128</sup> Shirley Baker email to the author, December 2012.

William Klein.<sup>129</sup> Not for the first time Baker was strongly affected by the social realities in front of her that she tried to address through photography which she believed “*capable of great things, but like any human being, can fall short of expectations.*”

Although Baker was making new work in the 1980s, and she accompanied her husband on work trips to Japan and the USA, always taking photographs, “*from time to time*” she would look at her older Salford and Manchester photographs. In 1986, in what has now become part of a ‘Baker mythology’, she took the photographs out again and was deeply affected by “*an amazing feeling ... of being amongst the people again*” and thought that it “*was now or never.*” At this time, Baker had learnt of the Documentary Photography Archive (DPA) that archivist and photography historian Audrey Linkman had established as part of the Manchester Local Studies Archive based at Manchester Metropolitan University<sup>130</sup>. Shirley Baker met up with Linkman and showed her the Salford and Manchester photographs. The two women would form a close friendship that would prove pivotal in the photographer’s career. Later that year, supported by the DPA, Baker prepared some of her ‘street’ photographs for her first exhibition in over twenty years, *Here Yesterday and Gone Today*, shown as part of a broader group exhibition *Images of Salford* at Salford Art Gallery.<sup>131</sup> Whilst the exhibition brought Baker’s work to public attention, critical consideration did not follow. Nevertheless, for the first time Shirley Baker was receiving commissions regionally, not for print publication as she once hoped, but for community touring exhibitions such as *My Face or Yours* commissioned by Cheshire Arts, and Viewpoint Gallery’s commission for a project on the Pendlebury Children’s Hospital, Salford. She did not, however, find these commissions altogether satisfactory, perceiving them overly prescriptive.

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<sup>129</sup> This sense of ‘dislocation’, ‘alienation’, ‘sadness’ and ‘loss’ that Shirley Baker herself refers to as present for her when taking her photographs seems at odds with what Val Williams finds in Baker’s work, with its ‘compassion’, ‘empathy’ and expressions of social cohesiveness (see Chapter 2). It is interesting to note, that this breadth of sentiment is experienced by visitors to the exhibition and is explored further in Chapter 5.

<sup>130</sup> Founded in 1985 the DPA was part of Manchester Local Studies then based at Manchester Polytechnic later Manchester Metropolitan University. The archive was the ‘sister’ organisation to the North West Film Archive, and aimed to collect photographs from the 1840s to the 1950s of Manchester. It also commissioned North West photographers to document aspects of everyday life from the mid 1980s to the 1990s, and thus was a critical supporter of a number of regional documentary photographers, including: Shirley Baker, Clement Cooper, John Darwell, Martin Parr and Tom Wood.

<sup>131</sup> *Here Yesterday and Gone Today* included forty prints, thirty in colour and ten in black and white.

Despite not being her own idea, the offer from the DPA in 1987 to photograph holiday-makers at the expanding Manchester International Airport was more in line with the photographer's interests in the performance of the everyday and the ordinary. Taken in July and August, the height of the burgeoning (yet still quite novel for many working-class families), package tour holiday season, her images portray a world within a world, in which 'ordinary people' who should be full of excitement going on holiday are instead 'caught' unselfconsciously looking weary and listless, waiting to board their flights.<sup>132</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, Baker's work was relatively well-known in the North West and was even making an appearance in popular local culture, with club nights using her images for flyers and local bands for record covers. She had work included in the group exhibition *North West Frontiers* at Cornerhouse art centre in summer 1989. However, outside of the region she remained unknown until Neil Astley, founding editor of Bloodaxe Books, approached her having read a review of the Salford exhibition. As a way of expanding their poetry publication list and being 'community-orientated' in the city of Newcastle where they were based, Bloodaxe had already published photographers Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen's *Byker* (1985) and Jimmy Forsyth's *Scotswood Road* (1986). Both books had sold several thousand copies and had two or three printings 'Everyone who had lived there seemed to want to have their own copy of a book showing the streets where they had grown up and the people they knew as a personal record of the communities which had been destroyed by the redevelopment', Astley stated.<sup>133</sup> Astley recognized a similar context of community displacement in Shirley Baker's photographs. He contacted the photographer and they met in Manchester. Together they selected images for a book, including sixteen of the Hulme colour photographs. It was Astley who recommended Stephen Constantine, a social historian born in Salford, to write an introduction along with Baker's own. *Street Photographs* sold very well at the time 5,584 copies. It was marketed not to photography specialists outside the region but rather 'primarily to the people who lived or had lived in the places' photographed.<sup>134</sup> Nevertheless, Bloodaxe chose not print a

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<sup>132</sup> The work, comprising 547 black and white and 38 colour photos, featured in regional Granada TV's programme on the DPA, screened on 23rd October 1987.

<sup>133</sup> Neil Astley, email to the author, 15 April 2019.

<sup>134</sup> Neil Astley, email to the author, 15 April 2019.

second edition because demand tailed off: ‘it made a difference that Shirley was known and accepted by the communities she photographed, but unlike Jimmy and Sirkka, she didn’t live there’, and this made a difference, assessed Astley. The local and ‘community’ emphasis of Bloodaxe’s marketing strategy certainly explains why Baker’s book and her work received no national critical nor curatorial attention and she continued to remain relatively unknown to nationally focussed photography historians and curators until recently.

### **1.7 Rediscovered, Only to be Lost, Again, then Rediscovered Once More**

The ‘success’ that publication and exhibiting might have brought was, however, followed by years of relative professional invisibility, though Baker’s photographs did become known to a number of social historians working on the history of the North West.<sup>135</sup>

She continued with her London *Grazing* project, preparing a book, though could not secure a publisher. Dewi Lewis, former Director of Cornerhouse, Manchester, exhibited some of these photographs in an exhibition of the same name, appropriately in the art centre’s cafe, and they were also shown at the Piece Hall in Halifax in 1993. She received a small community commission *What’s age got to do with it?* shown at Chester Cathedral in 1996, but after her eyesight having started to deteriorate in the late 1980s, according to her husband, the photographer gradually moved into a period of not taking so many photographs.

Baker was, however, to receive a different kind of recognition when in 1992 curator and photography historian Val Williams invited her to take part in the *National Life Story, Oral History of British photographers*.<sup>136</sup> Recorded at Baker’s home, the nearly three hours interview at times makes for uneasy listening as the photographer hesitantly provides details of her early life and diffidently speaks of her photographic practice; characteristic of the ‘modesty’ many who knew her refer to. Baker was ‘*simultaneously confident in the work*’, according to her husband, ‘*but nevertheless surprised when people found it good*’. What seems lacking at this time is a sense of

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<sup>135</sup> Chris Waters, ‘Landscape and memory and the Industrial North’, (*Ideas*, Vol. 5. No. 1, 1997), and Stephen Brooke, *Cities of Women? The Representation of Working-Class Women in the Photography of Roger Mayne and Shirley Baker, 1956-68*, ESRC Seminar Series, ‘Women in 1950s’ Britain’, (University of Manchester, 26 November 2010).

<sup>136</sup> Initiated in 1990 by *National Life Stories* at the British Library. See: <https://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/photography>.

being her own authority, able to speak about her photography with confidence. This was to change when in 1998, at the age of 66, the photographer embarked on an MA in Photographic History and Theory at the University of Derby. Baker was an enthusiastic student, making the long weekly journey by car over the Pennines from her home in Wilmslow. The course was to provide a new understanding of photography and of herself as a photographer and her work. By the time she received her final commission, for the prestigious opening of The Lowry in Salford, her idea of photography had been modified.<sup>137</sup>

With the exhibition and accompanying publication, *Streets and Spaces: Urban Photography - Salford and Manchester, 1960s-2000*, the photographer searched for contemporary equivalent locations and subject matter that she had photographed in the 1960s and 1970s and presented old and new photographs side-by-side. Though in this final project she stuck to a realist documentary style, she now worked with a more problematised understanding of photography's claim to truth, writing '*this is a personal view and cannot be a complete record*'.<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, the photographer was inclined to hold on to the medium's significance and value in emergent historical awareness:

*We cannot relive the past any more than we can revive the dead, but to dismiss photography - or any other record - as valueless, robs us of the chance to learn from earlier times so that we might better understand the present and prepare for the future. After all, what is history if it is not an imagined past, a collection of facts, which we can only view and interpret] in the light of our own experiences?*<sup>139</sup>

Her newly found appreciation of early twentieth century photographers such as Eugène Atget (1857-1927) introduced to her alternative ways of thinking about 'documentary photography' and 'the street'. She should would later write of "*the surreal world of the high street, (where) images often merge with reality,*" and she would read about Walter Benjamin's *flaneur*, that informed a more nuanced and multi-layered re-appreciation of not only her subject matter of the 1960s and 1970s, but her way of working in the street.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> *Streets and Spaces: Urban Photography - Salford and Manchester, 1960s - 2000* was commissioned as the inaugural exhibition for the newly opened The Lowry on the 12th October 2000.

<sup>138</sup> Shirley Baker email to author, 14 December 2012.

<sup>139</sup> Shirley Baker email to author, 14 December 2012.

<sup>140</sup> Shirley Baker email to author, 14 December 2012.

Nearly a decade later, in 2007, the photographer was included in a comprehensive exhibition at Tate Gallery, London. *How We Are: Photographing Britain*, which was described as ‘a unique look at the journey of British photography, from the pioneers of the early medium to today’s photographers’.<sup>141</sup> The exhibition included ‘well-known oeuvres alongside mesmerising lost masterpieces’: Baker fell into the latter category. Perhaps bolstered by the Lowry commission and the Tate exhibition, in 2007 her ‘street photographs’ were once again offered for sale by The Photographer’s Gallery Print Sales, as they had been back in 1996. Unlike the work of Roger Mayne, regarded as a pioneer of post-war British documentary (with work in the V&A and a collectors’ market), the gallery apparently found it difficult to encourage collectors for Baker’s work, being unknown, and they withdrew from representation.<sup>142</sup> Baker had never regarded herself as ‘an artist’, despite an unfaltering, though unarticulated attention to aesthetics in her photographs.<sup>143</sup> Nonetheless, this rejection must surely have been keenly felt. Could this explain why in 2008 she contacted Mary Evans Picture Library, a specialist historical image picture library, who digitised a selection of her photographs with a focus on Salford and Manchester.<sup>144</sup> Whilst acknowledging photography’s ‘post-truth’ ambiguity, the photographer fundamentally subscribed to its importance in the narration of history, and this is where, arguably, she seemed to be most secure in situating her work:

*Any historical account consists merely of fragments of the past recycled to form a new or mythical whole. Nevertheless, photographs aid the memory and stimulate the imagination; they provide useful information and give insights into the past unequalled by any other medium - particularly when accompanied by written or spoken words.*<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> *How We are: Photographing Britain*, 22 May – 2 September 2007. See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/how-we-are-photographing-britain/how-we-are-photographing-britain-8>

<sup>142</sup> As recalled to the author by ex-staff at TPG Print Sales.

<sup>143</sup> In the interview with Val Williams, the photographer does not explicate her choice of lighting, composition, framing or printing, yet much of the possible meanings in her photographs are dependent upon these choices made.

<sup>144</sup> MEPL have built up representation of a number of post-war photographers, whose photographic images it considers of ‘historical value’. Baker contacted Tom Gilmoor in February 2008 sending him a section of images; by August 2008, the Shirley Baker selection went ‘live’ on their website, titles to the images were approved by the photographer.

<sup>145</sup> Shirley Baker email to author, 14 December 2012.

The years 2011 and 2012 were fertile ones for the photographer. Salford Museum and Art Gallery mounted a retrospective exhibition that featured not only the ‘street photographs’, as they had come to be known, but a more comprehensive overview of her working practice throughout the decades.<sup>146</sup> A year later, her work would feature in three significant exhibitions and publications that included, for the very first time, her photography within histories of post-war British photography and art. *Observers: British Photography and the British Scene*, organised by the British Council in San Paolo, intended to present the work of British photographers who ‘focused their attention on their own country – on the customs, character and conditions ...around them’. Bringing together the work of some of the most illustrious names in British documentary photography, Baker’s photographic approach was given legitimacy beyond its hitherto acknowledged regional and historical value.<sup>147</sup> *A Lowry Summer*, an exhibition on the theme of summer leisure and curated at The Lowry, included works by Shirley Baker alongside those of L. S. Lowry, and Humphrey Spender.<sup>148</sup> My own exhibition, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning: the authentic moment in British photography* explored the twin associations of authenticity and realism within the post-war British documentary photography tradition.<sup>149</sup> My inclusion of Baker alongside photographers already historically recognised, including Roger Mayne and John Bulmer, validated the

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<sup>146</sup> Shirley Baker selected her photographs for this exhibition, and forms her first attempt at ‘cataloguing’ her own working practice over the decades.

<sup>147</sup> Presented in Sao Paolo September - November 2012. Curated by Joao Kulcsar (Sao Paulo) and Martin Caiger-Smith (London), the exhibition presented works by over thirty photographers, including: Cecil Beaton, Bill Brandt, Humphrey Spender, George Rodger, Paul Nash, Madame Yevonde, Nigel Henderson, Roger Mayne, Ida Kar, Norman Parkinson, Terence Donovan, Ian Berry, Shirley Baker, Tony Ray-Jones, Raymond Moore, Paul Trevor, Tish Murtha, Daniel Meadows, Chris Killip, Martin Parr, Paul Graham, Keith Arnatt, Anna Fox, Derek Ridgers, Peter Fraser, Jem Southam, Karen Knorr, Richard Billingham, Paul Seawright, Wolfgang Tillmans, Jason Evans, Simon Roberts, Nigel Shafran, Rut Blees Luxemburg, Sarah Jones, John Duncan, Gareth McConnell. See: <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/exhibitions/exhibition/observadores-fotografos-da-cena-britnica-desde-1930-at-hoje-2012>

<sup>148</sup> *A Lowry Summer*, The Lowry, July - October 2012. The association of Baker and Lowry is one commonly made. See: Chris Waters, *Ideas*, Vol. 5. No. 1, 1997; and ‘Shirley Baker’, (*Tate Etc.* issue 28: Summer 2013). Baker met Lowry: “I met Lowry in the Manchester Art Gallery some years ago – about 1970. I think it was at a Manchester Academy of Fine Arts exhibition. I remember he was looking at various abstract works. We got chatting and he asked me: ‘What do you do?’ When I said I was a photographer, he shrugged and said ‘same thing’, which I thought was quite surprising, coming from a painter. What I think he meant by that was that I was documenting things and so was he.” Val Williams, *Life Story Interview*.

<sup>149</sup> See: <https://www.lakesidearts.org.uk/exhibitions/event/2221/saturday-night-and-sunday-morning.html>

photographer's work within a framework that had hitherto been presented as singularly male.<sup>150</sup>

The following year Oldham Art Gallery organized another large retrospective of Baker's photographs *Looking Outwards*, in which the photographer would present more previously unseen work.<sup>151</sup> Loosely grouped according to themes defined by Baker, that included the public intimacy of couples, people asleep in public, men with false limbs, and reflections of people in glass windows, the overarching impression was of a photographer emphasising the extraordinary properties of the ordinary: "*no hard and fast rule of things that I find interesting*," she told Val Williams. By the end of the decade, the photographer was in receipt of notable gallery attention. However, frustratingly, for Baker, her reputation was still largely regional and remained peripheral to historical narratives of post-war British photography — a history still dominated by male photographers. It was not until my exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery, London, that her singular contribution would be highlighted and widely acknowledged.

*Women and Children; and Loitering Men* opened in July 2015 and brought together over 150 photographs from the Salford and Manchester 'street' series. It was accompanied by a high quality, fully illustrated publication that presented Baker's photographs as artistic works in their own right. The exhibition sought to contextualise Shirley Baker as a pioneering figure within the evolution of British photography post-war, a photographer whose work might be seen as a bridge between the reportage tradition of just after the war, and the emergent artist photographers who engaged the documentary style for reflective as well as critical purposes.<sup>152</sup> The exhibition was an immediate success with audiences who, like Baker back in 1986, were deeply affected by the photographs: 'It felt like these rooms were filled with unusual suspects for a gallery... it

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<sup>150</sup> Martin Harrison's thesis for the exhibition and book *Young Meteors* is an invaluable contribution to evolving new understandings of the evolution of post-war British photography by looking at the emergent field of 'photo-journalism'. However, there is a blind-spot regarding gender that the omission of Shirley Baker in his thesis reveals. See: Martin Harrison, *Young Meteors: British Photojournalism, 1957–1965*. (London: Cape, 1998).

<sup>151</sup> *Looking Outwards*, Oldham Art Gallery, 2013.

<sup>152</sup> There is a generation of photographers who came after Shirley Baker, emerging from the mid-1980s, who were more cynical if not critical about documentary photography's claims to truth as well as its humanist roots. It would be misleading to think of this as a 'movement', *per se*, for each photographer has a different understanding of photography and engages different subject matter, but they include amongst others John Darwell, Anna Fox, Sirkka-Liisa Kontinen, Daniel Meadows, Martin Parr, Chris Steele Perkins, Paul Seawright, Chris Wainwright.

was altogether beautiful' recounted a visitor.<sup>153</sup> The exhibition garnered extensive media coverage. The question of 'who was Shirley Baker?' and how had she 'escaped' previous national recognition dominated most media coverage, and gave rise to journalistic comparison with the American post-war photographer, Vivian Maier, another woman photographer whose work was 'discovered' posthumously. There is, of course, nothing Baker has in common with Maier other than their gender and 'the street' as a shared fascination, but the narrative of an 'overlooked' woman working seemingly from the margins of domesticity, then to be 'discovered', was too appealing a story for journalists not to contrive.

### **Afterthoughts**

The fact is that Shirley Baker's 'marginality' is a consequence of many factors: gender, regionality, her Jewishness, social class, and personal character and circumstance, as well as her ideas about photography. Her husband claimed that unlike himself as a GP Shirley "*didn't have a sense of a career.*" One might find in Baker's 'approach' something of the post-war culture of 'serious hobbyism', which, according to social historian Selina Todd the aspirational working classes and middle classes were actively and extensively drawn into, all of which required time and dedication on a scale equal to that of any paid work.<sup>154</sup> Photography, however, "*wasn't a hobby*" according to her husband, "*it was her life.*" Baker pursued it to the cost of other domestic roles and duties expected of a woman at that time, including delaying motherhood. It is perhaps the case that as a Jewish woman in post-war Manchester, and despite the city's large and established Jewish population, the photographer felt especially ill at ease asserting herself against both the cultural prejudice towards women working in photography and, in particular, the National Union of Journalists disdain for women members.<sup>155</sup> Unlike Grace

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<sup>153</sup> Andrea Gibbons writing on her blog post expressed the sentiments of many who found the exhibition experience exceeded any they had every previously had, and indeed the exhibition brought in many new audiences to The Photographers' Gallery, see: <http://writingcities.com/2017/07/24/shirley-baker-women-children-loitering-men/>. Accessed 10 April 2019.

<sup>154</sup> Selina Todd, *The People*, (London, John Murray, 2014), 236-46.

<sup>155</sup> In Manchester in 1947 there were anti-Jewish riots. See: <https://www.newstatesman.com/2012/05/britains-last-anti-jewish-riots>

Robertson, the only woman photographer who staffed on *Picture Post*,<sup>156</sup> Baker did not have a journalist father (Fife Robertson worked on *Picture Post*) to encourage her, and in any case this popular paper did not have the cultural grip on the young Shirley Baker that it did for an earlier generation of British photographers whose career ambitions were centred around *Picture Post*.<sup>157</sup> The more ‘accepted’ career option open to a woman in the 1950s of studio photography Baker rejected. In late 1950s and early 1960s Manchester, Shirley Baker pursued an ill defined creative path. Her working method, that at its core was an expression of her own interests, outside the timeline of ‘news’ and the ‘objectivity’ required of a reporter, had no obvious context for support or dissemination, for it ‘fitted’ the requirements of neither newspaper nor magazine editors.

Baker liked, in fact possibly needed, to experience a sense of her own freedom, or at least “*the illusion of it.*”<sup>158</sup> That she could not at the time articulate her photographs as ‘art’ was in great part due to the technological bias of George Wakefield and the course he oversaw, “*It took me a long time to unlearn this,*” Baker later declared. Unlike her contemporary Roger Mayne, also working in the late 1950s and 1960s, Baker remained outside of the ‘community structure’ of art and photography — the system of publishing, exhibiting, marketing, collecting, art criticism, thinking, and writing about photography and ‘art’ — that was emerging and that could have provided the conditions for her work to be seen.<sup>159</sup>

Furthermore, from the late 1970s onwards Baker would become a ‘casualty’ of the shift within photographic education and its practices influenced by Marxism, post-

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<sup>156</sup> Whilst there were women photographers who received regular assignments with *Picture Post* including Gerti Deutsch (who contributed over fifty photo stories to the magazine), Edith Tudor-Hart and Elisabeth Chat, Robertson is currently regarded as the only one on the magazine’s permanent staff. For further information on the role of emigre women photographers contributing to the magazine see the exhibition *Another Eye*, organised by Four Corners, London, <https://www.anothereye.org> and <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/women-refugee-photographers-who-changed-how-post-war-britain-saw-itself/>. Accessed 15 July 2020.

<sup>157</sup> *Picture Post* was an immediate success with a popular (though educated) readership, selling 1,700,000 copies a week two months after its launch in 1938. Sales increased further during the Second World War, and by December 1943 the magazine was selling 1,950,000 copies a week. When it folded in July 1957, circulation was less than 600,000 copies a week. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picture\\_Post](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picture_Post). Retrieved 9 April 2019. Baker’s fellow student Pat Seddon confirmed that she and her husband Derek ‘were big *Picture Post* fans’, finding the layout innovative, its attention to using a photo essay as well as *Picture Post*’s approach to documentary photography inspiring, however the magazine was never referred to by the college lecturers nor held up as a possible future career option. Email correspondence with the author, March 2019.

<sup>158</sup> Shirley Baker in conversation with the author, April 2014.

<sup>159</sup> At the time that critics like Berger were moving towards accepting photography’s cultural value alongside that of painting and sculpture, the young photographer Roger Mayne also was agitating (from the early 1950s) for both the expansion of photography’s value ‘as art’ and therefore his place within that ‘category’.

structuralism and semiotics, that sought to question and indeed viewed suspiciously humanist, social documentary photography. For many leftist critics and photo-artists, 'documentary' could no longer be regarded as a transparent portrayal of matter-of-fact-veracity, or as possessing an aesthetic form, and instead, was an extension of systems of power, surveillance and objectification, a role that cast the involvement of documentary in social observation as wholly intrusive to the lives of the photographed and thus subjugated 'other'.<sup>160</sup> This position left little room for documentary photography to be approached as empathic *witnessing* and or *revealing* the nature of injustices, and nor could it be understood as a complexly subjective and affective form received by the spectator with pleasure or indeed as an act of resistance to dominant ideologies. 'Documentary' and 'photography' would become an antagonistic battleground in which photographers were divided over questions of representational language, ethics and intent.<sup>161</sup>

This 'tendency' has cast post-war photographers like Shirley Baker, working in a naturalist documentary mode and with an interest in aesthetics, to the margins of what was considered critically acceptable contemporary 'photographic practice', often with an overly simplified polarisation that pitted 'community' photography against 'artistic' photography.<sup>162</sup> In this cultural context it is possible to see how Baker and her work would be accepted within the framework of 'community' and historically valued photography as exemplified by the DPA (i.e. representation of working-class communities) and through which Bloodaxe editor Neil Astley interpreted her work, but would be marginal to the institutional discourses and practices of 'artist photography' that consolidated throughout the 1980s.

Those photographers who did continue to work in a black and white realist tradition in the 1980s did so with an explicit 'political' agenda to represent working class

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<sup>160</sup> The influence of Marxism, post-structuralism and semiotics on the ontology of photography was considerable. Influential authors at this time offering critiques of 'documentary' photography included: Martha Rosler, 'In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)', in ed. Richard Bolton, *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990); Alan Sekula, 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary', in *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972-1996* (Illinois, Illinois State University, 1999); and John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, (London, Macmillan Press, 1988).

<sup>161</sup> For a short summary of the 'battleground of documentary' see: Liz Wells, *Photography: a critical introduction*, (London, Routledge 2007), 109-114.

<sup>162</sup> Art historian, Lynda Nead also draws attention to this down grading of the effect and the affective in post-war documentary photography. In her detailed analysis of Bert Hardy's *Picture Post* photos, Nead identifies his keen sense of the drama and emotion of the everyday that was conveyed through the effect of photographic composition, form and an 'accomplished' use of grey tones. Lynda Nead, *Tiger in the Smoke* (London, Yale University Press, 2017), 78-88.

communities. Photographers such as Chris Killip, Chris Steel-Perkins and Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen in the North East worked with an articulated understanding of the fallibility of ‘documentary’ and its claims to ‘truth’, that arguably lent their photography more critical credence.<sup>163</sup> Nevertheless, their photographs were still considered ‘naive’ and apolitical by many ‘photo-practitioners’ who either engaged theories that challenged the ‘classic’ documentary approach of ‘observing’ in favour of ‘self-representation’, or enlisted semiotic theory and conceptual art practices that commonly resulted in ‘constructed’ photographic works.<sup>164</sup> There were other photographers and artists employing realist photography throughout the 1960s and 1970s, for example as a form of ‘artistic anthropology’ (Tony Ray-Jones), conceptual walking practice (Richard Long), surrealist art practice (Richard Wentworth, Keith Arnatt and Ian Breakwell), or feminist practice (Yves Lomax, Jo Spence and Marie Yates). Indeed, aesthetically orientated natural landscapes by Faye Godwin and urban landscapes by John Davies also continued to be made throughout this period. I suggest, however, that Shirley Baker’s education (in the broadest sense) could not support the conceptualisation of her own method of working and the photographs she made in any of these terms. Over twenty five years, from the early 1980s to the 2000s, Shirley Baker’s photographs would, in effect, be outside of the various terms of reference that could support their appraisal.

The success of *Women and Children; and Loitering Men* in London was followed by its enthusiastic public reception a year later in Madrid, during the international *PhotoEspane* festival, and the next summer in Manchester, where the exhibition attracted over 280,000 visitors. Curators have subsequently included her photographs in an increasing number of group shows that have provided overviews of British documentary photography.<sup>165</sup> New bodies of work have been identified and curated, including *On The Beach*, in which I juxtaposed Baker’s Blackpool and South of France photographs; and

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<sup>163</sup> In communication with the author, founding editor of Bloodaxe, Neil Astley, identified the strong tradition of humanist, social documentary in Newcastle and the North East, through amongst other organisations, Amber Film and Photography Collective, whose purpose was to capture working-class life in North East England, in the spirit of the documentary principles of John Grierson.

<sup>164</sup> See Liz Wells, *Photography: a critical introduction*, (Routledge, London, 2007, 109-114).

<sup>165</sup> *Work, Rest & Play*, Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Xiamen, China, (2016), *North: Fashioning Identity*, Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool and Somerset House, (2017), and *Here We Are*, Burberry shop, London, Paris and Hong Kong, (2018).

her photographs of *Older Women*.<sup>166</sup> Whilst for nearly thirty years Baker's photographs were unavailable in published form, at the time of this thesis there are four new publications of her work.<sup>167</sup> Back in 1992, when asked by Val Williams what Baker might work on next, the photographer responded by saying:

*'I am a bit suspicious about saying what I will do in the future as when I do it seems to have a habit of not working out. But I have a few things I might get down to...I'm usually washing up or in the bath and I think of something'*.

With an archive of nearly a thousand photographs there is still plenty of scope for further appraisal to come.

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<sup>166</sup> I curated *On The Beach*, Photofusion, London (2016); Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool (2017). The exhibition was adapted by the photographer's daughter Nan Levy for the La Lavandou Cultural Centre, La Lavandou, France in summer 2018. Baker's photographs of older women formed the basis of an artist workshop led by the author at Artspace, Coventry in November 2018).

<sup>167</sup> Including: Anna Douglas, *Women and Children; and Loitering Men*, (London, The Photographers' Gallery, 2015); Shirley Baker, *Without a Trace*, (Manchester, The History Press, 2018); Shirley Baker, *Dog Show*, (London, Hoxton Mini Press, 2018); *Shirley Baker*, (London, MACK Books, 2019).

## Chapter 2

### Here Yesterday, and Gone Today<sup>168</sup>

#### 2.0 Introduction

The earliest published accounts of the work of Shirley Baker are the subject of this chapter. The first text is an essay titled *Street Scenes: Late Afternoon* written by Stephen Constantine, a Salford-born social historian at Lancaster University; another, *Street Photographs* is by Shirley Baker. Both essays introduce the photographer's first book of photographs, *Street Photographs; Manchester and Salford*, published in 1989 by Bloodaxe.<sup>169</sup> A third source is an interview between the photographer and Val Williams, curator and photo historian, conducted in 1992 for the *Oral History of British Photography Archive*, held in the National Sound Library at the British Library, London.<sup>170</sup> William's text also endorses the historical value of Baker's work, situating it within the history of photography as 'documentary'. Yet this emerging consensus belies some of Shirley Baker's own thoughts and feelings when, after many years, she came again to look at her images and found herself 'overwhelmed' by the intensity of memory and feelings aroused :

*Some of the photographs have been published in newspapers and magazines, and others used for publicity purposes but the majority were pushed to the back of a cupboard for many years until I decided to take them out and look at them again. I spread them out on the floor and was immediately overwhelmed by the feeling of rushing back through time and being amongst the people again. I felt then that others might be interested in the pictures and might also share my feelings....But I remember when I got these out again, and I thought to myself....I never thought I'd got enough, then I thought, if I have not got it now, I am never going to get it. But I had this amazing feeling when I got them on the floor, they just became alive...it just seemed like I was among all these people. And I thought, if it has that affect on me, and I am quite hardened to these pictures, then maybe other people will feel the same sort of thing. So I thought I should do something with these, make a book or something ... I always wanted to do a book, maybe everybody wants to.<sup>171</sup>*

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<sup>168</sup> Title of Shirley Baker's first solo exhibition at Salford Art Gallery, 1986 that included fifty one prints.

<sup>169</sup> Constantine was later appointed an Emeritus Professor at University of Lancaster.

<sup>170</sup> See: [https://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/photography/021M-C0459X0020XX-0100V0\\_](https://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/photography/021M-C0459X0020XX-0100V0_) Accessed: 9 May 2020.

<sup>171</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview, British Sound Archive, British Photographers*, (British Library, London), 1992.

This ‘Janus-faced’ quality is not unique to Baker. Writing about the nineteenth century British photographic survey movement, visual anthropologist and curator, Elizabeth Edwards identifies ‘a continual and dialogical tension’ between (the) espoused historical objectivity of the survey movement and the ‘needing-to-be tamed’ subjectivity and emotion of individual photographers.<sup>172</sup> The affective potential of Shirley Baker’s images will be explored later. Here I shall thematically analyse the texts and words of Baker, Constantine and Williams.

Getting behind their language allows us to develop some sense of the motivation of Shirley Baker, her original ambitions for her photographs, what others made of her work (and their ambitions for it), and the institutional framing and re-framing of it over twenty years. It tells us about the shifting evaluations of photographs as historical evidence, memory objects, and their institutionalisation. By considering this discourse, I reveal how the language of any historical moment ‘performs’ the images of Shirley Baker and its authored meaning. This language both suggests and reveals ideas regarding Shirley Baker’s practice, its publicly formed values, and the ‘task’ to which the work has been and is still being put today.

## **2.1 The Photographic Complex**

When I first met with Shirley Baker in 2011, many of her Manchester and Salford photographs were archived in the Manchester Record Office (MRO) alongside thousands of other historical texts and images. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in 1986, Baker had shown her work to the coordinators of the Documentary Photography Archive (DPA). When DPA closed, its collections were transferred to MRO.<sup>173</sup> Some twenty years later, Shirley Baker contacted Mary Evans Picture Library (MEPL) to licence her images for commercial and editorial use. With its extensive holdings of historical images, this library affirmed the *historical* importance of Baker’s photographs as visual evidence within social history. Whereas the MRO and MEPL provide a ‘boundaried’ interpretation of Shirley Baker’s images, a fuller understanding emerges when considering photography not as mere representations (either images or objects), but as

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<sup>172</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera and Historian*, (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>173</sup> For more information on the DPA, see Chapter 1.

part of what anthropologist James Helva has called the ‘photographic complex’, by which he means ‘a range of agencies, animate and inanimate, visible and invisible’ are clustered and from which emerge photographic images.<sup>174</sup> A vital element in this matrix is storage and preservation. According to Helva, the archive is not only a physical location, it is a performative space that both preserves ‘the work’ and defines it. In this sense, the archive is both actant and acted upon. For Baker’s photographs, their presence in a record office archive already defines ‘the work’ as a document of some historical importance. These archives were also where my curatorial project began.

## 2.2 Approaching the Discourse

Before embarking on my thematic analysis, it is important to consider what is meant by the term ‘documentary’ and the language used in defining this genre (the following Chapter 3 provides a more detailed consideration of ‘genre’). Despite the plethora of writing on this subject, there is widespread agreement over its core concerns.

Photography theorist and curator Liz Wells notes that despite all the changes in technology, practices and fashions, the history of documentary photography has always been concerned to claim ‘a special relationship to real life and a singular status with regard to notions of truth and authenticity’.<sup>175</sup> In writing about the Farm Security Administration (FSA), and the American documentary movement of the 1930s, Karin Becker Ohrn argues that documentary photography went beyond ‘the production of the fine print’ in order ‘to bring the attention of an audience to the subject of his or her work, and in many cases, to pave the way for social change’.<sup>176</sup> Photography theorist John Roberts concurs, claiming that despite varying political contexts, the twin notions of ‘realism’ and ‘the everyday’ have come to define the ‘continuities of documentary practice’.<sup>177</sup> These authors (and others) highlight the language used to articulate the ‘phenomenon’ of documentary photography. I have, therefore, mapped their characterizations of the genre, using them as ‘sensitizing concepts’ — ‘initial but

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<sup>174</sup> See, James L. Helva, ‘The Photography Complex: Exposing Boxer-Era China (1900-1901), Making Civilization’, in ed. Rosalind C. Morris, *Photographies East*, (Durham and London, Duke University, 2009), 81.

<sup>175</sup> Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction; 2nd Edition*, (London, Routledge, 2000), 75.

<sup>176</sup> Karin Becker Ohrn, quoted in Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 75.

<sup>177</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption; Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, (Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1998), 12.

tentative ideas to pursue and questions to raise’—against the three analysed texts, and in so doing identify Shirley Baker’s so-called ‘documentary’ practice as a received understanding that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>178</sup>

### 2.3 Methodological Summary

Reading the essays by Constantine and Baker and the Williams interview, I searched for patterns and meanings in their texts, highlighting words that articulated the practice of Shirley Baker as it related to the literature cited above. In this way, I became sensitive to the authors’ different subject positions. Constantine was making a case for the relevance and value of Baker’s practice to an understanding of history, whilst Baker was effectively explaining herself, her motivation and her photographic practice to the reader – though she concurs with Constantine’s view of history. In the early stages of reading both their essays, I began noticing patterns in the text as an ‘inductive’ process — that is, letting the data lead the coding in ‘an inductive or bottom up way....without trying to fit it into a precasting coding frame’.<sup>179</sup>

In this way I recorded, for example, a pattern to how Constantine used words that formed an understanding of the action of the photographer through five key processes: *capturing, taking, recording, observing and seeing*. Turning to Baker’s text, her self-reflexive language involved a greater range of concepts and themes to convey different stages in her actions: prior to taking the photographs (*wandering, tracing, roaming, seeing, being interested*); in the process of photographing (*capturing, taking, recording*); her affective state and behaviour throughout the process (*being compulsively driven, being fascinated, sympathising (with the people), noting, thinking/reflecting, being caught up (in the situation)*) and claims made for her professionalism by being *spontaneous* and *not posing* her subject.

From this descriptive level, I introduced a more formal level of first coding. I noticed the prevalence of words, phrases and concepts and began to ask questions about the authors’ use of language. It was at this point that I introduced theoretically

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<sup>178</sup> On ‘sensitizing concepts’, see, Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, (London, Sage, 2014), 84.

<sup>179</sup> My use of thematic analysis as a method was concerned to ‘reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’ and thus lead to the use of a ‘contextualist’ approach ‘sitting between the two poles of essentialism and constructionism’. See Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, ‘Using thematic analysis in psychology’, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 121, 2006.

influenced framings (drawn from the first coding and informed by reference to the literature) to the coding, looking for patterns in relation to the following four analytical questions:

- **authorial intention;** how is the photographer defined and how is she seen to be working?
- **the subject:** what is being constituted as 'the subject' of the photograph (what is visible and invisible)?
- **the viewer:** who is the image addressed to and how does the viewer relate to the image?
- **the image:** what is the image/photographic object 'doing', and how does it perform this task?

Using this four-part thematic frame, I re-coded the two texts, and went on to code the third interview transcript. What follows is a summary of findings for each of the four analytic themes.

## 2.4 Authorial Intentionality

In coding the three texts, I initially focused on words that described the activity of Shirley Baker in order to reveal each author's understanding regarding her intentionality, which in turn either explicitly or implicitly revealed their views of photography itself. All three texts described Shirley Baker as 'taking' and 'capturing' photographs and no-one, not even Shirley Baker herself, described her actions as 'making' a photograph. It is hard not to speak about a photograph as being 'taken', it is deeply embedded in the language and history of the medium, as well as our everyday experience of it, but the expression does downgrade the skills and artistry of the photographer. As Liz Wells has commented:

We speak of taking photographs rather than making them, because the marks of their construction are not immediately visible; they have the appearance of having come about as a function of the world itself rather than carefully fabricated cultural objects.<sup>180</sup>

For Susan Sontag, the use of the camera results in an unmediated process, 'essentially an act of non-intervention', and contrasts with that of the artist, 'the painter constructs, the photographer discloses', and it is this that produces the realist properties of

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<sup>180</sup> Liz Wells, *Photography*, 101.

photography.<sup>181</sup> Whilst Sontag's realist claims have been subsequently critiqued, so that in theory, at least, 'we no longer believe that the photograph directly replicates circumstances', photography theorist Mary Price nonetheless, suggests that the mechanisation (and more recently the digitization) of the camera, gives rise to a prejudice in which viewers commonly regard photography as a descriptive rather than a creative medium. Valued for its versimilitude, it is this empiricism and objectivity that governs many of the manifold uses of photography.

Stephen Constantine implicitly affirms photography's positivism when he states that, 'Like all photographs, the street photographs of Shirley Baker were taken at a particular time in a particular place, and part of their appeal lies in the preservation of that specific moment'.<sup>182</sup> Constantine's use of the word 'take' alludes to the idea of the photograph as description, that is, an unproblematic record of what was. Shirley Baker, in fact, agrees with Constantine, "*I was able to capture some of the street life as it had been for generations before the change.*"<sup>183</sup> Here is the idea of the photographer not as a creative artist, but at best someone especially gifted in 'entrapping' a moment in time, aided by the camera. John Berger writes of the photographer interrupting 'a moment taken from a continuum' so that 'there is no transforming in photography. There is only decision, only focus'.<sup>184</sup> In Baker's account of her own practice, however, she does suggest she was no mere 'interrupter, she speaks of "*wandering*", being "*intrigued*", "*discovering*", she is "*fascinated*" and "*enquiring*"; active language of personal enthusiasm that belies any reliance on mechanical intervention:

*I did become very much involved with it... I would have loved to do something, but what I was doing was recording something that was being done. You can say: "why can't you do something about it"?, but what I was doing was recording what was being done. But it was being done in such a way that people were suffering. But its difficult to know what you can do to alleviate suffering.*<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 11.

<sup>182</sup> All Stephen Constantine quotes, 'Street Scenes: Late Afternoon', *Street Photographs*, (Newcastle, Bloodaxe, 1989), 9-13.

<sup>183</sup> Shirley Baker, 'Street Photographs', *Street Photographs*, (Newcastle, Bloodaxe, 1989), 15.

<sup>184</sup> John Berger, 'On Photography', in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph John Berger*, (London, Penguin Modern Classics, 2013), 20.

<sup>185</sup>

Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview, British Sound Archive, British Photographers*, (British Library, London), 1992.

Shirley Baker was not governed by any reformist agenda so often associated with documentary photography nor does she have overall plan. Her motivation was entirely her own and in her interview with Val Williams, she recalls the almost accidental nature of her engagement:

*I do vaguely remember looking out of the window and seeing a crane and asking somebody, "what is going on out there?" And they said, "That's the slum clearance programme". And I said, "I must go and have a look at that". And I think that that's maybe, when it actually started....and then I just became so intrigued by what was going on, and then realising that it was all changing...So when I actually went to investigate, it became...a sort of obsessive thing, I just couldn't leave it alone, it seemed it was going to go on for the rest of my life. Whenever I used to have any spare time, I just used to go. I mean I gave up even talking about it because it seemed such a potty thing to do* <sup>186</sup>

The wide-ranging life story interview conducted by Val Williams introduces a new dimension in the discussion of Shirley Baker's practice. Rather than focusing on images, Williams tends to address the relationship between Shirley Baker and her subjects. Her approach might be said to illustrate one of the preoccupations of the critical Left at that time regarding the power dynamics between the photographer and subject. One of the questions Val Williams asks is: "*Did it feel like entering into a foreign country, or did it feel like your place*"? To which the photographer responds:

*I mean I didn't live there, so I cannot pretend to be a part of it, but in a sense I did feel it was my place, and I became very, very involved with it. But quite often you see things, in a different kind of a way when it's not absolutely a part of you. So I did become very much involved with it ...*<sup>187</sup>

In Val Williams' line of interviewing she does not question how Baker 'makes' or 'produces' her photographs. The one exception is when she asks the photographer how she "*got this very flat on, straight documentary...look.*"<sup>188</sup> Shirley Baker's response is telling (and concurs with Greenberg's view,) in that she makes clear her understanding of not only what the camera is, but also what she believes photography to be:

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<sup>186</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>187</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>188</sup> The term 'straight photography', is used by Liz Wells, to suggest an 'Emphasis upon direct documentary typical of the Modern period in American Photography'. Liz Wells, *Photography*, 352.

*I've always thought of it as a kind of recording media... I mean it is. The basic thing I was after... is truth. And this is the sort of thing that has really appealed to me about photography. I know... truth can mean anything, twisted around, but it's a kind of personal truth. Maybe that's more to the point...I mean that a photograph has to be, should be, the truth as the photographer sees it. This is the intriguing thing about photographs.*<sup>189</sup>

Baker clearly recognises as problematic the idea of photography as essentially non-interventionist and a giver of 'truth'. She cannot vanquish herself; after all it is she who 'sees' through the lens and presses the shutter—the 'photographic moment' is transformed into her own. What is interesting in this exchange is that neither Baker nor Williams talks about her work either compositionally or aesthetically in a way that addresses Baker as a combining or reflective agent involved in a creative process bringing parts together, constructing and 'manipulating the confluence of events' to create a coherent image.<sup>190</sup> Instead of image-making, Val Williams's line of enquiry focusses on Shirley Baker's ethics, her psychological state and human values, asking questions in search for an explanation for the photographer's motivation that would never be addressed to a man. For example, how far was the photographer affected by her post-natal depression? Could this have "*fed into the compassion there is in these photographs, ...so compassionate and affectionate?*"<sup>191</sup> Williams cannot, it seems, help but connect the two.

## **2.5 Subject Matter: People, Places and Time**

What a photograph is *of* seems obvious. Surely it is what the photographer has decided is worth recording? That 'this particular event or this particular object has been seen'?<sup>192</sup> Only what the photograph is *of* (i.e. its subject) is not always visible to the eye, perhaps it becomes knowable more in the mind or, even, as Roland Barthes later experienced it, through the heart.<sup>193</sup> What we see at a descriptive or literal level is not necessarily the

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<sup>189</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>190</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph*, 20.

<sup>191</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>192</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph*, 18.

<sup>193</sup> There are many interpretations of Barthes's term 'punctum', and I do not intend to summarise them here, suffice to say that critics have latterly engaged Barthes's theory to expand on the 'affective dimension of photography', see Thy Pu and Elspeth H. Brown, *Feeling Photography*, (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014), 349-355.

subject of the photograph, nor, indeed, may it be what the photographer intended to be regarded as the subject.<sup>194</sup> The vexed question, then, of ‘what is the subject’ hovers in the background of coding for ‘the subject’, and frames my understanding (and reading) of the three texts.

In coding I was looking for words that *pointed to* an indexical link to a referent/s, that which was incontrovertibly in front of the camera. Shirley Baker has told us that she photographed dogs and cats, babies and toddlers, women and children (not often men), houses and streets. These things she saw and these things she photographed. Across the three texts, prevalence in the coding demonstrates that all three authors see ‘people’, but how are these people being seen? What sense should we make of them? Constantine sees people as signifiers of a past:

*The people in these pictures, although living essentially in the 19th-century environment, are recognisably specific to the 1960s and early 1970s, date-stamped by their dress, their hair styles and the toys and impedimenta of the children.*<sup>195</sup>

Alternatively for Val Williams, people are not ‘signifiers’ of ‘pastness’. Their presence functions in a wider, though undisclosed, narrative that ultimately illustrates not only Baker’s judgement but her ‘skill’ as a photographer:

*I think this sense of presence of the streetscape being as important as the people, I find this a very difficult thing to do in photography. To make that kind of judgement, to make those things as important to each other, not to focus on the people nor to ignore the people. I find that very intriguing. And there is a kind of narrative in every photograph.*<sup>196</sup>

For Williams, people inhabit Shirley Baker’s photographs rather like actors stand on a stage, awaiting their script and their roles to commence. It is the directing eye and hand of the photographer, however, which turns the everyday performance into a photograph. In taking out her photographs after nearly twenty-five years, Shirley Baker is transported back to ‘the moment’ of her original intervention—the theatre of memory has sprung to

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<sup>194</sup> This point is explored through field work interviews that took place during the Manchester exhibition, see Chapter 5.

<sup>195</sup> Stephen Constantine, *Street Photographs*, 9.

<sup>196</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

life.<sup>197</sup> For Baker, people are an essential force and focus of her photographs, their presence, she feels, is what makes her approach different from the newspaper photographers who on coming down to get their story about the ‘slum’ clearance programme would, “*always show a picture of a damn pile of rubble, a pile of bricks. They didn’t really bother about photographing the people.*”<sup>198</sup> These ‘people’ are not part of a ‘mass’ nor standing in as a ‘type’, they are, for the photographer, a ‘somebody’: “*When you are doing something like this (photographing) you tend to see people as individuals not as a particular category.*”<sup>199</sup>

Baker might well wish to distinguish her work from that of earlier photographers who saw and treated people not as individuals but as ‘types’. However, their presence in her work acts as witness to their individuality, yet at the same time they *are* signs that stand in for a wider sense of community, neighbourliness, and humanity.<sup>200</sup> As Constantine writes, Baker’s ‘pictures direct our gaze to the essential humanity of her subjects, lit up by their natural man-made environment’... (she) sees the people, her essential subject’.<sup>201</sup> People and their ‘peripheral details’ are what the photographer herself claims to find ‘the most interesting’.<sup>202</sup> They are the signs of ‘the everyday’ to which the newspaper photographers find un-newsworthy:

*Whole streets were disappearing and I hoped to capture some trace of the every day life of the people who lived there. I was particularly interested in the more mundane, even trivial, aspects of life that were not being recorded by anyone else — rather than the more organised and official activities, such as Whit Walks, that were documented each year by the local press.*<sup>203</sup>

It is the frequency of children in Shirley Baker’s photographs that prompts Val Williams to ask the photographer about her experience of motherhood, and whether children had

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<sup>197</sup> Oral history and ‘TWTC’ conversations, demonstrate the potency of memory in relation to Shirley Baker’s photographs. The idea of the ‘theatre of memory’ was coined by Raphael Samuel, in *Theatres of Memory*, (London, Verso, 1996).

<sup>198</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>199</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992. The use of photography to visualize and categorize ‘the poor’ will be explored in Chapter 3.

<sup>200</sup> Baker’s work is, as the oral history and the ‘TWTC’ conversations attest, regarded as indexical and generic, types and symbolic. See Chapters 4 (Manchester) and 5.

<sup>201</sup> Stephen Constantine, 9.

<sup>202</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>203</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

“come into the picture more after she had her own child.”<sup>204</sup> Baker agrees that “*maybe*” motherhood had made her look at children “*in a different way*”, but she is at pains to point out that her interest in children pre-dated the birth of her child.<sup>205</sup> Baker was “*struck*” by how many “*children were just left to wander about the streets...left to their own devices. Little tiny ones in the charge of the older ones.*”<sup>206</sup>

The trope of the ‘innocent’ and suffering child has been a long-standing subject of art and photographic history. It might be thought a nineteenth century subject, but in anti-war, famine and genocide campaign materials the child repeatedly features as the suffering subject.<sup>207</sup> For some viewers this might be just what they see in Baker’s photographs, images of dirty and poor children, left out in the streets to look after themselves.<sup>208</sup> Val Williams does not see “*misery*” or “*innocent suffering*”, what she sees is “*compassion*” and “*affection*”, that for her stands out as a maternal gaze.<sup>209</sup> While Baker acknowledges some degree of emotional, one might even say empathic, attraction to children, she is far keener to explain this in terms of her “*intrigue*” in them and their play, “*out on the street, where there was certainly more life*” (is this a veiled criticism of the experiences of middle class children).<sup>210</sup> I might speculate that Baker sees these children as having agency, in pairs and groups, playing riskily on bomb sites, with fire, in derelict cars, and that she photographs them without, as Williams notes, ‘looking

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<sup>204</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>205</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>206</sup> Whilst Baker felt the situation “*not right at the time*”. unlike the photographs of documentary photographer Nick Hedges, working for the Shelter homeless charity s in the late 1960s, Baker’s images were not taken as illustrations of ‘the innocent child victim of a poverty not of her making’ within a reformist agenda. Rather than morally indignant, Baker found herself ‘*terribly depressed about seeing it all*’. See Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>207</sup> Karen Wells, *Childhood Studies* (London, Polity Press, 2017), quoted in Alison Hall, PhD thesis, *The Shelter Photographs 1968-1972*.

<sup>208</sup> This interpretation was contested forcefully by the Oral History participants, and those taking part in the *That Was Us* fishbowl event. See Chapter 4 (Manchester).

<sup>209</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>210</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992. That Baker could ‘capture’ children playing conveys clues to the time of day she must have been photographing, either midweek, late afternoon/early evenings,, or else weekends.

down at them'. They do not emerge as victims but as free beings, full of creativity and resourcefulness.<sup>211</sup>

Shirley Baker confirms that her photographs were a response to place, but unlike the recorders and housing reformers of the nineteenth century, she rarely provided specific locations (neither in verso nor her in notebooks). Sometimes we do not know if a photograph is of Manchester or Salford. If her intrigue was attached to 'places', their actual specificity seemed to matter less, place was "*an enormous area' where you 'saw all sorts of things you didn't see as you just passed by.*"<sup>212</sup> Baker's words here echo those of more than a hundred years earlier, when Friedrich Engels lived and worked in Manchester (1842 - 44).<sup>213</sup> Touring the slums of Manchester and Salford which became the basis for *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, he described, as does Baker herself, the "*hidden away*" aspect of working-class districts that the bourgeoisie can so easily ignore. Baker is aware of the (class) hypocrisy of knowing about, yet choosing not to know. In making the conscious decision of going into the "*heart of things*", she had a clear objective to make visible and, thus, historicise otherwise overlooked communities:

*If you lived in Manchester, anywhere near Manchester, you couldn't avoid seeing this, although you didn't see it because it had been there forever. So you didn't really see ... there were all these rows and rows of houses on either side that you didn't really see, didn't really investigate. And I knew about Hankey Park and places like that, and then I went and I thought I was going to some park or other*

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<sup>211</sup> There is also something about Baker's attention to children playing (rather than, and in addition to children posing for her), as opposed to not playing that I find intriguing, but do not have the space in this thesis to explore more fully. In my conference paper *Shirley Baker: The Astonishing Task of Achieving Adult Sanity*, (presented at the 'Play Conference', at The Foundling Museum (20 March 2017), I speculated that for Baker it is children's imaginative and creative playfulness that is of interest. I have drawn this interpretation from both visual coding all of Baker's photographs depicting children and with talking with exhibition viewers (see Chapter 9). Photography, I propose (or like to imagine), was for Baker a kind of 'play space', see Phyllis Creme, 'The Playing Spectator' in Annette Kuhn, (ed.), *Little Madnnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience*, (London, I.B.Tauris, 2013), 40. It is worth noting that Baker entered her photographs in a number of 'child photography' competitions in the serious amateur photography press during the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>212</sup> Stephen Constantine, 9.

<sup>213</sup> I had not realised until quite late in working on this thesis the uncanny similarity between Baker's own words and those of Engels. I have no evidence that Baker had read Engels's work, however, in quoting him here, I suggest something of the consciousness of what she was foregoing as a middle class woman: 'I forsook the company and the dinner-parties, the port-wine and champagne of the middle-classes, and devoted my leisure-hours almost exclusively to the intercourse with plain working men; I am both glad and proud of having done so. Glad, because thus I was induced to spend many a happy hour in obtaining a knowledge of the realities of life—many an hour, which else would have been wasted in fashionable talk and tiresome etiquette; proud, because thus I got an opportunity of doing justice to an oppressed and calumniated class of men who with all their faults and under all the disadvantages of their situation, yet command the respect of every one but an English money-monger'. See: [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Friedrich\\_Engels](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Friedrich_Engels). Accessed: 3 March.2020.

*and of course its Hankinson Street...and so you sort of discovered all sort of things you kind of heard about.*<sup>214</sup>

If 'place' is an overarching subject, then streets form a microcosm of space within, and even more so the individual houses. As a pictorial space and device, the street acts as a frame, entrapping and encapsulating the quotidian life Baker was interested to explore. Compositionally, the streets provide the photographer with satisfying perspectives and textures, 'a world' Constantine notes, 'of brick and slate, of cobbles and flagstones, of cast iron lamp posts' that many photographers before Baker, have found aesthetically pleasing and have captured in various tones of black and white.<sup>215</sup> For Val Williams, Baker's streetscapes have their own presence, an agency every bit as "*important as the people*" who populate them. As already noted, the specificity of streets is unimportant to Baker because essentially they form a 'narrative' space within which she witnesses and then articulates the social imaginary of the 'everyday' and the 'traditional'. Her interests were perhaps always more to do with the phenomenon of change rather than being topographically anchored. Constantine is correct when he says that these places are like 'many other cities, crammed with nineteenth century working-class houses, squeezed into cobbled and treeless inner-city streets, that formed long-standing communities, a hundred years in the making, now being demolished to make way for urban change and renewal'.

A slice of Manchester and Salford might be in these photographs, but the images represent even for Constantine 'a more universal phenomenon'. 'In many cities', he claims, 'from Beirut to Belfast, human beings assert their humanity... in circumstances rarely of their choosing and not of the best'<sup>216</sup> So these photographs are taken *from* a place, and are *of* a place, and yet are also of nowhere in particular all at one and the same time, and perhaps it is this universality that lends these photographs meaning to everyone who has ever lived through change and loss, regardless of specific historical context.<sup>217</sup>

The question of time has been bound up with the ontology of photography ever since the inception of the medium. For Henri Cartier-Bresson, 'Of all the means of

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<sup>214</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>215</sup> Stephen Constantine, 12.

<sup>216</sup> Stephen Constantine, 12.

<sup>217</sup> The identification with change and loss, abstracted from the actual historical circumstance, comes through many of the conversations and interviews across all three of the exhibition touring venues, including Madrid, see Chapter 4 (Madrid).

expression, photography is the only one that fixes a precise moment in time', a sentiment shared by many critically engaged authors subsequently.<sup>218</sup> Susan Sontag's concern throughout *On Photography* is essentially whether photography can ever adequately represent the moment of actuality from which (place) it was taken. Time, reality and possession, are for Sontag inseparable. 'Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality... One can't possess reality, one can possess images — one can't possess the present but one can possess the past.'<sup>219</sup> I have already referred to the 'taking' and 'capturing' of images, and John Berger adds another verb of symbolic violence to the discussion when he states that a photograph,

... arrest(s) the flow of time in which the event photographed once existed. All photographs are of the past, yet in them an instant of the past is arrested so that, unlike a lived past, it can never lead to the present. Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity'<sup>220</sup>

The title of Constantine's essay 'Street Scene: Late Afternoon' may be a literal description of the time of day when Shirley Baker took many of her photographs, but it also refers to the passage of time that conjures up images of change and loss.<sup>221</sup> Constantine actually employs the metaphor five more times in his essay, and with each use his text becomes increasingly elegiac in its portrayal of a period of historical change that 'threatened ... not only a built environment but a working-class culture'. For Constantine, 'The photographs in this book include images of traditional working class communities in their late afternoon. But they also show us the twilight...'<sup>222</sup>

Ironically Baker's photographs are not just evidence of photography's 'that has-been status', but also are evidence of something far less tangible; photographs call up, according to Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, the future history, 'of-events-yet-to-come'.<sup>223</sup> Constantine also seems aware of this possibility when he claims that, 'these photographs will inevitably capture the imagination'. What Constantine is

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<sup>218</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson's much quoted 'decisive moment' quotation is, in fact, a poor English translation of his influential book *Images à la Sauvette* which loosely translated is 'images on the run' or 'stolen images'.

<sup>219</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (London, Penguin, 1979), 11.

<sup>220</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph*, 62.

<sup>221</sup> Stephen Constantine, 9.

<sup>222</sup> Stephen Constantine, 12.

<sup>223</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, 'Incongruous Images: "Before, during, and after the Holocaust"' (*History and Theory*, Vol. 48, No. 4), 5.

acknowledging is that in addition to ‘stimulating the memory’ of viewers, viewers may bring to the act of interpretation their imagination in helping to form not just an understanding of the lacunae of the ‘historical past’, but also to ask questions regarding the future’.<sup>224</sup> The future seems never far away in the experience of these photographs.

A few viewers may know what was to come, but others like Constantine may muse about what happened to these people: ‘The people have now moved on. They deserved better, and we may wonder if they found it’.<sup>225</sup> In the presence of viewing the past there is always the signpost to the future.<sup>226</sup>

Shirley Baker also talks about her photographs in terms of the passage of time. The title she gave to her 1986 Salford exhibition, *Here Yesterday; and Gone Today* is not only a playful reference to the maxim ‘Here Today, Gone Tomorrow’, it illustrates her awareness of entangled temporalities.<sup>227</sup> Her use of photography brings to mind a ‘before and an after’, that projects the viewer both backwards to the past and forward to the future. In many of her photographs high-rise blocks of flats loom ominously in the background, visually juxtaposed with lower, Victorian terraces, creating a spectre of the world to come. Here is ‘a present’ recorded for ‘a future’ when the ‘thing’ ‘captured’ through photography, will no longer be in existence. Baker’s photographs are, however, more than an act of preservation, are they not also some dreadful warning? For one of the great paradoxes of photography, indeed the magic of photography that Barthes and Berger write so eloquently about, is the present/absent dialectic. In photography there is the potential for the subject — in this case people and their way of life — to live on, so long as the photographs continue to exist. We have here the idea of Shirley Baker as social investigator, witness to change, working the present for the future of our historical imagination. The camera as historian of the future.

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<sup>224</sup> See: Lesley M. Harris ‘Imperfect Archives and the Historical Imagination’, *The Public Historian*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 77-80, and Marianne Hirsh and Leo Spitzer, ‘Incongruous Images’, 5. See also Chapter 5 regarding the use of imagination in viewing photographs.

<sup>225</sup> Stephen Constantine, 13.

<sup>226</sup> My interpretation is drawn from the Oral history interviews, the ‘Tea with the Curator’ conversations, and more generally visitors to the exhibition. See Chapters 6-9.

<sup>227</sup> Here Today, Gone Tomorrow’. This phrase originally alluded to the brevity of the human lifespan, and was first recorded in John Calvin's *Life and Conversion of a Christian Man* (1549): ‘This proverb that man is here today and gone tomorrow’. See: <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/here+today%2C+gone+tomorrow>. Accessed: 4 May 2020.

## 2.6 The Viewer

As previously noted, though emanating from a humanist sense of injustice, Shirley Baker's photographs were, nevertheless, produced outside of any definite reformist agenda or charitable programme that would have supplied purpose and audience.<sup>228</sup> Rather, the photographer claims her motivation as "*anger*" and "*sadness*" and ultimately "*sympathy*" with the "*people who were being forced to exist miserably, often for years, whilst demolition went on all around them.*"<sup>229</sup> Whilst the depth of her emotional engagement is unquestionable, Baker nevertheless expresses uncertainty regarding the efficacy of photography. "*What can you do to alleviate suffering*' she asks Williams? *Her own solution was to 'record what was being done.'*"<sup>230</sup> This was a process, however, that lacked a focused outcome. Her question, perhaps, also reveals a lack of confidence in both herself and photography itself.

In a way, Shirley Baker becomes her own viewer. As she tells us in her essay and interview, twenty-five years after photographing, she took out her pictures to look at them once more. She recalls that the emotional impact was "*immediately overwhelming*" and prompted her to consider whether others might "*share my feelings.*" Consequently, she showed her photographs to the coordinators of the DPA, who at that time (1986) were appealing for photographic records of the local area, and who subsequently exhibited Baker's works, accessioning the whole exhibition into their public archive.

With her work legitimised, writing in her 1989 essay, Shirley Baker now has the confidence to describe herself as a 'photographic recorder', documenting 'lives' as they were 'changing', and moreover, she articulates her individual photographs as a *corpus* of work. In so doing, she recognised her images within a broader framework of public utility. Presented under the rubric of 'record photography' (collected together and archived), I suggest, that the photographer, for the first time, activates her work in what we now call public history. The idea of public history is concerned with 'remaking the past in usable form — to create and imagine a different future'.<sup>231</sup> In her essay Shirley

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<sup>228</sup> Unlike, for example, the photographs of Nick Hedges for Shelter in the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>229</sup> Shirley Baker, *Street Photographs*, 16.

<sup>230</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>231</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian*, 209.

Baker appeals to her readers to, ‘... now look hard at the past to learn for the future’.<sup>232</sup>

For Stephen Constantine, Shirley Baker’s photographs offer the viewer an opportunity to look ‘specifically at ‘the people and street scenes of particular parts of Manchester and Salford’. Constantine’s conceptualisation of photographs as ‘evidence’ will be commented upon below. Suffice it to say that his invitation to look ‘specifically’ comes from someone who believes in the authority and importance of Baker’s photographs as evidence that can support historical research such as his own, as well as a more generalised historical sensibility. The bulk of Constantine’s essay is devoted to an account of urban history from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s. Baker’s photographs serve an illustrative purpose to his brief historical account, but additionally the historian does recognise that photographs can be more than supplementary evidence. ‘These photographs must then inevitably capture the imagination and stimulate the memory of those who knew these times and know or knew these places, as they are or as they were’.<sup>233</sup> Through looking at these photographs in the book, Constantine appeals to the reader/viewer to enter the realm of personal and collective memory and of historical imagination, in which we remember *or* imagine the past, consider *our* present and imagine *the/our* future/s. These overlapping temporalities that entwine the process of viewing, remembering *and* imagining the past are, according to Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer at work in all old photographs, which:

reflect something “already deferred” ...not only the instant of time when they were snapped but the change-over-time central to their historicity - change between photos of the same subject, as well as of different subjects [on the same street], taken at different moments in time; and change between the time when the photos were actually snapped and the present time when we, as viewer, look at them.<sup>234</sup>

Constantine recognises the role of imagination, suggesting the possibility for any viewer to ‘insert’ themselves into the image, but in the closing paragraphs of his essay he appeals, to us to see *through* ‘her lens’:

This book may also draw from us another response. The artist sees the general in the particular, and we are privileged to observe through her lens. Her pictures

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<sup>232</sup> Shirley Baker, *Street Photographs*, 18.

<sup>233</sup> Stephen Constantine, 9.

<sup>234</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, ‘Incongruous Images: “Before, during, and after the Holocaust”’, *History and Theory*, (2009).(Vol. 48, No. 4), 5.

direct our gaze to the essential humanity of her subjects, lit up by their unnatural man-made environment...The photographs happen to be of districts in Manchester and Salford,...but they represent a more universal phenomenon'.<sup>235</sup>

Here, Constantine asks us to imagine the pre-photographic moment when the photographer is directing her gaze towards her subject, that will become, in turn, the photographs we are presently looking at. More than this, he claims we should feel a 'privilege' in our looking, thus conferring upon the photographer the status of someone who works with integrity and is 'gifted with a particular acuity of vision and acts as a kind of 'exemplary sufferer' on our behalf'.<sup>236</sup> In this formulation, Shirley Baker becomes a guarantor of the accuracy of the image in its 'Bakerness', as much as the image is 'certified by the medium itself'.<sup>237</sup> Arguably, without trust in the authenticity of Shirley Baker's photographs as records of 'real life', the viewer is unable to activate an affiliative gaze that circumvents the specificities of time and place, to thus draw the image into a wider empathic feeling of the 'togetherness' that Constantine invokes. Through his writing, the historian both advocates the 'importance' of the historicised document/photograph, and simultaneously invites us to liberate and open up Baker's images in order that they may represent a universal phenomena of 'any time and any place'.

In my introduction to this chapter I describe the moment that Shirley Baker narrates when re-viewing her photographs with great emotional affect. Having confirmed in her own essay and interview that she views her activity as principally that of an historical recorder (her works, therefore, historical records), her account of her own emotional experience might seem at odds with, indeed threaten to undermine, the objectivity of her images, and with it their historical value. The claims for objectivity on the one hand and for her subjective experience on the other might first appear antithetical to the realist claims of her photographs. Art historian Stephen Bann has proposed, however, that claims to 'truth to sources' is what enables an experience of photography

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<sup>235</sup> Stephen Constantine, 13.

<sup>236</sup> Liz Wells addresses this idea of the documentary photographer as an individual accredited with a special status, *Photography*, 77.

<sup>237</sup> Furthermore, Wells points to the integration of the expectation of photography's authenticity coupled with the photographer's reputation, each in effect substantiating the other. See Liz Well *Photography*, 77. The Manchester Oral History interviews illustrate this interdependency, in which Baker's photographs are perceived as authentic in part because of who she is. See Chapter 6.

as ‘arrest(ing) the decay of the present and vivify(ing) the resurrection of the past’.<sup>238</sup> His claim suggests emotion lies not too far beneath the surface of photography. For Frank Ankersmit, a German intellectual historian:

all of historical writing is situated in the space enclosed by the complementary movements of the discovery of (loss) and recovery of the past (love) that together constitute the realm of historical experience’.<sup>239</sup>

Thus, Shirley Baker’s affective response is, I suggest, born from this tension between ‘loss’ and ‘love’, in which the ‘entanglement of exactness and emotion, [is] tied to the authenticity of the object and the authenticity of photographic inscription’.<sup>240</sup> Historian Vivienne Little has also argued that emotions, in the form of empathy as imaginative activity, are required as much by the historian to ‘make sense of the past’, as by the ‘reader’ of history to be moved into the past.<sup>241</sup> Little’s proposition is instructive in thinking not only about the reception of Baker’s photographs, that I explore in Chapters 4 and 5, but by substituting ‘the photographer’ for Little’s ‘the historian’ and ‘the viewer’ for her ‘historical reader’, I am also hinting at the process by which Baker approached making her photographs. Thus, I contend, it is precisely the ‘reality’ (truth) Shirley Baker invested in her own photographs (and that others invest also) that makes possible their evidential and affective forcefulness.<sup>242</sup> The appeal of Stephen Constantine, then, to the viewer, to let the emotional forces of memory and imagination draw us into the past, is the same impetus that propelled Shirley Baker to wonder (also an act of imagination) if her photographs might be similarly affecting for others. Indeed, it is in the affectivity that Baker herself experiences in looking again at her photographs (and in the re-telling of this story many times) that is, I suggest, when and how the photographer imagines (and keeps imaging) a potential future for her photographs as images contributing to an historical consciousness and collective memory, in which the ‘love’ is not merely or

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<sup>238</sup> Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the use of History*, quoted in Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian*, 16.

<sup>239</sup> Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Experience*, quoted in Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian*, 17.

<sup>240</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian*, 18.

<sup>241</sup> Vivienne Little, ‘What is Historical Imagination?’, (*Teaching History*, *Historical Association*, June 1983, No. 36), 27-32.

<sup>242</sup> This belief in the authenticity of Baker’s images is expressed by participants of both the Oral History Project and the ‘Tea with the Curator’ conversations. See Chapters 4 (Manchester) and 5.

simply nostalgia for the recovered past, but holds the potential for inscriptions of the past to resonate in the future.

We have so far been thinking about Shirley Baker's images primarily within the shadow of loss and disappearance, possibly even melancholia. In her interview with Shirley Baker, however, Val Williams introduces a contrasting emotional engagement. Looking at a picture of a little girl (unidentified), Williams finds the image sums up 'being a little girl'. Whilst the image might have been prosaically described, Williams instead employs more affective language, by claiming that the image 'sung out to her'.<sup>243</sup> Williams engages the image, now not as a historical signifier of 'pastness', nor to be read for its ideological meaning, but as something affective, that touches her heart, which opens the way for understanding Shirley Baker's work within a more complex framework of experience. This I will go on to explore in Chapter 5.<sup>244</sup>

## 2.7 The Image: Presence and Absences

In the previous section, we considered the viewer to whom Shirley Baker's images are addressed. Now we turn our attention to 'the image' itself, to consider what the three authors have to say the image is 'doing'. The meaning of an image, as argued in the Introduction, is not locked into the photograph, but comes about through how it is 'tasked', that is, as a consequence of what the photograph is being 'asked' to perform and do.<sup>245</sup> In addressing this idea, I am not concerned to re-discover Shirley Baker's original intention, but to alternatively consider the variety of tasks to which our three authors, with their different professional and personal preoccupations, identify for her work. In this way, I hope to suggest the 'availability' of the image, in which 'use' determines 'meaning', nevertheless, whilst use may vary it is not limitless.

Most of the words used by Stephen Constantine in connection with the image relate to the idea of the image as performing as a 'record'; he writes of '*preserving*', '*capturing*', '*representing*', '*reflecting*', and '*showing*'. For the historian, the photograph is first and foremost an illustrative source of 'authenticity' and a record of the past. Like

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<sup>243</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>244</sup> A Deleuzian understanding of what was going on for Val Williams would suggest that the emotion she felt whilst viewing the 'encountered sign (a sign that is felt)', is more than a sensation as an end to itself, but that 'feeling is a catalyst for critical enquiry of deep thought' See: Jill Bennet, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>245</sup> Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', in ed. Victor Burgin, *Thinking Photography* (London, Macmillan 1983), 19.

other texts and documents, photographs are marshalled as evidence, providing useful information and to ‘give insights into the past’.<sup>246</sup> In 1989, when Constantine was writing, the idea that the historian might incorporate photographs as part of historical research was still in its infancy.<sup>247</sup> For Constantine, the image is a ‘stand-in’ with a direct indexical link to the people and street scenes, stating ‘in these pictures’.<sup>248</sup> The possibility of Shirley Baker ‘making’ rather than ‘taking’ her photographs, in other words, having subjective, artistic motivations, that might ‘exceed’ the documentation of ‘everyday life’ and social change, is outside of his discursive framework. Whilst acknowledging the image’s capacity to elicit affective response (memory and imagination), ultimately Baker’s photographs have ‘acquired a patina of age and with it the appeal of history’ that forecloses the work’s openness and inevitably takes us back to an historical awareness of the past.<sup>249</sup>

To a great extent, in her essay, Shirley Baker largely echoes Constantine’s view of her photographs as serving an historical ‘task’. She writes of her work ‘*capturing*’ and ‘*recording*’, her camera as both ‘*notebook*’ accompanying her ‘*roamings*’ around the streets, and as ‘*recording media*’ seizing ‘*traces*’ of ‘*everyday life*’.<sup>250</sup> Like Constantine, she considers her photographs as having a special capacity for eliciting memory. More than this, the photographer recognises the capacity of photography to give ‘substance’ to memory: ‘*Memories linger*’ she writes ‘*but without some hint or trace of reality, they too die out and come to nothing. Perhaps these photographs will give substance to some of*

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<sup>246</sup> Stephen Constantine, 9.

<sup>247</sup> Though social historians ‘discovered’ photography in the 1970s, in the 1990s it was still used primarily as illustrative to support a thesis. As late as 1994, Raphael Samuel, one of the first historians to legitimise and promote the use of photographs writes with a limited understanding of how the historian might use them. See Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 337. The use of photographs in historical research today is, surprisingly, still not without debate and confusion. As recently as 2013 Penny Tinkler asks: ‘...the question is how to use photos productively in social and historical research. This book will guide researchers and studies in working this out’. See Penny Tinkler, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013). xii. Other historians who have addressed the use of photography in historical research include: Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, (London, Bloomsbury, 2019). Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 2012) and Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, (London, Reaktion, 2001).

<sup>248</sup> Stephen Constantine, 9.

<sup>249</sup> Stephen Constantine, 9.

<sup>250</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

*those memories*'.<sup>251</sup> We should regard her own essay as a form of 'memory narrative' in itself, that gives substance to her own 'eureka' moment twenty-five years earlier. However, we should bring to bear our own critical reflections upon what she chooses to recall, and what is absent from her narrative. Intriguingly, with an opportunity to summarise her own practice, Baker instead focusses upon the social conditions as she recalls them at the time of the photographs being taken (as well as drawing upon official accounts of the time), so that her essay complements Constantine's broader historical narrative in providing a descriptive context against which her images might be seen as a form of illustration.

In her interview with Val Williams, Baker addresses the manner in which she works, emphasising her photographs as "*candid*" and "*spontaneous*", claiming she "*didn't want anything set up*", never having "*posed people in my pictures*", nor "*was the idea to be intrusive*."<sup>252</sup> In the next chapter, I will address the antecedents of such claims that are, I suggest, part of the discursive formation of social documentary. In discussion with Val Williams, however, the photographer identified a pattern to her photographic method: "*After looking at something for long enough you see a pattern involved... you see what goes on as a result of something else*."<sup>253</sup> Rather than addressing the aesthetics of Baker's photographs, Val Williams characterises her images as having 'clarity and plainness' and a 'straight on' appearance; yet in spite of this, Williams finds the photographs full of "*compassion*" and "*affection*", sentiments that have the potential to offer narrative possibilities, but that, ultimately, go unexplored by Williams. For the photographic historian, these 'characteristics' are projected onto Baker, 'the photographer' to confirm her 'personal integrity': tenets of the humanist photographic tradition explored in Chapter 3. In the closing paragraphs of their respective essays, as if an afterthought, and almost mirroring each other, Shirley Baker and Stephen Constantine address the textures and environmental forms within the photographs: "*I was also*

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<sup>251</sup> Shirley Baker, *Street Photographs*, 19. *French historical anthropologist*, Jacques Le Goff, states, 'photography [which] revolutionizes memory: it multiplies and democratizes it, gives it a precision and a truth never before attained in visual memory, and makes it possible to preserve the memory of time and of chronological evolution'. Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, (Oxford, Columbia University Press, 1992), 89.

<sup>252</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>253</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

*fascinated by the textures and abstract patterns created by age and time amongst the crazed paintwork and peeling cascades,”* stated Baker.<sup>254</sup> Whilst for Constantine,

The images impress upon us the rough textures of a strictly functional built environment. It is a world of brick and slate, of cobbles and flagstones, of cast iron lamp posts, of churches structured in black Gothic. It is angular and the tones are grainy, grey, rust-red and soot.<sup>255</sup>

Constantine and Baker are drawing attention to what they consider background detailing in the photographs, and neither author highlights their aesthetic function within the composition of Baker’s photographs. It is as if these elements are not to be enjoyed for what they are aesthetic pleasures, that make the photographs gratifying to look at and should only be understood as further evidential traces of the past.<sup>256</sup> Looking at these photographs becomes an act of noticing details from the past and comparing these with the world we now occupy. Concluding, each author discounts these formal qualities to make their claim that fundamentally it is ‘people’ that matter to the photographer and by implication to us also: ‘And within this context, Shirley Baker sees the people, her essential subject. It is people who soften its roughness with their forms’, affirms Constantine. Baker concurs: *‘But the people caught my eye and I nearly always included them in the photographs’*. Any opportunity, I suggest, to take another kind of pleasure from these photographs is, thus, hindered.

Now I turn to what is not visualised in her images. The near absence of adult men in the ‘street series’ may, Constantine prosaically explains, be attributed to full employment. Men were at work at the times when Baker made her photographs in the afternoon and on weekdays. Whilst all this is true, the connotations of their absence are noteworthy in a number of different ways. Work was a key theme in post-war social documentary photography precisely because it was so central to working-class communities. Hence the focus on: the miner, the steel worker, and the docker, that Baker is not interested in despite photographing so close to Salford Docks. Moreover, if a

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<sup>254</sup> Shirley Baker, *Street Photographs*, 18.

<sup>255</sup> Stephen Constantine, 13.

<sup>256</sup> Parvati Nair addresses the perceived problem of drawing attention to aesthetics in documentary practice in her work on Sebastiao Salgado. Parvati Nair, *A Different Light: The Photography of Sebastiao Salgado*, (London, Duke University Press, 2011), 119-167.

comparison to noteworthy books such as the fictional *Love on the Dole*, set in Salford near to where Baker photographed, or indeed to Richard Hoggart's sociological *Uses of Literacy* was to be made, one can conclude that there are significant gaps in Baker's 'illustration' or portrait of working-class communities. The photographs also imply that men did not participate in the daily life of communities, suggesting an elision between 'women' and that of 'the community'. This 'erasure' of men is what generated the title of my exhibition and book, *Women and Children; and Loitering Men*, on which I elaborate in Chapter 4. Neither Williams nor Constantine draw attention to this absence, though audiences to the London exhibition did notice this absence. This elicited gendered readings of Baker's photographs, with some viewers attributing a feminist agenda to Shirley Baker.

Other lacunae in Baker's work include the vibrancy of pub culture, the continuing importance of churchgoing, school playgrounds, home interiors, the wash house, shopping and funeral corteges, which according to my oral history participants were major events. In her photographs there is little indication of season, with no religious festivals nor community rituals, no 'high days and holidays'. In fact, Shirley Baker's photographs fail to provide very much social-historical information about working-class life at the time. This is, I contend, principally because the photographer was not interested in working-class community life *per se* (a mistake that historians and curators alike make), so much as 'the street' as a social space (at particular times of day), as well as the process of change (demolition) taking place in these distinct inner city streets.

Unlike post-war photographers such as Bert Hardy (1913-1995), Shirley Baker did not set out to 'reveal and castigate poverty':<sup>257</sup>

*And someone said to me, "Go out and photograph poverty". But it wasn't about going out and photographing poverty... there was poverty and squalor. But on the other hand there were people living very traditional lives and I was glad I got that as well.*<sup>258</sup>

From the late nineteenth century the camera had firmly established itself as part of the ideological armoury of the reformer and campaigner, who investigated and recorded the

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<sup>257</sup> Andrew Blackie, 'The Forgotten Gorbals', 48.

<sup>258</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

lives of ‘the poor’, with photographs used for all manner of ‘reports, surveys, philanthropy and literature’.<sup>259</sup> As we have already noted, Baker had no such explicit agenda for her work. Low income was a fact of life for many, if not most, families in the communities that Baker photographed. Stephen Constantine reminds the reader, however, that full employment resulted in household incomes for working-class families being at an all-time high. Thus, Constantine remarks, there was a ‘confidence and security’ of people in their environment that he sees reflected in Baker’s photographs and that he imagines gave rise to ‘no embarrassment nor resentment’ at being photographed.<sup>260</sup>

In their respective essays, the language of Constantine and Baker is, at times, intriguingly contrasting. Baker writes from the position of her experience of being *in* the communities, it was not her ‘*home patch but she did feel very much a part of it*’ and writes of ‘*living conditions being appalling*’, and ‘*dire poverty in the clearance areas being widespread*’.<sup>261</sup> By contrast, Constantine, writing in response to the photographs, finds that ‘the lonely children, the conspicuously dirty and ill-dressed, the deprived and defeated’ were ‘exceptions’ when taking the corpus of Baker’s photographs into account.<sup>262</sup> For Val Williams, the photographer does not portray the gypsy children as “*impoverished*” nor is she “*looking down at them.*” They do not emerge as “*victims*”, she observes.<sup>263</sup> Poverty is after all a relative term. My oral history project that ran alongside the *Women and Children; and Loitering Men* exhibition in Manchester revealed that those people with direct experience of having lived in these communities disputed that the photographs ‘showed’ poverty. On the contrary, what many contemporary viewers might consider signs of poverty, i.e. dirty clothing on children, were taken as normalised signs of a good ‘play out’ for children living in families

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<sup>259</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>260</sup> Stephen Constantine, 9.

<sup>261</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>262</sup> Stephen Constantine, 9.

<sup>263</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

without the kind of washing facilities that today would be expect as standard.<sup>264</sup> Neither investigating nor recording poverty was the objective of Shirley Baker's photographic endeavour, and whether poverty was 'seen' by her or by us largely seems a matter of the experience each one of us brings to bear on the image, an issue I expand on in Chapters 6 and 9.

*"I had this obsessive interest in the street"* Shirley Baker tells Val Williams.<sup>265</sup> As a photographer whose stated interest was to record *"the mundane"* and the *"trivial"* aspects of life it might strike us as odd that Shirley Baker never photographed inside people's homes, where much domestic life unfolded. In her interview, she says in hindsight that she was, *"sorry now I did not go inside the houses"*, yet she also confirms that her intention was not to *"intrude."*<sup>266</sup> Going inside would disrupt and complicate things.<sup>267</sup> The threshold of the home can be regarded as a trope of Shirley Baker's work, a physical and symbolic line she does not cross. Women sit on their steps talking with neighbours, and housewives clean their 'stoops' weekly; young children play on the stone steps with makeshift washbowl paddling pools (not venturing further into the street), and families pose themselves in a familiar visual photographic hierarchy (tallest at the back); elderly matriarchs survey the street from a hallway 'throne', and caged birds taste the air that would be anything but fresh.<sup>268</sup> The threshold, like the back allies, is a formalist devise in Baker's photographs. A frame within a photographic frame. It is also a place that holds many stories: of gender, ageing, family rituals, and maternal practices, and subtle class divides come into this too. But these stories 'behind the images' are there only in nuanced clues to be read and to be disclosed only in so far as the viewer can decode them.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Indeed my own mother commented that living in coal fired terraced housing resulted in a daily battle with soot, that would even finely coat babies' prams, pushed out into the sunny street.

<sup>265</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>266</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>267</sup> By contrast, documentary photographer Nick Hedges made a point of taking photographs in peoples' homes, which he believed conveyed their *actual* living circumstances. The move was fervently criticised by some critical photographers at the time, namely Jo Spence writing in *Camerawork* magazine, yet was lauded with awards for innovation from the charity sector in the 1970s. Explanations for Baker's diffidence might be located in her gender, that there were important class differences between herself and her subjects, or even, perhaps, her Jewish background.

<sup>268</sup> Stephen Constantine states: the 'wind blows full of grit and soot', 13.

<sup>269</sup> See the oral history accounts in Chapter 6 for further 'readings' of Baker's images.

As already mentioned, Shirley Baker did not take note of whom she photographed or where, neither the time of day nor even the date. On the verso of her photographs are scraps of notation, if anything at all: her address, and a note of the technical specifications, the f-stop and shutter speed. Her photographs remain as she intended at the time, without description, “*in some way to speak for themselves*”, ambiguous yet limited by their visual content.<sup>270</sup> Actually, Shirley Baker's photographs tell us very little about the housing conditions in Manchester in the 1960s —hence Constantine's detailed written account. Alternatively, we might consider the photographic image not as index or representation of ‘the real’ but, as Kaja Silverman has argued, as an analogy in which the image is ‘unstoppably developmental’.<sup>271</sup> Thus to regard the photographic image as ‘evidence’ of the social conditions from which the image was ‘extracted’ (streets and aspects of life in Manchester and Salford) would no longer be viable. Instead, we might welcome photography's ‘ambiguity’ and experience Shirley Baker's photographs as visual narratives, ‘dramas’, open-ended storytelling in which the image’s dialogical and social function is enhanced through the tactics of distribution and display, explored further in Chapter 4. While Shirley Baker holds to the familiar documentary discourse of ‘truth’, ‘record’, ‘evidence’ and ‘authenticity’, she does also hint at another possibility:

*So this was the scene as I saw it. These are my pictures and they are the observations of one person and they tell only a fraction of the story.*<sup>272</sup>

## **2.8 Conclusion**

The understanding of Shirley Baker’s photographs as a historical record and social documentary has its own history. The purpose of this chapter has been to locate the origins of this understanding through the analysis of the first written accounts of her practice. This has revealed some of the tropes of Baker’s Manchester and Salford photographs at the descriptive level, as well as their conformity to the social documentary paradigm. These include, in terms of subjects, working-class people and the streets they lived in, all photographed in a time of change, when ‘slum’ clearance programmes were not only demolishing houses, but also a particular way of life. History moves on, these houses and streets are now the subject of the historian’s gaze, and thus

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<sup>270</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>271</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy; or The History of Photography, Part 1*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015), 12).

<sup>272</sup> Shirley Baker, *Street Photographs*, 18.

Baker's images have been recuperated as historical records. It is this aspect of her work which comes through strongly in all the accounts I analyzed, including her own. Additionally, my analysis has identified the activity and intentions of the photographer that fit with pre-existing characterisations of a photographer as chronicler, surveyor, and recorder. Such culturally inherited definitions are in contrast, I suggest, to her practice that equally demonstrates her interest in, and response to, the aesthetic qualities of the environment (place, people, atmosphere, materials). Even Baker's own account ignores what is self-evidently the case: her actual fascination with the particularities of photographic aesthetics (her use of composition, grey-tones, framing, and cropping); none of which is referred to in the three texts. This brings us back to authorial intentionality. Can we trust the photographer to know what she is doing? There are perhaps two answers to this question. A woman professionally isolated in Manchester, trained in technical photography and only barely aware of contemporary photographers, lacks the confidence to perceive in her work aesthetic qualities and possibilities. Or alternatively, as I propose, Baker does not have a way of speaking about aesthetic matters and their affect being firmly anchored in the world of the 'record' and the 'documentary'. There are, however, other significant absences in all three of the accounts. Nowhere, for example, is her obvious humour referred to. Documentary photography should, it would seem, be serious and not amusing. The emphasis on the work's social purpose, and by extension Baker's own subjective position as a 'social documentarian', is entirely in keeping with a photographic paradigm shared by the authors, including Baker herself. Moreover, Constantine's and Williams's characterisation of Baker's socially empathic gaze might be understood as located in the politics and practices of a critically informed strand of community photography that was at that time concerned with the visualization of power. The genesis and development of the social documentary paradigm in Britain is the subject of the next chapter, in which the 'excessive' dimensions of Shirley Baker's practice is also addressed.

## Chapter 3

### Possible Frames, Necessary Histories: from the Poor to ‘the People’, ‘the Everyday’ and the ‘Out-of-the-Ordinary’

#### 3.0 Introduction

The ideas Constantine, Baker and Williams express do not spring from nowhere. They have their own history, and it is to this that I now turn, situating their views and language in three selected episodes of photographic history. My choice of episodes emerged from the thematic analysis of the previous chapter. As well as considering Baker’s work from the perspective of ‘social documentary’, this chapter also examines the not unrelated issue of the photographer’s conceptualization of her own photography in terms of her visual language, including its form, composition and use of grey tone. My analysis is structured around three phases in the history of photography, with specific reference to the concepts of the photo-document and documentary photography:

1. Nineteenth-century photography: recording, surveying, classifying and the concept of authenticity.
2. 1930s social documentary: the use of realism, ‘the everyday’, and the ‘structure of feeling’.
3. French humanist photography: empathy and the reciprocal gaze.

Each phase encapsulates changing ideas of the social ontology of photography, photography’s uses and visual language. A number of additional threads also run throughout the chapter: the tension between the truth value of an image and the photographer’s own subjectivity, the relationship between realism and the documentary, changing attitudes to the working class and their lives, and the issue of power – the power to define how the world appears to be.

#### 3.1 Nineteenth-century photography: recording, surveying, classifying and reforming the urban working-class.

*‘I roamed the streets. The camera alone was my notebook’*, these words of Shirley Baker, might have been uttered by any number of late nineteenth century photographers who recorded everyday life in the burgeoning industry cities of Europe and the USA. Three aspects of this early use of photography find their parallels in the practice of Shirley Baker: the involvement of photography in social reform and philanthropy, the use of

photography as a tool of social enquiry into the urban working class, and ‘the photographic survey movement’ which sought to record a traditional way of life threatened by emerging modernity.

### 3.1.1 Photography: the Reforming Impulse

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, photography’s scientific status was often an adjunct to social reformism and philanthropy, focussing on the lives of the poor — the dirt, disease, housing, economic conditions, their misery and their moral state. Areas of impoverished housing that were designated ‘slums’ by those who did not live in these homes or areas, that were gradually seen as a problem which required the intervention of the public authorities.<sup>273</sup> One of the earliest of these photographic reformers was Thomas Annan (1829-1887). Having set up studio in Glasgow in 1866, Annan received a commission from the Glasgow City Improvement Trust to document photographically the overcrowded, unhygienic conditions in advance of urban redevelopment authorised by an Act of Parliament. This series of photographs, created between 1868 and 1871, were presented in 1900 in book form, *Old Closes and Streets of Glasgow*, a work sold to the middle classes as ‘picturesque’ scenes of old Glasgow in a work that would also subsequently ensure the prosperity of the Annan family.<sup>274</sup> It has rarely been out of print and is regarded as a classic of the social documentary canon. In the USA, the Danish-born Jacob Riis (1849-1914), once a poor immigrant himself, recognised an opportunity to ‘enliven’ his newspaper reports on overcrowding in the ‘slums’ of East Side New York by engaging the latest technology of flash photography. In a series of photographs, now famous, but which divide critical opinion, Riis would enter lodging houses unannounced and with huge energetic presence as flash guns fired, ‘shot’ photographs of stunned men crammed into makeshift sleeping arrangements.<sup>275</sup> With little consideration for any

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<sup>273</sup> The word ‘slum’ originates in 1812 meaning a back-room. By 1825, the terms came to mean a ‘dirty back alley of a city, street or low people’. See: [www.etymonline.com/word/slum](http://www.etymonline.com/word/slum). In *Slums: The History of a Global Injustice*, Alan Mayn argues the term is not a ‘reality’, is value laden, and ‘should be retired’. See: <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/10/should-we-retire-the-word-slum/542415/>. Accessed: 5.5.19.

<sup>274</sup> Lionel Gossman, *Thomas Annan of Glasgow: Pioneer of the Documentary Photograph*, (Open Book Publishers, 2015), 67. <http://www.openbookpublishers.com/publication>.

<sup>275</sup> See for example Sally Stein, *Making Connections with the Camera: Photography and Social Mobility in the Career of Jacob Riis*, (Afterimage, 1983, 10 (10), and John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, (London, Macmillan Education, 1988), 217.

formal composition, Riis saw his function as bearing witness to a form of exploitation by rogue landlords, and he regularly supplied the police with his images to be used as evidence in prosecutions.

As previously mentioned, Baker never went inside peoples' homes, and instead her camera's 'social eye' stopped at the street/home doorstep, leaving our gaze straining to peer into the darkened recesses of narrow corridors, our imagination filling in the gaps of life beyond.<sup>276</sup> Unlike the work of Riis or even more recently the 1960s photographs of Nick Hedges, Baker's images were never activated as 'campaigning' materials. In any case, Baker was personally conflicted about the question of 'slum clearance'. She believed that the housing stock *was* substandard, and for her the issue was about how people were being treated by the local authority in the process of clearance and re-housing.<sup>277</sup>

Photographic theorist John Tagg has argued that despite the good intentions of men like Annan and Riis, their documentary practice was misplaced, and their activities would often cement social hierarchies rather than erase them. In Tagg's opinion the early use of photography exposes the medium's political and ideological implications that had, and still have, far-reaching effects in all aspects of social life and systems of power and control. Whilst assuredly leftist in his position, photography theorist John Roberts disagrees with Tagg, citing the example of the American photographer-sociologist, Lewis Hine (1874-1940) and his innovative use of photography. According to Roberts, what distinguishes Hine is that the 'real' or the 'everyday' were for the photographer symbolic of capitalist 'social and productive relations'. Hine's people were not exotic subjects or hapless victims, but were 'the real source' of the wealth produced in industrial capitalism.<sup>278</sup> As Roberts points out, representationally Hine accomplishes this by engaging a powerful 'frontality' in his photographs, a pose that the photographer

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<sup>276</sup> The term 'social eye' was coined by cultural theorist Stuart Hall. See: Stuart Hall, *The Social Eye of Picture Post*, in *Working Paper in Cultural Studies: 2* (Birmingham, University of Birmingham, Spring, 1972).

<sup>277</sup> Baker claimed to sympathise with the people who were being uprooted, but in fact agreed that they did need rehousing due to extremely poor housing stock. Some of her photographs were used by the Council's Building Department to argue in favour of the 'slum' clearance programme. See Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>278</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 74-76.

regarded as democratic, 'in so far as the intersubjective address stands as a metaphor for the beginning of a conversation'.<sup>279</sup> Quite the reverse of the scientific ideal of the 'objective unposed' subject, or conversely the objectifying anthropometric photography of early anthropological enquiry, Hine considered that the direct gaze towards the viewer transformed 'the object of the capitalist labour process into the subject of that process'.<sup>280</sup> Hine, however, was also aware of the problem of the photographic act itself that, according to Roberts, 'prefigures all the major assessments of photography as a documentary enterprise from Benjamin onwards: the essential instability of the subject - object relation in photography'.<sup>281</sup> Indeed the ambiguity and contradictory interpretation of composition, facial expression, bodily stance and gesture is evident in both Baker's own statements regarding composition, and in the reception of her photographs.

As for many Twentieth-century documentarists, the lack of posing is for Baker a 'point of principle', a hallmark of her photographic authenticity.<sup>282</sup> Nevertheless, her photographs do also show adults and children presenting frontally to the camera, self-presenting and engaging with a relational photographic process. It is perhaps such 'posed' photographs to which historian Stephen Brooke refers when he claims Baker's work gives 'visual agency' to those affected by rehousing. For Constantine, however, the naturalism of Baker's photographs is a sign of the confidence and security of her subjects as well as of a mutual trust and exchange premised on the photographer's empathy.<sup>283</sup> For

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<sup>279</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 74-76. Roberts summaries the use of 'frontality' as used by Hines as having its origins in both the painting of Manet, and the American co-operativist movement.

<sup>280</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 75.

<sup>281</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 75. It is interesting to note how stance, the gaze, composition of the body have become signifiers of the ideal conditions of the intersubjective relationship within documentary practice and as such have been much debated and argued over, for example in the heated critical reception of the work of Richard Billingham, in his portrayal of his working class family. See *Ray's a Laugh* (1996), [https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/richard\\_billingham.htm](https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/richard_billingham.htm)

<sup>282</sup> Nevertheless, her photographs do portray people frontally presenting themselves towards the camera. So whilst the humanist photographic practice of 'the candid' is one Baker subscribed to she did, in fact, have people pose. The question of 'what is a pose' is one that emerged throughout my research and was extensively discussed in the 'TWTC' conversations in the exhibition. See Chapters 7-9.

<sup>283</sup> Stephen Brooke, 'The Representation of Working-class women in the photography of Shirley Baker', in Penny Tinkler, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research*, (London, Sage, 2013), 42 - 43.

other exhibition viewers, however, alternative interpretations are made and imagined for the people portrayed in Baker's images.<sup>284</sup>

### 3.1.2 Streets and the advent of authenticity

As the world was being opened up by travellers to unknown, exotic places, nearer to home urban 'explorers' took to city back streets. From the mid-nineteenth century, the national press documented shocking and sensational stories about inner-city life, suggesting that anxiety and curiosity went hand-in-hand. London's East End even became a popular destination for 'slumming', a new phenomenon which emerged as a peculiar form of tourism motivated as much by curiosity, excitement and thrill as by moral, religious and altruistic concerns.<sup>285</sup> Amateur and professional photographers alike engaged photography in an ever-widening range of interactions with and representations of the working classes and the poor, and put it to a great variety of purposes, not always reformist and philanthropic. Published in 1851, Henry Mayhew's (1812-1887) *London Labour and London Poor* stands as an early example of photography being used to document inner-city life. Mayhew described the lives of working people in London in a series of articles (later compiled in book form) for the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper.

The texts were illustrated by engravings that the reader was assured were 'drawn' from *original* photographs, thus emphasising their scientific validity as 'evidence'. Pioneering Scottish photographer, geographer and traveller John Thomson (1837 -1924), returning to London from the Far East, renewed his acquaintance with Adolphe Smith, a radical journalist. Together, between 1876 and 1877, they collaborated in producing a monthly magazine *Street Life in London*, the aim of which was 'to bring before the public some account of the present condition of the London street folk, and to supply a series of

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<sup>284</sup> The 'TWTC conversations' (see Chapters 7-9) provide contrasting interpretations and experience of those featured in the photographs, that suggest the instability of interpreting 'real life' bodily gestures, stance and features.

<sup>285</sup> By 1880, interest in visiting slum districts of the Capital was such that the Baedeker guidebook to London directed visitors to notorious 'slum districts'. See: <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/slums.html>. See also Griselda Pollock, 'Vicarious Excitements' in *New Formations*, (1988, 4). Today, 'slum tourism' is today advocated by some as an antidote to a tourism that otherwise overlooks poverty in favour of focussing on heritage sites — a position that equally comes with counter criticism. See: <https://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Slum-Tourism-Report-print-web.pdf>

faithful pictures of the people themselves'.<sup>286</sup> For photography historian Liz Wells, the significance of their project lay in establishing 'actuality photography' as an early type of photojournalism, and she goes on to suggest that photographing the urban working class in the street took on the status of 'the real'.<sup>287</sup>

Wells argues that to the middle-class spectator, working-class lives appeared simple, real and untrammelled by the fripperies of middle-class existence'.<sup>288</sup> This search for authenticity would, according to Wells, take on a 'class inflection' that came to dominate documentary work throughout the twentieth century, 'as photography established itself as an important component in an extensive series of projects to investigate and record the lives of the poor'.<sup>289</sup>

By the turn of the century, urban and rural working-class lives had become a popular photographic subject of the middle-class photographer. Camera clubs, an established means of acquiring photographic skills, took to the inner-city streets of London in such large numbers that licences were required to photograph in many places, whilst the emerging photographic press defined codes of conduct for urban photographic behaviour, including what were permissible and impermissible subjects. Within fifty years of the invention of photography, the street as a locus for 'real' life, with a whole range of uniquely 'street characters' and 'street activities', had become a subject—even a sub-genre, of 'actuality photography', that would continue to evolve throughout the twentieth century, alongside the idea of documentary.

### 3.1.3 Change and Loss

As Baker explained in her 1989 essay, the huge 'slum clearance' programme of the inner city in the 1960s prompted her to '*capture some of the street life as it had been for generations before the change*'. This idea of taking photographs before something disappeared forever, has its origins in the late nineteenth century, though it would endure

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<sup>286</sup> See: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2013/nov/04/photography-london-street-life-in-london>. Accessed 2.5.19

<sup>287</sup> Liz Wells, *Photography*, 84.

<sup>288</sup> Liz Wells, *Photography*, 78.

<sup>289</sup> Liz Wells, *Photography*, 78.

throughout the twentieth century. Cultural anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards, writing about the English amateur photographic survey movement (*National Photographic Record and Survey Movement*), highlights two significant impetuses for its emergence, ‘the sense of the ever accelerating change in the social landscape and the physical environment’, coupled with the great expansion of photography as a pastime.<sup>290</sup>

The idea for a national photographic survey was first proposed in 1889 by Midlands-based geologist, science teacher and keen amateur photographer W. Jerome Harrison (1845-1908), who presented a paper at the Birmingham Photographic Society laying out his idea for a systematic photographic survey that would form a vast public archive for the future. The archive would comprise antiquities, ancient buildings, rituals and customs of Britain, ‘the practices and current conditions that map human experience, in order to constitute a “True Pictorial History of the Present Day”’.<sup>291</sup> What makes the Survey Movement significant, Edwards argues, is not just the sheer number of amateur photographers involved, but their disciplined programme of operation that expressed a positivist investment in photography as a surveying and recording medium.<sup>292</sup>

For example, Charles Baker Howdill (1864 -1940) a Leeds architect who served as President of the Leeds Camera Club between 1901 and 1904 urged his 117 members to enlist in the survey movement, calling on them to reject pictorial photography:

We have the privilege of recording with our cameras old ceremonies, rites and customs fast becoming obsolete....the application of our science to such ends as will not only yield us present pleasure but we will have the satisfaction of knowing that generations of unborn will revere the memory of those who left such record.<sup>293</sup>

Despite his advocacy over the years of his presidency, few of the club’s members could be persuaded to engage in the work. That Howdill struggled to enlist members illustrates a problem Edwards refers to when she describes the constant tension in the survey project between the aspirations towards ‘the scientific’ and the modernity of the enterprise and the subjective and aesthetic interests of the amateur photographers. One

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<sup>290</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and the Historical Imagination, 1885-1918*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>291</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian*, 2.

<sup>292</sup> Over a thousand across 73 country-wide surveys between 1885 and 1918.

<sup>293</sup> I am indebted to the unpublished research on Charles Baker Howdill by Janet Douglas.

way the movement tried to impose order on participants was through strict rules regarding composition, printing up, textual description and archival practices, and the requirement that photographers remained anonymous. This, argues Edwards, encouraged members to think of themselves not as personally or artistically attached to their photographs, but alternatively regard themselves as archivists of the future working with modern methods. Engaging with subject matter that the surveyors ‘knew’ was becoming ‘the past’, always had, however, the potential of slipping into regressive and anxious feelings of loss. Instead, participants were encouraged to work towards a shared sense of the future rather than being lost to an affective nostalgia for the past.

Shirley Baker’s working method shares something of the characteristics of the survey movement. In her writings and interview she expressed a sense of a culture on the brink of change, and a townscape that would forever be altered, maybe not for the better. The importance of recording this change is illustrated in her own appraisal of her motivation (see Chapter 2). Anxious that her work not be seen as nostalgic, she repudiated any claim to her own subjective or aesthetic purposes, and hoped that her pictures might have some future public utility, though she was uncertain as to what this might be. As noted in Chapter 2, that opportunity came in 1986 when the Documentary Photographic Archive Project in Manchester appealed to the public for photographs.

### **3.2. 1930s Social Documentary: Realism, ‘the Everyday’ and the ‘Structure of Feeling’.**

By the beginning of the twentieth century, photography had become ‘a practice with a past’, yet the term ‘documentary’ did not exist.<sup>294</sup> As photographic historian Ian Walker has commented, documentary ‘may seem like the simplest’ of terms but it is not.<sup>295</sup> This is a view reinforced by contemporary research that explores the grain of photographic practice historically and increasingly highlights the term’s ambiguity, the lack of consistency in the way it is used, as well as its fraught relationship with realism and the

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<sup>294</sup> Martha Rosler, *In, Around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)*, (Nova Scotia, Press of Nova Scotia College of Art, 2006), 73.

<sup>295</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade*, (Manchester: University Press, Manchester, 2007), 7.

realist image.<sup>296</sup> Shirley Baker's photographs are widely referred to as 'documentary', but it is my proposition, and the ambition of researching and curating *with* her work, to reconsider whether and how the term 'documentary' serves Baker's photographs *today*. Or is the term still being used because we have no other?

The sociologist Howard Becker, suggests that the naming of 'types of picture-taking' is important, because the practices of naming (and their histories) establish boundaries and distinctions that set up and legitimate forms of response to photographs.<sup>297</sup> In this respect, considering the history of 'documentary' photography contributes to our understanding of how Shirley Baker considered her work, how she made the work and importantly how the work has been received and is received today. Most scholars concur that the paradigmatic forms of documentary photography emerged in the United States, Britain and France.<sup>298</sup> Whilst Baker's assumptions about photography was shaped by nineteenth-century positivism, it was additionally fashioned by what has been termed the 'documentary impulse' of the 1930s, which continued into the post-war period as 'humanist documentary'.<sup>299</sup>

### **3.2.1 The Documentary Impulse: a Structure of Feeling**

For cultural theorist Stuart Hall 'the documentary impulse' emerged as a response to changes in the British intelligentsia in the years following the First World War. Employed in the expanding educational sector and the new cultural industries (cinema, the press and magazines, radio, advertising etc), these men (and they were very largely men) eschewed the isolating elitism of the pre-war world to produce a new public social rhetoric that embodied in various guises their own economic and social interests and political investments in the idea of *the people*. The documentary movement became a

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<sup>296</sup> Indeed this conflation is one that many artists have explored, see for example the work of Jeff Wall, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeff\\_Wall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeff_Wall)

<sup>297</sup> Howard Becker, quoted in Penny Tinkler, *Using Photographs*, 88.

<sup>298</sup> The author is aware that this is a history 'biased' towards these countries and one that consistently privileges the same 'canonical' movements, projects and practitioners. As Andrew Blaikie has stated, we must acknowledge that there were different forms of 'documentary' throughout the 1930s and onwards, each 'forging an emergent structure of feeling'. See Andrew Blaikie, 'Photography, Childhood and Urban Poverty: Remembering, The Forgotten Gorbals', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 7, (2006), 47-68.

<sup>299</sup> John Baxendale and Chris Pawling, *Narrating the Thirties: A Decade in the Making, 1930 to the present*, (London, Macmillan Press, 1996), 19.

way of bridging the gap between ‘them and us’, breaking down middle-class stereotypes of the working class and forging a new social-democratic political consensus that stressed class collaboration, amelioration, and reform and a new expanded idea of the people and the popular.

### 3.2.2 John Grierson: ‘drama on the doorstep’<sup>300</sup>

Although John Grierson coined the term ‘documentary’ in 1926, it was not until his essay ‘First Principles of Documentary’ (1932), that he fully articulated his vision for a new cinematic form that would ‘eschew the fantasy and escapism of Hollywood in favour of a cinema that would observe ‘real’ life: different qualities of observation, different intentions in observation, and, of course, very different powers and ambitions at the stage of organising material’.<sup>301</sup> Of course, Grierson’s emphasis on ‘observation’ was not new; as already noted, throughout the evolution of photography one of its ‘tasks’ has been to observe ‘the other’ but Grierson’s thinking and writings were one of the key transmission points of avant-garde Soviet and German culture into Britain in the late 1920s and early 1930s. John Roberts claims, however, that the political implications of Soviet and German ‘factographic’ culture was under-theorized by Grierson and his colleagues, arguably making British documentary the poorer for it.<sup>302</sup>

From early on Grierson avoided, the ‘confrontational cognitive disruptions’ of the Bolshevik cinema that he so much admired in favour of a more humanistic approach in which storytelling about ‘the everyday’ took an epic and pastoral form.<sup>303</sup> Grierson’s vision for documentary and how it would evolve throughout the 1930s was dominated by what Roberts describes as a ‘valedictory construction of the ‘everyday’ in which photography along with radio, literature and public service films turned to the experience of the working class as an identification with the ‘authenticity of working-class life, rather than the expression of class consciousness’.<sup>304</sup> The documentary movement that

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<sup>300</sup> John Grierson, ‘First Principles of Documentary’, in *Grierson on Documentary*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1979) 35, quoted in John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 59.

<sup>301</sup> John Grierson, quoted in John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 59.

<sup>302</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 59.

<sup>303</sup> Grierson admired filmmakers such as Vertov and Eisenstein. See John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 59.

<sup>304</sup> John Grierson, quoted in John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 59.

Grierson helped to establish inculcated a culture of public service which was perhaps in reality not perhaps not too different from the paternalism it sought to vanquish.

In Griersonian documentary we see the defence of ‘the everyday’ as a source of fraternity with others. But more than this, the ‘everyday’ becomes an aesthetic, in which documentary is ‘a poetic act, a means to raising the aesthetic status of the everyday’.<sup>305</sup> Scholars differ about Grierson’s actual position on aesthetics and ‘realism’ — as both style and ideology. Curator Tanya Barson claims that Grierson held a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of ‘naturalism’ employing ‘the idealist distinction between the real and the phenomenal, and stressed the need to creatively interpret reality through symbolic expression’.<sup>306</sup> Stuart Hall concurs with her view that by ‘documentary’ Grierson meant ‘the creative treatment of actuality’, an approach that Hall described as ‘poetic naturalism’. Grierson’s films at the Empire Marketing Board, however, and subsequently at the GPO, were by his own admission, ‘national education’ and a form of sociology:

It is worth recalling that the British Documentary group began not so much in affection for film per se as in affection for national education. If I am to be counted as the founder and leader of the movement, its origins certainly lay in sociological rather than aesthetic aims.<sup>307</sup>

This conflation of the ‘factographic’, the sociological and the affective has produced some of the most argued-over tensions around ‘documentary’ ever since. What results is a plethora of ‘documentary’ approaches that embrace a range of social and cultural functions and ways of visualising ‘the real’ and the ‘actual’. These would include photography as a sociological and anthropological tool of investigation, photography integrated into public service ‘propaganda’, the ‘reportage’ of daily newspapers and ‘investigations’ undertaken for the newly emergent human interest magazines, as well as the emergent photographer-artists who published their images in book form. What unites these varying approaches, however, is a consensus regarding the so-called objective functionality of the camera and its optics. Gone are the heroic days of avant-

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<sup>305</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 60.

<sup>306</sup> Tanya Barson, *Time present and time past*, (Liverpool, Tate Publishing, 2006), 9.

<sup>307</sup> John Roberts, ‘First Principle in Documentary’, quoted in John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 59.

garde experimentations and constructed photography, to be replaced by a camera-centric, naturalistic consensus, that holds sway even today.

### 3.2.3 Picture Post: Visualising ‘the People’ and ‘the Everyday’

Of the many forms in which ‘the unknown’ came to be knowable to the British public, the magazine *Picture Post* is perhaps the most lionised.<sup>308</sup> Founded in 1938 by German emigre Stefan Lorant (1901-1997) and financed by Edward Hulton (1906-1988), the popular magazine can be regarded not only as a product of a specific social documentary practice, but an active site in which such a practice was re-articulated and re-presented to the British public. Stuart Hall described the magazine as a fusion of two distinct journalistic traditions, on the one hand the tradition of social comment and reportage of English journalism and political writing throughout the 1930s, on the other ‘the revolutionary developments in layout, typography and photography which flowered on the continent’, both in avant-garde circles and in commercial practice.<sup>309</sup>

Despite the changing party political affiliations of its active owner Edward Hulton, who switched from Tory to Labour and back again, the magazine was in many ways a manifestation of Griersonian philosophy. Whilst *Picture Post* occupies a distinctive position in the context of British culture, serious ‘human interest’ magazines also emerged throughout Europe, the USA in the 1930s, with *Vu* in France and *Life* in the USA, each appealing to readerships that were constituted, according to Roberts, as a ‘rational, Liberal-Humanist Subject’.<sup>310</sup> Furthermore, as cultural historian Glen Jordan

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<sup>308</sup> By December 1943 *Picture Post* was selling 1,950,000 copies a week. By the end of 1949 circulation 600,000 copies a week. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picture\\_Post](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picture_Post). Accessed: 10 April 2019.

<sup>309</sup> Stuart Hall, *Down the Bay*, 71. Originally published as ‘The Social Eye of Picture Post’, in *Working Paper in Cultural Studies*, (No. 2, University of Birmingham, Spring, 1972), Hall’s article on *Picture Post* would prove influential to all future critical accounts of the magazine, and the emergence of British photo-reportage more generally. Nevertheless, given that to arrive at his hypothesis regarding *Picture Post*’s reformism, Hall does not provide a detailed analysis of the visual language of the magazine’s photo spreads, his evaluation is, I would suggest, informed by his own *prior* political agenda, rather like Roberts’ own radical ideological agenda, that frames his interpretation of the magazine—rather than as a consequence of visual analysis.

<sup>310</sup> John Robert, *The Art of Interruption*, 64. In 1930s Japan there were over thirty photography magazines. Though primarily responding to the burgeoning of amateur photography, *Asahi Camera* published extended creative essays of photography and text, including poetry. See Jelena Stojkovic, ‘Images With and Without Texts: The Photographic Magazine in 1930s Japan’, lecture delivered to the Japan Society at the Swedenborg Society, London, 17 September 2018, [https://www.academia.edu/39787032/Images\\_With\\_and\\_Without\\_Texts\\_The\\_Photographic\\_Magazine\\_in\\_1930s\\_Japan](https://www.academia.edu/39787032/Images_With_and_Without_Texts_The_Photographic_Magazine_in_1930s_Japan). Accessed: 10 June 2020.

suggests each magazine addressed its readership in a visual and textual language that it was assumed would be understood, and through which they would be interpellated in an ‘unshakeable faith that society will be transformed’.<sup>311</sup> However, as John Roberts notes, the social transformation inferred would never condone non-constitutional politics, ‘what... the illustrated magazines wanted were not oppositional images, but images that linked absence of continuity or to show people ‘getting by’.<sup>312</sup>

Glenn Jordan, writing about *Picture Post* as an institutional space in which particular principles and practices towards the photographic were formulated, has suggested that its photographs ‘are always about something’, they are never just ‘clever’ compositions, expressions of sophisticated lighting, or indeed ‘the photographer’s own feelings’ or artistry.<sup>313</sup> *Picture Post* was, he claims, all about social content, as opposed to considering photography as artistically expressive or indeed authored by a photographer with their own visual language agenda. Indeed, the notion of the photographer having a style was to be subsumed under the *Picture Post* philosophy: they were ‘journalists’ rather than ‘artists’, and unlike their French counterparts, sentiment and visual lyricism were to be avoided.<sup>314</sup> Central to *Picture Post*’s visual paradigm was its commitment to realism. The image, argues Jordan, comes to the viewer as if ‘uncoded’, unmediated by the photographer, hence the necessity of the photographic image appearing without a style: ‘Its reality is that of the having-been-there... of this-is-what-happened-and how’.<sup>315</sup> Both Hall and Jordan note, however, that the realism orchestrated by *Picture Post* was not the sole consequence of the ‘codeless’ image but was also achieved through the integration of text and picture —stories, captions, photos

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<sup>311</sup> Glen Jordan, *Down the Bay*, 17.

<sup>312</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 64.

<sup>313</sup> Glen Jordan, *Down the Bay*, 13.

<sup>314</sup> Stuart Hall, *Down the Bay*, p. 69. There is an echo here of the nineteenth-century English Survey photographers.

<sup>315</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, quoted in Glen Jordan, *Down the Bay*, 68. The realism of *Picture Post* was in stark contrast, for example, to the work of British photographer Maurice Broomfield (1916-2010) an industrial photographer whose work, strongly redolent of avant-garde photographic modernism of Russian and German photography of the 1920s and 30s, appeared in *The Times* style and trade magazines.

and layout all working together to produce a cumulative impact.<sup>316</sup> Nevertheless, what made *Picture Post* unique and formative with regard to British publishing at the time was the centrality of the image. As Stuart Hall notes, whilst the layout of each page appeared straightforward, with the pictures ‘disposed on the page within an uncomplicated aesthetic’, the use of large scale images — often filling a half page — was affecting and impactful, ‘the illusion amounting to a felt correspondence between the dimensions of the reproduced image and the dimensions of the human world it represents’.<sup>317</sup> These are ‘democratic’ pictures that, according to Hall, capture ‘a new social reality: the domain of everyday life’ in which ‘ordinary people’ (like ‘me and you’) engage in routine activity: standing in the street gossiping, at the shop corner, being in the home, playing in the street, or out in a local cafe, (or if a man) in the pub.<sup>318</sup> Alternatively, the pictures show some ‘activity made necessary by the extraordinary context in which individuals find themselves e.g. war or famine’.<sup>319</sup> In either case, at one and the same time, individuals are presented as both real life characters, with whom we can identify and are also transposed into symbols beyond their own particular circumstance or historical event, to become emblems of ‘everyone’ in the ‘universal human family’.<sup>320</sup>

Unusually for the period, photographers were named in *Picture Post* photo-story spreads. This attribution marks an important shift in the status of the photographer, from anonymous newspaper photographer to photojournalist.<sup>321</sup> Being ‘named’ as a photojournalist, however, symbolised more than parity with print journalists. It is, I would argue, illustrative of the acknowledgement of photography within the production

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<sup>316</sup> Stuart Hall, *Down the Bay*, 69. It is interesting to note that *Illustrated London News*, the other picture/text magazine of the period lacked the dynamic layout of *Picture Post*.

<sup>317</sup> Stuart Hall, *Down the Bay*, 69.

<sup>318</sup> Stuart Hall, *Down the Bay*, 69.

<sup>319</sup> Glen Jordan, *Down the Bay*, 13.

<sup>320</sup> Glen Jordan, *Down the Bay*, 13.

<sup>321</sup> The gradual introduction of naming photographers in magazines, for example in *About Town* and *The Sunday Times Colour Supplement*, is also commented on by Martin Harrison. See, *The Young Meteors*, (London, Jonathan Cape, 1998).

of knowledge as a *visual* transmitter of stories.<sup>322</sup> To be ‘named’, then, was also to assume the status of ‘auteur’: a photographer known for his or her distinctive and individual style, unlike the anonymous and instructed press photographers who working within tight schedules, who would neither be expected to express, nor able to execute, their own ways of seeing. The ‘auteur’ photojournalist (such as Bill Brandt) navigated, as Hall states, the difficult space between the ‘free movement’ of art and the social engagement of “*rapportage* made to the formation of this ‘way of seeing’”.<sup>323</sup> A ‘way of seeing’ that became not only a summation of the technical skills of the photographer — their choice of camera and lens, their response to light and shadow, that gave rise to the photograph’s effect—but also points to the emergence of the idea of the distinctive ‘skill’ of the photojournalist being at the right place at the right time. This candid intervention, gaining access to places where viewers/readers could not or would not go, became one of the hallmarks of the photojournalist as ‘witness’ and would, moreover, signal the ‘auteur’ photojournalist’s distinctiveness, distinguishing one photographer from another.

In this formulation, the photojournalist comes to be thought of as possessing a special relationship with *their* chosen subject, a relationship that they have identified from the spectrum of real world possibilities and have orchestrated in a ‘decisive moment’ composed through the camera’s viewfinder. It is worth noting, however, that the convention of candid photography was gendered and was not one that women photographers preferred, particularly in the inter-war years. Women, Val Williams argues, “*usually set out to record rather than to captivate*”, avoiding the candid and dramatizing gaze that allowed photographers to view themselves as reporters rather participants, and that indicated ‘a peculiar kind of machismo’.<sup>324</sup> In her 1992 interview

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<sup>322</sup> Formerly the *The Tailor & Cutter*, *About Town*, was one of the first British post-*Picture Post* magazines to run in-depth photo-lead editorial stories. A pioneering ‘debonair’ Men’s magazine, early editions only identified its print journalists, but by the early 1960s emerging photographers, including John Bulmer, Terence Donovan and Don McCullin (receiving some of their first extensive commissions from the magazine) were named. Author’s primary research, archive of *About Town*, British Library, London.

<sup>323</sup> Stuart Hall, *Down the Bay*, 71.

<sup>324</sup> Val Williams, *Women Photographers: the Other Observers*, (London, Virago Press, London, 1984) 25-26.

with Val Williams, Shirley Baker however, claims that candid photography had always been her aspiration.<sup>325</sup>

For the *Picture Post* 'reader', the idea of the 'honesty' and trustworthiness of the photograph was synonymous with the 'honesty' and trustworthiness of the photographer (and of the magazine). This sense of veracity, suggested through the candid and unposed image (or indeed images that must appear to the reader not to be so) interpellated the viewer to the point not of providing a sense of looking through a window so much as 'being invited into the frame'.<sup>326</sup> This was achieved via a style of naturalism that, unlike the earlier modernist photographers, or indeed many commercial photographers of the period, did not employ 'birds-eye' views nor unusual camera angles, but 'real life, real characters, the sharp images, natural lighting, frozen motion and Renaissance perspective'.<sup>327</sup> *Picture Post* photographs were taken in black and white (unlike the American *Life* magazine), and despite not replicating the realism of the eye, it was then, as Hall notes, the conventional code of visual realism. Today, this code lends documentary photographs something of the quality of a historical document, but how far this was questioned by contemporary readers of the magazine remains unknown. What would surely have been perceived by these readers was the sympathy of the photographers towards their subjects who were endowed with dignity and significance.

With good reason, Val Williams assumes in her interview with Shirley Baker that the magazine might have provided a focus for the young photographer's ambitions. Apparently 'not'. Her parents did not buy the magazine, nor as a student was Shirley Baker a regular *Picture Post* reader, unlike her fellow student Pat Seddon.<sup>328</sup> Neither did her formal photographic education focus on social content, the composition of photo-stories, nor aesthetic form. Yet, despite these provisos, in Shirley Baker's own statements about her work one finds an expression of a similar cultural framework of humanism and

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<sup>325</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story Interview*, 1992. In this interview, Baker, notably challenges Williams' thoughts that she had a particular empathy for women's lives.

<sup>326</sup> See Glen Jordan, *Down the Bay*, 14. As John Roberts highlights, However, there were exceptions, highlighting the photographer Walker Evans who arranged his subjects, arguably as part of a strategy for re-positioning himself as an 'artist'. See, John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 64.

<sup>327</sup> Glen Jordan, *Down the Bay*, 15

<sup>328</sup> Email correspondence with Pat Seddon, April 2019.

realism and ambition to help that Jordan champions in *Picture Post*, claiming that the magazine ‘sought to help the British public make sense of what was going on around them...[and] to represent, interpret or give meaning to important developments in contemporary society and culture’.<sup>329</sup>

### 3.2.4 Mass-Observation: the Marvels of the Ordinary

Like *Picture Post*, Mass-Observation is widely regarded as a key episode in the formation of the British social documentary tradition. The project which encompassed many disciplines, resists singular definition, and over the years has been characterized by what critic Nick Hubble has called a ‘bewildering’ range of perspectives.<sup>330</sup> Here I will focus on the centrality of photography in the project. The majority of Mass-Observation’s photographs (nine hundred) were taken by Humphrey Spender (1910-2005), a former *Daily Mirror* photographer, later employed by *Picture Post*. Other photographers who contributed work were film maker Humphrey Jennings (1907-1950) and the painters Julian Trevelyan (1910-1988) and Graham Bell (1910-1943). Since the 1970s, these photographs have been re-evaluated according to shifts in photographic theory, from John Tagg’s emphasis on power and representation to contemporary understandings, like those of Elizabeth Edwards that stress the materiality of the photographs. Writing on ‘the everyday’, John Roberts’s evaluation of Mass Observation derives from a perspective that regards the project as a social science research organisation. His assessment of its use of photography focuses, therefore, on questions of ethics, the subject/object relationship, and class and authenticity (see below). I am drawn, however, to the re-evaluation of Mass-Observation by photography historian Ian Walker, who proposes a surrealist reading that opens up new space around the project beyond its characterisation as either flawed social science or ethically compromised

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<sup>329</sup> Glen Jordan, *Down the Bay*, 13.

<sup>330</sup> Nick Hubble, ‘Introduction: The Mass-Observation Project’, *Mass Observation and Everyday Life*, (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1. For a recent discussion regarding the role of Humphrey Jennings and surrealism within Mass-Observation, see: James Hinton, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), See: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1603>. Accessed: 12 May 2019.

social photographic documentary.<sup>331</sup> In the context of my research, Walker's reappraisal also offers new perspectives from which to consider Shirley Baker's practice—her working method, as well as her photographic content— in order to foster an enquiry around her work that draws out its rich complexity. Whatever the theoretical lens, the people of Bolton, however, still relate strongly to the photographs as part of their personal and collective memories.<sup>332</sup>

The story of Mass-Observation is well-known. It was founded in 1937 by the anthropologist Tom Harrison (1911-1996), the poet and *Daily Mirror* journalist Charles Madge (1912-1996), and filmmaker Humphrey Jennings (1907-50), emerging within what Liz Wells has described as a cultural atmosphere of investigation in which: 'The world could no longer be taken for granted and understood; [and] ordinary day-to-day lives needed to be made strange by being examined with the supposedly impartial 'eye of the social scientist'.<sup>333</sup> Accordingly, Mass-Observation's manifesto proclaimed that 'Our first concern is to collect data, not to interpret them'.<sup>334</sup> This view was endorsed by Humphrey Spender who stated of his time working with Mass-Observation, 'It was factual data, of every kind, that we wanted from photos'.<sup>335</sup> The manifesto even referred to cameras as 'scientific instruments of precision', closer to reality than the pen.<sup>336</sup> This emphasis on facts, reality and objectivity should not necessarily lead us to conclude that

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<sup>331</sup> For further reading on the re-evaluation of Mass-Observation see, Nick Stanley, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1043/2255>. Accessed: 12 May 2019..

<sup>332</sup> Bolton Museum holds the *Worktown* archives, regularly organises exhibitions of the photographs and has places many of them on-line. See: <https://boltonworktown.co.uk>

<sup>333</sup> Liz Wells, *Photography*, 91. Mass-Observation was founded on 30 January 1937, shortly following the Abdication crisis of 1936, by anthropologist, Tom Harrison, poet and *Daily Mirror* journalist, Charles Madge and surrealist poet, painter, film-maker and photographer, Humphrey Jennings. For different reasons, each was concerned with what they regarded as 'the open emergence of forces so powerful, and realised as never before the sway of superstition in the midst of science'. Upon reading a letter in the *New Statesman* from Madge and Jennings, proposing their own anthropological study of the social situation leading to Abdication 'crisis', Harrison (recently returned from fieldwork in the New Hebrides) contacted them suggesting they might collaborate. The three men published another letter in *New Statesman* announcing the formation of Mass-Observation, to instigate an 'anthropology at home', in which British customs and rituals would be subjected to the same 'objective' assessment as a 'primitive' culture. In July, Harrison invited his friend the Surrealist painter and photographer Julian Trevelyan to join the small observation team in Bolton with Humphrey Spender.

<sup>334</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 117.

<sup>335</sup> Charles Madge and Tom Harrison 1937, 35, Quoted in Caroline Edge, *Creating and Collaborative Worktown Archive: Photography, Place, Community*, (Phd thesis, University of Bolton, 2017).

Mass-Observation's use of photography was wholly empirical and 'documentary' in the humanist/reformist sense; for as art historian Deborah Frizzell has pointed out, such terms and practices were also used by artists including the Surrealists.

From the outset, the Mass-Observation team experienced photography as a contradictory and variable medium: on the one hand a tool of (scientific) objectivity, yet also susceptible to the ethical tensions that arose due to the subject-object-spectator relationship. In Bolton, known as 'Worktown', the observation team, that included Harrison, Spender and Jennings (though Jennings spent only a few months there), went into a variety of public spaces, including casual gatherings and formal meetings, religious occasions, sporting and leisure activities, into the street and into workplaces, observing and recording people's behaviour and conversations in as much detail as possible. Notably they did not go into peoples' homes. The team employed every conceivable method of collecting information including, but by no means limited to, participant observation, following people and writing down their activities, writing down overheard conversations, gathering statistics, poetry, dream diaries, drawings, paintings, making collages, art and photography. Photographer Caroline Edge has drawn attention to the technical innovations that made Spender's photographs possible: the small 35mm camera (in particular Leica's *rangefinder* cameras), and fast film. Spender's camera could take photographs at a shutter speed of 1/1250 second, freezing a fraction of time previously unseen by the human eye.<sup>337</sup> The technological quality of his camera turned Spender into an 'invisible spy',

an impossibility which I didn't particularly enjoy trying to achieve...I was somebody from another planet intruding on another way of life...A constant feature of taking the kind of photographs we're talking about - even when people were unaware that they were actually being photographed - was a feeling that I was exploiting the people. I was photographing even when ... the aim explicitly was to help them.<sup>338</sup>

For its critics, Mass-Observation was devised by middle-class intellectuals to amass a literary and photographic archive of working-class life, and was flawed from the start. It has been argued by writers including John Roberts that Mass-Observation viewed the

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<sup>337</sup> Cartier-Bresson's 'Decisive Moment'.

<sup>338</sup> Liz Wells, *Photography*, 92

working class as some sort of exotic species to be studied under an anthropological microscope. Despite the project's left-leaning ambitions, Roberts associates Mass-Observation with an inherent moralistic attitude towards the working classes and the new commercial pleasures they enjoyed. Indeed, he claims the project was elitist, cast in a form that would seek to identify an 'authentic' working-class culture as object of study, then seeking to protect it (symbolically through photographing and then archiving) from impending loss due to commercialisation. Furthermore, Roberts argues, that with Mass-Observation and *Picture Post* there was a refusal to engage with the actual political potential of working-class people. Economic hardships, unemployment and the deep class divisions of the late 1930s were ever-present, and both Mass-Observation and *Picture Post* did highlight their existence, but did so not to stimulate political dissent and action but as *experiences* that demonstrated working-class endurance, goodwill, and continuity.

In his book *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and documentary photography*, Ian Walker introduces an alternative framework through which to understand the practice of photography at Mass-Observation. He argues that it is possible to construct an entirely different understanding of the group and the photographs they produced as a project of collective Surrealism.<sup>339</sup> In writing about Spender's photographs, Deborah Frizzell also situates British documentary in relation to Surrealism, claiming that rather than seeing the two as distinct and oppositional—a debate that equates realism with objectivity and the subjective with the imaginal—the conceptual and aesthetic frameworks of Surrealism were not in fact antithetical to the documentary project.

In one of his few theoretical texts, Humphrey Jennings wrote that his attraction to photography on one hand lay in its simplicity, democracy, reproducibility and apparent realism. Nevertheless, he was also attracted to what he regarded its complex psychology: 'Intellectually, the importance of the camera lies clearly in the way that it deals with problems of choice - choice and avoidance of choice'.<sup>340</sup> Citing Freud's view that *déjà vu*

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<sup>339</sup> *So Exotic, So Homemade*, (Manchester: University Press, Manchester, 2007).

<sup>340</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 102.

'corresponds to the memory of an unconscious fantasy', Jennings, referred to the camera as 'an instrument for recording the object or image that promoted that memory. Hence the rush to see "How they come out"'.<sup>341</sup> Jennings was a committed Surrealist and went looking for Surrealism in the 'everyday', unlike Spender who claimed:

I was trying to be very objective and accepted Surrealist elements when and where they cropped up, rather consciously avoiding pressures to seek out such elements. To say that Surrealist elements were particularly evident in Mass-Observation's findings would be simply to say that such elements abound in everyday life, since my function was to document everyday life'.<sup>342</sup>

Humphrey Spender came to documentary photography having studied photography in Weimar Germany, where he shared a studio with William Edmiston who made surrealist pictures. Although not a card-carrying surrealist like Jennings, Spender approached Surrealism not as antithetical to reality, but as producing a heightened and deeper understanding of the real. Jennings and Spender would wander the streets of Bolton, which was hardly Paris, but they believed that reading the industrial town through Surrealism might produce new insights into people's lives. Many of the *leitmotifs* of Surrealism put in an appearance: posters and advertisements, graffiti, uncanny or fantastical assemblages, unexpected perspectives on the familiar. Street hoardings and graffiti became their 'ready-mades' and combined unrelated elements to create surprising and at times humorous juxtapositions. Jennings regarded graffiti as 'the eruption of the repressed id of the city', whilst more prosaically Spender recalled that you never saw adults drawing on the walls: 'it was a kid's game'. Spender's graffiti photographs were treated in two ways, cropped to cut out all context, or standing further back to include context and individuals themselves: the former having the direct power of primitive cave paintings or the work of *art brut* artists; the latter in diminishing the direct power of the graffiti makes it open to narrative interpretation that could for some include a greater sentimentality or factual information. Surrealists were fascinated by 'hybrid and indefinable places - the *terrains vagues* that lay beyond the town centre', and Jennings

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<sup>341</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 102.

<sup>342</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 102.

somewhat improbably found his exemplars in Bolton.<sup>343</sup> Two of his Bolton photographs were even published in *Dictionnaire abridge du Surrealisme* in 1938.<sup>344</sup> In contrast to the ‘gentle lyricism’ of French humanist photography, the gaze of Jennings’s camera was ‘steady’, ‘flat’, and gave the impression of a rather ‘impassive neutrality’ that some viewers found ‘unnerving’.<sup>345</sup> Val Williams, as noted, highlights Shirley Baker’s “*very flat on, straight documentary*” approach, that provides “*clarity*” and “*plainness*”, but that arguably, some might also find unnerving, others patronising or even hostile at times.<sup>346</sup>

Shirley Baker was no latter-day Surrealist, but some of her photographs do suggest that surrealistic ways of looking at the world had come into more mainstream circulation. The textual analysis in the previous chapter reveals that Baker's humour and more surrealist elements go uncommented upon. For this reason, I will draw out those tendencies here, and suggest some comparisons with the Mass-Observation photographers. Perspective, camera angles, uncanny or amusing juxtapositions, decisions regarding cropping and framing are not just the inevitable qualities of camera work, they are deployed by Baker to create formalistically driven images, in which ambiguity draws us into curiosity and uncertainty, everyday absurdity is ‘found’ and depending upon the viewer, lightens up an otherwise dull world, subverts humdrum banality, or alternatively stirs a deeply held melancholia. Three of Baker’s images are considered here to illustrate this point.

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<sup>343</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 118.

<sup>344</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 118.

<sup>345</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 118.

<sup>346</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story Interview*, 1992.



Fig. 1. Manchester, 1962. © Shirley Baker Estate

In the photograph ‘toddler angel’ (Fig. 1), for example, the split-second throwing of a hula-hoop near a curly-haired toddler is tightly framed and isolated from the surrounding scene; a tilted camera angle creates a spatially foreshortened image that transforms the toddler into a haloed cherub that some viewers also see holding a toy gun extending the image’s incongruity and intrigue. Here, the ‘decisive moment’ denies us the necessary clues to reconstruct the ‘original’ scene. Instead, we are confronted with an unresolved ambiguity, in which through dislocation incongruous elements are drawn together to suggest a new one.<sup>347</sup>



Fig 2. Manchester 1964. © Shirley Baker Estate

With the ‘Regent’ billboard photograph (Fig. 2), there are three points of reference: the billboard for ‘Regent’ petrol, the abandoned old car and a ‘No Parking’ sign. These are

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<sup>347</sup> ‘TWTC’ conversations and gallery talks with visitors and the author, June 2017.

spatially and textually triangulated, resulting in a visual/textual pun, in which each element plays off the other, and that only exists within the photographic framing.



Fig 3. Manchester 1978. © Shirley Baker Estate

The isolated arched brick structure graffitied with the word ‘shit’ and two pointing arrows (Fig. 3) may be seen as an ‘objet trouvé’. Baker’s stark, flat-on factographic style, coupled with the disquieting public appearance of the taboo word ‘shit’, produces for some viewers an uncanny scene. Others, however, respond with laughter to a risqué visual joke, like an old-style smutty seaside postcard involving an abandoned public toilet that might also be read as a homage to Duchamp’s urinal. As with Humphrey Spender, Shirley Baker ‘did not go round searching out such objects but (I) was very aware they would turn up’.<sup>348</sup>

Like Spender, Baker was fascinated by graffiti and photographs it in its many variants, perhaps most surprisingly in full colour, closely cropped, so that they are presented powerfully as *objets trouvés* or, perhaps, ‘canvases’ of unknown ‘art brut’ artists. The streets Shirley Baker photographs are in the process of clearance and there are remaining ‘crofts’. Nevertheless in her photographs, both in colour and ‘grey tone’ the urban wasteland is emphasised so that it conveys a melancholic ambiance, an eerie stillness in an atmosphere that she said was otherwise full of the noise and the heat of the

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<sup>348</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 181.

demolition that was going on all around her.<sup>349</sup> Billboards, signage, words scrawled on walls are represented as ‘chance objects’, and often form elements in complex visual and textual wordplays made possible only via the framing of the camera, and through the interpretation of the viewer.<sup>350</sup>

Without doubt Shirley Baker is driven by a search for the strange, the absurd and the improbable that as Humphrey Spender claimed already ‘abounded in everyday life’.<sup>351</sup> The skill,(the artistry, if you like) was to see ‘it’ first, and then to see ‘it’ as, and make ‘it’ possible *through*, photography. For Liz Wells, the history of documentary photography has given rise to a problematic idealisation of the ‘gifted’ and ‘privileged’ photographer, who through their particular acuity of vision acts as a kind of ‘exemplar sufferer on our behalf’.<sup>352</sup> There is another way of approaching this notion, I suggest. Through the lens of Surrealism, it is *precisely* the visual acuity of Shirley Baker that does, in fact, give rise to her complex, hybrid, formally structured and engaging images.

Highlighting the ‘artistic’ impulse of Baker’s photographs is to reinstate the artist’s subjectivity into her work, something she is clearly uncomfortable with, for arguably this idea challenged her own notion of her photographs as historical evidence and documentary record. Neither in her writings nor in her interview with Val Williams does Shirley Baker talk about her work as ‘constructed’. The humanist photographic paradigm through which she articulates her practice is entirely in keeping with the ‘type’ of photographer, and thus the kind of photography she had in her mind for herself: humanist and social documentary. Nevertheless, also conscious of any claim she might make to ‘objective truth’, she recognised that her photographs could only ever be an expression of the situation as she experienced it. By looking attentively towards her images, however, at the

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<sup>349</sup> In *Tiger in the Smoke*, Lynda Nead uses the alternative term ‘grey tone’ to that of black and white to more accurately convey the subtlety of the atmosphere, effect and affect of the photography of the period.

<sup>350</sup> Younger viewers may no longer have the experiential knowledge to interpret the denotative meaning of some of Manchester and Salford’s street signage and advertising hoardings. Nevertheless, there is still sufficient incongruity and oddity in Baker’s photographs to draw in the viewer, to provide humour or a momentary retreat into self-reflection.

<sup>351</sup> The photographer Martin Parr has claimed, ‘We are surrounded by things that are surreal; its just that we don’t see...because we are living with it’. Quoted in Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 177.

<sup>352</sup> Liz Wells, *Photography*, 77.

way they are constructed, at their content and as a ‘corpus’, alternative understandings of her work open up.

### 3.3 French Humanist Photography: the reciprocal gaze

In describing the influences upon her work, Shirley Baker refers to her liking of the “spontaneous” and “candid” photographs that emanated from a different cultural context: French humanism and Cartier-Bresson, “*the man of the moment*.”<sup>353</sup> In appreciating the work of the French photographer, it seems likely that Baker was not only responding to his so-called ‘techniques’, but also to the perceived freedom of French photographers to engage the medium expressively and yet simultaneously with a generalised sense of truthfulness to the human condition.<sup>354</sup> In 1950s Britain the work of the French humanist photographers Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), Robert Doisneau (1912-1994) and Willy Ronis (1910-2009), and of Americans such as Paul Strand (1890-1976) and Walker Evans (1903-1975), represented a photographic subjectivity and creativity that was unknown to British documentarists who, for the most part, were tied to the institutional principles and practices of commercial photography and magazines such as *Picture Post*, producing photo-journalism and regional press work.<sup>355</sup> With the closure of *Picture Post* in 1957, however, and with a popular alternative publication still to emerge (*The Sunday Times Colour Supplement* was founded in 1964), coupled with the artistic establishment’s outright hostility to photography, the scope for a more independent and artistic

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<sup>353</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story Interview*, 1992.

<sup>354</sup> By the mid 1930s, a handful of documentary photographers moved into working not as photojournalists nor press photographers but as ‘independent’ artists e.g. Bill Brandt, Walker Evans and Cartier-Bresson, so the notion of the photographer’s acuity of vision, in which they could compose scenes to ‘create’ symbolism from everyday ‘happenings’, emerged. See John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 92-94. Given Baker’s highly restricted photographic education in technical photography, the creativity and freedom of the French photographers must have been enviable. See Chapter 1.

<sup>355</sup> Bill Brandt is an exception, in that as early as 1936 he established a particular stylistic approach, a blend of his earlier exposure to Parisian Surrealism and photographic experimentation in the studio of Man Ray and the social documentary style he encountered on moving to Britain in 1933. His book *The English at Home* (1936) was conceived as a collection of photographs that expressed an entirely subjective interpretation of English life across the classes. Taken as a whole, the publication forms a visual essay that eschews any attempt to be propagandist or reformist, subordinating, as John Roberts points out, any historical detail that fixes the photographs sociologically and historically, and instead offers the ‘reader’ ‘conceptual relations between images’ that built up ‘page after page’. Ian Walker claims Brandt’s work might be more accurately understood as ‘documentary fictions’. See also: John Taylor, ‘Picture the Past, Documentary Realism in the 30s’, *Ten*:8, (1982), 30. Brandt was cited by Baker as an early influence, along with Cartier-Bresson.

photography was extremely limited.<sup>356</sup> As post-war British photographer Roger Mayne recalled to this author, the work of the French and American ‘progressives’ was received with hostility by many post-war British amateur camera clubs, still wedded to ideas of Pictorialism or genre based themes barely altered, as far as Mayne was concerned, since the turn of the century.<sup>357</sup>

My discussion of the move towards a personal engagement with the language of realism focusses on the French humanists rather than on the American ‘progressives’ because the work of the latter was less influential in Britain in the early 1950s, and in any case the former was cited by Baker herself as an influence.<sup>358</sup> Writing about post-war photography, sociologist Peter Hamilton identifies the particular historical conditions in France that gave rise to what he refers to as the French ‘humanist photography paradigm’.<sup>359</sup> Although its foundational principles share much with British documentary movement: a focus on naturalism, an empathy for ‘the people’ and quotidian life (the ‘everyday’ and the ‘ordinary’), Hamilton proposes that the special qualities of French humanist photography were the product of a unique conjunction: the country’s long revolutionary history, the Popular Frontism of the 1930s, the Fall of Paris in 1940 and the resistance movement, all of which invested French photography in France with a special ‘moral purpose and a distinctive subject matter’.<sup>360</sup> Six themes were central to these photographers: the universality of human emotions; historicity in the form of background context; quotidian life of the *class populaire*; empathy or complicity with the subject

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<sup>356</sup> The extreme limitation on professional exhibiting opportunities for photography in Britain was taken up by Roger Mayne in his campaigning efforts with Arts Council of England in the early 1950s. Author’s conversations with Mayne.

<sup>357</sup> Such disregard is hard to imagine today.

<sup>358</sup> Roger Mayne and Hugo van Wadenoyen did include works by Paul Strand in their Combined Society touring photo exhibitions, alongside those of Cartier-Bresson. Roger Mayne in conversation with the author, 2014.

<sup>359</sup> Peter Hamilton, ‘France and Frenchness’, in Stuart Hall, (ed) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London, Open University, 2000), 76 - 151. Of course, it should be noted that other photographic languages engaged with realism did exist in Europe post-war, for example *Subjektive Photography* that was in part an attempt to distance the *Subjektive* photographers from the rise of commercial, documentary and journalistic photography. Elsewhere *Subjektive Photography* retained many of the experimental techniques of the Bauhaus before the Second World War, but subject matter was more complex, ‘reflecting the darker aspects of the human condition through their expressionistic and hallucinatory images’. See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/subjective-photography>. Accessed 10 April 2019.

<sup>360</sup> Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 91 -94.

(characterised as a complicit gaze); commonality in the viewpoint of the photographer mirroring that of the *class populaire*; and monochromaticity. These principles informed a range of subject matters such as street life, shops and bistros, children and play, the family, love and lovers, Paris and its sights, the homeless and the marginal, popular fetes and celebrations: representations that served as unifying forces in a society traumatized by the Occupation and in the 1950s by the divisive modernization of France.<sup>361</sup> Referring to his own practice at the time, Willi Ronis describes how:

This atmosphere of what I would call feeling, which is strongly imprinted in my photographic choices of the times, it was not simply due to my character and my sensitivity, it was equally present in the ambience of the moment, since we had rediscovered liberty, and we felt very united. There was no longer the fear that existed during the occupation ... That changed everything.<sup>362</sup>

Cartier-Bresson's much quoted 'candid' approach to photographing in the street and his seizing the 'decisive moment' have become axiomatic to the principles of documentary. Peter Galassi, amongst others, locates these concepts in the photographer's early interest in Surrealism.<sup>363</sup> Surrealist themes and ideas, he argues, would prove 'inescapable' for photographers (even those distanced from organised surrealist groups) exploring the world outside the studio, with unobtrusive handheld cameras such as the new lightweight Leica.<sup>364</sup> The photographer became 'an urban *flaneur*, a wanderer open to chance encounters, ... If one were attuned to the fleeting gestures, enigmatic objects and veiled eroticism glimpsed in the street, an unsuspected pattern of affinities - a new kind of poetic knowledge - might be revealed'.<sup>365</sup> The belief that the camera could 'snare and fix these moments of instantaneous, lyrical perception' had many important adherents.<sup>366</sup> The humanist photographer came to be thought of as particularly gifted in conveying human emotion photographically. Moreover, as anthropologist Parvati Nair has noted,

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<sup>361</sup> Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 94.

<sup>362</sup> Ronis quoted, Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 103.

<sup>363</sup> Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson, The Early Work*, quoted in Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 109.

<sup>364</sup> Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson, The Early Work*, quoted in Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 109.

<sup>365</sup> Cartier-Bresson used a Leica Rangefinder, and one lens, a 50mm all his life.

<sup>366</sup> Maria Morris Hambourg and Christopher Phillips, *The New Vision: Photography Between the World Wars*, (New York, MOMA, 1989), quoted Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 109.

their relationship to their chosen subject would also come to be characterised through human qualities such as solidarity, empathy, compassion, sympathy and even tenderness, which become synonymous with the ethos of the 'committed' or 'concerned' documentarian.<sup>367</sup> The street has become 'a stage on which all sorts of amazing stories are enacted, offered as a continuous spectacle, an unending series of tableaux'.<sup>368</sup> Photography, according to the writer Mac Orlan, became the most effective medium for 'capturing moments in the flowing stream of daily life' becoming, what he termed, 'poems of the street'.

Despite humanist photography's expression of Frenchness, the idea of 'the universality of a photographic language' also became a defining concept for many French photographers, releasing images from their dependence on texts and able to traverse different cultures.<sup>369</sup> Hamilton locates this approach in a number of events in post-war France and the USA. The founding of Magnum Photo Agency in Paris and New York in 1947 (its founders included Henri Cartier-Bresson), with publication projects such as *People are People of the World Over*, is regarded by Hamilton as the antecedent to the popular exhibition *The Family of Man* staged at The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York in 1955.<sup>370</sup> Magnum's approach was founded on the idea that its members could work on 'integrated story ideas' that transcended cultural specificity and spoke of a universal humanity, images that could be syndicated to a mass magazine audience, which though not yet global was numerous in both France, Germany and the USA.<sup>371</sup> In France in 1954, the *Biennale Photo-Cinema* was installed at the Grand Palais in Paris, accompanied by an album of photographs whose title translated as *One Hundred Photos Without Words*.<sup>372</sup> The culmination of this universality was the *The Family of Man*

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<sup>367</sup> Hamburg and Phillips (1994), quoted, Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 109.

<sup>368</sup> Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 109.

<sup>369</sup> Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 147.

<sup>370</sup> One of Magnum's founders, Robert Capa, 'saw the value in proposing global commissions to the picture magazines of the day', for which 'the agency's international membership was uniquely placed'. The first Magnum global essay, *People are People the World Over*, was spread over 12 issues of the magazine *Ladies Home Journal* (1948). See: <https://pro.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&ALID=29YL530CMLAY>. Accessed: 5 May 2020.

<sup>371</sup> Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 144.

<sup>372</sup> Peter Hamilton, *France and Frenchness*, 147.

(1955), for which Edward Steichen (1879-1973) developed a highly controversial, de-contextualised presentation in which (one time) editorial photographs were displayed without written captions; images that were meant to affect the viewer emotionally, rather than to inform.<sup>373</sup>

One can see many parallels between French Humanist photography and the work of Shirley Baker. She too speaks of “*being involved*”, yet at the same time recognizes the importance of “*not being intrusive*”; of “*not posing*” her subject and of “*being governed by chance*.” Her photographs would be “*spontaneous*”, “*candid a la Henri Cartier-Bresson*.”<sup>374</sup> Sympathetic to the people, she is “*caught up*” in their “*ordinary*” lives, and the changes going on around them. She identifies herself as “*compulsive*”, “*caught up*” in something bigger than herself, that would envelop her for twenty years in a sense of moral purpose, searching for “*the truth*”, even though she also acknowledged this term was problematic and was probably better described as her own “*personal truth*” as she saw it:

*The basic thing I was after ... is truth. And this is the sort of thing that has really appealed to me about photographs, and I mean I know it's a silly word, as truth can mean anything, twisted round, but, it's a kind of personal truth maybe. Maybe that's more to the point...I mean that a photograph has to be, should be, the truth as the photographer sees it.*<sup>375</sup>

### 3.4 Conclusion

Humanist photography was an influence upon Shirley Baker’s photographic practice. She tells us so; and across her oeuvre many of its concerns and themes are present: the street, children and play, the family, love and lovers, the homeless and the marginal, regional fetes and shows, and leisure. I suggest, however, that predominately contextualising Baker’s work only within the framework of British social documentary and/or the post-war humanist tradition runs the risk of rendering other intriguing and noteworthy aspects of her work either invisible or awkwardly non-compliant with the image of Baker as an empathetic ‘concerned documentarian’ hitherto constructed by

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<sup>373</sup> From 1955 onwards, the exhibition was seen by nine million people worldwide, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Family\\_of\\_Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Family_of_Man). Accessed: 12 April 2019.

<sup>374</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story Interview*, 1992.

<sup>375</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story Interview*, 1992.

social historians and myself as a curator. Other tendencies *can* also be discerned in her work and I propose to connect these to alternative traditions in British ‘realist’ photography: Surrealism and what Walker terms, in relation to the work of Bill Brandt, ‘documentary fiction’.<sup>376</sup> Brandt’s work, which Shirley Baker admired as young woman, has, according to Walker, been repeatedly described as social documentary. However, as Brandt’s suggests, his interests were always more to do with the aesthetics of the image, its metaphorical and allegorical meanings, than any social concern. Does such thinking help us re-situate the work of Baker also?

My argument in this chapter is not that Shirley Baker was consciously aware of the emergent history of ‘documentary’ photography from its earliest uses in surveying and classifying ‘the other’, or in ‘preserving’ cultural heritage under threat, nor was she aware of or actively engaged in debates and practices regarding the reformulation of post-war photographic realism. Rather, my point is that Shirley Baker’s work resonates with many aspects of these photographic precedents, but in ways that transcend neat categorisation. Side stepping established genres, however, runs the risk of creating perplexity. Yet Baker successfully overcomes this by creating images which whilst rich in ambivalence and ambiguity, are at the same time intelligible to viewers because of their points of contact with photographic precursors.

I have also suggested that different discursive framings (e.g. reform photography, British reportage, French humanism, and surrealist anthropology) not only give rise to a wider range of potential readings for Shirley Baker’s images, and that her images can evoke *simultaneously* different and competing interpretations, dependent upon the theoretical perspective of the researcher/curator/viewer. Such an acknowledgement, argues John Roberts, does not invalidate the ‘truth’ claims of photography as such, but rather insists that the viewer/researcher undertakes a greater degree of critical engagement with the mechanisms through which a given photograph claims its ‘truth’.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic*, 181.

<sup>377</sup> John Roberts argues that claims to ‘truth’ is a predisposition of all photography due to its inescapable link to the indexical. The question for Roberts lies in how we conceive of the idea of ‘truth’. See *Photography and its Violations*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2014), 25-39.

It is my contention that instead of seeking to resolve Baker's photography within a particular genre we should precisely draw out its polysemic nature through a variety of research, publication and curatorial strategies, so giving 'permission' to viewers to bring their own experiences to bear on the construction of meaning, (see Chapters 6 and 9).

Furthermore, I argue, nurturing active and affiliative viewing is what enables the work of Shirley Baker to have relevance for a wider range of people today. Questions arise from this ambition, however. Is promoting photographic polysemy a 'free licence', that 'anything goes' regarding interpretation and experience? What responsibility, if any, to the photographer and their original intentionality for the work does a curator have when working to encourage active and even critical viewing? Such questions point also to the differences between the critical engagement and interpretation in academic writing that commonly offers ideological and critical readings and exhibition curatorship in which competing priorities including 'real-world' considerations that may involve relations with a living photographer, a family estate, or even a dealer, and concerns for image conservation and perhaps market value—that can lean heavily on curatorial liberty.

These questions will be explored in the following chapters which describe and analyse my iterative curatorship of Shirley Baker's photographs—a process of metamorphosis. When first encountering Baker's work their value was principally as historical-descriptive images, being conserved in a social history archive. In presenting her photographs in an 'art exhibition' I effectively re-framed them as subjective and humanist 'auteur' documentary. Latterly, a participatory process that interwove various creative approaches to photographic interpretation and image would mobilize the multimodality of Baker's images.

## PART TWO: THE EXHIBITIONARY COMPLEX

### Chapter 4

#### Women and Children; and Loitering Men: London

##### 4.0 Introduction

Between 2014 - 2017, I curated an exhibition and published a book that featured Shirley Baker's photography. Entitled *Women and Children; and Loitering Men*, the exhibition was seen by over 400,000 people, in three major cities, London (2015), Madrid (2016) and Manchester (2017), with the book going into three editions. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, these exhibitions are presented as case studies that reflect on curation as a 'crystalline' practice—an interdisciplinary creative inquiry that engages arts-based and social science research methods to elicit knowledge production.<sup>378</sup> My account in this chapter focuses less on the knowledges generated by my inquiry — these are discussed in the Manchester case study (Chapter 6) — as on the activity of curation and how that extended and made complex my understanding of, and relationship to, both 'Shirley Baker' — 'the photographer' and her 'work' — and viewer reaction and interaction.<sup>379</sup>

The exhibition did not begin as an academic project, but rather as a personal discovery followed by my suggestion to Shirley Baker herself that I might organize a solo exhibition of her work in London. One of the aims of this chapter (and the next two) is to make more coherent the 'messiness' of exhibition organising for curators, and to deconstruct, for those who regularly attend such shows, the making of an exhibition. Additionally, situating myself reflexively in the research process has led me to reflect on my own evolving role in relation to Shirley Baker's photographs, and the host institutions with which I collaborated, and to consider the dialogical and intersubjective relationship between myself and the audience/participants in the meaning-making process.

Much of my preparation for the London exhibition was based on my previous curatorial interests and experience, but I did also draw inspiration from the ideas of John Berger, particularly his writings on photography and memory (see discussion of Berger's

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<sup>378</sup> See my discussion of the 'crystallisation' method in the Introduction, 33.

<sup>379</sup> Indeed, it was audience reception of Shirley Baker's photographs and the exhibition that set me on the course of this PhD research.

work in the Introduction). The case study presents an account of my evolving strategies, and of the identification, evaluation and selection of images. I go on to consider how I deployed exhibitionary strategies to affect and extend the audience's apprehension of the photographer's work, to implicitly 'destabilize' its status as historical record and social documentary, and to prompt alternative photographic readings and meanings. The second case study focuses on the Madrid exhibition, and serves to illustrate how Shirley Baker's photographs became re-activated by a political gaze that was contextually and temporally contingent, and totally unpredicted by my exhibition strategies. Manchester forms the third case study (Chapter 6). My curatorial impulse in 2015 had been to highlight the formal and aesthetic qualities of Baker's work, and to secure for the photographer the coveted recognition I believed she deserved. Following the first two exhibitions, my interests shifted to questions of meaning and audience reception. Most importantly, the Manchester exhibition presented a curatorial opportunity for experimentation: how to respond to the unique locational viewing context in which identification and mutual recognition of people, places and 'the historical past' might play a significant role in the audience *experience* of the photographs.

#### **4.1 The London Exhibition**

*Women, Children; and Loitering Men* was commissioned by The Photographers' Gallery (TPG) and opened in July 2015. It attracted a record 84,000 visitors over a period of two months and received excellent national media coverage. I conducted numerous interviews with journalists and appeared on BBC Radio Four's *Woman's Hour*. Given the lack of public recognition for Shirley Baker's photographs, the gallery found the exhibition an unexpected success, and her very 'obscurity' became central to the publicity narrative. Gallery staff noted an unusually intense level of viewer engagement something they had rarely experienced with historical work. This was demonstrated by visitors staying for longer than usual, and the gallery being animated by conversation, with viewers talking to each other not only about the exhibition itself, but strikingly about what individual works meant to them personally.<sup>380</sup> Spectators were, in other words, engaging the photographs through personal experience. After a workshop for

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<sup>380</sup> At TPG viewers stayed for much longer than the average viewing time for a work of art which is widely estimated to be between 2-30 seconds. See, <https://thinkingmuseum.com/product/slow-looking-online-masterclass/>. Accessed: 4 March 2020.

teenagers the gallery Education Officer wryly reported that they had all enjoyed Shirley Baker's photographs much more than the fashion exhibition upstairs. They found the images curious, funny and sad, and they had related to the children in the photographs. This phenomenon was the beginning of a critical inquiry as new questions began to surface: what *are* the photographs of Shirley Baker, what do they *do* and *how* do they do it?

#### **4.2 Laying the foundations**

Shirley Baker's unexpected death in September 2014 resulted in a creative freedom I would not otherwise have had. Back in 2012, I had proposed to TPG a one-woman show of 'Shirley Baker'. Two years later, and with me having almost abandoned the project, the gallery confirmed their interest. Given the delay, it was shocking that this news was closely followed by the photographer's death from breast cancer. The gallery wanted the show to open eleven months later. But at that point there was no exhibition plan in place. For a moment, it felt as if the project might collapse and so I was relieved when they confirmed they were still committed.

In working with a living artist on a solo show, it is common for the curator's role to be relegated to enabling the realization of the artist's preferred interpretation and vision. Even when an artist is deceased, a curator can find themselves negotiating with and conforming to a family, an estate or a dealer's preferred interpretation of 'the work', and even finding their access to borrowing material restricted or denied. The idea that an artist's work might be approached curatorially as 'raw material' is rarely the case. I have personally encountered this over a number of exhibitions in which variously artists, private galleries, and indeed one host institutional curator, suggested that I am 'behaving' in 'ways' that would be acceptable for an artist, but are considered too creatively interpretational for a curator.

As I have suggested in Chapters 2 and 3, Shirley Baker's photographs had been framed by understandings of the documentary genre, and that she herself subscribed to this view of her work. With Shirley Baker's death and no family interventions, I now had scope to look at her work differently, undertaking a meticulous historical and analytical investigation of the photographer's 'work'. This entailed methodical visual analysis across her entire oeuvre, a rigorous evaluation of both professional materials and

personal effects, and recording detailed interviews with family and colleagues. Such comprehensive investigatory and analytic research methods prompted alternate understandings of ‘Shirley Baker’ and her photography. It also revealed a previously unrecognised visual repertoire, including noting the prevalence of women and children throughout the twenty years of photographing in Manchester and Salford, an insight that ultimately led to the exhibition’s theme and title. Additionally, and significantly for myself, I had the opportunity to creatively ‘shape’ the exhibition. Curating Shirley Baker’s work would not simply be a matter of offering viewers an alternative historical ‘reading’ of her photographs — though it would achieve this. I would additionally engage Baker’s photographs in a creative exhibitionary praxis that was questioning of the performance and meaning of so-called documentary photography *per se*; and that, in turn, presented exhibition viewers with ways of relating to ‘historical’ photographic material beyond their more conventional museological installation as artefacts from, or representing, ‘the past’. The remainder of the present chapter is devoted to an explication of this praxis.

For three months immediately following her funeral, and aided with the help of two intern students, I sorted through and cleared the photographer’s small loft studio and office-cum-spare bedroom, scoured her bookshelves, and emptied drawers of her personal papers, effects and photographs prior the sale of the family home by her widow.<sup>381</sup>



Fig. 4. Shirley Baker’s dining room floor provided the first opportunity to see the full scope of her corpus of photographs

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<sup>381</sup> My helpers were Holly Myles and Natalie Meer from Manchester Art School.

This immersive connection with the deceased photographer's home was deeply affecting. The intimacy of 'the home' provided an experience quite unlike looking at photographs in an orderly workplace studio or in an archive.<sup>382</sup> Only after a few visits did I begin using the white cotton gloves of a professional art handler.

One of my first tasks was to make a temporary database of her own printed photographs — the first time that Shirley Baker's work had been formally classified. Baker's photographs, contact sheets and slides, professional and private photographic effects (cameras, magazines, newspaper clippings, photo-books, letters to editors, family snapshots, school reports, etc.) provided the material basis for the first biography of the photographer and an understanding of her working practice, presented as Chapter 1 of this thesis. Just as important as the unearthing of material artefacts were my encounters with the intimate spaces she inhabited, which generated a *feeling* of connection with the photographer. Anthropologist Kathryn Geurts has claimed that as researchers, 'we often find ourselves drenched' with the *other*.<sup>383</sup> I was drenched with 'Shirley Baker'. Did the affective experience of 'Shirley Baker' — my intimate handling of the 'things' that she placed value on, being in her home, getting to know her family — make me a different kind of curator? I think so. It transformed me from being a curator focusing principally on 'the work', to being receptive to what sensory ethnographer Sarah Pink refers to as 'the multiplicity of sensory ways of knowing (by) incorporating a whole range of different embodied experiences and emotions'.<sup>384</sup> This experience was also the start of questioning the status of vision *per se*, and its inter-connection with other senses, that would challenge my thinking about both my research process and the ontology of photography more generally. This was later explored through the exhibition narrative, temporality and spatiality (see below).

Although looking through, identifying, labelling and boxing up Shirley Baker's photographs revealed many new images and thematic categories, I decided to curate from her 'series' of photographs of working-class communities in inner city Manchester and

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<sup>382</sup> Discovering materials in archives does not come without affective excitements. But I certainly felt a difference in encountering Shirley Baker's work in her 'home' as opposed to the Manchester Record Office, where part of the 'street series' is also held.

<sup>383</sup> Kathryn Linn Geurts, 'On Embodied Consciousness in Anlo-Ewe worlds: A Cultural phenomenology of the fetal position', *Ethnography*, (London, Sage, 2003, Vol. 4 (3)), 386.

<sup>384</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, (London, Sage, 2015), 62.

Salford.<sup>385</sup> These resonated with my interest in post-war documentary photography and representation of Northern working-class culture. To some extent, Baker's photographs of working-class communities had been pre-defined as 'a collection' or 'series' by the photographer's two books (*Street Photographs*, 1989 and *Streets and Spaces*, 2000) as well as by the DPA. The photographer's own 'archive', however, revealed many more photographs, taken over a longer period of time. I found I had a different 'story' to tell about these.

My knowledge of post-war British photography was brought to bear on my initial interpretation of her works, but I felt that I needed to know more about post-war Manchester in order to construct a finer historical context. This research was time-consuming. I interviewed photographers active in Manchester in the 1960s, read about the local urban redevelopment strategies and what was termed the 'slum clearance' programme. Gradually, I pieced together a chronology of all the publications I could find featuring her work, and read through letters to and from prospective magazine and book editors. In this way I used material traces to tell 'a story' about the photographic distribution, meaning and reception of some of Shirley Baker's images — a story that later informed the exhibition as 'The Cabinet of Biographical Things' (referred to later in this present chapter).<sup>386</sup>

There is a potent performance in photography that can 'colonise memory and the imagination'.<sup>387</sup> Upon seeing Shirley Baker's photographs of children living in the clearance districts of Salford and Manchester, my mother declared that she quite expected to see me. "*It could have been you*". I, too, recognised something in these photographs that particularly moved me. In her project *Collective Visions*, artist Lorie Novak, demonstrates that viewers can 'adopt' a photograph of an other person into their own familial narrative — what Marianne Hirsch terms a *familial look*.<sup>388</sup> Shaped by our memories and personal history, yet idiosyncratic and 'untheorizable', our suturing into the family photographs of 'others' — that Hirsch identifies as a form of desire — works

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<sup>385</sup> New works and categories included, for instance: Blackpool, women and dogs, dog shows, older women, the South of France, window reflections.

<sup>386</sup> This term has been coined as a consequence of this PhD research.

<sup>387</sup> Penny Tinkler, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research*, (London, Sage, 2013), 13.

<sup>388</sup> See Lorie Novak in Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 93, and <https://www.lorienovak.com/projects/collected-visions/>. Accessed 5 May 2020.

in a manner, I suggest, unrealisable in painting.<sup>389</sup> In Chapters 6 and 9 I will provide further evidence of how viewers form potent connections to Baker's 'non family' photographs.<sup>390</sup> Some months into my research, I realized that my early years living in a Leeds inner-city working-class community had something to do with my attraction to Shirley Baker's photographs.<sup>391</sup> Except perhaps for biographers and historians, empathy is a difficult word to introduce into scholarly research.<sup>392</sup> It is an emotion that for many academics conveys too much sentiment, even risks sentimentality.<sup>393</sup> If empathy is to be understood as an 'heuristic device', the imaginative activity summoned by the historian, 'to make sense of the past' and, indeed, to re-convey that past affectively to a reader, in turn activating the reader's imagination, then it was empathy that I began to feel for the recently deceased 'Shirley Baker'.<sup>394</sup> As there was not yet a published biography of Shirley Baker, my empathic response resulted in imagining 'her story': a woman, professionally trained, prevented by gender from working for *The Guardian* newspaper, a woman who took photographs for more than sixty years yet barely showed them and did not receive full recognition for that work in her own lifetime. This was a 'story' I felt, as a curator, compelled to redress through curating Shirley Baker's photographs at a leading photography gallery.

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<sup>389</sup> I suggest that Joan Eardley's paintings of children in 1960s Glasgow — painted, indeed, from photographs by Oscar Marzaroli — would not have the same 'affiliative' effect or be as affective for a viewer. See *Joan Eardley*, National Galleries of Scotland, (2016).

<sup>390</sup> Hirsch, does not empirically demonstrate how the process of affiliation actually occurs. Through the *Shirley Baker Oral History Project*, participants 'adopted' photographs to perform as 'stand-in' photographs for the absence of their own 'family photos' and albums (see Chapter 6). I am grateful to Professor Penny Tinkler, my oral history project collaborator, for our exchanges on the process of the 'stand-in' photograph, and for reading her unpublished paper.

<sup>391</sup> My first childhood home was on Belle Vue Road in inner-city Leeds (1963 - 1967). I was born two years after Shirley Baker commenced photographing in very similar neighbourhoods, just over the Pennine hills in Manchester and Salford, in 1961. The link between research interests and personal history is developed by Robert R. Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher*, (New Orleans, Spring Journal Books, 2013).

<sup>392</sup> Despite the growing body of literature on 'affect', explorations and applications of empathy are more limited. An exception is Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect Trauma and Contemporary Art*, (California, Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>393</sup> Vivienne Little, 'What is Historical Imagination?', (*Teaching History*, Historical Association, No. 36, June 1983), 30, and Leslie M. Harris, 'Imperfect Archives and the Historical Imagination', (*The Public Historian*, 2014, Vol. 36, No. 1.), 80.

<sup>394</sup> Vivienne Little touches on the requirement of the historian to produce an affective narrative through crafting their writing. This finds an equivalent, I propose, in the aesthetic skills of the photographer. See Little, 30.

### 4.3 The Image Repertoire of Shirley Baker <sup>395</sup>

The urgency of boxing up Shirley Baker's photographs prior to the sale of her home resulted in an unusual move. All the images I was interested in researching further (including 'older women' and 'women and dogs') were taken to my own home. This highly unusual situation afforded me unlimited contact with the work. I began to lay out the prints on my living room floor. Spatially arranging the photographs made for an impactful visualisation of the 'image repertoire' of Shirley Baker within the boundaries I had defined for this project: the urban street scenes. In total, I handled over five hundred black and white images, hundreds of negatives, tens of contact sheets and three hundred colour slides. Looking intensely at these artefacts was the first stage in categorising, analysing and curating the images. The range of 'subjects' proved broader than either of Baker's two publications suggested. Now, with a sense of the material as a whole, I photographed each of her photographic prints and created a new digital archive on my laptop. In this way, I built a large digital picture library (*my* archive). This was the foundation for categorisation and re-categorisation of Shirley Baker's images according to different taxonomies and organisational principles.

We must assume that Shirley Baker produced her prints in the 1960s and 1970s primarily for her own satisfaction, for she told photography historian Val Williams she did not have exhibiting in mind, nor was she 'on commission' from a newspaper nor magazine.<sup>396</sup> Most of her prints were of a particular format: around 25cm x 22cm (10"x8") — a standard press image size for the period, suitable for sending out to prospective media publishers.<sup>397</sup> Nor did she sign her prints. Like many other photographers working at the time, she had no sense of these being collectable works of 'art'.<sup>398</sup> Paying attention to the information on the verso of her prints proved fascinating, as much for what was left out as what was stated. Whilst Shirley Baker provided technical information included shutter speed, she rarely either titled her images or provided specific street names, including (if at all) only broad locational information and date. Such absences would in time lead to collaborative knowledge production with local

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<sup>395</sup> Media Theorist Paul Frosh uses the term 'image repertoire' in his book, *The Image Factory*, (Oxford, Berg, 2003), 27.

<sup>396</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*, (London, British Library, 1992).

<sup>397</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*.

<sup>398</sup> Shirley Baker produced a series of larger 'collectable' prints in 1993 for The Photographer's Gallery Print Room sales. Prior to her death she did go back to sign some of her vintage prints on the verso.

audiences in Manchester (see Chapter 6) through an oral history project. She did, however, stamp each photograph with her address.

Before discussing the principles which guided my selection of the exhibition images, I briefly consider here the photographer's choices about what is and is not printed.

Viewing contact sheets and negatives provides 'clues' to understanding what a given photographer thinks is interesting at the time of printing. What is and is not printed tells its own story that is commonly lost in time. In looking at Baker's contact sheets, I started to question the photographer's (mainly unanswerable) motivations for taking certain images and then subsequently printing them up. What was the story Shirley Baker wanted to tell by printing, for example, the toddler behind the curtain looking close to tears rather than the moment she is laughing with a little boy standing below her window sill just seconds before? The printed image did not feature in any of her publications, arguably because it conforms to the stereotypical 'realist' image of 'the neglected child' redolent of nineteenth-century photography, and this may have been the reason for ultimately disregarding it.

Looking at the photographer's sequencing of images also helped me form ideas about the temporality of her photographic process: how she took photographs in time and space. From studying her contact sheets it was evident that the photographer sometimes followed her subjects, or she would alight on a particularly intriguing location and then wait for the 'right' composition to be 'performed' in front of her camera. She would try out a number of different ideas, framing and re-framing her subject, enabling her to see things differently, and to see different things. These are unhurried photographs, not the work of a newspaper photographer, and anything but the 'spontaneous snapshot' Baker said she admired.<sup>399</sup>

With nearly five hundred photographs from which to select, I had to generate an organisational principle for curating the exhibition. An obvious museological strategy was to exhibit the photographs chronologically. I did not find this a satisfying curatorial approach: too obvious. I was, nevertheless, interested in considering whether Shirley Baker's style, content and form had changed over the years, and, thus, I introduced an

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<sup>399</sup> Newspaper photographers were expected to take photographs that illustrated a story of that day. The turnover of work was not only high in a given day, but also diverse in subject. As recounted to the author by two local newspaper photographers working in the 1960s.

additional cataloguing system based on date of production. Looking at the verso of each print, I noted down any written dates, and compared these with the dates of published photographs in the two photographic publications and in the Mary Evans Picture Library (all digitization authorised by the photographer). I also referred to my chronology of Baker's home addresses put together with the help of her husband and on-line street directories and telephone directories.

I expected to see significant changes in the photographer's style over a twenty-year period. The differences were, however, subtle. The work of the early to mid-1960s responded to the street's strong formal perspective, giving rise to a 'classic' wide-angled, Renaissance composition resulting in a photographic 'urban picturesque' in which people and place were situated. Photographs from the mid 1960s onwards increasingly assumed more of a 'straight-on flatness' that depicted naturalistic 'moments' that the photographer had singled out and 'freeze-framed' from the daily goings-on in the street.<sup>400</sup> There were additionally more single-person 'portraits' and close-ups of children in these later works. Archives and collections have in recent years become the focus of scholarly attention and a 'privileged site of critique'.<sup>401</sup> For photographer and theorist Allan Sekula, the 'archival paradigm' is a form of abstraction in which 'the complexity and richness of use' — the specific context of production — is lost, resulting instead in a 'principle of generic similarity and iconic equivalence'.<sup>402</sup> Whilst I acknowledge Sekula's critique of the 'loss of context' that may lead to dehistoricisation and depoliticization, I found that noticing 'visual equivalences' (their presence or absence) between pictures contributed to my empirical method of attending to Baker's materials; and this enabled me to productively form new ways of seeing, interpreting and classifying defining Shirley Baker's photographs.<sup>403</sup> For example, my attention was drawn to the quantity of images of children as opposed to adults, the prevalence of women against the much smaller number of men, as discussed in Chapter 2. Some men do appear: for example, the men carrying out the demolition work, or the elderly or the 'down and out'. But more often it is

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<sup>400</sup> Val Williams uses the term 'straight-on flatness'. Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life story interview*.

<sup>401</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories*, (Oxford, Berg, 2001), 4.

<sup>402</sup> Alan Sekula, 'Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capital', quoted in J. Evans and S. Hall (eds) *Visual Culture: The Reader*, (London, Sage, 1999), 183–4.

<sup>403</sup> In describing my use of the Grounded Theory method I expand on the similarities between my curatorial method and that of coding, engaging the basic principles of noticing, comparing and contrasting equivalences and differences. See Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

children, then women, with some elderly or homeless men, who feature in Baker's photographs. Was this an incidental feature, merely an accident of the photographer's personal timetable? Or can we speculate that Shirley Baker was, overall, more interested in the lives of children and women?<sup>404</sup>

Sustained observing, categorising, questioning, and (re)evaluating Baker's images enabled me to 'see' new aspects to the photographer's work. This included, for example, her repeated attention to: doorsteps, thresholds, end walls, and ginnels (locational indicators *and* compositional devices); smoke and smog (signs of demolition and pollution that also created aesthetic and atmospheric photographic effect); fires and urban ruins (that both conveyed the process of demolition *and* created an affective urban picturesque).<sup>405</sup> In thinking about what the women and children were 'doing' in the photographs, I introduced new thematic categories: 'work', 'leisure' and 'play' - challenging myself in my interpretations of Shirley Baker's images. What constituted work? Was a woman sitting on a doorstep dressed in her housecoat working when chatting to her neighbour? When children were building dens was this a form of playful working at being adult? Was all play the same? Re-categorising the images presented numerous possibilities for re-thinking interpretational framings, as well as asking further questions about Shirley Baker's working method.

An overarching theme for the exhibition began to emerge, with a focus on children and women. I continued, however, to observe closely, in this way focusing not just on subject content, but additionally on how the photographer 'orchestrated' the unique photographic visual properties of an image. I noted how the photographer engaged perspective and framing (see p. 8-9), but particularly what drew my attention was how her images hold a 'concentrated moment' that results in an intensity that photographic anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards has suggested is part of photography's performativity and its 'heightening effect on the subject-matter'.<sup>406</sup> Many of Shirley Baker's

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<sup>404</sup> When considering 'the street' series in entirety, it is clear that there are many 'glaring' absences in this corpus; male defined work is largely overlooked (except for some portrayal of the demolition gangs); home life, pub activities, weekend life in the street, churches and schools, shops and shopping, sporting events, etc., so that really we can say that Baker's 'street' series is, in fact, a very partial view and not really representative of working-class culture or indeed a 'community' more generally. This point is further developed in the section on the oral history project of the Manchester case study.

<sup>405</sup> For an exploration of the affective viewing of representations of ruins, the drama of smoke and smog in post-war representation, see Lynda Nead, *Tiger in the Smoke*, (London, Yale University Press, 2017), 15-95.

<sup>406</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 18.

photographs exploit this 'heightening effect' well. For example, a group of women around an alleyway door inscribed with the word 'United' (Fig. 5) is presented as a 'scene' and 'discrete display', detached from the actuality of the performance within the living moment. In being brought forth into visibility, via photography, the photograph gives 'separate prominence to the unnoticed and, more importantly, creates energy at the edge'.<sup>407</sup>

If you are not from Manchester or a football fan, the cultural 'baggage attached to the word 'United' might not be apparent. Manchester United's home-ground, Old Trafford, is actually in Salford, not Manchester. There is not only a fierce rivalry between the two clubs, Manchester City and Manchester United, but a rivalry with traces of sectarianism. Although not exclusively, United is the team supported by Irish Catholics. Thus, in Baker's images is a latent story of sport, gender, religion, cultural identity and place. Did Shirley Baker know anything about football? I prefer my interpretation of the image, which is that the photographer was alluding to the women's shared circumstances and solidarity: 'United'.



Fig. 5. In taking groups around the exhibition, it was pointed out the word scrawled on the wall in its entirety would have been *Manchester United* and, indeed, the little boy in red and white was sporting, probably entirely by chance, the team's colours.  
© Shirley Baker Estate

By contrasting a full range of Shirley Baker's works, I noticed a pattern to her image construction. There was often a 'visual pun', as discussed in the previous chapter, that only existed through photographic framing. Her appropriation of found text (often graffiti) triangulated with one or two other points of alignment from the 'actual' moment/

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<sup>407</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 18.

event, whether this involved a human, animal or was architectural, and framed by the camera, created an intensity of viewing and an energy in which the scene was transformed into 'a photograph'. Shirley Baker was, I propose, 'constructing' or moulding her photographic images from the found elements of the city, in what I suggest is an intuitive sense of the enigmatic, in the manner of the surrealistic, in that everyday objects and scenes could take on a significance (symbolically, wittily and or formally) beyond their literal appearance.<sup>408</sup> I came to consider this 'device' as one of the singularities of Shirley Baker's aesthetic approach in making the familiar strange, something that had gone unremarked by previous commentators and which called for curatorial attention in the forthcoming exhibition.

In her book *Street Photographs*, Shirley Baker features sixteen colour works. The noteworthiness of this 1965 experiment is discussed in Chapter 1. What I am highlighting here is that it was by discovering the collection of three hundred Kodachrome slides that I was able to further comprehend Baker's working practices. It is clear on studying the slides that working *with* and *in* colour substantially changed what and how Shirley Baker looked and photographed.<sup>409</sup> Whilst grey-tone photography had come to be coded as the language of photographic realism, in her short-lived body of colour work, it is evident that Shirley Baker is 'seeing' in colour, producing works that are visually expressive in a different way to her grey tone images. Indeed, colour becomes, I suggest, 'the' defining subject *of* these photographs. Its vividness and intensity are often attached to children and their clothing, and to architectural features

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<sup>408</sup> The connection, for example of French humanist photography to Surrealism has been explored by a number of writers including Peter Hamilton, see 'Representing the social: France and Frenchness in post-war humanist photography', in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London, Sage, 1997), 109.

<sup>409</sup> Baker re-introduced colour in the 1980s capturing the colourful dress of young Punks, and the commercial brashness of fast-food take outs on London's Oxford Street, and by the 1990s worked in it exclusively. Her use of colour stands alongside a younger generation of 'documentary art' photographers, including Anna Fox, Martin Parr, Paul Seawright, and Chris Wainwright, in their move towards an alternative colour based language of naturalism, thus distinguishing it from the grey tone inter and post-war generation. Their move towards the more 'American' style of documentary art photography (the colourists Garry Winogrand, William Klein and Stephen Shore are commonly sited as an influence) also coincides with the repositioning of documentary photography in the gallery, as 'art'. For more on this 'shift' to colour by photographer Martin Parr see: <https://www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/how-martin-parr-takes-photo>. Accessed: 4 April 2020.

such as doors and windows that pierce through the grey tone landscape of demolition, smog and fire smoke (that some viewers regarded as symbols of ‘hope’.<sup>410</sup>



Fig. 6. Brightly coloured yellow and red doors as well as the childrens' lower garments (the girl's red socks, boy's turquoise trousers, and toddler's orange shorts) give this photograph a punchy and joyful energy that would have been entirely lost in black and white. © Shirley Baker Estate.

Shirley Baker's black and white photographs highlight the formal patterning, and composition of the built environment. Working in colour, the photographer now 'sees' the texture of the built environment, making the crazed paintwork, burnt wood, peeling facades, street graffiti and piles of brickwork her subjects.<sup>411</sup> Sometimes these textures form 'backdrops' — stages — for tableau scenes in which ordinary subjects, in their functional environment, become momentarily extraordinary. At other times the texture of urban decay is the photographer's sole subject and it fills the photographic frame. In these photographic images, Shirley Baker not only highlights decay as an aesthetic pleasure in and of itself, arguably detached from social meaning; she conveys a material presence so naturalistic that the photographed 'thing' is analogous to the 'thing' itself.

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<sup>410</sup> Lynda Nead explores the post-war shift from grey tone to colour in photography and visual materials more generally, regarding it both as a metaphor for post-war optimism and as a signifier of immigration into Britain from the Commonwealth. See, Lynda Read, *Tiger in the Smoke*, (London, Yale University Press, 2017), 127-199

<sup>411</sup> The photographer claims to have found these to be 'fascinating' indices of 'age and time'. Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story Interview*, 1992.



Fig. 7. To have noticed and transposed this mysterious (and uncanny) graffiti to a photograph in itself is intriguing. © Shirley Baker Estate.

In looking at the colour slides, the various performative processes at work in the making of her photographs is revealed. Sequential slides show how the photographer established herself with her camera at key observational points. For example, setting up her camera in front of a yellow shop frontage flanked by a peacock blue wall she frames the scene and waits for 'a performance within the frame' to be inscribed photographically (Fig. 8).<sup>412</sup>

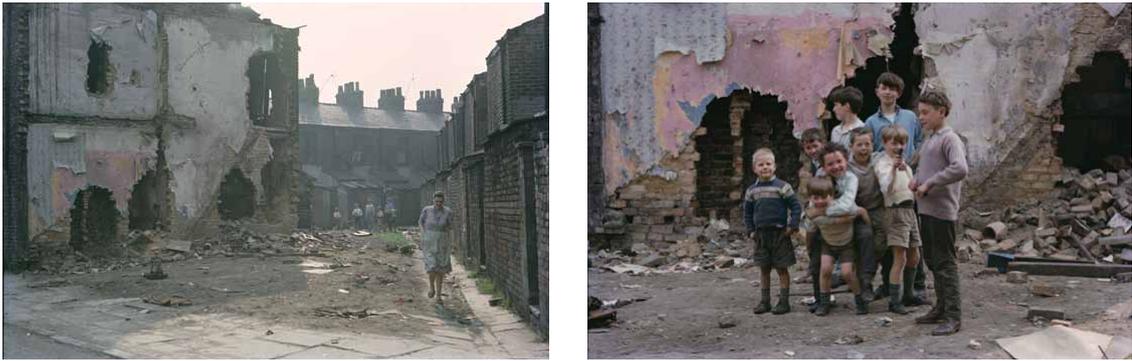


Fig. 8. Baker at first photographs the shop front with nobody passing by, but over three frames captures two women and a pushchair, but it is the man with the flat cap, mirrored in the drawing of a face in the window, that she chooses to print up and later publish in *Street Photographs*. © Shirley Baker Estate.

Other sequences disclose how the presence of Shirley Baker attracted the attention of far away children who spotting the photographer and through, I like to imagine, friendly banter between the two, co-created a performance with an embodied spatial dynamic and framing that is entirely photographic (Figs. 9 and 10).

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<sup>412</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 20.



Figs. 9 and 10. Over three frames ( two illustrated), children in the far distance of the first photograph come towards Shirley Baker, posing finally for a close-up. I like to imagine this as Baker and the kids co-creating their image. © Shirley Baker Estate.

My ‘discovery’ of the colour works went on to form a significant element in the final exhibition and its subsequent iterations. Not only did I consider them historically significant, they also suggested that the photographer possessed an alternative experience of photography to that of the black and white ‘committed’ humanistic genre, and that she embraced the aesthetic pleasure of the colour medium.

#### 4.4 The Sensory Limitations of Photography

In real life we not only view the world in colour, but our viewing is accompanied by sound. My discovery of the Val Williams interview held in the *British Library’s National Life Stories* archive of British Photographers (which forms a core element of Chapter 2) provided important contextual information. It was also, however, an affective experience. The sound of Shirley Baker’s voice, with its mannered restraint, yet with the occasional burst into passionate enthusiasm, was so compelling and memorable long after she had died. At this time, I also re-read Baker’s essays published in *Street Photographs* and *Street and Spaces*, in which she expressed her thoughts on photography’s limitations, the medium being incapable of ‘capturing’ and conveying the sensations of the streets — air heavy with brick dust, the hostile roar of bulldozers, the pressing heat of the bonfires, and a sense of what had come just before, and what might happen next.<sup>413</sup> What struck me was how Shirley Baker’s texts evoked an alternative sensory environment than that conveyed by her photographs. In the Lowry publication, written after she had completed her MA in Photographic History at the University of

<sup>413</sup> Shirley Baker, *Streets & Spaces*, (Salford, The Lowry Press, 2000), 9.

Derby, the photographer also addressed the relationship photography has with memory and imagination:

*... photographs aid the memory and stimulate the imagination; they provide useful information and give insights into the past unequalled by any other medium - particularly when accompanied by written or spoken words ....I hope, by bridging time through the magic of photography, a connection has been made with a past that should not be forgotten.*<sup>414</sup>

With a background in the curation of sound art and an interest in the history of documentary in both photography and radio, I had for some time wanted to explore the relationship between sound and the still image. I had previously introduced sound into exhibitions of photography, however, this had been as a discrete use of oral history testimonies using headsets.<sup>415</sup> Reflecting on Shirley Baker's thoughts about photography's inadequacy to convey the senses, memory and loss even as she asserted its 'magical' properties, I started to explore how I might introduce into the exhibition space some of the sensory environment absent from her photographs. This resulted in a collaboration with Derek Nesbit, a composer for experimental theatre and opera, to produce a soundscape for the exhibition installation. Together, we identified sections of Shirley Baker's *Life Story Interview* including: the day she saw the cranes in the streets prompting her to 'go and see', and the '*amazing feeling*' she had on rediscovering her photographs in a box after so many years.<sup>416</sup> The photographer's voice, which was particularly poignant given her death, was layered and synthesised with other sound sources that included:

- Newly made field recordings from demolition sites
- BBC audio effect CDs of broken glass and burning fires
- An on-line collection of old ice-cream van jingles
- The Opie recordings of post-war children's playground rhymes, newly digitised and held at the British Library
- CDs of Foley sounds (the reproduction of everyday sound effects).<sup>417</sup>
- Recordings of Derek's daughter playing with friends in the street

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<sup>414</sup> Shirley Baker, *Street Photographs*, 8-9.

<sup>415</sup> In both the *Marc Riboud* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* exhibitions, I installed CD speakers adjacent to photographs to amplify oral history testimonies.

<sup>416</sup> All quotes are from Val Williams and Shirley Baker, *Life Story interview*.

<sup>417</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foley\\_\(filmmaking\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foley_(filmmaking))

This layering structure provided a sonic metaphor and materialised equivalence of the palimpsestic environment Shirley Baker herself referred to. Her sense of loss at the disappearing streets, ‘*where you get layer-upon-layer-upon-layer*’ finding it astonishing ‘*how quickly things can disappear without a trace*’. The resultant twenty minutes looped soundscape was acoustically spatialised and installed at each exhibition venue as a five-speaker surround-sound. The effect for the audience was striking, as if sounds of a ‘real’ street surrounded them spatially and temporally, both felt (and heard) in the present and yet distant and as if coming from nowhere (like memory).<sup>418</sup> The mixture of sound sources — archived, fictitious and concrete field recordings — symbolically and materially represented time past and present and the ontological complexities at work in the concepts of ‘documentary’ and ‘naturalism’ in both sound and photography.

#### 4.5 ‘Another Way of Telling’: introducing John Berger <sup>419</sup>

Writing in *Street Photographs*, Shirley Baker expressed her fear that her photographs would be at worst forgotten or at best relegated to nostalgia. Her desire, for the contrary, that they might continue to find meaning and relevance, resonated for me also as a curator. I turned to the cultural critic John Berger whose writings on photography (published in the *New Society* and *The Observer*) had contributed significantly to establishing the medium as a recognised art form in post-war Britain.<sup>420</sup> Particularly instructive was Berger’s proposition regarding ‘ambiguity’ and the ‘expressive photograph’, outlined in ‘The Ambiguity of the Photograph’.<sup>421</sup> These related concepts opened up space for thinking about photographs as open sign systems, as photographic meaning being mutable rather than closed, and as photographs ‘finding’ relevance across time (ideas taken up decades later in visual anthropology):<sup>422</sup>

All photographic events are ambiguous, except to those whose personal relation to the event is such that their own lives supply the missing continuity... The expressiveness can contain its ambiguity of meaning and

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<sup>418</sup> The point of the surround-sound environment is to enhance an embodied experience of ‘hearing’, so that sound also resonates through environmental materials and is, thus, also felt by the body.

<sup>419</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, (London, Granta Books, 1989).

<sup>420</sup> Whilst as far as I know, Shirley Baker was unaware of Berger’s writings of the 1960s (unlike Roger Mayne), it seemed historically appropriate to introduce his voice.

<sup>421</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, ‘The Ambiguity of the Photograph’, *Another Way of Telling*, (London, Granta Books, 1989), 85.

<sup>422</sup> See Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph: John Berger*, (London, Penguin, 2013), 99-107.

give reason to it — it is a long quotation from appearances: the length here to be measure not by time but by a greater extension of meaning'.<sup>423</sup>

In addition to theorising photography, across three books, in collaboration with photographer Jean Mohr — *A Fortunate Man* (1967), *A Seventh Man* (1975) and *Another Way of Telling* (1982) — Berger made a series of experiments in the narrative structure of image relationship. Unlike a text-based novel, in *Another Way of Telling* the two authors sequence images so there is no explicit storyline, 'no words redeem the ambiguity of the images' and 'the reader is free to make his own way *through* these images', meandering in any direction they should choose, 'without... losing a sense of tension or unfolding'.<sup>424</sup> Despite the reader being able to enter the narrative at any given point, indeed reading whichever way they should choose, Berger and Mohr constructed their sequences as 'stories', that is, with the intention that the photographic sequence narrates. In order to develop this experimental form, Berger drew on an analogy with the workings of memory ('experience') and the visual structuring of montage ('form and energy').

In memory, discontinuities between time, place and action coexist and are reconciled through the subject's own experience that is brought into play. Berger transposes what he regards as these workings of memory to that of visual montage. In montaging, he suggests, images work on the basis of a chain of 'attraction' in which that which precedes and follows it (and vice versa) forms an 'energy of this attraction'.<sup>425</sup> This can take the form of 'a contrast, an equivalence, a conflict, a recurrence'.<sup>426</sup> The result, according to Berger, is not a sequence of disconnected images but 'a field of coexistence like the field of memory'.<sup>427</sup> In this way photographs, divested of their original temporal context and thus ambiguous,

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<sup>423</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way* 128.

<sup>424</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way*, 284-289.

<sup>425</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, 122. Berger emphasizes not only the pictorial relationship of one image to another, but its energetic relationality, admiring film director Eisenstein's use of the filmic montaging effect. Reading across images is for Berger an energetic practice, it has a dynamism. See 'Stories' in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph: John Berger*, (London, Penguin, 2013), 99-107.

<sup>426</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph*, 104.

<sup>427</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph*, 104

are restored to a living context, not of course to the original temporary context from which they were taken — that is impossible — but to a context of experience. And there, *their ambiguity at last becomes true*. It allows what they show to be appropriated by reflection. The world they reveal, frozen, become tractable. The information they contain become permeated by feeling. Appearances become the language of a lived life.<sup>428</sup>

Drawing on Berger's and Mohr's ideas, I began to consider how audiences might be encouraged to 'explore' Shirley Baker's photographic images, not as historical or documentary 'evidence', but dialectally, dialogically and relationally, so that the space in between images and between the image and the viewer could be imaginative, affective, unpredictable and reflective.

#### **4.6 Exhibition Design: an interactive framework**

The exhibiting of photography goes back to the inception of the medium. It is not my intention to make an account of this history here, but to make some observational points regarding one influential exhibition that, along with Berger's writings and his and Mohr's photographic experiments, influenced the development of *Women and Children; and Loitering Men*.<sup>429</sup> Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* exhibition has gained iconic status in the history of exhibiting photography. Famously criticised by Roland Barthes for its essentialism and removal of historical specificity, and later by Allan Sekula as an example of one of the worst aspects of American Cold War propaganda, even John Berger found its advocacy of a liberal humanism, 'sentimental and complacent'.<sup>430</sup> My interest concerns the more recent and 'nuanced' readings of the exhibition. John Roberts notes that the exhibition, never an avant-garde project, did, nevertheless, offer alternative understandings of photography and photographic meaning as effected *through* presentation.<sup>431</sup> Designed by ex-Bauhaus designer and photographer Herbert Bayer, the exhibition presented photographic images as a dramatic, spatially orchestrated display that eschewed the traditional 'Pictorialist' linearity of wallmounted framed prints.

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<sup>428</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way*, 123.

<sup>429</sup> For a history of photography exhibitions and displays, see *PhotoShow*, ed. Alessandra Mauro, (London, Thames and Hudson, 2014).

<sup>430</sup> Quote from John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, *Uses of Photography*, (London, Penguin, 2013), 54.

<sup>431</sup> For an overview of the criticism of *The Family of Man*, see John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998), 123-127. Quote, John Roberts, *Photography and its Violations*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2014), 35. Here Roberts takes up the leftist criticism of humanism, to argue that the 'we' inferred should be understood contextually.

Photographs displayed without frames, captions and authorship, at a range of sizes, often suspended from the ceiling, often at different heights — ‘performed’ their meaning relationally, as an extended montage, in what John Robert claims, formed ‘new chains of meaning making’.<sup>432</sup> Even politically inspired photography theorist Ariella Azoulay has argued in favour of the exhibition, suggesting it ‘be viewed a visual equivalent to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights’.<sup>433</sup> What interests me regarding my own curatorial strategy is that whilst *The Family of Man* orchestrated dramatic image-objects, its techniques of display were not to draw attention to its component parts. Instead, it constructed an ‘interactive framework’ that drew the audience into an embodied and affective relationship with the image narrative *as a whole*.<sup>434</sup> In so doing, as curator Alessia Tagliaventi has suggested, the exhibition performed its function as a space of ‘agendas and ideas’ as opposed to presenting a collection of discrete works by famous photographers.<sup>435</sup> For John Roberts, the broader issue here is that *The Family of Man* stands as a reminder of a ‘vision of photography as a sociality, agent of social form’.<sup>436</sup> In drawing on two experiments in photographic presentation (Steichen’s exhibition and Berger’s and Mohr’s books), I began to consider the status and functionality of the photographic object/image in relation to the audience’s role in meaning making. Thinking about the relationship of photo-object/image to audience, I became aware that exhibition design was not simply a matter of wall layout, but was a spatial temporal narrative *context* through which the photo image/object *and* exhibition perform meaning. I was also interested to explore the concept of an exhibition as a public space of sociality, in which a ‘we’ (of the audience) could be temporarily formed. This idea of the *social experience* and, indeed, purpose of an exhibition I develop over the following two case studies in Chapters 5 and 6, and in Chapter 9.

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<sup>432</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 124.

<sup>433</sup> Ariella Azoulay, <https://fkmagazine.lv/2018/07/02/the-family-of-man-the-photography-exhibition-that-everybody-loves-to-hate/>. Accessed 09.9.19.

<sup>434</sup> Alessia Tagliaventi, in ed. Alessandra Mauro, *PhotoShow - Landmark Exhibitions that Defined the History of Photography*, (London, Phaidon, 2014), 160 - 192.

<sup>435</sup> Indeed Steichen’s lack of attributing named photographers drew criticism, particularly from those considering themselves famous. See, Alessia Tagliaventi, 160 - 192.

<sup>436</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 124.

I now could see a way of presenting Shirley Baker's photographs in a narrative form that was not based on the photographer's biography (the exhibition as monograph), the social historical context (social history exhibition), nor the history of British documentary photography (exhibition as art history). In this respect, as with Steichen's curatorship of *The Family of Man*, I could say I came forward as a 'second artist', engaging Shirley Baker's work within my own 'work of art' —the exhibition— with 'an agenda and ideas'.<sup>437</sup>

Returning to my digital archive of Shirley Baker's photographs, I printed out thumbnails of every picture and started to 'play' with them on my dining room table, moving them about, looking and waiting to see what 'happened' as one image came into the energy field of 'attraction' with another, in the manner of Berger's and Mohr's pictorial experiments. Working with the 'feeling tone' of the visual rather than its historical meaning or semiotic connotation, I let my own affective response — an entanglement of unnameable feelings, personal memories, art historical knowledge, and present life experiences — guide me; feeling my way into the construction of an overarching photo-narrative. What *I saw* in looking at these photographs were people, more specifically women and children and a handful of men, living in an environment subject to progressive change, in which their homes were being torn down, longstanding kinship groups dismembered, with families moved out and on to a promised 'better future'. This was the basis of 'a story', that through the images of Shirley Baker, I wanted to tell. But not in the positivist sense of evidence and illustration, but by inference and suggestion.

Writing in the introduction of *Photography and Ontology: An Introduction*, Natalya Lusty and Donna West Brett point to a bias towards 'thinking photography' as opposed to 'feeling photography', a bias Berger cautioned against some thirty years previously. What they term a 'critical lacuna', a legacy of a neo-Marxist 'suspicion of emotion', has resulted, they suggest, in a deep scepticism toward an important essence of photography— how photographs make us feel — as though emotional responses to

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<sup>437</sup> Alessia Tagliaventi proposes that in curating *The Family of Man*, Steichen presented the exhibition as a work of art in itself, the implication, of course, being that Steichen's own creativity 'meets' at best or usurped at worst that of the artists on show, whose 'authorship took second place to the overall display, that was authored by Steichen' and Bayer. Indeed this criticism was lodged at Steichen by a number of exhibiting photographers. See Alessia Tagliaventi, in Alessandra Mauro (ed.), *PhotoShow*, 187.

photographs were unworthy of theoretical reflection or political critique.<sup>438</sup> Shirley Baker's photographs seemed to hold the potential of being restored to what Berger terms 'a living context'.<sup>439</sup> Such rehabilitation, however, did not necessarily depend on the photographs functioning as historical photo-documents, though for some spectators this would be the basis of their engagement (and consequently what the photographs meant to them). Nor would spectators have had to experience the temporal context from which Shirley Baker's photographs were taken (i.e. the specifics of urban clearance, or post-war reconstruction). Though, of course, they might engage with the photographs via an entanglement of informational interpretation *and* feeling at the same time. Alternatively, I was interested to experiment with how Shirley Baker's images might be brought to a living meaning by 'pointing to' (rather than illustrating) shared human experiences; what Berger terms 'a context of experience' of all our pasts, present and our future lives. Thus, I considered Baker's photographs *expressions* of change, loss, and abandonment, as well as resilience, kinship, play, determination and connection.<sup>440</sup> This was not to evacuate the 'true' social relations of social and economic inequality and poverty (as Allan Sekula has suggested of the archive). I did, however, wish to unlock the photographs from narrative of a beleaguered working class. Poverty did not define the people in these photographs. Shirley Baker's photographs suggested other identities and subjectivities.<sup>441</sup>

#### **4.7 The Publication: 'On the face of it there will be no story'**<sup>442</sup>

In scheduling terms, before I could finalise the content and design of the exhibition, the accompanying publication needed to be authored and printed to guarantee it ready for the exhibition opening. Given that there were only two softback publications of Shirley

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<sup>438</sup> See Natalya Lusty and Donna West Brett, 'Photography and Ontology: An Introduction', in *Photography and Ontology*, (Oxford, Routledge, 2014), 3. For further reading on the subject see, Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu, *Feeling Photography*, (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>439</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding Photography*, 105.

<sup>440</sup> The association of 'loss' and absence with photography is one that Barthes and Berger both highlight in their writings and has subsequently been taken up by many authors as defining the ontological conditions of photography as distinct from painting. I am mindful to think this has resulted in a particular kind of *melancholia* of the photographic, in contrast, arguably, with the rich exuberance that is often expressed in relation to the materiality of paint.

<sup>441</sup> Stephen Constantine's essay in *Street Photographs*, suggests the richness of experience in these communities. See: *Street Photographs*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bloodaxe, 1989), 9-13.

<sup>442</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, 286.

Baker's works and both were out of print, I had fundraised separately from public funding sources to guarantee a high quality, fully illustrated hard back publication for this exhibition. Bringing my own funds to the book gave me significant, though not total, autonomy from the commissioning gallery. I authored an accompanying essay, commissioned additional writers and, most importantly, collaborated with Paul Leadbitter the designer with whom I have worked over many years. The Photographers' Gallery took on the role of publisher and responsibility for sales. The title, *Women and Children; and Loitering Men* proved contentious with the gallery press department, who felt the word 'loitering' had sexual and predatory connotation.<sup>443</sup>

In recent years, the function of the 'critical catalogue essay' has become synonymous with both the power of the critic and her or his alliance with the artist in question, as well as the idea of there being a preferred interpretation (i.e. the critic's). I have worked, however, with publications as an extended exhibition 'platform' that communicates contextual and interpretational complexity that the exhibition medium cannot facilitate.<sup>444</sup> This has been explored not only through textual content, but also through design, including attention to typology and layout. In working with Shirley Baker's photographs for a 'photo-book', and following ideas of (filmic) montage of Berger and Mohr, I began to compose a photographic narrative across the pages, rather than edit a sequence of singular photographs as might be expected with a photographic monograph.<sup>445</sup> In going back to the thumbnails, I created a new category of 'people' — identifying family groups, women and children, women on their own, children, children at play, older men, men at work, men. These were my 'cast of characters', living in a network of streets undergoing demolition, to be replaced by an encroaching new urban typology of the tower block. With this loose 'storyline' in mind I continued to work with the thumbnails, shaping the narrative.

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<sup>443</sup> TPG eventually agreed to use the title. In Manchester, interestingly, it passed without comment.

<sup>444</sup> See <https://ravencontemporary.wordpress.com/portfolio/the-role-of-the-art-critic/> as an example of the ambiguous role of the critic and critical essay.

<sup>445</sup> Krzysztof Pijarski, writing on the differences between a photobook, exhibition and online platform, in *On Photography's Liquidity, or, (New) Space for (New) Publics?* See: [https://fw-books.nl/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Pijarski\\_new.pdf](https://fw-books.nl/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Pijarski_new.pdf). Accessed: 4 March 2020.

In British social realist film, there is an establishing shot known as 'our town from the hill'.<sup>446</sup> The camera, like a bird from a far, swoops down, gradually bringing the microscopic detail of the character's lives into focus; the street, the house, the living room, zooming ever closer inward to the protagonist or catalysing event. With this shot in mind, I set about constructing my own narrative equivalent, commencing with a wide-angle photograph of a Salford street scene with children playing, that established the typology of the urban picturesque 'street scene'. This photograph strongly identifies the spectator as a viewer *of* a scene, as well as 'setting the scene' of the photographic and human drama that will subsequently unfold across the pages (and subsequently the gallery walls (see Fig. 16).

The following image (Fig. 11) introduced a 'defiant' matriarchal figure surveying 'her' street — an image that brings to attention 'our' (the spectator's) act of looking at 'looking'.



Fig. 11. It was pointed out by many exhibition visitors that Shirley Baker's photographs featured many dogs, and that along with children playing in the streets this could no longer be seen. Baker's photographs thus, unwittingly contribute to the visualisation of the changing attitude to domestic animals.  
© Shirley Baker Estate.

Further wide street scenes home in on the details of daily life: washing billowing across the cobbles, children on trikes, a boy riding towards us on a bike, framed by terrace housing and pavements. These are spacious perspectives typical of the iconic post-war

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<sup>446</sup> Andrew Higson, 'Space, Place and Spectacle', (*Screen*, Vol. 25, 4-5, 1984), 2-211. See also, Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit*. (New York, Wallflower Press, New York, 2002).

photographic visualisation of working class neighbourhoods. Subsequently, I introduced families into the narrative: images of family groups sitting on their doorsteps in a tiered photographic ‘pose’, and a family of travellers in front of their caravan. A cast of adult ‘characters’ entered the narrative; older women gossiping to their next-door neighbours, groups of mothers airing babies in prams, proud housewives burnishing their door step cardinal red. Then the children: in ones, twos and threes (taking care of younger ones), larger groups enjoying street games, playing on the crofts (old bomb sites), and in and on derelict cars. Interwoven around this cast was the built environment: terrace houses, corner shops, alleyways, pubs, that themselves seemed to have a life of their own.<sup>447</sup>

In the middle of the book there is a burst of colour, a stark contrast with the grey tone photographs that takes the viewer/reader into a photographic exuberance and sensuality that is a hint of a post-war chromatic world, emerging from the bomb sites and Victorian ruins of the inner city.<sup>448</sup> Children’s clothing, bright yellow, red, green and peacock blue pierce the drabness. Graffiti, blistered wood and inscribed stone, captured in forensic material detail and almost to scale, appears to incise the page. Then turning the page the reader is mid-point through ‘the story’, returning to the black and white world of incremental demolition in which terrace houses, pubs and corner shops make way for the ominous silhouettes of tower blocks in the far distance. The final images of ever-greater expanses of waste land suggest a community on the brink of change.

John Berger describes his and Mohr’s visual stories as full of ‘discontinuities’, ‘far more evident than those in a verbal story’.<sup>449</sup> In the *Women and Children; and Loitering Men* ‘story’ each image is more or less discontinuous with the next. Although, in this story there *are* continuities of time, place and action — though these are not necessarily visually obvious to the viewer nor do they need of them — those viewers/readers who can bring or find and make personal connections may, however, experience additional and affecting affiliatory resonances.

There is the year in which the photographs were ‘captured’, the time of day, the week, and the moment ‘taken’ from an action and/or place; photographs in which the

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<sup>447</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker *Life Story Interview*, 1992.

<sup>448</sup> For an account of the symbolism of colour after the war see Lynda Nead, *Tiger in the Smoke*, 146.

<sup>449</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way*, 122.

same streets and buildings reoccur — that to the keen-eyed are clues to topography and may elicit memories; and actions, including games played, domestic chores, and individual actions that convey everyday routines, community observances, and rites of passage that describe and perform the rituals of the street. The photographs are additionally sequenced, often with an attention to peripheral details, recalling how Shirley Baker found these the most interesting, ‘*that’s when you see things*’.<sup>450</sup> Details such as the wheels of a baby’s pram, for example, might form a visual rapport with the subsequent photograph of boys on a bogey cart made of an old pram, so that each photographic image is simultaneously disparate *and* forms a visual correspondence with another image so encouraging ‘silent connections’ between otherwise discontinuities that encourage the spectator/reader to ‘enter the narration’.<sup>451</sup> The penultimate image is, to my mind, a prescient yet melancholic scene. A pregnant mother with two toddlers, a baby and one on the way, pushes her pram down a long, cobbled street, the terraced houses either side demolished (Fig.12). In the smoggy background, blocks of flats loom across a derelict wasteland: the future in waiting. The photograph preserves a moment in time. Two years later, on the back page of *The Guardian* weekend supplement, this image will be ‘fleshed out’ through the personal account of Pat Swindells:

*We would have been on the way home from school. There’s me with my eldest son, Anthony, Mark behind him, Paul in the pram, and I’m seven months pregnant with my youngest son, Phil. All boys: I’d lost a daughter, stillborn. They were pulling down the houses here to build flats – there was a lot of regeneration going on in Salford then. I’m wearing my sister’s coat, and my shoes are my mother’s “granny boots”. I don’t remember this photograph being taken, but I do remember that period well; it was a very difficult time. We lived close by, in two rooms behind a shop. We slept in one room – me, my husband and the children – and lived in the other.*<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> Val Williams and Shirley Baker *Life Story interview*, 1992.

<sup>451</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding Photography*, 105.

<sup>452</sup> Pat Swindells, *The Guardian*, 17 July 2015. See, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/17/thats-me-picture-pat-swindells-shirley-baker-salford-1964>. Accessed: 5 May 2020. For an altogether different ‘reading’ of the photograph, although none-the-less affective, see Tony Key’s account in this thesis, Chapter 8.

**That's me in the picture: Pat Swindells is photographed by Shirley Baker in Salford, November 1964**

'My eldest son went to see this picture in an exhibition... it really upset him. I think it made him realise how poor we were'



▲ 'There's me with my eldest son, Anthony, Mark behind him, Paul in the pram, and I'm seven months pregnant with my youngest son, Phil!' Photograph: Shirley Baker, courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library

Fig. 12. What is in actuality health-compromising smog, gives this photograph, as with others by Baker, a melancholic air.

This 'spectator' reads into this image her own life story, so that the photograph acquires meaning beyond the image, lending it, as Berger suggests 'a past and a future'.<sup>453</sup> There are details, for example the school to the left corner, that for Salford-born viewers 'supply the missing continuity' between the time when the photograph was taken and the time of its viewing.<sup>454</sup> Yet, this photograph, to the rest of us, is ambiguous in meaning, and thus holds, I argue, the potential for our imagination and stories.<sup>455</sup>

The final image in the book is in colour. It is of residents queuing to be rehoused (Fig. 13) The image illustrating the actual social context of people being rehoused symbolically augurs one world closing and another opening, a future world beyond the post-war greyness.



Fig. 13. While the photographic 'event' would appear to be the long queue for the caravan office, the toddler and the lamp post, once noticed draw in the viewer. © Shirley Baker Estate

<sup>453</sup> John Berger in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding Photography*, 105.

<sup>454</sup> John Berger in Geoff Dyer, 105.

<sup>455</sup> For the full article see, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/17/thats-me-picture-pat-swindells-shirley-baker-salford-1964>. For an altogether different 'reading' of the photograph, although none-the-less affective, see Tony Key's account in this thesis, Chapter 8.

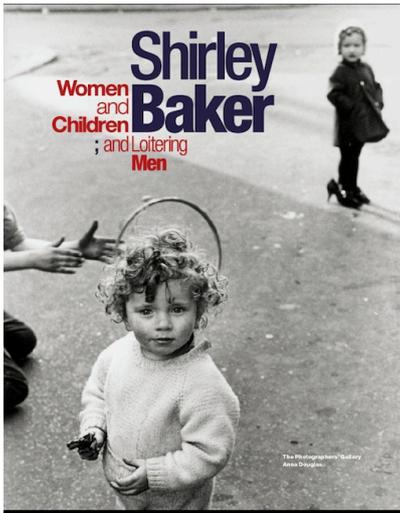


Fig. 14. This photograph prompted endless speculation on what the toddler was holding: a toy gun or a chocolate bar? In any case, the allusion to a gun and halo is what gives this photograph its surrealistic quality, with its contrast of childhood 'innocence' and adult vice, that is additionally echoed in the adult stance of the little girl to the top right corner.

The book's visual narrative has a beginning, a middle and an end. The reader, however, may dip into this story at any point, and I hoped each image was strong enough to hold their attention. Rather than provide a historical explanation to the images (as the previous two Shirley Baker books did), my own essay developed Berger's idea of ambiguity and in so doing suggested to the viewer the potential for engaging Baker's images in personal storytelling. In order to emphasise this potential, I commissioned Scottish poet laureate and author Jackie Kay to select two Shirley Baker photographs from which to write a short story. In selecting an image for the book front cover, I additionally chose one that would convey a sense of intrigue, thus confounding the impression of Shirley Baker as a social documentarian (Fig. 14).

#### **4.8 London: the Exhibition Installation**

I decided not to include any detailed contextual historical or sociological information in the gallery regarding post-war conditions and would additionally have preferred not to include titles with the photographs, thus cutting, symbolically at least, their ties to an actual time and place.<sup>456</sup> This strategy of heightening the ambiguity of the photographs was not approved by the commissioning gallery who felt visitors would be confused. As a compromise, I kept titling to a minimum, identifying each photograph only by place (Manchester or Salford) and the year. In contrast to a more typical picture gallery or museum linear arrangement common to historical photographic exhibitions, the overarching concept was to approach the exhibition as a series of linked 'installations'

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<sup>456</sup> Mary Price, *A Strange Confined Space*, (California, Stanford University Press, 1994).

that would provide the spectator with a dynamic visual space, in which images and space would evolve in tandem (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15. In this way the installation offered the spectator an *experience* of photography, exposing them to multiple perspectives on Shirley Baker's work.

The exhibition entrance was impactful. A freestanding wall — like the opening of a film — was papered with an almost life-size image of a wide angle street scene, in which boys played cricket as two girls look outwards from the scene and to us (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16. In London and Manchester, the entrance exhibition mural provided 'a stage' for exhibition goers to pose for their own photographs.

The gaze of one of the girls, coupled with their almost life-size scale, has 'the effect of closing down the distance in time' between the moment the photograph was taken (the presence of the photographer and the girls *in situ*) and the contemporary act of looking and experiencing the image in the gallery.<sup>457</sup> Indeed, in looking the viewer not only re-creates 'the photograph', they imagine the moment of its creation and perhaps

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<sup>457</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London, Penguin Books, 1972), 31.

may suture themselves into the scene. At this locational point, there was no contextual information panel. Opposite the photograph, however, and forming a contained installation space, was a large red wall text in which Shirley Baker's words set the scene for the exhibition:

*My sympathies lay with the people who were forced to exist miserably often for months on end, sometimes years, whilst demolition went on all around them.*

In singling out this particular sentence, I implied the duration of Shirley Baker's photographic 'project' and perhaps more importantly, I suggested that the photographer sympathized with their plight, and by implication that her photographs were to be read as an empathic gaze upon 'a culture under threat' rather than a exploitative relationship. Located within this demarcated space were two audio speakers from which a soundscape filled the space with credible street sounds. The image/sound installation formalistically functioned as a portal into the exhibition, setting 'the scene' pictorially, as well as indicating the type of photography and the depicted the human activity that would unfold beyond in the exhibition. It was also a symbolic portal to a time past. If the spectator is encouraged by the openness and scale of the scene and the scene-setting sound to walk in, they are also made aware of their presence outside of the photographic frame (outside of the historic moment) by the gaze of the two girls, one apprehending and holding our attention whilst the other dis-obligingly turns her back to us, uninterested.

The effect of the soundscape was deliberately disorientating, interweaving 'found' sounds, concrete recordings and Foley sounds to form an ahistorical non-diegetic sound track. Along with the verbatim speech of Shirley Baker, conveying her thoughts about photography's role in relation to memory, time and place, and her doubts regarding the truth-telling status of photography, the soundscape and the scale of the image evoked the illusory idea of photography as a form of time travel, yet it confounded the possibility of verisimilitude, challenging the commonsense view of photography as a 'window on the world'.

Going behind this 'screen', into the first gallery room, visitors could read an introductory text panel and enter the second stage of the exhibition installation. It is now a convention to offer the spectator an introductory exhibition text to 'orientate' the viewer's 'looking' and interpretation. This commonly comprises a short biography, something of the artist's working method, their working themes and concepts. This form

of public information is not neutral in meaning and is already a first level interpretation of the work. In this respect, my Shirley Baker introductory text followed a conventional exposition. It named her work as ‘street photography’ and post-war ‘humanist documentary’ and gave her project a social context, namely as a response to the ‘slum clearance programmes’ that were reshaping Northern cities.<sup>458</sup> In claiming her work as offering an empathic but unsentimental portrayal of the day-to-day lives of working people, I placed Shirley Baker and her photographs within a concerned and humanistic framework, that whilst not being able to guarantee it would, I hoped, shape the spectator’s own interpretation and experience of the work.

This humanist context was offered, at that time, as a counterbalance to what I feared might be a critical framing of Shirley Baker’s photography as a form of visual ‘othering’ of the working class. I now recognise that I was also suggesting the spectator take up an ethical position in relation to the photographs, inviting them to ‘see’ the same social and human values that I ‘saw’ in the work of Shirley Baker; and which I considered to be under threat from contemporary consumer capitalism: values of solidarity, support, kinship, and care. Whilst my text located Shirley Baker’s photographs within a documentary mode, it also suggested that the exhibition ‘offered the spectator an original interpretation of the photographer’s practice’, and thus indicated a different way of interpreting documentary.<sup>459</sup>

In the first gallery, I hung the black and white photographs following the sequence of the book. Each photograph was framed in a narrow square profile black frame. In writings about contemporary photography, I have never come across a discussion of the effect of frames on the photograph’s performance of meaning.<sup>460</sup> Conventions of framing or not framing photography are subject to changing ideas regarding the presentation of photography and its effects. In Herbert Bayer’s designs for the exhibitions organized by Edward Steichen, *Road to Victory* and *The Family of Man*, photographic images were blown up to various scales and were unframed and arranged in dynamic displays that challenged popular museological practices of the time, though they

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<sup>458</sup> Quotes taken from exhibition introduction wall text.

<sup>459</sup> Quotes taken from exhibition introduction wall text.

<sup>460</sup> I mean here the actual material form of ‘the frame’ and its subsequent effect on the image ‘framed’, as opposed to Derrida’s writings on his concept of ‘framing’ and its effect. See: Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987).

were more commonly used in the exhibitions of the Russian avant garde. Roger Mayne and Ida Khar, both post-war British photographers, also experimented with installation techniques of display in their exhibitions in the early 1960s, eschewing the use of frames in favour of extremely large prints pinned directly to the wall and displayed at different heights in relational clusters.

Today, black frames are commonly used for black and white photography displayed in museum collections and exhibitions. It is a style of frame that has come, arguably, to connote 'vintage' and the 'historical'. I have developed an interest in frames and their effect, experimenting in each of my exhibitions with different colours, profiles, and mounting. I had previously used a square silver frame effectively for exhibitions of post-war photography, including Shirley Baker's photographs, finding that this choice of frame lent the photographs a contemporary 'feel' that, symbolically at least, reduced the distance in time from whence the image was taken, to the 'now' of looking. With budget a consideration on this exhibition I had to settle for black. However, the colour photographs were framed in a square, deep white frame that, as spectators commented, gave her images a contemporary feel.

The wall hang took a form more like a magazine photo-essay layout, with clusters of images as opposed to a more conventional museum exhibition linear hang. Partly this was necessitated by limited space and the number of photographs, but I was looking also to build up a tempo in viewing, in which formal and symbolic relationships between images were made and 'acts of viewing' might become 'acts of experiencing' photography. I considered this viewing experience more akin to the process of memory — in that different times, places and people co-exist outside of physical and historical time and without requiring historical contextualisation.

The layout of all hundred and seven black and white photographs was hung around the first gallery from left to right. I had to accept, however, that I could not direct the viewing experience and that spectators could enter the narrative at any point, criss-crossing from one image to another, wandering back and forth, perhaps, as the artist originally wandered around, observing and reflecting on life and the everyday. Nevertheless, there was a story, and it was structured to conclude with the final colour image, as I used it in the book: heralding things to come.

In the middle of the black and white photography ‘installation’, I installed a display case ‘The Cabinet of Biographical Things’ (Fig. 17). The cabinet included:

- Baker’s Rolleiflex camera
- Original photograph of Baker using her Rolleiflex in the streets.
- Original magazines (*Amateur Photographer*, *The Photographer*, *The Economist*) featuring images of children in the context of stories that were in fact not all about children.
- A press release for the *Nine Photographers* exhibition held at Manchester’s Design Centre, 1964, original public exhibition invitation, and *The Guardian* newspaper review.
- Contact sheet showing sequence of a child in a window (and the photographer’s selected print).



Fig. 17. The ‘Cabinet of Biographical Things’ demonstrated the contextualised meaning of Baker’s images.

These artefacts were intended to flesh out Shirley Baker as a living person, and appeal to a variety of different kinds of viewers. For those with little experience of photography the mysteries of the contact sheet would be enlightening, whilst for camera ‘buffs’ her camera invests her photographs with connotations unappreciated by those who merely take snaps.

Whilst clearing out the photographer’s darkroom, I had found a number of Baker’s cameras, including a Rolleiflex and a Leica. I was in two minds initially whether to display them feeling it was predictable, even clichéd. Simultaneously, I had found a photograph of the young photographer using the Rolleiflex to take many of the photographs that were now displayed on the wall. Putting this photograph and the camera together on display could, for some spectators, provide ‘clues’ to Shirley Baker’s working process. A photographer using a twin-lensed camera takes photographs from

their waist height. This embodied position affected the camera angle from which Shirley Baker took her photographs which contributed to how her subjects were framed. Moreover, this type of camera means that the photographer does not obscure their own face whilst taking the photograph and thus they can, to some degree, maintain eye contact with their subjects. A number of photographers have suggested to me that this accounts for why many of Shirley Baker's subjects 'look back at her squarely in the eye'. Some spectators see in these subjects a commanding agency, whilst others interpret the returned gaze as linked to the photographer's empathy.<sup>461</sup>

The apparatus of the camera is one of photography theory's great lacunae. The theoretical emphasis on reading 'the image' and deconstructing its communicated meaning has meant that the technology of image production has until recently been relegated as unimportant. Here, I find a material cultural approach to photography in its concern with how and why particular visualisations of social and cultural life get made and circulate useful. Though cross-referencing photographs on display in the exhibition and magazine coverage, it appears that on at least three occasions Shirley Baker entered her photographs to 'child photography' competitions in the popular amateur photographic press — illustrated in the exhibition case by two examples, *Amateur Photographer* and *The Photographer* magazines. In each instance, their informality and vernacular setting was singled out by magazine judges as novel example of child portraiture in contrast to the stage-managed representation of idealised and perfect childhood to which the (presumed) middle-class readership was accustomed.

Shirley Baker's colour photographs were hung in a separate room (Gallery Two), just perceptible from the black and white installation (Gallery One). My thoughts here were that the spectator would arrive upon the colour photographs unexpectedly, an allusive reference to the surprise of colour in a post-war black and white world. The new colour exhibition prints were made from Shirley Baker's Kodachrome slides. I took the decision to match the prints closely to the slide colour rather than adjusting it in the printing process, even though in some cases, slides were under-or over-exposed. This resulted in varied intensities of colour across the full range of prints, with many photographs being muted. Critics and visitors alike responded positively to this mutedness, coming to regard it as a 'signature' of Shirley Baker's colour photography.

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<sup>461</sup> All comments made to the author during the London and Manchester exhibitions.

From a curatorial point of view, the question of posthumous printing from old negatives or slide film throws up challenging questions regarding the idea of the ‘authenticity’ of a print. Whose standard of colour and tonality does one work to? What about the effect of time on a print or slide regarding fading or deterioration?

The thirty-one colour photographs were displayed in three rectangular grids. The grid form has come to be associated with contemporary photo-artists interested in typology or correspondence.<sup>462</sup> Typically with grid structures the individual image/object is diminished in favour of corresponding sequences and or prioritising the whole, in which the entire grid is considered a single (often sculptural) work. With the display of Shirley Baker’s colour images, I augmented the strategy of formal correspondences between images (as used with the black and white photographs) by also introducing intense contrasts of colour between images. Presented in the grid form, the overall effect intensified the experience of colour for the spectator. Moreover, in displaying these 1965 colour images in this contemporary form, I hoped to ‘time travel’ these ‘past works’ into the present social relations of viewing. Due to space restrictions, a further selection of colour images was presented as a slide projection in a small darkened annexe off the main gallery. Its sequencing followed the concept of correspondences that I instigated for the rest of the exhibition.

With each TPG exhibition, the curator and the education team produce a contextual video that elucidates the exhibited photographer and the works on show. In describing Shirley Baker’s working practice and her subject matter, my account, like the text panel, had implications for how viewers would look at and interpret the photographer’s work. Given the relative obscurity of the photographer at the time, my narrative was pivotal in establishing her relevance to British photography. By imparting selected biographical details, I was starting to narrate a ‘Shirley Baker Story’, focusing on particular life events — her technical training, her failed attempts at becoming a photojournalist with *The Guardian* newspaper, and her marriage to a doctor. Offering only a partial view of the photographer, these ‘moments’ cohered as tropes that would be repeated subsequently in various radio and newspaper interviews.

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<sup>462</sup> The grid form of display is synonymous with the 1970s German photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher and has become pivotal in contemporary photography exhibition display. See Alessandra Mauro, *PhotoShow - Landmark exhibitions that defined the history of photography*, (London: Phaidon, 2014). *Photo Show*. 253-268.

#### 4.9 Present-ing the Past

The aim for the first iteration of the exhibition was to shift the meaning potential of Shirley Baker's photographs from 'record' *of* and 'witness' *to* a historical past, to images full of imaginative potential for storytelling in the present. However, with many spectators at The Photographer's Gallery, some of whom had travelled down from the North West, engaging the photographs in personal and affiliatory narratives of the past seemed inevitable and inescapable. This raised a question regarding whether Shirley Baker's photographs were, by the very fact of being 'old' but in living memory, 'trapped' in nostalgia. Could they only appeal to audiences over fifty years of age? This hypothesis might have been born out were it not for the kind of experience I had in London:

*One day, whilst I was leaving the gallery a woman and her son, stopped me: "Are you the curator", enquired the woman, "It's just that my son", the woman turned to invite the young lad into the space of our conversation, "he's just bought the book and he'd like you to sign it. Would you mind?"*

*Embarrassed by the idea that I should be sufficiently 'a celeb' to sign a book, I turned to the boy. Here was a chance to find something out:*

*"How old are you"?, I asked him.*

*"Fourteen", he replied*

*I detected an accent but could not place it.*

*"You're not English? Where are you from"?, I was digging a bit.*

*The boy responded saying he was Danish.*

*"We're on holiday you see, in London", interjected his mother, "And all he wanted to do was come to this show. We read about it in the paper. And he's bought the book, you see, with his own money, and he wondered..."*

*I was totally hooked now. Here was a demographic entirely unexpected: a teenager, Danish, willing to spend his own money (£24.99).*

*The least I could do was sign. But first I was curious to know a bit more.*

*"So tell, me", I ventured, "what is it that interests you about these photographs. They must be very different from the world you're used to back home, and you are so young".*

*The Mother now looked very proudly at her son, and nudged him closer to me.*

*"Go on, tell her".*

*"I just think..." , the boy hesitated, slightly shy and looking over to his mother once again, who nodded an encouragement, "I just think these photographs show us how we should be living now. All together".*

Today, there are many young people who do not subscribe to the kind of material world we are living in currently. And for one boy, maybe for others too, Shirley Baker's photographs helped him think about an alternative. In Madrid, where I now turn, audience receptions supports such a case.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Voicing Dissatisfaction, Contending with Austerity: Madrid 2016**

#### **5.0 Introduction**

In May 2016, the exhibition *Women and Children; and Loitering Men* transferred to Madrid as part of the *PhotoEspagne* annual international photography festival, that year themed as *Europas (Europe)*. As the only exhibition by a British photographer, ‘Shirley Baker’ came to represent ‘British Photography’. Additionally, the book *Women and Children; and Loitering Men* was also exhibited in the photo-book exhibition at the Biblioteca Pública de Palacio (National Library of Spain).

My analysis of the ways in which this exhibition was read by visitors in Spain that summer suggests that photographs that appear to be rooted in a very specific national, regional and socio-economic context could be, and were, appreciated in a very different situation. I discovered that the social, economic and political urgencies of the then contemporary situation in Spain — radically contested austerity measures, a parliamentary crisis in political representation and the rise of new popular parties on the left and right — framed and inflected the readings of Shirley Baker’s photographs in ways which reveal that the images were not time-and place-bound, as the Spanish audience’s readings indicated resonances between what they saw in Shirley Baker’s images and their own situations. This chapter explores the specific conditions of the viewing of the exhibition and analyses how and why these readings were made.

#### **5.1 Setting the Scene**

The festival curators had selected the exhibition venue. I was thus entirely unaware of the venue in which the photographs would be exhibited. Arriving at the Museo Cerralbo on the first day came as quite a surprise.<sup>463</sup> Even in May, the temperature in Madrid’s streets was a baking 30 degrees. So that stepping into the dark and chilly entrance courtyard was a welcome relief. Museo Cerralbo was once the home of 17th Marquis of Cerralbo.

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<sup>463</sup> See: <http://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/mcerralbo/home.html>



Fig. 18. The museum was built by Marquis of Cerralbo as his home, it opened as a public museum in 1944.

Designed with a dual purpose, as a home and a museum, no expense had been spared on its Neo-Baroque and Rococo interior that was weighed down with the Marquis's ambition. I was met at the base of the magisterial staircase by a young conservator sporting a white conservator's dust coat. We shook hands, exchanged a few words about how I was finding Madrid and then with outstretched arms he beckoned me up the ornately balustraded and carpeted staircase lined with Roman busts (each peculiarly shorn of their noses) and decorated urns. Upon arriving at the top, we turned into a darkened corridor to be met by Christ and various saints in states of gruesome flagellation: this was the entrance to the Marquis's personal home museum. In room after room, fifty thousand objects, including paintings, sculptures, ceramics, glass, tapestry, furniture, coins, medals, drawings, stamps, clocks, weapons, armour, stuffed animals and birds, and archaeological objects were displayed without labels — as intended by the original owner. Where on earth was the Shirley Baker exhibition going to be within this large cabinet of curiosity? "Don't worry" said my guide, responding to my anxious expression, "Shirley Baker is in our contemporary gallery". He led me in to a generous, high ceilinged contemporary exhibition space of three linked galleries. In London, I had selected a muted 'dove grey' paint for the gallery walls. In keeping with the Museo Cerralbo's opulent interior, the first two galleries had already been painted a deep cardinal red. Although a shock at first, and not what I had had in mind for

photographs steeped in post-war austerity, the colour proved a dramatic backdrop for the black and white photographs, and I later adopted it for the main gallery of the Manchester show. The exhibition was hung in much the same way as at The Photographer's Gallery in London and my team of three conservators followed the original hanging plan with two exceptions. I had to drop the colour projections through lack of a dark space, and I had to find an alternative entrance mural.

Due to the size of the first gallery and the orientation of the entrance doors, the large photo-mural from London had to be substituted by a vertical image. There was only a handful of photographs that would work with the aspect ratio of the available space. Back in the UK, I had selected a 'family portrait' of intergenerational women presenting themselves on their doorstep. A large false wall had been built prior to my arrival and we had fun manoeuvring it around the available entrance space to find an optimum point of view so that the almost life-size scale image (slightly cropped to concentrate on the family group) held a tension in the presence of the women defending the threshold of their home and a frank openness of 'being there' (Fig. 19).



Fig. 19. The concentrated space and the scale of image created an embodied experience of proximity and density for the audience.

With the exhibition spectator walking towards the image, in a re-enactment of walking down the street, the image formed an intentional and bold two-way performance of 'looking at' and 'being seen' that I hoped would draw the spectator into the complexity of the conscious present moment of looking.

## 5.2 Found in translation

As mentioned previously, in London the marketing team had been apprehensive about the exhibition title, considering the word ‘loitering’ to have connotations of predatory behaviour, particularly towards children. In Madrid, the problem was far more prosaic: there was no word in Spanish for ‘loitering’. Ironically, the resultant translation came closer to my original intended meaning: ‘Mujeres, niños y hombres que dejan pasar el tiempo’ — Women, Children and Men who let time pass.

I had had the original exhibition information board, with its brief reference to post-war urban replanning, translated. In their display in contemporary Spain, and in this setting, however, Shirley Baker’s photographs were effectively shorn of their material, historical and topographical context, so that I wondered what a Spanish audience might make of them. Could Spanish audiences relate to her works only as images of some exoticized and de-historicised British past? Or might they find in them aesthetic and compositional interest? Could the content of the photographs be drawn into other imaginary narratives that were independent of historical awareness and experience?

## 5.3 Strange and Familiar

In the first instance, I discovered that Spanish visitors expressed surprise at seeing the Britain portrayed by Shirley Baker. Photographs of demolished and ruined buildings challenged their received impression of Britain as an affluent post-war country, in comparison to their own economically starved and fascist ruled state. They remarked on street and housing typologies, finding fascinating their ‘alien’ form, in contrast to their own experience of housing and neighbourhood living. Photo-theorist Allan Sekula has observed that:

When photographs are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects. Accordingly, the pretence to historical understanding remains although that understanding has been replaced by aesthetic experience.<sup>464</sup>

Aesthetic apprehension was, however, not the overriding reaction of Spanish spectators. Despite their lacking knowledge of the indexical specificity of Shirley Baker’s images, viewers appeared able to identify signs — both familiar and strange — that enabled them to incorporate photographs into their own historical awareness and narratives of

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<sup>464</sup> Allan Sekula, ‘Reading and Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital’, in Liz Wells, (ed), *The Photography Reader*, (London, Routledge, 2003), 448.

experience. For example, visitors commented on women's dress in housecoats and pinafores, and their domestic labour in the street which was culturally similar to their own experience of women's post-war lives. Though the urban form of Spanish streets is different to that of England, the activities in the Northern streets resonated with viewers. Images of women talking with friends, mothers overseeing young children, and children playing in the street prompted the sharing of Spanish memories. In other words, despite cultural differences and lack of historical information, viewers *were* able to find *points of connection* in these photographs that corresponded to their own life experiences.



Fig. 20. Michael Busselle's photograph 'Women of Barcelona' (1966).

Indeed, their recognition of the theme of women and children at work and play corroborated my own identification of these tropes when I had first classified Shirley Baker's photographs during my primary research. Identifying and suggesting specific themes in her images — such as gendered friendship, solidarity and sociality — had very much been part of the objective of the original exhibition layout.

#### 5.4 Signs of their Times

Group tours are usually an opportunity for visitors to learn from the curator how to interpret 'correctly' what is on display. In taking a group of young Spanish adult visitors around the exhibition, I was intrigued, however, to find out what they were making of the photographs given their potential alienness. I invited them to tell me what they were thinking.

My tour group eagerly responded to my question. In English and through a translator, they conveyed that they found the work ‘moving’ and ‘political’:

*“For me, these are really political works”, one young woman emphasised. Some in the small group around her nodded in agreement, whilst others exclaimed, “Yo también” (“me too”). She continued, “They show a society with different values, more social, where people are in solidarity with each other. A young man close by chipped in. “Yes, I agree, in Spain right now this is what we need, a return to people helping each other, finding different ways to live without money. Materialism just isn’t working”. “What I love about these pictures”, a woman from the back spoke-up and as she did so the crowd opened up around her to let her voice in, “is that people haven’t got much, but they don’t look poor. They have each other, and that’s what is really important in life”.<sup>465</sup>*

My group became animated. Each was wanting to offer their view of the current situation in Spain, following months of political upheaval since the 2015 election had failed to deliver a majority government.<sup>466</sup> These visitors belonged to a generation rapidly politicized by devastating youth unemployment in the country (currently still standing at 31.7%) and an economic crisis, known as the *Great Recession*, which began in 2008 when millions took to the streets throughout Spain to protest against economic and welfare reform. What began as a youth movement rapidly built alliances across the generations, the unions and thousands of regional welfare activist groups, resulting in the popular protest alliance *Democracia Real Ya (DRY)* (amongst other groups), and in 2014 the formation of the anti-austerity/social democracy party *Podemos*.<sup>467</sup>

Launched in March 2011, a characteristic of *DRY* was its sophisticated understanding of representational and symbolic forms of communication and direct action. Indeed, the alliance was first launched as a website prior to organizing public actions that were pragmatic, symbolic and performative and that according to Peter Gelderloos, 'led to the creation of hundreds of police-free zones across the country,

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<sup>465</sup> My dialogue is an interpretation from memory, of the experience at that time, which is now three years old, but had been recounted on numerous occasions since and to a range of colleagues and interested friends and family. It feels, to me, an ‘accurate’ portrayal of my experience of that exchange, and represents also the significance to me of the further reflections that moment elicited.

<sup>466</sup> For more information on the 2015 General Election see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015\\_Spanish\\_general\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_Spanish_general_election). Accessed: 24 September 2019. On the 2016 General Election: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016\\_Spanish\\_general\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Spanish_general_election). Accessed: 24 September 2019.

<sup>467</sup> For more information on *Democracy Real YA!* see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/¡Democracia\\_Real\\_YA!](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/¡Democracia_Real_YA!) Accessed: 24 September 2019. For information on *Podemos*, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podemos\\_\(Spanish\\_political\\_party\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podemos_(Spanish_political_party)). Accessed: 24 September 2019.

hospitals were occupied and saved from privatization, neighbourhood assemblies sprang up, unused land and homes were occupied and squatted, worker cooperatives were founded and urban community gardens were established. were established'.<sup>468</sup>

The innovative use of social media has been a hallmark of the Spanish protest movement. Used not only to broadcast alternative information and narratives of austerity to that of the mainstream media, new technologies have been central to groups such as *15-M* as well as the *Podemos* party as a tool 'for the strategic creation of innovative and participatory uses of online platform (communication), aimed at generating changes in the social and political systems (social action)'.<sup>469</sup> The most spectacular use of visual image technology was on 12 April 2015 when in protest against the Citizen Safety Law (dubbed the 'Gag Law'), a law which restricted public demonstrations and actions, a 'virtual march' comprising two thousand hologram people was projected onto the Congress of Deputies in Madrid.<sup>470</sup>

The exhibition of Shirley Baker's photographs opened just six weeks prior to the 2016 General Election, which had been called due to the failure to form a government following the 2015 election. In this context of ten years of heightened political awareness and mass public participation, Shirley Baker's photographs, for this young audience at least, seem to have generated an affective resonance about social connection and alternative community values. It is worth saying here that while my main interaction was with this younger adult audience (mid-twenties to late thirties by my estimation), Pascale Dufour, Héloïse Nez and Marcos Ancelovici claim that the actual social and demographic composition of the 'Indignados' — the name given to anti-austerity, pro-democracy protestors — was not primarily youths directly hit by the economic crisis, nor was it made up of mainly 'marginal and anti-system people'. In contrast, it was 'an intergenerational and highly educated movement, strongly supported by national public opinion', with the majority of respondents claiming, in fact, to be in a 'rather good financial situation but afraid for their future'.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Peter Gelderloos, *The Failure of Nonviolence* (2015), quoted in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-austerity\\_movement\\_in\\_Spain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-austerity_movement_in_Spain). Accessed: 24 September 2019.

<sup>469</sup> See: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/anti-austerity-forces-and-digital-media-in-spain/>. Accessed: 24 September 2019.

<sup>470</sup> See: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/anti-austerity-forces-and-digital-media-in-spain/>. Accessed: 24 September 2019.

<sup>471</sup> Pascale Dufour, Héloïse Nez and Marcos Ancelovici, *Street Politics in the Age of Austerity From the Indignados to Occupy*, (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 15.

My contention is that, in this charged context, Shirley Baker's photographs were experienced (temporarily at least) as 'political' images by a wide demographic of the museum audience sympathetic to the social democracy movement and its championing of alternative societal values including sociality and solidarity.

### 5.5 Re-ordering Signs

Photographs are generally considered to be products of historical contexts and in this respect may be 'signs of their times'. The reaction of the young Spanish audience, however, demonstrates, as social scientist Dawn Mannay suggests, that the visual economy of photographs can be reordered so that they act as 'signs beyond their times, reinvented and mediating new messages'.<sup>472</sup> If for Allan Sekula the decontextualising of images impoverishes 'historical understanding', the reaction of audiences in Madrid suggests otherwise. True, the Spanish audience did not learn from Shirley Baker's photographs about the specific historical circumstances in which her photographs had been taken, nor about the social relations of the people depicted — not in the sense of their factuality. What I found was that Shirley Baker's photographs were re-activated and given meaning through narratives that involved a complex interplay of the content of the photograph (signs), the aesthetic affect of her images (for some viewers, Baker's black and white aesthetic produces a feeling of melancholy and or, perhaps, austerity), personal experience, social and political context and ideological beliefs (politics) that made them historically *valuable* to present-day lives. To the young Spanish audiences, Baker's images were released from the frames of 'documentary' and 'historical record' to 'speak' as resonant images in a political crisis that offered alternative social values.

There is also the context in which this reception occurred. It is not without some irony that visitors to the Shirley Baker exhibition had to first pass through the ostentatiously appointed home of the 17th Marquis of Cerralbo, a known virulent right winger.<sup>473</sup> Nevertheless, I think it relevant that the spectators' engagement with these photographs was formed and shared in a leading public exhibition space, given that space

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<sup>472</sup> Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*, (London, Routledge, 2016),17.

<sup>473</sup> Enrique de Aguilera y Gamboa came from an aristocratic family going back to the 14 Century. The 'palace' he constructed (1871-1893) was intended to be both home and private art gallery, housing his eclectic and extensive collection of fine arts, religious articles and archeological artefacts - much of which he found on his own excavations. He pursued an active national political career as a right wing Carlist, entering the Senate in 1885. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enrique\\_de\\_Aguilera\\_y\\_Gamboa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enrique_de_Aguilera_y_Gamboa). Accessed: 3 March 2020.

and the taking over of space, in many different forms (much of it symbolic), had been central to grassroots activities throughout Spain over the previous ten years.<sup>474</sup> Moreover, the use of imagery in public space, as part of the protests, had been sophisticated, spectacular and innovative. It is perhaps overstating it, but might it be also the case that Spanish audiences were acculturated to public debating, and public debating with images, and that their general interest in visualisation contributed to their particular reception of the Shirley Baker exhibition?

## 5.6 Conclusion

This case study suggests that, in engaging with photographs from other cultures and historical times, Spanish audiences found resonance through drawing on their own lives, and recent social and political experiences. In Madrid, the sense audiences made of Shirley Baker's photographs was neither activated by an identification with an 'Englishness' or 'Northernness', nor by historical information regarding the circumstances of their production. I concluded that the aesthetic qualities of the images were also not of primary interest. Alternatively, it would seem that a heightened and widespread public concern for social welfare provision and reform, public spending and cuts coloured the intense engagement with Shirley Baker's work. Moreover, I contend, that because the Spanish protest movement was characterized by media awareness, this resulted in a creative and innovative sensitivity to visual imagery and communication technologies. In this unique political, social and temporal context, Shirley Baker's photographs were, therefore, *experienced* and *interpreted* as politically relevant representations that offered viewers a vision of 'a past' that was anti-materialistic and socially cohesive. Furthermore, their interpretation chimed with their hopes for a society in which 'equality, progress, solidarity, freedom of culture, sustainability and development, welfare and people's happiness' could be advanced.<sup>475</sup> The exhibition

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<sup>474</sup> For a detailed analysis of the role of street protesting over the past 10 years worldwide see: Pascale Dufour, Héloïse Nez and Marcos Ancelovici, *Street Politics in the Age of Austerity: From the Indignados to Occupy*, (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>475</sup> Quote taken from the DRY manifesto, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/¡Democracia\\_Real\\_YA!](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/¡Democracia_Real_YA!) Accessed: 24 September 2019. For further reading on the political situation in 2015 & 2016 see: Pablo, Simon, The Challenges of the New Spanish Multipartism: Government Formation Failure and the 2016 General Election, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13608746.2016.1268292?src=recsys>. Accessed: 24 September 2019. Martin Portos Garcia, Taking to the streets in the context of austerity : a chronology of the cycle of protests in Spain, 2007-2015, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/45426>. Accessed: 24 September 2019. For a brief summary on the anti-austerity movement in Spain, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-austerity\\_movement\\_in\\_Spain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-austerity_movement_in_Spain). Accessed: 24 September 2020.

installation and my discussions with visitors revealed the latency of Shirley Baker's photographs which was re-activated by a 'political gaze'. This 'gaze', or what might be better designated as a 'political desire', bridged an imaginary reading of 'someone else's past', as portrayed in the photographs, with present-day aspirations for social and political change.

### **5.7 Postscript: Going forward to Manchester**

'Any photograph may become (such) a 'Now'', suggested John Berger, 'if an adequate context is created for it'.<sup>476</sup> The Spanish 'encounter' confirmed that Shirley Baker's photographs *are* relevant to today. Not as images about the historical time inscribed in the photographs, but as images inscribed in 'the past' yet resonating with and connecting to values for today. For Berger, activating a photograph's 'nowness' was a matter of putting the photograph 'back into the context of experience, social experience, social memory'.<sup>477</sup> Through the context of use (the situated contexts of distribution and display) and the context of viewing (in its fullest sense,) Berger suggested that photographs work 'radially' like memory, 'that is to say an enormous number of associations' come into play.<sup>478</sup> It follows, that photography is not used 'to illustrate an argument, or to demonstrate a thought', but as a form of critical humanist storytelling.<sup>479</sup>

In Madrid, the reception of the Shirley Baker's images was not a consequence of my deliberate attempt to actively 're-frame' her work in the light of the Spanish Crisis. The politically charged and affective response to her images *was* a surprise. A year later, in preparing a new curatorial project with the photographs at Manchester Art Gallery —as the curatorial practice at the centre of my doctoral research — I reflected on the 'phenomenon' in Madrid and what I had learnt in the previous, 'purely' curatorial, rather than research-framed exhibition, in London. I thus began to consider the use *of* the public space of the museum for discussion and debate, and the making space public *for* discussion and debate. Now approached as a form of critical curatorial inquiry, I raised the following questions:

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<sup>476</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, *Understanding Photographs*, 60.

<sup>477</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, 60.

<sup>478</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, 60.

<sup>479</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, 60.

what was the potential for an exhibition to provide space for meaningful, social engagement that connected with individual, shared and collective experience as elicited by the specificity but also the openness of Shirley Baker's photographs? What kind of exhibition context could I design to enable Shirley Baker's photographs to perform 'radially' and, thus, to be 'seen in terms which are simultaneously, personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic'?<sup>480</sup> Furthermore, how could I collect and analyse evidence of this curatorial process? I will take up these questions in the following Manchester case study (Chapter 6), and Chapters 7-9, in which I introduce my innovative research method 'Tea with the Curator'.

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<sup>480</sup> John Berger, in Geoff Dyer, 60.

## Chapter 6

### 'I'm part of that. That's part of us': Manchester<sup>481</sup>

#### Preface: vignette

*Upon opening the heavy glass door into the entrance of The Photographer's Gallery, in London, David catches my eye.*

*Accessed: 24 September 2019. That's another lovely shirt, David", I quip, striding passed the reception desk on my way to the lift. Turquoise and blue one day, pink and yellow another. Today David, one of the gallery receptionists, is wearing yet another of his joyful flowery shirts that remind me of the summery dresses my mother would sew for me when I was little.*

*Since installing the exhibition, David and I have developed a bit of a bantering rapport. He is from Manchester, and I have found his fat Northern accent a reassuring anchor in this very cosmopolitan, elongated vowel sound of-an-art-space. So it has become my habit to say a cheery Northern "Good morning", followed hours later by, "G'night, all the best", on the days I am in the gallery.*

*"I woz hopin' yer were gonna be in t'day as I wanted t' tell yer 'ow much I'm lovin' the Shirley Baker".*

*"Thanks", I respond.*

*"I've told all me family up North about-it".*

*I smile broadly, ear to ear, taking in the pleasure of David's enthusiasm.*

*"An' I'm just lovin' all the people comin' down. Gallery's full of 'Mancs'. It's great"! David laughs, with just an edge of conspiratorial, "We'll show 'em, them Southerners".*

*"Really, have people come all the way down"?*

*"Too right, and everyone's askin', when's show goin' t' Manchester? Yer 'are takin' the show to Manchester aren't yer"?*

*I hesitate. How much to reveal to David without sounding too unprofessional? "I've been trying to, but so far the Whitworth have turned me down".*

*Looking straight into my face, part incredulous, part beseeching.*

*"But it's a no brainer. I mean, these photos, they've gotta go home"!*

I did not tell David the story of how some months previously I had approached the then director of the Whitworth gallery by email, attaching illustrations of some of Shirley Baker's photographs taken in the 1960s in the terrace streets just behind the gallery. The gallery had always been a favourite of mine, going there as a child when I passed many a school holiday with my Mancunian grandparents; so I liked this personal connection. More significantly, with a programme to refurbish and extend the original building, and with public outreach high on their agenda, I thought that showing Baker's photographs there could provide a great link to the past communities who had lived close by. So, I was maddened that, without discussion of my proposal, I eventually received an email via a personal assistant to the effect that, 'Sorry, Whitworth does not show *that kind of*

work' [my emphasis]. What *kind* of photographs would that be? Black and white, realist, topographically close by and fifty years old? The response of the Director was indicative of what I was up against in attempting to re-present Shirley Baker's work as relevant to contemporary audiences today

## 6.1 Introduction

My experience in London and Madrid prompted me to reflect further on the mutability of Shirley Baker's photographs, their capacity to 'take on' new meanings for different viewers in different contexts, a quality that John Berger has referred to as 'narrative openness', beyond any empirical specificity. For Berger, 'the true content' of a photograph is invisible'.<sup>482</sup> It is formed in the accumulated meanings and feelings, between the moment the photograph was taken (the time and place and point of view of the photographer), and that of the viewer, looking from the vantage point of another moment in time and place.

In Manchester, I anticipated that Shirley Baker's photographs would evoke strong memories, reflections and feelings from audiences familiar with their topographical indexicality. Not only would local audiences possess more experiential knowledge of the photographs than myself (able to identify originating context, people, activities, etc.), there was also the very real possibility that people looking at the photographs in the art gallery could find themselves gazing at family and/or friends, or even facing an earlier version of themselves.

My initial idea was to work with people with direct experience of the time and place inscribed in Shirley Baker's photographs, and to draw out what visual anthropologist Marcus Banks calls, a photograph's 'internal and external narratives'.<sup>483</sup> For Banks, the internal narrative is 'the story ... that the image communicates', while the external narrative is 'the social context that produced the image'.<sup>484</sup> This would require a participatory framework through which complex 'stories' about Shirley Baker's photographs might be told. How would I garner these stories? What form would they

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<sup>482</sup> John Berger, 'Understanding a photograph', (1972) published in *Understanding a photograph: John Berger*, edited Geoff Dyer, (London, Penguin, 2013), 17.

<sup>483</sup> Marcus Banks, *Visual Methods in Social Research*, London, Sage, 2001, 11. For Banks, the 'internal narrative' of a photograph relates to the description of the photo image, and the question 'what is it of'? However, Banks acknowledges that even this so-called simple question may be subject to interpretation, resulting in a more experience based response that places the 'thing' into context. Whereas the story of the 'external narrative' 'is constructed elsewhere', in 'the social context that produced the image and social relations in which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing'.

<sup>484</sup> Marcus Banks, *Visual Methods in Social Research*, 11.

take? And what would I do with them? These questions formed one axis of my curatorial research inquiry, located as a praxis of the PhD research, that would consider how to respond to the unique situated historical context of Baker's photographs.

Memory work, in the published photographic theory literature, has tended to privilege the potency of family photography where familiarity, intimacy, affiliation and resonance is thought to be guaranteed.<sup>485</sup> Consequently, the mnemonic potential of 'non personal' photography ('documentary', photojournalistic, advertising images, reportage, artistic, and so on) has not been 'widely appreciated or understood'. Of course, it may be the case that documentary photographs are used creatively in a variety of non-academic heritage projects, but that in not being critically analysed and written-up as scholarly research it goes un-recognised. Could concepts of 'familiarity' and 'affiliation' apply to the photographs of Shirley Baker? Would her 'documentary' photographs draw participants into new awareness and reflections on their own lives, bridging 'the past' with 'the present'? How could they locate themselves in and through these documents of the past?

To test these questions, I introduced into the research an innovative blend of oral history/photo elicitation as a method. I describe in detail its use here as making an original contribution to participatory, photographic focussed research methodologies, and oral history methods. Additionally, I present the summary 'findings' from this research process, that contribute scholarly understanding not only of the ways people found resonance in Shirley Baker's photographs, but also to suggest how people relate to professionally authored 'auteur' photographs more generally, and, thus, their potential in future research.

In this chapter, I present and analyse the new exhibition strategy I developed for *WM&LM* at Manchester Art Gallery (MAG), focussing on participatory knowledges. Central to this new framework was the introduction of the Shirley Baker Oral History/ Photo Elicitation Project (SBOH/PE) that was conducted prior to the exhibition opening. Photographs were 'brought to life' through personal memory, and these 'internal stories' added valuable photographic knowledge about Shirley Baker's works, and contributed to historical awareness of working-class experience in post-war Northern Britain. Remembrances additionally resulted in alternative 'counter narratives' to the interpretation of Shirley Baker's photographs, and these destabilised their function and

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<sup>485</sup> '...we believe, the preponderance of family and personal photographs is intrinsic to current oral history practice'. See, Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, *Oral History and Photography*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

status as iconic documentary images of Northern poverty. As a consequence of this knowledge production, I adapted the exhibition concept, the content and installation, introducing four new elements: an 'audio guide', the '1958 Map' (Salford and Manchester), the 'Postcard Wall', the 'Cabinet of Attachment Objects'. These contributed to 'animating' the photographs of Shirley Baker and stimulated the sharing of personal experiences and knowledges between audience members. Thus, I go on to claim that the dialogical functionality of the exhibition shifted the emphasis from 'viewers' looking *at* the photographs by Shirley Baker, towards 'participants' experiencing *with* the photographs of Shirley Baker, and thus producing a different reading of the archive that is 'Shirley Baker'.

The introduction of an audio guide formed the core exhibition innovation, and consequently I describe this in detail. It stands as an imaginative and critical use of oral history, and demonstrates how by, offering listeners contradiction, ambiguity and discomposure, the idea of 'the authentic' first-person narrative is challenged, whilst simultaneously unsettling the 'seeming fixity of photographic meaning'.<sup>486</sup> During a six-weeks residency as self-appointed 'curator-in-residence', I established a varied programme of public participatory events (described below). Most significantly, it was this that enabled me to devise an additionally innovative method for initiating audience encounters with Shirley Baker's photographs that I named 'Tea with the Curator' (presented in Chapters 7-9).

The oral history/photo elicitation project and audio guide production was a significant undertaking that had to be delivered by a team, and I initiated a collaboration with Professor Penny Tinkler, a historical sociologist at the University of Manchester. Our working together emerged through the co-existence of our research interests in post-war history and photography and experimenting with the photo elicitation method.<sup>487</sup> Our generated shared data (oral history testimonies), however, has been analysed independently in relation to our discrete research projects.<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Alexander Found and Angela Thiessen, 'Introduction', in *Oral History and Photography*, (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011), 1-22.

<sup>487</sup> Together we initiated two separate funding bids for the oral history/audio guide. As a curator I initiated a HLF bid, whilst Penny secured ESRC funding.

<sup>488</sup> Penny Tinkler and I have co-written and co-presented a conference paper on memory and play. This is not part of my thesis, and what I drew from the data that we collected in the oral history project is distinct from Professor Tinkler's own research usage.

## 6.2 Preparation and Organization for the Exhibition Installation

The exhibition was installed across two large ground floor galleries that were easily accessible from the Museum's imposing classical entrance hall. Outside on the street, to the front and side entrances, large banners featuring 'the red-haired girls' (who later came to be known as 'the Murray sisters') promoted the exhibition. Two hundred and eleven thousand visitors came to see the show that summer, a record number of attendees for the gallery. The second edition of the book sold out in four weeks after the exhibition launch and was further re-edited, with this too selling out three weeks prior to the exhibition closing. It is still in high demand today.

The MAG gallery was considerably larger than TPG, and I included ten additional black and white prints and fifteen extra colour that were especially printed from original slide film. The new black and white photographs had been discovered during preparation for the Manchester show. Depicting the first generation of children of Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrants, I wanted to exhibit these photographs as they were an important and timely 'record' revealing the multi-ethnic working-class communities that had lived in Manchester and Salford nearly fifty years ago (Figs 21 and 22).<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> As many of the oral history participants suggested, throughout the 1960s and 1970s inner city neighbourhoods were racially integrated as a consequence of poverty, class and prejudice of private landlords who would not rent to either West Indian and Irish families — both groups the brunt of racist attitudes post-war, thus settlements occurred in areas where landlords would offer, and indeed often enthusiastically so, rents. As housing policy was used strategically to re-settle families post-clearance, it has been suggested (though cannot be corroborated by this author) that the Local Authority implemented both 'colour' and economic segregationist strategies in re-housing. The new Hulme council estate became primarily a neighbourhood of Afro-Caribbean families. By the mid 1970s, and as a consequence of the appropriation of Asian businesses and persecution in Uganda under Idi Ahrmin, Britain began to receive Asians fleeing that country. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idi\\_Amin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idi_Amin) Some of the oral history participants recalled that during the 1970s, Indian families started to settle in Salford. Stephen Williamson spoke of his delight as a child in being invited into his neighbours house to eat with them. Shirley Baker's photographs thus represent an important and currently un-researched representation of the multi-ethnicity of post-war Manchester and Salford, that includes first generation Black and Asian immigrant children, and children of both Irish and Traveller families.



Figs. 21 and 22. Shirley Baker's photographs portray an ethnically integrated community of children, united by family poverty and circumstances of prejudicial private sector land-lording. © Shirley Baker Estate.

The colour slide projection was substituted by enlarging the colour print installation to fifty colour prints in a layout that followed the TPG hang. As in London, the black and white photographs and the colour ones were installed in separate galleries, forming two almost distinct exhibitions, although these spaces were linked and could be accessed from two different entrance points. The entrance to the black and white gallery came off the main public entrance foyer, whilst the colour gallery led from the gallery shop. Both ways provided clear views into the galleries beyond, through large glass doorways. I took advantage of these dramatic spatial sight lines by once again installing large two thirds life size prints at each entrance point. At the entrance to the black and white gallery, I used the same street image as at TPG on a free-standing wall, while at the entrance to the colour gallery I installed a vertical freestanding wall supporting a two thirds life size colour image of girls swinging from a lamppost. As in London the soundscape was spatialized throughout the galleries to great effect.



Fig. 23. Girls swinging from a lamp post.

### 6.3 Additional Exhibition Elements and Events

The black and white gallery formed the main exhibition space and along with ‘The Object Biography Cabinet’ developed for London (and presented in Madrid), I introduced three additional elements: ‘The 1958 street map of Manchester and Salford’, ‘The Postcard Wall’, and ‘The Cabinet of Attachment Objects’. MAG’s senior curator suggested I create a separate ‘animation’ or ‘education space’ in which visitors could interact with these ‘activities’. I strongly resisted this hierarchical separation of ‘looking’ at Shirley Baker’s photographs from other forms of ‘engagement’ that would, I hope result in the exhibition becoming a space of sociality and deepening ‘encounters’.

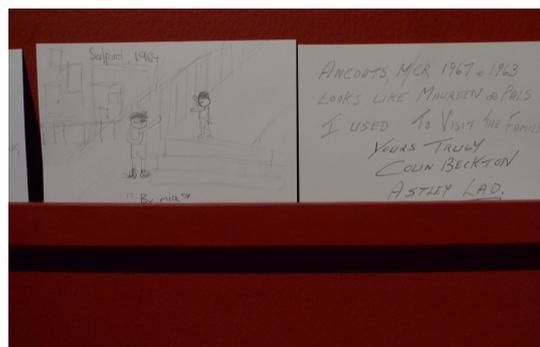
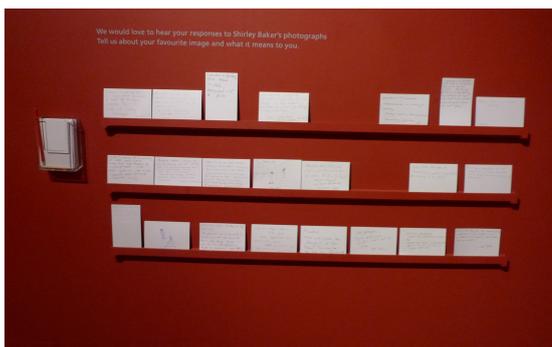
The 1958 map had proved popular in our oral history workshops (see fuller description below), with people drawn into animated conversation as they highlighted with a coloured flag family connections to the streets and neighbourhoods Shirley Baker photographed. I initially thought to put a large-scale map in the middle of the gallery in the form of a bespoke designed table mounted object. However, there was insufficient floor space to make this work and instead I displayed the enlarged map on the wall.



Figs. 24 and 25. The map became a focus for photography, with the exhibition ‘experience’ being re-distributed.

Over the twelve weeks of the exhibition, the map provided a focus for lively visitor interaction. Friends, family, and complete strangers were temporarily unified in affective exchanges, discovering and pointing out locations and narrating their significance to one another. By the final day of the exhibition there was literally no room left for a pin.

Adjacent to the map, I installed *The Postcard Wall*. Exhibition visitors were invited to select a photograph and on a blank postcard compose a response.



Figs. 26 and 27. In total 550 postcards were eventually displayed on specially constructed shelves with the gallery running out of cards.

Writing was primarily a solo activity, but the reading of other visitors' cards was not. Often narrated out loud, they generated further conversation and connections between visitors.

Objects are resonant with memories. Many museums now work with handling collections or 'memory boxes', particularly as part of reminiscence activities. During the oral history recordings, some participants brought with them objects that in addition to the photographic images themselves intensified and amplified their memories. I displayed a number of these once 'ordinary' objects, made 'significant' by survival, in a museum display case that I named *The Cabinet of Attachment Objects*.



Fig. 28. 'The Cabinet of Attachment Objects' — so named because despite their original ephemerality and 'ordinariness', the treasuring of artefacts, in some cases for up to sixty years, conveyed the especially intense relationship each owner had with their object.



Fig. 29. The yellow 'Donkey Stone' rope and scrubbing brush, were in fact new, bought by their owner to remind them of their mother.

Labels identified the name of the lender and included the briefest of descriptions, yet, the display was more 'cabinet of curiosities' than a social history display. Each of these decontextualised 'curios'/objects connected in some way to one of Shirley Baker's

photographs, but the connection was not always obvious. So that the perceptive observer/listener might connect, for example, Michelle Chadwick's treasured 'dolly's dress' with her recorded story describing the day boys threw the doll down the drain, with an image of boys fishing something out from a street grate. In this way, we might think of the participants as 'co-curators', the display of their possessions giving a sense of exhibition 'ownership'.<sup>490</sup>

Over the course of being 'curator-in-residence', I introduced a varied programme of public events — a 'fish bowl event', inter-generational conversation weekend, a film night, a book club, and exhibition guided tours.<sup>491</sup> With each of these events, I orchestrated different forms of audience engagement with Shirley Baker's photographs and engaged the exhibition as 'a catalytic agent' in which experiences of post-war class relations, issues of representation, and present day conditions of living could be shared, negotiated and debated through temporary communities of interest. The guided tours were publicised weekly and were offered to the public, and were also pre-bookable to existing groups. Rather than position myself as an authority on the photographer, I explored the 'guided' tour as a group dialogue, encouraging close and 'slow looking', thus considering how Baker composed her images *as* photographs. Whilst it might come as a surprise to the reader that in the post-Barthesian, post-semiotic theorisation of photography the idea of 'reading' a photograph needs to be introduced, my experience curating photography for non-specialist audiences concludes otherwise. That a photograph is 'made' not 'taken' is still for many people a novel concept, even when applied to their own photographic practices.

The intergenerational dialogue event, held over a July weekend, was adapted from the oral history/photo elicitation project (described below). The idea was a simple one. Working in pairs, across at least one generation, (e.g. grandmother and grandchild), two photographic postcards from the pack of one hundred and fifty exhibition images were chosen and prompted a thirty-minutes audio-recorded conversation *through* each image. The activity proved popular and permitted the older of the pair to share aspects of their lives that had previously gone unspoken, and for the younger to learn something

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<sup>490</sup> Participants brought in their possessions and had them accessed under conservation methods, thus validating them as of 'museological/cultural 'value'.

<sup>491</sup> For details about 'the Fishbowl' method see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishbowl\\_\(conversation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishbowl_(conversation)). Accessed: 4 April 2020.

about their older relative; and for there to be a mutual exchange of ideas and opinions.<sup>492</sup> The *That was The This is Now* 'fishbowl event' is described below through a vignette.

**Vignette: 'That was Then, This is Now', a Fishbowl Conversation**

*I had no idea how it was going to go. That was the truth of it. It seemed a good idea, though I can't remember now where I got it from. It might have brewed in conversation with Mike Kelly, a Salford activist, in our conversation about 'community' and what it meant today. And how he felt that something really had gone wrong, but he couldn't quite put his mind to it: "Did I know, there were food banks in Salford again, not one but several, and he just couldn't understand what had gone wrong with Society!"*

*Maybe it was the conversation with Adam one of the gallery invigilators, who in telling me about putting together an exhibition information pack for other invigilators queried: "Maybe we should be inviting conversations about freedom and play, not poverty."*

*Or could it have been the one with Geoff and Judith Wills who had travelled in from Stockport. Judith tells me that listening to people going around the exhibition has got her a bit frustrated: "I mean people are saying, "Ooh look at how dirty people are". But people smelt, the streets smelt, wet dust on the pavement, disinfectant, and the drains, and everyone smelt of cigarette smoke. You couldn't help it and you just accepted it. Dirt and smells, you were lucky to be clean. You can't look at these photos applying today's values to the past", and she wept in telling me this.*

*However it came about, I had decided to set up a Fishbowl conversation event. The gallery staff had agreed to let me hold it right there in the exhibition rather than in the education suite. This was really important as I wanted to set up a circuit whereby Shirley Baker's photographs would 'charge' our public conversation and our public discourse would in turn inform and reshape people's understandings of Baker's images. As it was a 'Late Night Thursday' in the gallery I knew it could get quite busy. I had also advertised the event on social media and around the gallery a week previously. But with no need to book the issue was how many people might just turn up to the 'drop in' event.*

*So here we were, putting out chairs for thirty people in a series of concentric circles, formed around four chairs; one for Penny, our moderator, and the other three for our 'panel of experts'. 'Fishbowls are useful for ventilating "hot topics" or sharing ideas or information from a variety of perspectives' states the literature<sup>493</sup> I had invited enthusiastic and vocal oral history participants Mike Kelly, Chrissie Buttefield and John Kerwin, to be that evening's panel because I knew they had strong opinions on our topics for conversation. Each had spoken with fervour in their oral history interviews around the themes of DIRT, RISK, COMMUNITY and they were also reflective*

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<sup>492</sup>The intention had been to use these recordings in a second version of the audio guide, but this proved to be technically too demanding and financially costly.

<sup>493</sup> <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/fishbowltechnique>. Accessed: 1 November 2019.

*and considerate. I was also confident that each could 'hold their own' if things got choppy in the heat of the moment.*

*Many of the oral history participants were frustrated that their working-class upbringings were not culturally and historically recognised and represented. And they consequently lacked the cultural framework in which to make sense of their own past, resulting in a form of self-censoring silence in some cases.<sup>494</sup>*

*Interviewees still harboured strong emotions regarding the urban clearance programme, believing it ill thought through. And they disputed the designation 'slum' for the areas known to them as 'home'. The idea of the fishbowl was to provide a public platform in which participants could listen, share and discuss with others such experiences and needs. This was not, however, an evening of reminiscence, but an opportunity to investigate, reflect upon and be reconciled with the past and to confront the present.*

*As the time came, attendees started to take places on the chairs. These were quickly filled, so we put out more. And then more. So that soon we had nearly seventy people sitting and standing and we had run out of floor space. Many people were known to us, having taken part in the oral history project. Tonight, they had brought along friends and family, including a mother of ninety years of age, intrigued to see who else might turn up. Having come to the gallery to see the show that evening, exhibition visitors of all ages were intrigued by what was about to take place and wandered into our circle.*

*At 6.30pm, Penny rang the bell and announced 'the rules'. "No interruptions when the panel are speaking, and no interruptions when any one from the floor contributes. Listen as you would like to be listened to. Address others as you would like to be addressed. Be sensitive and respectful to others' life experiences. And when thirty minutes is up, I will ring an old brass school bell."*

*We were off! Penny introduced each theme consecutively. Handing over to the panel, she gave each one five minutes to expand on the subject, framed by the concept of 'That was Then, This is Now'. There were so many moments that evening that were memorable and worthy of recalling. But without doubt the most affecting was when we came to discuss 'risk'. Our panel had recalled provocative accounts of risky play. All three felt, that in comparison to today's children, their embodied, imaginative and yes, risky play had been of life-long benefit. They worried that today's children, including their own and grandchildren, were unable to experience adventurous play. The floor took up the theme enthusiastically, comparing past notions of risk with today's cyber risks of trolling and on-line grooming. And then a woman mid-way in the dense circle put up her hand: "I'm listening to you all, talking about your pasts. I didn't know what to expect tonight. I don't normally come to the gallery, but I was walking past tonight on the way home from work. I'm a child protection lawyer. And I thought I'd just pop in, because I'd heard about the exhibition. And I have to tell you, that what I have heard tonight has really shocked me." I braced myself, was this the moment when the generous and respectful listening audience would descend into uncontrollable chaos? "I've looked at these photos, and listened to your stories of being brought up, and to be honest, if I heard these stories today I'd be*

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<sup>494</sup> For a discussion on the concept of 'composure' and the importance of cultural framing to narrative structures of remembering, see Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 66-67.

*recommending that the lot of you be taken into care. But you know, here you are. You've all done alright for yourselves. You weren't harmed. And you're telling us quite the opposite in fact, that you've all made such good lives for yourselves because of the way you played, on your own, with other kids, building bonfires, climbing over derelict cars, swinging from beams in burnt out buildings, sliding over iced canals, crashing bogies down steep cobbled roads. And I have to say... .” The woman was struggling now a bit now, choking back her emotions: “I am going to have to go home and think about all of this. I really am. Because... I just don't know any more if I'm doing my job right.”<sup>495</sup>*

*The audience was silenced. The hairs on the back of my neck bristled. The Fishbowl had achieved more than I could have imagined. People's past lives and present feelings had been shared, witnessed and held. We had navigated some awkward moments and come through. Joyful laughter and tears were shared as old friends and neighbours from over fifty years previously recognised each other and came together from across the circle. And afterwards, a gang of us went into the gallery cafe for a celebratory drink, talking until 10pm when we were asked, politely, by cafe staff: “Have yer no homes to go to?”*

#### **6.4 If Pictures Could Talk: Oral History and Audio Guide**

In art theorist W.T.J. Mitchell's book *What Do Pictures Want?: the Lives and Loves of Images*, the author proposes a reconsideration of pictures not as inert objects but as 'animated beings with desires and drives of their own' ('lives and loves').<sup>496</sup> Inspired by Mitchell's proposition, I wondered: what if Shirley Baker's photographs could speak, what would they want to say? It was this line of playful enquiry that led to my initiating an oral history project prior to the Manchester exhibition opening, and in turn to the development of an exhibition 'audio guide', not as a didactic medium but as a creative exploration in which photographs might narrate different stories about themselves. I had two aims for the audio guide: to challenge viewers to 'look again' and to 'see differently' Shirley Baker's photographs, and to narrate alternative stories about Northern working-class experience in the 1960s and 1970s.

##### **6.4.1 Some Theoretical Thoughts: Oral History and Photography**

Oral history methodology is not a simple way of accessing the past but is 'a complex interweaving of past and present'.<sup>497</sup> Memories, it is suggested, 'are reworked over time,

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<sup>495</sup> A bogey was the name given to a homemade go-cart, usually cobbled together from sets of old pram wheels.

<sup>496</sup> W.T.J. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: the Lives and Loves of Images*, (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 28-56.

<sup>497</sup> Penny Tinkler, 'When I was a girl', in Alexander Found and Angela Thiessen, *Oral History and Photography*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 247.

in the light of subsequent experiences and the meanings attached to these'.<sup>498</sup> In working with oral histories or life story interviewing, the interviewer should (as with other forms of interviewing in ethnography and anthropology) be aware of the situational context in which remembering and recalling takes place. This includes the influence of cultural factors, the location, time, and even of course (why should it not be the case) ourselves—the interviewer (gender, age, etc.).<sup>499</sup> Whilst the degree to which these factors influence the process of recollecting is debated, it is now widely accepted that recollections are 'complex constructions': there is no such thing as 'simply remembering'.<sup>500</sup>

In writing about the emergent use of photography in oral history practice, Alexander Found and Angela Thiessen point out that memory work with and through photographs introduces another layer to the entanglement of remembering. Photographs, they argue can be used as 'prompts' or 'triggers' (mnemonic devices) and in this instance once the remembering is in process the photograph may recede in focus. A photograph may also be used as a document of social history, a container 'of facts about past events and experiences'.<sup>501</sup> In either case, they caution the idea that a photograph is a simple mnemonic or historic device. The view that photographs are 'windows on the world' to be further opened through 'the elicitation of details and stories about a past reality 'captured' in the photograph' is one that requires challenging.<sup>502</sup> Alternatively, the researcher/interviewer engaging photography in oral history work should approach the photographic image as a form of signification that requires a degree of 'contextual decoding'.<sup>503</sup> In other words, images are produced 'by people with interests and agendas at a certain time and place', and as artefacts, 'are shaped as much by aesthetic conventions and as by social norms' that the researcher needs to be aware of or least alerted to these.<sup>504</sup>

Using photographs in oral history work requires attending to the photographic image as well as to the material photographic object. Different kinds of photographic

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<sup>498</sup> Penny Tinkler, 'When I was a girl', 47.

<sup>499</sup> For an example of where situation and context overdetermine the oral history narratives see Chapter 6.

<sup>500</sup> Penny Tinkler, 'When I was a girl', 47.

<sup>501</sup> Alexander Found and Angela Thiessen, 'Introduction', in *Oral History and Photography*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

<sup>502</sup> Alexander Found and Angela Thiessen, *Oral History and Photography*, 3.

<sup>503</sup> Alexander Found and Angela Thiessen, 'Mary Brockmeyer's Wedding Picture', in *Oral History and Photography*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 28.

<sup>504</sup> Alexander Found and Angela Thiessen, 28.

materials facilitate different memory experiences. For example, a well-handled photograph, torn, in an album, or a postcard or newspaper image may prompt memory-stories *about* the photograph's biography (the time of its production, subsequent dissemination and storage) that adds new insights to existing memory stories or indeed may encourage different stories to be told. Neither is meaning fixed by an image. Even with identical images, different viewers may bring their own personal experiences and associations to bear on what they see and interpret, as Jean Mohr discovered in his photographic experiment: as discussed in the Introduction photographs do not always behave as predicted (see p.16). Photographs also gather meaning, with the function of a photograph and its interpretation changing over time. In this respect, in using photographs in memory work the researcher needs to regard them not as objective memory triggers but as a 'rhetoric of memory', a 'reflexive medium' in which photographs and oral narratives 'playing on each other during the interview construct rather than simply reveal, recover, or retell the past'.<sup>505</sup> An unanticipated corollary of the Shirley Baker oral history project was enhancing understanding of how non-family photographs could be used in memory work, and this will be explored further in this chapter.

#### **6.4.2 Practice: Oral History and Audio Guide Method**

Having previously engaged photographs in creative oral history work, as a 'method' of my PhD research I now needed to develop a more formalised and analytical approach. Additionally, the guide would require production expertise: a team to record the oral history testimonies, a sound editor, hardware development, and considerable funding.<sup>506</sup> But there was a political as well as an organizational imperative to involve the entire gallery team in the making of the exhibition and the audio guide. What I hoped to do was innovative in terms of soliciting and developing participation of the public in a research-led practice. I therefore needed to work across all the different departments at the gallery and involve staff including the senior exhibition curator and the web editor, and collaborate most closely with two staff members of the Participation Team. It was also necessary to involve a number of the gallery volunteers, and to hire expertise including a press officer and an additional oral history interviewer. In total the team comprised fourteen people. Early in the planning, I approached sociological historian

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<sup>505</sup> Alexander Found and Angela Thiessen, *Oral History and Photography*, 3.

<sup>506</sup> The production budget for audio guide was approximately £25,000.

Professor Penny Tinkler of the University of Manchester and we developed a mutually beneficial collaboration, with the oral history project with Shirley Baker's photographs dovetailing with her own research into post-war working-class experience. We were both committed to explore the potential of a public exhibition as a site for original scholarly, yet arts based, research with people and photography and its potential as a space of empowerment and representation.<sup>507</sup> The aim, then, was for the institution of the gallery to validate working-class experiences, and to bring such experiences *into* representation through the exhibition display. Thus, the additional elements I designed for the Manchester exhibition were all material opportunities through which life experiences that have hitherto been rendered 'invisible' by public cultural institutions (such as MAG), could be actualised.<sup>508</sup> In turn, this might help extend the gallery's audiences to individuals and groups hitherto alienated from the exhibitionary culture.<sup>509</sup> Furthermore, we shared an interest in investigating and developing participatory visual research methods that blended oral history and photo elicitation creatively in memory work. Specifically, I wanted to experiment with how the method could elicit experiential knowledges and advance alternative interpretations — 'counter-narratives' — for Baker's photographs.

### 6.4.3 Preparing the Audio Guide

In London and Madrid, the exhibition soundscape had established an atmosphere that enhanced the viewing experience and symbolically emulated the workings of memory (fleeting sounds from the past represented in the present). My audio guide evolved as an antidote to the didactic exhibition guide that through narrative interpretation directs the spectator's viewing towards a preferred message or meaning. It is now commonplace for audio guides to be used in museums, art galleries, heritage sites and other 'visitor attractions'. The medium and method are established aspects of visitor management practices, and are increasingly viewed as part of the learning and interpretation 'experience'.

The idea of 'storytelling' as a form of narrative elaboration is recognised by audio guide producers as contributing to 'effective memory making and emotional

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<sup>507</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, (London, Routledge, 2010), 153-174.

<sup>508</sup> The importance of representation of the 'marginalised' forms the bedrock of oral history method. See Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 153-174.

<sup>509</sup> Gallery invigilators reported to me that many visitors commented that they had not been in the gallery ever before.

engagement’, as opposed to a more didactic, information-driven approach — though the latter may be deemed more suitable by a curatorial and/or learning team.<sup>510</sup> Audio guides are promoted as ‘fun to listen to’, and as a contribution to making ‘an exhibition *better* accessible’.<sup>511</sup> What is meant, however, by the term ‘accessible’? Does it mean: intelligible, meaningful, relevant, informative, useful?<sup>512</sup> Being ‘gripped’, ‘touched emotionally’, bringing ‘exhibitions to life’ are qualities the more creative storytelling exhibition guide is thought to provide.<sup>513</sup> However, what of the idea of disequilibrium, disturbance, contradiction, discomfort and antagonism? What place is there for these ‘discomposed’ experiences in the exhibition guide, as a form both of interpretation and experience? The concepts of ‘composure’ and ‘discomposure’ are addressed in Chapter 9.

I identified the Dutch company GuideID because of their work at the time with innovative visitor data collection.<sup>514</sup> The creative innovation in their audio system was that for each ‘stop’ (‘the object’ of interpretation) listeners could trigger with a hand held device a wall mounted QR code. This presented listeners with three separate audio recordings (A, B, or C). The playback was simple: a ‘point and click system’ in which users held the device to their ear like a small phone. Unlike some audio guide systems that use personal phones to access audio through wi-fi and/or app downloads (which often prove problematic due to internet signal failures), this was a closed system that logged into a dedicated wi-fi channel.

#### **6.4.4 The ‘Shirley Baker Open Day’**

My aim in devising the oral history project was to generate audio content for the exhibition ‘audio guide’. One bi-product, however, was the creation of an audio archive of post-war working-class experience that would sit alongside the collection of Shirley Baker photographs held at Manchester Record Office (MRO). The exhibition ‘audio guide’ was produced in just eight weeks to be ready of the exhibition opening on May 18.

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<sup>510</sup> An emphasis on ‘experiential knowing’ (‘memory making’ and ‘emotional engagement’), as opposed to ‘propositional knowing’ (information from an undisclosed authority) is a recent development and exemplifies the shift in museum and heritage practices towards ‘experience’. Quote, see: <https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/features/tonwelt-audio-guides-essential-part-visitor-experience/> Accessed: 31 July 2019.

<sup>511</sup> <https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/features/tonwelt-audio-guides-essential-part-visitor-experience/> Accessed: 31 July 2019.

<sup>512</sup> See: <https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/features/tonwelt-audio-guides-essential-part-visitor-experience/> Accessed: 31 July 2019.

<sup>513</sup> <https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/features/tonwelt-audio-guides-essential-part-visitor-experience/>. Accessed: 31 July 2019.

<sup>514</sup>The data ‘scraped’ from using the audio device included daily number of users, which photograph ‘stops’ were visited, which options were selected, and duration of usage overall.

Project recruitment commenced in early March with a ‘Shirley Baker Open Day’, held in the education studio at MAG. The purpose of the day was to recruit participants as oral history interviewees.

Amazingly, the day was attended by 120 people.<sup>515</sup> It had been widely publicised (in local press, on social media, and with community distributed flyers), and was ‘open to all’. I also offered participants the opportunity to see an exclusive pre-exhibition of some of Shirley Baker’s colour photographs, as well as to enjoy a feast of home-baked cakes.<sup>516</sup>

Although the day was billed as an informal ‘drop in’ session, I had devised a series of structured, hands-on animation activities that included a 1958 map of the area, and a postcard exercise to provide a focal point for conversations. Then, working at tables members of the public were invited to select up to twelve postcards from a pack of one hundred and fifty (all of Shirley Baker’s exhibition images) and to arrange these



Fig. 30. The simple framing device focussed participants’ attention, and brought awareness to their selection and connection with their chosen images.

in a desk-top frame, forming their own Shirley Baker mini-exhibition. The emphasis was on facilitating an enjoyable time in its own right, as well as to encourage future participation in the oral history project. Through this process we noted deep connections and specific memories that were being formed around the images, themes that would later inform our life-story interviewing. The ‘mini-exhibition’ activity had been designed to take twenty minutes. As strangers came together through the process, however, twenty minutes turned to sixty and the average time of engagement was even longer. It was a great success, and was repeated by gallery staff with children and adults throughout the

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<sup>515</sup> Data taken from sign-in forms. The uptake of 120 people for a first public event was considered exceptionally high by the gallery participation team.

<sup>516</sup> The exhibition pre-review also gave the day an air of ‘exclusivity’ that certainly drew participants to it.

exhibition period. Although we had not requested it, some people also brought with them their own photographs and objects from the 1960s and 1970s. Items were proudly shown off and prompted a flow of animated and heartfelt conversation.

The day was full of memorable surprises. It was so simple to pin a coloured flag to a map, highlighting significant family connections to the streets and neighbourhoods that Shirley Baker photographed.



Fig . 31. On the day it was thrilling for us to 'discover' two of four 'Murray Sisters'.

Yet it provided a focal point for strangers to meet each other in lively conversation, in which geography and memories intermingled. John Byrne and John Bell, separated by forty years, discovered they had lived on Oxford Grove, man and boy, at the same time. There was also the truly 'spine-tingling' moment when people who featured in the photographs introduced themselves. Two 'Murray sisters' attended that day (Fig. 31). Whilst already knowing they were the subject of one of Shirley Baker's photographs, they were moved to discover that there were two additional images; and that they were also, now, featured on the exhibition street poster.<sup>517</sup> Stephen Williamson proudly announced that his photograph of himself and his two brothers had appeared on a CD cover for the local rock band, *The Jazz Devils*, in 1990, (Fig. 32).<sup>518</sup>



Fig. 32. The photograph of the Williamson boys was become a favourite of many viewers to the exhibition. Salford, 1964. © Shirley Baker Estate

<sup>517</sup> For further information on Shirley Baker's photograph of the Murray girls see p. 203.

<sup>518</sup> See: <https://www.discogs.com/artist/98755-The-Jazz-Devils>

The image is almost ‘cute’ in the manner of the popular post-war Italian child painter Giovanni Bragolin.<sup>519</sup> Something had always struck me, however, about the picture; how its pathos and formal styling — one of the photographer’s most aestheticised child images —betrayed a slushy sentimentality. Stephen Williams, now in his fifties, was keen to tell me *his* ‘story’:

*This is a picture of my two brothers and me. My brother at the front of the picture, Derek, with the patch on his eye. The middle person is me, Steven, and the back child is Peter with the long trousers on. Mother’s favourite. And the picture is in Gertrude Street in Ordsall, otherwise known as ‘Tealeaf Alley’.*

Because Stephen was one of our participants actually featuring in a photograph, I was keen to know if he could remember the day the photograph was taken. I was really hoping his memory-narrative might provide clues to how Shirley Baker worked. Whilst he could not remember the ‘event’ himself, being only a toddler at the time, his older brother Derek recalled that Baker had “*put us in that position, telling us she’d buy us an ice-cream.*”

Then the picture fell into place. Only just legible to the left of Derek’s shoulder is the back end of the ice-cream van. In fact, there was another picture which now made sense: an image featuring a young stylish woman (one of the very few young women to appear in Baker’s ‘street series’) surrounded by a gaggle of toddlers, buying an ice-cream from the very same van. There was Derek, behind the small crowd of children, almost edited out of the picture frame, unmistakable in his home-made knitted balaclava helmet and glasses, longingly looking on.

The two photographs slotted together like a pieces in jigsaw. Such ‘revelations’ emerged throughout the oral history project and were what made the work rewarding and affecting. For these participants, attending the open day deepened the relationship they had already with ‘their’ Shirley Baker photograph, as they negotiated the reactions of other attendees and remembered overlooked or new details relating to the photographs, and most movingly to their lives back then and subsequently. The day was also full of emotion. Even for those attendees who were not featured, Shirley Baker’s photographs

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<sup>519</sup> Bruno Amadio (1911 – 1981), popularly known as Bragolin, was the creator of the group of paintings known as *Crying Boys* that were popular in homes in the 1950s selling over 50,000 copies. For more information on Bragolin see: <https://exemplore.com/paranormal/The-Crying-Boy>. and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giovanni\\_Bragolin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giovanni_Bragolin) Accessed: 8 October 2019.

resonated intensely. While it is understandable that sensory remembering and affective viewing can be forged with photographs that portray people that viewers knew personally, what was amazing to the team was the depth of connection to photographs in which unknown people and places featured. I will address this phenomenon later in this chapter and in Chapters 8 and 9, and consider its implications in working with non-family photographs in visual research methods.

By the end of the event, thirty five people confirmed their interest in the oral history project and the audio guide, registering to attend the following week's morning workshop. We had gathered plenty of notes towards prompts for future conversations and we had also 'discovered' people who featured in the photographs. Crucially, we were also now confident that we could produce rich content for the audio guide. Participants at the open day became ambassadors for our project, telling family and friends and publicizing the exhibition through their work and personal networks. Even those who could not go on to be recorded wanted to stay in touch and came to other events.

#### **6.4.5 The Oral History Project Workshop**

The aim of the second half-day workshop was to identify fifteen to twenty-five people to take part in oral history interviewing. With only three weeks to record and edit interviews, we calculated that each of us could just about handle between five and seven people each.

As interviewees arrived the team invited them to join a table of up to six unrelated people and to collectively undertake the previous week's 'mini-exhibition' activity with the postcards. Each table was facilitated by a 'recorder' who ensured that everyone had an opportunity to contribute and that conversations covered wide range of social experiences, while also tackling more 'difficult' issues (see subjects below). Each of the table's group conversations were audio recorded, and the recorder made written notes identifying key themes that would inform our future interviews.

Important 'resistance narratives' started to emerge in this second workshop. Everyone, regardless of their subsequent social mobility, was proud of coming from the working-class and multi-ethnic communities portrayed in Shirley Baker's photographs. There was defiant opposition to the term 'slum clearance', widely used by official bodies to refer to the demolition of the inner-city areas at the time and subsequently. As a consequence of these exchanges, I removed all reference to 'slum clearance' from the

Shirley Baker exhibition literature, and rewrote the press release and exhibition introduction panel. Participants also unanimously expressed, the importance of working-class experience being recorded and shared, particularly at a time of increasing social marginalisation. For instance Mike Kelly, who was born in Salford and is now active in social justice projects in the city, considered the oral history project a vital opportunity not only to enhance understanding and stimulate critical reflection on life in working-class communities in Manchester and Salford in the 1960s and 1970s, but also to create a public forum for critical reflection on today's individualist and materialist society. He additionally recognised and embraced the potential of the exhibition itself to 'perform' as a political and civic space.<sup>520</sup>

Following the workshop, and using each table's conversation notes, I identified emergent themes and patterns of memories. These topic headings helped to prepare the interviews and structure the audio guide content around memory stories which we knew the participants were comfortable in talking about. I wanted the audio guide to offer the exhibition audience several different perspectives through which to experience and interpret Shirley Baker's photographs, as well as to present narratives that could contribute to future post-war histories. I was surprised by how wide-ranging conversational themes were. The memories did not always have an obvious link to the surface content of a photographic image. Participants also engaged photographs to talk about current experiences and concerns as well as the past. Subjects included childhood experiences (games, toys, risk, memories of parental control, abuse, freedom, lack of money, innovation and imagination, rites of passage for boys and girls); memories of housing (conditions, heating, demolition processes, sounds, smells, new housing including high-rise flats); the importance of rituals (Bonfire Night, Whit Walks, religious practices, church, death, cleanliness); the street (conditions, lack of cars, dirt, street games, shops, associations with neighbours, women cleaning, safety, demolition); jobs and roles (gender differences, lost jobs and new ones, the 'knocker-upper', the coal man); education and schooling (passing the eleven plus or not); post-war affluence (new experiences, new domestic goods and TV); social change (immigration, gender, class and social aspiration and materialism, expectations, teenagers, marriage).

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<sup>520</sup> Mike's response echoed the interpretation made in Madrid (see Chapter 5). His passionate recognition of the potential of the exhibition for building awareness and citizenship led ultimately to my devising of the 'fish bowl' event once the exhibition had opened. The role of photography and photographic exhibitions to function in building civic imagination and action is explored by Ariella Azoulay in her book, *Civic Imagination*, (London, Verso, 2015).

Throughout the project, oral history recorders regularly discussed the representation of ‘marginalised experience’ and issues of equality, at the level of both representativeness of our participants and the variety of life stories told. We worked reflectively to make sure that the recordings not only represented a broad range of life experience but also contemporary understandings of society and social change, and stressed that no subject was ‘off the table’ if participants wanted to discuss it. Indeed to this end, and, despite our participants being 90 percent white (though many were of Irish decent), we made sure themes of ethnicity, racism, religious bigotry and bias were openly addressed, along with issues of class, gender, sexuality, educational prejudice, domestic violence and abuse:

*Yeah, you knew it, I mean, my mum would send us to the post office and you could see people...it was a regular occurrence for women to have a black eye in those days and it's sad, I don't think they thought they could fight back in them days and that's a bit sad really, I mean, now and there's so many good rights now that protect people, I think it's made women stronger, because they have these rights behind them, in them days you didn't and you married for life as well. Well I say that coming from a divorced family, but a lot of these women saw that you married for life and that was...you made the best of what you had.<sup>521</sup>*

#### **6.4.6 Oral History and Photo Elicitation Interviewing**

Over a two weeks period, our team of three oral recorders conducted twenty-five individual oral history interviews at the art gallery. The age range of participants was from early fifties to eighties the gender balance was equal. Our only concern, however, was that we had not managed to recruit anyone of Asian origin, and only one Afro-Caribbean woman in her early fifties came forward. Janet Samuel's contribution to our project was fundamental to representing narratives of immigration, racism and ethnicity in the 1960s, although we were mindful also that her participation should not be seen as representative of all Black experience.

The aim at this stage of the project was to provide a personalised historical context for Shirley Baker's images that would draw the listener/viewer into new awareness of both the image and the localised historical context of its production. I initially had wanted the selection of photographs used as the audio guide ‘stops’ to be selected by participants rather than by myself and the team. Entering the interviewing/recording stage, I followed a method akin to ‘crowd-sourcing’, expecting that participants’ selection would result in the identification of thirty photographs. We were extremely surprised, however, by the heterogeneity of people's image selection despite

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<sup>521</sup> Jane Duffy (nee Murray) oral history transcript, 5th April 2017.

the similarities of their memories. Rather reluctantly, but with pressure mounting, the team spent a fraught day selecting the images ourselves.

The interview process did not follow a scripted format used in some oral history recording, and each of the interviewers followed a slightly different methodological approach in their interviewing. This variance was not a problem, however. Had it been a social science project, this non-standardised approach would have presented an issue. Nevertheless, each interview commenced with the same methodological protocol. Participants were left on their own in the recording room in the gallery and given twenty minutes to select up to five postcard images from the pack of 150 with which they had worked previously in the workshops. The postcard images were now used as ‘prompts’ leading to personalized memory recall.

In working with photographic images, as a team of three interviewers we blended two methods: oral history and photo elicitation. In the latter, developed in anthropological studies and honed in historical ethnography and sociology, a photograph acts as a ‘prompt’ directing the viewer/participant’s response in ways that many researchers claim is a ‘deeper shaft into a different part of human consciousness’.<sup>522</sup> Writing on photo elicitation, sociologist Douglas Harper suggests there is no set methodology for photo elicitation and that each practitioner engages it by *feeling* their way with every new project. Despite the flexibility of the method, Harper nevertheless, asserts that the potential of working with photographs is not simply that they elicit more information, but that the ‘quality’ and ‘kind’ of information is different from non-visual interviewing, evoking a complex response of ‘information, feelings and memories’.<sup>523</sup> The project working with Shirley Baker’s photographs thus makes a contribution to this developing methodology.

Each interview commenced with a variant of scripted questions, including parents’ occupation at the time, number of children in the family, type of school and the home address. This ‘standard’ way of establishing an oral history interview, situates the interviewee in broad social and historical terms. It supports the subsequent line of questioning by the interviewer and ‘locates’ the interviewee in a shorthand fashion for future researchers.

In oral history-based research with photographs, there are two temporalities being activated for the participant: there is the time of the photograph and the present moment

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<sup>522</sup> Douglas Harper describes photo-elicitation as working for ‘rather mysterious reasons’. See ‘Talking about Pictures: a case for photo elicitation’, *Visual Studies*, Vol. 17. No. 1, 2002.

<sup>523</sup> Douglas Harper, *Visual Studies*, 15.

of recall and memory. An interviewer may ask about the subject's experience of when the photograph was taken, what Penny Tinkler has referred to as the 'youth-subject perspective' and, also address 'how the subject in adulthood now represents their past youth experience (adult-subject perspective)'.<sup>524</sup> When working with family photographs, a reflexive account is foreseeable and expected. With 'documentary' materials, however, subjective connection is considered unlikely.<sup>525</sup> The Shirley Baker project problematised such a distinction, finding that potent affiliations and resonance *were* mobilised with documentary images, and I explore this potential in more detail further in this chapter and in Chapter 5.

As previously mentioned, what made the oral history/photo elicitation project distinctive was that we interviewed people who featured in Shirley Baker's photographs: Philip Roberts, Stephen Williams and the four Murray sisters (Mary, Sally, Kate and Bridge). This provided a unique opportunity for the interviewer to bring the photograph as 'memory object' in to our interviewee's consciousness by asking them questions about the time the photograph was taken, how they felt looking at images of their younger selves, and what the image meant to them now.<sup>526</sup> Bridget Cunliffe recalled the day the photograph was taken, and what was going on for her sisters *at the time*, but she also spoke of what the photograph meant to her *now*:

*... it reminds me so much of my mum, because that sort of thing that she did with her arms like that, I find very much, I'm very much like that. So it's a nice thing that I can see the resemblance.*

The photograph has a complex meaning for Bridget, her sisters and her family. In 1989, a chance viewing of Shirley Baker's book by a cousin led her Mother to contact the photographer to request a print. Subsequently, each of the four sisters received a signed photograph which now hangs in each sister's home, cherished, and having acquired a new set of meanings since their mother's death.

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<sup>524</sup> Penny Tinkler, "When I was a Girl...", in *Oral History and Photography*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 46.

<sup>525</sup> Whilst the last decade has seen a considerable increase in the use of photographs in both oral-historical and social science-based research, nevertheless, those researchers engaging photographs to elicit memory have tended towards working with family and personal photographs as a point of 'entry' into wider historical knowledges and experiences. See Alexander Found and Angela Thiessen, *Oral History and Photography*, (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011), 1-19.

<sup>526</sup> This was not the exclusive research angle of the oral history project, and we could not have guaranteed locating original subjects of the photographs. It would, however, have made an interesting research study to address different photographic temporalities, affects and reception in the ongoing formation of identity building of photographed subjects.

I had received training in an oral history approach referred to as 'life story' method in which the narrator not only recalls the facts of a 'life history' but is *additionally* involved in 'something more interior...related to consciousness, self and the way that self is told or presented'.<sup>527</sup> I combined this approach with photo elicitation for the first time in the Shirley Baker project. Thus, I was learning and adapting my approach with each interview. I began by requesting biographical details, such as family size, parental occupation, address at the time of the photo, schooling, current occupation and present family details. The response to these more formally scripted 'life history' questions was often detailed and prompted further lines of questioning, so that it might be some minutes into the interview before I focussed on a postcard image. Then I asked:

*Can you bring us to the first picture that you wanted to talk about?*

Or

*Okay. You've put out a spread of Shirley's photographs to start us off and I wonder where you'd like to start?*

Or

*So tell us a little bit about the photograph that you first selected.*

Or

*Can you describe your first photograph?*

This first line of photographic-specific questioning belies its simplicity. How the question is phrased guided and influenced the interviewee's response. In writing about photo-elicitation, ethnographer Douglas Harper states that the reason an interviewee first makes their selection might be caused by a reaction (emotional immediacy). Or, it might be more considered at its visual descriptive level. Since project participants had selected their photographs on their own, before being interviewed, had there been an initial emotional 'reaction' this was experienced privately. By the time we sat together, a reasoning distance had intervened, such that the interviewee either tended towards a description of the photograph before moving into a generalised reminiscence or the narration of a memory story, or delivered a memory story immediately upon prompting. If there had initially been an emotional response, this was now lost to the moment of our conversation, in which the distancing of language took over.

Sociologist Dawn Mannay suggests that a photographic image may evoke memories, reflections and feelings, but for interpretation to occur the viewer must possess cultural knowledge that enables them in some way to make sense of the signs

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<sup>527</sup> For the difference between 'life history' and 'life story', see Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 40-41.

available.<sup>528</sup> For example, Malcolm Metcalf talked *to* the specificity of the photographic image in which he recognised features.<sup>529</sup> His reason for making his selection was due to the photograph recording a specific building of his youth that had personal relevance. He firstly describes what he sees. However, what *he* sees and how *he* interprets signs in the photographic image is framed by his own life history (cultural knowledge). His chosen image not only evokes ‘the past’ but, for Malcolm, it is an illustration of a moment in *his* past, so that the image is drawn into familiarity:

*And it’s a picture, first of all, of a cobbled street, with a lady with a pram, and a couple of children next to her. And a lot of the houses have been demolished. And, in the background, you can see three blocks of flats.*

Malcolm then calls upon his autobiography making the interpretation of ‘signs’ (the block of flats) possible, and this interpretation locates himself and the image in both the present act of looking and in his own past:

*So, this is obviously after the date when we moved away, in about 1959.*

He moves into recognition, weaving together what *he* sees and what *he* can name, because of his own life experience:

*But, to the left there’s what I recognise as John Street School. I actually went to John Street School for a period of about six months, when I was sixteen. And it’s peculiar because it had a playground on the top.*

Malcolm’s recognition introduced new data to the photograph, so that the obscure blackened building was now identifiable as a school with a name and an usual architectural play feature. But his recognition was important for personal reasons also. Lacking many family photographs from the time of his youth, Malcolm has found it difficult to describe the circumstances of his upbringing to friends. The photographs of Shirley Baker, therefore, have become for him not just testimony to a way of life that no longer exists but, irrespective of whether they featured identifiable elements, they ‘stand in’ for Malcolm’s own past *as if* they were personal photographs. Many of our participants exclaimed at some point in their interviews: “*It could’ve been me!*” or another family member.

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<sup>528</sup> Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Method: Application, reflection and ethics*, (Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2016), 63-81.

<sup>529</sup> This photograph was also selected by Tony Key in the ‘Tea with the Curator’ project with quite a different interpretation, not grounded in any recognition of place, but entirely imaginative and speculative, (even allegorical) interpretation. See Chapter 8.

In response to my invitation, “*Can you bring us to the first picture that you wanted to talk about*”, Michelle Chadwick launched into a specific memory-story about her grandmother. In her narrative she recalls her special relationship with her gran, at the same time as delivering a detailed account of, and providing new information about, ‘donkey stoning’ the front step, conveying the immense pride working-class women had in keeping house:

*Well, this reminded me of my grandmother, because being born in Lancashire and being a very proud person, she wanted to teach me how to keep my house and myself spotlessly clean. And so she taught me how to stone the step.*

Whilst the woman in the photograph was not known to Michelle, her activity was sufficiently familiar to prompt an analogous identification with a particular individual (her grandmother) and a memory from her own life experience. Even though it was a documentary photograph, taken in a community she did not grow up in, Michelle felt close to this image. It performed as a good enough ‘stand-in’. Christine Potter’s response to being asked if she knew the area featured in a photograph tells us something about how participants could relate to an image regardless of whether they had first-hand experience of the depicted content:

*I don’t recognise the area at all, but it could be any area because it was just so common for that type of thing.*

For Christine, as with other participants, the typology of place, people and activities featured in the photographs was sufficiently recognisable to permit a feeling of familiarity with the photographic content, regardless of whether it was known first-hand. As Christine put it, “*..that could be any of your family, looking at that really.*” Participants could personalise and find resonance in documentary photographs regardless of whether they or a family member actually featured in the photograph, or whether they had direct experience of the indexical inscriptions embedded in the image. Although with each of my interviewees, I began with focussing on a photograph, my ‘life story’ method encouraged interviewees to talk widely and beyond the photograph. This approach made for long interviews, typically between one and a half and two hours. I specifically employed this approach as it was appropriate for interviews that I had negotiated would later be deposited into the Manchester Record Office and would therefore be available for future research.

Between the team, our varied interview methods gave rise to different interview material. For example in the longer interviews, and with different kinds of prompts,

participants engaged the photographs in ways that allowed for a prolonged reflective response, drawing on both an ‘empirical dimension’ (in which they saw in the photographs details of their lives they had not specifically remembered for decades) and a ‘subjective dimension’ as participants ‘saw themselves implicitly in images from earlier decades of their lives’.<sup>530</sup> This process resulted not just in participants’ memories *about* the past, but also in accounts that were situated in present-day experiences and concerns. For example Mike Kelly spoke about childhood play and related his youthful body climbing over the cars with his present day ‘unfitness’. Many of the participants spoke of their ‘photographic encounter’ as enabling rediscovery of memories that had not been recalled, reflected on, or recounted for many years. As Christine Potter struggled to explain, this was a process of experiencing, forgetting and remembering:

[CP]:...*it’s something you’ve really forgotten about until you see these photos...*

[Interviewer]: *So, is there anything in that photograph that you had forgotten about?*

[CP]: *I wouldn’t say forgotten, it’s always there in your memory but just when you see a photograph, it brings it all back. Just one photograph can take you right back to your childhood really.*

With all of the interviews, Shirley Baker’s images undoubtedly influenced what was most readily recalled and discussed.<sup>531</sup> There are two points to make about this. Firstly, had our project been more weighted towards a history of working-class experience, the visual repertoire of Shirley Baker’s photographs — its focus on children, play and women — would have been unrepresentative. Also, Baker’s focus on children and play could be regarded as overly directing our interviewees’ selection and concomitant narrative accounts. It should here be acknowledged that only two of the project interviewees were adults when Shirley Baker was taking her photographs. Therefore the majority of our participants’ reminiscences about the period originated in their childhood

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<sup>530</sup> According to Douglas Harper, for photographs to work as ‘historical ethnography’ they must represent ‘the earlier experience of people interviewed’. However, what is meant by ‘represent’ and how the viewing subject makes connection to the photograph and, therefore, their past is ambiguous in Harper’s writing. See Douglas Harper, 17.

<sup>531</sup> That said, in my interviews I deliberately took a ‘life story’ approach that encouraged participants to ‘deviate’ from the photographic image.

experience, and this might explain their majority selection of photographs of children and play.<sup>532</sup>

Given, however, that the oral history material was directed towards a creative output — an exploration of photographic content and meaning, rather than a history *per se* of Northern working-class experience — the ‘fit’ between our participants’ memories and the images was in fact what we had hoped to elicit. That said, I was keen that the audio guide unsettled the dialectic of image/text (audio), so that stories and images did not always have an obvious or explicit relationship, so that discontinuity might elicit unexpected interpretations on the part of the listener/viewer.

### **6.5 Audio Guide: Selecting, Scripting, Editing**

Scripting, editing and producing the audio guide was an enormous task akin to making a long radio documentary. The team had recorded over thirty-five hours of rich material. Following recording, each interviewer roughly logged their own interviews, noting down what they considered were particularly interesting memories and themes. The audio files were then sent to a specialist transcriber for full transcription. Reading each transcript, each interviewer looked for patterns in the narratives that suggested the shared experiences of our interviewees, and highlighted significant memory stories. We sought out challenging social historical narratives and ‘counter-cultural’ knowledges; dark as well as light subject matter.

My plan, however, was to produce an audio guide using the verbatim speech of our participants rather than engaging a hired voice-over actor to narrate the words, or a curator’s authorial explanation of each photograph. What I realised, unfortunately, was that the interviews had been recorded with non-broadcast equipment in the gallery with background noise, and this affected the resultant sound quality. Consequently, there was the additional technical challenge of audio editing verbatim speech due to the vagaries of spoken intonation. Thus, whilst each of us identified memory-stories we for the audio guide as text-based testimonies, in compiling the actual production script I had to consider not just the content of the memory story, but also the *way* it was told and the

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<sup>532</sup> The point here being that participants at *that* time experienced the world through their childhood selves, a very different experience to say, their adult parents. In addition, there is the composition of their life story in the present interview moment that, as an adult, *now* seeks to make sense of their childhood experiences, that have in turn been overlaid by what they have as adults come to know about the times in which they lived. This ‘adult knowledge’ may in fact supplement childhood experiences and, or indeed, supplant such experiences. This process might explain why so many of the adult participants did not classify themselves as having *felt* they lived in poverty, yet they could also say that they *knew* their parents had financially struggled have come to know this later in their adult lives.

audio quality of each recording. GuideID had advised us to produce thirty stops.<sup>533</sup> With such a lot of good material, however, in the end, we increased the number of stops to thirty five, with each stop comprising three memory stories (audio clips) of up to three minutes long.

As recorders, we categorised our identified ‘memory-stories’ by topics drawn from social science: gender, work, ethnicity, children, housing, customs, education, community. This was a first-level interpretation of our interviews. We further augmented these topic headings with more phenomenological and nuanced sub-categories that surfaced in our interviews, ‘memory stories’ about street life, play, resourcefulness, risk, sexual violence, dirt, death, food and solidarity. In this way we gradually built up a series of thirty-five image/theme associations.

In contrast to the use of oral transcripts in historical research that are ‘mined’ for their historical information, the narrated memory stories had to be sufficiently engaging to attract and hold the attention of a listener. We had to balance, therefore, historical interest with whether a story was particularly insightful, shocking, funny or just ‘plain well-told’. As mentioned earlier, I was clear that the audio would not be used as a ‘supporting text’ or, as a caption, to illuminate the image, and that the image/text association should reframe the images, forming different associations and potential for meaning making. To illustrate this point further. Stories could: a) elaborate on the contextual circumstance of *that particular* image (its indexicality); b) engage the image as a *generic illustration* of an experience or a phenomenon that was depicted (*denotation*); c) unsettle the image in some way by suggesting something that could not be seen at the descriptive level of the image, e.g. a picture of an alleyway combined with a story about the threat of rape; d) elucidate the moment the photograph was taken (stories told in the present by an adult subject of his or her younger self). Also a story also quite oblique in its affiliation so that through a jarring contrast it would bring the viewer to an unexpected awareness. In other words, the image/text association was not necessarily always obvious and performed the photograph differently.

The audio clip selection process involved a lot of back and forth between the team as we debated the balance of themes, the range of images, the representation of narrators’ voices (some were born storytellers), length of stories, standard of narration and technical quality. Prior to digitally producing the guide, I listened to all one hundred and five audio clips again, checking each for speech continuity. Finally, I produced a

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<sup>533</sup> Based on their experience of previous exhibitions, GuideID recommended that only thirty photographs were selected for guide ‘stops’.

script for each of the thirty five audio/image pairings, that I used with a sound engineer to digitally produce the audio guide. In the final audio guide, each stop presents listeners with three audio clips (A, B, C) to choose from. Each ‘stop’ is introduced by a male ‘voice-over presenter’ who provides the name of the narrator and a short summary of each story. This scripted ‘voice’ - the only professional voice the listener hears - jars with the vernacular verbatim speech of our story-tellers. It is a return, arguably, to a more formal didactic ‘gallery guide’ style. However, given the pressing production schedule we were working to, the voice-over narrator provided by GuideID was an expedient option.

### **6.5.1 Audio Guide: Looking, Listening, Encountering**

Within a week of the exhibition opening, the demand by visitors to use the audio guide meant that we had to increase the number of hand-held devices from fifty to a hundred. Observing and listening to people in the gallery, I was surprised to see and hear the different ways the audio device was used. It might be anticipated that using ‘the guide’ would be a solo activity. Listening to others’ stories, however, transformed exhibition ‘looking’ into an embodied and relational activity of ‘doing’. Although listening was accomplished on personal devices, it was taken up by visitors in pairs and groups, so that individuals commonly interrupted their personal listening to share and discuss what they were hearing with accompanying friends and family. The audio stories stimulated conversations and prompted ‘collective consideration’ of the photographs ‘content, the sharing of memories with each other, and the exchange of opinions, for example regarding past ways of doing things to now. Listening-on-one’s-own-but-together

prompted embodied interactions between listener/viewers, and between listener/viewers and the works on display.<sup>534</sup>



Fig. 33. Brother and sister, Nicholas and Mary-Rose Healey (lived at 3 Woodville Street), meeting their cousin Nicholas Cooke, (living at 1 Honduras Street), for the first time in years, through the 'event' of the exhibition.



Fig. 34. Listening considerably extended looking time.

Individuals gesticulated towards the photographs ('pointing at' and 'pointing out') to engage each other in shared looking. Whilst listening also produced publicly performed affective responses that included laughing out loud between group members and, indeed, also crying, with individuals consoling each other. These types of arguably more private behaviours contributed to *experiencing* the exhibition and *experiencing* the photographic

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<sup>534</sup> There is not the scope in this thesis to elaborate on the history of 'art exhibition going' as but one form of 'art appreciation'. Nor to address the 'individual v collective argument' ventured by Walter Benjamin and his notion of a 'bourgeois' understanding of aesthetic experience as necessitating individual devotion to, and contemplation of, the work of art, that he contrasted with the experience of film-going, as 'an object of simultaneous collective reception'. See Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, second version', quoted in Julian Hanich, 'Watching a film with others: towards a theory of collective spectatorship', (*Screen* 55.5, Autumn, 2014), 358. However, I wish here to briefly take on Benjamin's criticism of 'bourgeois reception practices', acknowledging its basis in phenomenological reality (expressed, almost in the cliché of the silence of most galleries and the 'do not touch' signs), yet to also suggest that within this limiting 'solo activity' there may be, paradoxically a form of collective or 'joint action'. Certainly, the idea of being on-one's-own (with one's own reflectivity and feelings) but-together, has precedents in other forms of quiet 'devotional' practices such as praying in church, group meditation, or yoga, for example. I am here responding to two pieces of research that draw on social philosophy and philosophical theories of action, and that make more complex and nuanced the idea of individual behaviour *amongst* others. See Julian Hanich's 'Watching a film with others: towards a theory of collective spectatorship', (*Screen* 55.5, Autumn, 2014), 338-359, and Michal Pagis, 'Producing intersubjectivity in silence: an ethnographic study on meditation practice', (*Ethnography*, Vol 11, No. 2, 2010), 311-12. Suffice to say that during my ethnographic field work, I observed a range of exhibitionary behaviours that problematized the notion of Benjamin's bourgeois viewer, and indeed my 'Tea with a Curator' method suggests that reception of photographs can be 'enriched' through 'slow looking' *together*. See Chapters 7, 8 and 9. I do not, however, wish to suggest that there is or should be a normative way of viewing photography (or, for that matter, painting or sculpture) in galleries or museums.

image and objects on display, as opposed to a sense of a more restrained looking *at* or ‘reading’ the image. Unexpectedly, some visitors (both individual and in pairs) sat and listened to the memory stories without addressing the photographs, or having perhaps looked at one and now ‘holding the image in mind’, listened from a relaxed distance, as if listening to a radio play.



Figs. 35 and 36. Exhibitionary behaviours exceeded individualised ‘bourgeois’ reception, as criticised by Walter Benjamin, transforming ‘looking’ into ‘collective experiencing’.

Whilst I did not undertake any qualitative research such as interviewing audio guide users (as this was not a research focus), data provided by GuideiD at the end of the exhibition provides some useful statistical evidence that breaks down guide usage into numbers of stops visited, time spent at each stop, and overall usage time. The statistics were unforeseen. Of 211,000 exhibition visitors in total, 166,570 users took up the audio guide between 18 May - 28 August. All thirty-five stops were listened to, with 50 per cent of visitors listening for up to fifteen minutes, whilst 25 percent engaged for up to thirty minutes. Astonishingly, 25% of users listened for over an hour, and even more amazingly, fifteen hundred visitors listened to the guide for between an hour and two hours with one hundred twenty people listening for longer than two hours. This data would suggest that for most users listening considerably prolonged the act of engagement with the exhibited works.

## 6.6 Oral History Project Analysis: New Knowledges

In mobilising Shirley Baker’s images, participants’ memories and meanings resulted in a diversity of new knowledges regarding quotidian ‘lost’ details within her photographs. In turn, these memory stories additionally contributed valuable historical awareness of

often overlooked aspects of everyday life in post-war, working-class communities. Knowledges were elicited *by* the photographs and, in turn, interviewees added valuable information *to* the photographs. However, knowledges that exceeded the photographic image also emerged. John Byrne, for example, recalls the Irish community in which he grew up. The church shown in one of the photographs was the Holy Name Church (the famous landmark on Oxford Road) and was, according to John, the centre of the Catholic community. But he also hints at residual conflicts: even after fifty years he remembers that although the congregation was overwhelmingly Irish, the priest was a middle-class Englishman.<sup>535</sup>

Memories covered a vast array of themes including gendered work, domestic violence, ethnically diverse home-life practices, religious and ethnic prejudice, social mobility, children's lives, schooling and play, and the annual local rituals such as bonfire night and the Whit walks. Below I focus on a number of examples that demonstrate how participants' knowledges named the indexical details of a photograph, contributed insights into gendered labour and class, housing and race; offered resistance to contemporary readings of deprivation and poverty and how the oral history/photo elicitation project opened a major new theme by which to consider Shirley Baker's work — children and play. Each of these categories is illustrated by excerpt from an oral history testimony.

### 6.6.1 Naming place, naming people



Fig. 37. John speculated that the two figures in the far distances, was his bother and himself. Manchester, 1968. © Shirley Baker Estate.

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<sup>535</sup> John Byrne, states: “Well, it’s the Holy Name Church and that was the centre of, if you like, the Catholic community, not for everybody, but I would say the vast majority. And it was a bit of an anachronism. It was a church with an overwhelmingly Irish congregation with a rather middle-class English priest.”

*Well, we're looking down Oxford Grove. We lived at number 24 where the two kids are playing out, supposedly me and my brother....Glen being the owner of the shop that we're looking at, he's number 2 Oxford Grove. The person on the other end of the skipping rope is a girl called Katherine Mahoney. And the girl that's actually skipping, her name is Helen Rafferty. They were the kids I used to play with on the street. And when I first seen that picture I thought what a really fantastic thing to see, two people that I knew as I was growing up actually captured in a moment in time playing on the street that we used to...the games that we used to play, and I thought it was fantastic. I also like over on the opposite side. I knew that family over there. I think they were called the Deans, the young kids. But all the toys that are outside. Prams. We used to play outside there as well. I think there's a little car outside..., like a toy car. The girl is Karen O'Brien that's stood further back behind...[And] This is where I used to live.*

John Bell's memory, like many of the interviewees' is astonishing for its detail. With each name recalled, and with an almost forensic attention, he brings the photograph to life and into *his* life. For me, listening to him speaking, it was as if the photographic image is 'his' to own; now and forever inscribed, like the original scene itself, on a celluloid memory-screen somewhere deep inside his body. John told me that he has harboured this memory for many years. It had lain dormant somewhere deep inside his consciousness. Seeing the photograph was, for him, reassuring, for it confirmed what John believed, and now he was looking at the photographic evidence to prove it:

*So if we go to my mum's and look at photographs, it's all from down our end of the street and outside our house, so you don't get an idea of how big the street is and what it looked like, so all of that when I was a kid growing up was forgotten. I had memories of it and all that, and then when I seen Shirley Baker's photograph there, it just... I wasn't lying to myself. You know, like sometimes your memories, you make it up in your mind how it looked, and then that just confirmed it. The picture was there. And I played at this end of the street, and now there's a photograph showing that end of the street, and Glen's shop.*

Further into our interview, John also draws my attention to the 'present absence' of the photograph. Being also quite funny, he launches into stories of his experience growing up Irish on an Irish immigrant street, 'it was almost like its own county actually', with its religious and cultural rituals and practices.<sup>536</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> Even as early as 1848 there were 53,000 Irish families in Manchester and Salford, and they made up 13 percent of the population. See Steven Fielding, *Class and Ethnicity: Irish Catholics in England, 1880-1939*, (Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1993).

## 6.6.2 Insights into the past



Fig. 38. The multi-ethnicity of children's lives is attested by Shirley Baker's photographs. Hulme, 1965. © Shirley Baker Estate.

Most interviewees perceived Shirley Baker's photographs as authentic and important evidence of particular ways of life that are now unknown, forgotten or lost to many people, particularly younger generations. Interviewees, however, did not only refer to what could in actuality be seen in the photograph. In our interview Janet Samuels revealed in what exceeded representation all together; that behind the 'appearance' of multiculturalism there was also prejudice and racism. One way to account for the multiculturalism of the areas Baker photographed was that Black and Catholic Irish families lived together not only as a consequence of their low household income but also due to discrimination by private landlords and boarding houses who displayed signs in the window: 'No Black, No Irish, No Dogs'. This resulted, according to Samuels, in an unspoken fraternity between West Indians and the Irish who recognised each other as victimized. One consequence of such discrimination was that a number of landlords of Irish and West Indian background rented their properties to families of either ethnic group.

Interviewees also drew attention to lost everyday rituals. Taking one postcard at a time from the thick pile to her right, Michelle Chadwick momentarily held the image in both her hands: Yes, no, maybe? Which pile should she put it to? She held No. 63 a bit closer, 'Yes, there was something there'. The woman on her knees, it was a similar

enough likeness to her grandmother. Or, she should say, the woman was doing what her grandmother always did at the end of each week, donkey stoning the top step (Fig. 39).



Fig. 39. A woman 'Donkey Stoning' her step. Manchester 1968. © Shirley Baker Estate.

Michelle had always had a special relationship with her Gran, the woman who had taught her how to 'keep house' from being a little girl, and this photo just brought it all back:

*And first of all, you had to scrub it [the front step] very hard, and all the pavement outside, which belonged to your section of the house in the row. ...then you used the donkey stone to rub onto the step to make it look smart. And the donkey stone was given to you when the rag and bone man came round, ...maybe once a fortnight...And you'd be sent out with parcels of unwanted garments... And in return... he would give you a donkey stone... kind of a pumice, in different colours. Some would be cream, rusty colour or a bit more white colour. And so along the street, there would be different shades of these donkey stones, which looked quite nice actually. So at least outside your property, it showed that you were being proud.<sup>537</sup>*

Michelle's memory story, corroborated by most participants, described forgotten tasks — painting thresholds with 'cardinal red' paint and 'donkey stoning'. Her narrative is emotional and factual, and attests to the lived experience of working-class women and girls finding agency and asserting moral rectitude and pride through public domestic labour.

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<sup>537</sup> A 'Donkey Stone' was originally a trade name that then came into general usage. The stones were made of pulverised stone, cement and bleach powder, and came in three different colours: brown, cream and white. Brown stone came from Northamptonshire, the white quarried near Wigan and the cream was a blend of brown and white. The stone was used for scouring the doorsteps for decorative purposes and also to prevent the steps from becoming slippery.

### 6.6.3 Resisting and Countering

*I think if you said to people from outside the area, what do these photographs mean to you, they would turn around and say, that's a really deprived area and look at those kids, don't they look shabby and they must have been living in poverty. And, I mean, some of them, they don't particularly look well nourished, they don't look particularly clean. But again, I'm not so sure if you'd have gone back to the children at the time and said, do you feel that you're living in poverty, they'd have probably said no.<sup>538</sup>*

Deprivation and poverty have come to define the photographs of Shirley Baker, as Colin Ford founder of the National Museum of Photography in Bradford, put it on BBC Radio 4's flagship arts programme *Kaleidoscope* on 27 January 1986: 'Not since the photographs of the Farm Security Administration in America in the thirties have I seen someone photograph people in deprived states and getting herself so involved'.<sup>539</sup>

What was it to be poor, however? Poverty is a sensitive subject and the language brought to its discussion is often morally weighted. We can speak of being *in* poverty, or being hard-up, but terms such as *being* deprived, or *being* poor did not sit well with participants, whose lived experiences had more to say about them than being defined by money or the lack of it.

*And from the age of eleven, I had part time jobs. My mum made sure that we were fed and I had clothes, but if I wanted anything that was, shall we say, like your own things, it was a case of, you know, the money wasn't there. I worked at a greengrocers, cleaning chickens out, and moving 56-pound bags of spuds up and around, so that they could go in this chute. Cleaning the butcher's block at the end of the day on a Saturday. And then not long after that [aged 13], I got a job, which probably I wouldn't advise it to anybody nowadays, but it was right for me at the time. I worked in a car battery shop. Health and safety was probably really non-existent. And I got on well with the two blokes who owned it though, because when they went on holiday, I ran the shop.<sup>540</sup>*

Project participants acknowledged the hardships of their upbringings, often stressing, as did Mike Kelly, their hard-earned financial contribution. Yet at the same time they refused to interpret Shirley Baker's photographs as objective evidence of deprivation and

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<sup>538</sup> Mike Kelly, oral history interview March 2017.

<sup>539</sup> Colin Ford, quoted on the back cover of the publication *Shirley Baker: Street Photographs*, Bloodaxe, 1989.

<sup>540</sup> Mike Kelly, oral history interview, March 2017.

poverty in the widest sense by equating the photographic visualisation of dirt on bodies, on clothing and in the environment with impoverishment. From the very first workshop, participants offered divergent interpretations that challenged readings of images of ‘grubby’ children in the streets, in pairs or gangs as evidence of poverty, and keenly pointed out that children’s dirty clothing was more indicative of a lack of modern domestic laundry equipment and women’s competing household tasks making keeping house an endless cycle of chores, as well as different attitudes to personal hygiene:

*Now my mum she must have gone to the washhouse, ‘cause she didn’t have a washing machine. Nobody did. You’d go to the washhouse, and you’d take the clothes, and there’d be like a line of about fifteen washing machines, massive washing machines, you put all your washing in, washed, and then there was driers and racks. We did have a rack, ‘cause mum used to do a lot of hand washing, and it’s kind of a wooden contraption, long poles, and she used to hang the clothes over them, in the kitchen, and then do the cooking. So, you’d go out smelling of chops, liver and bacon, so basically, I used to think, oh gosh, these clothes smell awful. But they didn’t bother about that then.<sup>541</sup>*

Photographs could also be read as evidence of parental neglect, certainly when viewed through the lens of contemporary ideas of good parenting. John Kerwin, was not alone in countering this view, highlighting the pleasurable freedom of risky and inevitably dirty play, with its much valued qualities of independence, self-reliance, creativity and embodiment. Indeed narratives, like John’s emphasising childhood freedoms in play intersected with narratives about dirt.

*On one adventure we set off down the East Lancs Road...with an attempt to go [cycle] to Southport. We never made it...the brake assembly on the front wheel worked loose and it jammed and I went flying over the handlebars landing full on my face on all this gravel and dirt, mangled wheel, and I walked back...we all walked back, bit of camaraderie there. But I was a dripping mess of blood and grit and grime. I must have looked horrendous. And when I went into the house, ...my mother screamed, and she dragged me upstairs, and she filled the bath with cold water and plunged a bottle of Dettol in it. And then she set about scrubbing all this grime and dirt off my face. I was in absolute agony. But getting injured and hurt was a kind of fact of life. And I’m sure all these women and elder daughters that were sat on their doorsteps watching these kids, they would be routinely dragging kids off the street and patching them up and scrubbing them clean and sending them off again. It was just a fact of our life.<sup>542</sup>*

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<sup>541</sup> Mike Kelly, oral history interview, March 2017.

<sup>542</sup> John Kerwin, oral history interview, March 2017.



Fig. 40. Looking for patterns across the corpus: 'Performing Adulthood'.

Over the course of the project, participants spoke from within the photographic worlds depicted, and yet challenged the terms used by others to describe and to interpret Shirley Baker's images which were interpellating their lives

#### 6.6.4 Looking afresh: at the Great Big Adventure Playground

Memory stories opened up Shirley Baker's photographs to new understandings and meanings that led to my own re-conceptualisation and categorisation of the photographer's images. Due to the age of most of the interviewees, memories tended to focus on their childhood selves growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. Every participant selected at least one image depicting children. It would be wrong to assume, however, that these once children (now adults) could only talk about their childhood activities. Participants spoke also of their experience of the adult world from their then child-self perspective and by re-evaluating and interpreting adult behaviours and practices from their present day adult-self point of view. Narratives of childhood experiences and children's perspectives on the adult world were, however, strongly defined themes across all the interviews, with the exception of one interviewee who was already an adult by the 1960s.

I had highlighted the photographer's depiction of children in the exhibition title. This had been on my part almost a quantitative response to the content of Baker's images, where children featured numerically more than adults. Listening to

interviewees' accounts describing their child-selves, I was prompted, however, to look at Shirley Baker's work afresh. Rather than seeing 'children' as the photographer's subject, I started to relate interviewees' recurring accounts of their imaginative, free, risky and embodied playing, and the way children mobilised urban spaces (the open crofts, streets, derelict cars and buildings, and the canal), as alternate ways of understanding the photographer's preoccupations:

*At the end of the street, Mackenzie Road, there was a piece of derelict land [with] about four or five derelict cars, ...they were just little adventure playgrounds for kids. We sat in them, we played fantasy games in the cars, we jumped off them, we took remaining bits off them. It was a real little workshop. People used to bring bits of spanners and hammers and try and take further bits off the car that hadn't already been taken off.<sup>543</sup>*

Whilst Shirley Baker believed adults were 'miserable' with their living conditions, she noted that 'to the children it was a giant adventure playground'.<sup>544</sup> Guided by participants' recollections, with their focus on 'play' and 'children's active bodies', I have subsequently gone back to look at the exhibition photographs featuring children and categorised them thematically in terms of 'types' of play activities. For it is 'play' that I now believe was the photographer's preoccupation, not 'children' *per se*.<sup>545</sup>

### **6.6.5 Working with Memory**

Project participants reported that looking at Shirley Baker's photographs stimulated them to remember. They spoke of being animated during and after the workshops and interviews by processes of remembering and talking about the photographs, often finding themselves full of emotion. Christine Potter put this succinctly in an email within days of attending the first open day workshop: "*I went home so fired up.*" In engaging Shirley Baker's photographs, interviewees repeatedly described how they were accessing memories that they had not recalled or reflected on for many years, or certainly not in a sustained way.

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<sup>543</sup> John Kerwin, oral history interview, March 2017.

<sup>544</sup> Shirley Baker, *Streets and Spaces*, (Salford, Lowry Press, 2000), 4-5.

<sup>545</sup> My findings regarding play were presented at an international conference on: *Children Rights to Play* (2017), and with Penny Tinkler at the annual *International Children's History Conference: Mobilities* (2018).

### 6.6.6 I See a Mirror

In identifying which photographs to work with, some participants selected images they found aesthetically pleasing. More often, their choice was down to *feeling* an image either documented authentically some aspect of their youth and/or had personal resonance. As previously noted, however, for a handful of participants and visitors Shirley Baker's photographs *actually* featured a younger version of themselves: for 'the Murray sisters', and the three 'Williams boys', Baker's photograph *of them* has become a much 'cherished' family' photograph. A visitor to the exhibition, Catherine Richardson (nee Brennan), talked to me and other gallery visitors about the photograph *Hollywell Street, Ordsall, 1966*, in which herself, her brothers and neighbouring children are playing in the back street, overlooked by her young mother and a neighbour. Since her mother saw the photograph in 2000 at *The Lowry* and contacted Baker, who sent her a signed copy, it has proudly hung above the living room mantelpiece. Brother and sister Anthony and Mary-Rose Healy lived at 13 Woodville Avenue, whilst their cousin Nicholas Cook's home was 1 Honduras Street. The cousins came together for the first time in decades on the occasion of the Shirley Baker exhibition, and unexpectedly found themselves face-to-face with a photograph of their childhood homes. The photograph brought back vivid memories. Nicholas put it even more strongly: "*I've been searching for the pieces of my childhood, those times and in a way you are holding them here, for me, in this exhibition.*" In such cases, the status of Baker's photograph was slippery — in between a public historical record function and a personal memento of a captured moment that meant 'more' to the participant than the 'ordinary' viewer.

At the time *his* photograph was taken, Philip Roberts asked the photographer for a copy (Fig. 41). Baker agreed but failed to take his address, and the little boy was disappointed; a point that irks him still to this day. In talking with me, Philip Roberts lifts the 'boys in the tree' photograph from its decontextualised ambiguity giving it what John Berger referred to as a 'life story'.<sup>546</sup> His often wry story-telling of unencumbered play (in which a caterpillar on a branch was 'exotic to us') was richly detailed, supplying topographic accuracy — naming the Baptist church in the background and the surrounding buildings beyond the photographic frame, as well as conveying the hardship of some children — with his best friend, William having at that point only a pair of ill-fitting wellingtons for footwear.

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<sup>546</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, (London, Granta, 1982), 91.



Fig. 41. The photograph holds conflicting memories for Philip; on the one hand is his reliving of the joy of free spirited play, and on the other, remembering the economic disparity between himself and his friend William. Manchester, 1966. © Shirley Baker Estate.

His narrative dug deep, into the network of abandoned cellars beneath the derelict ground invisible to the photographer. But this was where the local kids played. He reveals a lad growing up exploring the nearby urban wastelands looking for nature. In the summer months, on the wasteland behind (*“William is wearing shorts, so it could be summer”*), *“lefty students”* ran play schemes and stimulated his early politicisation, joining them on demos *“an’ the like”*. Through encounters like this one, I learnt more about the methods Shirley Baker employed in photographing children. Contrary to her own statements, she did request that children hold or adopt positions of photographic interest to herself. I got to hear how her subjects felt today at having been photographed, and discovered the wider historical context to the photographic moment:

*Philip Roberts: You have to remember this was the time of Myra Hindley and Brady, so you’d be wary of strangers asking you to do this, that and the other.*

*Anna Douglas: And were you told by your parents to be careful?*

*PR: Yeah. Well facing where I’m sitting now, was the Post Office, Moss Lane Post Office. And there was a missing person picture in the window, Lesley Anne Downey...And when I seen Shirley Baker taking photographs, you know, you’d think, why? What was it all about, like? And she said, “Oh it’s just for a woman’s magazine.” And in my innocence I said, “Oh would you send me a copy when it’s published?” And she said, “Oh yes, of course.” You know, it wasn’t until later the following day, well she never took my address. How was she going to send it to me? And it was like, “oh.” It was thirty years later when I seen it again.*

### 6.6.7 Surrogate Images

In many instances, participants had few if any family photographs. In this circumstance, Shirley Baker's photographs were not just evidence of 'a past', they acted as stand-ins for their own past lives, performing the function of 'adopted' family snaps. Yet it is also the case that Baker's professional images portray activities, record moments and are formally composed in ways that would have been considered 'unsuitable' for family photographs at the time. And so her images additionally offer a visual 'counter-narrative' of childhood experience that otherwise could be transmitted only as oral narratives.<sup>547</sup> Our interviewees' testimonies were peppered with phrases that suggest that Shirley Baker's photographs occupied a space in which likeness, or near enough likeness, overlapped with their own visualised memories of the past.

*They could have been any street corner...where we lived there would have been more houses ... but any of these could have been our street more or less. (Sue Sheffield).*

*This could be my dad, okay...going to the bookies. (Lesley Hampson)*

*And that could be any of your family, looking at that really. (Christine Potter)*

Some participants even saw their own likeness in Shirley Baker's photographs. When Norma Barratt selected the photograph of the toddler in a blue dress, her back to the camera, she knew the image spoke to her experience. Norma's mother had died when she was three and she had been expected to be relatively independent from then on. Baker's photograph was important to Norma in embodying how she remembered feeling growing up unable to express those feelings at the time.

*I chose that [photo] purely because it's a little girl and she's wearing a blue dress and a pair of sandals... no idea what she's looking at, nobody else on the photo but that just kind of speaks to me because it looks like, oh, that could be me standing there...And very much, looking back on it, I felt like I was on my own looking after myself. I would be that big or not much bigger. So, yes, that's just what that said to me, really.*

When claiming "I actually look like a Shirley Baker kid", Norma Barratt locates and validates her own life experience through the now 'famous' Shirley Baker. Despite the difficulties and loneliness of her childhood, in so doing she gives herself a part in an

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<sup>547</sup> Baker won at least two camera magazine competitions on the theme of 'childhood', her photographs singled out for their 'life-like' authenticity, in contrast to child studio portraiture or more formal family snaps.

emergent visual and cultural history of Salford formed by Baker's photographs. John Kerwin recognised his likeness in several of Shirley Baker's photographs. However, his affiliative narrative, like those of other interviewees, reconciles what might appear contradictory. That is, an initial and deeply felt identification with the scene and the boy, his subsequent assertion of the impossibility of sameness that nevertheless does not destabilise his rapport with the image:

*...I used to play on bits of waste ground or patches of ground like these kids here. In fact, the guy with the dark hair and the pullover could be me. It looks like me. It looks exactly like I was at the time. It's not, but it looks very much like me. I was throwing myself around, I was stick thin, I could jump and leap around.*

### 6.6.8 Unconscious Optics

In her book *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch has suggested that photographs of the self or the family elicit 'specifically relational forms of reading'.<sup>548</sup> Hirsch defines the concept 'familial gaze' in terms of a network of intersubjective gazes that occur between family members in the moment of being photographed, or as Walter Benjamin called it 'unconscious optics'.<sup>549</sup> This 'insider' look was mobilized by two members of the Murray family. Bridget Cuniffe discovered she was photographed three times by Shirley Baker. In her oral history interview she described the special resonance of one of Baker's photographs as it now was — a memento of their deceased mother. The photograph was additionally significant due to the paucity of family photographs taken at the time:

*We've got some pictures but not many...so there were official photographers that used to go round at the time of the Whit Walks and then they'd take photos of you and then they'd give you a card with their details on and say, if you want to buy the photograph then... you know.<sup>550</sup>*

Taking part in the oral history project and talking with a 'stranger', however, created the opportunity for herself and one of her sisters to reflect upon their child and adult selves,

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<sup>548</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames, Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, (Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press, 1997), 93.

<sup>549</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 9-11.

<sup>550</sup> Taking family photographs was still an expensive business in the 1960s and 1970s. Although domestic cameras were relatively inexpensive, the purchasing of film and the cost of developing resulted in family photographs tending to be reserved for 'special occasions'. All of the oral history participants recalled very few if any family photographs, and this would make, I propose, the presence of Shirley Baker in the streets a huge attraction.

constructing a personal ‘insider’ narrative *through* Shirley Baker’s photograph. Talking about the effect of encountering herself photographically portrayed with her sisters eating a Sunday ice-cream treat, Bridget stated that:

[the photograph and] *The audio recordings were almost therapeutic. Speaking on a one-to-one basis gave me a real understanding of where I came from and how this shaped my life.*

Bridget’s sister Kate Withington had her own insight specifically regarding the photograph of herself and her sisters, what it conveyed about the family dynamics and its effect on the present moment. On close examination, what stood out for her was just how confident her sisters were in directly returning the camera’s gaze that afternoon, in contrast to her own shyness, a result of having a lisp:

*...when I first saw this I became quite reflective...you know my sisters, they were quite gregarious, but I always remember being very shy, a bit timid...So I think that’s the reason why. I probably knew it was being taken, but I didn’t want to look at the camera.*

In seeing themselves as knowable to themselves, yet encountering themselves also as ‘other’, Baker’s photograph ‘stages the subject’s own specular self-encounter as an encounter with otherness’.<sup>551</sup> The two women’s experience of familial looking, while simultaneously looking at ‘otherness’, blurs the documentary status of the Shirley Baker image. The ‘Red Haired Murray Girls’ photograph lies somewhere between family portraiture, historical document and for some viewers allegory (of young girlhood) and symbolism (of the feminine red hair found in Pre-Raphaelite paintings on show elsewhere in the art gallery). This play between genres might acquire an alternative genre name, and whilst not quite correct, the term ‘allo-portrait’, that art historian Mieke Bal defines as lying somewhere between ‘self’ and ‘other’, a composite term recalling self-portrait, ‘but infuses that genre with the otherness of allegory’ comes to mind.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, 89

<sup>552</sup> The ‘title’ ‘Red Haired Murray Girls’ was written on the photograph as it was originally sent to the Murray family in 1989. The term ‘allo-portrait’ is not as Bal nor Hirsch intended it, for they are referring to a composite that is formed around ‘self-portraiture’. See Mieke Bal, *The Artemisia files: Artemisia Gentileschi for feminists and other thinking people* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 139. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, 89

### **6.6.9 Bridging Past and Present**

Participants were also able to use photographs to exchange views about life today in contrast to life ‘back then’, with narratives that were often orientated towards a younger listening audience, including participants’ own children and grandchildren. Mike Kelly remarked that his children had ‘no idea’ what kind of childhood he had, and that this project had enabled him to talk to them about the conditions he was brought up in, but also to convey thoughts about the present ‘state of play’.

*I think compared to children nowadays, we were much more active. I mean, you know, I was a school governor for 21 years at the school where I went. And we used to have to talk about doing risk assessments when the kids were doing PE. Now I can't imagine that anybody even thought about doing a risk assessment when I was at primary school.*

The workshops, the oral history interviews, and indeed the exhibition more generally, provided a much-valued cultural framework to explore and locate past life experiences. Many participants mentioned that it was difficult to recount stories about their childhood to family and friends because they lacked personal family photographs that would confirm and evidence their experiences. Malcolm Metcalf showed his ex-wife photographs by Shirley Baker :

*One of the great difficulties I've had in my life, is almost describing Hanky Park to people...I said, "look at these,....that's where I grew up". And she was amazed. She said, "I didn't know it was this kind of poverty."*

In this respect, Shirley Baker’s photographs were engaged as both evidence of and explanation for participants’ own past lives. Her photographs filled in cultural gaps in the visualisation of post-war working-class experience, with the project as a whole (the oral history process and the exhibition) forming a space of reparation. Most participants, including Malcolm Metcalf and his sister Norma, expressed affection for Baker’s photographs, and deep gratitude to the photographer for making the work:

*We're very grateful for what she [Baker]did, you know: that she caught it, in many ways'.*

### **6.6.10 Collective Remembering and Empowerment**

As well as giving participants a sense of their own history, taking part in the Shirley Baker oral history project created a sense of a shared identity gained through collective

acts of remembering in the workshops, in subsequent evening events, and additionally through narratives presented as a connective history in the diverse voices in the audio guide. For John Kerwin one of the motivations for joining the project had been to find out how ‘the lives of others’ who had shared the same upbringing ‘had unfolded’.<sup>553</sup> Sue Sheffield voiced what many participants felt when expressing the benefits of participating as a form of personal comfort, helping her to find herself through also being part of a temporary community:

*It made me feel very much part of a community as my memories were not just exclusive to myself, but shared by many others.*

Contributors remarked on feeling empowered by the unique opportunity to have their memories and histories affirmed and given status in a ‘prestigious’ art gallery. Others reported that involvement in the project had been ‘life changing’:

*My mother cannot stop talking about how this project has given her a boost.<sup>554</sup>*

Media interest in the project resulted in several of the oral history participants being interviewed by TV, radio and newspapers (including *The Guardian*), and they reported how this validation boosted their morale and confidence. Amongst participants, there was a strong sense of their contributing to an important history that needed to be told. In December 2017 all the oral history audio recordings and full transcripts were deposited in Manchester Record Office to form part of their emergent audio archive. Everyone who took part in the project signed full copyright clearance in perpetuity for their recordings to be publicly archived.<sup>555</sup> For Frank Pope, a lifelong Communist Party activist, this was an important matter of political and cultural representation.

*I benefitted by reawakening my memory of the time I lived in and felt privileged at being able to share the past with today’s people.*

Stephen Williamson movingly reported that:

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<sup>553</sup> John Kerwin, Oral History Project feedback sent to the author, October 2017.

<sup>554</sup> Email to Anna Douglas from Michelle Chadwick’s son.

<sup>555</sup> To date, these recordings have not been made publicly available, and Shirley Baker’s photographic collection remains, like many photographic collections in local archives, little known and underused.

*I never thought my life being born in Salford would amount to much, but to think that I am now part of history, well that is something.*

### **6.7 Photo Elicitation: Documentary Photography in Memory Work**

As we have seen, the oral history/photo elicitation method proved effective in generating new and diverse readings of Shirley Baker's photographs. Experiential knowledges — memory stories as well as contemporary reflections on the past and the present — countered, and made more complex, images that purported to be 'straightforward' pictures of deprivation and poverty. Participants' life stories, added empirical information not available to the curator, and also contributed knowledges about the photographs that could only have been accessed through actual life experiences but were still, nevertheless, closely tied to the image content. Narratives contributed to new taxonomies — other ways of thinking about and classifying Shirley Baker's photographs — and this has contributed to social historical and photographic research and curating. For many of the participants, telling 'their story' through the work of Shirley Baker was a complex and nuanced, often an emotional experience, that offered composure.<sup>556</sup> Presented in the form of an audio guide, the personal testimonies of working-class experience (articulated through the lives of the 'as then' children through the reflective experience of adulthood) enhanced exhibition audiences' historical awareness of the post-war period.<sup>557</sup> For the interviewees, having their memories (that 'stood in' for their lives) as part of the guide, to be accessed by visitors, also contributed further to a sense of collective belonging and a complex and nuanced feeling of pride, in which personal memories were transformed into public knowledge regarding a marginalised and forgotten history. This process was spoken about by many contributors as an important act of memorialisation and restitution.

Listening to the audio guide encouraged a more contemplative, slowed-down engagement with Shirley Baker's photographs that drew visitors' attention to elements in the images that would otherwise have gone entirely unnoticed or uninterpreted.<sup>558</sup> In introducing divergent stories, however, I did not seek through the audio guide to present

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<sup>556</sup> The concept of 'composure' is explored in greater depth in Chapters 8 and 9.

<sup>557</sup> Numerous theorists have suggested that oral history stories focusing on childhood tend to emphasise and highlight positive experiences at the expense of more disturbing ones in order for the adult to maintain composure. See Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, (London, Routledge, 2010), 34.

<sup>558</sup> I continue to explore this approach of 'slow looking' in Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

a more truthful picture of a photographic ‘subject’. Indeed the diversity of the accounts problematised the idea of what ‘the photographic subject’ of any given image might be, and was, for each viewer. Moreover, in the relationship of narrative to image, the audio guide worked against a reading of photography as ‘evidence’, encouraging in the listener an alternative awareness of photography’s mutability.

Whilst animating the work of Shirley Baker was my primary objective, photo elicitation also drew attention to the diverse ways in which interviewees related to Shirley Baker’s images. And this in turn confirms that ‘practices of remembering’ with and through photographs are intricate and complex. The mnemonic potential of personal photographs is widely acknowledged. The photo elicitation project confirmed, however, the potential of documentary photography both in the construction of memory and in contributing to memory recall, as long as personal resonance, recognition and identification could be located by the viewer. The project additionally demonstrated how, in accessing narratives of ‘the past’, participants also mobilized photographs to reflect upon their lives, helping them to make sense of their personal present, as well as to reflect upon society at large, thus demonstrating documentary photography’s contribution not only to memory recall and making, but to present day sense-making. Penny Tinkler has suggested that ‘several factors are seen to influence how people remember and talk about photos’. These include the personal relevance found in an image, how photographic images are conceptualised and ‘how, if at all, photos feature in people’s lives’.<sup>559</sup> The project’s findings, summarised here, suggest that the concept of relevance or how an image resonates for a viewer is not a straightforward matter of image content, and indeed draws into the meaning-making process a host of factors existing for the viewer at any given time, be they personal, social or historical. I have explored this further in the ‘TWTC’ conversations conducted during the exhibition, and presented in next chapter. Critical to the resonance ‘found’ by participants in Shirley Baker’s images was the photographer’s use of realism, which in participants’ minds guaranteed an image’s authenticity and trustworthiness. The photographs portrayed people and places and everyday activities that participants believed in and could form intimate connections with. When literal identification was unavailable, however, interviewees were still able to identify with the image, ‘adopting’ its everyday content as ‘stand-ins’ that mapped sufficiently onto their own life experiences. Norma Barratt explained she “*loved Shirley Baker’s work because it’s like our own lives*”. Indeed, most

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<sup>559</sup> Penny Tinkler’s unpublished draft paper, ‘Shirley Baker’, February 2018.

participants spoke of Baker's images as if talking about personal family photographs. Sue Sheffield spoke for many in articulating how Shirley Baker's photographs could be absorbed into her life, their likeness to her past being almost mirror-like: "*I'm part of that. That's part of us*".

## 6.8 Conclusion: Connective Memory Work and Reparation

*This was without doubt the best exhibition since I started working here. I really felt like there was no separation between my life and the exhibition and the visitors. You see, I could talk to them about the photos 'cos I lived in streets like this, it was, like, my life too. So you see, I had a lot to contribute, and normally I don't feel like this. So, I have really enjoyed working in this exhibition, I looked forward to coming to work and am sorry it's going to come down.* <sup>560</sup>

Curators are regarded, and often regard themselves, as the custodians of works of art and their meanings. In developing exhibitions, they may revise previously-held views and pioneer new approaches, but they rarely consult with the public before the show's opening. A indeed if gallery visitors are invited to 'participatory events' and workshops, these are usually considered as 'add-ons' organized by non-curatorial staff.<sup>561</sup> This description largely fits the way I went about organizing the London exhibition. As it was Shirley Baker's first national solo show, my aim was to establish her reputation in the canon of post-war British photography. But I also wanted to discover how, and how far, a curator might 'pluck' a corpus of historic so-called 'documentary' photographs out of the past so that they become relevant to audiences in the present.

The invitation to transfer *WC&LM* to Madrid helped cement Baker's growing reputation. As far as Madrid was concerned, the question of 'relevance' was largely taken out of my hands. The exhibition opened in the midst of what the Spanish called 'The Great Recession': a million people emigrated, most under twenty-fives were jobless, and half a million families were evicted from their homes. It is therefore hardly surprising that in such dire circumstances politics had become a major preoccupation. And although, ironically, Shirley Baker's photographs were taken in Britain's 'age of

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<sup>560</sup> Audio interview conducted with a member of the gallery invigilation team by Anna Douglas, July 2017.

<sup>561</sup> I am aware, however, that some museums and galleries are now creating positions that are variously termed 'Participatory Curator', arguably, in an attempt to ameliorate the cultural, and usually hierarchical differences between these professional roles. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, I consider that the norm in galleries and museums is to locate both the concept of, and 'real' audiences 'outside' the practice of the art curating process.

affluence', her images were now the subject of a political gaze that saw in them a reflection of Spaniards' own current distress.

In bringing the exhibition 'home' to Manchester, I now wanted to prioritise not the status of Shirley Baker, nor the aesthetic qualities of her photographs, but how opportunities for participation — both *pre* and *post* the opening of the exhibition — might excavate new knowledges and 'release' new meanings in the work. The early sections of the Manchester case study dissect the actual organization of the exhibition itself. Much of the work of selecting images had already been done, but a new space and cultural and historical context (plus the context of this PhD research) prompted a rethinking of the overall scope of the exhibition, including its design. Participation became my focus. Participation does not just happen, however. This new strategy (or series of strategies) was approached iteratively and experimentally within the framing of the PhD as curatorially-based research *with* people and photographs. It required levels of organization which were both time-consuming and expensive, and skills that curators do not always have nor, arguably, desire.

After describing these nuts and bolts, I set out a detailed exploration of the ways in which the oral history/photo elicitation project generated new meanings and understandings of Shirley Baker's photographs. The lived experience of post-war working-class communities is rapidly becoming the subject of 'history'. Often bypassed in official records, working-class culture deserves to be documented for its own sake. But for my purposes it additionally provides an important, though not exclusive, context to Baker's photographs. These new knowledges emerging from the oral history/photo elicitation project (and indeed across all the participatory strategies) elucidate what we may 'see' in the pictures and draw attention to details that we might well have overlooked. The objects of an 'historical gaze' also change over time. Until I conducted my oral history interviews I was unaware, for example, that Shirley Baker was photographing in areas with a high concentration of Irish families. Was Shirley Baker, a Salford-born woman of Jewish heritage, aware of this? Perhaps not, or else at the time it was not considered significant; whereas today ethnicity is regarded an essential marker of identity.

The case study also demonstrated, through practice-based research, the complex imbrication of memory and photography. It evidences and analyzes how professionally authored non-personal photographs can be mobilized affiliatively, therefore revealing

their potential for use in memory work. The audio guide, the ‘product’ arising from the oral history project, interwove memories, feelings, and opinions and offered listeners/viewers a means to connect divergent, and sometimes conflicting histories as narrated by the oral history participants. I propose that the audio guide be understood as a form of ‘connective memory work’, in which Shirley Baker’s photographs facilitated an exploration of, and the audio guide made manifest, ‘affiliative structures of memory beyond the familial... as a form of affiliation across lines of difference’.<sup>562</sup>

I additionally drew attention to the relationship between content, design and modes of what I term ‘exhibitionary behaviours’.<sup>563</sup> Looking at Baker’s photographs, listening to personal testimonies, writing and reading postcards, pinning flags to the 1958 map, looking at personal ‘attachment objects’ and, importantly, witnessing the emotions of others in the exhibition not only augmented individual memories, but in looking and listening viewers interacted with other visitors, not only family and friends but complete strangers. Such relationships were both discursive (looking was often accompanied by talking) and embodied (pointing towards, touching the glass, posing for selfies in the exhibition and in front of the murals). These behaviours transformed viewers into participants who shared interpretations, opinions and memories with each other, expressing these through a full register of feelings: pride, anger, sadness, disappointment. Thus I have suggested that the photographer’s images are mobilized by participants in their *experiencing* of Shirley Baker’s photographs. Whatever their reaction, people appreciated that in *WC&LM* their own lives, the lives of their families and the community that nurtured them were at last being recognized. This collectivisation of ‘memory’ was not limited to those who experienced the conditions that Shirley Baker

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<sup>562</sup> See Marianne Hirsch use of the theory of ‘connective history’, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2012), 246.

<sup>563</sup> I use this term to draw attention to a full range of behaviours that occurred in the exhibition environment and that I noted through my participatory observation fieldwork. Whilst I make a shift from ‘viewer’ to ‘participant’, and ‘looking’ *at* to ‘experiencing’ *with* the photograph, I do not want to give the impression that I believe this is a superior or preferred means to engage Baker’s work. Nor do I wish to suggest that, as some digital producers have argued, ‘looking’ is inherently ‘passive’, whilst ‘doing’ things is ‘interactive’. This to me is a bogus argument. The question at hand should always be what is ‘happening’, how, why and to what end.

photographed, however, but included many others who were ‘hailed’ by her potent images as well the exhibitionary experience.<sup>564</sup>

Overall, the Manchester project is presented as a case study in which participatory methods are engaged to generate new meanings and understandings of Shirley Baker’s photographs. Moreover, the commitment to experiential knowing contributes to what I call the ‘expanded exhibition’: a dialogical and relational space of personal and collective memory, memorialisation, reparation and empowerment. Informed, however, by a commitment to a critical understanding of the photographic medium, my exhibition strategy sought *also* to unsettle viewers’ expectations and performance of ‘documentary’ photography, to amplify its mutability and polyvocality, and to suggest that Shirley Baker’s photographs were at one and the same time a documentary record and evidence, aesthetic image, memory object, ‘space’ for identify confirmation and building, and imaginative storytelling.

In the next chapter, I present another exploratory use of photo elicitation as part of my GTM research, addressing how participants mobilize Shirley Baker’s photographs not just as memory objects, but alternatively as images that facilitate identity building and subjective composure.

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<sup>564</sup> I have suggested in two conference papers (Shirley Baker: ‘The astonishing task of achieving adult sanity’, The Foundling Museum, International Play Conference, 20 March 2017, and ‘Quotidian Mobilities’, Children on the Move: International Conference of the History of Childhood, University of Greenwich, 19 June 2018) that in fact it is the representation of childhood and play that, to use Hirsh’s terms, ‘connects’ otherwise disparate cultural, generational, gendered differences.

## PART THREE: THE CURATORIAL-DIALOGICAL COMPLEX

### Chapter 7 'Tea with the Curator'

#### 7.0 Introduction

Over the following three chapters (Chapters 7, 8 and 9), I present both a method for researching how historical photographs elicit personal connections between people and images, and the analysis which I undertook of my collected data during *WC&LM* at Manchester Art Gallery. My preliminary conclusions lead me to suggest that professionally authored photographs are resonant beyond their function both as historic and historical objects, and memory materials. I propose that in locating personal meanings, historical photographs become animated, and viewers may experience deep engagement which actively involves them in identity building and social recognition.

In the oral history project, I discovered that Baker's photographs 'performed' as potent mnemonic media. Once the exhibition was launched, however, the popularity of the exhibition and the wide demographic of the visitors it attracted, suggested that viewers found ways of experiencing Baker's images that problematized any simplistic understanding of nostalgia and/or personal memory. I decided, therefore, to devise a new form of research practice within curation that I named 'Tea with the Curator'. Twelve 'TWTC' conversations were conducted and audio recorded. The transcripts of these exchanges were subsequently coded using Grounded Theory Method (GTM).<sup>565</sup>

In present Chapter 7 I describe 'TWTC' in detail. I outline the origins of my creative process in participant observation and the environmental context of the research, as well as my approach to the unstructured 'interview' process. I further describe the research recruitment, ethical concerns and the materials used, each of which evolved as a creative response to the context.

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<sup>565</sup> The original formulation by Glaser and Strauss is Grounded Theory. Kathy Charmaz (*Constructing Grounded Theory*, Sage, 2006) modified their argument that theory emerges from the data by introducing current theories of the need for acknowledgement of the role of the investigator and analyst, what Donna Haraway and others in feminist epistemology termed 'situated knowledge'. The adjective constructivist, therefore, recognizes the active but self-reflexive participation of the investigator in the research and analysis process. Antony Bryant argues that Grounded Theory is not a single theory for the production of concepts arising from the analysis of data without a pre-existing conceptual framework. Instead, it is a method and there are *varieties* of Grounded Theory being used widely and across a variety of disciplines. See Antony Bryant, *Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing; Pragmatism in Research Practice*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017).

‘TWTC’ performed as an innovation in curatorial practice by being present as curator during the exhibition and entering into dialogue with visitors. I additionally propose that the method substantially extended my scholarly research into the work of Shirley Baker, and furthermore sheds additional light on performance of her works. Overall, I demonstrate how curating itself is an important arts-based research practice that both co-produces and shares new knowledges, particularly in the context of engaging non-scholarly audiences that theoretically orientated academic approaches could not achieve.

Chapter 8 introduces my use of GTM in the analysis of the ‘TWTC’ conversations. As my research was, as far as I know, a novel use of GTM in contemporary curatorial practice with photography, I demonstrate its adaptation to meet the unique narrative challenges that arose from the ‘interview process’ engaging photo-elicitation. GTM is an iterative and reflexive process. I will lead the reader through the progressive stages of comparative coding; from ‘open coding’, to ‘focussed’, finally arriving at three ‘emergent categories’ that I suggest describe how participants find resonance and relevance with Shirley Baker’s photographs: *Drawing on Experience*, *Subjectivising* and *Storying*. I go on to describe the properties and dimensions of these categories in which participants: draw on perspectives, interests and experiences they already possessed (*Drawing on Experience*); acknowledge their own centrality in the meaning-making process, and connect with their affective response (*Subjectivising*); and in spite of believing in the authenticity of Shirley Baker’s images, simultaneously employ her photographs in processes of creativity and imagining (*Storying*).

In the concluding Chapter 9, I present the discussion section in which I identify the significance of my analytic categories and the relationship between them. This required returning to my original data for further analysis, this time focusing on the narrative structuring of the accounts themselves. In this way, I identified and originated a new term ‘narrative compositing’, to describe participants’ coherent spoken narrative accounts. The dimensions and implications of narrative temporality are further identified as key to this process. I go on to introduce two concepts from oral history ‘composure’ and the ‘cultural circuit’, to support my emergent theory that in finding personal resonance and relevance in Shirley Baker’s photographs, participants lend aspects of themselves to the pictures and in so doing engage subjective temporality — synthesising ‘the past’ and ‘the present’.

Drawing together my findings, analysed through the concepts of ‘composure’ and the ‘cultural circuit’, I elaborate on their relevance to curators working with historical photography and exhibition audiences. I highlight two aspects to this. Firstly, the process offers an opportunity to encourage and support participants in the narration of subjective experiences, which leads to composure, social recognition and mutuality. I suggest that the dialogical, relational and situated conversational method of ‘TWTC’ elicited subjective experience through what I term ‘slow looking’; I define the characteristics of this novel term as they evolve, and suggest its wider implications for curating in deepening audience engagement and affective response.<sup>566</sup> Secondly, I address how ‘TWTC’ can be understood as a creative visual research method that re-visited and offered different interpretative framings and new thematic categorisations that significantly extend and indeed qualify as, scholarly research on Shirley Baker’s photographs and her practice. Thus, I demonstrate that curating can function as a research practice generating and sharing new knowledges.

### **7.1 Background and Ethics**

During the first exhibition in London (2015), I became intrigued as to why Shirley Baker’s photographs appealed to so many different people — across ages, ethnic backgrounds and countries of origin. In Madrid, a totally different context without the specific associations of British histories of class and place, visitors had a different, but equally engaged, reception. In the Manchester show, and specifically during the pre-exhibition oral history project with self-selecting participants from Manchester and Salford, these images had served to touch a rich vein of memory.

Once launched, the audience for the exhibition at the Manchester City Art Gallery proved diverse. It included many different ages (from small children to seniors) and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (including tourists, temporary workers and students from the global north and south). Such diversity was evidence that the response to Shirley Baker’s work was not explicable as nostalgia for, or personal memory of, the post-war years in Britain. The questions I asked myself were: Why did these photographs seem to generate such strong engagement and register powerful affects? What ‘sense’ were audiences making of Baker’s work? How did

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<sup>566</sup> During the process of writing up this thesis, I have discovered that the term ‘Slow Looking’ has been developed at Harvard Graduate School of Education’s ‘Project Zero’. See: <https://pz.harvard.edu/who-we-are>. Accessed: 4 April 2020. See also Shari Tishman, *Slow Looking*, (London, Routledge, 2018).

they experience and relate to her photographs affectively? What did they interpret her images to be about and of?

Over two weeks, I observed visitors to the Manchester exhibition, noting sustained levels of engagement: people were animatedly talking, spent considerable time in the gallery and talked with me about Shirley Baker's photographs. Wanting to know about this phenomenon, I evolved an innovative process that I named 'TWTC' to record and analyse visitor experiences. As opposed to designing the study from the outset as a social science research project, I modified my knowledge and skills in oral history and participatory arts.<sup>567</sup> I blended formal and informal methods of interviewing and conversation and adapted ethnographic approaches including photo elicitation, participant observation and field diarying. I worked with postcard images of Baker's exhibited works, and in inviting people to select two I encouraged them to 'freely associate' rather than overly think their choice. In my own capacity, I had the feeling not of being a social science 'researcher', but of performing a reflexive role more akin to a tea party host-cum-curator-cum-knowledge facilitator.

Central to this mixed method process was my initiation of a three-way intersubjective and dialogical exchange 'with' and not 'on' participants, and 'with' Shirley Baker's photographs.<sup>568</sup> This approach was in line with an inclusive creative practice that attempts to redistribute the power relationship between myself and my co-conversationalists and to recognise and value their experience and knowing. The term 'participatory practices' covers a diverse range of approaches and projects with different aims. For the purposes of my research I use the term to refer to a process that in its ambition aims to foreground and make central the views and experiences of participants and to 'give voice' to their lived experience. Whilst the 'TWTC' participants were not invited to take a role in the project/research design, nor in the distribution of the findings, nevertheless, with my approach there was an implicit

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<sup>567</sup> The concept and practice of 'research design' is well covered in a full range of literature for qualitative research. For example see: Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*, London, Routledge (2016).

<sup>568</sup> Quoting Luc Pauwels, Dawn Mannay states that this type of approach results in research that is a 'joint enterprise', *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*, 49. With the emergence of visual and narrative research methods that tend towards more creative and participatory approaches, there is an increased blurring of the distinctions between the methods of participatory arts with people, and participatory research with people. See: Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*, (London, Routledge, 2014), 45-61. This has been addressed in numerous scholarly articles particularly concerning art as form a critical enquiry/ critical enquiry as art, see the collected articles in the J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, SAGE Research Handbooks, 2007.

challenge to the received convention of the curator as a 'knowing subject' in control of the meaning of the art work (in art historical terms, as well as on the part of the artist). Moreover, framing my 'research' process as 'creative' emphasises the methodological value I place on both my own and the participants' behaviours, including playfulness, self expressiveness and imagination; the innovative use of materials and media; drawing on techniques of engagement that have come to me tacitly, or through artistic activities rather than as a social science methodology. The intention with 'TWTC' was for knowledge to be co-produced and exchanged, and for our understanding and experience of Baker's work to be effected and indeed for her photographs to be affected, a point I will return to later in this chapter.

## 7.2 Project recruitment and data sampling

Initially, I recorded and transcribed twelve participant conversations, of which six were coded. I am aware that my selection of participant accounts influences my data sample and analysis. In doing so I aimed for a balanced spread as my participant cohort would permit. Sociologist and Grounded Theorist Kathy Charmaz proposes that as part of a GT approach the researcher study their own methods in order to gain insights that will help them improve both their 'methodological skills and the quality of data'.<sup>569</sup> Whilst at this early stage in 'TWTC' I was not actually following a GT method (it covered my transcript analysis only), in writing up I have nevertheless found it useful to reflect on 'TWTC' by drawing on this mode of analysis. The method's emphasis on meaning as emergent through social processes and with its attention to *doing*, has been key to evolving the theoretical framing of this thesis (see Introduction).

Writing in her methodological textbook *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Charmaz prepares the emergent GT researcher by describing at some length the process of 'gathering rich data', and provides a general overview of how a researcher might access situations and people employing ethnographic methodologies and qualitative research approaches to interviewing.<sup>570</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory; 2nd Edition*, (Sage, London, 2014), 54.

<sup>570</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 22 -108.

Rich data gets beneath the surface of social and subjective life. An enquiring mind, persistence, and innovative data-gathering approaches can bring a researcher into new worlds and in touch with rich data.<sup>571</sup>

Despite such motivation, however, Charmaz does not provide examples of *actual* innovative participant recruitment; by which I mean, *how* the people a researcher wishes to engage are identified and persuaded to participate. For this reason, I focus here in detail on the recruitment process for ‘TWTC’, and on how the recruitment and conversational engagement (that produced the analyzable data) were twin elements of an overall innovative approach to doing research with others.<sup>572</sup> Furthermore, while Charmaz proposes that GT researchers may engage a variety of extant textual and visual documents as data for coding and additionally identifies the production of ‘elicited documents’ such as patient diaries, she does not highlight the use of alternative ‘documents’ (photos, videos, letters, objects, etc.) as part of a mixed strategy for generating interview content (i.e. data generation).<sup>573</sup>

Therefore my use of postcards, ‘post-it’ notes and the exhibition photographs contributes to the advancement of a creative GTM that engenders innovative data generation in the specific field of working with photography and its exhibition. Moreover, the ways in which I used ‘tools’ or ‘prompts’ to elicit responses, particularly through photo elicitation, and the methods by which I invited participants to ‘give voice’ to their thoughts and feelings (i.e. free association, written post-it notes and in our conversation) was generative of ways of thinking and feeling with Shirley Baker’s photographs that arguably would not have occurred otherwise (a point I return to in the discussion section of this chapter). This resulted in innovative forms of data, some of which I coded (conversation transcripts), whilst others (post-its, field notes, non-recorded conversations) contributed to evolving what Charmaz terms ‘sensitizing concepts’ that supported the coding process.<sup>574</sup>

Sensitizing concepts give researchers initial but tentative ideas to pursue and questions to raise about their topics. Sensitizing concepts can provide a place to *start* inquiry, not *end* it. Grounded theorists often begin their

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<sup>571</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 22.

<sup>572</sup> See Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*, (2014), 45-61.

<sup>573</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 47.

<sup>574</sup> See Kathy Charmaz, for expansion on the concept of ‘sensitizing’, (2014), 30.

studies with certain guiding empirical interests to study and...general concepts forming a loose frame for looking at these interests.<sup>575</sup>

Participant recruitment commenced the week prior to the conversation project in the following ways: following my daily public exhibition tours I offered individuals the opportunity to have ‘TWTC’; I directly invited people in the exhibition and who seemed particularly eager to talk with me; and in response to a poster at both exhibition entries, participants could book a place.

In my previous oral history projects, I have paid particular attention to recruitment, not assuming that individuals have an inclination to participate nor have the time. If participants are essential to the content production of an artistic work then I conclude that recruitment should be ‘designed’ as part of the overall artistic activity, even considered a part of its ‘aesthetic’. Over the years, I have experimented with different recruitment strategies considering how to ‘find’ people and secure their interest by going ‘to them’. This has involved attending a Women’s Institute produce market; taking a village fête stall, and joining in a local history groups day fair. So whilst my overall method can be thought of as a blended GTM/ethnographic influenced method, in this first stage of ‘data sampling’ I was, in fact, primarily foregrounding it as a curatorial project in its own right, that would engage individuals in an enriching artistic experience.

This was expressed in two ways. Firstly, the term ‘Tea with the Curator’ was meant to sound fun. It also expressed something of an ‘exclusive’ experience, that I deliberately played on and that I hoped might encourage some people to want to take part. The idea of a ‘curator’ is, I acknowledge, intimidating for some individuals, and will have had a limiting effect on my research sample (it perhaps frightened off some people). I nevertheless tried to balance any fears surrounding expectations of what a ‘curator’ is with the opportunity to also ‘de-mystify’ who was behind this exhibition, and the opportunity to have a ‘unique audience’ going around the exhibition with this mysterious ‘other’.

This appeal seemed to work well, as two of the three groups who booked did so as an ‘event experience’ — doing something “*a bit out of the ordinary.*”<sup>576</sup> Sue came

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<sup>575</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 30.

<sup>576</sup> Peter Holden and family.

with two friends with whom she has a lunch date each month and “*look for different things to do each time.*” Peter, attended with his partner and teenage niece, again responding to the prospect of ‘something to do’ on a Saturday afternoon with ‘the niece’. Molly with her friend Claire was booked in by her mother who, having attended a group tour previously, thought the teenage girls might like an ‘insight’ into the exhibition as they were considering studying photography at ‘A’ level. Tony, Sean and Elizabeth were recruited directly by myself in the exhibition in response to their enthusiastic questions.

Recruitment was, therefore, not rigorously ‘scientific’. As things turned out it was ethnically white European in focus. I did not consciously take into consideration class background nevertheless I did prioritise age and gender spread. The final selection of six of the twelve conversations was based on age, gender, place of birth, and current residency. The table below highlights participant demographics.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Residency</b>	<b>Place of Birth</b>
Elizabeth	45 - 50yrs	F	Manchester	Greece
Sean	50yrs	M	Salford	Salford
Peter	60 - 65yrs	M	Manchester	Manchester
Tony	55 - 65yrs	M	London	Essex
Sue	65 - 75yrs	F	Manchester	Manchester
Molly	15yrs	F	Manchester	Manchester

Table: 1 Demographic

### **7.3 Tea with the Curator: method**

There were two stages to the ‘TWTC’ process: a preliminary selection and reflection with the postcards, followed by dialogue in front of selected exhibition photographs. I re-used the Shirley Baker postcards from the oral history project as these had proved popular with participants and were pragmatically useful as handleable objects. The postcards facilitated alternative ways of ‘encountering’ Shirley Baker’s images. ‘Looking’ could be augmented by handling, turning the image/object around, bringing it closer to the eye, and importantly could easily be shuffled around with other images (each postcard was numbered) making selecting two images out of a potential hundred and fifty easier. Imagine how convoluted it would have been working directly with the exhibition prints, with participants walking backwards and forwards looking at

photographs and having to devise a notation system (particularly tricky as the exhibition photos were not numbered).

Looking at Shirley Baker's photographs in the exhibition was one kind of embodied experience of encountering and seeing. The concentrated space of the café, however, permitted an alternative embodied and reflective relation with the image, that remarkably and unexpectedly resulted in participants seeing and perceiving different things than when later confronted by the exhibition print on the wall. For example, Elizabet highlighted how she detected the photographer's gaze towards two little girls that she had missed with the exhibition print:

*It was for me perhaps easier to see on the postcard how the photographer doesn't forget them, in fact makes them central, and to me that's really important.*

I asked each participant to select two images: "*Go with your gut feeling, freely associate and work with your unconscious attractions to images, without having to know or analyze in that moment why.*" The 'why' is what we would explore through our conversation in the gallery. I then invited each person to write on a post-it note one or two words that encapsulated their reasons for selection. This process formed a first-stage in participants' becoming a knowing, recognising and reflective subject, (unconsciously) empowered to have knowledge and speak about 'their' image. In a study identifying women's epistemological assumptions, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule offer five epistemological positions that are pertinent to thinking about audience engagement with art: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge.<sup>577</sup> 'TWTC' was an attempt to encourage viewers to think of themselves as creators of knowledge and to value their own and objective strategies for knowing.

I had not anticipated the variety of ways the post-it could be used and how it was indicative of how each participant would later talk more fulsomely about their image. The 'post-it' was an aide-memoire to a thinking process, but it might also be a trace that 'captured' the fleeting punctum 'trigger' that prompted Elizabet to respond

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<sup>577</sup> Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (eds.), *Womens Ways of Knowing: The Development of Voice, Self and Mind*, (New York, Basic Books, 1986). See also Karen Barbour, *Embodied Ways of Knowing*, (Waikato Journal of Education 10:2004), <https://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/handle/10289/6228>. Accessed: January 2020.

to the *'dorky girl with glasses'*.<sup>578</sup> Tony's and Peter's 'post-its' formed titles to each of their photographs, with Peter creating a character out of the small toddler boy:

“*'Cheeky Chappie', I've called him.*” Whilst Tony's “*Long Journey*” and “*Mistakes and Futility*” pointed to his predilection for selecting more complex compositional images in which he could locate a rich story:

*For me this was a long journey and the journey's not ended, and they don't even know where the journey started, it's been imposed.... the power in that image isn't the features, the faces, it's just the composition overall... the road narrowing into the background, the picture's going into the distance, it's losing a huge amount and you can just make out on the faces and the way one child's looking over the other one's shoulder, there's almost a fear factor there. They feel secure because they're with mum, you can see that, they're close-knit, they're together, but there's till this, “I don't know what's going to happen next”? That's why I picked that particular picture.*

Sean's note featured just two artist's names: “*Guston*” and “*Elliot*”, clues to both his own cultural awareness and the associations he would bring to Shirley Baker's images. The post-its are a note 'from the field'.<sup>579</sup> I kept each one. Two years later they are still tucked in an envelope at the back of my pink 'field notebook'. Along with the photographs of each of the 'TWTC' participants standing with 'their' postcard in front of the 'real' exhibited photograph, they form a collection of data, as well a personal and affective memento of the project.

### ***Vignette: Tea is served in the cafe***

*Sean meets me in the Gallery's plush cafe. He is already sitting in a high backed upholstered chair and shakes my hand with real enthusiasm. Sean has recently turned fifty, “not that I act it”, he cheekily announces. He has a fabulous head of red hair, pulled into a short pony tail. If there is such a thing as a 1980s, Mancunian male 'look' Sean is it. T-shirt, loose jeans, trainers. From the off, Sean is eager to communicate not just why he wants to be here today in our 'TWTC' conversation', but pieces of information about himself. But of course, these are not just pieces of data, they contribute to my understanding of Sean and in the telling permit Sean*

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<sup>578</sup> Arguably, the instant 'the triggering moment' is made knowable and thus speakable, Barthes 'punctum' dissolves, being replaced by the conditions of interpretation that is 'the studium'.

<sup>579</sup> Jan van Maanen, *Tales from the Field: On writing ethnography*, (University of Chicago, Chicago and London 2010), and Robert M Emerson, *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes*, (University of Chicago, Chicago, 2011).

*to communicate ideas about himself to himself through me and Baker's photographs. He literally is hearing himself narrate himself, perhaps for the first time. So from the moment I sit down I am aware that Sean is using our conversation to gain something. And that something is a sense of himself as an artist and someone who knows and can talk about art. Not in some showy-off kind of a, "here is my cultural capital" kind of a way. Nevertheless, he is telling me he has 'cultural capital', and I am in no doubt that Sean will even know which theorist was responsible for coining this term. No, I think what Sean wants is to be able to talk about art, and to be heard, because as he'll explain, he's been deprived of this for years. I explain the how 'TWTC' — "the game", as I've started to call it with participants — works:*

*"Take the pack of 150 postcards, I'll go away. And whilst I am away choose two postcards that in some way speak to you. Don't over think this, it's really the first reactions I am wanting to explore with you. Write down on two post-it notes the headline reason why you chose each picture. And by the way do you want a cup of tea, coffee and a cake?"*

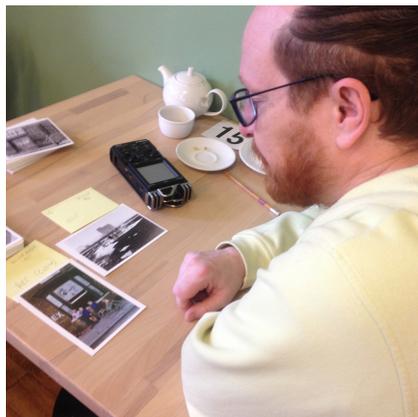
*Sean says he is "all right" for a drink as he has just had a coffee. But, I can read puzzlement on his face, which I read as a sign of "Am I going to get this right", so I reassure him:*

*"There's no right or wrong on this one. Really, it's any reason why the image stands out for you. It could be that it reminds you of someone, say your Granny, or even that you like the colour blue. That's it."*

*Sean is my third 'tea guest'. By now I have become aware of my own repartee with participants. How the offering of "tea, coffee, cake" was a way of trying to put people at ease, to make the process fun rather than like some tedious visitor questionnaire, or research method. I also was feeling responsible for making the process worthy of giving of their time, because I cannot presume that people are just waiting for the opportunity to participate in art. But I shouldn't perhaps have been so worried with Sean because he is brimming over with wanting to talk to me. I leave him*

going through the pack of photos: “I’ll need more than 20 minutes to go through this lot,” he cockily laughs. “There are some real crackers here. Can’t I pick more than two?” Sean asks this with such urging, pleading and cheekiness that it is hard not to give ground. I reassure him to aim for two, but three would not be a disaster. Sean assures me that he will try; and no soon as I have turned to leave he is sitting back in his big club armchair, flicking through the cards with a wide smile of delight.

On my return, Sean has his two photographs on the table. He is visibly pleased-as-punch to have managed to get his selection down to two, and post-it notes adhered to the back of each. Sitting down opposite him, I pull my winged armchair around the low coffee table so that our two chairs form a defensive wall around us. I put my digital recorder in-between us and switch it on. We have now officially begun:



Figs. 42 and 43. Sean having selected his two Shirley Baker photos.

*Anna: So first of all, do you want to tell me who you are?*  
*Sean: Sean Caherty. I live in....*  
*Anna: Can you spell your surname?*  
*Sean: C-A-H-E-R-T-Y.*  
*Anna : Fantastic!*

*Sean establishes his artistic knowledge almost immediately in our conversation. With respect to one of his two selected photographs, depicting a group of boys posing in front of a derelict house with windows half-white washed, he not only declares “then some kids have drawn on it cartoon-like figures, probably with fingers”, he further exclaims: “...that’s Philip Gutson isn’t it? It’s just that screaming boot thing that he draws, do*

*you know what I mean, absolutely fantastic.”<sup>580</sup> In the very next breath, in fact with Sean there’s not much space for breathing in his chirpy dialogue, he tells me about being “the first one” in his family to graduate, going to Salford University. Whilst studying, he tells me he worked at the Lowry art gallery, and launches into a quick-fire succession of name-dropping regarding the artistic associations he has drawn upon in choosing his two photographs: “... this is one of those typically Lowry-esque images of a lone building, and then the connection with the Waste Land by Eliot...” In one sharp burst Sean has dropped three artistic names into the space of our conversation.*

*“Okay”, I announce, “Let’s go and find your photos.” And gathering up Sean’s two postcards, and leaving the digital recorder running, we walk into the exhibition to find Shirley Baker’s photographs. “So what originally drew you to this picture?”*

*This is how most of the ‘TWTC’ conversations went.*

#### **7.4 Conversations are so much friendlier than social science interviews**

Why have I called the ‘TWTC’ conversations and not interviews? A principal objective for my research was to eliminate the perceptual status barrier between curator and ‘lay’ visitor, and yet neither did I want to erect an alternative — myself as ‘ethnographic researcher’ and the ‘researched subject’. Through the form of a ‘conversation’ I wanted to get closer to how people might express themselves to themselves and amongst each other, filtering out as much as possible the circumspection and civility of ‘being interviewed’.<sup>581</sup> This required a narrative approach that was open, meandering but contained; guided by myself, though open to serendipity and the unexpected. As I wanted to understand what individuals were in *that* moment experiencing and ‘doing’ with Shirley Baker’s photographs, the ‘TWTC’ conversations were ideally more like everyday conversation, in the sense of being subjective; yet, more akin to psychotherapy, they needed also to be descriptive, reflective and negotiated, and make

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<sup>580</sup> Philip Guston (1913-1980) Canadian American painter. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_Guston](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Guston). Accessed: 3 March 2020.

<sup>581</sup> Dawn Mannay suggests that one of the principles of participatory research practices is to ‘engender access to more authentic views’, 49. This concept is, of course, also problematic as Kathy Charmaz points out, *Constructing Grounded Theory; 2nd Edition*, 79.

possible the interweaving of novel connections and insights in ways that seldom occur in everyday life.<sup>582</sup>

I have not read in any of the social science methodological literature the idea of providing participants with a ‘good time’. Yet this principle is common to participatory arts practices. As I have stated, I performed ‘Tea with the Curator’ as an artistic event in which I aimed to host my guests and provide them with an ‘interesting time’, perhaps even a surprising and memorable experience. I also wanted to facilitate participants ‘seeing’ something they might otherwise be unaware of: Shirley Baker’s wit and visual punning. Such an approach could have become overly pedagogical — a lesson in visual literacy — that would leave little room for the participant. So, whilst mindful that I was holding the space of our conversation, I was additionally attentive to letting our co-constructed narrative take its own course, rambling and ambling into ‘in-between’ spaces that were just as telling, if not more so, than any answers to formally constructed interview questions might be.

Drawing on my oral history skills in semi-directed narratives, I tried not to interpret, judge or pronounce upon my co-conversationalist. I opened an ‘interactional space’ that fostered eliciting each participant’s narration of his or her own experience of Shirley Baker’s photographs in that moment, in our conversation. In turn, I encouraged, sensitively listened, shared and learnt; and tried not to fill the silences.<sup>583</sup> In re-defining these conversations as ‘research data’, and through coding the interview transcripts, I have come to reflect upon how each conversation was an interactional performance in which ‘I’ and ‘the participant’ were presenting ourselves *to* and *with* each other and *with* the photographs of Shirley Baker. Rather than being understood as ‘capturing’ an authentic response of the participant to Baker’s photographs, the ‘TWTC’ conversations, in themselves, should be understood as co-creating the condition and making it possible for participants to become knowing and recognising subjects, empowered to know and to speak with Shirley Baker’s images.

Knowing and speaking in ‘TWTC’ is situated *in that moment*, in the gallery, *on that day*. Knowing emerges from our conversation, and takes form, I propose, in ways that would be impossible when looking at photographs on one’s own. For example,

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<sup>582</sup> See Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 58.

<sup>583</sup> For expansion on the ‘intensive interview’ technique and opening of ‘interactional space’, see Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 57.

the personification of photographed subjects into ‘characters’, such as Peter’s “*Cheeky Chappie*”, and the performance of their speech through ‘voicing’ requires a ‘listener’. The ‘sense’ of Shirley Baker’s photographs was then the participant’s, but it was co-created through a dialogical exploration of ‘looking’, ‘listening’ and being together, *between us* (the participant and I). It should be assumed also that the participant was performing *with me* and *to me* their response to Baker’s images.<sup>584</sup> The experiential significance of ‘TWTC’ as a context for looking, knowing, speaking Shirley Baker’s photographs and ‘the self’ is explored in further detail in the summary of findings in Chapter 9.

Each conversation was approximately sixty to eighty minutes long. Following brief personal factual details (name, date, place of birth, and residency) and the first question, “*So tell me why did you chose this photo*”?, no two conversations were alike. As I was interested in *how* participants were feeling in response to Shirley Baker’s images, what emotions and affects were elicited, I introduced lines of enquiry around these topics across all of the conversations. However I was attentive not to impose too far my own concepts and concerns. Overall, the conversations have great variety to them, however, this does not invalidate them as research data. Quite the opposite, for it is the diversity of interpretation that forms one aspect of my research interest. Additionally, through subjecting the data to GTM coding, I discovered patterns of reoccurrences and similarities in language, meanings and actions, emotions and body language, across what at first might be considered ‘idiosyncratic’ narratives, as I go on to interpret in Chapters 8 and 9.

### **7.5 ‘Mining’ or ‘wandering together with’<sup>585</sup>**

Approximately fourteen hours of conversation data were collected and transcribed. Six hours were ‘initial coded’ and then raised to final ‘focussed coding’. This data-set forms the basis of my Constructed Grounded Theory analysis. Yet as Dawn Mannay cautions, interviewing should form part of a wider ethnographic and creative approach that ‘challenges the positivistic framework of interviewer as an autonomous ‘miner’

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<sup>584</sup> The idea of the interview as an ‘authentic’ account of reality has been challenged across oral history and qualitative social science methods. Kathy Charmaz reminds us interviews are ‘a construction - or reconstruction’, in which interviewer and participant perform their respective selves to each other in the moment of conversation. See Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 79.

<sup>585</sup> For the full quote by Sherman Heyl, see Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*, (London, Routledge, 2014), 9.

and offers alternatively a vision of ethnography via the metaphor of travel, to characterise the interview as a ‘wandering together with’, which she suggests is ‘characterised by twists, turns and creativity’.<sup>586</sup>

To that end, my interviewing method was additionally supported by participant observation diary entries that included general observations of exhibition behaviour (noting how people went around in pairs, groups, and individually); embodied experience (talking with others, pointing, sitting down, using the audio guide, pushing prams, with children, taking ‘selfies’ and group photos, participating in postcard and map activity, trying to ‘open-up’ photos with two-finger-gestures); and visible affective responses (laughing, crying, smiling, holding back tears, composure). I also noted down ‘overheard’ conversational strands of interest (new information, places, dates, names of people) and ‘rich’ memories, debates and discussion points — particularly if they added controversy to an image, or were ‘touch points’ — that is, ‘key moments that shape a person’s overall experience’.<sup>587</sup> These included the Manchester Arena bombing and the Grenfell Tower disaster, both of which occurred during the first month of the exhibition. These happenings incontrovertibly shaped people’s experience of Shirley Baker’s photographs at that time, and demonstrate the potency of situated reception. However, this is not my focus here.<sup>588</sup> There were also heated discussions overheard in the gallery, and that I entered into, regarding definitions of ‘poverty’, ‘deprivation’, ‘risk’ and ‘dirt’, and these influenced other curatorial events. I also digitally recorded informal conversations, including four Italian teenage foreign language students and their instructor five adult foreign language students from the Far East with their teacher, and three cousins on a family

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<sup>586</sup> Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative*, 98.

<sup>587</sup> The concept of ‘touch points’ is used by Bate, and Robert in ‘Bringing user experience to healthcare improvement: Concepts, methods and practices of experience-based design’ (2007), as referenced in ‘Exploring the Legacies of Filmed Patient Narratives: The Interpretation and Appropriation of Patient Films by Health Care Staff’, Mary Adams, Glenn Robert and Jill Maben, *Qualitative Health Research*, 2015, Vol. 25(9), 1242.

<sup>588</sup> The Manchester Arena bombing was a suicide bomb attack on 22 May 2017, the first week of the exhibition opening. The instagram account of The Photographers’ Gallery, where the exhibition opened two years previously, received postings that ‘thanked’ Shirley Baker for having photographed children with their mothers. Given that Manchester Art Gallery is in the city centre, staff had expected visitor numbers to drop off in the wake of the bombing. Alternatively, gallery invigilation staff recalled that visitors to the gallery commented on the poignancy of the exhibition street poster that featured ‘The Murray Sisters’ with their mother, and that there was a heightened sense that Shirley Baker had ‘focussed’ on women and their children, and that this was appreciated. On 14 June 2017, four weeks into the exhibition, a fire broke out in the 24-storey Grenfell Tower block of social housing in London. It caused 72 deaths, with more than 70 others injured. Grenfell also informed many visitors’ experience of Baker’s photos. ‘TWTC’ participant Elizabeth stated what was felt by many when looking at the photographs, a great deal of which included tower blocks: “well I suppose, in the current context... the towers, with what’s happened with Grenfell and stuff, you know, it’s also hard not to think about that story.”

reunion; but these are not part of this research sample. The 'Fishbowl' event was also digitally recorded, as were all the 'Intergenerational Conversations' held over a weekend in July. Many more conversations with exhibition visitors who approached me in the exhibition or gallery cafe formed 'field notes', as did my conversations with the enthusiastic exhibition invigilators, who proved invaluable mediators of visitor experience. There was also one other significant dataset. This was the digital exhibition audio guide handset which tracked visitor usage. Whilst this was invaluable in my own evaluation of the guide and proved useful data for the guide's funders, this quantitative data does not except anecdotally, form part of this research project.

Because of my adaptive use of CGT in the humanities and arts field, and to provide the scope for its future application, the next chapter will outline in detail my use of the method to code my dataset and summarise the means by which my emergent codes were subsequently raised.

## Chapter 8

### Introducing Grounded Theory Method analysis

#### 8.0 Introduction

The ‘conversation’ transcripts were the basis of detailed coding using a GTM as identified by Grounded Theorist Kathy Charmaz in her book *Constructing Grounded Theory*.<sup>589</sup> Initially, I thought to use the qualitative method of Thematic Analysis (see Chapter 2), believing that by establishing the themes and subjects viewers identified in Baker's photographs I would locate and understand their wide appeal. My dataset, however, comprised complex multi-faceted, first person narratives. As I entered the data, I found this structural complexity overwhelming as it obscured the thematic content of the narratives themselves.<sup>590</sup> What was the relationship between complexity and the viewers’ meaning-making process that emerged in relation to Baker’s photographs? What did such a relationship suggest about the viewer's experience *with* Shirley Baker’s photographs? Referring to the work of founding Grounded Theorist Anselm L. Strauss, Kathy Charmaz notes:

Strauss viewed humans beings as active agents in their lives and in their worlds rather than as passive recipients of larger social forces. He assumed that process, not structure, was fundamental to human existence; indeed, human beings created structures through engaging in processes. For Strauss, subjective and social meanings relied on our use of language and emerged through action. The construction of action was the central problem to address. In short, Strauss brought notions of human agency, emergent processes, social and subjective meanings, problems solving practices and open-ended study of action to grounded theory.<sup>591</sup>

GTM was therefore a suitable analytical tool as it offered a way to focus on the *process* of meaning-making through language and action, rather than the (thematic) interpretations made *per se* by viewers of Baker's photographs. It provided a way to attend to and value viewers’ actions, as well as their subjectivities. The range of audiences for Shirley Baker’s photographs suggested that viewers were actively involved in making their own meanings *with* the photographs. To study the images ‘as data whose meaning is intrinsic’, was therefore to ignore the ways in which people 'assign meanings to pictures’,

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<sup>589</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory, 2nd edition*, (London, Sage, 2014).

<sup>590</sup> The concept of ‘entering’ data refers to the agency of the researcher and their reflexive investment in the data as live material as well as to ‘data entry’.

<sup>591</sup> Kathy Charmaz (2014), 9.

through social action, the polysemy of photography and the polysemy of interpretation.<sup>592</sup> Thus, GTM offered a way of understanding the viewing and interpreting individual (my 'TWTC' participants) as 'active agents' of meaning, who engage in 'emergent processes' and actions.<sup>593</sup> In drawing on personal experience, in addition to cultural context and structures, viewers arrive at interpretations that are both subjective and culturally situated. In this way, I began to address the data as narrative products of 'human beings as active agents in their lives and in their worlds rather than passive recipients of larger social forces'.<sup>594</sup>

As a result, I shifted my research enquiry from: what did participants think Shirley Baker's images were *of*, in the sense of content, themes and subjects (a semiotic and art historical reading), to: what were viewers *doing* with Baker's photos, and what did they think and feel were Baker's photographs *doing*? Consequently, I expanded my research method, locating it in a pragmatist foundation that regards research as a way of learning and interpreting. In this move, I reconfigured my conceptualisation of the intersubjective relationship of viewer and photograph and myself as interviewer/researcher, to introduce new avenues of research enquiry. The following questions now opened up: How were people engaging with the photographs by Shirley Baker? What was happening for the viewer in their encounter with her photos, situated *in* conversation with myself? How did participants produce their understanding *with* me, *with* the photographs, *through* language, in order to arrive at coherent meanings for themselves? What function did the action of meaning-making have for participants?

The additional attraction of GTM was its attention to the reflexive researcher in which the subjectivity of the researcher and her or his role in the research process is considered. Their influence on findings is drawn in to the stages of data gathering, comparative analysis and further theorisation. As Charmaz suggests, the Grounded Theorist works from the basis that research is a 'social construction' that reflects the interests and conditions of the researcher in culture:

In this view we construct research processes and products, but these constructions occur under pre-existing structural conditions, arise in emergent situations, and are influenced by the researcher's perspectives,

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<sup>592</sup> Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*, (London, Routledge, 2016), 64.

<sup>593</sup> Kathy Charmaz, referring to the work of Anselm L. Strauss, (2014), 9.

<sup>594</sup> Anselm L. Strauss, paraphrased by Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 9.

privileges, positions, interactions, and geographical locations. Similarly, standpoints and starting points matter and likely shift during inquiry. All these conditions inhere in the research situation but in many studies remain unrecognised, unmentioned, or ignored. Which observations we make, how we make our observations, and the views that we form of them reflect these conditions as do our subsequent grounded theories. Conducting and writing research are not neutral acts.<sup>595</sup>

In this respect, GTM chimed well with the perception of myself as a co-creator of knowledges in the dialogical exchange of ‘TWTC’. Nevertheless, despite my affiliations with the method, at the time I took the risky step of approaching my data without any preconceived ideas, being unfamiliar with the method of analysis, uncertain what I was looking for and without knowing what I would find. As Charmaz puts it, ‘we bring an open mind to what is happening, so that we can learn about the worlds and people we study’.<sup>596</sup> What Charmaz does not convey, however, is just how existentially unsettling this uncertainty can be for a researcher. In learning the GTM, one of my biggest challenges has been to ‘trust’ myself and my data.

One of the tenets of GTM is its ‘in the field’ application, what Charmaz refers to as the ‘call for action’.<sup>597</sup> In addressing her question, what purposes *should* knowledge serve? Charmaz suggests that GTM researchers root their research in practice and in future applications, and in doing so ask themselves about the ‘credibility, ‘originality’, ‘resonance’ and ‘usefulness’ of their research:

A strong combination of originality and credibility increases resonance, usefulness and the subsequent value of the contribution...When born from reasoned reflections and principled contributions, a grounded theory that conceptualises and conveys what is meaningful about a substantive area can make a valuable contribution. Add aesthetic merit and analytic impact, and then its influence may spread to larger audiences.<sup>598</sup>

My study was intended as a contribution to the field from which I work, that is curatorial practice with historical photography. Thus, by investigating how audiences related to Shirley Baker's photographs, I hoped to make a contribution to my personal practice, and

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<sup>595</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 240.

<sup>596</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 3.

<sup>597</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 21.

<sup>598</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 338.

to propose ways of rethinking the potential of curatorial and creative interpretative work with historical photography *per se*.

### 8.1 Transcribing, memo-ing and line-by-line coding

I transcribed twelve hour-long conversations.<sup>599</sup> This was a laborious process. However, transcribing is a ‘first reading’ of the data, itself an act of interpretation.<sup>600</sup> On my own initiative, following each transcription, I worked with my memory of each participant and our conversation to generate a short memo. Written in eight minutes (a self imposed disciplinary framework) these participant profiles were referred to throughout the coding process and subsequently over the three years of working with the data. In this way I kept the participants ‘alive’ in my research.

In my first reading of each transcript, I was drawn to interpreting participants’ motivation individualistically, biographically and informationally, as with the oral history transcripts, and was thus unprepared for how different the method of GTM was. GTM focuses on *defining* what is happening for interviewees (as expressed in the language of the data), and then originating a code to summarise this *action as* part of an emergent analysis of what participants are *doing* and what is going on in their worlds. In outlining the purpose of coding Charmaz describes it as follows:

Qualitative coding, the process of defining what the data are about, is our first analytic step. Coding means naming segments of data with labels that simultaneously categorizes, summarises and accounts for each piece of data. Coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations. We aim to make an interpretative rendering that begins with coding and illuminates studied life.<sup>601</sup>

My first attempt at the line-by-line coding, as recommended by Charmaz, of my participants’ accounts was unsuccessful and frustrating. I was describing and summarising *what* was being narrated (topics and themes identified *about* Baker’s photographs, as well as themes in participants’ lives), or trying to ‘read into’ the lives of my participants, rather than detecting the overall processes from within their spoken

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<sup>599</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 137.

<sup>600</sup> Interestingly, in neither of Kathy Charmaz’s text books outlining the GT method does the author identify methods of transcription, though she fleetingly acknowledges its ‘hidden benefits’, (2014), 136.

<sup>601</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 43.

language. Kathy Charmaz offers the following advice to think of coding as a ‘heuristic device’

to bring the researcher into the data, interact with them, and study each fragment of them. This type of coding helps to define implicit meanings and actions, gives researchers directions to explore, spurs making comparisons between data, and suggests emergent links between processes in the data to pursue and check.<sup>602</sup>

At one level I understood the logic of coding that I should put aside any preconceived ideas and categories and not look to the transcripts to provide evidence of these. I had chosen to work with the GTM precisely to try to uncover new ways of thinking about how people related to Shirley Baker's work (and photography *per se*). Nevertheless, I found the ‘flexibility’ of initial coding, the idea that data might contain many analyses to which the researcher might return, confusing. Additionally, the GTM emphasis on discovering participants’ overall processes, actions and behaviours rather than identifying the themes to which they might be speaking, was strange to me. Rather than the openness of initial coding prompting new ideas to emerge, as Charmaz advocates, I was alternately confused and worried about getting it ‘right’.<sup>603</sup> Part of this confusion lay with how to name codes, but was also due to the complex narrative structure of my participants’ accounts, so that I found it difficult to understand the overall ‘meaning-making’ and ‘sense’ of what was going on in their conversations with me. Addressing these two concerns formed the next stage in my GTM journey.

The question of how to annotate transcripts might appear trivial. Nevertheless, for me it was fundamentally linked to trying to conceptually grasp what coding *is* and how codes arise from the researcher’s *own language*. As Charmaz proposes:

Our codes arise from the languages, meanings, and perspectives through which we learn about the empirical world, including those of our participants as well as our own... Coding should inspire us to examine hidden assumptions in our own use of language as well as that of our participants.<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>602</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 121.

<sup>603</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 117.

<sup>604</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 47.

Charmaz does not offer any practical guidance, however, for how to lay out data nor how to annotate the codes researchers identify, but only identifies what the coding logic actually does:

[coding] define[s] what we see as significant in the data and describe[s] what we think is happening. Coding consists of this initial, shorthand defining and labelling; it results from a grounded theorist's actions and understandings.<sup>605</sup>

Initially, I printed out each transcript as an A4 document and coded in the margins. Recognised this first attempt as too descriptive, in my second round I aimed to generate codes by focussing on gerunds, asking myself what was happening in my data, what were participant's doing?<sup>606</sup> I also pragmatically changed my notational method, and on the recommendation of an academic friend employed post-it notes.

The GTM researcher aims to use 'constant comparative methods' to 'find similarities and differences' across data and to 'establish analytic distinctions'.<sup>607</sup> At first I hoped that the physical mobility of the post-its would facilitate my noticing the 'two major threads in the fabric of grounded theory: generalisable theoretical statements that transcend specific times and places, and contextual analyses of actions and event'.<sup>608</sup> The method of matching line-by-line coding of my transcripts with 'post-it' notation at first seemed promising. It made the process of coding very 'visual'. Pinned to the wall, surrounding each participant's selected postcard image, the post-its formed a colourful manifestation of codes that helped me to 'take in' visually as well analytically my 'initial' codes and to make comparisons between data and notice patterns of occurrence. I undertook coding four of my interview transcripts in this fashion. However, given that I had between 250 and 350 lines per transcript I was accumulating unwieldy stacks of notes. I finally abandoned the post-it note method, as it was proving unmanageable: it restricted my coding activity to the same physical place of study and required large areas of wall or floor to go undisturbed. The process of visualising my data did, however, set me on a new course of action. I had realised the importance of my coding, feeling a

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<sup>605</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 43.

<sup>606</sup> Gerunds are characteristic of the GT method, Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory, 2nd edition*, (2014), 111.

<sup>607</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 54.

<sup>608</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 46.

creative and visual process more closely allied to my curatorial methods (I will develop this suggestion later in this chapter).

Nevertheless, despite this minor breakthrough, I was encountering a greater methodological problem in that the line-by-line coding was proving too ‘granular’ in detail. Participants gave richly textured yet fragmented accounts; interweaving memory, metaphor, opinion and allegorical and imaginative storytelling, that blended past and present. Rather than originating initial coding that summarised what participants were ‘doing’ overall, I found that in line-by-line coding I was ‘taking apart a single incident’, paraphrasing and summarising fragments of dialogue, resulting in what one of the founders of Ground Theory (GT) Barney Glaser refers to as a ‘helter skelter’ of over-conceptualising, that ‘generates too many categories and properties without yielding an analysis’.<sup>609</sup> I should say here that only when entering the final theoretical coding stage could I see that how participants’ fragmenting and blending was a phenomenological process that was in itself worthy of analysis and would lead to theorising (see Chapter 9).

## **8.2 The Roots of Grounded Theory**

There was also another problem that related to GTM’s origins in social science. I was used to working with life story transcripts in oral history projects. There, richly textured memory stories contribute to historical interpretation. I found the GTM distancing due to its focus on the coding of behavioural phenomena, rather than attending to the fullness of individuals’ lives in a biographical sense. I was even resistant to GTM’s methodological discourse, feeling that ‘colourful’ personal testimonies were being reduced to dispassionate ‘data’, that in turn were subjected to ‘coding’. It was as if my fertile relational experiences with participants were being stripped of their subtle conversational magic and creativity, in favour of a systematised approach that I was experiencing as dehumanising: the exact opposite, in fact, of the objectives of GTM in exploring how ‘interaction is inherently dynamic and interpretative and addresses how people create, enact, and change meanings and actions’.<sup>610</sup> Why then, could I not experience the sense of creative ‘play’ Kathy Charmaz describes: ‘Grounded theory coding is part work, but it is also part play. We play with the ideas we gain from the data’?<sup>611</sup>

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<sup>609</sup> Barney Glaser quoted in Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 125.

<sup>610</sup> Kathy Chamaz, (2014), 9.

<sup>611</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014),137.

### 8.3 Curating Grounded Theory: Grounded Theory as Curation

The analogy between GTM as a method, and processes of curating (as an alternative form of research method), formed a breakthrough moment. I began to recognise a similarity between my own processes of curating as a ‘doing’ research practice, and the GTM of ‘abstracting, conceptualising, patterning and configuring, and abductive reasoning’.<sup>612</sup> In curating Shirley Baker’s photographs, I had sifted, sorted and synthesised hundreds of photographs. I discovered patterns in formal details, subjects, actions, and environments. I had originated new thematic categorisations and had formulated new ideas about the photographer’s working methods and interests (see Chapter 4). When it came to the ‘TWTC’ conversations, however, I was struggling within these highly individualistic texts to identify concepts and find relations between them.

There were three problems: using line-by-line coding was missing the overall sense of what people were ‘doing’; I was still focussing on the content of the participants’ narratives; and for a long time I just did not accept that GTM coding was not about ‘getting it right’, but about following directions that were useful to my research. As Charmaz puts it, ‘Rich, thorough data can generate many research questions... You may be amazed at the diverse ideas you can gain from the data of one project’.<sup>613</sup> Thinking of myself as curating the transcripts — with no right or wrong — provided a heuristic handle on my otherwise slippery and elusive data. I now turned to looking for patterns of ‘doing’.

The potential for pursuing the conceptual and methodological links between ‘doing’ GTM and ‘doing’ curating, in fact, underpin this entire study in its proposition that a crystalized curatorial practice is a form of research enquiry (see the Introduction for a summary). Beginning by posing the puzzling research question: what is ‘the work’ of Shirley Baker? I proceeded ‘abductively’ to bring together ‘diverse strains of prior knowledge’ to this question in order to let ‘imaginative interpretations’ of her work grow.<sup>614</sup> I was discovering that there is great, as yet unrealised, potential in bringing the two methods of curating, and Grounded Theory together.

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<sup>612</sup> Anthony Bryant, *Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017), 61.

<sup>613</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 136.

<sup>614</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 202.

#### 8.4 Defining a ‘Meaningful Unit’, and the Right Amount of Data

Building on my heuristic and conceptual breakthrough, I realised I needed to redefine the amount of text to be coded. In an article outlining his approach to coding, social scientist Ronald J. Chenail suggests that whilst close reading is essential, line-by-line coding can lead to the researcher misidentifying qualitative elements that are meaningful to analyze.<sup>615</sup> In arriving at a code, Chenail recommends the researcher proceed by identifying a ‘qualitative meaningful unit’, that leads towards abstracting the qualities into a code. For Chenail, the code is not a truncated version of the spoken text (data), neither is it a description:

The code is derived from the analyst forming an abstract relationship between the qualities of a “that” in the data and a “this” in the form of a qualitative declaration or pronouncement of a quality (i.e., the coding, categorizing, theme-ing, essence-ing, or theorizing) about the “that’s” qualities in order to abstract the something (i.e., the unit of analysis) in terms of something else (i.e., the results of the abstraction).<sup>616</sup>

Coding has to be slightly apart from the concrete data in order to capture the qualitative differences being suggested via the qualitative code. The initiated code must, however, draw upon and include the distinct qualities of the data being coded in order to create a meaningful code. Chenail invokes a wonderfully homely metaphor of baking bread to make his point further:

You need to include some qualities of the unit of analysis as your “starter dough” to create the qualitative coding and analysis of the qualitative unit of analysis.<sup>617</sup>

By now I was familiar with my transcripts, and I recognised that coding them all would be too time-consuming, whilst I was not convinced that quantity of data would necessarily result in either more productive or representative analytic awareness. Thus, I decided to select only six transcripts. Selection of the six was based on as even a demographic spread of age and gender as was feasible. On this basis, I recommenced

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<sup>615</sup> Ronald J. Chenail, ‘Conducting Qualitative Data Analysis: Reading Line-by-Line, but Analyzing by Meaningful Qualitative Units’, *The Qualitative Report*, (Volume 17, Number 1, January 2012), 249. Accessed: <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17-1/chenail-line.pdf>, January 2019.

<sup>616</sup> Ronald J. Chenail, 249.

<sup>617</sup> Ronald J. Chenail, ‘Conducting Qualitative Data Analysis’, 249. Accessed: <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17-1/chenail-line.pdf>, January 2019.

‘initial’ coding for a third time.<sup>618</sup> Now, engaging Chenail’s method, I was understanding what coding *is*: a juxtaposition that ‘creates a metaphoric relationship’.<sup>619</sup>

### 8.5 Initial coding and on ‘being’ your own authority

This third round of initial coding I undertook using the regular Mac Pages software programme on my lap top. I transposed each transcript text to a three column table; the left hand column was reserved for consecutive numbering of the ‘meaningful unit’ plus the written ‘initial’/‘descriptive’ code; the middle column for the transcript data, divided into ‘meaningful units’; whilst the right hand column for what would become the focussed code and memo notes.<sup>620</sup> How did I define what was ‘meaningful’ and the length of a unit? Chenail warns that:

... approaching lines of a text as prospective units of analysis could lead researchers to over and under-sizing their units to be analyzed. This arbitrary calibration by the researcher could lead to misidentifying meaningful qualitative elements to analyze. This problematic outcome can arise because in the analysis of textual material, the number of words portrayed in a line has more to do with margins, justification, and font size than setting forth significant qualitative elements to be studied for their qualities or essential features. In other words, a line of text might not constitute a suitable, undivided entity or whole to analyze qualitatively.<sup>621</sup>

I re-read the conversations, often out loud. This helped restore the overall sense that what participants were ‘doing’ was communicating *with me*, which line-by-line coding had lost through arbitrarily fracturing dialogue. Now, I was thinking in terms of what were participants ‘doing’ overall, in speaking *with me*, rather than focussing on the content of their accounts informationally (as I might in oral history interpretation).

I arrived at conceptualising what each participant was ‘doing’: striving to make sense of Shirley Baker’s images. They did this by employing a range of strategies in speech, and it was these ‘clusters’ that I noticed and that formed the ‘meaningful unit’. In this way, identifying a ‘meaningful unit’ was linked to analysing *how* each participant was ‘seeking’ to ‘do’ something with Baker’s photographs *with me*.

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<sup>618</sup> Engaging in ‘initial’ coding three times might seem an oxymoron. However, I was still attempting to originate a first stage of ‘naming segments of data’, see Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 111.

<sup>619</sup> Ronald J. Chenail, ‘Conducting Qualitative Data Analysis’, 249.

<sup>620</sup> Charmaz calls the first level coding ‘initial’, see Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 109-137. Chenail refers to it as ‘descriptive’. See Ronald J. Chenail, 252.

<sup>621</sup> Ronald J. Chenail, 249.

A 'meaningful unit' was marked on each transcript by means of introducing at the beginning and end of each unit the notation *///*. I then progressively re-read each transcript, this time around generating the initial (descriptive) code, that always included 'starter words' taken from the words of 'the unit' that I was coding; as Chenail describes it, 'working from a recursive orientation'.<sup>622</sup> I did this quickly trying to be as intuitive as possible. In initiating the descriptive codes, I began to spontaneously jot down brief memo observations in the third column of each transcript that explored and responded to my abstraction of the unit's qualities into a code.

Whilst Charmaz suggests that the phase of initial coding precedes a subsequent phase of more abstracted and conceptual 'focussed coding', in reality I began to simultaneously identify initial codes *whilst* generating 'tentative' focussed codes. My focussed codes were not simply extracted from the 'meaningful unit' codes on the basis of what most interested me, rather, I looked for repeated occurrences and made comparisons between codes. I started to consider what the initial codes were implying and inferring and, as Chenail puts it, testing 'the credibility of my juxtaposition of two elements qualitatively different, but also qualitatively connected'.<sup>623</sup>

Up to this point, I still had not consulted any literature in support of my analysis and worked entirely from my data. I found this analytic and interpretative 'freedom' troubling at first. What if my codes/ I were wrong? What if I was just identifying something so obvious it was not worth the effort? What, in any case, was I looking to identify?<sup>624</sup> Charmaz reminds the researcher that:

You are a part of your analytic work. You bring your analytic skills and perspectives to bear on the analysis throughout the research process - and that can be your gift.<sup>625</sup>

This seems obvious, and indeed is central to my proposition in this thesis that curating is a form of critical, reflexive and emergent enquiry; and additionally argues for the encouragement of non-hierarchical, experientially emergent and grounded ways of

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<sup>622</sup> Ronald J. Chenail, 252. Accessed: <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17-1/chenail-line.pdf>, January 2019.

<sup>623</sup> Ronald J. Chenail, 252. Accessed: <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17-1/chenail-line.pdf>, January 2019.

<sup>624</sup> Given that my research project is premised on non hierarchical, experientially emergent and grounded ways of knowing, my reluctance to become my own 'authority' is more than ironic.

<sup>625</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 140.

knowing. Nevertheless, the lived reality of the GT researcher as their own authority felt at times disconcerting.

## 8.6 Introducing Emergent Concepts

Charmaz suggests that arriving at the focused coding stage, the researcher uses their initial codes to:

sift, sort, synthesise and analyse large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytical sense to categorize your data incisively and completely.<sup>626</sup>

Focussed coding builds on the initial coding stage, and along with observations formulated in memo-writing, starts to ‘advance[s] the theoretical direction of your work’.<sup>627</sup> Coding my conversations had generated hundreds of ‘initial codes’. One transcript alone contained 250. Having become more familiar with my data, I was starting to have ideas (‘emergent concepts’) regarding the patterns and occurrences of ‘ways of speaking’, rather than the content of participants’ narratives which had proven distracting initially in coding. Wanting to test ideas out, I returned to the ///meaningful units/// and started to highlight these under five (colour coded) ‘emergent concepts’:

Pink: words for depicting (what is visible in the photo)

Brown: words around memory/ being "drawn into the photo"

Red: words for Affect : "photo makes me...."

Blue: sentences beginning with: "for me", etc.- Lending yourself in/to the picture,

Orange: words highlighting (drawing on) previous interests/experience

## 8.7 Focussed Coding and Tentative Categories

With colour coding the five ‘emergent concepts’, I became more confident with my data. Colour transformed the screen/ printed page transcripts into ‘visualisations’ that helped me notice occurrences, patterns and threads of data. This resulted in the raising of fifty eight focussed codes (see Table 2 diag. r/h column).

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<sup>626</sup> Kathy, Charmaz, (2014), 138

<sup>627</sup> Kathy, Charmaz, (2014), 138

5 <sup>th</sup> July 2017 t Manchester Art Gallery with Eli Savet - 2nd TRANSCRIBE EDIT	<p style="text-align: center;">Words for depicting Words around memory/ being 'drawn in' Words for Affect : photo makes me.... Lending oneself into the picture Drawing on previous interests</p> <p style="text-align: center;">FOR ME</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">For Eli meaning is coming from her, it is not about SB trying to communicate a message.</p>
<p>1. <b>Loving</b> how the photographer 'engages with children.</p> <p>2. <b>Interpreting/Finding</b> the photographs AS 'powerful' ( agencing) and about (ofing) 'play'</p> <p>3. <b>Connecting</b> with interest in 'little girls' and play - symbolically in the real world.</p> <p>4. <b>Inferring</b> 'absorption'.</p> <p>5. <b>Imagining/ inferring</b> into it) the photos as girls 'really enjoying themselves' 'totally absorbed'.</p> <p>6. <b>Pre-existing believing</b> - (play is 'life-changing'...and 'some kind of politics').</p> <p>7. <b>Locating</b>...hope, a politics</p>	<p>1. Yeah. I mean for me in general what I've loved about this photographer is how she engages with children, in particular with children playing, you know/ For me, this I think is very powerful about play / and here I love this, you know, these little – I'm also very interested in little girls - and I love how they are so absorbed, they are totally absorbed in what they are doing / and what I read into it is that they're really enjoying themselves as well / and there's something about this activity of playing, you know, even in difficult conditions, that I think is life-changing and it's a source, for me, it's a source of hope and also some kind of, I would even say some kind of politics.</p>	<p>Affective Mirroring/reflecting her pre-existing interests (in play and girls) Affiliating with the image - through transcultural/ historical experiences Experiential knowing Connecting (importing) with her previous experience/ interests. DOE/ Sense Making (through experience, knowledge ad belief) Insiding (noticing) and outsidng (Lending herself) to the image Attributing agency to the photograph" Agencing the photo. <b>STORYING</b></p>

Table: 2. Using colours to identify four initial concepts.

The focussed codes were words describing actions and behaviours drawn directly from the transcripts, plus those I abstracted and interpreted from the data.

With so many focussed codes, I once again employed colour coding (derived from the five original 'emergent concepts') to help analyse and sort through my data and look for gaps. In this way, I discovered that the focussed codes could not all be 'captured' by these five concepts. Initially, I was concerned whether I had too many focused codes and if I was using the right words and noticing the right processes. Were the emergent concepts correct, though I was confident in their origins in the initial codes. As Charmaz reminds us, 'focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorise your data incisively and completely'.<sup>628</sup>

Going back and forth with my data, including re-comparing and re-testing my focused codes against the initial codes, thinking about my language, I refocused on identifying patterns of relationships between the focussed codes, constantly asking myself the question: 'what *were* participants doing'? The focused codes that exceeded my five 'emergent concepts' caused me to consider new relationships and this gave rise to three additional 'emergent concepts', so that I eventually arrived at eight new 'emergent concepts' (see Table 3 below):

<sup>628</sup> Kathy, Charmaz, (2014), 138.

<b>Emergent concepts</b>	<b>Focussed codes</b>
<b>Drawing on Experience</b>	Resonating, remembering, reminiscing, knowing, anchoring, witnessing, approximating, drawing on previous experience/knowledges (but not memory), consolidating values, personalising, insider knowing, reflecting, actualising, affiliating, positioning (identity/self), acknowledging, preSenting, reflecting, making sense.
<b>Subjectivising</b>	Lending herself to the picture, “For me”, “I think”, “I get”, “I think”, positioning,
<b>Affective looking</b>	Empathising, remembering, agencing (the photo as powerful), connecting, aestheticising, emoting.
<b>Storying</b>	Narrating ‘the past (remembering, recalling, reminiscing) allegorising, voicing, charactering, intertwining, speculation, humanising, pasting, imaging, reflecting, gendering, inferring, ‘Decisive momenting’
<b>Approximating</b>	Stand-in’
<b>Believing in Realism</b>	‘Decisive momenting’, evidencing, trusting, humanising, believing, authenticating.
<b>Detailing</b>	contrasting, describing, appreciating (composition)
<b>Present-ing</b>	Opinioning, questioning, being in the now.

Table 3. Grounded Theory, second stage, emergent concepts.

## 8.8 Theoretical Sampling and Theoretical Concepts

Having developed eight emergent concepts, this could have been a point to stop. I had developed insights into what my participants were ‘doing’, yet my emergent concepts were not telling a coherent analytical story. My research lacked ‘theoretical reach’<sup>629</sup>. Charmaz warns that whilst arriving at description satisfies many research projects, ‘one hazard of grounded theory approaches is constructing a list of connected but under-analysed processes’.<sup>630</sup> Alternatively she proposes that ‘theoretical sensitivity’ moves coding through description toward ‘empirical indicators’:

Theoretical sensitivity is the ability to understand and define phenomena in abstract terms and to demonstrate abstract relationships between studied phenomena. With this type of sensitivity, grounded theorists discern meanings in their emergent patterns and define the distinctive properties of their constructed categories concerning these patterns.<sup>631</sup>

<sup>629</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 247.

<sup>630</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 246.

<sup>631</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 161.

Excited by my findings so far, I was keen to push them further. Referring to these eight emergent concepts, I started to ask myself about their properties: What were their similarities and differences? Could understanding the phenomena of encountering and engaging Shirley Baker's photographs (the how) communicate what Baker's photos were doing (the what)? Would shining light on the 'how' and the 'what' help appreciate photographs as co-creators of meaning in the present?

As Charmaz suggests, theoretical sampling is not a 'seamless' process, 'you have lots of stops and starts along the path'.<sup>632</sup> I went back many times to my data transcripts, re-reading the colour coded data and its applicability to the focussed codes, until no additional focussed codes nor new emergent concepts emerged. As already noted, I was concerned with my use of language and its precision in suggesting what people were 'doing' *with* Shirley Baker's photos, or to put it another way, *how* they were relating to the photos. I spent considerable time using a thesaurus to test out the suitability and precision of my chosen gerunds.<sup>633</sup>

I then returned to the eight emergent conceptual categories and their related focussed codes. Once again, asking what the relationship between the focused codes under that emergent concept could be, I began to synthesise the focussed codes and the emergent concepts, to arrive at three amalgamated emergent conceptual categories that could 'hold' the conceptual framework that I was raising through the data. A second diagrammatic table identifies this process (see below). A picture was emerging: viewers were actively involved in 'doing' the work of 'finding' meaning and 'making' a photograph relevant (to them), and significantly this 'doing' was relational and emerged not just in connection with the photograph, but through the intersubjectivity of the social context of 'Tea with a Curator'. In other words, meaning is emergent and relational. I will return to this issue in the section in Chapter 9 on application with stakeholders.

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<sup>632</sup> Kathy Charmaz, (2014), 193.

<sup>633</sup> The issue of the words and metaphors surrounding the ontology of photograph and the medium's reception seems relevant here. For example, Marianne Hirsch engages the concept of 'affiliation' and 'familiarity'; Penny Tinkler, refers to 'resonance', 'relevance' and 'identification'; whilst Kaja Silverman writes of the photograph as an 'analogy'. With each chosen word a different conceptualisation of photography and its role in meaning is evoked.

Theoretical concepts	Focussed codes
<b>Drawing on Experience (experiential knowing) (+ Present-ing).</b>	Resonating, remembering, reminiscing, knowing, anchoring, witnessing, approximating, drawing on previous experience/knowledges (but not memory), consolidating values, personalising, insider knowing, factualising, reflecting, actualising, affiliating, positioning (identity/self), acknowledging, preSenting, reflecting, making sense, adopting, evidencing, trusting, believing, authenticating.  + Opinioning, questioning, being in the now.
<b>Subjectivitis (Lending herself/ (+ Affective looking)</b>	Lending herself to the picture, “For me”, “I think”, “I get”, “I think”, subjectivising, positioning, presenting.  +  Empathising, remembering, agencing (the photo as powerfully affecting), connecting, aestheticising, emoting.
<b>Storying (+ Approximating + Realism + Detailing +</b>	Narrating ‘the past (remembering, recalling, reminiscing), allegorising, voicing, charactering, intertwining, speculating, humanising, pasting, imagining, reflecting, gendering, inferring, ‘Decisive momenting’, contrasting, authenticating.  + ‘Standing-in’

Table 4. 3rd stage, raising of theoretical concepts.

## 8.9 Testing the Theoretical Concepts

Working now with these three ‘theoretical concepts’, I needed to further test their validity against my original transcripts. I devised three spreadsheets, each titled with a conceptual category, mapping the relevant (colour coded) exemplar conversation quotations on to the relevant emergent categories. Was there the evidence to backup my emergent conceptual categories? Additionally, I wrote memos expanding on each conceptual category to help ‘create conceptual handles’ and to explain what was happening in the conversation setting. In this way, I began to identify the particular ways participants engaged Shirley Baker’s photographs: what they did with them, how they related to them and how they found resonance in and made sense of Shirley Baker’s photographs. In the next

chapter, I define the 'specifiable properties' of the three theoretical concepts 'Drawing on Experience', 'Subjectivising', and 'Storying' while initially I presenting these concepts as distinct, I will argue that as lived experience they are narratively interwoven.

## Chapter 9

### Compositing, Composure and the Cultural Circuit

#### 9.0 Findings: what have I discovered?

In this chapter I elucidate the three ‘theoretical concepts’ arrived at through coding and the sub-categories that make up these primary categories. Though presented here as discrete themes in lived experience, they are commonly narratively interwoven and synthesised by participants. I go on to consider what these categories tell us about what viewers are doing with Baker’s photographs, leading me to formulate recommendations for curatorial practice.

#### 9.1 Theoretical Concept 1: *Drawing on Experience*

‘Drawing on Experience’ brings together a series of processes employed by participants. Together these strategies amount to a form of personal or subjective knowing that sociologist Thomasina Borkman terms ‘experiential knowing’, in which ‘truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others’ is brought into play in order to make sense of a thing or experience.<sup>634</sup>

In ‘experiential knowing’, the ‘TWTC’ participants mobilized forms of ‘insider truth’ known only to themselves and that could not be perceived by an ‘outsider’ viewer (including a curator). Whilst in the oral history interviews a photograph’s resonance was commonly due to literal recognition (people and places) in ‘TWTC’ resonance was formed through approximation — the viewer found sufficient likeness of people, places, objects, articles and activities (particularly children at play) for identification and familiarity, and thus for resonance to occur.

One way participants achieved personalized connection to their photograph was through narrating autobiographical accounts from or about ‘the past’.<sup>635</sup> This took the form of specific memory stories, but more often participants narrated more generalised reminiscences, fragments from either *their* past, or recalled more generically ‘the past’ as they knew it to be or have come to believe it to have been. With the exception of Sue, who brought her grandson to the exhibition, to show him “*this is what parts of*

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<sup>634</sup> Thomasina Borkman, ‘Experiential Knowledge: A New Concept for the Analysis of Self-Help Groups’, (*Social Service Review*, 50 (3)), 2.

<sup>635</sup> See Kathy Charmaz, on situated and subjective sense of time, (2014), 196-205.

*Manchester looked like, and this is how children played*”, participants’ engagement of ‘the past’ was not to further their own understanding of ‘the historical past’, instead, the past became a conduit to augmenting and composing a sense of their own autobiographical belonging, establishing identity ties and communicating a sense of belonging in the present and the future.

Sean was the only participant with first-hand experience of the areas Shirley Baker photographed and was of a similar age to some of the children in the 1960s photographs. In looking at his two photographs he did recognise particular places and these prompted specific memory stories about place, but this was not the stated reason for selecting his photos. It was ‘types’ of place and activity to which he responded with generalised reminiscences about his childhood. In referring to the photograph of the children and the ‘bogy cart’ Sean eagerly recalled the creative building ritual:

*You’d get crates from the shop or something, it’d be that thing, you’d be putting nails in it, that thick, trying to bend them over and trying to knock it through and then try and knock it back, just to secure the thing. It was going to come off anyway, but it was that kind of like, you know, rudimentary kind of construction, you know what I mean; wonderful.*



Fig. 44. Sean in the gallery with his ‘Bogey’/‘Guston’ photograph.

Familiarity with a perceived subject matter (article and/or event) prompted Tony’s selection of a photograph of a group of builders, including two young ‘apprentices’ sporting leather belts (Fig. 44).



Fig. 45. Tony and his postcard selection.



Fig. 46. Tony substituted his postcard upon seeing this photo in the gallery.

Commencing with a personal reflection on childhood development, Tony's disclosure of the personal significance of the boyhood belt he still owned conveyed the depth of his identification with something in the photo that for most viewers would have probably gone unnoticed, and perhaps comes close to Barthes's punctum (the part of an image that is poignant for the viewer, that 'pricks').

*This is just my experience, I don't know whether it was fact in other areas, but getting a leather belt as a boy was almost like a rite of passage to becoming a man... But I still have the leather belt given to me by my grandfather when I was 12, 11 or 12... To me, that was, it was a city thing, it was almost like, suddenly you've grown up, you're wearing a belt, a leather belt, not just a tied piece of rope.*

Identification was not always down to a mirror-like self recognition. When Peter selected a portrait of a joyful dirty faced young toddler beaming into the camera he titles him 'Cheeky Chappy' (Fig. 47). His narrative, that begins with his general recollection of the 'cheeky chappies' he has known, shifts to an instance of projected and idealised identification with the child's perceived unrestrained freedom to 'get grubby':



Fig. 47. Peter with 'Cheeky Chappy'.

*'Cheeky Chappy' I've called him. I've met some cheeky chappies in my life. And you meet characters and they've been all kinds of people from chairmen of companies to just cheeky chappies on the street. We worked with one actually, a guy called Pete and you'd be sitting alongside him, and he's a cheeky chappy and great fun to be with. I can imagine him (the toddler) growing up to be one hell of a character. He's probably a stand-up comic (laughs)....And he's so happy and he's not afraid to get grubby. And I kind of admire that in people. Because I can remember as a kid, I didn't like to get grubby. Didn't like to get my hands dirty. So to see 'that' in somebody who is completely free. ...You know I was brought up in Warrington, you had a thing called Walking Day, so I was spruced up in the starch white blouse and white plimsolls that had been whitened and I was impeccable, impeccable....He's full of himself.*

Both of Peter's two photographs embody his passionate belief in creativity and self-expression. "They're as free as a bird" is a refrain throughout our conversation. In humanising the child, I suggest Peter experiences this portrait with enhanced resonance, affiliating with the photographic subject through aspirational identification. 'Cheeky Chappy' is a personification of the child Peter would have liked to have been, and the man he hopes he has grown to be: "full of the joy; the happiness."

### 9.1.1 Authentication, affirmation and identity

Evoking the past was not the only means by which Shirley Baker's photographs resonated. For photographs to be resonant their content must in some way be

consistent with a viewer's sense or emergent sense of themselves (their values, beliefs and interests), with the photograph providing evidence of it.<sup>636</sup> For this to happen, the photographer's images had to be regarded as authentic and as evidence of 'real' people's lives.

Both Peter and Elizabeth have strong opinions about play and freedom of expression. In Baker's photographs, they find a reflection of their own interests in play and creativity. Elizabeth believes in the hopefulness of play, "*a bit of light in hugely dark conditions*", and Shirley Baker's photographs bolster and consolidate this conviction. Yet at the same time she is aware of projecting her values onto Baker's images, knowing that such principles (hope and healing) lie beyond visualisation:

*I see some of that here, because, you know, these kids are in difficult conditions and there is something about playing that's just, I feel, you know, you can't tell that from a picture, but there's something that, in the here and now, play creates, brings hope, healing ...*

Peter brought up his children "not to be restricted in any way." The photograph of kids sitting on the pavement chalk drawing is consistent with his principles regarding childhood liberty and life-long creativity:

*The other thing that got me is, these kids are drawing, you know, they're not afraid to draw, they're not being told they can't draw and just the freedom of expression, you know, they're on the street they're as free as a bird and they are drawing what the hell they like, that's what got me.*

Looking at Shirley Baker's photographs offered participants the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, confirm beliefs and opinions and in turn to consolidate identities. Sean selected his two images because elements in both reminded him of other artists' works. He finds another image "*Lowry-esque*" and a bit "*Picasso too*", and the lone building recalls T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*. In this way, Sean demonstrates to me that he has 'cultural capital', and in the process consolidates his identity as someone knowledgeable about art (in fact it turns out he is an artist looking to re-establish himself after years living abroad). Sociological historian

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<sup>636</sup> The question of the relationship between an image and identity composure is explored in Chapter 7.

Penny Tinkler has suggested that ‘Photos can be important resources for the visualisation of experiences that are difficult to convey in words’.<sup>637</sup>

Throughout our conversation Sean spoke fondly of Shirley Baker’s images and expressed gratitude to the photographer for having taken them. Her photographs offered him evidence of childhood pastimes that were not captured as family photographs and helped make his experience of growing up in an Irish family in 1960s Salford communicable and intelligible. The areas he grew up in have been dramatically altered. Coupled with the fact that many of the activities he once enjoyed, such as building fires, playing in abandoned factories or even hopscotch in the street, are now deemed unsuitable as children’s pastimes.

In photographs of other children, there was recognition that prompted extended accounts of his own childhood. Risky play, “*no health and safety, we’d be climbing on the skylights and the rafters and everything*”, and looking after his sisters whilst his parents were working, anchored his past self. In talking to the images, however, Sean entwines his past *and* his present. Memory stories merge into extended opinions, and past and present are compared. This enables him to elaborate his opinions regarding contemporary childhood experiences, play theory and British attitudes to kids, as compared with continental Europe where he has spent much of his adult life:

*I don’t think they (children) would be allowed to have the amount of time away from families that we had. It was a lot freer in the respect that like, look, there was nowt inside the house then, there was none of that sitting there with your ‘Xbox’ or anything like that.*

There is an history of anti-Irish sentiment in England that Sean has found difficult to articulate throughout his life.<sup>638</sup> Therefore, talking with Shirley Baker’s photographs provided a conduit through which he could reconnect with his Irish identity and talk about his experiences of growing up a child of Irish heritage. Probably unbeknown to Shirley Baker, she photographed Irish streets and Irish heritage families, such as the Murray family, and these were recognised by Sean and identified with. Sean’s detailed memory stories, recalling his mother’s accent and his schooling were a prelude to his wider explication of the history of the Irish in the North West, “*37,000 men died building the Manchester ship canal, most of*

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<sup>637</sup> I am grateful to Penny Tinkler for sharing with me her unpublished paper ‘Shirley Baker’, (February 2018), 8.

<sup>638</sup> Sean’s comments regarding life in continental Europe were directed at the previous year’s EU referendum.

*them Irish*”; and the insidious prejudice particularly during the 1970s post IRA bombings, that prepared the way for his further explication on the contemporary political Irish situation:

*And bear in mind, this is the 1970s...all the thing about the IRA, and it wasn't so much a thing in our school 'cos most of us were Irish or Irish linked, but I know people in Salford that were Irish...that had a terrible time, people on buses, inside pubs 'No Irish, no blacks, no dogs', that's what it was like.*

So, whilst Sean is for much of our conversation not actually speaking directly about, or even to, Shirley Baker's photographs, it is possible to say that *with* them he composes narratives that bolster his own identity as a working-class, Marxist of Irish descent, that might otherwise not find expression.

Tony finds Baker's photographs “*in some ways a bit of history*”, and he believes in their authenticity because “*it's a street photograph*”— a genre that comes with the expectation that “*t's not set up*”.<sup>639</sup> In looking “*deep enough*”, Tony identifies details such as the Silver Cross pram, that are familiar because though he was born in London “*it looks so similar, it could've been the back street*”. Tony does not extensively reminisce. Rather he uses his knowledge, gained from having lived through the 1960s, to speculate from experience on, for example, the actual circumstances of the “*grubby*” children wandering the streets. He asserts his ‘insider knowing’ to challenge the interpretation that he imagines (correctly, in fact) of the many younger viewers or those from middle-class families at the time.

*I would imagine many of these places didn't even have running water at this point in time. So it wasn't a case that people were dirty, it was just the case that the opportunity wasn't there.*

The past, for Tony, is a channel to consolidating his present-day concerns regarding the social changes that in his opinion have resulted in the atomisation of individuals and family. In Baker's photographs he finds evidence of loss and insecurity, of close family networks and communities threatened. These are not literally visualised through Baker's black and white aesthetic (her picturing of the invasive smog and the wide open spaces produces a melancholia), but because he believes in them already and projects these feelings onto Baker's images. Talking

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<sup>639</sup> Tony was the sole participant to name Baker's photographs as ‘belonging’ to a specific sub-genre of ‘documentary’ photography. Nevertheless, all the participants believed in their ‘authenticity’ and ‘realism’.

through Shirley Baker's images provides Tony with an audience with which he can voice his opinions and concerns:

*The one thing I do remember is being much closer in the community. You'd walk half a mile and be in some family member's, or someone you'd call aunt, though it wouldn't be an aunt, and you'd be in their house and it was just much closer.*

Childhood reminiscence is not a strategy Sue employs to form a relevant personal connection with Shirley Baker's photographs. She recalls only one childhood memory, though it is an affective one, when she identifies a photograph featuring a child looking into the street through a pair of lace curtains "and you remember the feel of them as well, and almost the colours, see the colours." (Fig. 48). It is her own past life experience as an adult that 'draws' Sue to her selected photographs:

*I was drawn to it with the women gossiping... I mean it's a lovely, lovely picture, but so many times when there's a group of women, and one leaves, then you talk about the one that's left, that's what struck me about it.*



Fig. 48. Sue in the gallery: "What will they say when she gone"?

Sue is unsure about photography, finding its realism a barrier to her appreciation of it as an artistic medium:

*A painting comes from somebody's head and somebody's skill in the art of putting the paint on. But a photograph, you take it...that is it.*

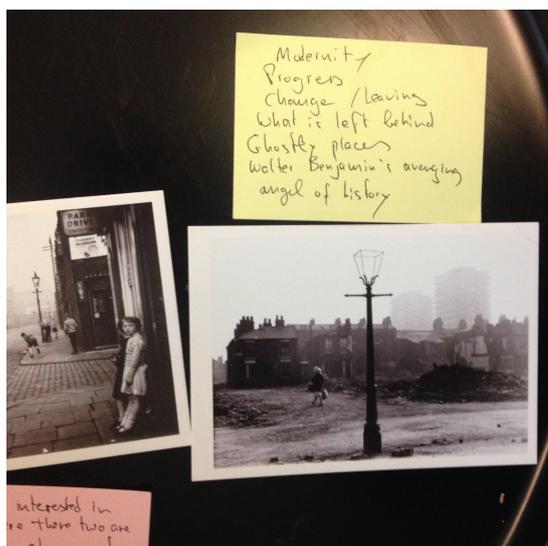


Fig. 49. What and where is the subject? The woman, the lamp post, the tower blocks?

Believing in the authenticity of Baker's images — *'it's a moment in time'* — permits Sue to transpose her own life experiences to the images, animating them within speculated scenarios that become familiar and ring true. She identifies and interprets bodily gestures, clothing, and actions, and in this way Sue connects to Baker's work.

## 9.2 Theoretical Concept 2: *Subjectivising*

I now turn to consider the second conceptual category, 'Subjectivising'. Here I make a shift from what I characterize as the photograph understood by participants as 'representational' of something that exists in the world to the image as eliciting affect. Three key concepts are folded into this strategy: the viewer as a consciously meaning-making agent, as typically conveyed by the participants' opening 'qualifying' phrase *'For me'*; the photograph as an actant upon the viewer (*'the image made me'*); and, related to this, the image's affective potency, in which participants experience being *'drawn into the image'* — a process in which participants appear to *feel* their image rather than simply *see* it.

### 9.2.1 'For me'

In opening new threads of conversation, many participants used the qualifiers *'For me'*, *'I feel'*, *'I think'*, *'I get'*, *'What I read'*.<sup>640</sup> These phrases might be

<sup>640</sup> Martha Rose Beard draws attention to the use of 'qualifying' phrases in the construction of oral history narratives, see, 'Re-thinking oral history - a study of narrative performance', (*The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 21:4), 539.

thought merely rhetoric, part of the punctuation or colour of everyday speech. I suggest, however, that in their use participants acknowledged (both consciously and unconsciously) the polysemy inherent in a photographic image, that *their* meaning was one of many possibilities. Moreover, participants presented themselves as agents of meaning by drawing on personal experience or indeed projecting personal values on to the photographs, from beyond the frame. For example, one of the photographs selected by Greek-born, Elizabet depicts a woman with shopping bags walking across a croft with newly erected tower blocks in the smoggy distance (Fig. 49).

Looking at her photograph, Elizabet temporarily lends her own experience to the image proclaiming:

*I mean, for me, you know, her bags, for me, there's something, I am jumping to a migration story, I mean I can't help that...*

Eizabet names her meaning as something particular to herself — ‘it comes from me’, and in doing so suggests that this connection could not be shared by other viewers. She experiences her image as powerfully affecting, stimulating a feeling of change and ‘pastness’ — as a similar photograph did for Tony.<sup>641</sup> For her the past that is invoked by Baker’s photograph is multi-layered. At one level it is a literal depiction of demolition, that conveys to her environmental and social change, on another level it is a metaphor for ‘History’, and the melancholic passing of time itself. Her narrative, additionally, was an opportunity to convey her intellectualisation of ‘the past’ and ‘history’, through her reference to the philosopher Walter Benjamin, whom she invokes often throughout our conversation. As I have suggested, ‘Drawing on Experience’ also enabled the participants to take the opportunity to perform to me aspects of their cultural capital:

*There's a lot of social change occurring, photographed here, and for me, it's interesting to think there is something about Benjamin, with the Avenging Angel ... looking back at the remains of history. And that's*

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<sup>641</sup> Lynda Nead suggests that post-war visualisation of bomb sites and urban decay and destruction are complex in their emotional disturbance. Drawing on post-war Kleinian psychotherapy, Nead claims that depending on context and the predisposition of the spectator, such images elicited feelings of anxiety, loss, ‘hopeless despair’ and melancholia, or indeed quite the opposite, excitement as the Victorian old was swept aside, making way for the post-war new. See Lynda Nead, *Tiger in the Smoke*, Yale University Press, London, 2017, 90-92.

*deeply moving and methodologically I'm very interested in it, and autobiographically also I feel connected to that.*

What is remarkable and unimaginable, however, is the subjective identification that Elizabet makes to a 'past' that, though connoted by Baker's image, is buried so 'very deep' in her unconscious that when it erupts during our conversation it causes a somatic wave of nausea:

*But for me there is something about, you know, it's the old houses that are being torn down here, this lady, to me, again, now this is stuff I'm not necessarily seeing in the picture, it comes from me, but I suppose because I have, at least my family has, a history of migration and they had to pack their bags and leave. I mean they were, from the Greek community in Istanbul and at some point in the late 50s they had to leave. There's something about this lady with her bags that I think it goes to a very deep unconscious and stirs up memories of moving, you know.*

How might we understand how and why Elizabet has such a deep embodied experience that takes her fleetingly to Istanbul, thousands of miles away from Manchester? How and why does *she* 'see' a woman fleeing, whilst *I* 'see' a woman returning home from the shops?

Widely thought to have been orchestrated by the Turkish secret services, on 6 September 1955 the Istanbul Pogrom ignited. Mobs rampaged through the city vandalising Greek homes, shops and businesses. Seventy-three of Istanbul's eighty-one orthodox churches were destroyed and sixteen priests were killed. According to the 'James Bond' author Ian Fleming, who was in the city at the time, '*Hatred ran through the streets like lava*'.<sup>642</sup> While the total death toll was probably no more than thirty, two hundred women were raped and a few men were forcibly circumcised in the street. Over the next five years the Istanbul Greek population declined from sixty-five thousand to forty-nine thousand. Today, there are probably no more than two thousand five hundred increasingly ageing Greeks in the city.<sup>643</sup> The sense of a living connection to the past of one's extended relations, that Elizabet appears to affectively experience, has been the longstanding preoccupation of Holocaust studies and memory theorist Marianne Hirsch.

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<sup>642</sup> Ian Fleming was in Istanbul for the *London Sunday Times* covering the INTERPOL (International Police) Conference. He referenced the Istanbul riot in his James Bond spy novel *From Russia, with Love* (1957). See, Phillip Mansel, *Constantinople: City of the World's Desire, 1453-1944*, (Middlesex, Penguin, 1995), 425.

<sup>643</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istanbul\\_pogrom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istanbul_pogrom). Accessed: 25 February 2019.

Hirsch's term 'postmemory', coined in the early 1990s, has since been enthusiastically taken up in the broad fields of memory work.

To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue in the present.<sup>644</sup>

In researching with children of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch noticed a pattern in which connection to the past 'was mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation'.<sup>645</sup> What is of particular interest to my own research is that this work, according to Hirsch, is particularly elicited by photography.<sup>646</sup>

More than oral or written narratives, photographic images that survive massive devastation and outlive their subjects and owners function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world. They enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past, but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic 'take'.<sup>647</sup>

The direct kinship of the 'second generation', a vertical and intergenerational relationship that Hirsch latterly referred to as 'familial postmemory', is not the only means of transmitting postmemory. Hirsch later proposed that the process could also be experienced horizontally and intra-generationally naming this 'affiliative postmemory'.

Affiliative postmemory would thus be the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation combined with structures of mediation that would be broadly appropriable, available, and indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission.<sup>648</sup>

By extending the scope of postmemory, Hirsch suggests a 'potentially wider array' of 'retrospective witnessing by adoption' to include other traumatic events of the twentieth century.<sup>649</sup> We might imagine that following the traumatic experiences of the Istanbul

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<sup>644</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, 5.

<sup>645</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5.

<sup>646</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5.

<sup>647</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 36.

<sup>648</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 115.

<sup>649</sup> Emmanuel Alloa, Pierre Bayard, Soko Phay, 'Figurations of Postmemory: An Introduction', *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1-2, Spring/Fall 2015, s3.

Pogrom, Elizabet grew up with her forebears' overpowering memories — narratives that, as Hirsch suggests, risked displacing or even evacuating her own life stories.<sup>650</sup> For Hirsch, the experience of postmemory shapes the recipient, 'however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension'.<sup>651</sup> The Istanbul Pogrom happened more than fifty years ago, but for Elizabet its effect continues into her present and might be ignited at any surprising moment; even by the image of a woman laden with bags, hurrying back home from the shops.

### 9.2.2 The Affective Image and Emotional Impact

Here I take up the issue of the affective potency of Shirley Baker's images. As each of the participants expressed at some point in our conversation an affective reaction to Baker's photographs, the question of how her work is perceived as both *registering* ('capturing') affect and emotion, and *productive* of affective response and emotion requires attention. Before addressing this, however, I wish to highlight the following two processes, both of which were experienced in the moment of being *with me in* conversation. Participants had a (momentary) live reactive experience as a consequence of encountering the exhibition print with me on the wall (in contrast to handling the postcard). They also 'voiced' their experience of affect as recalled (filtered) matter, in which they explained to me the emotion they had felt upon looking at the postcards, and that explained why they had chosen their image or, alternatively, addressed their subjective and affective interpretation of it as affecting.

The importance here lies in my observation that feeling *about* or in *response* to an image was commonly given as the principal reason why a photograph was selected. This suggests that participants prioritised and favoured their own subjective and affective response over the image's potential (historical) informational content, or the image's formal qualities. Additionally, *feeling* relates to and indeed elicits further considered thought, with participants stating they had been "*drawn in*" to their image, a consequence of feeling, before then going on (with me) to consider and interpret the image in terms of its meaning for themselves. Thus, I propose that for participants actual *feeling* (or thinking about and then 'linguaging' feeling) was commonly a 'gateway' to

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<sup>650</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5.

<sup>651</sup> Marianne Hirsch, 5.

further thinking and reflecting; upon either themselves, their lives or the state of the world they inhabit.<sup>652</sup>

The affective responses of participants emerged as a consequence of, and in combination with, the following identifiable processes: firstly, the perceived subject matter of a photograph, that may or may not have resonated for participants, forming an emotional identification, in terms of memory and 'the past'; secondly, the effective quality of the image, that includes its aesthetic, tonality and atmosphere, as well as formal composition, so that images 'touched' the viewer to the degree that there is a synthesising of *feeling* and *seeing*; thirdly, there is also the predisposition of the viewer towards emotionality; and finally, the conditions of viewing, meaning the exhibition context as well external social factors such as the Grenfell Tower disaster in June 2017, or the Manchester Arena bombing that shaped the viewing context.

For Elizabet, Molly, Peter and Tony the affective power of Baker's photography is experienced so forcefully that each presents their image as if it has a commanding power over them: "*It was like being struck in the face, it was a really strange feeling,*" recalled Tony. Peter similarly expresses an intense physicality in his claim that the image of the toddler "*hit me between the eyes.*" Whilst Elizabet refers to being "*gripped*" by the image. These are powerful expressions, that proceed from the viewer simultaneously believing their image a 'document of reality' while responding, without thinking, to its 'magical value'.<sup>653</sup> Such a process leads Molly to propose she was "*initially enticed*" by her image. I do not intend here to summarise the theoretical positions or to review the extensive secondary literature on Barthes and Benjamin regarding this question of the 'document' versus 'aura' of photography.<sup>654</sup> Instead, I focus on my 'field research' to consider expressions of the experience of affective looking and photographic agency. Participants' accounts indicate the link between perceived photographic subject matter (its perceived indexical inscription) and an image's affective power, so that it is almost impossible to separate one from the other, or to identify which comes first for the viewer.

The 'story' that Elizabet weaves around one of her photographs — two little girls standing to the side of boys playing cricket in the middle distance — elicits a powerful avalanche of mixed feelings (I return to this account in more detail later in the chapter).

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<sup>652</sup> See Gilles Deleuze 'Encountered Sign', in *Proust and Signs*, quoted in Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, (California, Stanford University Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>653</sup> Tim Dant and Graeme Gilloch, 'Pictures of the Past: Benjamin and Barthes on photography and history', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2002, Vol. 5 (1), 9.

<sup>654</sup> Tim Dant and Graeme Gilloch, 9.

She finds the photograph a “*very powerful*” confirmation of her belief and feeling that “*play is a source of hope*” and so in ‘looking’ she is in the “*grip*” of that hopefulness. Yet Elizabeth, nevertheless, connects to “*a double sense of the outsidersness of the girls*”, intensified as one of the girls wears glasses — “*my feeling is, you know, she’s perhaps... not always so popular... and for me that’s a very moving feeling.*” While she senses their gender, as well as their individual marginalisation and lack of belonging, Elizabeth also experiences “*relief that the photographer is not letting that go unnoticed,*” so that she ultimately can say that the image “*just opens up my heart to look at it.*”

Tony experiences Shirley Baker’s photographs as “*history pieces*” that are powerfully affecting. He claims this is due in great part to the photographer’s use of black and white film, which for many viewers also in itself connoted ‘the past’. He invests in the authenticity of Baker’s works and finds in them identifiable features and almost likenesses of people and places, that resonate from his own childhood, so that Baker’s photographs make possible emotional identification, and are simultaneously evidence of personal history. Added to this are his own feelings about middle age: “*I am older now, looking back on something I was familiar with.*”<sup>655</sup> Baker’s aesthetic and composition also register affect for Tony, finding the images “*ethereal*” and “*melancholic.*” These emotions are instrumental in his authoring of emotive allegorical narratives, in which the passing of time unfolds as “*a journey that is just so powerful and emotional watching it.*” The impact of his own stories (on himself) furthers the affective power of Baker’s works, so that they are to Tony, “*almost upsetting, it’s a sadness actually, ...it’s just this feeling of loss actually, for me, looking at the pictures.*”

Sue too is moved by the idea of time passing, although this is not explicitly in the context of her own life. Responding to a photograph of a couple crossing a croft, she speculates on *their* circumstances and imagined pathos. In so doing I suggest that Sue draws on the lives of the couple, entwining their history with her own (and ours), to reveal the cycle of change, life and death:

*I just thought, if they’d lived there, what they were passing, what had been knocked down? It’s where they’d lived their life and it’s gone, you know. And just these two older people amongst all the demolition, and you just think their life, what it was, assuming that they’ve lived there, is now gone. So that’s what struck me there.*

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<sup>655</sup> Many viewers of the exhibition suggested that the black and white aesthetic of Shirley Baker’s photographs invoked a powerful sense of ‘the past’. By contrast, her colour photographs (taken at the same time) seemed ‘modern’ more like ‘today’. Anna Douglas, ‘Field Notes’, June-September 2017.

In Shirley Baker's photographs Sean also finds a *'juxtaposition of. the old and the new'*, which *'screamed out'* to him fiercely. In one of his selected photographs, featuring the city's heavy polluting smog, he experiences *'the mist of time'* that prompts the same wistfulness expressed by Elizabet and Tony. Overall, however, Sean's memory stories are optimistic, sensory reminiscences in which he re-lives and intensely re-feels the original event. They are not just 'connected with the thinking process and with words' but are, as French poet and concentration camp survivor Charlotte Delbo terms, 'sense memories' in which the 'physical imprint of the event' is registered.<sup>656</sup> Sean's story recounting the day he mounted his younger twin sisters on his bike handlebars to go careening down a steep dirt track is relived with all the defiant youthful fearlessness he invites me to imagine was felt on the actual day. His extreme pleasure in recalling this tale in the present is linked to the "flying fuck" attitude that he keenly bears today. Another story replays his sensory experience that has stayed with him since being a small boy. In one long burst of storying, the past is re-experienced (performed) in almost filmic technicolour detail, with full surround sound and added olfactory embellishment:

*I used to go to an Italian barbers, and he had this wonderful red leather chair and it just reeked of something like of, it could be in the middle of like New Jersey, you know the kind of like, somewhere that Fat Pauly or something, do you know what I mean, but I never got to feel this, because I was that tiny, wonderful red arm things, there would be a board put across and I would sit on this board, and then to do the back of my neck, and he'd like go (Sean is enacting the gesture of the shaver on his neck). Do you know what I mean?*

As a girl I never visited the barbers, but in Sean's telling I can feel the chair, smell its reeky leatheriness, hear the imagined shop banter and the sound of the electric razor on the back of little Sean's neck.

### **9.3 Theoretical Concept 3: Storying**

The category of 'Storying' is the most expansive of the three categories, with many of the focussed codes it encompasses also found in the other two theoretical concept categories. Indeed, we might think of the 'TWTC' conversations as extended narratives. In naming this category 'Storying' I am referring, however, to 'the most basic element' of a type of narrative in which participants tell me about somebody or something (in the photograph or in their life) 'doing something', and in this process arrive at a satisfying coherency of

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<sup>656</sup> Quoted in Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 25.

meaning about the photograph and about themselves (I return to the concept of narrative and subjective ‘coherency’ later in this chapter).<sup>657</sup>

Through coding, three genre types of story are established: ‘narrations of the past’ (remembering, recalling reminiscing), allegorising, and ‘decisive momenting’. The structures of storytelling are identified in which participants employ contrasting, speculating, imagining, reflecting, inferring, intertwining, and authenticating. Stories, I suggest, do the task of performing themes and story-lines that include but are not exclusive to gender-ing, class-ing, age-ing, etc. Finally, stories are told through characters and protagonists (from both the participants’ lives and those they imagine in the photograph’ — both involving participants voicing and charactering their words and feelings.<sup>658</sup>

Through ‘Storying’, Baker’s photographic images are animated and enriched. ‘Storying’ also closes the gap between viewing subject (participant) and photographic object/image, so that the photograph becomes resonant, relevant and useful to the participant by supporting their reflection upon their own past in order to consolidate identities in the present. I now look more closely at three genres of narrative: the past, allegory and ‘the decisive moment’.

### **9.3.1 Narrations of the past (remembering, recalling and reminiscing).**

The ‘TWTC’ conversations did not explicitly address ‘the past’ (indeed, I specifically tried to steer conversation away from reminiscence), yet all of the participants engaged in forms of narrating ‘the past’ — their own and/or collective or ‘historical past’. Whilst not always directly related to the image in a descriptive, indexical or identificatory sense, all of the participants nevertheless spoke of Shirley Baker’s images as prompting or eliciting memories.

As we have seen, for Elizabeth the photograph of a woman with shopping bags prompts the telling of her family’s story of their eviction from Istanbul. Sue imagines Shirley Baker’s “*secretive*” photographic practice and connects this to fragments of her Jewish family’s migrant story (in which she learnt “*not to ask*”). For Molly, stories of her playing with cardboard boxes and of wearing her father’s shoes support her emergent

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<sup>657</sup> See Cheryl Mattingley, ‘Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots; the Narrative Structure of Experience’, quoted in Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life:2*, ‘Stories are about someone trying to do something and what happens to her and to others as a result’, 187.

<sup>658</sup> The concept of genres, structure and protagonist is adapted from Ken Plummer’s description of narrative. See *Documents of Life:2*, 187 - 189.

adult values. The rites-of-passage account of being gifted a leather belt as a boy confirms Tony's present-day connection to its giver (his grandfather). Sean's conversation is full of autobiographical stories, recalling dangerous play, making a bogey, looking after his sisters, going to the hairdressers, being Irish.

As with Peter, the majority of his stories lack direct connection to image content. Nevertheless they only arise as a consequence of viewing Shirley Baker's photographs. The portrait of a mucky toddler enabled Peter to have a fresh insight into his childhood self, with his reluctance "to get dirty", in contrast to his present-day values of expressive freedom that he projects onto the child he sees as "enjoying the moment". Personal memories emerged from everyone's encounter with Shirley Baker's photos, but less predictable were the distinctive types of storying comprising speculating, imagining and fictitious accounting to which I now turn.

### 9.3.2 Allegorising

Given participants' belief in the veracity of Baker's photographs, it is perhaps surprising that they also engage the photographs allegorically. In evaluating the allegorical form within ethnographic writing, ethnographer James Clifford has written:

A recognition of allegory emphasises the fact that realistic portraits, to the extent that they are 'convincing' or 'rich', *are* (my emphasis) extended metaphors, patterns of associations that point to coherent (theoretical, aesthetic, moral) additional meanings.<sup>659</sup>

'Emplotted by powerful stories', I suggest that Baker's photographs might similarly be thought of as 'inescapably allegorical'.<sup>660</sup> Indeed, Shirley Baker 'the photographer', like Clifford's 'ethnographer' should, I propose, be thought of as engaged in 'imaginative reconstruction' rather than in 'objective' rhetoric.<sup>661</sup> Whilst her own claims to being a 'recorder' might suggest otherwise, 'one of the strongest impulses in allegory', according to Walter Benjamin, is towards an 'appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to redeem them for eternity'; so that to view Baker's photographs as descriptive, realist *and* allegorical is not, I suggest, so antithetical.<sup>662</sup>

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<sup>659</sup> James Clifford 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in James Clifford & George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1986), 100.

<sup>660</sup> James Clifford 'On Ethnographic Allegory', 98.

<sup>661</sup> James Clifford 'On Ethnographic Allegory', 98.

<sup>662</sup> Walter Benjamin, quoted in James Clifford 'On Ethnographic Allegory', 119.

Molly selected a photograph of a toddler wearing a man's pair of oversize shoes, pushing a doll's pram along the pavement, "*for different reasons*". Her interweaving of several narrative forms — autobiographical, realist/descriptive, historical imagination and allegorical (scrambled rather than sequential) — reflects this. At first, she alights on the oversize shoes that "*made me kind of feel nostalgic*" for her younger self, who in wearing her parents' shoes "*wanted to be just like them, ... following in their footsteps*". Elaborating on her experience of "*always wanting to be older*", she identifies the theme of "*adulthood and childhood*" in her photographs. She speculates on the motivations of the toddler — "*the men's shoes probably made her more confident*" — and reflects on the prospects for women in the 1960s: "*a woman has a child, the woman goes out with the child, that's the way it went*". Molly describes the environment: "*two different paths blocked by a wall*"; and being observant she surmises that "*it's obviously a back path that not a lot of people take, you can tell by the different cobbles.*" What might be considered descriptive in the realist sense however becomes for Molly an extended metaphor with the path standing in for a narrative stage in which, finally, the little girl is propelled into her story of "*choices and directions in life*":

*I feel like the way that they've shot it is to show that, yes she does have different routes that she can go. She could choose to ditch the pram completely and she could go off in one direction or she could stay on the path that she already is and stay with what she's envisioning for herself right now.... as in, you do something else, or you could ... go along the road of normality.*

Through storying, Molly brings her chosen image into coherence and simultaneously seeks to impose an order of a narrative kind upon the inchoate experiences that mark her transition from childhood to teenager to adult.<sup>663</sup>

Tony tells me he is "*someone who likes to look deeply into things*". He claims the "*longer you look at the pictures*" the more you sense "*the power in the image*" that for him comprises "*the composition overall*", as well as Baker's aesthetic, the atmosphere and her attention to faces, gestures, clothing and the stance of the people populating her photographs. Although he accepts that these people and places really existed, this does not prevent him from taking each and every element in the photograph and imagining embellished stories that carry huge symbolic and moral meaning. He titles his two

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<sup>663</sup> Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life:2*, for an expansion on the various narrative structures that form a 'life story narrative', 191-197.

chosen photographs: *'Mistakes and Futility'* and *'The Journey'*. Through the course of our conversation these bridging themes permit Tony to link his two photographs to his extended human story of choices, failures, regrets, change and loss. It is worth quoting him at length to appreciate the extent of his storying and his use of 'voicing' as part of a strategy of personifying anonymous photographed subjects by making them into 'characters' that become (temporarily) knowable to Tony:

*The first picture with the two ladies, one is looking very drop-headed, very, almost, "what have I done, why am I here"? She may be married, she may not, but it's almost like the, looking at the way that two people are dressed, the girl looking on would appear, in the photograph to look to have actually started to move out of the environment, almost like she's a visitor. So a friend that's maybe done good and moved out. But it's almost like a communion going on between the two people. This one now feels trapped, pregnant and stuck; the other one's talking, bending over; almost looking at the lump from the baby, and hence 'the mistakes and the futility' of the problems that's led them to where it was. So that's my take on that.*

### 9.3.3 'Decisive Momenting': imaging the 'authentic moment'

Here, I turn to the narrative strategy in which participants addressed the context and 'the moment' in which their chosen photographs were 'taken'. This prompted each participant to approach their photograph as a series of 'clues' that held the potential to reveal the stories behind the 'decisive moment'.<sup>664</sup> Thus, despite confidence in the enduring notion that a photograph is 'taken', participants were simultaneously able to, as Tony put it, *'find[ing] a story there'*. Sean stands for all the participants in believing in the authenticity of a 'Baker image' whilst simultaneously also considering there to be a story *behind* the image, *with* an image, as well as *engaging* an image to narrate aspects of his own life:

*So she'll have, I should imagine, she'll have, like, approximated the frame and she would've been up, maybe even talking to them, maybe even directing them like....and it gives a story, a narrative beyond these, like, individuals.*

Through coding I identified a range of imaginative strategies which facilitated participants entering and animating their image, thus bringing it to life. Sociologist Ken

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<sup>664</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson referred to prowling the streets as "ready to pounce, determined to 'trap' life, to preserve it in the art of living." See *The Decisive Moment*, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1952).

Plummer identifies ‘characters’ and ‘personification’ as common elements in the narrative form of the ‘life story’:

*The narrative of life stories will be peopled by recognisable ‘characters’... We write, read or hear life stories being tuned in to look for villains, persons and fools, and seeking a whole array of what has been called ‘storytypes’— not far indeed from stereotypes. Usually there will be a protagonist, and antagonist, and a witness of some kind... There could be a vast array of such ‘personification’ to appear in our stories, but often they are reduced to a small clustering of basic types: father and mothers, parents and children, the good and the bad. Listening to life stories may mean listening to the stories of the personifications that people a life.<sup>665</sup>*

Whilst the ‘TWTC’ participant accounts were not life stories as such, I suggest that one reason why participants could find Baker’s photographs resonant was that they worked as a series of known ‘storytypes’, whilst not necessarily exactly mirroring their life own experiences, were ‘good enough’ approximations to resonate widely. What is more, coding highlighted how in forming their subjective accounts, participants anchored their ‘decisive moment stories’ in personification— identifying ‘characters’, imagining context and voicing dialogue.

Participants pieced together ‘the decisive moment’ through forensically observing, describing and evaluating the overall composition of the image and its content. The perspective from which the photograph was taken, the gaze of the photographed subject to the camera (leading to speculate where Baker was positioned) and consideration of gesture lead participants to imagine the relationship between the photographer and her subjects and what might have *actually* been going on at the moment the photograph was taken.

The key point here, however, is that in *imagining* the ‘decisive moment’, each of the participants authors their own ‘truth story’ of the ‘decisive moment’ — the ‘decisive moment’ being a ‘myth’ in any case. So that what I am suggesting is that each participant imagines the social relations around their image as an extension of and consistent with their pre-existing version of the world (and themselves). In other words, the ‘decisive moment’ is in the ‘TWTC’ participants’ accounts a pliable and versatile fiction that relates to the self —a proposition I expand on in the section on composure later in this chapter.

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<sup>665</sup> Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life:2*, 188.

To illustrate this point, I wish to return to the conversation with Elizabeth and the photograph of the two little girls. Elizabeth is interested in gender and space. Imagining and speculating what was going on at the moment the photograph was taken was integral, I suggest, to her intense affiliation with the image. She draws on her own experience of photographing: *“I always get my shadow in”* and wonders *“where she [Baker] is standing”*:

*Do they know her, do they feel safe with her, and so they don't pay attention to her? I mean I don't really know where she would be standing, I guess she's in the street as well, but she's a little ... bit higher or is she taking it out of a [window]?*

The girls are on the edge of the photographic frame and this prompts Elizabeth to reflect on their *“outsiderness”*, and it produces in her a *“sense of marginalisation and not belonging”* in the *“social world”* beyond the photograph. As well as disquiet there is also optimism. The girls look directly into Baker's camera. Elizabeth imagines the rapport the photographer is having with them, and in so doing interprets the act of photographing as reversing inequalities. For Elizabeth, Baker 'the photographer' is a witness to the *“things society renders invisible or marginalises,”* and she is *“countering that”* and commenting upon it by the very fact of having photographed the girls. She 'takes' the lived experience of the girls and transmutes it into a powerful photographic symbol of 'having been' — *“the photographer has seen them ... is not letting that go unnoticed and is witnessing that and making a comment on it...and for me that's so important.”* Yet despite her re-visioning of the social relations of the image production, Elizabeth simultaneously acknowledges that Baker's photograph is not as it would have been in reality, that it is a uniquely photographic construction:

*You wouldn't have seen this whole act happening, you know, the way social space is organised and how the boys have their space and that's a space of reprisal play, of joy and the little girls, they're looking, but the photographer holds them in mind, doesn't forget about them. And to me that's extremely important.*

What I am suggesting is that Elizabeth fashions the 'decisive moment' out of her own pre-existing interests in gender and consequently her desire for the girls to be noticed. To Elizabeth, Shirley Baker performs as an 'active witness' of gender marginalisation that she remedies, for just 'a moment' back in 1962, through her symbolic act of photographing

the girls. I suggest also that Elizabeth views her own present act of looking (at the photograph of the girls in the gallery) as a form of public witnessing as recuperation. For Elizabeth, this photograph is, I propose, like a screen upon which she projects her own meaning, though not entirely without the visual basis inscribed in the photograph.

Molly shares with Elizabeth the idea of Shirley Baker as witness of gender marginalisation, and in so doing locates herself in this image. In photographing a young girl playing as a robot in the back street, Molly attributes feminist intentionality to Shirley Baker, stating “*maybe the photographer was thinking of more like a feminist point of view.*” She claims this, rather like Elizabeth, by her investment in the action of Baker having *noticed* the girl playing away from the boys in the front street — a speculation Molly derives altogether from her own experience as a child in which “*I never really went out into the streets like boys did.*”

The ‘in the moment’ photographic relationship of Baker to the girl does not concern Molly. She does, however, enter into a lengthy narrative that includes ‘voicing’ and ‘charactering’, in which she speculates about the girl at the time she is photographed, more generally about her life, and what adults might have thought of her playing outside. Her imaginative account is additionally augmented by her own childhood memories, her opinions regarding adult behaviour and her thoughts, feelings and values about being an emerging woman today. I quote here at length to appreciate the full measure of her narrative strategy.

*I feel like she's in the back street because she purely thinks, "I don't want to play with Barbie dolls, I don't want to play like girls are supposed to play" ....Maybe girls weren't even supposed to properly play outside back then, and she's thinking "I want to be alone and play by myself and make my own rules" ....you never really see pictures of girls playing outside and it makes you think, maybe in this time, this is when, the time that women were actually feeling like, 'do you know what, let's go outside, let's do things that we're not supposed to do'. And without people like this girl, who probably stepped out of her comfort zone to go outside and pretend to be a robot, or a zombie, or whatever she was envisioning herself being, it's changed the world for us today, because if she hadn't have done that then I wouldn't have been able to do it in my front room, or go outside and play.*

Despite keenly engaging Shirley Baker’s photographs as allegories, Tony is concerned with the social relations embedded in the ‘decisive moment’. Believing Shirley Baker’s photographs to be ‘street photographs’ provides him with a frame of reference through

which he speculates that the people photographed are not *'posed'*, but *'are being themselves'* and are *'comfortable with the photographer'* being around. Whether the people photographed have explicitly or implicitly given *'their consent'* and are *'involved in a conversation'* with Baker is for Tony an ethical principle by which he assesses the *'success'* of Baker's work, claiming for him, *'it's all about rapport'*. Addressing a photograph of two 'down and outs', Tony imagines one man *'empowering the photographer to take the picture that they've posed for, "You can take my picture, course you can"'*, he voices, as if one of the men is speaking to Shirley Baker. In another of Baker's photographs, however, he discerns the body language of resistance: *'the look of the face and the expression, is "what're you doing in my face, why are you here, why are you taking a picture of me?"'*

For Tony, everything turns on noticing and then interpreting facial expressions, gestures and body language. These provide the evidence for him of social *'rapport'* and *'consent'*, and the cues to imagine what is going on for the people in the moment of being photographed as well as in their life circumstances beyond the photographic moment, which form the basis of his allegorical storying:

*This lady here, the look on her face ... it's got that long, long-suffering sort of view and just a view where she's almost numb with life and getting on with it, and it's become just another routine. But she's sort of crossed arms because, it's not fear, you know like, it's not closed, it's strength. There's two sides to that sort of body language for me personally; people cross their arms when they're very, very strong and feeling comfortable in themselves, or when they're fearful. That lady's not fearful, that face isn't saying, "I'm frightened of you". But there's a story there.*

In Tony's narration, actuality and allegory comfortably integrate with no sense of contradiction.

Sean knows that in taking photographs *'we impose these things'*. He is comfortable with the idea that the photograph of five boys in front of a whitened out window is posed, formal, *"all like, for the camera."* He speculates on how Shirley Baker set up the picture. *"She'll have, like, approximated, the frame, and she would've been, even talking to them, maybe even directing them like."* It is a simple photograph, a portrait of a five friends, perhaps, but it also bears the clues to what has recently taken place:

*So obviously the kids have been in [the derelict house] and they've whitened the windows out and then the kids have finger painted drawings*

*in the whitewash that are 'raw...the kind of thing Picasso said he always wanted to get back to.'*<sup>666</sup>

He does not think that Shirley Baker “*meant much*” by the photograph and there is no deep meaning behind it nevertheless “*it gives a story*”, a narrative beyond these five individuals:

*It's not just about those streets. It's about what went on in the transition period from domesticated, lived in, habited, to the demolition and it's that liminal space.*

#### **9.4 Discussion: what is novel about these conceptual categories?**

My ‘theoretical concepts’ refer to three broad meaning-making ‘strategies’ that participants mobilized in response to Shirley Baker’s photographs. I have demonstrated the sources that people drew upon when creating meanings with Baker’s images, including their personal history, values, opinions, and beliefs as well as historical events. Participants consciously deployed these sources, ascribing personal meaning and finding evidence for these meanings in her images. Affective experience was also identified: for some participants, their vivid emotional reaction precipitated a delayed and more articulated response to the image. Potent feelings were elicited (that in some cases were overwhelming), and enabled participants to form strong identifications with subjects and events in the photographs. I also highlighted that participants addressed Baker’s works as authentic and evidence of the past, *and* that they consciously (and unconsciously) mobilized her images symbolically and allegorically, that is as the basis for imaginative story-telling.

This might have drawn my research journey to an end. However, I still had questions that puzzled me. What were participants ‘doing’ when composing their ‘personalised’ accounts? What meaning did this experience serve for the narrator?<sup>667</sup> How far were the photographs active agents in these personal accounts? How might we consider the social interaction of ‘Tea with the Curator’ and its role in shaping these accounts? To summarise: What were the photographs of Shirley Baker ‘doing’?

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<sup>666</sup> Whitewashed windows prevented people from walking into the glass, or indeed made it easier to see that the glass was broken. See: <https://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=119286>. Accessed: 31 March 2020.

<sup>667</sup> I am using ‘meaning’ in the Symbolic Interactionist sense of not assuming that ‘the meaning of an object emanates from this object itself, as if meaning is intrinsic to it...people form meanings from what they do with the object’. See Kathy Charmaz, 271.

I went back to my data and noted the following: that whilst the meaning-making processes are analytically presented as discrete conceptual categories, of course in reality participants did not actually speak like this. For example, in Sean's account he identifies the old style Silver Cross pram used for the boys' bogey cart, enabling him to demonstrate his knowledge of the pram's brand. He offers opinions on present-day parenting, demonstrates knowledge of other types of prams, locates himself in *his* past via his 'Mam', and conveys historical information about past working-class childrearing practice:

*I mean these Silver Cross, they're all back in vogue now, and everyone's got it [one], and its that or the big SUV for bringing your kids to school, but you know, I remember it years ago, before the McLaren buggies and that came out, like my Mam had one of these for my little, my next youngest sister.*

In this account, typical of all the 'TWTC' conversations, Sean shifts between narrative strategies, blurring distinctions between types of experience and knowledge, and blending timeframes, often all in one short unit of speech. My 'theoretical concepts' splinter the lived reality of speech flow and therefore do not reflect the lived experience of participants. What sense was I to make of the lived reality of constructing narrative accounts? What were participants experiencing, and would it be possible to explore why?

I considered again the boundaries between the theoretical concepts, as well as the relationship between them. How did they connect? This seemed key to further understanding the experience of participants. Kathy Charmaz reminds the emergent grounded theorist that 'when researchers bring together diverse strains of prior knowledge to theorise puzzling findings, the possibilities for imaginative interpretations grow'. She refers to this 'mode of imaginative reasoning' as abduction, noting:

it is a mode of imaginative reasoning researchers invoke when they cannot account for a surprising or puzzling finding. Subsequently, they make an inferential leap to consider all possible theoretical explanations for the observed data, and then form and test hypotheses for each explanation until arriving at the most plausible theoretical interpretation of the observed data.<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>668</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, (2014), 200.

In trying to figure out how participants manoeuvred between ways of meaning-making (and why), I drew diagrams to provide a visual representation of the three conceptual categories, focussing on the relationship of one to an other. Quite spontaneously, I drew a Venn diagram. In what was an epiphany moment, I considered the overlap in the middle; recognising that it contained ‘parts’ of each of the meaning-making processes, of ‘Drawing on Experience’, ‘Subjectivising’ and ‘Storying’. These overlapping ‘elements’ were why participants’ narrative accounts had proven so difficult to code in the first place. Now, I could re-consider this fragmentation in a new light, and began to enquire how and why participants were speaking in this way. I continued to probe my theoretical concepts and went back to my open coded transcripts once again. Struggling to find a conceptual understanding and language to convey the complexity and interrelated ways fragmentation and overlapping in ‘meaning-making’ operated, I started to think of participants’ accounts as (unconsciously) inventive ‘processes’. Through an imaginative leap, I ‘played’ with the term ‘processing’ by consulting a thesaurus. In this way, I came to regard the properties of my conceptual categories via concepts ‘freely borrowed’ from computer science.

In computer science, a ‘thread of execution is the smallest sequence of programmed instructions ... which is typically a part of the operating system’.<sup>669</sup> The implementation of threads and processes differs between operating systems, however, in most systems a thread is a component of a process. Multiple threads can exist within one process, ‘executing concurrently and sharing resources such as memory’.<sup>670</sup> ‘Multithreading’ is a widespread programming and ‘execution model’ that ‘allows multiple threads to exist within the context of one process. These threads share the process’s resources, but are able to execute independently’.<sup>671</sup> Thus, I arrived at conceptualising and naming of participants’ accounts as ‘processes’ made up of ‘threads’. I now had a way of conceptualising meaning-making as a ‘process’, made of up three strategies (Drawing on Experience, Subjectivising and Storying), subdivided into threads (that formed my subcodes: see Chapter 8). Whilst ‘TWTC’ participants in

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<sup>669</sup> See wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multithreading\\_\(computer\\_architecture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multithreading_(computer_architecture)). Accessed: 3 March 2020.

<sup>670</sup> See wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multithreading\\_\(computer\\_architecture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multithreading_(computer_architecture)). Accessed: 3 March 2020.

<sup>671</sup> See wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multithreading\\_\(computer\\_architecture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multithreading_(computer_architecture)). Accessed: 3 March 2020.

principle could ‘execute’ one ‘thread’ independently, (recalling, say, one memory of an experience) in reality their accounts are ‘multithreaded’.

I pushed the idea that ‘threads’ could share resources. What were the ‘resources’ that threads shared and that facilitated ‘multithreading’ across the three meaning-making strategies? I considered the transcript accounts once again. All participants’ accounts involved the imaginary interplay of time boundaries (indeed Molly seemed to affectively re-live past time). Participants defined their own unique temporality. Before exploring in greater depth how they achieved this, I present some additional thoughts following a further coding for ‘temporality’ and ‘imagination’.

#### 9.4.1 Temporality

While past experience was a route to identification and resonance, with all participants claiming that some aspect of their chosen image “*reminded them of...*,” ‘the past’ was not, in fact, a dominant characteristic of individuals’ narrative accounts. Remembering the past was only one strategy; in actuality, individuals blended past, present and future, in no particular sequence. Shifting between these temporal boundaries, participants additionally engaged objective and subjective time, thus invoking ‘the past’ (history) and ‘their past’ (autobiography), addressing ‘the present’ (society) and ‘their present’ (day-to-day living). Temporality situated the participant in the present moment of our conversation with Shirley Baker’s photographs, and more generally with themselves ‘in time’. In *Good Days and Bad Days: The Self in Chronic Illness and Time*, Kathy Charmaz theorises the lived experience of sufferers of chronic illness and their subjective relationship with time.<sup>672</sup> Along with other researchers, she proposes subjective time as a ‘tool’ deployed (though unconsciously) as an important part of identity formation, supporting individuals’ self-concepts.<sup>673</sup> Thinking about the ‘self in time’, however, is not a matter of situating oneself in the past, but occurs by navigating ‘different timeframes’:

I realised that chronically ill adults implicitly located their self-concepts in the past, present or future. The timeframes reflected the form and content of self and

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<sup>672</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Good Days and Bad Days: The Self in Chronic Illness and Time*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2014).

<sup>673</sup> Kathy Charmaz, 203. Authors who have explored the notion of ‘subjective time’ or ‘temporal structure of experience’, include, Valtteri Arstila and Dan Lloyd, eds., *Subjective Time: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Temporality*, (MA, MIT Press, 2014).

mirrored hopes and dreams for self, as well as beliefs and understandings about self.<sup>674</sup>

The temporality of the ‘TWTC’ accounts supports narrative structure *and* facilitates resonance with their chosen images; it additionally bolsters present experiences of self, yet also allows for ‘time travel’.

My findings also suggest a link between temporality and affect and emotion. Coding for affect and emotion, as I have suggested previously, highlights the affective agency attributed by each participant to a photograph in the present, with Molly claiming her image “*enticed*” her. I propose that in the ‘TWTC’ accounts emotions are presented as temporal. Tony’s interpretation and feeling of “*a sadness*” elicited by one of his images traverses timeframes. He believes sadness to be experienced by the subjects of the photograph (in the past) and he experiences this emotion in his present moment of viewing with me: “*its just the sadness, the look on the faces...*” Tony navigates emotion and time, interpreting and experiencing in the present what he imagines was happening in the past, in great part also because he believes in the authenticity of the photograph, that it portrays ‘real’ emotion that he “*can totally empathise with.*” Asked how these feelings come to him, whether elicited by actual identification or approximate recognition, Tony’s response illustrates the complexity of thinking about photographic affective agency with its entanglement of the intangible and unknowable, the aesthetic of the image, content recognition, culturally framed narratives and his past and present life circumstances which prompt in him an overall feeling of loss:

*I think I relate to the picture more by the dress of the people and the wet on the roads, and the mist in the background. It’s more a feeling ... than an image that I relate to. It’s almost upsetting, it’s a sadness actually. Even though I haven’t experienced that, not anywhere near that, but it certainly, it’s just this feeling of loss, actually, for me, looking at the picture.*

Tony brings to this photograph *of* loss, himself:

*I guess my age, and it’s the feeling of loss of the family, communities, because we had a great family community, but we’re split now.*

In writing about temporality and emotion, grounded theorist Jennifer Lois argues:

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<sup>674</sup> Kathy Charmaz, 206.

There may be a subclass of emotions, which I will call temporal emotions that can only be felt by crossing timeframes...Nostalgia, regret, disillusionment, ambition, hope, optimism and dread ... cannot be felt without bridging the present to either the past or the future. As such, it is possible that the ways we use temporal emotions have a particularly important effect on constructing a continuous self over time.<sup>675</sup>

Time is also referred to ‘thematically’ in many of the accounts, so that Sue wistfully speculates that a couple in a photograph walking across a demolition site could have lived “*their life history together...and it’s gone*”. Temporality is, I suggest, intrinsic to meaning-making, forms of narration, and narrating and consolidating a sense of self (which I will return to later in this chapter); timeframes are also traversed by the narrator imaginatively.

How people imaginatively deploy multi-temporalities points also to the way we might perceive the temporality of Shirley Baker’s photographs. In writing on his own photographs, Canadian photo-artist Jeff Wall has referred to the ‘liquidity’ of the photographic medium.<sup>676</sup> Wall’s use of this extended metaphor counters the notion of the medium’s ‘dry’ and unalterable fixity, alternatively suggesting its ‘liquid intelligence’, that gives rise to contingency, affectivity and the possibility of photographic mutability. In speaking with Shirley Baker’s photographs, the ‘TWTC’ participants recognise and believe in the inscription of a ‘real’ past moment, and yet as their accounts demonstrate, such meanings held in these photographs continue to develop often in unforeseen directions. Thus, with each new viewer and each viewing context new meanings emerge. So that we can say that Baker’s photographs are not fixed and static (in meaning), but are dynamic and fluid (in meaning) representations that are very much alive to their present and their as yet undisclosed future. They function *in* and *as* ‘liquid time’. Moreover, as multi-temporal images, Baker’s photographs not only hold the potential to reveal stories about ‘the past’ and the past of their subjects, they also hold the promise of revealing a great deal about each viewer, who speaks (of themselves) in the present and in presence to each photograph. Baker’s photographs thus perform reflexively and intersubjectively.

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<sup>675</sup> Jennifer Lois, quoted in Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 204.

<sup>676</sup> Jeff Wall, ‘Photography and Liquid Intelligence’, in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Peter Galassai, (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 109-110. Referenced in Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015), 67-70.

Wall poetically anticipates this photographic agency in his essay when he concludes that, ‘in photography, the liquids study us, even if from a distance’.<sup>677</sup>

#### 9.4.2 Imagining

Despite their ‘evidential status’ participants simultaneously engaged with Baker’s photographs imaginatively to suture themselves into the photograph: to speculate on the lives of those depicted; to hypothesise the moment the photograph was taken; or to elaborate allegorical stories that facilitated the formulation and consolidation of opinions and values. These exercises in imagination bolstered participants’ emotional responses. Though the ‘TWTC’ participants (unlike the oral history participants) did not recognise particular people, places or things, they did ‘find’ in their photographs sufficient approximate likenesses (*‘it could have been’*) to permit their imaginative placement into the photographic scene. In looking at their photograph, participants were able to ‘re-live’ feelings from approximate lived experience, or to imagine — in deed, ‘summon up’ — feelings and project them on to the photographic subject, based on an experience that in *their* terms was similar enough to resonate.<sup>678</sup> Despite being only fifteen years of age, Molly nevertheless draws on her early childhood experiences of ‘make-believe’ play to imagine the lived experience of her photographic subject ‘robot girl’.<sup>679</sup> She vividly evokes her early emotional excitement, in a transformational moment of imaginative recognition in which she merges her ‘young person’ self into ‘the child’ in the photograph, and it is as if the image, not her own imagination, were drawing her in and making her feel:

*But this is why it drew me to it, because I remember playing in the back streets, near my house, and my mum would be putting out the washing...and I vividly remember it, but it wouldn't be washing, it would be some sort of like jungle swing,... I would imagine it as a completely different scene to what my mum would be seeing; and I feel like that picture kind of draws you in on the different perspectives that you can see it in, because on one hand, the child, or as a young person you still remember those feelings you had as a child, and how, like I still remember the scenarios that I came up with, I can't necessarily come up with them now, but I still remember them.*

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<sup>677</sup> Jeff Wall, 110.

<sup>678</sup> The psychoanalytic concept of projection is not one I have space to explore further in this thesis.

<sup>679</sup> A title I coined as a consequence of my dialogue with Molly.

Historical imagination could be blended with more symbolic or metaphorical narratives. For example, in Sue's 'decisive moment' account in response to a colour photograph depicting a well dressed couple in the mid-distance, crossing a derelict wasteland (she and I presume/imagine for an evening out on the town), she imagines affectively the road being like the workings of memory itself, a meaning shared also by Tony:

*I thought, if these people had lived amongst here and their lives had been centred around here, you know, and the people that they've known and, whatever, their life, their life history together, or wherever, was here, and they're walking, it's gone, isn't it, that's what struck me. What memories they might've had of being here. But even they might've just been going to visit somebody, they live somewhere else, it doesn't matter does it, but you just think of all those memories that have gone.*

Despite investing in the authenticity of Baker's photographs, participants could simultaneously engage with her images as 'photographic fictions', and as symbolic representations, divorced from 'the decisive moment', yet simultaneously indexically linked. "Making up stories," as Sue referred to it, with Shirley Baker's photographs, could, nevertheless, still be deeply affecting. In Tony's emotively allegorical account he blurred the line between the emotion he 'found' in the image and his own pre-given receptive state:

*To me, that's what I see in the photograph, it's just this never-ending, the road doesn't end in front, it's not as if there's another building or a crossroads, it just comes out of view, goes back into the distant background, it's a never-ending story. It has no beginning or end, it's just, impacts there, it's just sadness...*

### **9.4.3 Blending, Synthesising, Compositing**

So to return to my question: how to explain a process that blended time *and* the properties of the 'threads'? Again, I turned to concepts from computing to think about the properties and the behaviour of time and multiple (anachronistic) sources. This brought me to the notion that participants' narrative accounts were a 'composite' of threads from various sources. In 'digital compositing', various visual and audio elements from separate sources are built up in overlapping layers, blended and seamlessly integrated in a way that makes them appear to naturally belong in the same space. 'Layer-based compositing' represents 'each media object in a composite as a

separate layer within a timeline, each with its own time bounds, effects, and keyframes'.<sup>680</sup> Thus, how participants related to Shirley Baker's photos was through what I call 'compositing'. The 'compositing' model provides a framework to conceptualise how participants imported 'threads' (knowledges, experiences, opinions, memories, stories, affect and imagination) from a variety of 'sources' in their lives, each within its own time frame; layering and blending these threads to arrive at accounts that cohere and are integrated. It offers a way of understanding a process by which people organised their narratives in responses to Shirley Baker's photographs, but the broader question of what this experience meant for participants, what the accounts were 'doing', was still unaddressed and it is to this that I now turn.

### 9.5 'Tea With The Curator' as narrative construction

Over the past twenty years oral history has evolved from being regarded as 'witness [to] ... the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated', to being widely understood, in scholarly circles at least, as a narrative-based methodology.<sup>681</sup> Once regarded a tool of recuperation and advocacy, this revision repositions oral history as a method that attends to the construction of subjectivities (in language) through cultural processes, something in someways similar to the method of GT. Central to what oral historian Martha Rose Beard refers to as this 'post-positivist' move, is the recognition of oral history testimonies as narrative constructions that are based in and emanate from culture.<sup>682</sup> In furthering my thinking regarding the coherence and integration of accounts, range of sources and 'Tea with the Curator', I turn to two concepts that have emerged from oral history: composure and the cultural circuit.

In her article *Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews*, oral historian Penny Summerfield argues that narrators draw on generalized public versions of the aspects of their lives that they are talking about in order to construct their own particular personal accounts. She cites as an example, oral

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<sup>680</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital\\_compositing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_compositing). Accessed: 3 May 2020.

<sup>681</sup> Alistair Thomson, 'Making the Most of Memories: The Empirical and Subjective Value of Oral History', (*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9:9), 291–301, quoted in Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, (London, Routledge, 2010), 69–70.

<sup>682</sup> Martha Rose Beard describes scholarly oral history method as 'post-positivist' in its address to the subjectivity and reflexivity of the intersubjective oral history process. See 'Re-thinking oral history - a study of narrative performance', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 2017, 540.

historian Alistair Thomson's work on Australian veterans of the First World War.<sup>683</sup> Thomson found that his interviewees described scenes from the recently released film *Gallipoli* as if they were accounts of their own experiences in battle. Whilst the 'TWTC' accounts are not life stories, Summerfield's proposition of the interaction between the narrator, the forms of their account, the function of their narration ('construction of the subject') and the cultural sources from which accounts are drawn, is I find, relevant to my study. The meaning-making function of the 'TWTC' accounts (including their form) can thus be reconceptualised. It is no longer a question of *what* participants communicate about Shirley Baker's photographs, but additionally *how* they communicate. Participants' narrations are, I suggest, informed by cultural sources that include Shirley Baker's photographs and their own life histories, in which participants are communicating *from* and *about* 'the self'.

## 9.6 Narrative with a purpose: composure

Historian Graham Dawson in his influential work on 'composure' in oral history accounts argues that this concept has two dimensions.<sup>684</sup> The first dimension refers to the process of narrating (composing) a story or account, and recapitulates my earlier discussion on 'compositing'; the second dimension highlights the individual's facility to present a coherent story with which he or she feels psychologically comfortable. Dawson illustrates this interdependency:

The cultural importance of storytelling lies not only in the stories we are told ... but also in those we ourselves tell, or compose. It is a cultural practice deeply embedded in everyday life, a creative activity in which everyone engages. Even the most mundane of narrative is an active composition, created through the formal arrangement of narrative elements into a whole ... At the same time, the telling also creates a perspective for the self within which it endeavours to make sense of the day, so that its troubling, disturbing aspects may be 'managed', worked through, contained, repressed ... In this second sense then, storytelling also 'composes' a subjective orientation of the self within the social relations of the world, enabling it to be imaginatively entered-into and inhabited ...<sup>685</sup>

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<sup>683</sup> Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', (*Journal of Cultural and Social History*, (Vol. 1, 2004 - Issue 1), 65-93.

<sup>684</sup> Dawson adapts his theory of composure from Kleinian theory. See 'Heroes of history, heroes of phantasy', (*Soundings*, 3, 1996).

<sup>685</sup> See Graham Dawson, 'Heroes of history, heroes of phantasy' (*Soundings*, 3, 1996) and 'Soldier Heroes, British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities', quoted in Lynn Abrams, 66.

In forming accounts, interviewees not only 'strive for a 'satisfying narrative', but also, 'for a version of the self that can be lived within relative psychic comfort — for, that is, subjective composure'.<sup>686</sup>

### 9.7 Composing a story or account

While Dawson explains how people tell stories about their lives whilst drawing on known cultural discourses, he does not identify the actual structure and content composition of narratives. Through GTM coding, I identified the 'threads' (of sources) people draw upon to form the content of their accounts, and significantly I identified the structural function of temporality that Dawson does not highlight. Participants' 'composite' measures of time, as demonstrated in Sean's account, imaginatively combines degrees of 'the past', recent past, further away past, deeper past and so on. Accounts also highlight events in time; events that are known only to the teller — for instance Sean's own family history — and also identify historical events of social and cultural significance in historical time — for example Elizabeth's reference to the 1950s Istanbul Pogroms, or Sean's to the IRA bombings of the 1970s. Thus, I propose, 'subjective time' (a creative interplay of time with imagination) is the means by which participants mobilise a range of 'relevant' sources (from personal past and the historical past) to achieve 'composure'. There is, additionally, the temporality of the narrative account itself, in which 'threads' (disparate events, experiences, thoughts and ideas that are particular to the life and experience of the teller) are 'composited' to arrive at narrative composure.

Now I turn to the second dimension of Dawson's theory. The historian claims that in composing a story, the teller subjectively draws upon 'culturally recognised values' in order to construct a 'self' which makes sense to both the respondent and to the listener, thus achieving psychic or subjective composure. As Dawson and others have identified, however, respondents 'do not compose their stories by drawing upon cultural constructs at random'.<sup>687</sup> Alternatively, 'The social recognition offered ... will be intimately related to the cultural values' that tellers 'hold[s] in common' and which

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<sup>686</sup> Graham Dawson, 'Soldier Heroes, British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities', quoted in Lynn Abrams, 66.

<sup>687</sup> Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', 93.

‘exercise[s] a determining influence upon the way a narrative may be told and, therefore, upon the kind of composure that it makes possible’.<sup>688</sup>

Dawson’s theory here is relevant to my study in two ways: it addresses both the photographer herself (Shirley Baker) and the way in which the ‘TWTC’ participants respond to her work. Dawson’s theory offers a novel and alternative way of understanding Shirley Baker as a deviser of stories ‘embedded in culture’. In this sense, I argue, that producing her photographs satisfied her own ‘need’ for narrative and subjective composure. Secondly, and additionally, Dawson’s work draws attention to the accounts of the ‘TWTC’ participants as narrative discourses about ‘the self’, formed intersubjectively with Shirley Baker’s photographs.

In trying to understand why Baker’s photographs have resonance for such a wide-ranging audience (including those not even born when they were made), I propose that experiencing Baker’s images supports the work of viewers composing narratives about ‘the self’ and their world. How the photographs achieve this, despite their historical and locational specificity is, I suggest, due to Baker’s images providing viewers with an imaginative visualisation of ‘complexly structured social worlds’.<sup>689</sup> Moreover, Baker’s photographs are resonant for viewers because they provide a ‘repertoire of possibilities’ that can be (to a greater or less degree) identified with.<sup>690</sup>

Thus, I argue that Shirley Baker’s photographs be understood as narrative-based works, that have a visual coherency (their realistic form), and are devised by the photographer from the ‘narrative resources of culture’.<sup>691</sup> Consequently, they function ‘as a currency of recognised identities’ that continue to resonate across timeframes and cultural differences.<sup>692</sup> Indeed, whilst I did not overtly code for content, I note that the range of subjects and topics referred to by viewers is worth a brief comment here (I develop this further in the section on curating below). Themes of childhood, community and place, emerged in both the oral history and the ‘TWTC’ conversations, and are, I suggest, important in the construction of autobiography and identity. Engaging with Shirley Baker’s photographs bolsters ‘TWTC’ participants’ identity ‘composure’, in that

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<sup>688</sup> Graham Dawson, quoted in Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 67.

<sup>689</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 66.

<sup>690</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 66.

<sup>691</sup> Graham Dawson, quoted in Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 67.

<sup>692</sup> Graham Dawson, quoted in Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 67.

the photographic content 'appears' to the viewer to offer them evidence of their (past) experiences, approximate experiences, and/or (presently held) beliefs and values. In encountering Shirley Baker's photographs, the 'TWTC' participants imaginatively construct and build their unique subjective narratives, crossing timeframes (and cultural differences), making the pictures their own. They achieve this by 'lending' aspects of themselves to the photograph (putting themselves in the picture); and in turn, due to the participants' faith in their evidential status, Baker's photographs 'perform' as proof of the existence of 'self'. In this way, her images bolster each participants's belief system, as Elizabeth's account illustrates:

*I think it is very powerful about play...there's something about this activity of playing...you know, even in difficult conditions, that I think is life-changing...because you know, these kids [in the photo] are in difficult conditions and there is something about playing that's just....you can't tell that from a picture, but there's something that in the here and now play creates, brings hope, healing and in the concreteness in the here and now.*

'Concealed' in accounts that on first hearing appear to be 'about' Shirley Baker's photographs, participants 'use' her images to construct autobiographical discourse that supports their own identity construction. For instance, a recurrent 'theme' in Sean's narrative concerns his Irishness:

*So we were in English in school...talking about accents and I says, "Well, that's funny 'cos my Mam's Irish but she hasn't got an accent", and half the class turned round like....That was the day I realised my Mam had an accent. Do you know what I mean, 'cos you're brought up with it.*

Sean 'finds' his 'Irishness' in Baker's photographs, just as Elizabeth locates her 'Greekness'. Her astonishingly unexpected (by her own admission) affective account, prompted by the 'woman with shopping bags' photograph, situates her as a child of Greek migrants:

*But for me, there is something about...it's not necessarily in the picture, it comes from me, but I suppose my family has a history of migration and they had to pack their bags and leave...I mean they were from the Greek community in Istanbul...*

Elicited by photographs of girls playing, Molly's extended narrative facilitates the teenager's articulation and rehearsal of her nascent feminist identity. Thus she claims that Baker's images 'do' feminism:

*I think she's intended for the girls to be a role model for other women out there... it brings out the feminist side of things.*

Shirley Baker images are for Tony 'doing' the work of narrating his life journey:

*From my own life, I mean my journey is... at nineteen... I moved abroad to work,...then came back...the university gave me my job back....I got [into] the commercial world, so the journey for me is never-ending. It's still not finished, and it never will.*

His selected photos also grant him an opportunity to grieve and feel loss:

*It's just impacts there [touching his heart], it's just sadness, the look on the faces. It's just this complete loss for me, and that's how I'm feeling about the picture.*

## **9.8 Cultural Circuit: Photographs as Public Resource**

The concept of the cultural circuit points the way to further explorations of what Baker's photographs are doing in this process of composure. Yet, there is a more 'tricky' question: What are the 'TWTC' narratives doing *for* Shirley Baker's photographs? The Circuit of Culture model developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has been enthusiastically adopted by oral historians in order to explain how 'personal experience and expressions of the self' are interwoven with public discourse.<sup>693</sup> As Penny Summerfield proposes, the model additionally offers the potential of cultural 'feedback', in which personal experiences can in turn inform and shape public discourse, that then may be taken up by individuals themselves, both singularly and/or collectively, to become embedded in their own experiences, as in a never-ending circuit:

Privately and locally told stories of experience are picked up and enter public discourse in myriad ways, including word of mouth, newspaper reporting, television interviewing, film-script research, and so on. They are adapted, glossed and elaborated, and become woven into the generalized, public form

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<sup>693</sup> See Annabelle M. Leve, *The Circuit of Culture, as a generative tool of Cultural Analysis*. See: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED544487.pdf>. Also Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 68.

of those stories which changes over time: the public account of past events does not stand still.<sup>694</sup>

If we were to define Shirley Baker's photographs as a form of 'public discourse', this might suggest that they played an overly determinist role in the 'TWTC' conversations, prompting participants to speak atypically on themes, topics and experiences they would otherwise not consider. Is there a danger of her images 'colonising the memory' and thoughts of participants, as with Thomson's work (cited above)?<sup>695</sup> I suggest that such fears are misplaced. Whilst participants' accounts are certainly elicited by Baker's images — indeed, the 'TWTC' process was intentionally 'about' her images, rather than engaging the photographs to elicit memory stories — these dialogues should rather be regarded as mediated cultural accounts. Participants dialogically communicate 'ideas' about Shirley Baker's photographs *and* 'the self', *in* the interview process itself, and relationally *with* the works of Shirley Baker. This intersubjectivity will be returned to in the summary section of this chapter.

The cultural circuit model facilitates an understanding Baker's photographs as satisfying participants' 'needs' as they strive to locate their experience in 'public discourse'. Furthermore, it supports my view that her images 'perform' as visual 'evidence' of experiences, or as 'alternative frameworks' of experience, as Penny Summerfield's description of oral history suggests:

If they [people] cannot draw on an appropriate public account, their response is to seek to justify their deviation, or to press their memories into alternative frameworks, or to be able to express their stories only in fragmentary and deflected accounts.<sup>696</sup>

Some may consider the subjective accounts of the 'TWTC' participants as idiosyncratic or atypical. I would, however, suggest that they be regarded as meaningful expressions of a desire for satisfying composure within the complex matrix of public discourse. As Lynn Abrams has proposed: 'The oral historian is not

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<sup>694</sup> Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', 68.

<sup>695</sup> Penny Tinkler, unpublished article, 'Shirley Baker' (2018).

<sup>696</sup> Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', 68.

just looking for ‘facts’ for her or his work but is looking to detect the emotional responses, the political views and the very subjectivity of human existence’.<sup>697</sup>

The cultural circuit is a helpful way of encapsulating the intersubjective process that begins with Baker’s images as discursive objects which elicit subjective experiences for viewers. These are, in turn, recalled and narrativised in the ‘TWTC’ accounts. These acts of narration may circulate in many and often unforeseen ways (e.g. even this PhD thesis) and thus re-enter the public realm to be incorporated into new public discourses.<sup>698</sup> This understanding leads me to propose that the significance of her photographs to contemporary audiences is in their work of providing legitimisation and recuperation of a range of experiences, from the comfortingly coherent to uncomfortably awkward and complicated — what oral historians refer to as ‘discomposure’.<sup>699</sup> Moreover, as public discourses inform personal meanings, so personal meanings can inform and reshape public discourses. In the process of the ‘TWTC’ conversations (as with the oral history project and the exhibition guide), participants contributed personal accounts that lead to the ‘re-meaning’ of Shirley Baker’s photographs. In my mind, and perhaps to readers here, Elizabeth’s ‘woman with shopping bags’ will forever be transmuted into the ‘everywoman’ refugee of our time, or perhaps, even, ‘the everywoman’. A dirty-faced toddler lives on as the ‘Cheeky Chappy’, the freewheeling spirit we perhaps all secretly aspire to be. The relationship between personal memory and public discourse will be further explored in the discussion of curatorial application in the concluding section of this chapter.

### **9.9 The intersubjectivity of ‘Tea with the Curator’**

The building and constructing of the ‘TWTC’ participants’ imaginative meaning-making accounts arises out of a subjective and intersubjective dialogue (‘Tea with the Curator’) that may be characterised as: the participant *with* the photograph, *between* the interviewer (me) *and* the participant, the participant *with* themselves,

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<sup>697</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 22.

<sup>698</sup> In particular, the oral history testimonies re-enter public discourse through their incorporation in the exhibition audio guide, and the archives of Manchester Record Office.

<sup>699</sup> The term ‘discomposure’ refers to the difficulty the interviewee might have in locating their subjective experience with public discourse. See Lynn Abrams, 69.

and *with* the cultural discourses surrounding Shirley Baker's images.<sup>700</sup> These accounts are shaped (but not determined) by the innovative method that I originated. For instance, inviting people to choose only two images, to focus on using postcards (that paradoxically helped participants to view details they had otherwise missed in the exhibited prints), the slowness of our conversation — conversation that focused not on memory *per se*, but on encouraging imaginative subjective responses to Baker's photographs. This 'shaping' is not a problem, however, unless there is an expectation that the research is accounting for an 'authentic' experience. As Lynn Abrams identifies regarding oral history methods (along with other discourse based interview methods), 'what we as researchers hear are narrative constructions' of 'experiences actively created for an audience'.<sup>701</sup>

In this regard, as researchers we need to bring to our analysis an awareness of the construction of accounts in culture, and thus go behind a narrative's more obvious 'content' to ask: what is going on here for the participant with me within culture at this moment? 'Tea with the Curator' was uniquely positioned as a method of research, as it both elicited narrative accounts that could be 'requisitioned' as research data *and* provided participants with a deepened engagement with Shirley Baker's photographs that was satisfying and pleasurable in itself, as Elizabeth conveys:

*For me these days I don't engage with art or galleries, but there's something about the way this has been set up that has really spoken, so thank you very much.*

### **9.10 Drawing Together Some Threads**

This chapter has drawn on two theories employed in oral history and memory studies, 'composure' and the 'cultural circuit' to open up ways of understanding the multiple interrelated processes, (revealed through the Grounded Theory coding) involving the viewers and Shirley Baker's photographs. In composing an account about 'the self' and in the 'pursuit of personal equanimity' they 'lend' parts of

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<sup>700</sup> The intersubjectivity of research practices with participants in 'interview' methods that include oral history and constructivist grounded theory is widely acknowledged. See for example Lynn Abrams on intersubjectivity, *Oral History Reader*, 59-69; and whilst Kathy Charmaz does not refer specifically to 'intersubjectivity' in her Constructed Grounded Theory handbook, her entire thesis highlights intersubjectivity.

<sup>701</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Reader*, 59.

themselves temporarily to the photograph and a satisfying process of ‘meaning-making’ emerges. The photograph ‘makes sense’ to the viewer at *that* moment in time and participants experience composure.<sup>702</sup>

Drawing on the theory of the ‘cultural circuit’, I have suggested that ‘TWTC’ participants experienced Shirley Baker’s photographs as a trustworthy visualisation of their own everyday experiences — of class, gender, age and so on; and on their aspirations for hope freedom, creativity. Unsettling feelings were also encountered such as precarity, sadness, fear, loneliness — feelings that they struggle to find elsewhere in public discourse. The ‘need’ for public discourse to validate peoples’ lived experience is, I propose, the principal reason why diverse audiences have ‘embraced’ Shirley Baker’s photographs. This is also an argument in favour of the continuation of humanistic photography in contemporary practice, as well as recuperative exhibitions that re-animate historical photographs. Despite their historical age, Baker’s photographs still have the capacity, due to their ‘experiential’ focus, to continue to provide audiences with opportunity for self-recognition. It is now common practice to employ family photographs in memory work, but ‘Tea with the Curator’ also demonstrates how personal affective connections can be developed with ‘authored’, realist photographs through the construction of subjective narratives.

### **9.11 Curating as a Recuperative and Research Practice**

It is not my purpose here to furnish a do-it-yourself manual for curators, and I am also only too aware of the constraints of time and funds that confront any curator, curtailing opportunities for in-depth research. Instead, based on my own work, I seek to recommend certain new approaches particularly highlighting the concepts of composure and the cultural circuit for the practice of exhibition curatorship.

Although my own research concerned the displaying of historical photographs, I propose that my findings have applications, and can be adapted, to other kinds of (art) exhibitions. Presented with an image of people, of places or objects, the viewer may consult the gallery label or catalogue seeking meaning, but they should be encouraged to pose the question, ‘what does this image mean to me?’ ‘Me’ is a portfolio of personal experiences, memories, feelings, intuitions and knowledges

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<sup>702</sup> Penny Summerfield, ‘Culture and Composure’, 70.

which the viewer employs to make sense of a picture. Some of these thoughts and sentiments may have been latent or unconscious until liberated by the image. ‘Me’ may also furnish new knowledge and meanings that extend scholarly research and future curating. The implications for the curator interested in living meanings is threefold: a curator needs to empathise with their potential audience, to provide enhanced opportunities to narrate their own subjective experiences and take into consideration when selecting work for an exhibition, the multiple relevancies of an image. At a time when curators are under pressure to extend their exhibitions to marginalized audiences, they need to pay heed to views outside the art-historical paradigm. When oral history participant Stephen told me, “*Yer know, yer a ’right for a curator,*” I winced at the image he clearly held of my profession as aloof, elitist and culturally distant. Curators need to recognize that exhibitions are arenas for awareness-making experiences that meet psychic needs. The issue of ‘security’ is difficult to speak of as part of curatorial practice, but in fields such as oral history it is acknowledged that social recognition exercises a determining influence upon the way a narrative may be told, and therefore upon the kind of composure that it makes possible. Social recognition touches on many aspects of the intersubjectivity of the photographer/artist-viewer encounter choreographed by the curator. It includes: the mood of the viewer, the cultural setting, what might be happening ‘outside’ in life, and so on — much of which is beyond the control of the curator. Composure however, manifests itself when personal meanings are legitimized by an open curatorial strategy that refuses to close down multiple, diverse interpretations.

The cultural circuit model highlights the relationship between public discourse and the recall and recounting of personal experiences. The latter in turn may shape new discourses. An exhibition is itself an intervention in this cultural circuit: for example people may now remember their own personal experiences through the work of Shirley Baker, whilst Baker’s photographs, as actants, will not be unaffected by what has been said about them. I contend that curating is an important research practice that co-produces and shares new knowledges and makes arguments ‘not possible through writing alone’, with particular emphasis on reaching non-scholarly audiences.<sup>703</sup> Through my

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<sup>703</sup> Quote taken from the University of Essex, PhD by Curatorial Practice promotional webpage. See:<https://www.essex.ac.uk/courses/pr01065/1/phd-curating>. Accessed: 3 March 2020.

work with people I have subsequently authored conference papers and given talks focussing on Baker's work in the light of previously unconsidered meanings, including childhood, play and risk, women and ageing, and women's relationships with dogs. There is, for example, enormous potential for the photographer's work to be explored in relation to gendered labour, Irishness, first-generation immigration, and place. Shirley Baker's photographs elicited a breadth of personal experience, and this is, I propose, the unique value of her work, which repays, as Tony pointed out, slower engagement and "closer inspection." As a method, 'Tea with the Curator' demonstrates how to facilitate subjective engagement through a process that facilitates 'slow looking'.<sup>704</sup>

'Slow looking' engenders reflexivity and reflectivity; it elicits intuitive, serendipitous, and free association, and facilitates audience experience at the level of affect, that may give rise to affiliative mutuality — particularly for the non-specialist audience.<sup>705</sup> 'Slow looking' can be achieved by a variety of curatorial techniques that step outside the familiar paradigm of an auteur or social historical photography exhibition and that include, but are not limited to: exhibition design, experimenting with non-linear hangings, scale and the sequencing of images; the introduction of a range of media such as sound, narration and lighting; forms of varied and creative interaction, and encouraging new gallery based 'behaviours'. Such techniques and methods contribute to processes of 'defamiliarisation', in that what is being 'looked'

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<sup>704</sup> My concept of 'slow looking' evolved independently of Dawn Mannay's reference to the term 'Slow Science', though her reference proved useful to developing my own concept. See Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*, 52. The term has also come into use particularly during the 2020 Covid 19 pandemic as galleries and museums innovated making visual art and museum artefacts accessible online and by encouraging various forms of audience engagement. See for example, *Slow Art Day*, 4 April 2020, <https://www.slowartday.com>. Accessed: 2 April 2020. I have subsequently discovered that this concept is part of a research project *Project Zero* at Harvard Graduate School of Education under Shari Tishman, see: <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/slow-looking-the-art-and-practice-of-learning-through-observation>. Accessed: 2 April 2020.

<sup>705</sup> The term 'affiliative mutuality' is used by Marianne Hirsch to describe the effect of 'recognizing each other' as exemplified through the exhibition *The Family of Man*. See *Family Frames: photography, narrative and postmemory*, (Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1997), 53. In their paper, *Mutuality in person-centred therapy: A new agenda for research and practice*, authors Cramer, Jones and Murphy explore the conditions within which mutuality takes form in therapeutic relationships. Drawing on their hypothesis, I suggest that through affect and emotions (including empathy), individuals can take up dialogical and intersubjective relations with Shirley Baker's photographs (at the level of content, form and effect), and with myself and other exhibition viewers, that expands their affiliations with Others, even those outside of their world views. See, *Journal of Person-Centred & Experiential Psychotherapies*, (Volume 11, 2012 - Issue 2).

at becomes strange and thus ‘interesting again’.<sup>706</sup> Moreover, they are instrumental in overcoming the conventional silence associated with gallery going that inhibits social interaction.<sup>707</sup> The restoration of convivial sociability to the exhibition space might seem antithetical to ‘slow looking’. My research demonstrates this not to be the case. Indeed, the notable conviviality and social interaction of audiences for *WC&LM* paradoxically deepened intersubjective and relational engagement. It marked a shift towards ‘experiencing’ (in contrast to ‘looking’ at) the photographs of Shirley Baker, invoking what Giles Deleuze referred to as ‘the stance of the nomadic thinker who is free to create new connections and open up experience’.<sup>708</sup> As Sue expressed towards the end of our conversation, “*I’m so pleased that you opened it up to me.*” Whilst Tony welcomed the opportunity to do what he “*actually likes*”, which is “*to look deeply into things.*” Slowing things down, facilitating conviviality and sociability are essential processes in bringing about deeper engagement and mutuality. Moreover, I want to go one stage further to propose that individual ‘composure’ and social recognition are formed *with* others. So that the convivial space of the exhibition plays a critical role in enabling and securing the commonality, mutuality and empathy that bolster both subjective (individual) and collective (we) composure.<sup>709</sup>

I am arguing for a curatorial practice, that in working with historical photographs, recognises, seeks and values the importance of ‘narratives of the self’ and their contribution to ‘processes of recuperation’ — individual and collective. This work — that I do not prescribe as a method but offer as a way of thinking — should not be relegated to the ‘participation’ or ‘learning team’ (who commonly operate post the curation of the exhibition), nor should it be regarded as a detour

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<sup>706</sup> The concept of ‘defamiliarisation’ was first coined in 1917 by Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky in his essay *Art as Device* to refer to a process by which art ‘forces us to slow down our perception, to linger and to notice’. The concept has been taken up in a range of research practices that include ethnography and even engineering. See Dawn Mannay, 32. Also, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defamiliarization>. Accessed: 3 March 2020.

<sup>707</sup> The hallowed space of the gallery and consequently the idea that audiences should be reverentially silent when viewing art is historically situated. Additionally, it would be an error not to recognise that not all viewing in silence is reverential in the sense of culturally excluding, see Mason and Sayner, ‘Bringing museal silence into focus: eight ways of thinking about silence in museums’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1413678>. Accessed: 3 March 2020.

<sup>708</sup> Giles Deleuze, quoted in Dawn Mannay, 32.

<sup>709</sup> Whilst the concept of ‘subjective composure’ has its origins in one-to-one life story recording, I suggest that as an audience member subjective composure was additionally achieved through the sharing of experiences and in locating shared and collective experiences in the exhibition.

from the main curatorial work of ‘educating’ audiences in aesthetic appreciation or in the history of art or photography — though such information might still be introduced as ‘sensitising concepts’, as I did with ‘Tea with the Curator’; and, of course for some participants art appreciation is just what they want.<sup>710</sup> Rather I am, suggesting that facilitating ‘subjective composure’ *with* art ‘objects’ deepens engagement *and* keeps historical work ‘alive’. This, I contend, should be the work of a curator.

In selecting photographs to work with (curate), we should ask ourselves: What task might these photographs ‘perform’ in providing (audience) composure and recuperation? How might these photos be relevant to today’s conditions? Such questions introduce intersubjectivity to curating and invite curators to imagine, speculate and re-invent the possibilities of how to keep ‘old(er) work’ alive. We cannot, of course, predict audience reception, and we must always be open to the unexpected and even the uncomfortable. The intention is not to forecast and foreclose meaning, but to animate and revise and even to contribute to the process of recuperation. Rather than being ‘stuck’ in the past, through imaginative curation Shirley Baker’s photography are, I suggest, ‘doing’ important work, in the present.

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<sup>710</sup> ‘Sensitising concepts can provide a place to start *inquiry*, not to to end it’. See Kathy Charmaz, 30-31.

## Conclusion

An instant photographed can only acquire meaning in so far as the viewer can read into it a duration beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.<sup>711</sup>

I began this thesis with a major question: who and what is ‘Shirley Baker’? Rather like a refracting crystal turned over in the hand, I have rotated this question through a series of practice-based, discursive and methodological ways of framing, knowing and understanding Baker’s work. These are plotted over three parts of this thesis: The Photographic Complex, The Exhibitionary Complex and The Dialogical Complex. What unites these three parts is a framework that draws upon Ivan Kopytoff’s theory of ‘the cultural biography of things’, so that in this thesis I identify a chain of ‘biographical events’—including Shirley Baker’s life, my exhibition *Women and Children; and Loitering Men*, three foundational texts, and two participatory projects—through which Shirley Baker’s Salford and Manchester urban photographs are constituted as cultural objects, endowed with specific meanings, classified and reclassified ‘into culturally constituted categories’.<sup>712</sup>

Focusing on the cultural biography of Baker’s images shifts our understanding from what photographs are *of*, to *how* photographs are experienced and make meaning. So that rather than providing a visual analysis, I have attended to how their naming and meaning emerges through social practices of use which vary over time as preoccupations and perceptions change. Baker’s photographs are not, however, merely the consequence of changing social relations, but also actants in their own right, they may not determine meanings, but they play their own limiting part in the field of meaning production.

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<sup>711</sup> John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 64.

<sup>712</sup> Ivan Kopytoff, in ed. Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66.

Meaning-making is complex. As I demonstrate in the core contributions of this thesis, the oral history project and ‘Tea with the Curator’ (Chapters 6, 7 and 9), is meaning-making process of mutual constitution between image and viewer, which relies largely on viewers’ shared cultural perceptions. This does not preclude, however, what Christopher Pinney refers to as ‘corpothetics’, a neologism he uses to describe how the efficacy of an image is to be understood only in relation to a particular embodied observer, with both image and viewer constituted by their encounter. This is especially illustrated in Chapter 4, dealing with ‘Tea with the Curator’.

By apprehending Baker’s photographs through the framework of cultural biography and actant theory, I have been prompted to re-assess the vexing problem of the genre definition of Baker’s works as ‘historical record’ and ‘social documentary’, which I had first identified prior to embarking on this thesis and that I started to address through curating Baker’s photographs. These ingrained classificatory systems have their utility and also their limitations.<sup>713</sup> In Part 1, The Photographic Complex, I examine what *are* Baker’s photographs by analyzing how they were defined in three key texts as ‘historical records’ and ‘social documentary’ (Chapter 2). What my thematic analysis demonstrates is the available discursive framework at work in naming and describing Baker’s photographs, a framework that even Shirley Baker herself subscribed to in her own writings. In Chapter 3, this picture is further historicised by a consideration of the discursive frameworks of the genre definition itself and how this may have impacted on the work of Shirley Baker at the cost of seeing her work in other ways. Recent scholarship for example, on the 1930s photographs of Mass-Observation (MO) members Humphrey Spender and Humphrey Jennings has proposed that an

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<sup>713</sup> Art historian James Elkins has suggested that genre is ‘as much a consequence of institutional habits and needs that [and] are too ingrained to be abandoned or easily critiqued’. See *Domain of Images*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2018), 84.

alternative interpretation of photographic realism is part of a surreal anthropology; and this has productively informed my own ways of seeing Baker's work differently. Whilst I have no evidence that Shirley Baker was ever interested in either MO or Surrealism, I would suggest that what we might call 'popular Surrealism' colonized British advertising, design, book covers, and so on to such an extent that Surrealism was difficult to avoid. My own close analysis of her photographs (the first curator/scholar to undertake this endeavour) reveals that she was nevertheless intuitively drawn time and again to the extraordinary in the everyday— its aesthetics, actions, performances, events and people — and this enables an interpretation of her work as surrealistic — in reading if not in intent.<sup>714</sup>

I am not suggesting that we exchange one genre definition for another, nor do I deny that Baker's photographs do perform as historical records, for they can do nothing but be indexically linked to a moment of 'having been'. Nevertheless, what I am suggesting is that genre framing and a misinterpretation of realist codes has limited the potentiality of other ways of seeing and experiencing Baker's photographs. What we should remember is that more than one thing can be true at the same time, and so what I am opposing is exclusive categorizations which limit the productive potential of Baker's photographs for both audiences and curators. The work I conducted with Baker's images in the participatory projects illustrates this point; re-contextualising Baker's images dialogically and relationally enabled new modes of meaning-making that put pressure on their singular meaning as historical documents. What I am also implicitly highlighting here is not only the limiting effects of classification by genre, but also the paucity of available language (in English) to locate a more nuanced appreciation of the various complementary complexities of Baker's photographs. For example, might we

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<sup>714</sup> Indeed, showing Baker's photographs to Jan Drabble, member of the Leeds Surrealist Group as part of my research, has affirmed my reading.

not employ the term ‘historical poetic’, a phrase coined by Elizabeth Edwards in writing about photographer Susan Meiselas’s Kurdistan project.<sup>715</sup> Or perhaps we should sidestep the constraining framing of genre definition altogether to identify a different way of interpreting Baker’s photographs? What if we consider not what Baker’s photographs are (of) so much as what they are doing? In what ways are viewers mobilizing Baker’s images in social practices of use?

This alternative way of understanding photographs as objects in the ongoing process of meaning-making informed my retrospective analysis of the reception of Shirley Baker’s photographs in London and then Madrid, presented here in Part 2: *The Exhibitionary Complex* (Chapters 4 and 5). What became clear in London was the appeal of these photographs taken in a different place and time for a diverse audience; what was not clear was the basis of this appeal. In Madrid, the photographs were subject to a ‘political gaze’ in which viewers saw in Baker’s images, following a decade of austerity, alternative social values of cooperation solidarity, resilience and anti-materialism. The question then formed in my mind, What might happen when Baker’s images were exhibited in the city of their original production? This shift in emphasis to the experience of audiences led to my initiation at Manchester Art Gallery of two participatory processes engaging Baker’s images: the Oral History/Photo Elicitation project and ‘Tea with the Curator’ (‘TWTC’) (Chapters 4, 7, 8 and 9).

In the oral history project, Baker’s photographs were presented to participants as memory objects, whilst for the ‘TWTC’ participants they were sensory, experiential and relational objects. The effect of the two methodical framings of Baker’s photographs can be characterized by how participants consequently and differently mobilized time (the past, present and future), personal experience, imagination and affect. The oral

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<sup>715</sup> Quoted in Marianne Hirsch, ‘Postmemory’s Archival Turn’, *Postmemory Generation*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2012), 227-249.

history method encouraged participants to perform as narrators about ‘the past’ and to add experiential knowledge (information and facts) to the photograph that filled in the missing *continuity* of Baker’s ‘historical’ images, including naming locations, people, actions and events. Despite this focus on the past time of the photograph, participants engaged Baker’s images to form fresh insights into their own past lives and present attitudes. So, for example, they spoke of their childhood risky play, and this led to commentaries that explored their attitudes to present-day childhood, parenting and risk, and to a more risk-averse society generally.

By contrast, the ‘TWTC’ conversations emphasised the intersubjectivity of the ‘now-time’ —of being with me and Baker’s photographs. Rich composited accounts not only blended together narrative forms (memory, storying, opinions, facts, and information), they were also temporally more fluid, traversing past, present and future, but with greater emphasis on the present. Most of the oral history participants grew up in the same districts at the same time, and not surprisingly their narratives share a commonality, particularly regarding childhood experiences. I should point out that, whilst these participants valued collective remembering, the theme of ‘play’ generally elicited potent connective affiliations for audiences, irrespective of the time and place of their upbringing. Indeed, the importance of the subject of ‘play’ in Baker’s photographs emerged as a consequence of these participatory projects and of my conversations with exhibition visitors more generally.

My approach to the ‘TWTC’ conversation differed from the oral history project in that I focussed on participants’ thoughts, feelings and emotions in the present with Baker’s images. The ‘TWTC’ participants were demographically diverse. Their accounts were therefore more individualized, less informational, and could even be described as idiosyncratic. To understand what was going on in these conversations, I introduced a qualitative research method, Grounded Theory, to code and analyse the

conversation transcripts. This method is more customarily used in the social sciences, particularly in health, psychology and business management, so that my adaptation to the fields of curation and photographic reception contributes to developing this method in the artistic and cultural fields. Coding the 'TWTC' conversations revealed a greater degree of participant reflexivity than with the oral history interviews. Where memories did feature, they were mobilized to reflect much more upon the narrator's present circumstances, opinions about present-day society and speculations on the future. These narratives were also more expressive of affect and were characterized by imaginative interpretation, in which participants inventively engaged Baker's images as visual stories to which they supplied the storyline.

Both of these participatory methods could be regarded as overly influential in determining how participants related to and made meaning with Baker's photographs. I alternatively propose that each process empirically substantiates how people relate to and derive meaning from photographs as a situated, relational and intertextual social process in addition to their descriptive content. John Berger suggests that by maximizing the 'ways' a photograph might be encountered (a 'radial system'), an image is restored to an 'ongoing moment' of meaning for the viewer. The participatory practices enabled participants to mobilize Baker's photographs through personal experiences, but also and importantly to encounter themselves in the present, with the intersubjective experience with Baker's photographs meeting ongoing needs for composure. I want to suggest, however, that composure served different purposes for the two groups of project participants. For the oral history interviewees, composure was primarily located in a sense of and need for 'belonging' and a recognition of their shared historical experience of time and place. I might summarise this position by a simple statement such as: *Baker's photographs support me in knowing where I come from.* Such a sentiment is born out by analyzing the oral history interview transcripts as well as in the formal project feedback. As participant Nicholas Healey stated: "I've been searching for the

pieces of my childhood, those times; and in a way you are holding them here, for me, in this exhibition”. Alternatively, for the ‘TWTC’ conversationalists, and with my emphasis on the ‘now-time’ of our photographic encounter together, Baker’s photographs were mobilized not as evidence of ‘the’ or ‘their’ past so much as a ‘past time moment’. In this respect, her photographs were enlisted as a portal through which each participant stepped in order to explore and consolidate their ideas and opinions, to open their imagination and to feel something (through out conversation). In everyday life, the philosopher Hans Bernhard Schmid has suggested, we rarely take our thoughts or feelings to be our own in any meaningful sense.<sup>716</sup> The ‘TWTC’ fulfilled, I suggest, a need for participants to be able to say (though of course unconsciously): *I know what I am thinking, this is who I am.*

This empirical research supplies what I believe is missing from Marianne Hirsch’s thesis of photographic ‘affiliation’ which is derived from theorising rather than from empirical research *with* people and photographs. My research therefore contributes not only to understanding further how people construct meaning with Baker’s work— and what both ‘viewers’ and photographs are doing; it contributes to a growing body of practice-based research *with* people and *with* photographs that aims to bring about transformative experiences. Furthermore, these contrasting methods have contributed to answering my overarching question: ‘Who and what is ‘Shirley Baker’ ? So that instead of considering what Baker’s photographs *show* or what they *mean* (in the descriptive sense), we might consider what they are *doing*, how viewers *experience* them, what can viewers *do* with them, and what *emerges* from this act? Baker’s photographs in this way can be understood not through their genre, even by extending the genre terms, but by understanding more about how they journey through, are effected by, and are productive

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<sup>716</sup> Hans Bernhard Schmid, ‘Shared feelings: towards a phenomenology of collective affective intentionality’, in Hans Bernhard Schmid, Katinka Schulte-Ostermann, and Nikos Psarros (eds.), *Concepts of Sharedness: Essays on Collective Intentionality*, (Munich, De Gruyter, 2013), 78.

of social processes. It is to this that I now turn, considering the role of curating and the expanded exhibition as a social process that facilitates meaning-making and connective engagement.

John Berger tantalisingly offers the curator a vision of how historical photographs may be restored to a ‘living context’:

If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would reacquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments.<sup>717</sup>

For Berger, a ‘living context’ is realised by interconnecting knowledges around a photograph and by linking the past with the present and future. He also, I think significantly, draws attention to the role of people (viewers) involved in doing *something* with photographs. Whilst Berger names this the ‘radial system’, he offers no practical guidance of how it might form as a practice. I propose, therefore, that together the two participatory projects, my integration of participant accounts in the Manchester exhibition installation and as the verbatim audio guide, as well as a series of public participatory events, demonstrate Berger’s ‘radial system’ in action.

Valuing experiential and subjective knowledges and affective response might suggest that I am in favour of a form of relativist anarchy — an anything goes; but as noted earlier, actants do have their limits. What I am proposing is that an emphasis on the multiple and diverse knowledges of what Ariella Azoulay terms ‘ordinary people’ can provide ‘new ways of seeing’ that enable the spectator to reclaim photographs, finding resonance via their own experience and to form affiliations with ‘their fellow citizens’.<sup>718</sup>

As mentioned above, Berger’s ‘radial system’ is not a blueprint for curating. What is offers curators is a schema with which to consider the value of personalised

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<sup>717</sup> John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph: John Berger*, 56.

<sup>718</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, (London, Verso, 2015), 86.

meaning and affect, conveying an alternative function for exhibitions as arenas for intervening in and effecting the visual economy of photographs by encouraging transformative and affiliative readings of them. Moreover, exhibitions might thus then be articulated as frameworks to enable empathic affiliation and facilitate connective engagement beyond viewers' positionality and difference.<sup>719</sup> Reconceptualizing exhibitions with photography through the 'radial system' also touches on, for me, the role of the curator and curating as a praxis of connectivity, and it is to this that I now turn.

My main argument is that curating should be understood as a social process. What is the consequence of this? I am arguing that by understanding exhibitions as temporal and situated events in the biography of an artist/photographer and their works, the curator also has the opportunity to reflexively consider their own contribution to the 'life of the thing' and to the ends that this may historically and socially serve? To consider this question is to situate curating as a social praxis with consequences in culture, history and society at large. It is to think in the terms of Berger, Hirsch and Azoulay when they propose, in their different ways, that the practices of doing photography have effects. This ought to prompt the curator to ask, 'Why curate this work now?' 'Why do I think this work might have relevance? What can be done to restore it to a 'Now' context'? Yet these questions also highlight the need for the curator to reconsider their active own performance in this 'Nowing' process. Leading me to ask: What does a practice of curating look like under these new conditions? Here, I am drawn once again to the work of Marianne Hirsch in her appeal to artists (and here I add curators) who work with archives and collections (to which I add all historical photographs), to engage in what she terms 'reparative' work that 'aims to think divergent histories alongside and in connection with each other'.<sup>720</sup>

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<sup>719</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 21.

<sup>720</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 21.

I can foresee that any such a consideration might result in an encyclopedic array of epistemologically divergent interpretative notes, text panels and so on; or, as is now commonly the case, the participatory/interpretation/education/community team working at 'finding relevance' for audiences. What I am suggesting, however, is different, and involves the curator from the outset taking on the relevant question of what can be done between works of photography and with viewers? It is this emphasis on the 'living experience' of the 'now time', the present moment of the exhibitionary encounter, that is the critical ingredient in what I am terming the expanded exhibitionary practice of the curator.

Considering exhibitions, therefore, as the staging of emergent, relational, dialogical, intersubjective, situated encounters with photographs and with viewers (who I here will recast as 'experiencers') becomes the expanded role of the curator. This requires consideration not only of the role of design, the *mise en scene* of the exhibitionary encounter, all related print and social media matters, and so on. It would significantly also include planning for a range of (participatory) encounters conceptualised as 'enabling' processes of meaning-making. All of these aspects are affordances of the exhibitionary 'radial system'.

I would like to return briefly to the idea of the 'expanded exhibition'. Whilst observing audiences in Manchester, I noticed how many viewers were enjoying themselves photographing the exhibition, Baker's images, themselves, family and friends. There was a tangible sense of people taking pleasure together: the posing, setting up of shots, and then looking at the taken images before, then, doing what with them? It would have been another research project entirely to have addressed the digital dissemination of these 'selfies'. Nevertheless, I have pondered on this phenomenon subsequently. Where were all these images going? To Facebook pages, Instagram, Whatsapp groups, blogs and emails? Baker's images (and my exhibition) were certainly

being digitally distributed beyond the physical limits of the gallery. How might we conceptualise this phenomenon beyond just thinking of it as successful wide-ranging publicity and marketing? My provisional interpretation is that it further illustrates Berger's concept of the 'radial system' as a spatial and temporal distribution of knowledges and experiences, and points to the social significance of the *Women and Children; and Loitering Men* exhibition as a connective, lived experience—not only for those visiting the exhibition but also for those in receipt of its digital shadow.

The exhibition installation usually forms the locus of a curator's practice. What if we re-conceptualize an exhibition as a spatio-temporal event understood as 'a constellation of processes rather than a thing'?<sup>721</sup> The implication for the curator is to change the focus of their activity from a custodial curation of 'things' to social relations. Here, a new emphasis on relationality is key: the relationships between objects with other objects, objects in relations to people, and people in relations with others. Furthermore, by situating curation as a spatial and temporal process it is reframed as an affective practice that exceeds the control of the curator, alternatively re-habilitating this role as 'facilitator' rather than as pedagogue. Re-thinking the 'radial' exhibition as a site of public participation that in involving 'ordinary people' co-produces emergent new knowledges, re-locates exhibitions as a unique form of 'public research inquiry', distinguishable from solely scholarly-based research.

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<sup>721</sup> Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift, 'A Passion of Place' in, eds. Ron Johnston and Michael Williams, *A Century of British Geography*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 292.

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