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“A Tool for Social Change” : Community Photography at Belfast Exposed

1 In the summer of 1983, the people of Belfast may have come across large ivory-coloured posters with bold black letters announcing a photographic exhibition called “Belfast Exposed”. It advertised a call for entries which was “open to all”, and the only recommendation was that prints should be a minimum size of 8x5 inches. The top half of the poster was taken up by a drawing by Sean McKernan (a photographer and one of the organisers of the event), representing hands holding a camera, on whose lens typical sights of the Belfast skyline were reflected and symbolically united : the residential complex in West Belfast known as Divis Flats, the City Hall, as well as “Samson and Goliath”, the two famous cranes of the Harland and Wolff shipbuilding company whose name is associated with the industrial history of the city, and with the construction of the Titanic and other gigantic cruise ships. The photographic exhibition was an invitation made to all the people of Belfast to contribute images depicting life in the city from their own point of view, without restrictions on subject-matter, quality or style. On October 17th 1983, visitors discovered the exhibition of about 200 photographs, produced by a handful of amateur photographers, at the Conway Mill, in West Belfast’s Falls Road.¹ The “Belfast Exposed” exhibition was highly successful, both in terms of the number of participants who entered photographs, and of the positive response from the audience.

2 In a context framed by control and censorship in the media,² Belfast Exposed was a reaction to mainstream representations of the city whose focus was primarily on the sectarian conflict opposing the Catholic and Protestant communities. The exhibition stemmed from a desire to give visibility to unseen images made by local people from both communities : images which did not shun the difficulty of life in a divided city but staked a claim to showing Belfast in a more ordinary light. Conferring value on these representations, Belfast Exposed represented an assertion of what people considered important, and opened a forum for the expression of a grass-roots perspective, according to founding member Sean McKernan :

We decided to set up “BX”³ in 1983, that’s all it was, a one-off exhibition. We were very much conscious of the fact that people at a grass-roots level, individuals, community groups weren’t given the opportunity to have their say. (McKernan in Northern Visions, 2013, ii)

3 The name “Belfast Exposed” remained as the organisation grew from that first spontaneous initiative to become a central resource for the practice and learning of photography, extending roots deep into the voluntary sector across the community. It developed an important archive of images, from the contributions of photographers and from the numerous projects undertaken over the years with community organisations. In turn these images led to more exhibitions.

4 Over thirty years later Belfast Exposed has now become a gallery located in the Cathedral Quarter, an important institutional partner in the city council’s cultural regeneration programme. Commissioning and publishing new work every year, it is recognised internationally as an important actor in the development of contemporary photography in Northern Ireland. Important changes occurred in 2000 when a new administrative board took over from the founding members and more finance became available from European Peace funds, from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland as well as from the City Council. The organisation’s activities now revolve around exhibitions, workshops, a bookshop specialising in photography, as well as activities which come under the tag “photography in the community”. The term encompasses a range of practices whose aim is to make photography accessible to people of all ages, “to enable creativity and critical thinking, where the camera becomes a tool for driving and documenting change”.⁴ Projects in collaboration with partners mainly from the educational and voluntary sectors are organised by two members of staff, photographer Melvyn Smith aided by Tom Finlay. The driving principles of community photography practices are the facilitation of access to artistic expression, the development

of visual literacy and collaborative work between the resource centre (Belfast Exposed), community organisations and participants. The objective is that participants acquire the necessary confidence and skills to produce personal images that critically and creatively reflect on issues as diverse as housing, mental health, leisure, immigration, or youth culture.

5 "Photography in the community" is an echo of the term "community photography" which was preferred in the first phase of development of Belfast Exposed. The appellation was then a direct reference to earlier participatory uses of the camera. Community arts and community photography appeared in the fertile soil of the counter-culture and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Britain: art and activism were both renewed by the recognition that artistic and cultural expression was central to agendas of social change driven from below. Art (inclusive of theatre, video, murals, photography, silk-printing, graphic design) was harnessed as a tool of empowerment in projects which challenged dominant conceptions of legitimate cultural forms and sought to play a role in forms of political resistance at a local level (Kelly, 10-14 ; Dickson, 16-26). Taking Belfast Exposed as a case in point, this article is interested in the evolution of community photography practices, from their origin in the activism of the 1970s to today's conceptions of participatory art. To what extent can the evolution of the definition of community photography reflect how the definition of empowerment itself evolved in the last thirty years ? In other words, how far is Belfast Exposed willing or able to take on board the notion of empowerment through the use of the camera, and what does this say about the relationship of art and politics in the 21st century ? My hypothesis is that community photography can only be endorsed in more subdued terms today partly because of evolutions in the management of culture : openly political approaches to the arts cannot thrive in institutionalised organisations that are increasingly dependent on public and private sponsors. On a more general level, a shift in imaginaries of social change, now framed by a wide acceptance of neo-liberal agendas (in which the concept of agency is understood as individual and framed by market forces), has led to even greater marginalisation of radically alternative discourses. From "community photography" to "photography in the community", the emphasis has evolved from overtly political practices to a looser notion of "community engagement".

6 This research is based on interviews with founding member photographers Sean McKernan and Frankie Quinn, as well as current members, Melvyn Smith and Ciara Hickey. Sean McKernan's personal archive was an important source, while the research done by Fabrice Mourlon on the involvement of photographer Frankie Quinn in Belfast Exposed until the 1990s provided useful insights. Starting with an analysis of how radical notions of empowerment informed early community photography projects in Britain in the 1970s, the article will focus on how Belfast Exposed defined its aims and methods around community photography practices from 1983 to 2000. Moving on to Belfast Exposed today, the question of the role and definition it gives to community photography practices will be raised.

Empowerment and Community Photography in the 1970s : Theory and Practice

7 In their book *L'Empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice* (2013), sociologists Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Carole Biewener chart the course of the term's evolution in the last forty years. The concept first emerged in the context of the new social movements of the 1960s (feminism, civil rights, adult education) and also informed evolutions in the field of social work : as an objective and a process, empowerment was a driving principle in political mobilisation aimed at challenging vertical power relations, and it was used by marginalised communities (mostly women and ethnic minorities) to enable the expression of their traditionally silenced points of view. It was then integrated into the tool-kit of development agencies (the World Bank, the United Nations) in the 1990s : driven from above, empowerment became institutionalised and lost its radical edge. It became synonymous with the objective of participation of marginalised populations in the dominant political and economic system, in a way which fostered consensus and foreclosed contestation. In keeping with the individualistic ideology developed by the New Right both in the United States and in the United Kingdom in the course of the 1980s,

the term was harnessed in the following decade to serve a neo-liberal agenda: appropriated by a rhetoric which stressed individual responsibility, empowerment was used as justification for the reduction of states' spheres of intervention (Bacqué & Biewener, 9 ; see also Mayo; Cornwall *et al.*). The concept was instrumentalised to put the onus on people rather than structures.

8 Drawing on the work of sociologist Lorraine Gutierrez, Bacqué and Biewener underline that the concept of empowerment encapsulates three articulated dimensions. First is the individual level, where empowerment means consciousness-raising, growth in confidence, the development of skills as well as a positive image of oneself. This leads individuals to a critical understanding of their environment and corresponds to the recognition of a "capacity to do". Empowerment becomes collective where the inter-subjective, organisational encounter of individual critical consciousnesses takes the form of collective action. The last dimension is political and social: it describes the capacity to effect real social change through the joint action of empowered people. Gutierrez stresses the fact that only in its more radical uses does the concept fully combine the three dimensions. It is then envisioned both a process and a resulting state : it stems from the collective identification of a problem at a grassroots level, whose resolution is reached collectively while decisions remain in the hands of participants.

9 Empowerment formed the core aim of community arts in Britain in the 1970s. Community photography appeared as a specific development, with an emphasis on the technique and uses of the still image. Highly influenced both by the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s and critical discourses about power, representation and access to cultural expression, community arts emerged spontaneously at the beginning of the 1970s in Britain, from the involvement of art students and photographers (from middle-class but also working-class backgrounds) seeking political roles for the arts⁵. In urban working-class neighbourhoods, a number of community projects harnessed the potential of photography in ways which gave marginalised social groups a voice. Paul Carter, who helped set up a community photography workshop at the Blackfriars Settlement (London) in 1974, saw radical implications for community photography :

Community photography makes photography relevant to local people by making them the main subjects, audience and users of the photographs produced. Through this greater contact with photographic processes people understand, appreciate and become more critical of all the photography they see. In addition, by providing the means for local people to learn photography themselves, diverse groups are brought together and they discover more, not just about photography but also about the community in which they live. Through making their own images people can break the monopoly professional communicators have over the representation of their lives.

10 Paul Carter's Photography Project was part of a nascent network of community photography groups in London. The Islington-based Photography Workshop, a collective founded by Terry Dennett and Jo Spence in 1974, was one of the first organisations to offer a definition of the objectives and methods of community photography in their statement of aims. To them, photography was an image-making technique which should not be limited to individual uses, nor to the domains of the illustrated press, fashion or fine arts, but should be used in collective ways and for political purposes, allowing the expression of traditionally silenced views. Photography had the potential to question common-sense ideas and challenge stereotypes: drawing from the developing body of theoretical texts on culture, power and ideology in the emerging field of cultural studies, Spence and Dennett argued that giving visibility to alternative representations from marginalised groups was part of the struggle to challenge cultural hegemony⁶. Empowering uses of photography could play a significant role in social change by questioning representations circulated in the media and allowing the expression of minority views.⁷ Observing projects in London and reflecting on their own practice, they defined community photography as a process through which individuals and groups could gain the confidence, skills and sense of purpose necessary to act on specific issues and effect social change at a local level. Empowerment was experienced as a working method, a process and a result. Most of these aims were taken on board when the Photography Workshop merged with

the Half Moon gallery collective to form the Half Moon Photography Workshop in the East End of London. In the independent photographic magazine that they produced, *Camerawork*, Jo Spence's article "The Politics of Photography" (1976) offered one of the first coherent definitions of community photography :

The most recent break with traditional fields of photography has been the use of photography as a TOOL by community activists. [...] This is done by starting with simple cameras, or video, and then gradually working through to the more technically advanced equipment, linked to darkroom and printing skills. This puts photography in the hands of a lot of people who will eventually be able to dispense with the experts. [...] People can discover how to relate to themselves and to others more positively when armed with images of themselves – images which counteract the stereotypes usually seen in the mass media. The main objective is here to enable people to achieve some degree of autonomy, in their own lives and to be able to express themselves more easily, thus gaining solidarity with each other. It also helps to some extent to demystify media and to make the relationship much less of a one-way affair.

- 11 Empowerment, as an objective and a framework of practice, directly supports this definition. The core concepts of community photography, and of community arts in general as they appeared in Britain in the 1970s, were the rejection and demystification of expert knowledge in favour of non-professional expression, the creation of alternative representations of self and community to foster positive images and reject stereotypes, access to the means of cultural production, the development of skills that will benefit the whole social group, and the achievement of more autonomy and control in the process. Inspired by Paulo Freire's philosophy of the "pedagogy of the oppressed" and its adaptation by Augusto Boal to theatre, community art practices were understood as inherently political. This vision was entirely geared towards the aims of emancipation. In this context, "community" embraces several meanings: commonality is defined not only with reference to the social and physical environment, but also to the common ownership of skills and resources, to the commonality of interests as people join in a common cause. In community arts practices, authorship itself becomes a common matter: artistic productions are the result of collaborations and they contribute to the definition of shared meanings. Such an approach stood in stark contrast with contemporary evolutions in the professional photographic sector, at a moment when photography was undergoing a process of institutionalisation which elevated it to the status of a fine art and as individual photographers began to enjoy more recognition as artists in art galleries (Bertrand).
- 12 Community photography projects developed in England in the 1970s in mostly urban working-class environments.⁸ Through its use in tenants' associations, in youth clubs and in pensioners' groups, to give only a few examples, photography served to express discontent, to organise resistance and to turn disempowered people into actors for change. The Arts Council of Great Britain passed on the thorny issue of funding these somewhat out-of-kilter activities to the developing Regional Arts Associations, whose committees were composed of representatives from the arts and the voluntary sectors sitting alongside elected local councillors. Only the more progressive Regional Arts Associations responded to these novel approaches to art. To an extent they helped foster conducive environments for the development of community arts networks locally (Goodhall, 52). In the specific context of Northern Ireland, community arts also appeared in the 1970s, with a lead given in the field of drama, around the Turf Lodge Fellowship Community Theatre, but also in visual arts around the work of the Media Workshop (Lynch, 58-9). More organisations appeared in the second half of the decade. These community arts groups developed against the political backdrop of the "Troubles" (which began in 1969) and treated this context as subject-matter, with a particularly raw edge: the principles of collective creation, the collective ownership of works, and a central concern for the participation of the audience meant that political issues were not eschewed or treated as subjects over which people had no control or no say, but openly debated on stage or in exhibitions. Community arts created forums for the expression of critical views on political and social issues, and opened spaces where alternatives could be imagined collectively. They vindicated the possibility for art to have a social conscience, to resonate with people's concerns and be political in ways which avoided sectarianism or social exclusion. In a context where

resources for the arts were scarce and only a few prestigious institutions were supported, community artists sought to challenge the elitism of art productions and make a case for participatory art forms engaging entire communities from production to reception. Community arts challenged received notions of what art meant, who it was for and who was entitled to produce it. Clearly, the case was for the development of working-class artistic expression, against mainstream conceptions that art practice and art appreciation belonged to the élite. According to Martin Lynch, such an agenda meant that support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland remained at best irregular and tentative through the 1980s (Lynch, 59). In spite of difficulties in securing financial support⁹ and of accusations of links with paramilitary activities that some organisations faced in cases of "political vetting"¹⁰, a vibrant network of community arts groups developed in Belfast, creating fertile soil for the sharing of insights, skills and resources among a critical mass of like-minded actors. Undoubtedly, the existence of such a network and the non-institutional culture that community arts managed to foster were conducive to the emergence of Belfast Exposed in 1983. Community arts in Northern Ireland and community photography in England provided two important frameworks of reference for the founding members.

Defining a Role for Community Photography : the Quest for Authenticity

- 13 From the first event at the Conway Mill in October 1983, the Belfast Exposed exhibition toured to other venues in Belfast, mainly community centres. In 1983-4, it travelled to Dublin, Geneva and Moscow. Within Ireland, thanks to links with student unions or lecturers, universities proved receptive and provided venues.¹¹ The exhibition was held in different venues in London (Islington Town Hall, the Royal Court Theatre, the prestigious Queen Elizabeth Hall, as well as less conventional spaces such as Victoria Park or the Caledonian Road Pool), on the invitation of the Greater London Council Ethnic Minorities Group, with the support of the Irish community in Islington (Burke). As a bastion held by Labour radical Ken Livingstone, the Greater London Council was an important symbol for the photographers involved in Belfast Exposed : the irony of being able to bring a piece of Belfast to the heart of London was not lost on them. The exhibition was well reviewed in the press everywhere it travelled. Important figures such as Irish poet Seamus Heaney praised the strong documentary quality of the exhibition (Mourlon, 4). Sociologists, historians, activists, and the general public showed interest in these images largely because they provided insights into the quality of everyday life in Belfast, different from the daily stock of media images focusing on violence. They offered

a raw, revealing collection of black and white and colour prints [...], depicting the real Belfast – vandalism, the daily lives of ordinary people of the Falls and the Shankill, children, joyriders, leisure activities, the marathon, swans on the Lagan, the pubs, parks and cemeteries – it's all here as seen through the lenses of the people themselves. (Belfast Exposed, c.1986)

- 14 The emphasis on authenticity ("the real Belfast") reveals a conception that Belfast Exposed's role was to act as a mirror reflecting people's lives, without sentimentalism and without censorship. The archive grew from that guiding principle. Visibility meant conferring value: even images of the more mundane or the less flattering aspects had their place as part of the depiction of many people's lived experience in the capital. Belfast Exposed was part of an effort to portray the city just like any city in Britain, with its culture, its achievements and its problems, not as a city forever associated with the ravages of the Troubles. The Troubles did of course inevitably feature in the collections of the archive, but from the perspective of the people themselves, as the context in which daily life took place and was constrained. "On the one hand, [Belfast Exposed] wanted to show the full extent of life taking place beyond the images provided by the mainstream media and on the other to document the Troubles themselves to a fuller extent." (Bruhns, 50) The insistence on authenticity and relevance also informed a view that art should come from and relate to people's concerns and interests, taking the cue that "culture is ordinary", grounded in everyday signifying practices (Williams). As it expanded, the archive became a space for communication, debate and reflection on

Belfast society. Being able to see one's environment reflected in photographs, exhibited in different venues and considered as deserving coverage generated a sense of pride which was fundamental to building confidence.¹²

15 Most founding members were local unemployed photographers, early papers stressing the fact that they were amateurs, not professionals. People who submitted images to the first exhibitions certainly described themselves as amateurs, without anything pejorative in the use of the term, which was vindicated as a "marker of authenticity". (Bruhns, 51)¹³ Kate Crehan defines the difference between experts and amateurs as the quality of being seen as having or not having "accredited knowledge", recognised by institutions (Crehan, xvi). The founding gesture of Belfast Exposed was to assert the validity of people's definitions of what deserved to be seen, irrespective of credentials. This opened a space for the expression of usually silenced views.

In stark contrast to the media coverage of Northern Ireland, Belfast Exposed gives an amateur insight into the varying images of Belfast. We make a point of turning nothing away. To date the exhibition remains totally uncensored. (O'Reilly)

16 Doing away with expert knowledge and favouring the expression and development of non-canonical forms of knowledge is one of the central tenets of empowerment processes. Emphasis is on creating "art within reach" (Northern Visions, 2011), where "content is preferred to technical achievement" (Belfast Exposed, 1983).

17 As the organisation gained recognition, it attracted more photographers who saw it as a platform for their work as well as a worthwhile initiative with roots striking deep into the community. The archive was constantly added to, feeding into more exhibitions. Belfast Exposed quickly expanded its range of activities to include training sessions for individuals and groups in order to transmit photographic techniques to a larger audience. Belfast Exposed photographers also offered their services to help organisations promote their work through visual communication. Arts Council funding, which first came in 1985, allowed Belfast Exposed to establish its base in Donegall Street and purchase equipment for a darkroom.¹⁴ The same year, Belfast Exposed secured two salaried positions sponsored by the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme. By January 1986 there were six full-time employees and four ACE staff, all photographers. These were one-year contracts that could not be renewed year in, year out. Apart from their responsibilities in supervising the workshops and liaising with community organisations, these photographers continued personal work documenting Belfast.

Photography and Agency

18 There are few remaining texts produced by the organisation which detail its conception of its role or define community photography precisely.¹⁵ This is certainly due to the fact that the organisation gave priority to its projects, workshops and exhibitions over theoretical reflection. Its philosophy was reflected in its practice, and community photography was broadly understood as collective practices which sought to counterbalance dominant representations in the media. However a document published in 1985, *Belfast Exposed Magazine* (n° 1), does offer some elements for a theorisation of the practices experimented by the group.¹⁶ It contains ten one-page texts exposing the views of the people involved in the organisation. Larry Speight claims :

Community photography is more than a form of entertainment, it is a language that tells a story about peoples [sic] lives and the environment in which they live. [...] Belfast Exposed is a gallery of images of a living vibrant community, offering itself as an educational tool to heighten our consciousness about the nature of our society. If we allow it, Belfast Exposed can give us new eyes."

19 Speight further suggests that photographic images can serve an enterprise of "cultural analysis" : the still image has the capacity to de-familiarise the familiar and thus help question it :

As an educational tool for raising our consciousness about our culture "Belfast Exposed" can help us change from cultural puppets to actors engaged in cultural change. These photographs can be used to set us free from the servility of illusions. [...] Belfast Exposed can help us all become idealists, and activists in the evolution of culture.

20 Speight's analysis of the processes that community photography sets in train encapsulates the three levels of empowerment described by Gutierrez: individual, collective and political, from consciousness, to the "capacity to do" and the capacity to act collectively to effect social change. Speight describes a process of emancipation of subjectivities, from the passive acceptance of images to the active making of new ones, in which critical awareness of the politics of representation takes centre stage. Photography is an asset in such processes because the still image has the capacity to invite spectators to pause and reflect, and to generate a critical process which take people from observation to analysis. The documentary image, because of its strong referential quality, is also accessible and inclusive : it "speaks to people."¹⁷ Through the use of photography, participants in the workshops, Youth Group or Women's Group were given the possibility to develop critical uses of photography which had the potential to provoke debate, raise awareness and lead to forms of action. Photographs held up a mirror for the community, a bold gesture in a divided city. "Belfast Exposed is a means of stimulating people into an act of concern for the needs and aspirations of the community of which they form an integral part." (O'Reilly)

21 In 1992, Belfast Exposed moved to larger premises in King's Street, where a gallery could be set up, alongside the darkroom and workshop space, with a regular stream of about two hundred users. It gained more recognition, organising seminars and lectures by local and international photographers. One of the main issues that began to cause controversy among members was that of funding and the inherent strings attached, as the organisation grew bigger and became accountable to more sponsors. Taking stock of the evolution of the political context for community photography in the 1990s, following over a decade of Conservative government policies, founding member Danny Burke defended the conception of a politically engaged practice, and argued that in a difficult social, economic and political context, there was more need for community photography, not less. To him the impact on people's lives of the neo-liberal policies of the Conservative governments, opened a whole range of issues and spheres of action for a political use of community photography :

Community photography must redefine itself in the post-cold war, post-Thatcherite "revolution", the age of undiluted consumerism, privatisation and wide-spread economic squeezing of the poor, unemployed and marginalised. This redefinition must not solely be restricted to the technological opportunities posed by digital photography and computer imagery but must ensure that these skills and technology become the cutting edge of the struggle to democratise media and the empowerment of marginalised communities. (Burke, c 1995)

22 In 1995, because of disagreements regarding the evolution of the organisation at a moment when it began to be perceived as becoming more institutionalised, Burke parted ways with Belfast Exposed and founded Community Visual Images. This new organisation sought to further political aims and highlight issues which affected disadvantaged social groups, but with an emphasis on video. He managed to secure European Peace and Reconciliation Funds¹⁸ but was very much aware that such funding could well become a restriction to any organisation whose political aims might be considered too prominent and radical : "the availability of E.U. funding in recent years has obviously assisted community photography where it has been accessed but the reality is that if community photography is seen as subversive to the establishment, "political" or outside the "law", funding will not be forthcoming. [...] Make no mistake about it, the community media empowerment revolution will not go unchecked by the State and the multi-national conglomerates. Legal, financial and other forms of control and repression are already in the pipeline." (*idem*)

23 In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Belfast Exposed experienced important changes. On promotional leaflets, the "community photography resource centre" became a "centre of excellence for contemporary photography". As arts and culture were given pride of place in

urban regeneration programmes, funding from the City Council, the Arts Council and the National Lottery became more forthcoming.

"From Rock'n Roll to Jazz"¹⁹

24 In 2000, founding member Sean McKernan left the management of Belfast Exposed, while remaining on the board of trustees. Pauline Hadaway, with a background in the management of community arts, became Director.²⁰ Artist Karen Downey, who had been involved with the communication of the organisation in the previous years, remained as senior curator, while Mervyn Smith, involved with Belfast Exposed since 1994, took responsibility for coordinating the workshops and community photography projects. New staff arrived, mostly in administration. Belfast Exposed was offered new premises in a refurbished and more central building: it moved back to Donegall Street, a bit lower down the street than where it had been in the 1980s. It is in the heart of the "cultural quarter" which the city council has designated for arts venues in its cultural regeneration programme.²¹ The new building has a downstairs and an upstairs gallery (the latter is called "Belfast Exchange"), a large workshop space fitted with a darkroom at the back of the first floor, an open-space office at the front, and a small bookshop specialising in photography in the entrance.

25 The activity of Belfast Exposed is twofold: on the one hand it seeks to establish its position as a leading commissioning and publishing body for contemporary photography in Northern Ireland, and on the other it endeavours to stay true to its roots in community photography, through its programme of workshops, events, and projects with schools and voluntary sector organisations. In addition, since 2010 the gallery has been developing a policy of commissioning artists to produce work based on its thirty-year-old archive. Emerging or established artists and photographers are invited to reflect on the significance of the archive as creative material in contemporary artistic practice. Thanks to both private and public funds (the Community Relations Council and Lloyds Bank), interns have been employed to work on the cataloguing and digitising of the archive, which visitors can browse on a computer in the "Belfast Exchange" space upstairs.²² They are invited to contribute to the referencing of the images if they can ascertain a time and place when a photograph was taken. But the task of digitising let alone captioning is immense and the archive has only been partially covered. Precise knowledge of the archive's contents lies to a large extent in the memory of long-term members Sean McKernan, Frankie Quinn and Melwyn Smith. Given the prominence given to exhibitions and commissions (an average of six exhibitions a year in the downstairs gallery), the international recognition that the gallery now enjoys and its emphasis on photography as a fine art, one wonders to what extent and in what terms community photography can be embraced in the "new" Belfast Exposed. Can a balance be struck between fine art photography (a very dynamic field and an increasingly expensive market) and photographic practices with roots in political protest ?

26 It seems that the first role the gallery wants to play is as an actor in the promotion of contemporary photography.²³ It successfully presents the work of up-and-coming photographers of international repute, in a domain which has become extremely competitive. Community photography, on the other hand, corresponds to a philosophy of practice based on collective participation, emphasis on process as much as product, and accessibility. Yet the overall impression that the gallery gives is one of sophistication. The exhibitions it presents can be challenging, in line with current debates within the field of artistic production. This can be daunting for potential visitors. "It has changed from rock n' roll to jazz," Sean McKernan suggests. This remark (with its reference to different class markers) points to a change in the politics of the gallery and to a redefinition of its stance. In my discussions with Frankie Quinn and Sean McKernan, the idea that art resources today are heavily biased in favour of middle-class tastes was very present. The discourse used by the gallery has also evolved. On its website, the organisation refers to "photography in the community" to advertise current and past projects undertaken with voluntary organisations, schools, local councils or residents' associations. Talk is much more about "community engagement" and "community outreach", than the more political notion of "community empowerment". These terms correspond to the

preferences of the sponsoring institutions because of their softer connotations. However they merely mask a process of depoliticisation of the political dimension of art.

27 Projects undertaken as part of the "photography in the community" activities of Belfast Exposed vary in duration, number and age-group of participants. Some three community photography projects a year are exhibited in the upstairs gallery. Mervyn Smith, in charge of classes and long-term projects, leads and coordinates over 260 workshops a year. His role is central to providing skills and guidance : "My job is to translate my photographic skills into a group dynamic. Getting people to read photographs, making sure that what's in the exhibition is actually telling a story."²⁴ But he is the only member of the team doing this, whereas in the 1990s, Belfast Exposed was mainly staffed by photographers, all coordinating projects alongside their personal work. My contention is that the political dimension which guided community photography practices at Belfast Exposed through the 1980s and 1990s was rooted in a class-based analysis of social issues. Empowerment was understood as a process which comes from the grassroots, from the bottom-up, and challenges the vertical structure of power. This radical edge no longer seems to be a driving force. The projects that Mervyn Smith undertakes address very raw issues with various sections of the population and do have a tremendous impact on how people understand themselves and relate to one another, how they grow confident in their own voice. Yet the notion as it is now embraced in the activities of Belfast Exposed has more to do with education, personal development and gaining confidence than with an overarching aim of political change. Director Pauline Hadaway explains :

Our educational and outreach programme [...] seeks to identify photography as a curious, inquiring and communicative practice, made familiar through knowledge and understanding of aesthetic and technical processes and its relationship to social history. Finding out how photography works and learning how to apply that knowledge effectively opens up the potential for empowerment and personal development. (Hadaway, 52)

28 These aims are very important, and have to do with forms of empowerment. Indeed the ability to read images, to question their uses, to be aware of their manipulative effects, to respond to them critically and to produce one's own is crucial in a society which is ever more saturated with images. What is no longer an issue, however, is the objective of collective action and mobilisation through the use of critical photographic practices.

29 As a comparison, the Red Barn Gallery, which photographer and former Belfast Exposed member Frankie Quinn has been managing almost single-handedly from 2008, and which exhibits documentary black-and-white film-based photography, can be said to further aims that echo the ambitions of the first Belfast Exposed :

Our projects target many of those who previously have had little or no voice, participation or representation in the visual arts. We facilitate the stories of our communities through the use of photography. (Red Barn Gallery)

30 Located in the centre of Belfast, the Red Barn Gallery produces exhibitions about the history of Belfast and Northern Ireland, thanks to the collection of images that Frankie Quinn has been entrusted with over the years. New work by contemporary photographers is also regularly exhibited. Photographers such as Buzz Logan, who documented the redevelopment of working-class neighbourhoods in the Shankill in the 1970s, Judah Passow, who stayed in Northern Ireland in the 1980s to document the Troubles, and Bill Kirk who photographed working-class life and culture in 1980s Belfast, are representatives of the strong social documentary bent of the gallery. Quinn emphasises the preference for issue-based photographs, images "people can relate to." He keeps producing his own work on the peace-lines and the Orange Loyalist marches, images that have attracted interest and recognition (Mourlon). In spite of its popularity,²⁵ the small gallery, located in a former pub, struggles to remain afloat with very little public funding, surviving only thanks to the print sales it makes. The comparison with the levels of funding Belfast Exposed receives angers Quinn :

We only got funding for the first time this year [2015] from the Arts Council and the City Council. It's only very minimal and it's only for a year. It just pays the rent. And it bought us a computer and a printer. I got £6000 or £7000. [...] I can't see myself doing the same thing next year. The stress of it is too much. We've been trying to get the Arts Council and the City Council on board

for the last number of years, but Belfast Exposed have it all, they have all the funding. [...] I don't get no wages, I've been on the dole for so many years, I don't blame that. But I would like a wage too. It'd be a pity to see this place closing but I'm not prepared to do that for many more years. I'd like proper equipment, proper funding, heat ! (interview with the author)

- 31 Quinn's bitterness about the disproportion in the allocation of funding is rooted in an analysis of social class differentiation: according to him the debate is back to the notion that legitimate art corresponds to the tastes of a middle-class élite, whereas people's art is undervalued : "[Belfast Exposed] do art photography, we do people photography. [...] It's a class issue. The elite who pay the taxes demand that kind of venues. And they have to be served," he argues. Through the exhibitions he curates, Quinn defends politically-conscious, social documentary photography. He sees the genre as playing the role community photography at Belfast Exposed played in the 1980s and early 1990s : to open a forum for discussion about social issues, to reflect on the social environment, on culture and everyday life, via the still image.
- 32 The difference in recognition that a comparison between today's Belfast Exposed and the Red Barn Gallery illustrates should come as no surprise. Community photography practices appeared in the United Kingdom during the 1970s with agendas for radical social change and challenging established definitions arts and culture. They stemmed from contexts of resistance to political, economic, social, and cultural domination. The political transformations that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has undergone since the 1990s have had a very strong impact on how political change can be imagined. Class-based analyses have been discredited and superseded by a new rhetoric of individualism, and the concept of empowerment has been appropriated to fit this new discourse, in the context of the neo-liberal turn. Additionally, overtly political narratives have become suspicious, particularly in a society which seeks to reconcile its population and find neutral, common ground.

Conclusion

- 33 "The raison d'être of the organisation was to provide a platform for community groups. It wasn't about the art of photography, it was about people having a representation." (McKernan, in Northern Visions, 2013, ii) These objectives guided the first 18 years of the organisation, a vibrant network of photographers closely connected to the concerns of the community. Belfast Exposed created a living archive which managed to counterbalance dominant representations of Northern Ireland and Belfast in particular. The archive and the exhibitions provided a mirror for the people of Belfast, and raised central issues about collective identity, representation, and the possibility of collaboration in a divided city. It endeavoured to make photography accessible through the teaching of technical skills but also in terms of content and approach.
- 34 In the course of the last fifteen years, Belfast Exposed has undoubtedly changed. Its evolution seems to match the objectives set by the city council in terms of raising the cultural profile of Belfast. Culture is seen as an asset in this endeavour as the arts become part of the strategy to attract economic activity and investment, while cultural capital is recognised as a crucial sector to develop for Belfast to be able to compete with other European cities (McManus & Carruthers). Cultural policy is driven from above and funding bodies control the allocation and use of subventions. Now part of the "Cultural Quarter" of the capital, the profile and activities of Belfast Exposed project an image of a space dedicated to the "art of photography", through commissioning, publishing, and debating it. Even though the organisation constantly acknowledges its roots in community photography and stresses its action in favour of community development, it seems that the practice has changed. The political agenda community photography was first designed to further has been lost along the way. Belfast Exposed does an excellent job in associating the gallery with current debates in contemporary photography. It has perfectly recognised the importance of the archive, developing it in innovative ways through artistic commissions. It has a lively programme of workshops, seminars and events. Yet its core mission has changed. It has established itself as a centre for excellence in contemporary photography, thus giving pride of place to art photographers. It does foster forms of empowerment through its activities with community

partners, but the overarching agenda of social change driven from below has receded and given place to a more upmarket venture.

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Notes

1 Conway Street was a site of sectarian conflicts lying on the Catholic side of West Belfast. In 1982, the run-down site of Conway Mill, an old linen mill, was leased to an activist group with a project to transform it into a hothouse for local enterprises, and a site for educational and cultural activities.

2 For a detailed study of the involvement of the British media in the coverage of "The Troubles" see David Miller, *Don't Mention the War. Northern Ireland, Propaganda and the Media*, London : Pluto Press, 1994; David Miller, "The Media and Northern Ireland : Censorship, Information Management and the Broadcasting Ban," in Greg Philo (ed.), *Glasgow Media Group Reader*, Vol. II, London : Routledge, 1995. David Miller and Bill Rolston, *War and Words : The Northern Ireland Media Reader*, Belfast : Beyond the Pale, 1996.

3 "BX" was soon used as a nickname for Belfast Exposed. Today the logo of the organisation uses these two letters. It is colloquially referred to as such in Belfast.

4 Belfast Exposed, "Photography in the Community," <http://belfastexposed.org/community_photography_and_projects>, accessed 12th January 2015.

5 Community arts projects also appeared at the same period in the United States, in the wake of new social movements led by students, women and ethnic minorities. The guiding principle of bringing art and politics together in collective action was similar to contemporary discourses in Britain.

6 Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony was central to the early project of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies which was to point to the limits of orthodox economic Marxism in fully explaining mechanisms of domination. The Centre demonstrated

the necessity of analysing the power of ideology in informing values and representations : Gramsci's description of cultural hegemony as a process by which the ruling class imposes a dominant ideology (a process which does not go without resistance or compromise) defined the work of the early years. Stuart Hall recalls how, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the cultural theory developed by the Frankfurt School, Benjamin and Gramsci was absolutely crucial to the definition of the Centre's project. (Hall, 1990)

7 Excerpts from the Photography Workshop's unpublished statement of aims mention these objectives in particular : "to initiate projects and *promote interest in the use of photography as an educational tool,*" "to positively encourage *individual self-reliance, with the aim of working towards group activity, collective practice and the pooling of resources* and information as a general principle in contemporary photography," "to give practical *help to community activists and people working with children* outside the state school system, in setting up their own facilities, mobile and communal darkrooms, etc. [...] To encourage the *photographic recording of contemporary local history* by people themselves, with or without the assistance of professional photographers." Jo Spence Memorial Archive, c. 1974. (original italics)

8 Community photography projects appeared for instance in London (Tower Hamlets, Blackfriars, Holborn), in Birmingham and the West Midlands (Handsworth, Sandwell), in Liverpool (Bootle) in the second half of the 1970s. See the documentation on six different community media projects in England collected in Nigg and Wade in the late 1970s.

9 In its first years for instance, Belfast Exposed relied on sponsorship from local businesses, camera clubs and organised fund-raising events.

10 See the report of the Political Vetting of Community Work Working Group, published in 1990.

11 Interview of the author with Sean McKernan, Belfast, 29th January 2015.

12 In 1990, Belfast Exposed applied for Arts Council funding for an exhibition project around the discovery of a collection of photographs by local photographer Vincent Dargan. Dargan documented the Lower Falls in the 1960s and 1970s prior to the construction of the Divis Flats complex. One argument advanced was that "[Belfast Exposed wants] the people of the area to see this work and appreciate it as it will cultivate a sense of pride in their community and as the work reflects their past they deserve to see it." Belfast Exposed, 14th May 1990, 2.

13 Indeed, it was vindicated : "The 'Belfast Exposed' concept was originated by a group of amateur photographers and shall remain an amateurs [sic] preserve," Brendan O'Reilly, "Why Belfast Exposed," Belfast Exposed Magazine, 1, 1985, unpaginated.

14 "Belfast Exposed" remained at the Conway Mill until 1985 when the allocation of its first Arts Council grant was conditional on finding another location. This was a case of political "vetting", a discriminatory policy enforced from 1985 which allowed the Government to withhold public funds from organisations considered as having links with nationalist organisations. Community work was a constant target of this practice. Tellingly, this may well signal the political dimension of community art and community action: it could be argued that it was less for their alleged political allegiances than for the radical potential of their educational activities that they were seen as a threat. The agenda for social change and equal rights which community arts promote, as well as the notion of people's control over their representations and over the decisions that concern them, associated organisations based at the Conway Mill with political activism. On the practice of political vetting in Northern Ireland and its consequences for community work see Political Vetting of Community Work Working Group, 1990. On Belfast Exposed in particular, see p. 4.

15 "Promoting community photography" and "popularising community photography" are mentioned in applications for grants or leaflets, but what community photography actually encompasses is often taken for granted.

16 It seems that the magazine was not continued beyond this first edition.

17 Frankie Quinn, interview with the author, Red Barn Gallery, Belfast, 30th January 2015.

18 The first PEACE programme was implemented between 1995 and 1999 to promote peace and reconciliation after the 1994 official ceasefire announced by both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary forces.

19 Sean McKernan, interview with the author.

20 Hadaway had previously worked as Development Officer at the umbrella organisation Community Arts Forum between 1998 and 2000. In 2014, Hadaway was succeeded as director by Tracy Marshall-Elliott.

21 For an in-depth analysis of the cultural regeneration programmes of Cathedral quarter from 1997, see Carruthers & McManus, "Cultural Quarters and Urban Regeneration – The Case of Cathedral Quarter Belfast", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 20, N° 1, 2014 : 78-98.

22 Leaflet produced by Belfast Exposed in 2001, acknowledging the support of these two institutions for the Digital Archive Project.

23 See its homepage : "Our mission : To be the major centre for photography in Northern Ireland, promoting and encouraging excellence in the medium, enhancing the reputation of local photographers internationally, and bringing the best of world photography to the heart of Belfast." <<http://belfastexposed.org/>>, accessed 4th March 2015.

24 Mervyn Smith, interview with the author, Belfast Exposed, 30th January 2015.

25 "Last year, we had about 8,000 people come through the door. There's proof, we've got our comments books." Frankie Quinn, interview with the author.

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Abstracts

Les pratiques community photography dans l'histoire de Belfast Exposed, collectif de photographes et galerie de photographie

En 1983, une exposition intitulée « Belfast Exposed » ouvrit ses portes à Belfast, suite à l'invitation faite aux photographes amateurs locaux de proposer des photographies présentant leur point de vue sur la vie quotidienne dans une ville déchirée par les conflits communautaires. Le petit groupe de photographes impliqués dans l'organisation de l'événement, ainsi que dans la circulation de l'exposition qui s'en suivit, donna corps au collectif qui conserva le nom Belfast Exposed. Celui-ci désigna ses activités comme relevant de la *community photography*, un terme rappelant les projets photographiques participatifs expérimentés dès les années 1970 en Angleterre. Toujours active aujourd'hui, l'organisation est devenue une

galerie bénéficiant d'une excellente réputation internationale. L'article analyse l'évolution des pratiques *community photography* dans l'histoire de cette organisation, en rappelant que ces pratiques apparurent dans les années soixante-dix à la faveur du succès des théories de l'émancipation et du concept d'*empowerment*. Plus de trente ans après la fondation de Belfast Exposed, comment la galerie conçoit-elle les pratiques *community photography* aujourd'hui, et dans quelle mesure leur évolution reflète un processus de dé-politisation du concept d'*empowerment* ?

In 1983, an exhibition entitled "Belfast Exposed" opened in Belfast, on an invitation made to local residents and amateur photographers to photographically present their own perspective on the challenges of life in a divided city. The core of photographers involved in the exhibition and its subsequent circulation gave rise to the organisation which took up the name Belfast Exposed. It defined its activities as "community photography", with direct echoes to similar ventures experimented in mainland Britain in the 1970s. Still in existence today, the organisation has become a highly successful gallery. The article analyses the evolution of community photography practices in the history of this organisation, starting from the premise that community photography first appeared in the 1970s on the back of a very strong rhetoric of empowerment. Over thirty years after its creation, what does community photography at Belfast Exposed mean today, and to what extent does the evolution of the practice reflect the de-politicisation of the concept of empowerment itself ?

Index terms

Index de mots-clés : photographie, community arts, Belfast Exposed, Irlande du Nord, empowerment, régénération culturelle, institutions artistiques

Index by keywords : photography, community arts, Belfast Exposed, Northern Ireland, empowerment, cultural regeneration, artistic institutions