

Fire in the civic hole

Robert Galeta

Under the rubric 'Evidence', the ten photographers in the current Bradford Grid group have chosen to revisit and/or re-photo people and places of Bradford already existing as photographs. As before in their work, there is no single favoured method or approach. However, they have made the choice to exhibit the results as paste-ups on the fence in the- how to put this?- former Forster Square. For the information of visitors, this, Bradford's second victorian civic square, was demolished in the early 1960's to make way for a large retail complex. This lasted perhaps longer than the average as British Home Stores, C&A and others held on. The modernist style and materials were now wearing badly but still capital's appetite stayed away as the city's wider fortunes got no better. About seven years ago the whole thing was razed and a new mall complex promised. What we got was the first fence, eventually decorated with generic photo-posters of fashionable young people sitting outside cafe-bars. We're now on the third or fourth fence as the promised mall has been reduced in size and a de facto People's Park has been given permission to remain.

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Photographers and non-photographers alike can hardly be unaware that the equations photography = evidence, and, more widely, documentation = evidence have been and continue to be challenged. To put it briefly, technological practices share a condition with cultural and art practices in that they cannot take place outside of webs of institutional power and purpose. Whose power and whose purpose are questions that should always be asked (recent political journalism is an example). As another way into such debates within photography itself I'd like to turn to some strategies in writing and research which try in their own ways to get closer to truth.

Here is a passage from the sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia's Black on black, his reflections on his country in the decade 1969-79:

'A worker (a mechanical turner in the Pignone-South factory in Bari) sends me a little collection of his poems. He is called Tommaso Di Ciaula: a name which inevitably sends me back to the short story Ciaula discovers the moon by Pirandello. One of my friends, a scientist who dearly loves literature, had spoken about this story, in Houston, to one of the american astronauts who had been to the moon, who, really interested, asked to read it; my friend translated it into english and sent it to him. I find it wonderful and consoling that someone who actually set foot on the moon felt the astonishment and emotion of the poor sicilian wretch discovering a faraway moon. Di Ciaula, coming out of his Pignone-South in Bari,

discovers his moon too, just like the character in Pirandello coming out of the darkness of his sulphur-mine: a luminous feeling about things, about memories, about sorrows; solitude which reveals itself in communion with things; things which display themselves in symbols.'

Now here is an extract from 'The experience of work' by a group of researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham and published in Cultural Studies 9, 1976. In the Introduction the group discuss their research frameworks in order to validate and renew them:

'Our deliberations on methodology circled round a number of problems. Can we posit the existence of a real 'subject' to our enquiries which is 'out there' existing quite apart from the fact of our enquiry? If such a 'thing' exists, can we ever 'know it' in any direct and 'objective' manner? If, on the other hand, this directness is impossible what is the nature of the mediations through which our 'knowledge' comes to us?'

This dry, but determinedly clear, language continues as some of the group want to underline,

'...subjective experience is seen as the active development of meaning which [...] does precisely have a creative element, and is much more than [...] the reproduction [...] of pre-given ideology.'

I hope the reader will agree that each of these pieces is a serious attempt to get to the complexity of experience, unfolding and re-appearing in representations as it does to the subject and the onlooker, familiar or stranger. Sciascia not only tells but instances the interleaved-ness of people, place, time and past time. Some may know the writing of Bruce Chatwin who has a similar ability, and one important result is the holding off of a final, explanatory framework for the linking strands. The Birmingham group too are having none of a presumed, authoritative outcome.

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The serious efforts of the Bradford Grid will be displayed using wallpaper paste on a site millimetred in a Ledger in an Accountant's office in Leeds. They might be received, and tolerated as 'art'. I suggest Bradfordians and visitors go and look at them as a kind of knowledge, which they are.