

Photographer as Researcher in the project 'Under Gods: Stories from Soho Road'

'Under Gods' explores the contemporary circumstances of diasporic urban faith communities along Soho Road in Birmingham, the site of some 30 religious centres and home to over 90 different nationalities. The project photographically traces the quotidian spiritual and material practices, as well as the communities, religious organisations, networks and transnational flows that shape this one street.

The researcher's camera has long been described as a distancing device and a tool by which the researcher maintains a falsely objective, or positivist, 'scientific' stance towards their subjects, a position also embedded in the historic uses of photography as an objectifying and cataloguing device (Tagg 1988, Henning 2000, Sekula 1989). Drawing on everyday 'field' experiences, this paper describes visual research design in complex urban settings, elaborating upon the processes of engaging intimately with individuals and communities from both behind and besides the lens. While such projects may encounter obstacles – they often engender ethical issues that require careful negotiation - this paper builds on Malinowski (1915-1918) and Haddon's (1899) early ethnographic use of the camera to argue that researchers' photographs provide valid, qualitative ('thick') description. More important, however, is that in contemporary research the camera is now a mode and medium of exchange with an equivalence of function and agency acting across cultural differences. Yet as visual researchers, we need to retain a critical stance with respect to these methods, cognizant of the reflexive eye of the photographer, rather than adopting them unquestioningly.

My Vision

The project 'Under Gods: Stories from Soho Road' has its origins in my educational and social background, both of which have had a profound influence on the development of my creative vision. I grew up as the daughter of two Anglican priests in Birmingham, one of the UK's most culturally diverse cities, where over 90 different nationalities now live. At Brighton University I gained a BA (Hons) in Documentary Photography and then moved to Italy to complete a scholarship at a research and communications department for young artists and journalists. During these experiences I became aware of the cultural specificity of my upbringing. I developed an interest in the growth of multi-faith communities in European inner-city contexts and the complex issues of immigration, secularism and religious revival.

Soho Road

In 2008-2009 I investigated suburban faith on the two-mile stretch of Soho Road in Birmingham. I lived with and visited the different religious communities, including Jamaican Rastafarians, the Jesus Army evangelical Christians, Sikhs, Hare Krishnas and Thai Buddhists. It is impossible to escape faith on Soho Road; it is in every shop, in the items they sell, in the images of Mecca or Halie Selassie hanging from their walls. I heard religious identity and practice being discussed frequently on bus journeys, during office meetings, in the playground and at the gym.

In the words of a South Asian female Anglican priest:

'On Soho Road people are conscious of their faith rather than where they came from. People used to say 'Oh I am from Bangladesh, Pakistan, West Indies or Poland. Now people say 'I am a Muslim, I am a Sikh, I am a Baptist, I am a Catholic; this is my identity'.

The Sikhs community is the most established faith group on Soho Road and they recently set up the first Sikh nursery in England outside of London. The quantity and variety of Sikh Gurdwaras reflect the variation of practice and religious understanding within the many different religious communities along this two mile stretch. These diverse buildings were alive twenty-four hours a day, and clearly for many of the community the Gurdwara was much like a second home. The army of Sikh ladies particularly impressed me. They would be present in the kitchens throughout the night, kneading dough, rolling chapatti upon chapatti and constantly chanting 'wari gru'. When I visited a Sikh friend I found that she too chanted in her own kitchen as she cooked meals for her family. On one occasion I entered a Gurdwara for the first time and twenty minutes later I was sitting on a rug with the visiting holy man from India in the very English-style garden. We ate oranges dipped in salt and discussed the extreme length and spiritual significance of his dreadlocks whilst looking over the fence at the Lidl supermarket on Soho Road.

Much as the Sikh community maintained several different Gurdwaras, the Buddhists had set up a variety of temples for Thai, Sri Lankan, Indian and Vietnamese adherents. Buses on a Sunday took Christian individuals to church congregations meeting in a tent in the local park or a school gym hall. Evangelical Jesus Army members in multicoloured camouflage print outfits could be found sitting next to Jamaican born ladies adorning large decorative hats. During my explorations I encountered individual Buddhist monks, Catholic nuns and Protestant priests who would go from one faith building to another, fascinated like me by the different community activities, and taking the opportunity to pray where they were unrecognized.

The field as a Dialogic Space

Anna Grimshaw (2009) notes that ethnographic understanding emerges from experience, from sensory feeling as much as from intellectual reflection. In my case, it was vital that I be alone in the field, exposed, vulnerable and prepared to relinquish control.

My days were planned according to the best light in different locations at different times, and then according to the schedule of practice for the various religious groups. However, no day ever went quite to plan, and I spent a great deal of time arranging meetings around others' schedules that more often than not fell through. On reflection it would perhaps have been more energy- and time-effective to focus on one community at a time. However, the ongoing calendar of events and happenings in each community meant that I had to maintain my knowledge and relationships with them over a sustained period of time. I discovered that the disorientation and confusion I felt could be harnessed creatively, enabling me to regain some sense of normalcy amidst the steady flux of alien experiences. I realised that I could not separate myself from my own familiar world completely and at the same time keep an important evaluative distance, but that I had to submit myself to the experiences of disorientation, vulnerability and ignorance and in a sense learn to see again through others' eyes (Grimshaw 2001).

My observational stance produces narrative images that seemingly deny my presence as photographer. This is influenced by the training I received as a documentary photographer in a heavily theoretical photographic degree. Over the duration of the project I became aware of the questions that mattered and developed a confident analytical narrative voice that was not concerned with representing the trace of the photographer's presence. I acquired a new toolkit in the field and learnt to avoid overtly intentional and descriptive imagery. In this sense I find parallels between my work and that of Edward Weston who stated that his photographs involve learning to see his subject matter in

terms of the capacity of his tools and processes so that he can instantaneously translate the elements and values in a scene before him into the photograph he wants to make (Weston 1980).

My approach was founded on respect – for my subjects and for the world in which they live - and fascination. I had been the only white girl in my nursery class; I have memories of eating Indian curry at friends' birthday parties and attending Sikh festivals in the local park. I grew up within a religious community but do not attach myself to one religion. I feel this offers me a unique perspective to study the faith communities intimately. As the daughter of two priests, living with people whose religion is fundamental to every aspect of their life, staying in a Catholic convent or a Hare Krishna temple and going on road trips with the Rastafarians did not seem as extreme or exotic as it may have to others.

Crucially, an ethnographer requires self-knowledge and sensitivity towards their classificatory schemata especially when dealing with highly complex conceptual systems such, as those found in the world religions. I was constantly aware of my own personal sensibilities and preconceptions as a British-born woman and how they were reflected onto the subject and the method I pursued. Increasingly I was conscious that my strategy for exploring the world embodied not just certain ideas but also beliefs about reality, gender, religion, the nature of subjectivity and the status of my subject matter in the wider public realm. There is no 'ideal' position to which researchers can aspire; they have to maintain a reflexive, critical evaluation of circumstances and the ways in which these influence their work (Gelsthorpe 1993, Bowes and Meeham Domokos 1996).

Engagement and Exchange

In recent years, a number of writers have suggested that photography should not be thought of in terms of a single centered and disembodied 'gaze' but rather as part of a new visual practice, which presumes an embodied observer (Henning 2000:182). A researcher has to enter into that process self-consciously instead of pretending that they can somehow transcend their humanity and stand outside, merely observing. Ethnographic fieldwork should be intuitive, empathic and reactive (Bakhtin 1981).

Morally I seek to create work that is the result of a collaborative process rather than using the persons as experimental subjects. I see analytical social knowledge as a processual aspect of human social relations, not a static thing to be discovered and seized. My photographs on Soho Road developed through collaboration between my subjects and myself as image-makers, to the extent that I sought opinions on how they wished to be represented and allowed them to intervene in positioning themselves. I took fewer photographs as the project proceeded and recognised that in order to gain the most expressive, revealing and truthful images, I should spend the majority of my time observing and conversing with my subjects in their environments.

My subjects frequently questioned what right I had to document and reveal the intimacy of their lives and beliefs. I negotiated this issue by assuming a collaborative approach to my image-making and gaining as deep an understanding as possible of the lives of participants before capturing them on film. In addition, I asked people to take images of myself to see how they perceived me. I see the personal as well as the intellectual rewards that come from relocating daily research in a shared space where boundaries between myself, as photographer and subject, as stranger become permeable. I offered people services in return for their hospitality, such as driving the Thai Buddhists monks to the wholesale market at 5am (their spiritual status means they cannot drive), or babysitting for a Muslim family. I also took photographs of people's weddings and funerals. Using digital camera equipment enabled me to share the results and offer my subjects copies of their images quickly and easily; this

became crucial in building trust and sustaining relationships and access. Photography therefore became the currency of our exchange.

By taking steps to make people understand what I was doing, I discovered that every individual had a completely different understanding of my explanation, and it often required tailoring on the spot before even a proper introduction. I therefore became quick at gauging people's moods and likely receptiveness based solely on their appearance and body language. My misjudgements and mistakes revealed my own system of signification, codes and classification, which became highly useful in editing the work.

Photographic research proved to be an unpredictable process with an aim and message that evolved and was largely unclear until late in the editing process. With the images and data I collected it would be possible to have created an entirely different body of work. Having had no prior ethnographic training my rules in undertaking the project were variable depending on person, situation, time and place. I knew as a photographer and I now see also as an anthropologist, that visual documentation or research has to be a social engagement, not an exercise in data collection. Engagement is bound to be partial and will always include serendipitous elements - contexts, events and social alignments that could not have been predicted or foreseen (Pieke 2000).

I did not carry consent forms so as not to obscure my relationships and lead to misperceptions of my intentions. I do not attach a huge ethical importance to consent forms in my practice; although a person may sign one day, over time people's ideas of how they want to be viewed (or not viewed) change. Even when I acquired signed consent at a later date I would choose not to use the images in every permissible way out of my understanding of the subjects and their sensibilities. Recently *La Repubblica* magazine in Italy decided to publish some of the images and an Italian journalist, who was to write the accompanying piece, asked for my contacts in the area. I decided not to give them and sent a carefully drawn up project description and the quotes I had collected. Each image in the publication of the series in *Le Monde* magazine carried my own description of the context and story behind its creation.

I agree with the three guiding premises offered by Caldarola (1985) on the use of imagery: firstly that photographic images are event-specific representations; secondly, that any meaning in the image is dependant upon the context in which it was produced; and thirdly, that the production of photographic images is a social event, involving communication and mutual understanding on the part of both image-maker and image-subject. And yet, I can envisage my photographs in similar terms to those of Malinowski; as capturing ephemeral moments of social life, visual analogues of equally ephemeral utterances (Young 1998:19).

Photographic agency

At the conference '*Fieldworks Dialogues between Art and Anthropology* (Tate Modern London: 2003) Michael Taussig and George Marcus called upon anthropologists to explore in their writings the kind of collaborations and complicities that are at the heart of anthropological field encounters (Empson 2010). Visual researchers need to be mindful of the demands of the camera on themselves and on their subjects and of the limitations and possibilities these entail, as well as of the communicative qualities of the final image. Photographic narratives are inherently unstable structures, prone to subversion and collapse once their constituent images are mentally rearranged.

Photographs illuminate an 'effect' of reality not reality itself. Although my photographs are grounded in the subjects' accounts and social and religious practices, the images reflect my embodied experience; the camera at once captures the world and captures myself at the moment of execution. Acknowledging this, I sought to communicate ideas about culture, people's lives, experiences and

beliefs, not at the surface-level of description but as a visual metaphor that bridges the space between visible and invisible. In the sense I was communicating not through a realist paradigm but through lyrical expressiveness. Kacauer (1960:22) sees the expressive aesthetic value of photographs as a function of their explorative powers. In a similar vein, Feyerabend (1993:21) argues we need a dream world in order to discover the features of the real world we think we inhabit.

The visual medium of photography engages the viewer empathetically, enabling them to find their own place within the context of the photographs. For me, photography yields 'the desirability of not comprehending everything' (Pinney 1992: 26). Instead of imposing a single meaning, held by context or caption, such work leaves open the different levels of interpretation; 'the image itself as a textural analysis' (Chopra 1989:3). In the photographic study discussed here I sought to leave the subject of religion open to interpretation, replete with a multiplicity of voices and readings.

For me photography is not about photographing *per se*, nor about technical intricacies, but about engaging with the world and producing historical documents that recreate a distant world in quotidian detail (Young 1998:1). Photography's strength lies in its potential as a medium to question, arouse curiosity, hear different voices or see through different eyes (Edwards 1997:53).

Notes

The 'Under Gods' stories from Soho Road photographs, together with an installation of quotes and objects from Soho Road, is currently on show at Wolverhampton Art Gallery until Feb 2011. Alongside the show I am running a series of talks and educational projects that re-engage with the local community to initiate discussion, debate and personal insight. In March 2011 the exhibition will move to London's Host Gallery. A photographic book with essays by Christopher Pinney and Elizabeth Edwards will be published in March 2011. Please refer to www.lizhingley.com for updates.

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