Tom Wood – The DPA Work

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DPA Work - Photographs of Rainhill Hospital and Cammell Laird Shipyard comprises two bodies of work made by Tom Wood between 1988 and 1996. Although some of the photographs from each collection have also appeared in other photobooks including *People* (1999*), Photie Man* (2005), and most recently *Men and Women* (2015), these new books present a fully conceived iteration of each.

The basis for the edit and sequence of the photographs in each book emerged from a selection of work, which was exhibited at the Contemporary Art Space Chester (CASC) at the University of Chester, UK, in 2013. The exhibition – which I curated – formed part of the *Parallel Programme* of *Look 13 Liverpool International Photography Festival*. These photobooks are the result of my collaboration with Tom Wood and present an expanded version of what was seen in each exhibition.

The Documentary Photography Archive (DPA) was founded by Audrey Linkman, and the organisation's background and intentions are outlined in Linkman's essay in Volume II of this publication. From 1985, the DPA commissioned photographers to 'document' different aspects of British society in the North West of England, at home, in places of work and at leisure, and a list of these commissions can also be found elsewhere. The Manchester-based organisation's remit was to 'build up' a collection of contemporary 'documentary' photography. Both of Wood's projects were undertaken prior to the closure of what were two major institutions on Merseyside. The commission for each was originally proposed as a six-week undertaking, but eventually stretched over a long period for both projects starting in 1988 and continuing until 1996.

The exhibition at CASC initiated a dialogue regarding how the work should be curated and contextualised, mindful of the time in which the photographs were made, their subject, and their reception some thirty years later. In revisiting this material Wood was conscious of really only 'seeing' some of these photographs for the first time with a heightened awareness of an approach which was 'non judgemental'.

Wood's work is driven by the necessity to understand the world via the aesthetic of the photograph. That aesthetic is in turn defined by the nature of the encounter with the people whom Wood photographs, but also the performance of those individuals in a specific setting. In Wood's case a six week time-frame would not readily allow for the type of encounter which characterises his other work, where a familiarity with the people and places he

photographs is all-important in *building something up*. At both Rainhill and Cammell Laird, Wood's approach was also shaped by the specific nature of each location, and how this determined the experience and encounter with those he photographed. This is defined by the constraints and freedom which each affords, as he too finds his own behaviour and practice shaped by the routine and setting into which he is drawn. The result is a body of work deeply rooted in the embodied perception of the photographer and his relationship with the space and subjects photographed.

Audrey Linkman has outlined how the work of the DPA reveals what she describes as "the story of the photographer's journey". Photographers working for the DPA donated all of their negatives, en-prints (6 x 4 inch prints), contact sheets and work prints, which is invaluable for anyone wishing to study a photographer's practice in its most unadulterated form, as it lays bare an unedited insight into the photographer's working process. Linkman (*Activate 3*, 2006) has described how:

> We asked photographers to deposit in the archive the total body of work produced in the course of the commission. Photographers retained copyright in their material, but negatives, contact prints, work prints and written information were to be stored in the archive. This was unusual practice at a time when photographers were normally commissioned to produce an exhibition of some thirty prints. The exhibition prints represented the cream of the commission and the remainder rarely, if ever, saw the light of day. However preservation of the total body of work has considerable advantages for those who may wish to analyse or interrogate the images. It better reveals the photographer's approach and method: it reveals omission, reflects obsession, and potentially contains elements of style or technique that will be developed in future work. It tells the story of the photographer's journey. The preservation of the total body of work can also balance our understanding of the subject. The subject in a documentary photograph is the victim of the photographer's interpretation and has no means of challenge or redress. So images that show the subject in a range of different ways may help achieve a more balanced view. To this day I see framed photographs in exhibitions as torn and bleeding around the edge, ripped out of the context that endows greater depth of meaning.

Audy Murfpy is Dead

The commission for Rainhill Hospital was offered to Wood by the Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool as a result of his other work and empathetic portraits of people on Merseyside. Wood has commented on his initial reluctance in undertaking the commission, owing to the length of time involved in travelling from his home in New Brighton on the Wirral to Prescot on the outskirts of the city. It is well known that Wood does not drive and some of his best

known work has been generated as a result of his habitual use of public transport including *All Zones Off Peak* (1998) and *Bus Odyssey* (2001).

The intention of the commission was to create a positive depiction of a group of patients, who gave their consent to be photographed on a regular basis. The same patients were due to be moved back into the community, and it is this process which provides the book with its denouement, although the sequence of images does not follow a linear chronology. A House of Commons exchange in 1985, recorded in Hansard, between Labour MP Bob Parry and John Patten, then Secretary of State for Social Services, drew attention to the contentious relocation of some of the hospital's long term patients to new accommodation in North Wales. This was not the case with Tom's subjects, but reveals the plight of those, who after a period of hospitalisation, may have been left without friends and relatives or homes to return to.

In 1989, a selection of the Rainhill photographs was exhibited at the Open Eye Gallery with the DPA project title *Care in The Community*. This title refers to the Conservative Government policy, which led to the eventual closure of institutions such as Rainhill. The aim being to resettle patients in community-based accommodation, or in acute cases, their transfer to other hospitals on Merseyside or elsewhere. Alongside Wood, a writer was also commissioned to interview the same patients whom Wood photographed, but this material has not surfaced, but it would certainly have formed part of the narrative of this volume. Wood was also permitted to photograph nurses, doctors, visiting relatives and orderly staff. Throughout the series of photographs the same protagonists reappear as he shadows their day-to-day interactions. There are also general views of the wards, which provide a point of entry in the same way as establishing shots in cinema. These moments provide a counterpoint to the events, where Wood is both present and disconnected, as a set of relations and events unfold before him.

The imposing Gothic architecture of the Victorian-built asylum and its meeting rooms with large windows, and the corridors between, afforded good light in which to photograph. The natural light which illuminates the subjects stands out both formally and metaphorically; an aspect which is highlighted in Clare Shaw's poem entitled *Just Look*. Wood admits that most of the time at Rainhill was spent talking to the patients, and the amount of photographs taken totalled only two or three rolls of film a day. By Wood's standards this represents a low output for a day's work, compared to what he might photograph in other situations. On one occasion he also stayed overnight in the hospital's guest accommodation, and some days he would eat meals and drink cups of tea with the people he photographed, amidst the fug of cigarettes smoked by the patients in the hospital wards.

In cinema, depictions of institutional care are perhaps most well known in Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), and Werner Herzog's portrayal of institutionalised children with both hearing and sight loss, in *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971). Up until the late 1980s it was not uncommon for those who had suffered a mental 'breakdown' or depression to be housed with those with more debilitating psychiatric illnesses.

The Rainhill volume includes a total of four poems by Clare Shaw, whose repeated admissions to Liverpool psychiatric wards began in 1992 – coincidentally the same year that Rainhill closed. Shaw is a prominent voice in the UK survivors movement and has a profound commitment to the direct representation of the experiences of those detained in psychiatric services. She was a co-founder of *Mad Women*: the Liverpool women's *Mental Health Forum*; and *Harm-ed*: a user-led training organisation. Shaw's recent interest and research into *ventriloquism* – where the voiceless are given speech – was explored during her 2015 residency at The Poetry School. Shaw's poems lend Wood's photographs another kind of image-voice, which both amplifies and silences any meaning which this work might be assigned. In its emotive force the intensity of what is seen draws us into an uncomfortable proximity with that which we might otherwise not wish to see; Wood's work attempts to move past what cannot be easily passed by, and the subject matter challenges our social, political and aesthetic understanding of psychiatric care.

I Done All I Could Noel

The following extracts are based on a commentary and interviews conducted by Audrey Linkman and Tom Wood following the completion of the commission in May 1997:

> In September 1995 the D.P.A. advertised a commission in the region of £2500 - £4000 on a subject of the photographer's own choice. The commission was offered on the usual D.P.A. conditions regarding deposit, written documentation etc. Over 500 requests for further information and 139 applications were received. Three photographers were invited for interview in October 1995 […] It was decided to award the commission to Tom Wood. Tom's proposal centred on the Cammell Laird Shipyard in Birkenhead. Tom had been at work photographing in the shipyard since 1993. He stated clearly in his application, and reiterated in his interview that his central concern was to explore a new approach to representing the subject of people at work – and especially to move away from the stereotypical portrayal of men at work in a dockyard. Previous contact with Tom and his method of working convinced the interviewing panel that Tom was certainly capable of achieving exciting results in this direction.

Artists and photographers have long been interested in places of work and their representation. Stanley Spencer's series of paintings based on his visits to Lithgow's Shipyards in the Port of Glasgow for *Shipbuilders on the Clyde* (1940) represent another great centre of shipbuilding in the UK. Chris Killip, who has been an important influence for both Wood and Martin Parr's work, described the difficulty of a similar undertaking in his photobook *Pirelli Work* (2006). In 1989, Killip accepted a commission from Pirelli UK to photograph their Burton-on-Trent tyre factory where he also strove to find the right approach for the difficult conditions in which he found himself. Similarly Wood's primary objective was not only to find new ways to photograph a subject long associated with photography's history of people at work, but also to avoid the stereotypes of documentary, editorial and reportage.

Wood had been trying to photograph at Cammell Laird since the 1980s, eventually making regular visits, two days a week, from 1993. At first he was denied access for security reasons and was then accompanied by a representative of the company, who supervised his navigation of the working shipyard. Later on Wood was left to his own devices and was able to freely photograph whom and wherever he wanted. The threat of redundancy was a protracted and painful process for all those concerned and Wood admits to his frustration that in terms of shipbuilding work being carried out at the yard, there was very little happening. Each week, and often on a daily basis, more men were made redundant until the yard closed, and many of the portraits here reflect this inevitability: A group photograph of the last four apprentices, as well as others resigned to their fate.

The last vessel to be launched at Cammell Laird, on April 16th 1992, was the submarine *HMS Unicorn,* an Upholder class vessel, which was later sold to Canada as the UK moved to an all nuclear fleet. In Wood's photographs of the men watching the launch of the *Unicorn*, the word 'fuck', daubed neatly onto metal stanchion, is a summary response to the ongoing redundancies. At the time Wood's friend and photographer Patrick Shanahan accompanied and drove him on his visits to the shipyard, and the book also includes some of Shanahan's photographs from this time. The Cammell Laird exhibition and volume also includes photographs, which were selected from Wirral Archives Service in Birkenhead. In our selection and edit of photographs, Wood was interested most in those which conceivably he could have made himself. The archive material reveals Cammell Laird's century long association with Birkenhead and Liverpool's maritime history: a city described by Wirral born writer Malcolm Lowry as 'that terrible city whose main street is the ocean'.

The yard built its first vessel, an iron barge, in 1828, and some of Britain's most famous ships have rolled down the slipway, including the first Ark Royal aircraft carrier, which was recently sent to be scrapped in Turkey. The yard, which at its height employed 40,000 people, closed on July 30th 1993 with the loss of over 400 jobs at a time when unemployment on Merseyside was already running at 11.8%. In the lead-up to the closure of Cammell Laird, and during the ownership of VSEL (Vickers Shipbuilding & Engineering) Wood's relationship with the shipworkers was framed by the spectre of redundancy – a sensitive situation in which to make photographs.

Wood had initially been working in black and white but he returned to colour in 1993 and recalled how:

> By this time more men had left and it was even more deserted. I had no minder now. I could explore physically as well as photographically. I would go into the workshops. There were only a few men where once there had been dozens. Because there were only a few with little to do they wanted to talk. I tended to make portraits, very simple portraits, using a Mamiya RB 6 x 7 as well as my Mamiya Press 6 x 9, a range finder camera. So I used a long lens on the RB, 180 for the portraits. I could do a picture just of a head and nothing else and fill the frame. These guys would talk to me; they were probably leaving that week and I would make as honest a portrait as I could without any sentimentality. I used available light and usually a one second exposure.

Two years later, following the shipyard's initial closure Wood, supported by the DPA, was able to return once it reopened solely for ship repair. These later photographs, often made in the holds of ships, are illuminated by the flame of gas torches, tungsten inspection lamps and flash lighting through air thick with fine dust. We peer down into an otherworldly Danté-like space, which is both monumental and cavernous, and elsewhere we are able to sense the claustrophobic conditions in which the men worked. The photographs made during this period are characterised by an entropic reversal where burners cut into the ship's steel, as they were taken apart for scrap.

Wood photographed at Cammell Laird up until 1996 which was a critical year in Liverpool's recent political and social history, remembered for the docker's strike, which lasted for two years. This moment represents the tail-end of a period characterised by industrial disputes and the privatisation of industry, which signalled what is generally described as the de-industrialisation of Britain. The impact of this train of events is particularly poignant in Liverpool, where the city's dialectical position, geographically and politically, was actively targeted by successive Conservative Governments.

Closure

When Rainhill Hospital closed in 1991, Wood retrieved a collection of 68 turn-of-the century photographic portraits, most likely made by one of the hospital's doctors. These photographs had been thrown away into a skip outside the closed hospital. This collection of portraits reinforces the impact of what we see in the Rainhill volume. Earlier, Wood had been able to photograph an section of a hospital's admittance document of one particular patient from 1937; Wood photographed the same man, still resident at Rainhill, some fifty years later. The two photographs do not tell us what might have been if this person had not been admitted, nor of what has taken place inside the hospital. Instead these images quicken the realisation of a lifetime lived or lost – and maybe now past – as we see these photographs almost thirty years after they were made.

The found photographs are also a reminder of other institutional portraits made by doctors and their assistants such as those seen in Dr Hugh Welch Diamond's photographs of patients of the Surrey County Asylum (1856) and Georges Didi-Huberman's *Invention of Hysteria* (2004). These photographs are noted for an intensity that belies their original function in recording the faces and physiognomy of individuals where it was believed that the face 'mirrored the soul'. In Huberman's analysis of Martin Charcot's photographs of female patients of Salpêtrière circa 1878, he writes of the patients collaboration and participation with the physician's desire to photograph what he terms their increasingly 'theatricalised bodies'. The 'journey' taken by Wood, which Linkman refers to earlier, can perhaps be considered his most challenging work, in terms of what it entailed experientially, but also in its aesthetic and contextual interpretation.

When Bob Dylan arrived in Liverpool on his 1965 tour, documented in D. A. Pennebaker's film *Don't Look Back* (1967), he playfully and poignantly refers to the city as 'Mercyside'. At Cammell Laird, the portraits of shipyard workers simultaneously hide and reveal the fears and concerns of those whose future prospects led to the majority having to leave home and find work elsewhere, or face the scrapheap of the dole. The uncertainty of this is also manifest in the graffiti and expletive utterances, which punctuate an environment festooned with pornography torn from magazines and newspapers. These images attain a level of unsettling banality as they form part of the fabric of particular male working environments of this time. They often sit uneasily close to family snapshots, which have been assembled alongside other ephemeral material in an abject collage, which presents a nihilistic distraction from the exhaustion of long hours of work in cramped, dangerous and dirty conditions.

In these photographs the prospect of a merciful release is symbolically and metaphorically transubstantiated in the makeshift fabrication of a crucified worker, in Cammell Laird

overalls: inscribed with the following: ‘RIP Cammell Laird’ and beneath the figure “I done all I could Noel”. Elsewhere, a shipyard rope has been fashioned into a noose in the centre of the construction hall in a very serious but tragi-comic gesture. In recent times the shipyard has once more re-established its position as a viable employer in the area.

In both books Wood’s photographs represent these people as individuals. Ultimately, they reveal what it means to be alive, to hold rights of citizenship, a home life, relationships and employment, but in the background the possibility that a turn of events economically, politically or psychologically can reshape our lives with far reaching consequences.

References:

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Malcolm Lowry, ‘The Forest Path to the Spring’ in *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, 1961

Interview extracts from the Documentary Photography Archive in the National Archives database