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Memory, Urban Regeneration, and Public Art. *Other People's Photographs*.

Text published in *In Favour of Public Space. Ten Years of the European Prize For Urban Public Space*. Edited by Magda Anglès. ACTAR / CCCB (2010). ISBN 978-84-92861-38-5

Family pictures are elusive statements, as family albums are complex documents. We may say, paraphrasing Michel de Certeau, that family pictures and family albums are 'full of shadows'. We look at them in ceremony, quasi deferentially, searching, perhaps, for whatever signs of love may still be visible in them. Certainly, we could say that family pictures and family albums are constructed out of love. This is partly what compels us to look at the back of these photographs: a search for the handwritten inscription of a name, a date, a place, or an intimate declaration of sorts. Words, then, are intrinsic to the family photograph, even if by absence, as absence itself is at the heart of family albums: their construction is also a process of demolition. This fascination for what is not there, for what has been purposely cut out and erased, the manifestation of a desire to forget, is at the very core of any investigation into the family photograph. Or into urban space.

In many ways, *Other People's Photographs* is an exceptional endeavour. It is a project that stems from the very heart of a place and its people. It is enthusiastic, celebratory, participatory... Most importantly, it got people and their stories out of their homes, and into the streets. This migration of people and photographs from the domestic space of the house into the street reactivates the social and political nature of public space. Private narratives become public statements, and the insularity of the home, and the shelved family album, is transcended. However, we could question what happens to the family picture when it is relocated, like a street sign at a vandal-safe height on a lamppost, laminated against the weather and mounted on metal plaques next to surveillance warnings, "*Images are being monitored for the purpose of crime prevention and safety*", or next to 'Respect' campaign warnings, "*REMEMBER We impose fines for littering – including cigarette butts and gum – dog fouling and fly-tipping*". How should we negotiate the legibility of this abstracted image? Or, indeed, we could question whether there may not be a trace of violence in this displacement.

But *Other People's Photographs* is many things at once, or perhaps, consecutively. It starts with a black and white photograph of a young couple in a Folkestone street market in 1955, and it finishes not far away from the very place this photograph was taken, just over fifty years later, at a 'memory bank' located in Albion Mews, an alleyway annexed to the new shopping centre of Bouverie Place. This phenomenal journey from the family album to the shopping mall is what brought me to Folkestone last Saturday. I wanted to see with my own eyes the legacy of this remarkable project. I wanted to see it 'live' so to speak, to listen to the stories on location, to see how the city contains it. Indeed, *Other People's Photographs* is essentially a project about the city and about memory, of peoples as well as places. It was commissioned by the agents involved in the regeneration project of Bouverie Place in the heart of Folkestone, namely Shepway District Council and the London based corporate developers and owners of the

new shopping centre: Bride Hall of Mayfair, and Warner Estates of Marylebone. This collision of memory and urban regeneration adds a significant amount of possibility and complexity to the project that cannot be ignored, and somehow makes it, to my knowledge, unique.

Bouverie Place is described as a shopping centre, although in reality it appears to be only an elevated ASDA supermarket, with two levels of car park on top, and a number of chain shops at street level, the likes of Next, HMV, George, New Look, Peacocks, and Sportsdirect. These chain shops are aligned in what once was the continuation of Alexandra Gardens, which still runs through from Sandgate Road to Middleburg Square, except that now one end of the street has been absorbed into the shopping centre, and has an ASDA flying over it.

Situation #1. By the confluence of Alexandra Gardens and Albion Mews there is a photograph up on a lamppost: a colour picture of a young girl with red shoes in what could be the 1970s. Right behind this picture are the two touch screens where the bulk of *Other People's Photographs* and stories are accessible to the public. They look like a friendlier version of the cash machines located a bit further along the same wall: a double Nationwide cash dispenser, "FREE CASH WITHDRAWAL all major cards accepted here"; the difference being that the cash machines are busy dispensing money, while the two 'memory dispensers' are 'Out of Order (Temporarily)'. I took some pictures with my digital camera, kind of visual notes of the display and their interaction with the things around them, including a red NPower trailer, "Britain's brightest energy company", stationed right in front of the booths. Not three minutes had passed when a security guard approached me with the anticipated remark. I was on private property: "no photography allowed without permission". Next to the sanctuary of memory, contemporary photographs are forbidden.

Situation #2. The two booths of *Other People's Photographs* are located on the former site of Papas fish and chip shop, which having been there since 1982, received a compulsory purchase order from the Shepway District Council and was forced to move out. The same story went for Anthony Cowie's soft furnishings shop, there since 1959, just opposite Papas, and for Turner's greengrocers and the Presto dry cleaners, both there since the 1930s. Papas and Cowie fought their case against the 'land assembly', but lost after years of litigation. Although they would have accepted relocation within the site, they were told they had to go because the developers didn't want a fish and chip shop in the shopping centre, nor a local family run business. Instead, Vodaphone is now on Papas' site, and Starbucks on Cowie's. They finally managed to find new premises near by, but the greengrocers and the dry cleaners just packed up, and have gone missing. However, there are no *Other People's Photographs* there to tell the story of these exclusions.

In her book *Ground Control. Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First Century City* (2009), Anna Minton makes a close study of contemporary practices of urban regeneration in the UK, paying special attention to the role played by 'land assembly' and 'compulsory purchase orders' in the increasing privatisation of public space. 'Land assembly' is the legal term that refers to the act of joining up large tracts of land by the public sector by means of 'compulsory purchase orders', buying out residents and businesses – businesses that for years would have had to endure the

continuous and systematic neglect and decay of the public space around them. When the local authority completes the land assembly, regeneration plans are then put forward 'in the public interest', and the site is handed over to private developers, including the ownership, regulation and vigilance of the resulting walkways and open spaces within the new site. As happens in commercial developments like Bouverie Place, the new owners prioritise chain shops over local business at the expense of well-established local communities and local networks. Therefore, urban regeneration done this way inevitably creates voids of memory, obliterates the local community, and erases local practices and networks. In order to counteract this invasive presence, this void of locality, and whatever history of confrontation with local dissidents may have occurred during the process of regeneration; in order to promote the acceptance and integration of the new development and of the new corporate owners, a certain sense of historical depth could be conveniently preserved as quotations of what was there once. In the new Bouverie, where erasure is complete, the ATM's of memory do the job. They bring back to the new site a certain historical resonance, echoes from the past, transforming corporate ownership into carers for the community, commissioners of public art.

The extraordinary energy and vision put into this project collapses in Bouverie Place. In the privatised Albion Mews and Alexandra Gardens, where photography is not allowed, the beautiful pictures and voices of *Other People's Photographs* become assets for the benefit of corporate business, hijacked and coffee-tabled, tamed to the point of conformity, to adorn the public image of ubiquitous developers and complacent local authorities. It feels to me that, in its phenomenal beauty, *Other People's Photographs* represents a missed opportunity to become the most remarkable piece of local activism in the form of community public art that I have seen. Bouverie Place, with its grey grandeur, its self-importance, and its ASDA warehouse of panoramic escalators and low wages, oblivious to the likes of Papas, Cowie and Turner, has managed to acquire public image at the expense of private photographs. And what is more, it also has made off with the copyright of the images.

At the end of the day, on leaving Albion Mews, past several signs of prohibition and the Burger King, as I crossed the road towards the post office building I realized that it had closed down. There I took my last pictures as I walked towards the graffiti on the window. The redness of the phone and post-box acted as a premonition that, like a message in a bottle, it was again too late; that we were, once more, about to be sent back to the future of (bullying) urban regeneration.

