



A University of Sussex PhD thesis

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David Moore 21922761

Auto-ethnography (App1)

What the Subject Did

Negotiating agency within representation

Here I will address my positionality in relation to my practice and Lisa and John's family, and consider how the heuristic and iterative methodologies within my work were influenced by the prevailing circumstances, social determinism and perceptions of class. My PhD thesis is a retrospective critical analysis of my artworks and there are overlapping areas of discussion that this autoethnography also refers to. As an adjunct to the main text my central ambitions within *Lisa and John* were to challenge the authoritative voice of documentary photographic discourse through intervention, participation and a re-presentation..

I experienced a comfortable upbringing within a lower middle-class family close to the City of Derby, England. Both of my parents were from working-class backgrounds and a related utilitarian culture was present in aspects of my upbringing. My Father was a professional engineer who left school at fifteen, continuing his education through apprenticeships and evening classes. At some point he benefitted from introductions to classical music, possibly influenced by a discourse promoted by the Workers Education Authority [WEA] who encouraged working class men and women toward a discourse of 'high' culture outside of market imperatives after World War 2, yet also, most certainly, through the attendance at

Methodist Chapel as a child [Rose, J, 2001].

We had one painting in the house, a framed oil by Frank Wallis, an American impressionist (1897-1934) that I now display on my own walls. As a child, an annual trip to Derby Museum during the summer holidays revealed the work of Joseph Wright of Derby. I acknowledged the painting, 'A Philosopher Giving that Lecture on an Orrery' (1776), and others from an early age. I later understood many of Wright's works as representations of the dawn of the industrial revolution as the UK headed towards the economic downturns of the early 1970's and the ensuing recession that contributed to the conditions I was to photograph twenty years later (1).



Wright, J. (1776) 'A Philosopher Lecturing on the Orrery' [Oil on canvas]. Derby Museum and Art Gallery

Between 1979 and 1985, prior to attending art school and within a period of economic recession, I was employed as a 'Visiting Officer' for the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS), presenting an analogous arena to consider against the practice of

documentary photography (2). Within an apparatus where ‘claimants’ were subject to visual and oral verification to ascertain their deservedness for furniture grants and extra payment, I was let over the threshold of family homes to ‘assess’ living circumstances as a government employee. Whilst the fuller experiences of the unemployed, the sick and the elderly I visited, remained unavailable to me, these encounters offered significant experiences of the lives of others through the spectacle of domestic poverty. Whilst in that employ, my response to these circumstances as political acts of facilitation, was advising claimants on the most innovative approaches to securing funds. As such, a social agency was activated through a developing political consciousness, as I acted in empathy with *the other*, simultaneously operating within a system that was potentially in conflict with those same communities. During 1985-88, I left the job to study on the BA (Hons) Photography Course at West Surrey College of Art and Design, Farnham, England, where such experiences dovetailed through my emerging photographic practice, leading to *Pictures from the Real World*, my final and outgoing project, that much later, initiated *Lisa and John* in 2017.

Pertinent to, and present in much of my practice via what I have described as an *anthropology of the near*, is an oppositional response through consideration of what is being observed. My projects and publications, *The Commons* (2003) and *The Last Things* (2008) were borne from series of post-panoptic perspectives that advocated submitting a perceived locus of State power to photographic scrutiny, extending the public gaze by interrogating inaccessible space. The works performed visual empowerment as a political and social gesture, allowing a view of environments inherently resistant to photographic documentation, and in the case of the latter, a secret space that was not officially acknowledged (3). The enquiry of *Lisa and John* can be mapped onto these projects as an

aligned critique of the social and political authority of photographic representation and within that the need for empowerment is a significant consideration.

Within an exploration of the ethics of anthropological practice, the artist Joseph Kosuth [1975] makes a distinction between differing approaches. He describes that ‘what may be interesting about the artist as anthropologist is that the artist’s activity is not *outside* but a mapping of an internalizing cultural activity in his own society’ (ibid). This partially describes my position in relation to *Lisa and John*, although not fully. When developing *Pictures from the Real World*, the housing estate I worked within was in proximity to my then home, yet the social demographic differed considerably from my own area. Before and throughout making *Pictures from the Real World* I was aware that my own family’s relatively socially mobile background, alongside my status as an art student, questions of my own authenticity and ambition, forged an uncertain hybridity. As such my consciousness of class positionality developed through the production of the work. Homi Bhabha’s, intersectional critique within a post-colonial discourse, defined *mimicry* as a critical concept of assimilation and immersion (1994). He described a ‘blurred copy’ that the *subject* may offer to the would-be coloniser, understood as a camouflage, ‘not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance’ (ibid). In the early stages of the production of *Pictures from the Real World*, I consider retrospectively, that I performed my own, and partial *reverse* mimicry as a tool of assimilation with the families I met as my status in homes, previously as a State employee, had to be renegotiated. Again, retrospectively, I now consider this having been borne from lack of experience and uncertainty. (4) Yet, although Bhabha’s text sets up a tension between critique and experiential vernacular, noting that ‘mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge’, within my

practice it enabled a communicative flow. The works development and eventual resolution disturbs the legacies from which Bhabba writes. Within *Lisa and John* such communication was desired as a democratizing act (ibid p126).

I find a partial explanation to my position as it was in 1987. Dave Beech argues, where there is a 'transgression of visible markers of social class, (within practice) the 'concerned' artist remains uncertain of their licence' (2008). Beech refers to practice that is consciously collaborative and at that time I had not yet understood what I now describe as the 'choreography' of production methods in the work (Moore, D. 2023. P19). His observations describe my uncertainty that in time dissolved. What eventually led my enquiry was a human identification with the families I worked with, reflected in my ambition to make the empathetic imagery, albeit within the prevailing discourse as described in the thesis.

The presence of 'David' throughout *Lisa and John* receives the couple's critique. My advocacy of their agency in the form of suggested participatory methods, initiated the practice, yet within this context acknowledges my presence as that of an outsider. In 2016/17, my devising and curation of *Lisa and John*, considered this performativity to signal such anomalies, both theoretically and in practice, renegotiating the spectacle of *Pictures from the Real World* whilst utilizing my *difference* as a reflexive aspect of the works. Such reflexivity will inhabit future practice.

Notes

(1) Whilst attempting to ascertain the date of Wright's painting I was advised by Lucy Bamford, Senior Curator of Art and the Joseph Wright Collection; 'the date of the work is unknown, so we usually describe it/caption it as 'exhibited 1766' as we know that this is the first date that it was shown to the public. It was probably therefore painted between about 1764 and spring 1766'. Email conversation with the author and Lucy Bamford. 28th June 2022.

(2) The Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) was a government department that managed 'benefit' payments to the unemployed, the sick, the disabled and other individuals in need. 'Due to the severe recession, unemployment rose to 3 million and the high unemployment persisted throughout the 1980s. Unemployment was particularly concentrated in the former manufacturing heartlands of the north, Wales and Scotland' UK Economy in the 1980s. Available at:

<https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/630/economics/economy-in-1980s> (Accessed: 21 March 2021).

(3) See; <https://davidmoore.uk.com/The-Last-Things-2008> and <https://davidmoore.uk.com/The-Commons-2004> (Accessed: 22 December 2023).

(4) An example of further research interest in this area, noted and discussed in lectures with students, was Gustave Dore's *Illustrated London* and of Dore's excursions into the East End for reason of social observation and the production of lithographs for publication (1872). Dore, prior to leaving the sanctity of central London and

heading for Shoreditch, described himself as ‘adopting rough clothes’, a gesture aiding and assisting passage and ‘access’, albeit with the police as their guide. Dore initially considered that such a performance might be connected to the authenticity of the material collected yet was acknowledged by himself as ineffective. The Eastenders too were not convinced, ‘We were to them as strange and amusing as Chinamen: and we were something more and worse. We were spies upon them; men of better luck whom they were bound to envy...’ (Ibid)

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