

The digital progression of community archives from amateur production to artistic practice. A case study of Belfast Exposed.*

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Abstract

'Belfast Exposed is a small group of amateur photographers from all parts of the City, the vast majority unemployed' (O'Reilly, 1985?, no pagination).

'Belfast Exposed is Northern Ireland's principal gallery of contemporary photography, commissioning, publishing and showing work by artists and photographers from Northern Ireland and across the world' (Belfast Exposed, 2014).

In 2013 Belfast Exposed celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. As these quotes indicate, in this amount of time the ethos and focus of the organization has shifted considerably, from originating as a grassroots, community based photography initiative to becoming a significant international photographic art gallery. A key aspect of the change in its *raison d'être* was the gallery's move from analogue to digital media. By 2005 over 3000 images from the analogue archive were digitized, with the aim of opening the archive to wider audiences, and by 2007 the gallery had launched two digital libraries, one offline and one online.

This paper seeks to explore the implications of this process of change both for the organization and its analogue and digital photographic archives, combining archival theory with psychoanalytic social theory. Interviews with staff members, content analysis of the digital libraries, and a first-hand engagement with the

process of re-housing the analogue archive, have assisted the research process. Furthermore, several works of art based on the archive, and commissioned by Belfast Exposed in the last decade, have been analysed as examples of new modes of engagement with the archive.

Acknowledging the political agendas and policy-making context to which both the organization and the archive are impacted by, a major trend is identified: new cultural meanings of the post-peace process have replaced old interpretations, influenced by artists' responses to the archive.

Keywords

Archive, digitization, photography, Belfast Exposed, art gallery, community, community archive, artistic practice, peace process, Northern Ireland, psychoanalysis, Lacan, lost object

Belfast Exposed: 30 Years Taking and Storing Photographs

In 1983 Belfast Exposed was founded as a community-based, grass-roots photography initiative that encouraged local Northern Ireland communities to work with photography as a means of documenting, and thereby engaging with, the turbulent social and political issues that were occurring during the Troubles. The founding members of Belfast Exposed did not adhere to a specific viewpoint regarding the conflict and instead sought to bridge the sectarian divide by engaging with local communities, both Protestant and Catholic, via photography workshops. They were also seeking to contest the prolific but external mainstream media news representations of Belfast by producing and displaying images from within the province. As insiders, they had access to scenes and moments, many of ordinary everyday life in Belfast communities, that professional journalists could not, or did not want to access. Despite this approach, developing the project in the midst of military conflict meant suffering

the repercussions of ongoing political tensions. As a result, two years after their initial exhibition at the People's Theatre in Conway Mill, Belfast Exposed was strongly perceived as a pro-Irish, nationalist organization. Their original goal of bringing the communities together remained unachieved and the need to take a more formally neutral stand was created. As such the organization developed a constitution at this time, containing five key objectives which focused on fostering amateur photography for its own sake and opened new opportunities for funding, such as the Action for Community Employment. (Hadaway, 2007:16). Flinn has identified the three key driving forces for a community archive to develop – community participation, control and ownership of the project – which were central to Belfast Exposed from the start. (Flinn, 2007: 153) From these roots an analogue photographic archive began to evolve, using an ad hoc process of storage and focusing on amassing a large quantity of material. Indeed, as the project expanded and transformed over its first two decades the archive at Belfast Exposed grew to over half-a-million analogue photographic images. These images are often at odds with one another, a clash of the mundane and the extreme, the counter and the inclusive, reflecting the iconic history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland while at the same time depicting the everyday, working class lives of the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, and Belfast in particular.

However, a significant shift occurred within Belfast Exposed in 2001, with the arrival of digital technologies, an emerging political peace, and improved financial backing (Graham, 2005: 567-68). At this time, supported by instrumental arts funding focused on moving Northern Ireland forward politically, economically and technologically; and inscribed within a wider UK political agenda of urban development, the organization developed a digital archive project called Gateways. The aim was to create a small but inclusive selection of images, in which both communities were featured and the content of the archive as a whole

was well represented. Several founding members were involved in the selection process lead by senior curator Karen Downey (Chambers, 2012). This particular configuration combined a fresh approach with informed knowledge of both the images and their context. By 2007 two digital libraries had been launched, one offline and another online. However, as a result of the selection and scanning process, the original intent of the Belfast Exposed project was altered. Replacing the counter-mainstream news media representations of Northern Ireland during the Troubles was a return to the sensationalized themes of public disturbances and urban conflict. Additionally, there was less focus on the common social lives and communities of Belfast inhabitants during the 1980s-1990s in the digital libraries. These everyday images were replaced by images of benign cityscapes and positive cultural events. As Brewer outlines (2010: 154) this ideological shift is indicative of the society in Northern Ireland moving forward in the peace process by way of drawing a line through the past, by culturally redefining it, in order to move towards a hopeful future.

In the years since 2007 this process of re-appropriation of the past has continued to be a key theme within Belfast Exposed. The organization has shifted its focus, again away from its grass-roots community origins and later focus on archival legitimacy, and instead towards recognition as a formal, albeit primarily political, contemporary art gallery within the UK and Ireland. Belfast Exposed began commissioning freelance artists, academics and cultural practitioners to engage with the archive (mainly the analogue version) to produce and exhibit new artistic works, thus creating new cultural meanings. A key example of this was in the 2012 exhibition *Prima Materia* in which prominent international artists were invited to mine the archive and create new works, including Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin. (They later won the 2013 Deutsche Börse photography prize for their reinterpretation of another photographic archive (the Archive of Modern Conflict), while paying homage to Bertolt Brecht's earlier *War Primer*,

published in 1955.) While the focus of Belfast Exposed has remained political, at the same time there has been a shift away from the amateur, community-orientated work in favour of a more academic and artistic focus, encompassing Northern Ireland politics along with international ones, but leaving the original grass-roots ethos of the organization somewhat behind. On the website it describes itself, thus revealing this change, by stating: 'Belfast Exposed is Northern Ireland's principal gallery of contemporary photography, commissioning, publishing and showing work by artists and photographers from Northern Ireland and across the world' (Belfast Exposed, 2014). Nonetheless, in March 2013, the organization began to address this gap by initiating a comprehensive and critical 'external review and evaluation of Belfast Expose', Photography's collaborative, community, educational and training programmes,' with the goal of strategically redeveloping these programmes for the future (Belfast Exposed, 2012). One of the results of this review has been to renew its focus on community-based workshops and engagement.

Researching in a Community Archive

The original modus within Belfast Exposed was characterized by an intense engagement with its subject matter via close communication between its staff and its staff with the communities. In the past, the Troubles were frequently experienced first-hand. Furthermore, often the same situation was faced together. Even when this was not the case, the dialogue among the founding members and between them and the communities always remained active.

This naturally emerged working logic lived on the organization at different levels. During the digitization of part of the archive, providing contextual information and the extent of it became a fundamental element of the project. As will later be explored in more detail, the text accompanying the digitized photographs (metadata or otherwise) is in fact the result of a shared past on the one hand,

and of group work on the other. Nowadays, while the art gallery employs more formal educational and training processes and tools, the community participation element still relies heavily on direct knowledge transfer from person to person. Only in the past year mechanisms have been put in place to ensure that the Belfast Exposed working modus is in fact adequately passed on to future generations.

It is against this background that we decided to directly engage staff members of Belfast Exposed in our research. We conducted semi-structured interviews with three of them as well as with artists engaging with the archive. In addition to this, we held informal conversations with other staff members, volunteers, workshop participants and gallery visitors. Also, we experienced and participated first-hand in the re-housing of part of the analogue archive, volunteered for the organization and attended numerous events at the gallery. The access to tacit knowledge about both the archive and its digitization process could only be gained through a direct and personal engagement with staff members, the organization and its archive.

It is this straightforward connection to the archive and archivists that Carolyn Steedman calls for when archives are explored, be it by archival researchers or academics (2008: 1). Steedman, in her idiosyncratic style, calls for a multiplicity of approaches to exploring the study of archives but is most focused herself upon the use (and critique) of Lacanian psychoanalytic social theory, as filtered through Jacques Derrida. This paper takes a similar approach, beginning – as Steedman does – by engaging with Derrida's notion of *le mal d'archive*, or archive fever (or more literally, archive sickness) (Derrida, 1995). Derrida sought to explore the earlier writings of Freud in order to reveal the role archives have in cementing and perpetuating state power and authority. It is this psychoanalytic framework that will be similarly used to examine Belfast Exposed, via both the writings of Steedman as well as Ariella Azoulay. Psychoanalytic social theory

combines well with wider archival theory, with Derrida perhaps the first and best at marrying two seemingly dissimilar areas of academia: both are marked by the search for notions of 'truth' in the origins of the past; both deal with absences, gaps, lost objects and forgotten times; and both are fixated on filling these spaces. In both we have a compulsion to repeat, to continually chase after these truths (Steedman, 2001: 1161). It is through this framework that this paper examines the shifting archival practices and changing ethos of Belfast Exposed over the past 30 years.

The Belfast Exposed Archive

Tucked away into a small corridor like storage space, the archive occupies one of the walls, lined with archival bookshelves that are filled with folders after folders. The space at Belfast Exposed looks like any archival storage with its hygrometer and stack of white gloves. Yet, soon after entering the room, the lack of shelf marks becomes apparent. The numbers on the spines of the folders refer to an internal organisation system that is difficult to crack, even with assistance from the staff members. The layers of old and new index numbers, together with occasional place names or dates, remain indecipherable.

The reason for the impenetrability of the archive is the lack of an index, a lack of a comprehensive catalogue, which would inform the visitor about the contents of the negative folders in the archive.ⁱ This leaves the visitor in a situation where it is very challenging to search for something specific, but rather, the visitor has to adapt their methods to better suit the surrounding and the situation. Curator Nayia Yiakoumaki has proposed to use the term browsing to describe the activity that takes place in an uncatalogued archive. She considers the method of browsing 'the most appropriate strategy to gain a general, non-hierarchical and unprejudiced understanding of the archive' (Yiakoumaki, 2010: 12).ⁱⁱ

The browsable, yet unorganised archive disorients the visitor. Although the negatives

and their corresponding contact sheets have been ordered chronologically into numbered folders, the contents of the binders are not listed. The visitor to the Belfast Exposed archive has to confront the material without much contextualising information, however, as Sekula argues in *Reading an Archive, Photography between Labor and Capital*, photograph's context in an archive is lost, as the 'the possibility of meaning is 'liberated' from the actual contingencies of use' (Sekula, 1999: 444). The reading of the archive becomes contingent and the encounter arbitrary.

The contents of the Belfast Exposed archive have been divided into different collections after a taxonomic model, according to their producers and the purpose of their use. The images of the archive are divided into slides and PR photography as minor collections on the one hand; and citizen photojournalismⁱⁱⁱ and workshop photography^{iv} as mayor ones on the other. The main collections consist of about 100 chronologically ordered folders (with 40 negative sleeves) each. The Belfast Exposed archive is both taxonomic and diachronic (Sekula, 1999:446).

Although there is a certain loss of context in the Belfast Exposed archive, the timeframe and the location in which the photographs were taken are rather limited, and together with the choices the past the keepers, they propose a framework for the interpretation of the photographs. In recent years, postmodern archive theory has began to shift the perception of the influence the archivist, or the holder of the archive, have in the shaping and interpretation of records (Cook and Schwartz, 2002: 174). The abstracted photograph finds a new context in the archive, one that does not necessarily reflect the context of its original use, (Sekula, 1999: 443-5).

The photographic collection has been under constant editing; new folders were created for exhibitions and negative strips moved back and forth, from one folder to the other without marking their origin. The archive was, for a long time, a very

active archive, not a repository of material that was not needed anymore, and put to the side, but rather a vital source of imagery for the organisation. In the early years the archive was the main reason for the existence of the organisation, and an inseparable part of it – the organisation circulated its photographs, its archival contents, to several exhibitions around the world. The Belfast Exposed photographic archive is very organic; it has grown with the organisation – it has been modified according to organisation's needs – which has resulted in an incomplete archive where some of the photographs are only accessible as contact sheet prints, and the original negative has been misplaced or removed altogether.

The act of archiving is that of storing documents for the future. They aim for completeness, at recording everything, being the complete picture of something, to be complete (Creet, 2002: 269). Yet, the archive can never record and store everything, an aspect of the archive on which Derrida's Archive Fever is focused. While recording memories, the archive simultaneously destroys the memory, it is not capable of storing everything (Derrida, 1995).^v The Belfast Exposed archive, like any archive, is not complete, not finished. The incompleteness manifests itself in the visible gaps left by removed negatives, and lacking metadata, while the absences remain inconspicuous.

Digitization Process: Gateways and the Online Archive.

In line with the original spirit of encouraging community participation with the archive, Belfast Exposed initiated the Gateways^{vi} project. While the analogue archive was confined to the four walls of the organization, a small part of it should overcome this physical barrier and promote engagement with the recent past of Belfast. Thereby processes of forgetting and remembering needed to be negotiated. Thus while initially, Gateways was about opening the archive for wider audiences, soon the staff at Belfast Exposed realized how working with the

archive would significantly change the organization entirely (Education for Change, 2006b: 15).

Between 2001 and 2005, around 3000 images from the analogue archive were selected and scanned. Further 157 images were donated by the Ulster Museum in an attempt to establish a long-term collaboration, which unfortunately failed due to compatibility issues of software across both organizations. The images were organized using the standard Dublin Core System of digital cataloguing, which lead to an intense engagement with the contextualising act of creating metadata content (Education for Change, 2006b: 16). Belfast Exposed was ahead of times by implementing social tagging: community workshop participants and other prospective users were asked to label the images. During this time Belfast Exposed obtained the legal copyright over the images they held, along with the photographers who took the images (where they could be identified)^{vii}. As the targeted age of Gateways viewers was meant to be at a 12 year-old level they felt that the more explicit images of the recent conflict needed to be left out of the archive. As such, what had been politically contentious was now made benign. Furthermore, private photographs that had been brought in by community members had to be left out, which on the one hand '[...] emphasises the exclusively documentary character of the archive' (Bruhns, 2002). On the other, this absence/gap could be seen as a sign of how the mundane remains invisible to history (Cooke 2008:29-30).

[Insert Figure 1]

In October 2004 Gateways was launched, along with learning packages that, unlike the digital archive^{viii}, have been expanded since. The use of metadata and technology in Gateways was acknowledged for 'enabling fully flexible access and creative interpretation by users of the archive and learners' (Education for Change, 2006b: 13), and was key to securing further funding. In the early 2000's making archival goods available to wider audiences through digital repositories

was a pivotal element of UK cultural policy, with keywords such as 'interactivity' and 'engagement' in relation to audiences a main focus in the policy (Education for Change, 2006a: iv – x). These developments were primarily politically-led, as aspects of the British New Labour government's agenda to bring the UK into the digital age, and also corresponded to the economic boom of the late-1990s and early 2000s in the UK and Ireland. In 2005, Belfast Exposed was awarded with £118,725.00 by NESTA (National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts), in the category 'Learning awards: pioneering approaches to learning' (NESTA, 2006: 20). At the time, however, the digital divide in Europe was still very accentuated^{ix}. Gateways was developed well before the popularization of Facebook, in a time where smart-phone-like devices were a novelty and when many browsed the web in public libraries and Internet cafés. Furthermore, the physical location of Gateways has always been problematic. First, it was located on the ground floor of the gallery on a space under the stairs. In 2011 it was moved to the Exchange gallery upstairs, occupying an empty walking space between the offices and the toilets. Although Gateways' users could add their own text, voice and video comments, as well as save their favourite images in a personalized photo album, they interacted with Gateways very little (Chambers, 2012).

'In the focus groups people said that they should go online with all those features. But there were many copyright issues unresolved for this interface to go online. There was a feeling within the team of Belfast Exposed that [...] [P]utting the archive online could have threatened the value of the community' (Chambers, 2012).

[Insert Figure 2]

Keeping a balance between openness and engagement on the one hand; and promotion and support of the political agenda of peace and reconciliation on the other, meant keeping a sense of control over Gateways. For instance, the

random samples generated by the software ignore any voice that could have been given to the community; and user comments are subjected to revision by the staff at Belfast Exposed. The organization's editorial policy is contingent upon the cultural policy of UK museums and archives, in that Belfast Exposed was prevented from allowing sectarian or inflammatory comments to be included on the Gateways archive, even if these were representative of community perspectives.

Up until 2013, a selection of 584 images from Gateways was accessible online and searchable by categories only. Gateways is organized in three main sections: political landscapes, portraits and the community. Only the images contained in political landscapes made it to the website. Both versions of the digital archive hold hardly any photographs taken indoors. The focus is on public events and there is much repetition across categories, but especially in funerals and parades. The photographs serve to reiterate themes and moments of the conflict. Many of them are amateur snapshots: people posing for the camera or photographed from great distances. These images seem unfinished. They were digitized straight from the negatives, thus they have not been cropped after the exposure. In the fall of 2013, Belfast Exposed launched a new version of their website.

[Insert Figure 3a] [Insert Figure 3b] – One figure next to the other, please. Thanks!

Now, Images can now be searched by category and/or keywords, thereby the word-cloud of Gateways has been incorporated. Although, the number of archival images accessible online has decreased by 20% (from 584 to 466), some recent digital images have been added (Smith, 2014). Also, new photographers appear and for the first time images taken by a woman are available. Perhaps the most interesting change is the emergence of a new copyright holder: the Belfast Exposed Image Archive. The archive is listed now as a separate entity in its own right. By being put to the same level with the photographers, the archive

emerges as a subject. As such it has become an actor, which is able to start a life of its own. The Belfast Exposed Image Archive fundamentally legitimates the organization as indispensable in Northern Ireland, not only within the arts and culture sector, but also in relation to the shared past of the whole population.

[Insert Figure 4]

The Archive is both a repository and a maker of cultural memory. As such, it changes over time and it is impacted by mediation and remediation processes (Assmann, 2004: 46-7). The balance between forgetting and remembering is renegotiated by different strategies, in which the Belfast Exposed Archive seems to fulfil two roles. On the one hand it functions as a cultural storage memory – 'Speichergedächtnis', in which the conscious processes of sheltering, safe-keeping and cataloguing images take place. On the other, the dissemination of photographs online and offline, together with artistic interventions, outlines the archive as a practical memory – 'Funktiongedächtnis', in as much taking relevant knowledge is pre-selected and offered as guidelines to construct identity/ies at the present time (Assmann, 2004: 49-54). These two roles are both impacted by the wider political and social context, and by the material nature of archival goods. Digitization processes open up possibilities of greater storage and dissemination, but the loss of materiality not always has a positive impact: the sacred character of archives is worn off (Assmann, 2004: 56) and long term archival storage becomes an unresolved challenge. One could even say that certain definitions of what an archive is^x are threatened since tracing actions and leaving traces in digital files is exceptionally difficult.

Artistic engagement creating second layer of meaning

While the Belfast Exposed archive has been engaged with by archivists, researchers and curators since the beginning of last decade, the photographs from the archive had not been exhibited in the gallery since the appointment of the new

director Pauline Hadaway in 2000.^{xi} Some images from the archive had travelled outside the gallery, to the United States in 2001, but on the gallery walls the images from the archive were not shown until 2009 in the What You Can't See exhibition that launched 'the imminent construction of Belfast Exposed's new Archive Gallery' (What You Can't See, 2009).

While the archive material stayed removed from the gallery space, it provided inspiration for several exhibitions during the time the Gateways digitisation was under way. In 2004 two exhibitions displayed new archival takes on Belfast: *Archive_Belfast* by Claudio Hills and *Archive: Lisburn Road* by Daniel Jewesbury and Ursula Burke, followed by three more archive themed exhibitions in 2005 and 2006. During the digitisation process archival themes were present in the exhibition programme and in new commissions. This coincides with a period when archival practice in art become ever more popular,^{xii} and a few years later also significant anthologies and exhibition catalogues focused on artists and archives. However, at Belfast Exposed, the preferred mediums for displaying the images from the community archive was the Internet, publications and the Gateways system that was being developed

It was not until 2009 when photographs from the archive started appearing on the walls of the gallery. However, this time the images were not displayed as historical photographs of the Troubles but as works of art; they changed their place in the ecosystem of photographic collection. Photographs are commonly categorised in archives according to their use, and the purpose for which they were created, following a taxonomic organisation principle. Thus a vernacular photograph, when appropriated by an artist, changes its location in the ecosystem, and the photographic object is approached differently (Edwards, 2012). After Gateways became accessible online, alternative methods of interrogating the archive began to gain visibility in the gallery. Temporary curators in particular turned attention back to the archive, not only as a source of

artistic inspiration, but in itself a source worthy of re-examination and reinterpretation. As Foster writes in his seminal analysis of artistic practices in the archive, the 'excavation sites' were turned into 'construction sites', which 'suggests a shift away from a melancholic culture that views the historical as little more than the traumatic' (Foster, 2004:22). Historical photographs were no longer only embodying traces of the past; they could be the building blocks for the future, which expresses itself in art.

Duncan Campbell's film *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* (2003)^{xiii} was the first work to show the archive in a new light. Campbell did his research with the analogue archive during the reorientation of the organisation, when the digitization process had just begun.^{xiv} He manually searched through the folders, looking for still images that could be used for the film. The expectations of what to find in the archive were not met, and he had to revise his plans. Rather than forcing the archive to suit his purposes, Campbell was guided by the material he could find, and adapted the film to respond to the archive (Campbell, 2014). As mentioned above, the lack of a catalogue that can be consulted prior to the actual encounter with the photographic archive makes finding information about specific events difficult. It withholds its meaning and does not provide an easy access to its contents. The archive forces its users to commit to it, to adapt their views, to reconsider the questions they ask. Azoulay describes this type of interaction with a photographic archive favourably, as 'an encounter, and therefore as never fixed and completed' in photographic meaning, a secondary but much more open engagement with archival photographic documents that should be essential when interpreting them (Azoulay, 2011).

The 16 mm film combines still images from the Belfast exposed archive and footage from Community Visual Images, a collection also located in Belfast. A Scottish voice-over ponders on the world during the 34-minute duration of the film, which opens with images of local youth spending time on the streets, doing nothing.

The photographs show the mundane detail of everyday life, an aspect that is emphasized by the ill-composed snapshots from the 'Workshop collection'. The out-of-focus face of a boy is framed by a brick wall, which every detail is sharply drawn. The majority of the photographs included in the slowly evolving montage are those that could easily be discarded in collections and left to a marginalised role; their value and importance are questionable.

[Insert Figure 5]

What is absent in the film are the images of action, of political events, the imagery familiar from the media. The photographs are loaded; the Troubles and its devastation are bubbling beneath the surface, but remain latent. All that is visible of the Troubles are the graffiti, burned cars and torn down houses – the traces of events, not the events themselves.^{xv}

Digitised, catalogued photographs grant the researcher and the artist easy access to the archive. Digital, researched, and contextualised photographs provide a brief glimpse into the Belfast Exposed archive. The small number of pictures available online offer themselves to be scrutinised and analysed by a wider public.

Another body of work that appropriates material from the Belfast Exposed archive is Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *People In Trouble Laughing Pushed To The Ground* (2011).^{xvi} It consists of over a hundred circular black and white photographic prints, *Dots*. These dots refer to small stickers placed on the contact sheets by archivists to mark the images selected for digitisation. The circular area underneath the stickers have been obscured by the stickers' placement, creating a hidden area on the contact sheet. By exposing the area underneath the sticker, the small, insignificant details of the images gain importance.

[Insert Figure 6]

Although *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground* is pregnant with the

sorrow and struggle of the Troubles, the strictly cropped circles display a less volatile, yet at the same time very affective interpretation and representation of the archive. *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed To The Ground* is a pseudo scientific excavation into the archive, an archaeological fieldtrip examining the material traces people have left with their encounter with the archive.

[Insert Figure 7]

Broomberg and Chanarin's work comments on the act of digitisation, on the arbitrariness of the act of choosing images to be digitised, on the unconscious aspect of a conscious, meditated act. Broomberg and Chanarin did not choose to use the digital images to comment on the digitisation process – only the analogue archive. The work grew as a response to, and from, the digitisation process, yet it surpassed the digitised images altogether. The images also play with notions of censorship and control,^{xvii} hinting at elements of Derrida's archons within *Belfast Exposed* itself as well as the larger historical attempts at media censorship by the British government during the Troubles. As Derrida states, 'They [the archons] are also accorder the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archive' (Derrida, 1995:10).

Although the photographs marked with a dot were the ones selected for public display through digitization, at the same time, the area underneath the dot was obscured to those visiting the analogue archive. The person making the selection, placing the dot, exercised archival power over the collection by simultaneously exposing and withholding information.

Broomberg and Chanarin's work is more interested in the structures of the archive, than individual images in it, or their historical value. It examines the influence of the editing process, and the role of the archivists and researchers, the users of the archive, in providing interpretations of it. *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground* presents an archive that has been modified over and over again,

by addressing the processes of exposure and concealment; the exposed circular areas also refer to the mass of material that is not visible to the public; the images Duncan Campbell's film displays.

Belfast Exposed, Archives and the Lacanian Real

In order to situate *Belfast Exposed* within Derrida's psychoanalytic-archival framework, a wider exploration of Lacanian theory is first needed. In Lacanian terms, *Belfast Exposed*, like any photographic archive, is not a concrete thing (despite its presences, both analogue and digital) but rather a method – an ongoing process of creating meaning and reality via the Imaginary-Symbolic relationship of the meaning-creators within the organization and without. Our unconscious need to create a structure around the raw reality of the archive is deeply based in the Symbolic, our socially prescribed structural impetus to do so, and it is through the Imaginary that we consciously create the specific structures that we then use, and attach the meanings to them that we then do. But these connotations of the archive need to be constantly reviewed and reinterpreted as their lack of concrete or fixed definition is tied to their Real-ness – their meanings are never fully fixed, Lacan tells us, as the meanings of language never can be (Lacan, 1993: 137). All forms of communication are fluid as they are contingent upon an otherness that can never be fully defined or known, an otherness that in Lacanian terms is known as the big Other, or the Real. Žižek refers to the Real as the 'hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization' (1989: 169), against which all meaning formation glances off of, but the effect of which is meaning creation, albeit temporal and fluid. As such, the Imaginary-Symbolic definitions and structures of the archive are never enough and we constantly seek to create, recreate, validate and revalidate them. We attempt the temporal illusion of attaching a fixed meaning to them, to give them a concrete sense, but with that fixidity slipping almost immediately after we

do so. This perpetuates the cycle of meaning-creation in the context of time, and to a lesser degree with *Belfast Exposed*, space.

This meaning-creation is, of course, Imaginary, in that we consciously create connections and identifications out of the raw material of the photographic archive – as we know from Barthes, photographs themselves, individually, are devoid of meaning until we as unique individuals and as cultural beings fill them (1977: 17); photographic archives are no different, just larger and more complex. But the drive to do so is largely unconscious, an aspect of the Symbolic, in that we are prompted socially to do so, to give meaning to where we perceive the need for it, to anxiously attempt to fill the threat of the void of meaning created by the Real-ness of the world around us. How much more so with *Belfast Exposed*, where this 'horror of the Real' (Žižek, 1997: 22) is tripled: first by the inherent inadequacy of language itself; second, by the very real traumas of the Troubles (specifically, death and suffering) which the archive, from its very beginning sought to negotiate; and third, by a desire to freely create an alternate, non-traumatic visual identity of Northern Irish people in opposition to that which was largely promoted by the mainstream news media during the period of the Troubles and long after.

Historically, *Belfast Exposed* is representative of Northern Ireland's larger post-traumatic society, in that it has sought to create (both unconsciously and consciously) these new social realities and meanings by way of first creating and gathering photographic images (via individual amateur photographers and community workshops), and then by assembling and reassembling them into categories and groups (via archival work and artistic reappropriation of meaning), contingent upon varying societal contexts within Belfast, Northern Ireland, Ireland and the UK over the past 30 years.

Archive Fever and Belfast Exposed

To bring Lacan's concepts into Derridean terms regarding archives specifically, outlined in Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995), there is clear comparison to be made between linking the notions of the Symbolic order to that of Eros, the pleasure principle, and of the Real to that of Thanatos, the death drive. While the pleasure principle seeks to preserve, in this case the creation of the archive and its archontic and hypomnesic qualities, 'the death drive tends thus to destroy the hypomnesic archive... it is what we call *le mal d'archive*, archive fever' (Derrida, 1995: 14). More simply, this is the psychological aspect to contain and preserve versus the condition to repeat and destroy. In Greek terminology Derrida attributes the former with those powers who control the archive, the archons (Ibid.: 9), and the latter with those elements that would seek to disrupt this control, the anarchivic (Ibid.: 14). Ariella Azoulay expands on Derrida's notions with regard to state power and the historical use of 'official' archives as another element of social control. She states:

'Archive fever is the claim to revolutionize the archive; the claim to a different understanding of the documents it holds, of its supposed purpose, of the right to see them and to act accordingly... Archive fever reveals the binding feature of archival documents in the opposite sense to the way in which they serve the powers that be: they are not the property of these powers, and should be protected from them. They must not be rewritten or changed, they should be made available to whoever might express interest in them, and to serve in any future claim as to the power exerted through and by them' (Azoulay, 2011).

Azoulay pays particular attention to photographic archives and cites a number of contemporary examples of archive fever actively, anarchivically, at work, either via counter-reappropriation of official archive images or through the creation of alternative archives. Interestingly, she situates *Archive Fever* as a historically

recent challenge to dominant ideologies, which poses questions when the developmental history of Belfast Exposed, as discussed earlier, is considered. It would appear that the organization has run almost in reverse to this trend. Unlike the official archives she criticizes, as stated earlier Belfast Exposed began as a form of counter-archive in the early 1980s, opposing predominate news media representations of Northern Ireland from the start and being community-based at a time when communities were at war with one another. As the peace process progressed however and increased funding gradually became more readily available, Belfast Exposed expanded into its digital and later artist-based iterations, gradually leaving behind the community emphasis, the hard political images of the Troubles and the analogue archival project as a whole. While the focus of the organization remained, and remains, broadly political, it has become more adherent to the dominant political ideologies of peace and reconciliation and less likely to challenge them outright, as well as more adherent to business concerns as an art gallery.

This runs somewhat contrary to Azoulay's numerous examples of contemporary anarchivic organizations, archives and galleries. However, the reason behind this can be as numerous and varied as differences between individual and specific archives allow. As Carolyn Steedman implies, the everyday idiosyncrasies of archives, archivists and archival researchers, in all of their iterations, can often result in their taking very little conscious notion of the socio-cultural misuses of power that Derrida writes about. She states:

'Commentators have found remarkably little to say about record offices, libraries, and repositories, and have for the main part been brought face to face with the ordinarieness, the unremarkable nature of archives and the everyday... There is a kind of surprise in such reactions, at encountering something far less portentous, difficult, and meaningful than Derrida's use of the concept of 'archive' would

seem to promise' (Steedman, 2001: 1162).

This is not so much about undercutting Derrida's connections between psychoanalytic social theory and archival theory as it is about simply pointing to the 'ordinariness' of the archive as being a key to this connection. As discussed earlier, for *Belfast Exposed*, financial issues are of concern. Public funding of arts organizations in Northern Ireland has been inexplicably linked to the dominant political rhetoric of the peace process, highlighting a great difficulty for arts organizations to remain autonomous. Additionally, and as stated previously, the very Real horrors of the Troubles also transcend politics and enter personal lives, and a necessary aspect of cultural healing has been having to lock these images away for a period of time (Brewer, 2010: 154). It was for this direct reason that specific analogue images were left out of the digital archives. Despite having cultural significance concerning the Troubles, they were deemed to be too graphic and potentially upsetting for potential viewers of *Gateways*, pointing to emotional factors that Derrida does not explore (Chambers, 2012). As Steedman states, 'The way archives are, is to do with their inhabitants, temporary and permanent, the living and the dead' (Steedman, 2008: 1).

However, it is imperative that the living inhabitants maintain this awareness, to find the balance between archon and anarchiv. As such, Azoulay's solutions to the homogeneous control over archives, either guerrilla re-appropriation and/or the creation of alternate archives, could match well with *Belfast Exposed* in its current and specific situation. With a new executive director in place in 2014 and a renewed focus on community-based projects, the organization could return to its originary ethos and engage more pointedly and directly with Derrida's notion of what a counter-archive, *le mal d'archive*, constitutes: 'It threatens every principality, every achronic primacy, every archival desire' (Derrida, 1995: 14). In Lacanian terms *Belfast Exposed* has the ability to resist the social order of the Symbolic by way of not being afraid to approach the terror of the Real more

closely, be that by pulling past images of the horrors of the Troubles into the present, commissioning artists who will incite controversy, or risking financial destitution by way of biting the political hand that feeds them. It is a dynamic and necessary balance between Eros and Thanatos, life and death, order and chaos, for which the photographic archive is central to in *Belfast Exposed*.

Conclusion

Browsing through the newly launched *Belfast Exposed* website familiar images start appearing – 'Aren't those the hands that appear on the pages of *People in Trouble*?' 'Is that not the car from *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles*?' The images that are familiar from the works of art appear on the organisation's website either in the archive section, or, like in the case of the picture of a young man standing and pointing to the distance, a photograph taken by Danny Burke, is chosen to illustrate a text about the history of *Belfast Exposed*.^{xviii} The very same image, although with additional yellow paint spots, appears in Duncan Campbell's *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* Poster from year 2007. Although the film was not commissioned by *Belfast Exposed*, its influence on the image selection on the organisation's website seems striking – the very image appearing twice, once as a *Belfast Exposed* photograph and once as a poster for an artwork, would suggest that the artworks produced from the archive, or as a response to the archive, feed back into the archive, make the holder of the archive look at the archive in a new way, to acknowledge the over looked imagery.^{xix}

[Insert Figure 8]

Yet this is a looking backwards into the archive for that which cannot be found. In psychoanalytic terms this is a search for Freud's 'lost object' and Lacan's *objet petit a*, as they, like the archive material's original meaning and context, are always-already lost. Steedman comments upon this by looking to Derrida's notion of the archive, the *arkhe*, as "the place where things begin, where power

originates, with power's workings inextricably and for all time bound up with the authority of beginnings, origins and starting points" (Steedman, 2012: 2). She likens this to an illusion, thereby linking the concept of 'origin' with 'truth' in modernist Western society. It is imperative for today's *archivists* to realize this. They must actively acknowledge that archival mining of the past, be it analogue, digital, document and/or artwork, is really about both the present and the future, and that 'origin' is not as much about 'truth' as everyday, ordinary choices are. As Steedman states, 'We need to take all these uses and imaginings of the archive into account, when we're trying to decide what the Archive is' (Ibid., 8).

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Authors Biographies

Patricia Prieto Blanco, (College of Arts,) National University of Ireland Galway, ROI

Patricia Prieto Blanco is a Spanish visual sociologist-media researcher. After graduating in Audiovisual Communication in Madrid, she moved to Germany to complete her Masters in Media Studies at the Ruhr University. She is now based at the Huston School of Film and Digital Media (National University of Ireland, Galway). At the moment, she is immersed in an ethnographic study of contemporary image use by transnational families, in which she explores how photography seems to be employed to overcome space, rather than time nowadays. This theme is at the core of her PhD project, where she also employs photography as research method. Her theoretical work has been published in *Networking Knowledge*, the Postgraduate Journal of MeCCSA, and is part of two different German volumes 'Performanz/Performance' and 'Im Moment des "Mehr". Mediale Prozesse jenseits des Funktionalen'. Her practice-based research has been showcased in the USA, Japan, Ireland, Spain and the UK.

Mirjami Schuppert, (Art and Design Research Institute,) University of Ulster, UK

Mirjami Schuppert is a Finnish curator based in Belfast. Her research focuses are curation and photography archives. She completed her Master in Cultural History at the University of Turku, Finland, before starting to develop her own curatorial projects in Finland, Germany and the UK. She is currently working on a practice-based PhD, funded by the Vice-Chancellor's Research Scholarship, at the University of Ulster, Belfast. Her curatorial practice she deploys dialogical curatorial strategies and is interested in the concept of the curatorial as an open, slowly evolving process. Schuppert's work has been well received and published both in academic and in artistic contexts. She is a member of the Ulster Research Salon, and a co-founder of the European Society for Art and Research (EGFK). Her latest project, Archive Play, is accompanied by a catalogue published by Kehrer Verlag.

Jake Lange, Independent Researcher, UK

Jake Lange is an American photographer and academic working in Ireland and the U.K. He received his BA (Hons) in Media Studies and Photographic Practice from the University of Ulster in 2007, where he is also completing a part-time, practice-based PhD exploring psychoanalytic social theory behind death as a subject in art photography. He has guest-lectured at the Institute for Media Studies - Ruhr-Universität and has presented his academic work at the Helsinki Photomedia Conference as well as for the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA). Outside of his doctoral subject, Jake is a practicing art photographer whose work focuses primarily on abstraction, seriality, entropy and form. He is a member of the Belfast-based Catalyst Arts group as well as the Galway-based Gallery 126. He is a qualified social worker and currently works full-time as a trade union activist for the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA).

* A very early account of this project was briefly presented at the Photomedia Helsinki 2012 by Patricia Prieto-Blanco and Jake Lange. After the addition of Mirjami Schuppert to the research team, however, the scope and depth of the investigation greatly increased in the past two years, which lead us to write this comprehensive piece.

i

The Belfast Exposed archive is like many private archives that have grown organically; that have not been taken care of by an archivist. The organisation of these archives is commonly less methodological than in a larger institution, which are more likely to achieve the ideal of fully indexed collections.

ii Yiakoumaki has developed this methodology for her work as a curator, and in response to the Whitechapel archive, however, the method can be adapted to the use of other archives as well.

iii Citizen photojournalism is possibly slightly misleading as the photographs in the Belfast Exposed archive were not mean for the use of the media. However, the core group, the active members of the organisation shared the ethos with citizen photojournalists; they wanted to record their city, and their neighbourhood for others to see. More on citizen photojournalism: (Palmer, 2013: 119). In Belfast Exposed, the photographs of this category are commonly called the 'political collection', although they are marked as 'B' in the new index and as 'old' in the previous one.

iv The people taking part in the workshop participants are either community groups, and the workshops are directed to them, or they are individuals taking part in training courses open to the public.

v The drive to record everything, to store everything in the archive, is the mal d'archive, the archive fever.

vi Gateways is the name of the digitization project of the analogue archive at Belfast Exposed.

vii Nowadays, it has been agreed that Belfast Exposed will keep all pictures taken by workshop organisers who do not work for Belfast Exposed. Furthermore, every photograph taken during Belfast Exposed workshops is saved on a hard drive. Both participants and Belfast Exposed hold copies (Smith, 31 Jan 2014)

viii This needs some clarification. The analogue archive of Belfast Exposed has been always divided into the 'political' and the 'workshop' collection. This division was extrapolated to the digital archive. However, Gateways is to a very large extent made of images coming from the 'political' collection. As Mervyn Smith is the only active photographer contributing to the 'political collection', while many workshop participants contribute to the 'workshop' collection, the balance of the archive has shifted significantly. (Smith, 31 Jan 2014).

ix In 2005, 34% of EU25 individuals never had used a computer (Van Dijk, 2004:9). In comparison, 51% of EU27 individuals used the internet on a regular basis (once a week), rising up to 70% in 2012 (European Commission, 2013).

x Sue Breakwell defines an archive as 'a set of traces of actions' (2010:98)

xi The gallery started building a new, more contemporary art photography focused exhibition programme, and the archive was seen as a potential problem by the director (Hadaway, 2012).

xii However, as Foster points out, as such artists have been working with archival material since prewar period (Foster, 2004:3)

xiii The film was not commissioned by Belfast Exposed.

xiv Again, it is important to note that approximately half of the images came from Community Visual Images, and it is not possible to identify clearly which images came from the Belfast Exposed archive.

xv The photographs resonate 'late photography', (Campany, 2003).

xvi The work was commissioned by the curatorial team Brown&Bri, who worked as archive curators at the Belfast Exposed for an 18-month period in 2010-11.

xvii Although the photographs marked with a dot were the ones selected for public display through digitization, at the same time, the area underneath the dot was obscured to those visiting the analogue archive. The person making the selection, placing the dot, exercised archival power over the collection by simultaneously exposing and withholding information.

xviii <http://belfastexposed.org/history>

xix An aspect also acknowledged by Pauline Hadaway. (Hadaway, 2012)

SEARCH THE COLLECTIONS: [SEARCH IMAGES](#) [BROWSE CATEGORIES](#) [BROWSE KEYWORDS](#) [RANDOM SELECTION](#)[RANDOM SELECTION](#)**GATEWAYS COLLECTION BROWSER: TUTORIAL**[CLOSE TUTORIAL](#)**MAIN TOPICS:**
CLICK TO JUMP TO TOPIC[WELCOME](#)[VIEWING IMAGES](#)[SEARCH](#)[CATEGORY SEARCH](#)[KEYWORD SEARCH](#)[RANDOM](#)[PHOTO INFORMATION](#)[PHOTO ALBUM](#)[ADDING TO YOUR ALBUM](#)[COMMENT ON A PHOTO](#)[AUDIO COMMENTS](#)[LOG OUT](#)

Displaying 1 to 45 of 45



PUP: ERVINE; SINN FEIN PROTEST 1997

[Home](#) > [Archive - Image Archive](#) > [Political Landscapes](#) > [Political Activists](#) > PUP; Ervine; Sinn Fein Protest 1997



[<< previous](#) | [next >>](#)

Title

PUP; Ervine; Sinn Fein Protest 1997

Archive

Belfast Exposed

Photographer

Workshop Participant

Location

Belfast City Hall, Donegall Square.

Date

1997

Catalogue No.

PacVine52/37-21a

Credit:

© the photographer.

[Request image](#)[Terms of Use and Copyright](#)

Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) leader, MLA and Belfast city councillor David Ervine during a protest by Sinn Fein Youth. The protesters placed a banner over the dome of the entrance portico of Belfast City Hall as part of the Saoirse campaign in 1997, which lobbied for the release of republican prisoners. The PUP is the political wing of the Ulster Volunteer Force, a leading loyalist paramilitary organisation. It is the only loyalist political party that publicly acknowledges its historical alignment with a paramilitary organisation.

[Back to Political Activists](#)



Category

Word: PUP



Taken by a BX workshop participant

IMAGE OF THE WEEK

ALLIANCE PARTY, BELL; SOUP, RODGERS; 1999

WILCOX SMITH



Photo © Wilcox Smith

WSP's ongoing focus on the 2004-2005 election cycle and the role of the media and the public in the process is a continuation of the work that we have done for the past several years. We are currently working on a number of projects that will be published in the coming months.

The focus on the public is a key element of the Community Action Strategy, an initiative for the Community Action Strategy that is designed to help us understand the needs of the community and to help us understand what we can do to help them. The strategy is a key element of our overall strategy and is a key element of our overall strategy. We are currently working on a number of projects that will be published in the coming months.









Captions

- Figure 1: Browsing Gateways at Belfast Exposed.
- Figure 2: Gateways is located upstairs, occupying an empty walking space between the offices and the toilets.
- Figure 3a (left) and 3b (right): Browsing BX online archive before (left) and after (right) the autumn of 2013.
- Figure 4: In the new website, contextual information is only provided for some images featured as “Image of the Week”.
- Figure 5: Falls Burns Malone Fiddles (film still), Duncan Campbell, 2003, SD video, colour/no colour, sound, 33 min.
- Figure 6: Untitled (Legs), People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground, Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, 2011, Fibre-based print, 8” x 10”. Commissioned by Belfast Exposed.
- Figure 7: Untitled (People saluting), People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground, Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, 2011, Fibre-based print, 8” x 10”. Commissioned by Belfast Exposed.
- Figure 8a (left) and 8b (right): Left: Falls Burns Malone Fiddles Poster, Duncan Campbell, 2007. Screen print on paper. Right: Belfast Exposed, Danny Burke, circa 1985