

Neil Armstrong: re-Possession

"Hey mister... what are you doing... can we help?"

A student type photographing the back lanes of *Benwell was always going to be a magnet for local kids. Their enthusiasm was infectious; I invited them to take part.

Forty two years later three of us met up again to replay that first encounter; to re-make something out of nothing.

At the same time as I was taking those early photos, 'conceptual' artist Victor Burgin was busy appropriating the language of advertising in order to deconstruct the mechanics of persuasion. At a certain moment in time his work, and my proximity to it, converged.

Issues around the unequal distribution of wealth, opportunity and the mechanics of mass persuasion seem as relevant today as they were in Thatcher's Britain and are as good a place to start as any when considering Caroline street as it is now.

My 1976 photographs could have been called *'found piece of timber used to chalk a representation of itself.'* They were taken with a certain nod in the direction of Lucy Lippard's book *'Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972'*, my bible of choice during the latter part of three years as a Fine Art student in Newcastle in the 70s. I was embarking on my own dematerialisation of the art object and had not intended that anything so emotive as child centric imagery would become part of my work.

The photos lived under my bed for a lot of years, only resurfacing recently when I began developing this project.

Reacquainted with my now grown up subjects, I have borrowed the notion of 'possession' from Burgin's original work, and applied it to the present day. I was there when the original posters were being pasted onto walls around Newcastle in 1976; saw the print run being delivered to the Robert Self Gallery, yet

over time, this work has gained more personal significance to me than it had when I lived in Caroline street.

With the distance of years, my 1976 photos seem to have acquired historical gravity. I was determinedly not a 'social photographer', identifying instead as an artist, yet despite my intentions, the passage of time has bestowed a social documentarian characteristic upon those pictures regardless. I'm not sure how I feel about that.

For sure though, the appearance of my four unsolicited and curious subjects on that sunny 1976 afternoon did add hugely to what would otherwise have produced a dry, academic photograph of wall and chalk, and they are one of the main reasons I began this re-imagining. I am grateful for their injection of the playful into my otherwise oh so formal explorations. My older more confident self is now engaging with the adults my subjects have become, in an attempt to try figure out where we all sit in the bigger picture. I am no longer concerned with art movement categorisation, only with the process of discovery.

First time round I was on my own patch, the back lane of my flat; literally making art in my own back yard. Now I am a visitor, a researcher intent on re-imagining and finding out how this empty space informs other lives as well as my own.

When we recently walked along the sea of grass that is now Caroline Street, Angela and John mapped out where their front and back doors used to be... and those of their friends. The walls became solid and the street and back lanes were once again populated with sounds, games, and domestic politics.

They were not encouraged to play with certain undesirable family members. The older boy in my photos reached adolescence only to be fatally assaulted outside a supermarket just up the road. Even now there is a reticence to say the name of the 'notorious local family' member who was sent down for his manslaughter. The prevailing opinion is that

justice was not done.

His sister, the younger girl in my photos, recently also passed away and I hear from her son. He has seen my photos in the Evening Chronicle via a 'where are they now?' type feature published recently and widely circulated in an attempt to find my long lost subjects.

The two remaining children, Angela and John (also sister and brother as it turns out) still live in Newcastle upon Tyne. Angela lived in the United States as an adult, but has come back to reside within eight hundred metres of the wall I photographed her against in 1976. With a bird's eye view, she now looks down from one of the flats that rise above Caroline Street. When I visit her there she points out we can see that very same wall from her window now the street has been flattened.

All these years later I am appropriating their image once again in order to ponder the interplay between words, image and meaning. In today's world many people are increasingly sceptical of what they read. Words written on the side of party political buses promising an extra £350 million a week for the National Health Service are blatantly misleading; presidents of world powers invent 'alternative truths' in the pursuit of popularity. If by being 'creative' we mean to construct a unique vision which might enrich collective minds that's something many would consider a noble ambition. The flip side of this 'creative thinking' however presents as intentional acts of deceit, concealment and exploitation.

The relationship between questions, 'facts' and statistics is as tenuous today as it ever was yet we are still invited to accept that there is such a thing as 'truth'. Burgin's work encourages examination of the mechanics of a media truth; mine considers society as it has evolved since those posters hit the streets of Newcastle and asks the same question.

I have used Burgin's work as a foil to my own because it forms part of my lived experience and resonates for me. I have appropriated it because it resides as part of my memory of that time, and because I think it

has importance in the context of this piece of rough land, this demolished street, and the questions that delinquent space now pose. Caroline Street is as palpable today as when it was standing; a sea of grass grasping at the detritus that tumbles through it.

Victor Burgin's poster piece was intended for the street. Caroline Street has for now moved from its place of origin into the gallery. Co-opting him into Caroline Street may be a subversion of Burgin's original intent for his own work (though he is no stranger to subversion himself) but hopefully giving it a roof and a different context is less of a transgression of concept and more an evolution of the original idea.

Neil Armstrong 2019

* Benwell is in the west end of Newcastle. Streets were named after the nine children of the local 19th century Buddle and Atkinson families, hence the name Caroline Street. The coming of the railway, followed by Armstrong's munitions factory in 1847 heralded a boom in house building. Tyneside flats, where two separate dwellings were combined in a single house, were laid out in a gridiron pattern, following the fashion in America. Once thriving, the area has been in need of re-development for many years, formerly being famous for the nostalgic scenes of North East industrial decay used as a backdrop to the 1971 film 'Get Carter'.