John Umney, Student # 276778

Course: PH3, Sustaining Your Practice

Assignment Three: Work Experience

Title: “Living the Life”

Word count without quotations &c. 2222

Word count with quotations &c. 2259

Figure 1 Umney, archive family photograph – photographer unnamed

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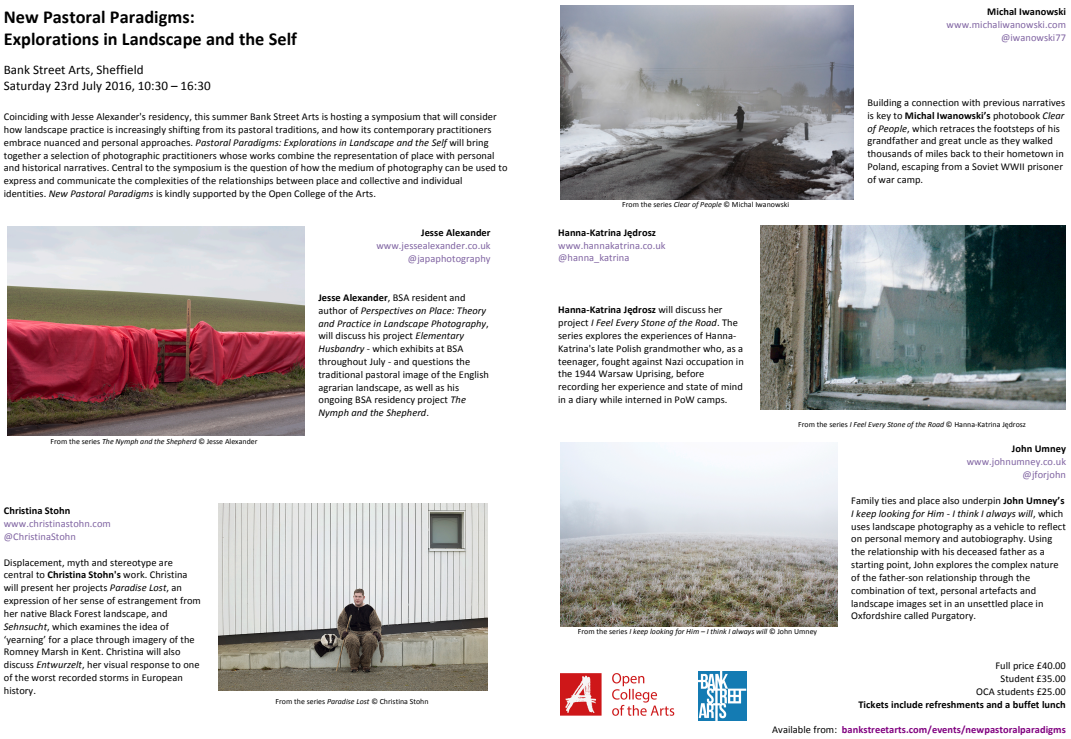

New Pastoral Paradigms:
Explorations in Landscape and the Self

Bank Street Arts, Sheffield
Saturday 23rd July 2016, 10:30 – 16:30

Coinciding with Jesse Alexander's residency, this summer Bank Street Arts is hosting a symposium that will consider how landscape practice is increasingly shifting from its pastoral traditions, and how its contemporary practitioners embrace nuanced and personal approaches. *Pastoral Paradigms: Explorations in Landscape and the Self* will bring together a selection of photographic practitioners whose works combine the representation of place with personal and historical narratives. Central to the symposium is the question of how the medium of photography can be used to express and communicate the complexities of the relationships between place and collective and individual identities. *New Pastoral Paradigms* is kindly supported by the Open College of the Arts.

From the series *The Nymph and the Shepherd* © Jesse Alexander

Jesse Alexander
www.jessealexander.co.uk
@japaphotography

Jesse Alexander, BSA resident and author of *Perspectives on Place: Theory and Practice in Landscape Photography*, will discuss his project *Elementary Husbandry* - which exhibits at BSA throughout July - and questions the traditional pastoral image of the English agrarian landscape, as well as his ongoing BSA residency project *The Nymph and the Shepherd*.

Christina Stohn
www.christinastohn.com
@ChristinaStohn

Displacement, myth and stereotype are central to **Christina Stohn's** work. Christina will present her projects *Paradise Lost*, an expression of her sense of estrangement from her native Black Forest landscape, and *Sehnsucht*, which examines the idea of 'yearning' for a place through imagery of the Romney Marsh in Kent. Christina will also discuss *Entwurzelt*, her visual response to one of the worst recorded storms in European history.

From the series *Paradise Lost* © Christina Stohn

From the series *Clear of People* © Michal Iwanowski

Michal Iwanowski
www.michaliwanowski.com
@iwanowski77

Building a connection with previous narratives is key to **Michal Iwanowski's** photobook *Clear of People*, which retraces the footsteps of his grandfather and great uncle as they walked thousands of miles back to their hometown in Poland, escaping from a Soviet WWII prisoner of war camp.

Hanna-Katrina Jędrosz
www.hannakatrina.co.uk
@hanna_katrina

Hanna-Katrina Jędrosz will discuss her project *I Feel Every Stone of the Road*. The series explores the experiences of Hanna-Katrina's late Polish grandmother who, as a teenager, fought against Nazi occupation in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, before recording her experience and state of mind in a diary while interned in PoW camps.

From the series *I Feel Every Stone of the Road* © Hanna-Katrina Jędrosz

From the series *I keep looking for Him – I think I always will* © John Umney

John Umney
www.johnumney.co.uk
@jforjohn

Family ties and place also underpin **John Umney's** *I keep looking for Him - I think I always will*, which uses landscape photography as a vehicle to reflect on personal memory and autobiography. Using the relationship with his deceased father as a starting point, John explores the complex nature of the father-son relationship through the combination of text, personal artefacts and landscape images set in an unsettled place in Oxfordshire called Purgatory.

Open College of the Arts

BANK STREET ARTS

Full price £40.00
Student £35.00
OCA students £25.00
Tickets include refreshments and a buffet lunch

Available from: **bankstreetarts.com/events/newpastoralparadigms**

Figure 2 Alexander, publicity sheet for "*New Pastoral Paradigms: Explorations in Landscape and the Self*" Symposium Sheffield 2016

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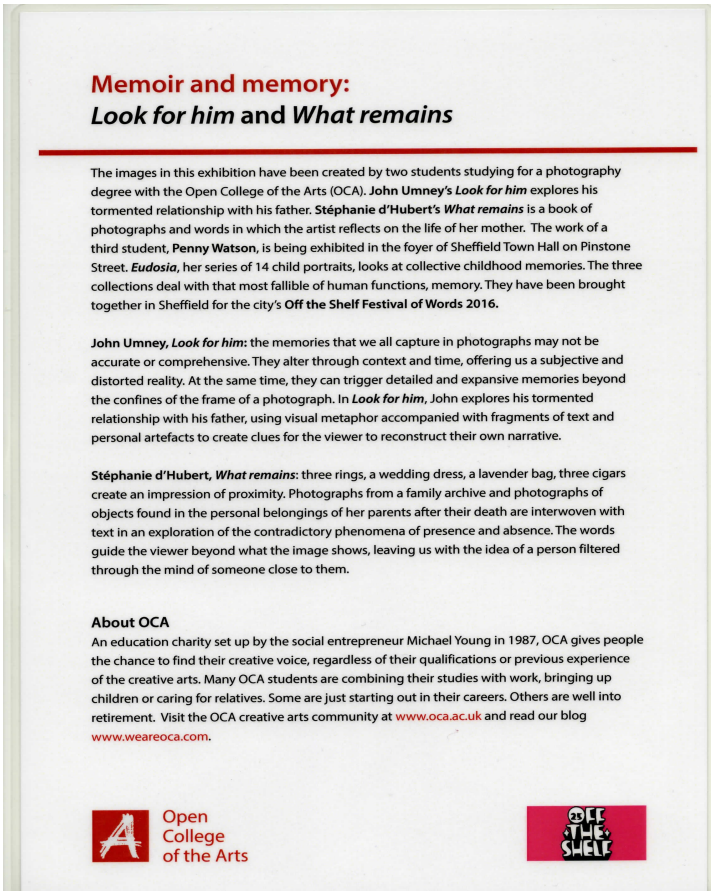

Memoir and memory:
Look for him* and *What remains

The images in this exhibition have been created by two students studying for a photography degree with the Open College of the Arts (OCA). **John Umney's *Look for him*** explores his tormented relationship with his father. **Stéphanie d'Hubert's *What remains*** is a book of photographs and words in which the artist reflects on the life of her mother. The work of a third student, **Penny Watson**, is being exhibited in the foyer of Sheffield Town Hall on Pinstone Street. ***Eudosia***, her series of 14 child portraits, looks at collective childhood memories. The three collections deal with that most fallible of human functions, memory. They have been brought together in Sheffield for the city's **Off the Shelf Festival of Words 2016.**

John Umney, *Look for him*: the memories that we all capture in photographs may not be accurate or comprehensive. They alter through context and time, offering us a subjective and distorted reality. At the same time, they can trigger detailed and expansive memories beyond the confines of the frame of a photograph. In ***Look for him***, John explores his tormented relationship with his father, using visual metaphor accompanied with fragments of text and personal artefacts to create clues for the viewer to reconstruct their own narrative.

Stéphanie d'Hubert, *What remains*: three rings, a wedding dress, a lavender bag, three cigars create an impression of proximity. Photographs from a family archive and photographs of objects found in the personal belongings of her parents after their death are interwoven with text in an exploration of the contradictory phenomena of presence and absence. The words guide the viewer beyond what the image shows, leaving us with the idea of a person filtered through the mind of someone close to them.

About OCA
An education charity set up by the social entrepreneur Michael Young in 1987, OCA gives people the chance to find their creative voice, regardless of their qualifications or previous experience of the creative arts. Many OCA students are combining their studies with work, bringing up children or caring for relatives. Some are just starting out in their careers. Others are well into retirement. Visit the OCA creative arts community at www.oca.ac.uk and read our blog www.weareoca.com.

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OFF THE SHELF

Figure 3 OCA, Exhibition and artist list, "*Off the Shel*f" Festival, Sheffield 2016

Introduction

This essay presents three case studies relating to “Work Experience” undertaken through the final stages of Level Three Photography (PH3). It will outline various aspects of practical involvement within contemporary photography in relation to exhibiting and presenting work, collaboration, networking and engagement.

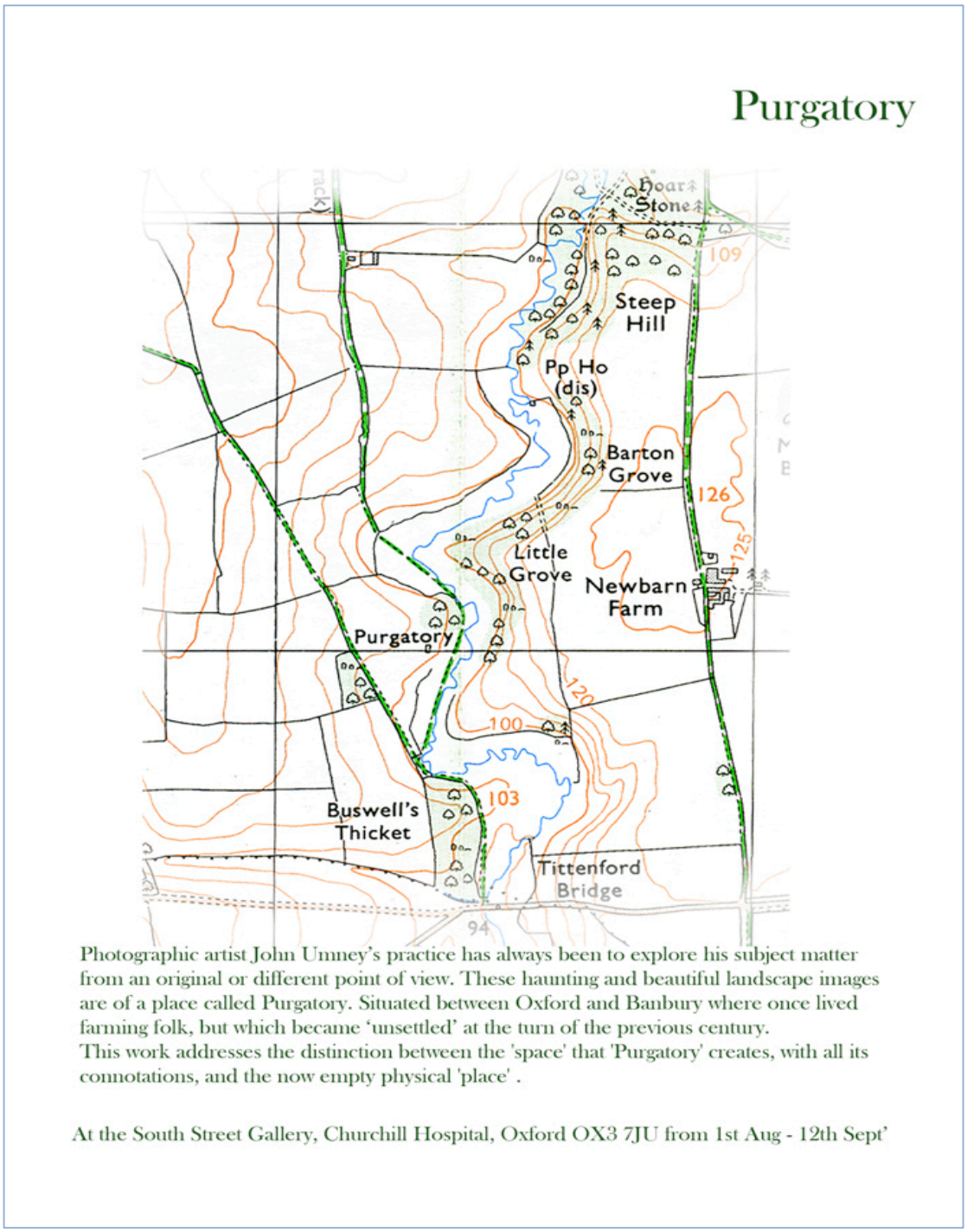

Figure 4 Umney, Artist context at the South Street Gallery "I keep looking for him, I think I always will." 2015. Note the exhibition was extended for a further six weeks at the request of the gallery.

Case study 1– The Exhibition

Figure 5Figure 4 Umney, OCA Level Three Group Exhibition - Nuffield Orthopaedic Hospital, Oxford

The "White Wall" gallery experience is still the most common method by which artists disseminate their work to an audience. During this final phase of study, I have managed to exhibit my work in the following places:

- Group L3 show in the Nuffield Orthopaedic hospital permanent art space, Oxford.
- A solo show in South Street Gallery, Churchill hospital, Oxford.[1]
- Oxford Artweeks.
- "Off the Shelf" Festival, Sheffield.

I was offered the opportunity to exhibit in the permanent artspace in the Nuffield Orthopaedic hospital because of my involvement as a volunteer with the Oxford NHS, and in particular the Warneford Mental health hospital where I had been working with dementia patients. The idea for a group L3 show came about from discussions with fellow student Penny Watson as a way of developing a sense of community with other Level Three students, the chance to collaborate with other students and to collectively experience the issues associated with hanging work in a public space.

[1] South Street Gallery: http://www.ouh.nhs.uk/artlink/exhibitions/south-street-gallery.aspx

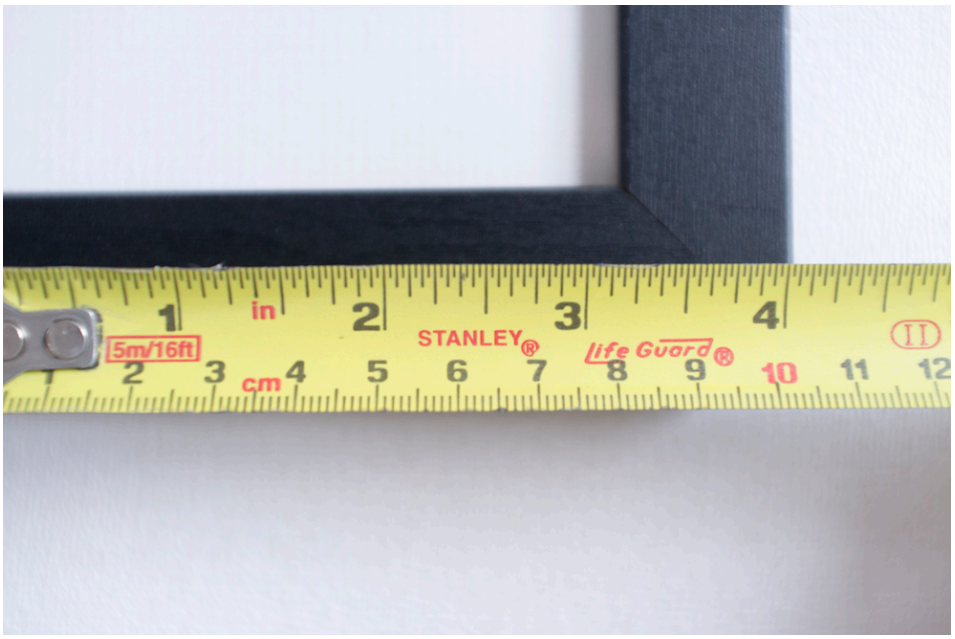

Figure 6 Umney - detail guidance on measurements

I had previously exhibited in Oxford Artweeks, one of the largest "artist studio" events in the country (as well as a number of other non-professional exhibitions) and so had experience in mounting and framing. I decided to mount and frame all the contributing artists in order to set and maintain a common standard in presenting the work on the wall.

Early on we made the decision to set the number of prints to seven and therefore the number of artists would be limited which determined it would be a competitive process. In the end the down selection wasn't that difficult, but it allowed a conversation around the ideas that were presented which kept the focus on the work.

Lessons learned included:

- Deciding on the aesthetics of presentation i.e. all the photographs were mounted and placed into similar sized black framed frames and the height (of the top-side) on the wall was consistent. Some exceptions to these restrictions were negotiated.
- Costs weren't inconsiderable. I sought funding from the college which covered a significant proportion of the expenses; without securing that fund the show would have had difficulties presenting a professional show. The College also helped with PR to local press (Oxford Times).
- Creating a sense of identity for the show – its purpose both as a vehicle for the contributing students and for the College was important both for those students/college but also in how it was perceived in a wider context – press, peers etc. – see page 10
- Be prepared for the unexpected. There were a number of complaints surrounding one body of work which was subsequently taken down. With hindsight it might have been predicted, though no-one within the clinical network i.e. not part of the College, had identified any potential issue with the work.

Benefits:

- It enabled a Tutor led "Study day"[2] providing an opportunity to have the work critiqued in an exhibition environment and a critique of the curatorial decisions.
- Another gallery in The Churchill Hospital became aware of my work and asked me to exhibit in their gallery – a solo show of three months. This further opportunity allowed me to arrange my BoW project in a specific order and invite critique on narrative and sequencing. This further informed the final edit process in a way that virtual presentation would have struggled.

The principle contact within the hospital space is a practicing artist and it was useful to be able to test ideas on him as the ideas matured. However one the significant benefits of exhibiting was the continued development of a network of artist contacts. As already stated the solo show at the South Street gallery came about because of that network and further photographic work also stemmed from it.

Figure 7, "Off the Shelf Festival" 2016 catalogue entry. Note the catalogue was published before the space allocation was decided on. Umney & d'Hubert exhibited in Sheffield Cathedral, Watson in Sheffield Town Hall

[2] OCA tutor led Study Visit: https://weareoca.com/photography/study-visit-memory/

Case Study Two – The Artist Talk

The artist talk at the "*New Pastoral Paradigms: Explorations in Landscape and the Self*" at Bank Street Arts, Sheffield was, as I expected, a far more daunting prospect than exhibiting the work in a gallery setting. However it provided the most significant developmental outcomes. I had informally presented on a previous occasion to an audience of academics and artists at a "Family Ties Network" event at the Glasgow School of Art.[3]

Figure 8 Umney, "Episodes" an alternate presentation of the work "*I keep looking for him, I think I always will*" at the Glasgow School of Art November 2015

The process I decided upon for the "Artist Talk" can be described as follows:

- Planning[4]
  - Format
  - Preparedness
- Ideas of narration – what to tell and the notion of performance
- Rehearsal and critique

[3] Blog post of my reflections from the Glasgow School of Art event: https://sypjsu.wordpress.com/2015/11/23/attraction-as-a-distraction-feedback-from-gsofa/

[4] Planning covers two areas: format & narration and are intertwined with the process of rehearsal and critique.

In respect of presentation I had two ideas at the start: To either narrate each image or, to narrate a broader version of the imagery – attempting to critically align the experience, however well or badly remembered, with a talk as a structural ally to the visual imagery. I decided not to dwell on the specific images but to develop imagery around the work developed from the research undertaken around memory. Another essential aspect of the talk I felt was to consider the notion of a narrative 'arc'. The image sequence had been through many iterations and had a purposeful arc and one that had been tested in front of an audience of students a week prior to the talk. However it was equally important to comprehend that visual 'arc' during the accompanying narration. Feedback suggested that I largely achieved that end. I felt it was important for the concept not to lead the viewer through each image content, but to rely on the viewer to combine the twin imagery of photograph and spoken text.

The performative nature of an "Artist Talk" suggests a process of rehearsal as the twin strands of timing and delivery are vital components to a successful "talk". My technique was to develop a set of bullet points that prompted both the order of the talk and what it was that I wanted to say. I had considered writing a text that would occupy the allotted time, but experience at a conference close to the event suggested that that technique would make it more difficult to develop engagement with the audience. The initial purpose of the rehearsal phase was to indicate the duration of the talk and then, subsequently, the narrative structure. Rehearsing alone first and then in front of willing volunteers before a "live" run – in my case the Thames Valley Student Group – were vital.

The experience of performing in front of an audience delivers a conversation with the work mediated by the audience reaction and is akin, I suspect, to a formal critique of the work. The result is, or at least it was for me, a new perspective on the work. The first rehearsal with the student group helped me to 'feel' the work in a public space and the second performance at the Symposium further developed it.

The "Talk" was captured on video[5] and has become part a valuable component of my C.V. Additionally the event itself provided many opportunities to develop my network of artists and I have been asked to curate a show "riffing" on the ideas developed at the seminar in an exhibition in Summer 2017 and one where I have decided to collaborate with a fellow artist on the panel.

[5] A video of the talk can be viewed on line here: https://johnumneyblog.wordpress.com/2016/10/30/new-pastoral-paradigms-explorations-in-landscape-and-the-self-bank-street-arts-sheffield-23rd-july-2016/

Case Study Three – Collaboration

It is more difficult for students to collaborate in a virtual campus. I was shown a copy of the Level Three course during the latter stages of Level Two and noticed it mentioned the development of a network of artists.

Figure 9 Watson/Umney, call for entry to OCA level three student exhibition, 2015

I started a (photographic) print group (Forum) around fifteen years ago and so have an idea of the difficulties in developing and maintaining a network. Forum group members were recruited by me from various places – about half of them I had never met before. It requires energy and commitment to make it happen and the sense of momentum is critically dependent on the members of the group – as with any other collection of individuals. It has to be made worthwhile and reciprocal. The following examples are examples of collaborative ventures that have proven successful, in one way or another:

Figure 10 Umney, Stephanie d'Hubert's installation at "*Off the Shelf*" Festival, Sheffield Cathedral 2016

- Level Three Group exhibition in Oxford. *See page 5.*

- Level Three study weekend – June 2015[6]
    - Along with Penny Watson we organized a photography study weekend in Barnsley.
        - With two OCA tutors.
        - Two visiting artists – John Davies and Laura Pannack.
        - Dedicated scheduled Crit's for each student.

[6] Link to my blog post of the Study Visit :
https://umneybow.wordpress.com/2015/06/23/a-busy-time/

        - Social and networking time.
- Sheffield's "Off the Shelf" Festival October 2016[7]
    - Practical
        - Facilities in Sheffield Town Hall and Cathedral.
        - Dealing with suppliers.

    - Curatorial
        - Where to situate the work physically.
        - How to display the work.

- Invited Artist talks[8]
    - Fiona Yaron-Field
    - Johanna Ward
    - Chloe Dewe Mathews

- Cohorts
    - Physical
        - Forum – pre-existing print study group
        - Thames Valley Group
    - Virtual
        - Initial cohort with students of my choosing.
        - Fellow Student Stan Dickinson's L3 "Hangout".
        - Facebook and Student Site.

I had wondered when I started the course how amicable artist's would be to cooperate and I have largely found them to be extremely helpful and keen to talk about their work. The study visits with artist talks that I've organized have been extremely valuable both in terms of developing an understanding of their work but also in establishing connections in a developing network.

The student events (in Barnsley and Oxford) have also been very valuable in developing a pseudo-cohort in that I feel confident in asking for advice, critique and the development of conversations. There is something very immediate about the physical interchange of a print in return for comment – there is less room to hide for both parties.

I have been involved with the Thames Valley Group since its inception, it has also proved to be a valuable space to meet fellow students, exchange views and share experience. The continued presence of an OCA tutor also adds to the rigour to the

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[7] Student review by Stan Dickinson:
https://stansocasyp.wordpress.com/2016/10/30/_trashed/

[8] Links to these talks:
Fiona Yaron Field: https://weareoca.com/photography/ocasa-study-visit/
Johanna Ward: https://weareoca.com/photography/johanna-ward/
Chloe Dewe Mathews: https://weareoca.com/photography/artists-talk-chloe-dewe-mathews/

proceedings and the College and Student Association have proved very supportive.

Figure 10, Umney, OCA students at the South Street Gallery Exhibition – "*I keep looking for him, I think I always will*", Oxford 2015

Conclusion

In an age where activity within an environment can be largely, if not totally, virtual it was a conscious decision to become increasingly actively and physically involved with what might be described as the "industry" of *Art*. Whilst the two exhibitions were both spaces that didn't rely on artist presence, I did decide to organize trips with other students to experience reaction to the work. I found that purposefully engaging with other students and artists has benefitted my learning experience greatly and that that networking has helped my progress considerably in terms of appreciating how I might move forward, both as an artist and practioner.