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frenchmattershead: shops



Shops, currently exhibiting at Site Gallery, Sheffield is the culmination of a two year international project by artists Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead. The artists have travelled extensively in this period, investigating the communities and relationships that are formed around shops. The gallery show is a presentation of some of the material they have amassed, ranging from formal photographs of shops and their customers to documents of their process and interviews with shoppers around the world.

Let's start with your current exhibition. What will someone see when they walk into it?

Rebecca: They are looking at traces of events that have happened in local shops around the world. So in each case we have worked with local shops by asking them to invite

their customers to do a sort of performative event in front of the cameras that somehow represents our experience of being in that shop. The end result could be a photograph, it could be a video, it could be a text or a publication.

In a way, the shops are almost incidental. Rather, in a way what you get is a sort of portrait of an element of that country or that city, or some kind of values or some kind of community that exist around shops. Shops are a kind of filter for us, rather than the main focus. The focus for us is more people and places and the identity of the people around those shops.

You said you posed people for the photos. How did that work?

R: We set a time for people to arrive and then whoever turned up, say one

person or fifty people, we put them together and placed them or posed them. If there were a lot of people, then maybe they were posed quite still and if there were fewer we asked them to be more playful and perform out their relationships to the shop or their relationships to each other. Then we took a lot of photos.

Andrew: But this is a description primarily of the group photos strategy where it's not really us doing the inviting. It's the shopkeepers themselves who we asked to invite their customers. So it's subverting their relationship between buyer and seller. And the idea of this just being an exchange of money to goods is changed into a sort of personal invitation from me to you to come and be a part of our gang, our group photo outside the shop. It's a question of identity. Do you want to be a part of this picture? Do you not



Istanbul, Turkey

want to be a part of this picture?

But then we kind of formulated other kinds of strategies, other than the group photos. These were more akin to the sort of nature of the shop or the nature of the commerce. So its some times double portraits, sometimes solo portraits of customers looking through kind of kiosk holes.

You've got quite a lot of elements of human geography in your work. Do you consider yourself as artists first and foremost?

R: Artists only!

A: It's such a broad term isn't it. And it isn't to say that we are not interested in human geography and, we do interact with it in some ways. I have bought the books and read the books. For example Peter Jackson, a professor at the University of Sheffield, I read a book of his "Maps of Meaning" which has been very helpful to my practice. And on this project, he is writing a piece for our book. And I thought, yeah, super. It seemed a pretty good fit. He has an interest in the geography of shopping.

So I think we do have a practice, in process similar to human geography research. But really, what is research? It's just going and speaking to people and recording it, and then at some point analysing it, to support your hypothesis, except we don't go in with a hypothesis.

R: All we come out with is a nice photo and a lot of stories!

So instead of going in with a hypothesis, you go in with an intervention?

A: Yes. It is the intervention which is there to try and shed some insight on life. Either for those living that life,

and they are unaware. Asking them to question again how they relate to their shops and communities. Or in the gallery, with the people looking at it.

The exhibition takes in a large range of places and shoppers. How did you manage to link these disparate places together? Was it through a method when you got there?

R: Yeah, we did a blog as we went along. And, its the show that links them together. I mean they weren't explicitly linked. We knew we wanted to do something with shop when we got there.

A: Also that we had the same equipment, the same camera and video camera a clip board and an approach and a question about shops.

So, you walked in and said I'd like to do something with you and then you did it. When it came to taking the photos, how did it work?

R: Half we took ourselves, you know just on a sort of Wednesday afternoon. But if we were taking a photo of say fifty people, then it was really helpful to have someone to deal with the technical aspects. So we'd chose the frame and then direct someone. Then we would set them up and sort of place and pose everybody, and then when it came to take the photo, they could do all the sort of technical bits to make it look good. But also to do things like say, look at the camera, in the appropriate language from behind the camera

A: For example, there are eleven pictures from the butcher in Istanbul and seven were taken by us and then the other four by a local photographer. It depends on who's around. And, unfortunately it was budget as well, if we could afford to have a professional photographer follow us around all the time it would be amazing!

R: Yes, so we just used them when we thought it would be useful. But it's a kind of technical collaboration, not a creative one. We planned exactly how it would look, and then they would show up at four o'clock or whatever. It's hugely planned, we plan everything.

How did you choose the places?

A: they come about through different means. Sometimes you chose them and sometimes they choose you. A lot of it was dictated by funding.

What sort of reactions have you had in different places?

A: There's a whole bunch of things going on in these photographs and videos which make it kind of complicated. You address that you have one point of view coming from one culture. For example, here you might say 'Yeah, we're being supermarket-ised' and the grow your own at home is becoming a part of our culture as a positive thing... and then you go to somewhere like Romania, where it is a sort of opposite. The supermarkets are fashionable. And the home grown is being eroded, slowly. There is no one overarching thing that we are trying to communicate with the exhibition. Instead, we are trying to show everything together. To suggest the scope of potential of different societies through their shops. And there is the opportunity to compare one with the other, and to make connections if necessary. Or see differences, and for those differences to be embraced.

Are there any surprising themes that come through or that the project might be about?

A: In a way, the project is about control. One thing I really like about the shops the we have been looking out for is this aspect of control they either have or don't have over their daily routine and their lives.

Can you elaborate on that?

R: Well we tried to make a project with a big supermarket in Romania. And I went to see the marketing director about it and she loved the project and that she absolutely wanted to do something with us. All she had to do was to check it out with her head office, and it's a yes. And then it never happened. They never got back to us. So to contrast that with a small shop, where it is just the owner and you go in and can make a face to face decision. It's up to them, they say yes or no. Everyone is in positions of personal power within their own lives. In China for example, institutions made it really problematic for us to do anything.

But on a small independent shop basis people have that power over their lives.

A: Sometimes it fails as well, because people have control and influence. We went to a sex shop in Norwich called the Love Store. And the owner of it was really great and loved the idea. But his employee was less so, and it was his employee that was the main face. So it completely fell flat. And I quite liked that, that he had the control within himself, to not do something he didn't want to do.

R: Whereas, when you work for Tesco, you have to follow the party lines some times.

At the beginning of the interview you said something about portraits of cities?

R: They present a portrait of that city at that time. For example, in Istanbul there is this butcher's shop, fairly close to the city centre, in this neighbourhood where people migrated to from Eastern Turkey all at the same time. So all these people know each other, they have grown up together, and there is a lot of trust in this neighbourhood. So when you've got a photograph of people who then trust the butcher with their door keys and then the parents who ask the the butcher to look after their children and that says something kind of specific about the closeness and the trust that is in that neighbourhood in a way that we wouldn't have had at the kiosk at Romanian. Which is more about people wanting Monte Carlo cigarettes or uni-rear butter which says something more about communism and shifting patterns of consumption. So I think in each place, the shops do say quite about the places they are in. But then we know it's there, and perhaps you'd have to tell us if you saw that from looking at the work and not knowing the back stories.

A: Of course the back stories are there, they are hinted at. I like the fact that we can draw a parallel, once in Istanbul, between the woman that buys the chicken for her pet cat. the pet cat eats the same chicken that is sold to the best restaurants or hotels in the posher side of Istanbul. So there is this image of just knowing he supplies both, and you get rich people eat cat food and cats eating posh chicken. ■