

# ENGLISH ANXIETIES

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'... spies, pryers, mass-eavesdroppers, nosey parkers, peeping-toms, lopers, snoopers, envelope-steamers, keyhole artists, sex maniacs, sissies, society playboys...'

Humphrey Spender, *Worktown People: Photographs from Northern England, 1937-38*, ed. J. Mulford, Falling Wall Press, 1982

Humphrey Spender's list of names by which Mass Observation (MO) were 'affectionately' known, reflects a mix of jokes, prurience, class tensions and wider social fears. Certain anxieties are evident in what was a vanguard experiment into recording the everyday that initially combined writers, artists, anthropologists, photographers and poets with people from all walks of life. It is this encounter between social science and other disciplines that makes such a project so distinctive. In doing so, it represented the ideals of a younger generation in the 1930s, one that saw exciting cultural possibilities in connecting disciplines and various ways of seeing. In many respects, MO was an idealistic pursuit of knowledge based on the power of 'facts'. The interactions between art and science that shaped the early thinking were indeed an innovative approach to illuminating ordinary social lives. However, the moments where this cross-disciplinary dialogue took place were all too brief.

MO grew out of a chance encounter in the pages of the *New Statesman*, where a poem by Tom Harrisson, 'Coconut Moon', was published in proximity to a letter by Charles Madge on the idea of an 'anthropology at home'. Harrisson had returned to Britain in 1936 where he immersed himself in the industrial north of England after previous anthropological fieldwork undertaken in the Pacific on the remote island of Malekula. This method of 'participant observation' was taken to another level by MO who combined reports by trained and untrained

observers in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of everyday life. At the same time, a loosely formed group based in London had already begun to think about ways of mapping and interpreting the collective unconscious of England in the wake of the abdication of Edward VIII. These separate but complementary projects found their collective expression in January 1937, when, following a meeting, a brief manifesto of MO's aims was published. At this time the core members were the poet and *Daily Mirror* journalist Charles Madge, the painter, writer and filmmaker Humphrey Jennings, and the ornithologist and explorer Tom Harrisson. However, the group had support from Madge's colleagues including his wife the poet Kathleen Raine, Stuart Legg, who worked with Jennings on the GPO Film Unit, and Surrealist painter David Gascoyne. In his book on *The Auden Generation* (1972), Samuel Hynes described the group's disciplinary interests as '...literary and scientific, realist and surrealist, political and psychological. Marxist and Freudian, objective and Salvationist... a mixture of such contradictory elements as would seem to guarantee its failure.'

Tim Brennan's latest work *English Anxieties* has grown out of a commission between Ffotogallery and Photoworks, in association with the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex and the European Centre for Photographic Research at the University of Wales, Newport. For the last year Brennan has sifted through a myriad of archive boxes and folders, consisting of handwritten and typed reports, drawings and printed ephemera, originally gathered to provide some insight into the social worlds that MO looked to map and analyse from its inception in 1937. In previous work including *Museum of Angels*, *Codex: Crusade* and *Republic of Atlantis*, Brennan has offered us a working model for the role of the artist as historian. *English Anxieties* continues the mining of history with a series of reflections on cultural value and social agency, Modernism, power and paranoia, and the materiality of the archive.

For the commissioners, this project marks an ongoing partnership around shared interests in the visual dimensions of MO that have to date received little attention. In this bookwork we find gestures towards reclaiming the entangled randomness of daily life in both ordinary and extreme situations. To this end, Brennan has focused on a small number of boxes that are representative of the conceptual beginnings of the organisation as one of the most creative experiments in the history of British sociology. The content for *English Anxieties* is drawn from boxes of observations made on art, astrology, photography and wall chalkings, including the mysterious report by TC Lethbridge on Fifth Column activity in the Cambridgeshire area. In the previous pages, Brennan combines an archival style, that of record photography, with references to Modernist forms. The pastel buff folders, the geometry of these assemblages made of press cuttings from newspapers and magazines, typed observations, notes, drawings, point towards official and unofficial knowledge. Everything here becomes a clue to a bigger order of things, material fragments that are both expressions as well as codes of the everyday.

With reference to *Unprofessional Painting*, a modest catalogue that accompanied an exhibition of the paintings by the Ashington Miners between 1939 and 1940, Brennan highlights challenges made to the dominant institutional order of art. Here the collision of Modernism with the academy professional and amateur artist, introduces a question about art's relationship to ideology. The social realism of the Ashington Miners, or the encounter with the 'real' represented by pavement artists working in the street, are seen in relation to the arrangement of artefacts that suggest a lingering formalism. Brennan collapses contradictions within Modernism as something socially progressive on the one hand (within a history of the Left), but on the other with competing ideas as an aesthetic form that refers only to itself. In these archival tableaux, Brennan has incorporated observers' reports on the behaviour of gallery visitors with commentary on chalk drawings, the occult, and with a reflexive nod to MO's methods - the official archival request form listing the names of recent users. The combination of elements has immediate and subtler resonances, often unsettling, that opens up a sense of history as entwined with the worlds of personal and collective fantasy, as well as genuine fears grounded in real events.

One of the most intriguing aspects of *English Anxieties* is the inclusion of TC Lethbridge's report on 'Observations upon Unusual Phenomena' noted in the Cambridge District, June - August 1940. While challenges were being made to aesthetic orthodoxies in the world of art, Brennan brings us back to a prime wartime concern surrounding enemy infiltration and betrayal through a perceived presence of a Fifth Column. Here Lethbridge is the scholar-detective, finding clues and messages in litter trails, marks made on walls and telegraph poles. As both Andrew Biswell and Peter Davidson eloquently point out in their accompanying essays, Lethbridge's intellectual world is bound up with historical elements of Cambridge University and wider interests in the figure of the spy in the literary imagination.

An interesting parallel with a contemporary observation to Lethbridge's report can be found in an article written by Tom Harrison on the abundance of spy stories in popular fiction. In *I'm Getting Fed Up With Spies* published in *Lilliput* magazine in March 1942, Harrison lamented the rise of a new theme for writers - the 1940 spy. Based on actual wartime events, particularly recent Fifth Column activity in Norway and Holland, large amounts of books with titles such as *I, Spy*, *A Spy in Khaki*; *The Spy Who Died in Bed*; *Beastmark the Spy*; *Six Feet of Dynamite* and *Secret Weapon*, flowed from a revitalised well of literary intent that capitalised on primal fears, espionage and betrayal. Infiltration by German secret agents and worse the patriot turned traitor, patiently waiting for the moment, watching carefully, codifying and transmitting vital information, was particularly apposite in lieu of popular fears of MO as an intrusive set up.

Brennan has revisited the written descriptions and drawings by Lethbridge and rendered these through the pictorial language of the Isotype. The Isotype System was developed by

Austrian émigré, Otto Neurath, a benign Marxist who looked to develop a visual language to convey large amounts of social and economic information. Neurath's system was aimed to engage non-literary audiences and this graphic approach was used for a book based on observer accounts in Devon entitled *Exmoor Village* (1947). Neurath's graphics were readable though complex, constructed using striking colour schemes and crisply delineated symbols of factories, homes and leisure. In Brennan's work Lethbridge's report is transformed into a world that is colourful, deliberately sparse, succinct, the clinical yet cheerful tone offsets the sense of paranoia. This pictorial world of coded messages by an assumed enemy presence, actual or otherwise, point to a sense of place close to the heart of myths of England.

As ever, a project like *English Anxieties* does not exist without the good will and support of many colleagues. We are extremely grateful to all staff at Ffotogallery and Photoworks for their assistance, to Dorothy Sheridan and colleagues at the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex, the University of Wales, Newport, to Andrew Biswell and Peter Davidson for their fascinating essays and to Dean Pavitt at LOUP Design. However, our deepest thanks go to Tim Brennan who has brought something distinctive to the interpretation of the Mass Observation Archive that we hope will encourage a wider interest in its remarkable contents and the conditions that have brought it into existence.

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Exhibition curated by Russell Roberts

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