

Institution: Queen's University, Belfast		
Unit of Assessment: 28		
Title of case study: Connecting communities with hidden histories: the photographs of Janet Mendelsohn		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015-19		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Kieran Connell	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer in Contemporary British History	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: Jan 2015 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-20		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>This project centred on the discovery of an archive of 3,000 photographs taken in late-1960s Balsall Heath, a working class, increasingly multicultural, 'red light' district of Birmingham. The images were taken by Janet Mendelsohn, a student at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Mendelsohn's photographs had not been seen in public for over forty years. By staging a major exhibition (attended by 21,000 people) and a range of creative encounters that attracted the attention of local, national and international media, the research brought Mendelsohn's work into contact with a diverse range of new stakeholders. The project significantly enriched public understanding of both the history of Balsall Heath and of wider issues such as a multiculturalism, prostitution, class and culture.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>The research arose out of an AHRC-funded project (G1) that focused on connecting Mendelsohn's work with new audiences. This culminated with a major public exhibition, held at Ikon Gallery in central Birmingham 27 January-3 April 2016 (1). The underpinning research for the project was undertaken by Connell following his appointment at Queen's and Matthew Hilton (who was based at the University of Birmingham). Hilton acted as PI on the project, while Connell as CI oversaw the project on a day-to-day basis. An article (2) explored, for the first time using archival work and more than 50 oral history interviews, the institutional conditions at CCCS that helped produce Mendelsohn's work. According to the journal's metrics, since its publication in 2016 it has become the third most-read <i>Social History</i> article and has attracted more than 3,900 views. This was expanded upon by an edited collection (3) that featured contributions from world-leading scholars across four continents, and underpinned the Mendelsohn project by pointing to the wider socio-political contexts of CCCS. The book was praised as 'intimate', 'one of a kind' and 'speaking to the moment in which we find ourselves'. Finally, the exhibition at Ikon was explicitly underpinned by research on Mendelsohn's work published in an essay in an accompanying exhibition catalogue (4). This study revealed social climate in which</p>		

Mendelsohn was operating in Balsall Heath, patterns of migration, the level of poverty and the nature of prostitution in the area, which was a key focus of Mendelsohn's work. This directly shaped the way in which the exhibition was curated. The exhibition was widely praised in reviews in the *Guardian*, the art magazine *Apollo*, the Danish broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten* and on BBC television.

The creative engagements that were staged with Mendelsohn's work – including a 'pop-up' exhibition in the community in which the images were first taken – also helped inform a more in-depth academic study by Connell on the historical significance of Mendelsohn's work (5). This was the first time Mendelsohn's archive has been explored in an academic context. The innovation of the study lies in the way in which it fused an analysis of Mendelsohn's work as an exemplar of the early innovation of cultural studies as a discipline with a wider inquiry that contributed to historical debates around race, gender, community and society. The article, in one of the top-ranking journals in the field, was described by anonymous peer-reviewers as 'powerful', 'evocative' and 'rich'.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

(1) *Janet Mendelsohn: Varna Road*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 27 January – 3 April 2016

(2) K. Connell & M. Hilton, 'The Working Practices of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies', *Social History* 40: 3 (2015), pp. 287-311

(3) K. Connell & Matthew Hilton (eds.), *Cultural Studies 50 Years On* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016).

(4) K. Connell & M. Hilton, 'Janet Mendelsohn, Cultural Studies and the Social "Conjuncture"', in K. Connell, M. Hilton & J. Watkins (eds.), *Janet Mendelsohn: Varna Road* (Birmingham: Ikon, 2016).

(5) K. Connell, 'Race, Prostitution and the New Left: the post-war inner city through Janet Mendelsohn's "social eye"', *History Workshop Journal* (spring 2017).

G1 M. Hilton (PI) & K. Connell (CI), 'Past, present and future: connecting communities with shared histories', AHRC Grant (£78,190), ref. AH/M008665/1

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The project stimulated impact amongst new audiences and stakeholders by staging active encounters with the Janet Mendelsohn archive: 3,000 images that were taken when Mendelsohn was a student in the late-1960s. It was undertaken in collaboration with project partners Flatpack, an annual film festival; Ikon Gallery, an internationally acclaimed art gallery; Ort, a café in Balsall Heath widely-used by local residents; and Some Cities, a photography collective that aims to encourage wider participation in the arts.

The key activities that took place during the project were:

1. An exhibition at Ikon (27 January-3 April 2016), the first retrospective of Mendelsohn's work. This was attended by 21,000 people. A corresponding exhibition catalogue was also produced, which communicated the historical research undertaken by Connell and Hilton.
2. A 'pop up' exhibition at Ort Café (10 March-28 April 2018), organised by Flatpack and attended by 285 people.

3. Two photography workshops (July 2016) with hard-to-reach communities, run by Some Cities and attended by 10 local residents.

Visitors to the exhibitions benefitted from **engaging with Mendelsohn's work** in a manner that – given that it was previously hidden from public view – would not otherwise have been possible. The exhibitions explored the nature of life in 1960s Balsall Heath in ways that **enriched public understanding** about the history of 'deprived' areas, immigration and sex work. The exhibition comments book (S1) demonstrates the impact Mendelsohn's work had on visitors: '**I learned a lot from the show**'; '**I can almost imagine what it was like back then**'; '**Beautifully presented exhibition of stunning photographs ... that touched me profoundly**'. That the exhibition catalogue has sold 928 copies to date – well beyond 150, the average number of catalogues sold at Ikon per exhibition – further demonstrates the extent to which the project inspired the public to enhance their understanding of the historical contexts around Mendelsohn's work. Reviews of the catalogue on Amazon (where it has an average rating of five stars) include '**an insight into a forgotten community**', '**helped me make sense of the landscape I knew**' and '**a fascinating story of life in Balsall Heath**'.

The exhibition generated significant **media coverage (S7)**, including extended features in *the Guardian* (11 January 2016), on BBC Radio 4's *Making Histories* (9 February 2016) and on the BBC Four documentary 'The First Black Brummies' (19 Feb 2019). In each case Connell was interviewed about his research, allowing him to bring it to new audiences (the BBC Four documentary attracted 500,000 viewers; the *Guardian's* average daily print circulation in 2016 was 161,191). Foreign media attention (e.g. *20 Minutos* and *Jyllands-Posten*) was combined with sustained interest from local media (BBC Midlands Today, *Birmingham Mail*). The latter was important in generating impact among residents of Balsall Heath by enabling them to **communicate their memories** to the general public. One woman recognised herself as a girl in a photograph and was subsequently the subject of a *Guardian* feature, which she used to **challenge negative stereotypes** around life in inner city areas by emphasising that 'we were always sent out clean...tidy' and 'well-fed'. Another woman photographed by Mendelsohn used an interview with the *Birmingham Mail* to foreground Balsall Heath as a place of working-class respectability, somewhere 'you could roam about as a child without any fear'.

The project generated impact by **developing the working practices** and **expertise** of its partners. First, the project enabled Ikon Gallery to reach communities it had previously struggled to interact with – those, as Jonathan Watkins, the director of Ikon reflected, 'who were far from educated and middle class' (S2). Second, the project enhanced Ikon's expertise in photography and its place in the artistic canon. For Watkins, 'the American style of photography that Janet Mendelsohn brought was something that we didn't know about ... we were surprised to see that it was happening in this country'. Third, the project acted as springboard for the careers of individuals connected with it. For Andrew Jackson (S4), director of Some Cities, it represented 'a wonderful opportunity' that has 'taken me from ... Mendelsohn's humanistic approach, to the participatory works of the current residents and finally to the production of my own new works'. This culminated in 2018 with Jackson's first solo exhibition at the Midlands Arts Centre. The project, Watkins concluded, was both '**a highlight in our programme**' and '**a perfect example of how an artistic programme can be conflated with an academic project**'.

The project also achieved impact by initiating a **dialogue** between past and present, in particular with respect to debates around the **representation** of inner-city areas. The photography workshops held by Some Cities introduced a small group of Balsall Heath residents to basic photographic techniques and encouraged them to use photography to reflect on life in the area. Participants subsequently revealed how the sessions had given them **greater insight** into the challenges involved in making photographic work, as well as **enhanced confidence** in their own artistic abilities. One BAME participant reflected (**S3**) that she initially 'didn't feel massively comfortable photographing people I didn't know' but the workshops '**helped me realise...that I can do it**'. Another suggested that taking part in the workshops '**changed my perspective of the way we live**. Taking pictures just opens up the whole world to you, like you've got a reason to go and talk to people'.

Finally, the project generated **unforeseen impact**. As a result of the project Janet Mendelsohn was one of 80 projects nominated across Europe for the 2017 Deutsche Börse Photography Prize, one of the most prestigious photography prizes in the world. The exhibition likewise inspired Chris Akers (**S5**), a local writer, to develop a project based on Mendelsohn's work. '**The exhibition was the catalyst for writing a screenplay**', he reflected. 'Focusing on how the people interacted in Balsall Heath and lived the life they lived fascinated me and is the focus of the script'. Enthused by their original involvement in the project, in 2018 Flatpack staged another exhibition featuring images that had not previously been shown. The exhibition was staged in the heart of Balsall Heath, attracted 2,346 visitors and was the subject of features in the *Guardian* (17 April 2018), the *Birmingham Mail* (10 March 2018), and BBC television (3 March 2018). The director of Flatpack described his involvement in the original project as 'pivotal' in the subsequent expansion of Flatpack's organisational remit to include elements of local history. Finally, the project helped initiate a change in the way history is taught at Clifton Primary School, one of the largest schools in Balsall Heath at which more than 30 different languages are spoken. Having attended the exhibition and having corresponded with Connell, the head of history at Clifton now uses Mendelsohn's photographs to encourage his pupils to interrogate the nature of social change in the area. The photographs 'allowed the children to visualise what their locale looked like in the recent past and compare it with the present day', he reflected (**S5**). '**Using these high-quality photographs and the research provided by Kieran allowed us to teach local history from a fresh angle and the photographs have been passed on to all teaching staff at the school for future use**'.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1. Ikon & Flatpack exhibition visitor books
- S2. Interview with Jonathan Watkins, director of Ikon Gallery
- S3. Focus group with participants of photography workshop
- S4. Artist statement from Andrew Jackson, director of Some Cities
- S5. Email correspondence with participants (available on request)
- S6. Reviews of academic outputs (available on request)

S7. Cuttings to relevant media coverage:

- Article in the *Guardian* (11 Jan 2016): <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jan/11/wickedest-road-in-britain-photographer-janet-mendelsohn-varna-road-birmingham>
- Article in the *Guardian* (1 April 2016): <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/01/janet-mendelsohn-photograph-balsall-heath-birmingham-1968>
- Article in *20 Minutos* (30 Jan 2016): <https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/2658240/0/janet-mendelsohn/fotos-ineditas/barrio-vicio-birmingham/?autoref=true>
- Article in *Jyllands-Posten* (16 Jan 2016): <https://jyllands-posten.dk/premium/indblik/Kultur/ECE8368550/taet-paa-kranke-skaebner-i-englands-ondeste-gade/>
- Article in *Birmingham Mail* (4 Sept 2016): <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/found-mystery-ballerina-girl-balsall-11832344>
- Article in *Apollo* (26 Jan 2016): <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/photographing-vice-on-the-varna-road/>
- BBC Radio 4 Coverage (9 Feb 2016): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06zryym>
- BBC Television coverage (21 October 2020): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bty31k>