

## THE FUTURE OF SIDE GALLERY

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Stemming from the Amber film & photography collective which formed in 1968, Side Gallery in Newcastle first opened its doors in 1977 and has been producing, exhibiting and supporting social documentary photography ever since. Even now, the directors of the gallery still work within those same principles and have never strayed from their commitment to social documentary, building an archive of over 10,000 images and 100 films. In 2010, however, following the overhaul of the funding structures of the Arts Council England, the gallery lost their core funding. Added to the subsequent cuts to culture made by the Newcastle Council the future of Side Gallery, not for the first time, hung very much in the balance.

'It was a very difficult time and we very nearly went under,' recalls Kerry Lowes, one of the eight directors of the collective, 'but the public support and the support of the photographic community was overwhelming and we kept fighting.'

Fast forward six years and Side Gallery is in the closing stages of a full re-development of the establishment and is getting ready to open its doors in October after 21 months thanks, in large part, to a successful Heritage Lottery Fund bid awarded to the collective in 2014. Along with additional project funding from Arts Council England, Paul Hamlyn and revenue support from the Newcastle Culture Investment fund the gallery has been able to complete the £1.67 million project. The current funding has allowed for them to massively increase the accessibility of the gallery and has considerably increased the size of the exhibition space,

The new gallery also houses a public access study space with 3 individual workstations, a library with a collection of photography books and a host of other material that the collective have accumulated over the years and a dedicated area for exhibiting small scale exhibitions such as those produced as part of the collective's learning and participation programme. The first exhibition to utilize this space will be *Home*, which will show work produced by young people from North Tyneside who are either at risk of or are already homeless. This will run alongside the core exhibition *Childhoods* which brings together new work and archival work from Amber's collection and is set to re-launch the gallery on 1<sup>st</sup> October.

One of the agreements with the Heritage Lottery Fund was that 50% of the shows draw on archives and collections, both Amber's own and others. The redevelopment has delivered new facilities for the conservation of the collection, a new darkroom, and a major programme of digitisation - subject to the agreement of photographers, the work will be freely available to the public both in the gallery and online. It has also provided the time and space for the collective to put in place their first structured volunteer base, without which, the collective are keen to acknowledge, a lot of the current archival work would not have been possible.

With that in mind, however, some would argue that the continued reliance on archival work and the refusal to move away from social documentary is restricting the gallery and is, perhaps, considered outdated or nostalgic. When pressed on this issue Kerry Lowes is quick to respond. 'We use the archive as a tool to produce new contemporary work which helps to show the links between the past and the present. Social documentary has changed over the years and the methods of producing and exhibiting it have changed but Side Gallery has changed with it. And the current funding will allow us to continue to do this, even more so.'

Indeed, if there was ever any doubt as to the importance of social documentary within this region one need only look as far as *For Ever Amber*, a retrospective of the AmberSide Collection which took place at The Laing Gallery in 2015. The 60,000 plus visitors over its 12 week run is testament to just how important the role that Side Gallery and Side Amber Collective plays in the North East.

The most overwhelming outcome of *For Ever Amber* for the collective came with the countless comments received from people thanking them for representing their lives, their community and their stories.

'Social documentary is a documentation of what's happening. There isn't just one objective truth and it's important we counter the demonisation of the working class and marginalised groups which is far too commonplace in the mainstream media. We provide a space, away from all that, which allows people to come and see these photos and really look at these stories and narratives and that will always be important,' states Lowes.

Despite the funding problems that have marred the recent history of Side Gallery, the collective are hopeful about the future. The reopening season has been supported by £70,000 Grants For The Arts funding from Arts Council England with an additional £10,000 pledge from Garfield Weston. On top of this the collective will continue to apply for all relevant available funding including re-applying for National Portfolio Funding through Arts Council England when the next round opens up. For now, however, with being only one year into the three year commitment of both the Heritage Lottery funding and the revenue funding from Newcastle Culture Investment Fund the collective have a little space to

breathe.

As Lowes concludes, however, 'Funding is always going to be an issue for smaller groups like ourselves as we're always competing with large organisations that have dedicated funding officers. We have come under pressure, in the past, to become more generalist and perhaps at times we have paid for the price for that, particularly as documentary has gone in and out of fashion, but we will remain dedicated to it, regardless of trends and continue to support practitioners working within the genre and help to tell the stories of lives that often get overlooked or mis-represented.

**CHILDHOODS, Side Gallery, Saturday 1st October to Sunday 20th November**