

Marjolaine Ryley: Growing Up in the New Age

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Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow

23 June – 8 September

Wolverhampton Art Gallery

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A collaborative photographic project supported by Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow; Wolverhampton Art Gallery; and PARC - Photography and the Archive Research Centre, London College of Communication.

Introduction

Growing up in the New Age is a new autobiographical photography project by Newcastle based artist Marjolaine Ryley. Combining colour photography and text pieces with New Age objects and archival materials, Ryley explores ideas of memory and family relationships in relation to the alternative world of Free School education and the counter culture of the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Through her work, she interweaves personal experience with an alternative reading of British social history.

Included in the exhibition is archival material with an emphasis on the work of photographer Dave Walkling whose black and white images document the squatted housing where Marjolaine grew up and beautifully capture the spirit of the era. Ryley discovered the work of Walkling shortly after she began working on this series. The meeting of his documentary and Ryley's meditation on the past, constructed through a series of colour photographs, research and writing, is at the core of this project. They reinforce and reflect upon each other.



Growing up in the New Age / Boots of Many Sizes 2011-12

The Long Autumn

Marjolaine Ryley

As thoughts of childhood break through into your consciousness with each day spent walking these streets and parks, pushchair ahead, you receive them like the leaves spiraling from the trees, each a different shape and colour. You think about 'growing up in the new age' an alternative universe of free schools, squats, communes, camps, your imagination running free and wild. How do you begin to tell this story when motherhood has stolen all your days and nights now filled with her, sweet smelling, soft, she has captured your heart and soul and exhausted you with her needs and demands. You are absorbed by her, memories of your childhood blurring with visions of her future, your parents choices and a complex jigsaw of your own hopes and doubts. What age will it be for her to grow up in? Rebellion and countercultural living seem impossible now. You could not do it for yourself but you know you would try to move heaven and earth for her.

NO ORDINARY SCHOOL



Kirkdale - a living alternative

Kirkdale and the philosophy of alternative education

Zoë Lippett

Kirkdale is the name of the small, independent free school that Marjolaine Ryley attended from 1976–1987. The school was founded in 1964 by John and Susie Powlesland and a group of free-thinking parents who wanted a radical alternative to the education establishment. Kirkdale was run as a parent/teacher cooperative from premises at 186 Kirdale Road, Sydenham, London. Approximately thirty children attended and the community was divided into three age groups –the Bees, aged between three and a half and five; the Wasps, aged between five and eight; and the Hornets, aged between eight and eleven.

Kirkdale is one of several free schools to have been established in the UK during the twentieth century and was relatively unusual in being located in the capital City. To enable children to experience ‘attractive rural settings’ the school organised camps where peer communities could be set up under simple conditions. The idyllic simplicity and unfettered adventure of the camps is conveyed in Tamsan Barratt’s archival photographs and remembered in Ryley’s poignant images.

The association made in Kirkdale documents between freedom and happiness echoes the alternative education philosophy of A.S. Neill (1883–1973), founder of the most famous free school Summerhill (est. 1921). A progressive educator and author, Neill believed that a child’s happiness was the most important consideration in decisions about a child’s upbringing, and that this happiness grew from a sense of personal freedom.



Growing up in the New Age / The White Tent 2011-12

Summer Camp

Marjolaine Ryley

Waking with the hard earth cold beneath the canvas, aching all over, dewy morning, new beginning, city further away than ever, no parents, nothing but the long camp day filled with many moments, crackling fires, guitars, ice cold water, stars, ages pass into nothingness, modernity never been here, stretching fields, far horizons, leaves in your hair, cider and the promise of adulthood, that strange tantalizing place nearly within your grasp.

The night game; crawling in pairs or more thrillingly alone, through the undergrowth, towards the circle, bright fire inviting you onwards. Stopping for a moment to wonder how lying alone, in the dark, covered in mud, completely unseen, could feel so damn good. Those rivers, valleys and forests that you played in popping into your living memory as ever you are able to return to the hills.



Sydenham 1979 © Dave Walking

“Everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless objects, which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.”

W.G Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Penguin, 2001)

Looking for evidence: the photographs of Dave Walkling and the artist’s archive

Marjolaine Ryley

Like many artists I am a notorious hoarder and collector. My own photographs feel increasing like one enormous ‘archive-collection’. This ultimately seeks to capture the ever-changing world around me, as well as looking back through time and history. Through an approach which combines new photographs with my own writing and archival materials I am attempting to ‘bring to life’ a snapshot of a vanished history, both personal and social.

Objects take me closer to that experience through their tactile and evocative qualities. The original black and white prints created by Dave Walkling in the 1970s have a dual fascination, as physical objects, but also as a window through time. The archival materials assist the creation of new photographs and texts, while offering a key with which to unlock them.



Growing up in the New Age / Holy Man 2011-12

Under the Counter: Culture

Malcolm Dickson

Writing in his insightful book of the social history of music in the sixties, Joe Boyd, founder of Witchseason Records (Incredible String Band, Nick Drake et al) wrote of the counterculture:

When it flourished in the spring of 1967, it was seen as a sub-culture of drugs, radical politics and music built around the International Times, Indica Bookshop, Oz magazine, UFO, the London Free School, Release ... and the Arts Lab.¹

This is the arc that *Growing Up in the New Age* emanates from. Ryley's photographs function like 'aide-mémoires' to aspects of her life – an intimate sharing of stories, memories and emotions that come to life through the form of the exhibition and its related means of drawing in a public. These are augmented by a series of black and white prints by Dave Walkling, whose images of Kirkdale and individuals around the squatting scene add a salient primary source of evidence of the time alongside other objects, letters, documents, clothing and memorabilia which, for Ryley, act as the remains of that larger experience that she grew up with and which in this project, knit together the archival with the lyrical.

Kirkdale is basically the nexus for 'the counterculture'. Free schools were for the liberation of learning, from a left libertarian standpoint – before the conservative Right appropriated the term 'libertarian' in the pursuit of individualism and the free market. It was part of a move that characterized the earliest period of countercultural expression through to the present – a challenge to



mainstream culture, to learn horizontally rather than be taught from the top down, to inspire change, to find new ways of expressing yourself and of creating your own culture. This resounds from its earliest beginnings through to the present via punk and the DIY aesthetic of fanzines, labels and clubs, the indie boom, rave culture, street parties, disruptive actions and environmental protest, hip-hop, new folk, world music, flash mobbing and critical mass. Much of the counterculture is now of course adopted by the producers and consumers of mainstream culture, no less so than in the self help sentiments and products of New Ageism. The liberatory aspects of this impulse, however, are vividly embraced in the project, and its contradictions alluded to.

'White Bicycles: Making Music in the 1960s
(Serpents Tail, 2007)



Growing up in the New Age / Peace Oil 2011-12

Remembering the Counterculture

Val Williams

Considering the counterculture, played out against the background of post-austerity Britain, diverse images and memories come into play. For some these are personal- Marjolaine Ryley's recollection of the Kirkdale Free School resonate with a collective memory of the Free School movement, epitomized in its best-known manifestation, A.S. Neill's Summerhill founded in Suffolk in 1921 where: ' We set out to make a school in which we should allow children freedom to be themselves. ' Neill's philosophy resonated within the alternative communities of post-war Britain. The rejection of authority, coupled with exposure to other cultures and the opening-up of travel in the form of overland journeys to India and Nepal, by the emergence of radical feminism, the re-fashioning of traditional music into 'folk-rock' and the availability of empty housing stock across Britain, were some of the elements of the 'New Age'.

British counterculture is a slippery mixture of modernity and nostalgia. In 'Electric Eden', (2010) Rob Young describes the communal retreat to the country- the singer Vashti Bunyan travelled from south to north in a horse- drawn caravan in the late 1960s; around the same time, Robin Williamson and Mike Heron of the Incredible String Band, produced music, which would define a generation, from a remote Scottish cottage. For alternative city dwellers, rural values and pursuits were central- John Seymour's seminal 'The Complete Guide to Self-Sufficiency' (1976) became as important to those living in a Southwark squat as it did to the youthful colonizers of the redundant farmhouses of Wales.

Nicholas Saunder's 1975 ' Alternative England and Wales'



Growing up in the New Age / Mushrooms and Sandbags 2011-12

taught DIY, gardening and politics to middle-class youth, enabling them to manage the housing and educational projects, which are a remembered presence in Ryley's work, and an actual one in the 1970s photographs made by Dave Walkling. 'The Squatters Handbook', first published by the Advisory Service for Squatters in 1976 (and now in its 13th edition) was another survival manual for a generation.

The 'looking back' which was integral to the British counterculture is evidenced too in work made by the independent photographers of the 1970s. Homer Sykes's 'Once a Year: Some Traditional British Customs' was published in 1977, exploring the symbiosis of pub culture and 'ancient' customs. The idea of the 'Fayre', celebrated by Sykes and other photographers, would mutate into the music festival with its roots in folk and alternative culture now symbolized by the annual Glastonbury celebration.

'Growing up in the New Age' explores the repercussions of memory. Shortly after Ryley began the series, she discovered the work of Dave Walkling, photographs of the squat in Kirkdale Road in south London and the Kirkdale Free School. The meeting of Walkling's documentary and Ryley's meditation on the past, constructed through photographs, research and writing is at the core of this project. They reinforce and reflect upon each other.

The visual resonance of the counterculture resonates throughout 21st century society. In Ryley's work, in photographer Tom Hunter's continuing study of countercultural communities, in David Spero's series of alternative dwellings in 'Settlements', made in the early 2000s and in Iain McKell's photographs of New Age travellers in 'The New Gypsies', (2010).

About the artist

Marjolaine Ryley

Marjolaine Ryley studied photography at the Surrey Institute of Art & Design and the Royal College of Art. She is based in Newcastle Upon Tyne and is a part-time senior lecturer in photography and video art at the University of Sunderland. Ryley's practice encompasses photography, moving image, text, objects, and archival materials. Her work explores ideas of memory, history and family relationships, linking personal experiences to broader social and political narratives.

Ryley has exhibited and published nationally and internationally. Ryley's work is included in several collections including the Victoria and Albert museum and the Serralves Museum, Porto. Exhibitions include Impressions Gallery, Bradford; Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow; and The Palacio des Artes, Porto, Portugal. Much of Ryley's work has explored family photography including her first monograph Villa Mona - A Proper Kind of House (Trace Editions) and Field Study 7 -Residence Astral, which was published to coincide with the artist's Visiting Fellowship at the Photography and the Archive Research Centre (PARC). As part of the artist's fellowship at PARC Ryley developed The Last Picture Show, a website and forum exploring the changing nature of family photography in the digital age. A new monograph, Growing up in the New Age, will be published by Daylight Imprint in 2013.

www.marjolineryley.co.uk

www.growingupinthenewage.org

www.thelastpictureshow.org

About the partners

Wolverhampton Art Gallery

Wolverhampton Art Gallery opened in 1884 and benefitted from a major £6.7m building extension in 2007. The Gallery houses a permanent collection of more than 18,000 items and delivers a vibrant temporary exhibitions programme. The collection was formed from bequests and gifts given by local benefactors and patrons of art Sidney Cartwright (1802-1883), Philip Horsman, and Paul Lutz (1832-1899), who collected the contemporary art of their day. Today the original collection of Victorian and Georgian decorative and fine art is complimented by an internationally recognised collection of 1960s and '70s British and American Pop art, and a growing body of contemporary art. The Gallery specialises in exhibiting and collecting art on the theme of conflict and is recognised for its collection of works by visual artists on the theme of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. As

an Arts Council England National portfolio-funded organisation the focus of the temporary exhibitions programme is contemporary art. An important strand of this work is the presentation of photography and film works reflecting the social and political landscape of modern Britain. In 2010 WAG received the prestigious Contemporary Art Society's Commission to Collect Award jointly with The Hepworth, Wakefield, to commission Hamlyn award-winning artist and filmmaker Luke Fowler. The commissioned work will be presented later in 2012.

Wolverhampton Art Gallery is based in the millennium city of Wolverhampton in the West Midlands, 12 miles north of Birmingham City Centre.

www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk

Street Level Photoworks

Street Level Photoworks was founded in 1989. From its inception it has provided artists and the public with the opportunity to produce and participate in photography and aims to make artistic production accessible, both physically and intellectually, to a wide audience. Recognised for its integrated practice, the organisation promotes the work of artists through exhibitions, commissions, residencies, and publications; an education programme; community collaborations; open access facilities and training courses for the public.

The exhibitions and public engagement programmes support the aim of building diverse audiences for photography in Scotland. To achieve this, SP work with artists from local, national and international sources. The majority of the work shown is issue driven. The main exhibition programme is augmented by off-site projects that extend the reach of the artists we show with local and regional partners. Recent exhibitions have included John Hoppy Hopkins, Colin Gray, Gayle Chong Kwan, EJ Major, Gina Glover, Harry Papadopoulos, Stansfield/Hooykyaas, Alina Kisina, Wang Fu Chun and Chi Peng. The education programme involves a range of collaborations in the community and bespoke education projects for all kinds of groups along with bite size education activities accompanying and complimenting exhibitions. We work with agencies operating across areas of inclusion, social justice, and equalities. It aims to enable the creativity of non-artists, increase involvement by under-represented groups, and assist the artistic programme by engaging participants.

Street Level is based in Trongate 103, an arts resource which is the home for 8 diverse arts organisations.

www.streetlevelphotoworks.org

The Photography and the Archive Research Centre (PARC)

PARC is part of the University of the Arts London and is based at the London College of Communication, Elephant and Castle, London SE1 6SB. The Centre organises study days, seminar programmes, conferences, research projects and publications.

Field Study 15: Growing up in the New Age is a new publication by PARC which brings together the work of Marjolaine Ryley and Dave Walkling

Professor Val Williams is Director of PARC and editor of the Journal of Photography and Culture.

www.photographyresearchcentre.co.uk



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