

Art in the Archives: An Artist's Residency in the Archives of the London School of Economics

Sue Donnelly



Fig.1 *I'm bored at home; I'm happy in the crèche!*

Soviet poster 1930s

© London School of Economics and Political Science 2007 Coll Misc 0719-16

From October 2001 to July 2002, the artist Ruth Maclennan was based in the Archives Division of the London School of Economics.¹ For all involved in the residency, those nine months were an experiment: it was the first time that an artist had been placed in an academic archive within the United Kingdom, with daily access to the original source materials that have been vital to generations of social scientists and students. The initial impetus came from the artist, along with the LSE's arts co-ordinator Ben Eastop. It was one of the first projects to develop out of LSE's desire to encourage a greater collaboration between the arts and the social sciences, a desire which has led to a number of artists working within LSE over the past decade.

Ruth and I began with a morning in the Archives, taking her through the range of material that we hold. This includes Charles Booth's *Maps Descriptive of London Poverty*, early twentieth-century political posters from the UK and the Soviet Union, the photographic collection of George Bernard Shaw, and Beatrice Webb's diaries.² Ruth was enthusiastic about the archives and we agreed to make an application to the Leverhulme Trust's Artists in Residence programme, which resulted in a grant of £10,000 to support Ruth's work with us.

2001 was in many ways not the most auspicious time for the Archives to set out on an entirely new project. The residency began just after the Library at LSE had completed a refurbishment of its premises, including the building of a new reading room, storage space and staff

accommodation for the Archives. We were busy establishing a new service and the increase in numbers of users that had followed. It was also a time when we had a number of major projects underway aimed at improving our finding aids and providing greater online access to the archives. We seemed to have quite enough on our plates. However, after the long slog of a building project, it was time for Archives staff to take a fresh look at their work. In common with many other professions, there is a tendency for an archive team to recruit individuals with similar outlooks and it is essential to ensure that the team is exposed to varied external influences and experiences in order to stay fresh and enthusiastic. I hoped that Ruth would help us to look at the world and our work in a different way. The artist's residency also appeared to provide a good opportunity for bringing our collections to new audiences, though at the time I had little idea who these might be. Finally, it sounded fun and when you have been working anywhere for a while it is good to be reminded that work can be enjoyable.

The application to the Leverhulme Trust set out our objectives in a more prosaic manner. They were to:

- establish a creative collaboration between Library Archive staff and the artist and encourage future collaborations;
- re-present the contents of the Archives to stimulate debate and inspire new audiences;
- create art which engages directly with the site and context of LSE and the Library through working with archive material and other Library and LSE resources;
- examine the relationships between culture and economics and between art, commerce and institutions;
- explore the role and use of archives in modern society;
- secure the long-term survival of the Archives through a programme of conservation, cataloguing and re-formatting to ensure a continuum between past and present;
- facilitate and encourage use of the archive material for academic and educational research;
- promote the Library in its stunning redeveloped building.

The residency would work with the Archives Collections and staff and would focus on investigating:

- what happens to political communication over time? How do ideas live, change, or disappear?
- what can cultural workers – artists, writers, performers, philosophers, academics – do to influence or initiate debates outside their own field to engage a wider audience?
- what is the value of the archive for contemporary audiences?

We began in a conventional way with the Archive staff introducing Ruth to the wide range of archives held in the Library. At this stage we believed that her inspiration would be the Archives themselves. We had not anticipated that we, the archivists, would become the major subject of her work.

From the start we treated Ruth as we would any part time member of staff – she had a desk in our open-plan office, came in and out on a regular basis and joined the Christmas party. We gave her unlimited access to all the archives, something Ruth described as an ‘unprecedented adventure’. This freedom allowed her to follow a number of paths through the archives, with the questions raised and answered leading in different directions. The archives that engaged her most

directly were the photographs of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology, the early Soviet Union posters, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's notes on magic, Bertrand Russell's 1895 Berlin diary and Beatrice Webb's diaries and papers. In retrospect, it is also apparent that the Archives staff spent a lot of time talking with Ruth – which is probably how we turned into the main subject matter for her work. It was crucial that we did not have a specific agenda for her work: we were simply keen to see something new emerging.

The residency also included interviewing Archives staff, LSE academics and others, about their experiences of working in archives. Artists Volker Eichelmann, [Richard Wentworth](#), David Mabb and Monica Ross were invited to participate in *Out of the Archives*, a series of talks held at LSE in which artists reflected on the implications of the archive in society and in their own work. The seminars aimed to open up discussion between artists, academics, archivists, students and anybody else who was interested. Nearly two hundred people attended the talks, including many members of the art community who had never previously visited LSE. We were disappointed to find that few archivists attended these events. This may have been related to the timing and location of the talks but any future work of this kind would need to consider the best way of engaging both communities.

Two pieces of new work emerged from the residency. In December 2001 *The Archives Project: Part 1*, a video, poster and graphic assemblage of copies of material found in the archives went on display in the Library Foyer. The second piece produced was the video *The Archives Project: The Gatekeepers*, which was based on a series of interviews with members of the archives team and reflected their views of their work, their role in the LSE and their views of the wider world. While the word 'gatekeepers' has proved difficult for many archivists to relate to, the display of the video in the Library's lobby helped raise the profile of the archives.

A major limitation on the project was the lack of funding for the production and display of new artworks. The terms of the Leverhulme Trust grants specifically excludes funding for exhibitions. The lack of any display space within the LSE buildings at that time also restricted the ways in which Ruth could make use of the experience of being at the LSE. (It is heartening to know that our recently appointed arts co-ordinator is looking into this issue and ways in which it can be addressed.)

Assessing the impact of the residency was not straightforward compared with most archive projects which are measured by numbers of archive records created, hits on websites or visitors through the door. There were new art works created both during and after the residency, but not as many as we would have liked. The Archives were re-presented to new audiences and our profile was raised both with the LSE and with a new audience in the arts community. The interviews undertaken for the *Gatekeepers* gave Archive staff an opportunity to be more reflective about their work. Some found it difficult to be the focus of attention and be forced to think through the issues involved in their work, but it would be stimulating to have more such opportunities.

The project also opened the Archives to the possibility of working with other artists. In 2006 the artist Heather Barnett, who works at the intersection of art, education and science/social science, began a residency based in the LSE's Department of Social Psychology. Her initial work in the Archive was prompted by our role as the LSE's memory. She has combined work with Archives staff, academics, students and alumni on building up 'family trees' of the various disciplines, exploring the question of whether the LSE's history is located in the written records of the Archives or in the strong oral tradition of a relatively small institution.³

Heather Barnett's work also embraced the archive of photographs taken by George Bernard Shaw. Spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these images are a rich resource comprising approximately 16,000 photographs. Heather produced a re-creation of the Archive (including authentic boxes and files) in the main student services centre, allowing students and others to browse through the photographs and get a sense of the spirit of discovery involved in working in an archive. There was also a promenade performance based around Shaw's writings which included film and live action. A book may follow. This residency was able to break down the four-hour fire-wall of the Archives and bring the images and objects to those who would never enter the Archives Reading Room.

The two artists' residencies have certainly challenged the Archives Division and its staff. Archivists are taught to be concerned about security of the object, to preserve the integrity of its provenance, and somehow also to make it accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Working with both Ruth Maclennan and Heather Barnett has made archivists try and think more clearly about the why and the how of our role.

Notes

1. For further information about Ruth Maclennan's work, see www.ruthmaclennan.com/
2. Details of range of archives held by the London School of Economics can be found in our online Guide to holdings at www.lse.ac.uk/library/archive/guide_to_holdings.htm.
3. For further information about Heather Barnett's work, see www.heatherbarnett.co.uk/index.htm

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a talk given at *The Archival Impulse Study Day* at Tate Britain on 16 November 2007.

Sue Donnelly is Archivist at the London School of Economics.

Tate Papers Spring 2008 © Sue Donnelly