

Seine Net Queens

20 August – 9 October 2016

Laura Spring with Bernie Reid and Mairi MacKenzie

The Seine Net Queens: A Raw History¹

by Mairi MacKenzie

I am an outsider to Helmsdale and, prior to the opening of this exhibition, had visited the village only once before, for two hours on a Sunday afternoon during April 2016. Timespan was closed; the excellent fish and chip shop was open. I noted the beauty of the area, drew comparisons with the coastal region I was born and brought up in,² and voiced a wish to come back ‘someday’. However, this brief visit had inevitably left me none the wiser as to the history of the area, the origins of the village, the lives of its inhabitants or its changing fortunes, and I left that day with as much real insight into Helmsdale as I had had when I arrived. It therefore does not escape me that this commission by Panel and Timespan to write about the seine net queens is somewhat peculiar, timely and challenging.

However, the principal challenge lies not in the novelty of the topic – I am a historian and it is the nature of my work to unearth new information – but in the source material I have been given to work with. The prompt for, and central to, the *Seine Net Queens* exhibition is a small archive of photographs held by Timespan. These images depict the said seine net queens, splendid in their regalia of crown and cloak, with hand-picked attendants; locals joyously celebrating their gala day; and sober scenes of herring

gutters undertaking hugely demanding work. Although not plentiful in number, each picture is beautiful and vivid. They are hugely evocative and their inspiration can clearly be seen in the garments and plywood mannequins designed for this exhibition by the textile designer Laura Spring and the artist Bernie Reid respectively. Evocations, however, do not make for solid histories, and photographs always present real difficulties when used as evidence in historical research.

In a culture where we are bombarded with images and various strands of media rely on the acceptance that ‘the camera never lies’ for validation of their output, it could seem antithetical to question the veracity of photographs, particularly in the context of a legitimate, well-kept archive. Cameras, after all, were born of the mechanical age and provided an antidote to the fanciful depictions of 19th-century Romantic artists who relied upon and presented personal interpretations and escapism in their work. From the outset, photographs were promoted as making perfect copies of nature and they did indeed reveal the world in an unprecedented way. However, they were, and are, also able to distort, misrepresent or overemphasise aspects of their subjects. Sometimes they raise more questions than they answer. Often they are completely open to interpretation, entirely dependent upon the experiences or knowledge of the viewer because so little concrete information is held within the image itself.

The photographs at the centre of this exhibition are presented with very little supplementary information: an approximation of dates and names of those depicted where known. I know what the people in the images looked like at a given moment and I can see what they were wearing. However, to paraphrase Brecht,³ the images of the seine net queens and the ceremony that surrounded them tells us almost nothing of what it was to be a seine net queen or to participate in the ceremony that surrounded them. Empirically, I am none the wiser.

However, the images of the seine net queens are what Elizabeth Edwards, Professor of Photographic History, refers to as ‘... raw histories’.⁴ In one sense this means that the history contained within them is unprocessed and ripe for development. It requires supporting testimonials and considered analysis of the social, economic and cultural context within which they were taken, to unravel the seemingly complex and unknowable.

In another sense they are raw because photographs of bygone times can be painful for those who remember them and for those within communities that have changed.

As such these images are hugely significant. The lack of sustained research into them does not preclude their fundamental vitality. They are central to an aspect of Helmsdale’s history but also are representative of wider, more complex histories – in particular the hidden and often unrecorded histories of women. Inevitably though, many will consider them to be only of local interest, and those who were there may view their own humble recollections as inconsequential. Just as ‘certain photographs or clusters of photographs become signature images for a discipline or practice’⁵ others remain marginal to the business of ‘big’ history. This, however, is simply a matter of perspective.

In the National Galleries of Scotland hangs *Newhaven fishwife*, a photograph taken by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson circa 1843. It depicts, as the title would suggest, a Newhaven fishwife called Mrs Elizabeth



David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, *Mrs Elizabeth (Johnstone) Hall, Newhaven fishwife*, Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

(Johnstone) Hall and is a celebrated image, considered hugely important within the history of photography, and as ‘an important social document, recording the appearance of members of the fishing community at a moment when their way of life was threatened by increasing industrialisation and modernisation’.⁶ However, I would argue that the significance of this image, and others by Hill and Adamson, is, to some extent, bestowed and not inherent.

This becomes clear when we compare *Newhaven fishwife* to the group of images at the centre of the *Seine Net Queens* exhibition. One is a formal portrait by a member of the Edinburgh elite: the others are amateur photographs. One is in the permanent collection of the National Galleries of Scotland: the others are in the archive of Timespan. One has been subject to analysis by Walter Benjamin, the philosopher and cultural critic whose writings on photography in the early 1900s are still referenced and revered: the others have been pored

over by relatively few. At the risk of stating the obvious, and being overly reductive, it is clear that, irrespective of content, the differences in the origin and location of these images have shaped their reception, recognition and position within the hierarchy of historical sources.

The fundamental purpose of the *Seine Net Queens* exhibition has been to ‘explore Helmsdale’s 20th-century heritage through the shifting roles of women in work and leisure ...’ and to investigate ‘convergences between tradition and modernity, handcraft and industry, and labour and ceremony’.⁷ And the wonderful images held in the archive at Timespan provide an excellent starting point to further research in this area. But the lack of substantial information to support these photographs makes the task a tricky one and I have been forced, in the absence of other testimonials to ‘write with photography’, a process that, as I have already explained, is fraught with difficulties. This is particularly so when faced with histories of women, whose voices and experiences have not been formally documented. All that we are usually left with are pictures and a tendency to romanticise them by people who know nothing of their content or context. However, there is no real reason why the images of the seine net queens, herring gutters and gala days contained in this exhibition should remain as unexplored relics. My hope is that they serve as a prompt, a social historical ‘call to arms’ for people to share their stories, and a reminder that everybody’s history matters.

1. This title is appropriated from the book by Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2001)

2. I come from Stranraer, a small port in South West Scotland, diametrically opposite (geographically) to Helmsdale.

3. Berthold Brecht quoted in Walter Benjamin, *A Small History of Photography* (1931) in Walter Benjamin, *On Photography*, Translated and edited by Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion, 2015) p.92

4. Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2001) p.5

5. Edwards, 2001 p.12

6. <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/research/the-newhaven-fishwife/> accessed 13/08/2016

7. *Seine Net Queens*, introduction text, Panel, 2016

Bibliography and further reading:

Greg Battye, *Photography, Narrative, Time: Imagining Our Forensic Imagination* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014)

Karen Beckman and Liliane Weissberg (eds.), *On Writing With Photography* (Minnesota University Press, 2013)

Walter Benjamin, *On Photography*, Translated and edited by Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion, 2015)

Victor Burgin (ed.), *Thinking Photography* (London: MacMillan Press, 1982)

Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs* (Oxford: Berg, 2001)

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2002)

Penny Tinkler, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research* (London: Sage, 2013)

Commissioned by Timespan, *Seine Net Queens* is a new exhibition, curated by Panel that presents photographs from Timespan's archive alongside new works by textile designer Laura Spring, artist Bernie Reid and fashion researcher Mairi MacKenzie.

Exploring Helmsdale's 20th-century heritage through the shifting roles of women in work and leisure, *Seine Net Queens* investigates convergences between tradition and modernity, handcraft and industry, and labour and ceremony.

Panel is an independent curatorial practice led by Catriona Duffy and Lucy McEachan. Based in Glasgow, Panel promotes design in relation to particular histories, archives and collections through exhibitions, events and cultural projects. www.wearepanel.co.uk

Laura Spring, originally from Staffordshire, is a textile designer/maker living and working in Glasgow creating bold graphic print designs that are transformed through screen and digital print into fashion accessories, homeware and stationery.

Laura is committed to supporting local manufacturing and ethical methods of production in the creation of her work. In addition to working on her own collections, Laura enjoys collaborating with other artists, designers and companies across various fields. She has worked with artists Laura Aldridge and Ciara Phillips to produce limited edition ranges of bags for House of Voltaire 2012 and 2014 respectively. She has also produced limited editions for Heals, Lush Cosmetics, Belle & Sebastian, The National Trust for Scotland, *Not Another Bill* and *India Street* curated by Katy West.

Mairi MacKenzie is a fashion historian and curator based in Glasgow. She is Research Fellow in Fashion and Textiles at Glasgow School of Art, a visiting lecturer at Glasgow University and was lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion. Mairi's current research is concerned with the relation-

ship between popular music and fashion; social histories of perfume; and the history of dressing up and going out in Glasgow. She is author of *Dream Suits: The Wonderful World of Nudie Cohn* (Lannoo: 2011), *Isms: Understanding Fashion* (A&C Black: 2009), and *Perfume Was My Hobby: Histories of Scent in the Everyday* (I.B. Tauris: forthcoming). In 2014 and 2015 Mairi programmed, produced and curated the *Fashion Cultures* programme for The Merchant City Festival, Glasgow. MacKenzie is from Stranraer, a ferry hub in the South West of Scotland.

Bernie Reid is an artist who lives and works in Edinburgh. His previous work includes commissions for a variety of clients including Stella McCartney, i-D magazine, Dazed and Confused, Nissan, the Saturday Telegraph, Boxfresh, Volkswagen, German Elle, Habitat and Wallpaper.

Seine Net Queens Commissions:

Textiles

Herring Gutter Apron

Screen print on heavy denim cotton with rope

Seine Net Queen Cape

Ventile cotton with screen printed cotton lining

designed and printed by Laura Spring, construction by Rebecca Coyle, 2016

Installation

Mannequin Paravent 1

Cork and gloss paint on plywood

Mannequin Paravent 2

Cork and gloss paint on plywood

designed and constructed by Bernie Reid, 2016

Essay

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