

Report: Site-Specific Exhibition

Name: Joseph Allen

Site Specific Exhibition Title: Foxtrot Hotel (integral)

Rationale

The Swansea Airport was built during World War 2 and at the time was known as RAF Fairwood Common. This was used as a fighter base for the RAF when defending South Wales and Bristol from enemy attacks, making it a historically important site. The Airport is now used as a small private flying airport where people can keep their planes, fly them, attend gatherings and events, along with enjoying a cup of tea at the on-site Café. A very welcoming and social place. But the interest in this place for me wasn't the history of the building, but the people within it, these workers that graft day in and day out aren't here for anything but the love of it. They're all volunteers which work for nothing, doing their part to keep the place on its feet, through pure commitment they keep the lights on for the few people that visit the Airfield every week. A workforce of normal people playing their parts.

Throughout my work for this exhibition I am photographing, documenting and addressing the volunteers at the Airport and will be exhibiting them in a way that makes them look as if they are part of the space I am exhibiting in.

Group

When we first took to looking at the site our first reaction was to go down to the civic center, to the archives, and find out what we could about what the place was in the past. Maybe even find some audio/video recordings to use in the exhibition. We also started thinking about what our work would go around, my first instinct was the people, so was Suzanna's, Cae and Steven wanted to work with space a bit more and Corey was undecided.

Individual

When I first took to looking at the space I found it very interesting with the state of the exhibition space and then the kinds of people that were there. Some spaces in the Airport looked run down, yet the people there were so happy and filled with a sense of proudness about the place, felt they were making a change by working there. So I decided to take that and run with it for my exhibition, I wanted to show the workers working.

A Summary of the Research

Much of the research that I have done that has helped me produce my part in the exhibition was done by going and attending the airport. I would go up during the week and at the weekends to speak to the volunteers, workers and some of the locals to get more information on the Airport and to see how they experienced the airport. All the people that I spoke to during this time were very helpful and surprisingly well versed in the history and importance of the airport. By doing this I was given access to archival imagery that they had, information on past owners, information on how the airport functioned in the modern day and personal opinions of the people that frequented the Airport. I also conducted some online research and some library research to try and see if I could find out any new information, possibly some information that I hadn't already gathered from the staff and customers, but I was not able to find any helpful information online that I hadn't already gathered from talking to the people themselves.

When hearing people talking about how photos of space had been taken during the war and some just after the war, I was interested to find out what these photos were. When we went into the Swansea Archives, we found some photographs taken of planes, squadrons and some videos of interviews with people. But none of these were useable due to copyright restrictions with the archive. This meant if we wanted to use anything we would have to try and find the source, and so I did. Through talking to the patrons at the Airport I was able to find one of the men that was in a video we saw, talk to him, and get the email of the man that was behind the camera. We didn't end up using these videos in the exhibition but being able to do this research was very informative and helped me learn to be more insightful when speaking to people. The photos that we found in the archive (as previously mentioned) were copyrighted too, so we had to go looking elsewhere too. We ended up talking to a chairman of the airport and he happily gave us something he called "The Big Red Book", a book filled with the images that were in the archive, he then emailed these to use, and we used some of them in the marketing material.

This shows that the use of primary and secondary research for the exhibition was present and that we used it in a way that allowed us to go forward addressing the history of the people in the Airport.

Links to videos mentioned:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmqveUKoUC4> (Gower Aviation 1911 to 1951)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ef38GOUtPbQ> (Alex Imlach Swansea Home Guard WW2)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHn-0-I5UYE> (Sergeant Pilot Alan Richards RAF Fairwood Common)

Photos Mentioned and Used:



Techniques Developed for the Production of Your Body of Work

I was lucky that when I first looked at this place and wanted to photograph people, I was quickly able to turn that into photographing particular people, then photographing particular people doing their jobs. So, my idea for the exhibition was a nice straight line to the finish line. But I did have to change my idea a little bit towards the end, my original idea would be focusing on who the people were, showing their faces and talking about them. But then I found that it would be more impactful to focus on them as workers that keep the airport a-float.

My way of exhibiting wasn't always vinyl, I had the idea to change the Imagery that was already there into my photographs, for example, if there was a canvas photo of a plane, I would change that for a photo of a worker, but when speaking to my lecturer Ryan I decided to change that to exhibiting in spaces that hadn't already been taken up by photographs or posters, which turned me to the windows. This is when I decided to go vinyl, along with changing my idea on the content of the photographs. I had chosen 3 windows to exhibit when Ryan suggested to me that I exhibit more photos on the 'CAFÉ sign that was adjacent to my work, obscuring the workers faces more and allowing me to create an interesting visual, I decided to go along with this and involve it in my exhibition.

All my prints were cut by hand, by me, in the university with a scalpel and a ruler. This made cutting my work a long and strenuous process, but it is something that I excelled in, the work came out perfectly and I was able to exhibit my window photos without a hitch. But when I was attempting to put the café sign up the photos started ripping, this is something that I had not accounted for, therefore I did not make enough time to do reprints. This meant that my final exhibition had these rips in the photographs, but no one noticed and the exhibition carried on smoothly.

When putting my work up for my exhibition I was sticking the vinyl up normally, sticking the top of the vinyl to windows and then slowly pulling away the plastic layer and watching for bubbles as I go. But once I had put my work up, I found that my peer Suzanna had started using a different method that was found specifically for sticking vinyl to windows. This was something that I should have used when putting my work up due to it making it easier and less stressful to do. The method was what she called "Wet application method" she would spray the back of the vinyl and the windows with soap and water, then place the vinyl onto the window and be able to move it around until the water had either dripped out or evaporated. Causing less bubbles, less rips and an easier time exhibiting. I will be using this technique if I ever exhibit on windows again.

Photos of work in situ:



Individual and Group work overview

My contribution to the final outcome of this exhibition consists of the design, printing and hand cutting of the brochures, the cutting, printing and sticking of my own work in the exhibition, helping others with their works either on the day or prior to it with cutting and sizing, contacting people at the airport and helping with communication between the group and the airport, and giving my group lifts to and from the airport when needed.

The most challenging part of this exhibition would have to be the sizing for the Letters, this took a long time of measuring, printing and cutting to get right, but in the end, it didn't turn out too bad, a couple of rips but nothing that was detrimental to the exhibition.

Overcoming personal hardships with the work in this exhibition was a case of just focusing on the big picture and not spending too much time on the details, realizing that it's not always going to be perfect, but it can be good enough. Overall, my group was amazing throughout this exhibition, the teamwork, communication and the ability to discuss and agree on things was just great. There was a problem with one of the group members where they would not respond to messages or give a hand in the finalizing of the exhibition, but in the end, they showed up and were still able to exhibit, we also helped them with their work. Overcoming the lack of communication with this person was not an easy thing to do, but when they were ready to speak with the group, we were able to smooth it over very quickly and carry on with the exhibition.

I feel that through this exhibition and working with my group I have been able to build on my professionalism skills, my social and people skills, my skills as a photographer, working with large companies to come to agreements on things to do with the marketing and the exhibition, my ability to work in a group, my ability to pick photographs that work together/ curation skills, and my speaking skills when talking on camera to a TV journalist.

All of these skills that I have mentioned here will help me greatly in my ongoing professional career, the ability to talk to people I don't know, make connections and go on to work with them in future projects is a skill that I have learnt through this and a skill that I will use frequently in my career as a contemporary documentary photographer. I have been offered opportunities to continue documenting the workers at the airport and these skills will be handy to do it professionally and correctly.

Evaluation of the Exhibition

Execution

The overall execution of this exhibition was, in my opinion, great. Everyone turned up, everyone's work was in situ on time for the assessment and the reactions from the visitors was very interesting. Everyone's work made sense, and when people felt confused or wanted to know more, everyone was able to explain and talk about their work in a way that informed the viewers of our intentions. We also had Artist Statements in case we weren't available.

A nice surprise for our group was that everyone wanted to work on different aspects of the airport, meaning that we were able to sufficiently cover the history of the airport. Corey focused on the past by exhibiting old signatures from RAF pilots with his work which briefly addressed the history the space has with World War 2, me and Suzanna focused on the present by working with people in different ways, mine was more documentary and hers was more abstract, then Cae and Steven focused on the present by working with the space around the airport. All bases covered in our own unique way.

The number of people that came to the exhibition was very small, but the people that did were very interested and asked lots of questions about the work and the history, they would move quickly from work to work, but they were all very interested. We also had some very important visitors to the airport. There was a pair of people that came up to the airport that had a very large following on Facebook, they came up and said that they would mention our exhibition on their page to try and create a bit of advertisement for us. Then there was a woman who contacted us about doing an interview about our exhibition, she wanted to film us and the exhibition and put it on Channel 8, the local news broadcast, that night. Me and Suzanna were happily obliged, and we were put on the news for the exhibition. This was an amazing reaction to our work and the best audience interaction with our work that we could ask for.

Facebook links:

Swansea scoop - <https://www.facebook.com/share/r/1Cf9rNWzLS/>

That's TV Swansea Bay - <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1BcRYyYgbD/>

Work in Situ:



Reflection

Looking back on the exhibition, there are things that could have been done better, for a start, my part in the exhibition. Had I thought about the difficulty of putting such oddly cut vinyl photographs onto a window, I would have brought multiple prints to avoid having to exhibit ripped prints. Or I could have used the “wet application method” to make my life easier when putting up my work. There were also problems with a certain person in my group but that isn’t something that we could have prepared for, so it is not something that we could have handled better.

From this exhibition I have offered and been accepted to continue working with the Swansea Airport to make more Documentary works, become a volunteer and even help then with event planning and marketing. A relationship has also begun between the University and the Airport, something that I hope to be able to help along the way by continuing my work with them. So, going forward, I will be using everything that I have learnt through this exhibition and before it to make myself into a respectable and professional Documentary Photographer.