



Dark Room: The Exploration

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The community workshops recorded in this book were part of a piece of work I was commissioned to make in advance of The Festival of Belonging 7 -14 March 2020, for Manchester Jewish Museum. The aim was to encourage people to explore their photographic collection more deeply.

This second book forms part of a duo of picture books that capture the making of the work. The first book 'The Photographs' is a simple visual record of the selection we made. This one looks at the way we 'read' photographs and was made after carefully watching and reflecting on all of the workshops and the encounter and exploration of the eleven photographs.

The photographs are deeply moving and although currently we know nothing of the history of the individuals or of the places where they stand or sit, my hope is that the installation will be the beginning of further exploration of these extraordinary images.

A photograph traps a moment in time. It is therefore at once about the future and what is to be and at the same time a moment from our past. Many of these black and white images were made in photographers' darkrooms, and kept in boxes within dark museum stores. Brought out of the darkness they surprise us by their power. In the colourful light space of the here and now they ask to be researched, talked about and respected.

Helena Tomlin

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Dark Room

Dark Room is both a small installation and a beginning of a process of exploration.

It began with a selection of a small number of photographs from the wonderful collection at Manchester Jewish Museum. The eleven chosen photographs have no information attached about the place, date or identity of the sitters - all are unknown.

They were brought out of the dark confines of their museum boxes into the light to meet the many visitors who would come to The Festival of Belonging.

I like to make exhibitions that involve people - and in this one you can explore, read and discuss things.

Thank you to everyone who has been part of this deeply moving experience.

Belonging

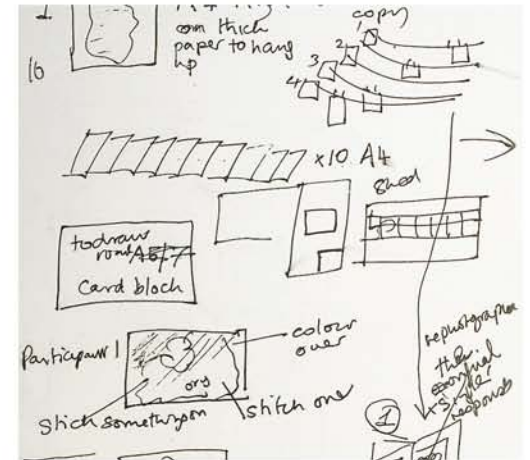
A dark room is all about things unknown - you cannot see them but they are there.

It is a mysterious place - as is the photographer's darkroom.

Most people have photographs that have been passed down from one generation to another; and these special objects, unlike a digital photograph, are made of paper and they are special as they can easily be lost.

Writers such as Susan Sontag, John Berger and Roland Barthes have all described the photograph's deep and often complicated history. In this book you can find out a bit more about their ideas.

They write beautifully about the universal power of a photograph, and in this sense sharing these objects with each other is an important process. Being in the dark about our own history is a shared experience also.



Exhibition

In December 2019 Manchester Jewish Museum commissioned me to make a small installation that would focus attention on their little known photographic collection.

As part of the project I was asked to involve library visitors and invited community groups in the making of it. Each gave me a different insight into the way families engage with a photograph.

All these have been brought together in an installation where you can explore, read and reflect.

Exploring through making

I chose three ways to explore:

Drawing and using thread

Using small stamps to make words

Making small plasticine sculptures to record the details of the photographs that had the most affect

Each workshop gave me a different insight into the way families engage with a photograph although all shared a focus on the question of personal stories, which were brought out through the making process.

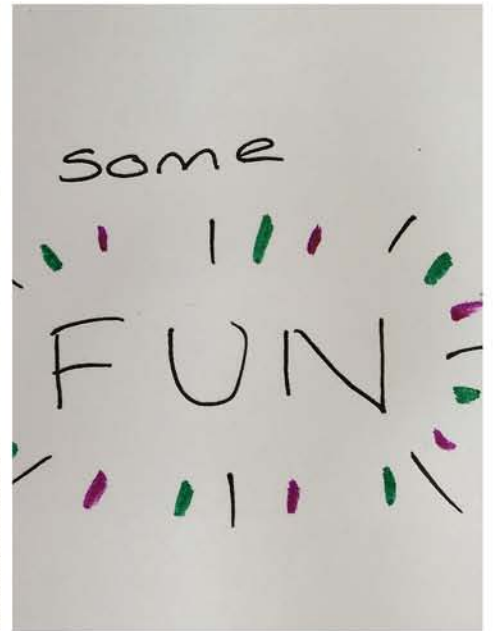
How did everyone feel about these images, and also could they help the Museum to find out more about them?

Journey

I recorded this amazing journey in my journals and by working with Joe Gardner who took photographs with everyone's permission.

Finally I created my own series of artworks that reflected on all these ways of looking. You can explore these artworks in the boxes.





Care

Many museums own photographs where both the photographer and the photographed are unknown.

These photographic collections need to be treated with great respect and care, as some may have belonged originally to families who have experienced the trauma of ethnic cleansing, and in the case of the Manchester Jewish Museum's collection, the Holocaust.

I realised that showing photographs where we know nothing of either the identity or of the stories of the people in them raised difficult ethical questions.

Each time I worked with families to understand how they responded to the eleven photographs I became aware of how personal stories of their current lives became mixed into the images, words or sculptures they created. These 'altered' images were striking and imaginative, but had to be seen in a space (this book) that explained how they were produced.

Altered Images

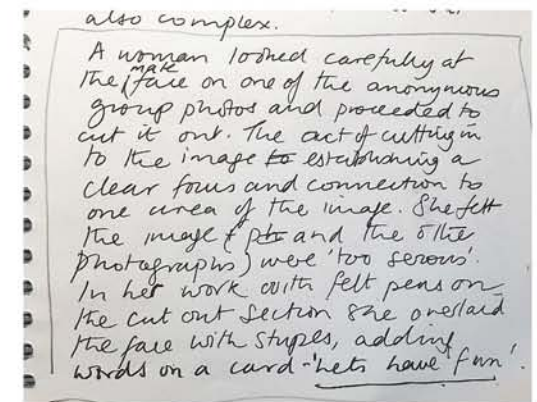
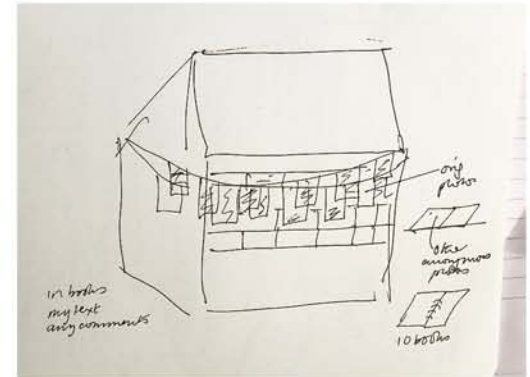
After reflection and discussion I decided to show the little artworks or 'altered images' with some notes from my journal wherever possible.

I wanted visitors during The Festival of Belonging to see the family artworks with an explanation, as many might be aware that the original photographs could be part of a difficult past story.

Without the comments describing the process of additions you might read the 'new' image - The 'Ballerina', 'The Man in the Hat called Martin' or 'Jess the Dog' - as injuring the original in some way, which was never the intention of the project. These stories are 'current' but were not part of the photographer's or sitter's world.

Transparency

Keeping the project open and 'transparent' has been an important part of the work, the emotional and powerful experience of encountering photographs is something that is shared by us all.





Draw/Sew

She's a ballerina girl
She's given up what she
is going to say.
She's finished what she
wants say.
They don't allow her in
the ballerina show
She wants to watch on the
tablet the ballerina show



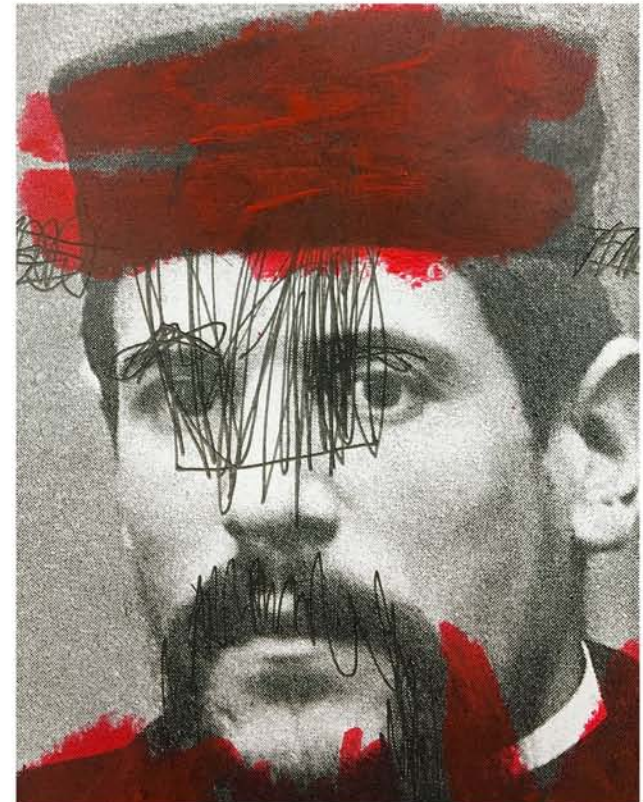


to grow.

The most unusual encounters developed.

The ~~four~~ young boy of around 14 years old ~~was~~ selected the man with the hat. This 'choice' was shared with an older boy who named the man ^{in the} as 'Martin'. The encounter with the image had triggered ideas/memories even at this early stage.

The resulting bright red image a visual testament to this connection



00 - 00
He is
call b
* * test
00 00



info:
information sheets to ta
about ~~the man~~ dog. Or boy

Jess the dog was made after carefully
looking through each photograph
and selecting the man with the
dog by his side. The girl who made
the piece lost herself in the colouring
of her copied detail. Talking at
length about the love of her dog
and her interest in them....



Golden, but
on the inside.
Except today: it's
showing through.





Another adult participant
sewed directly into the photocopy
creating a link between herself
and the image, and bringing
it to life through making the
textiles more vibrant. As though
they could be touched once again.

Both these participants talked about
their Jewish families and photographs.

Her biggest bow
She wore it
anyway.



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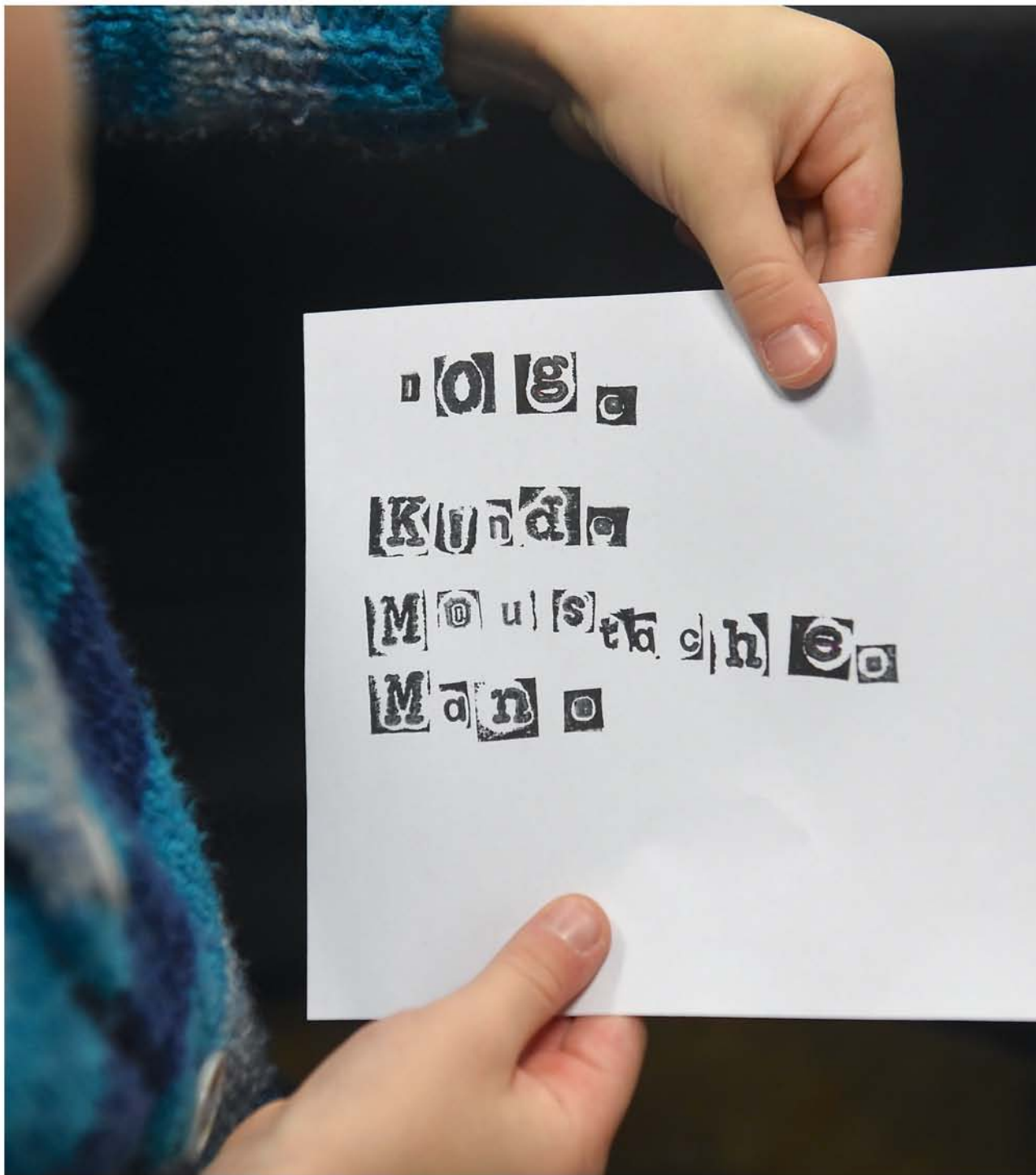
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Text







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Another family gathered around the photograph of a Spring meal, with guests eating and chatting. There was great excitement around the table as we were told that the Dad in the group had been born in Wythenshawe hospital (the first birth at the maternity unit) and that the woman at the dinner party was surely the woman who opened the Unit in ^{July} 1969. She was

Thinking about emotion and photographs

The writer Roland Barthes felt a photograph embodied time and space and was made up of the 'studium' and the 'punctum'.

Studium

The 'studium' Barthes described as the 'content' of the photograph - the place where it was taken, when and who was in it. This creates an initial attraction to the photograph, but is not memorable.

Making words with the letter stamps seemed to give everyone a distance. The focus was on describing in words the photograph as a whole. Most participants looked at the content - what was going on and who was in the photograph, rather than writing about the emotions that looking at the photograph sparked off. The studium in fact.

Punctum

The 'punctum' is part of the photograph that wounds or pricks us, and this can be different for everyone. So a detail of a hand, a piece of clothing or a gesture may all be what Barthes described as the 'point of wounding'. It is the part of the photograph that 'pricks' us or jumps out at us and we go on to have an emotional reaction to it.

The act of drawing and sewing uses the hands to create an image or texture. This more direct method gave participants the chance to find details which 'spoke' to them, and I could see in the 'Draw/Sew' workshop which parts of the photograph 'wounded' each participant. Go back a few pages and you will see the details - the faces, hands and pieces of clothing that generated stories and feelings about participants' own lives.







*A boy (around 8 years old) chose the girl sitting on the white bench. He began immediately to fashion the white bench (including the decorative side piece) and inserted a joyful 'face cushion'. We were able to talk about where she was sitting (a wealthy house) because of her dress, the chair and the window. The modelling activity allowed this slow process of 'delving deeper' and to understand the context of the photo.

A mum with her two children chatted in the photographs her



Model



Process

The modelling workshop was held during 'Storm Dennis' and I didn't expect a large turnout. In the end a good number of families arrived to join me work with plasticine and Play Doh (for the younger ones).

The simple approach of selecting a photograph from the wall behind me worked well and conversations were generated through a shared experience of looking, rather like at the cinema.

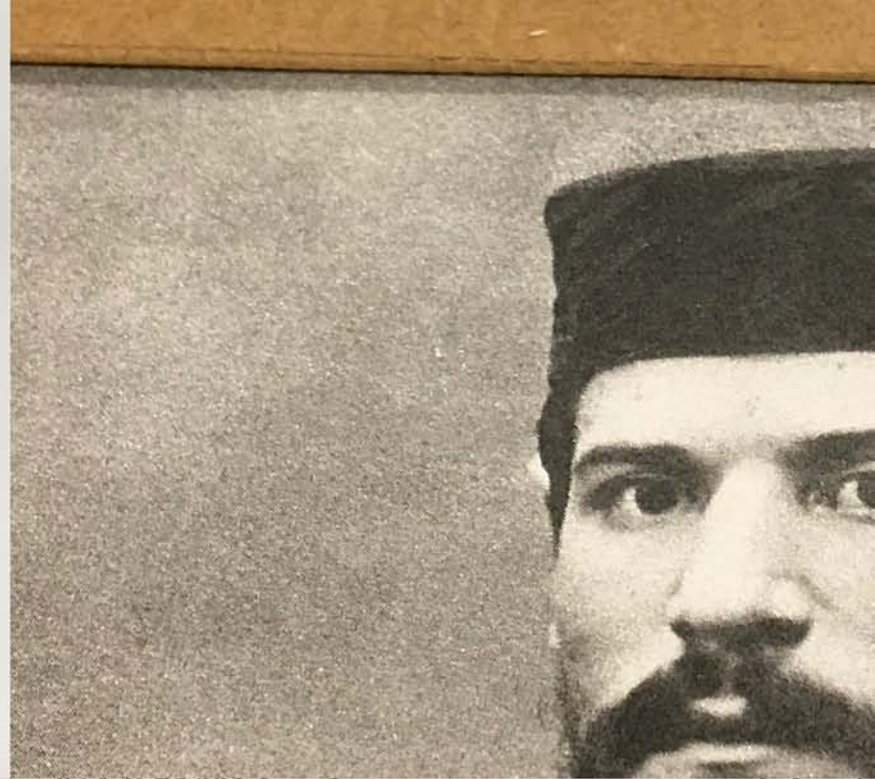
As we moulded the plasticine and Play Doh into little balls and sausages to create different details, families openly discussed their own collections of photographs. The action of making in 3D a single detail (a dress, a chair or a head of hair) enabled us to think about the feelings generated by these black and white photographs.

A few participants felt that because they were printed in black and white their own family photographs could easily be ignored and were left in boxes or books. Making the small models at the Museum had sparked their curiosity, and when back home the family photographs would come out of hiding.

Another participant (around 10 years old) added the shoes.
A slightly older boy (around 10 years old) spent a long time selecting a photograph to work with. After a good deal of reflection he picked the families outside their doorways. He immediately set to work modelling the intricate whorls of curly hair of the woman at the back of the picture. Each fine piece had a beautiful connection to it; exactly referencing the original. The whole table looked again and talked at the image and talked about it. This process of 'blowing up' detail (linked to the grazing view) was fascinating.





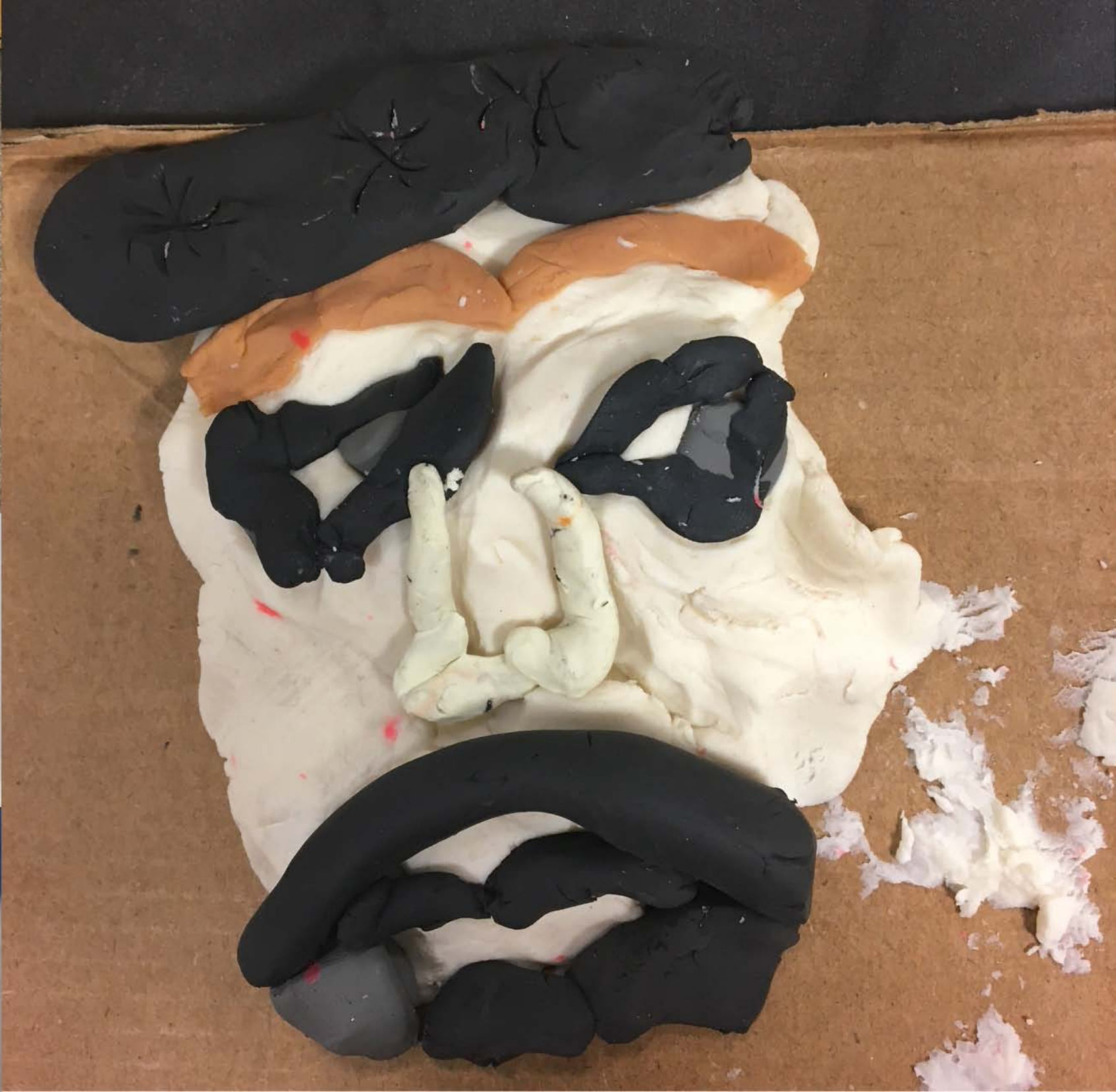


enjoyed
 little one made a play doh h
 it on his own head!
 Towards the end two brothers
 image again. They fixated on
 and mustache, making a 2D pla
 black white plasticine. The p
 the features and left untouched



hat and pu

s pulled the
the dark eyes
at image in
pieces isolated
ed the chair and
suit.



Writers on Photography

Roland Barthes

Barthes wrote 'Camera Lucida' in an attempt to explain what makes the essence of a photograph.

He thought that 'cameras...were clocks for seeing'. He described a photograph as containing 'a message without a code'. A photograph does not require knowledge of a code the way that language does. The content of its message is relayed directly by the image. A photograph of a dog looks like a dog.

John Berger

John Berger was an art critic, novelist and painter. In 'Understanding a Photograph' Berger tried through a series of essays to explain the essence of a photograph.

Berger explained that photography has no language of its own and that we learn to read photographs like X-rays. 'The language in which photography deals is 'the language of events.'

He wrote 'The photograph is an automatic record through the mediation of light...A photograph while recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen. It isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum.'

Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag was a writer, filmmaker, philosopher, teacher, and political activist. In 'On Photography' she wrote 'to take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. All photographs testify to time's relentless melt'.

She wrote about photography, the present and past: 'one can't possess the present but one can possess the past'. Photographs, for Sontag, were like a trace, something 'stencilled' off the real, 'like a footprint'.

Further Reading

Roland Barthes, 'Camera Lucida' 1980

John Berger, 'Understanding a Photograph' 2013

Susan Sontag, 'On Photography' 1977