

AMBER: INTEGRATE LIFE AND WORK AND FRIENDSHIP



Children playing with discarded junk, Byker, 1971, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen

RADICAL COMMITMENT

What possesses a group of artists to buy and run a pub as a base for their work in a community? Or invest in a 63 foot fishing boat to make a film about the industry? It takes a special kind of commitment to make art as the members of Amber Film and Photography Collective have done since 1968. A special kind of vision, and integrity too: it's no accident their early manifesto opens with the word 'integrate'.

Radical comes from the Latin word 'radix', a root. To be radical is to go to the root of things, to the start, to first principles. It means questioning established ways and claiming the right to think for yourself, freely – and that, of course, is what good artists have always done. It's art as philosophy, in the Socratic style: asking questions about things most of us take for granted.

If you want to document the lives of people living in North Shields, if you want to tell their stories rather than your own, why *not* buy and run a pub, become part of the community? Why *not* commit to spending five years there from the start?

It takes time to build relationship, to gain people's trust, to see beyond the surface, to understand. Yes, a flying visit by a great photographer can produce good pictures. But there is a depth, a seriousness, an engagement in the Amber artists' work that is of a quite different character.

And it comes from being rooted in place and community, from questioning everything, especially one's own assumptions, from intense looking and listening. That is radical commitment.

CONSISTENT COMMITMENT

Amber was founded in 1968 at Regent Street Polytechnic in London, by a group of young artists including [Murray Martin](#), [Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen](#) and [Graham Denman](#). The following year they moved to Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the industrial North East of England, where Martin had connections. The artists wanted to be rooted in a specific place as part of a working class community. Martin and [Peter Roberts](#), who joined a couple of years later, grew up in such places and felt that higher education had separated them from their own roots, their own culture. They wanted to bridge the gap by documenting and celebrating working class culture. It wasn't an aspiration Victor Pasmore or Richard Hamilton, Martin's art school tutors, had much time for.



Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, Murray Martin & Peter Roberts at The Hoppings, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1971

That commitment has remained constant, though working class life changed profoundly with industrial decline. The closure of steelworks, shipyards and coal mines that provided work and a social and cultural context for millions of people recast life in the North East. In films and photography, Amber artists told stories about terraces being cleared for high-rise housing, the social life of neglected quaysides, the enterprise of the sea coal gatherers and, of course, industry.

[Launch](#), a 1973 film about a ship built at Swan Hunter in Wallsend, is emblematic of Amber's early filmmaking. Just 10 minutes long, it raised questions about industry, class and modernity that provoked widely different responses—some saw it as a political comment on working conditions and inequality while others accused it of romanticism. Today, it is also an elegy to a vanished world, a historic document like the novels of Charles Dickens.



Still from *Launch* (Amber Films, 1974)

As the industrial tide withdrew, Amber stayed to tell stories of the people left behind and the new landscapes in which they live, observing the high-rise future being pulled down and replaced with a more modest world. The resulting images do not avoid a degree of sadness: where there was pride there is often just defiance. But on the margins Amber also found stories of humanity and resilience: farming, open cast mining, harness racing and horse breeding all appear in a still growing body of documentary and feature film and photographic projects.

The [recent exhibition of Amber's work at the Laing Gallery](#) traces this painful mutation of one way of life into another and the simultaneous evolution of a group of artists in response. The

underlying continuity is remarkable. A 2005 photograph by Simon Norfolk shows Dalton Park Shopping Outlet at dusk. It stands on the site of a former colliery, its tent-like roof suggesting the transience of a desert market. In the foreground, filling three quarters of the frame, is an allotment with sheds and greenhouses. But there seems to be more stability in the ramshackle creativity of reused materials, where people who may once have worked in the mine grow food in the footsteps of their parents and grandparents.



Dalton Park Outlet Shopping Centre, Murton, Co Durham, 2005, Simon Norfolk

COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT

In 1968, it seemed natural for a group of artists to form a collective, pooling their various earnings and paying themselves an egalitarian wage. It was, after all, a moment of high idealism. But it is exceptional to have stayed a collective, with shared decision-making and rights, through the post-Thatcher years as individualism became an article of faith and money the benchmark of value. Much of the art world bought the dream. Amber didn't.

They paid a price for it too, Side Gallery, the group's photography venue, losing 80% of their regional arts funding in 1989, when they refused to move away from commitment to documentary work. About the same time, Channel 4, which had broadcast many of Amber's films in the 1980s, began moving towards mainstream markets under a different funding model. Documentaries and dramas made by Amber artists in close cooperation with the working class communities involved were replaced with advertising-friendly reality television. There is not just a political gulf separating *Seacoal* from *Benefits Street*: there is a creative and moral one too.



Kayleigh with her grandmother Lyn and baby Cody, 2007, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, *Byker Revisited / Today I'm With You* (Amber Films, 2010)

Ironically, there was a also price to be paid in artistic recognition. The art world likes authors as religions like saints. Artists who resist turning themselves into a cult are ignored, if not actively rejected. When the BBC bought [Today I'm With You](#), a film made out of Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen's long engagement with the Byker district of Newcastle, the corporation could no longer deal with collective credits. It had become impossible for it to buy a film unless director and producer were individually named.

Working collectively was not just a principle – it brought human and artistic rewards. It gave the members peers with whom to develop and test their practice, friends in difficult times, even, as some have put it, a kind of family. And it was never exclusive. Over the years people have left and new members have joined. Other artists have done work with Amber without being formally part of the group. Today, they still eat together once a week, enacting the group's unwavering commitment to collective creativity and shared humanity.

ARTISTIC COMMITMENT

The artists who founded Amber in the late 1960s belong to a British generation whose lives had been transformed by access to higher education. Their ideas and practice were shaped by the art world, and especially the art school, of that time. If they subsequently turned their backs on it – like the Free Form artists whose story is documented by [Kate Crehan](#) – it was a deliberate rejection of some of that world's values. In different ways, many in that first generation of community artists, wanted to connect the artistic possibilities they had discovered with the working class culture they refused to abandon.

What they did not reject, therefore, were the artistic ideas, standards and references their education had given them. Amber artists saw their work in relation to that of other filmmakers and photographers, whether or not their practice was community-based. The humanism of [Henri Cartier-Bresson](#), leading French photographer and co-founder of [Magnum](#), was an inspiration and the exhibition of his work at Amber's Side Gallery in 1978 was both natural and a signal of artistic ambition.



Murray Martin, c 1972

The collective has commissioned, supported, exhibited and collected the work of many other great photographers from Martine Franck, August Sander and Weegee to Susan Meiselas and Wendy Ewald, while always including talented working class photographers who documented their own communities like Jimmy Forysth and Mary Gillens. As a result, Amber's own work has been presented as part of a developing body of documentary photography, so that the communities with whom the collective worked could see themselves in an international context.

Amber values craft, perhaps because of its past and current roots in working class life. Its members understood the empowerment that comes with mastering tools, techniques and materials. They understood too that many of the people they wanted to work with had a similar respect for embodied knowledge. In rejecting the art world's narrowest preoccupations and current values, Amber held fast to practices and beliefs that connected them with many of their best fellow artists of the past and today.

COMMITMENT TO PEOPLE, ALWAYS

This rigour hasn't prevented Amber from working in more obviously participatory ways. At different times, they have run a writers' group and video projects with young people and teenage mothers, often in the process of involving a community and leading towards a feature film. In the 1980s, the collective was very committed to developing working class participation in the Film Workshop Movement through a specialized training company.

And today, as people's relationship with and use of still and moving images has been transformed by technology, the group is using participatory approaches again to rethink its ever changing relationship with the community and people's access to their own history held in the vast Amber Collection. The Laing exhibition brought a huge response from local people, many of whom appear in the work or know others who do. A flood of memory, knowledge and ideas was released, opening all sorts of new possibilities for the collective. As Graeme Rigby told me:

'Everything in Amber is always an experiment and you don't know what new discoveries and priorities will emerge out of what you're doing, but what we're trying to achieve is a participatory practice going hand in hand with the group's collective film production, new photography production and the gallery exhibition work.'

REFLECTIONS

Integrate life and work and friendship.
Don't tie yourself to institutions.
Live cheaply and you'll remain free.
And then, do whatever it is that gets you up in the morning.

From an early Amber Manifesto 1968

Despite that, it's hard to imagine any of the people who have been part of the Amber collective over the decades describing themselves as a community artist, still less a participatory artist. The rhetoric is not about helping people to make their own art work or passing on creative skills. Nothing is said about the social impact of the work: whatever people gained from being photographed, filmed or otherwise involved in Amber's productions they have kept to themselves.

And yet everything that Amber stands for is completely in line with that practice. Its films and photographs stand on the same ground as community/participatory art, where it is distinguished principally by artistic ambition and unwavering commitment. Anybody who still believes that this restless art is a short cut to mediocrity would do well to spend some time looking at Amber's work online.

Amber's commitment to collective creative practice raises important questions about who the work belongs to. In participatory art, authorship has often been viewed simplistically so that it – and all that comes with it, including authority – is thought to be a matter of helping people to make something. If a person took this picture, played that part on stage or held their own lantern in the procession, that means they have expressed themselves.

The truth, as ever, is more complicated. Sometimes, having a great artist tell your story is better. Better because you don't want to be an artist, actually, even temporarily. Better because their skill and knowledge will make the telling of your story stronger, deeper, more truthful. Better because more people will hear it.

What matters is who chooses how it's done; where the power lies.

Murray Martin died unexpectedly in 2007. His grieving friends completed the film he was making about a family of Travellers and their culture of horse breeding, and what emerged was as much about Martin as an artist as the apparent subject of his film. They included an interview he gave three years before his death, in which he said of his approach to filmmaking:

'It's also attempting to reflect and record on behalf of a culture something which is important to them and accurate for them, so that a dialogue can take place. What that means, really, is that you have to engage with those communities or those individuals and say things about their lives which you believe to be accurate and ultimately they believe to be accurate, however difficult those statements are. At the end of the day the success or failure of a piece of work by Amber is the community you make it about looks at it and says "That's right".'

SOURCES

Site visit and interviews

- Visit to 'For Ever Amber' at the Laing Art Gallery and Amber Collective at Side Gallery (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK), 15 September 2015, and conversations with Graeme Rigby and brief meetings with other members of the Collective.

Book

- Amber Collective, 2015, *For Ever Amber, Stories from a Film & Photography Collective*, Newcastle

Film

- Amber Collective, 2008, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, Newcastle (90 minutes), including 30 page booklet, 'Amber, A Short History'.

Websites

- [Amber Film & Photography Collective](#)
- [Amber Films on YouTube](#)
- [A Culture Preserved in Amber](#) by Neil Young, British Film Institute
- Amber on the UNESCO [Memory of the World Register](#)