



Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen's Photography & Amber Films

Inscribed to the UNESCO UK Memory of the World Register since 2011, the work of photographer Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen and the films of the Amber Collective of which she is a founder member give a profound account of the working class and marginalised communities in the North East of England between the 1960s and 2009. What makes their work so special is their unique focus on people. From life in the terraced streets of Byker and the visionary Byker Wall Estate that replaced it; to the experiences of travelling, fishing and mining communities - Konttinen and Amber's work delves deep into important but neglected narratives that have been shaping English identity for the past half a century.

However, these glimpses into British culture are so much more than mere historical records, as Konttinen tells us:

Writing in The Sand, Whitley Bay, August 1980. © Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, courtesy Amber / L. Parker Stephenson Photographs.





Children with collected junk near Byker Bridge, 1971. © Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, courtesy Amber / L. Parker Stephenson Photographs.

“Our work gives people a chance to speak of their lives in their own words. I think that in itself is a form of celebration because those voices were certainly not heard when we first came to the northeast. These stories are not always easy, but they mean a lot to the communities and it means a lot to them that they are being heard.” Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen

There is nothing else like Amber in the UK. Its scale, scope, focus, quality and collaborative nature make it truly unique. From negatives and contact sheets to exhibition prints and photofilms - the AmberSide Collection Trust holds a major body of Konttinen’s work from the past 50 years.



Byker Revisited, 2005. © Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, courtesy Amber / L. Parker
Stephenson Photographs.



Gerel with son Tengis, Byker Revisited, 2005. © Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, courtesy Amber / L. Parker
Stephenson Photographs.

The Collection's visual heritage boasts a rich diversity of films and photography with local, national and international narratives involving over 40 other photographers over 40 years. Its focus captures not only changing lifestyles and public attitudes to the camera but also the evolving approaches to documentary practice itself in response to cultural shifts, making the archive's vast body of information of value to present and future generations.

The Amber Film and Photography Collective's work is locally, nationally and internationally recognised, through publication, exhibition, screening and broadcast - their films and photographs are widely celebrated and utilized to further creative dialogue. 40 years ago Konttinen's Byker exhibition toured the People's Republic of China, marking the first British cultural exchange with China after the Cultural Revolution. In the early 2000s, the Byker Community Centre used the same exhibition to introduce newcomers, many of them asylum seekers, to the Byker Wall Estate that had replaced the old Byker. Subsequently she was invited back to begin her new project Byker Revisited. The work continues to inform the understanding of community amongst planners and architects. For Konttinen, the UNESCO status is both an honour and a valuable recognition.

“It will add credibility to the significance of our work to the entire country and also acknowledge the quality of the work itself.” Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen

It has certainly helped raise Amber's profile, who in 2016 re-opened Amber's Side Gallery following major refurbishment funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund, and Arts Council England. The GBP 1.5 million programme of work led to the establishment of new digitisation facilities, an ambitious education programme and a new website to share the work (www.amber-online.com). Side Gallery and Cinema continues to showcase internationally relevant contemporary and historic work in the humanist documentary tradition.

To Konttinen, 'photography has an immediacy as a visual language, yet it does not simply reproduce what is visible, it makes things visible.'

Her images speak a common language that is accessible to everyone, but which is interpreted through one's own life experiences – and that is exactly why this particular heritage, and photography and film more generally, is so valuable. It connects people – with themselves, with each other, and with the world around them. Being inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register ensures that these important sources continue to be preserved and celebrated.⁵³

⁵³ Konttinen, S. (2019). Wider Value of UNESCO to the UK 2019 Report. United Kingdom Commission for UNESCO interview. Phone Call. London.