

#NWConnect Ian Taylor Podcast Transcript

NB. Your hosts, Kim and Amelia are in bold.

Kim: Hello and welcome to North Wall Connect

Amelia: A new podcast series where we talk to the talented artists featured here at The North Wall Arts Centre.

Kim: Brought to you by your hosts, Kim

Amelia: And Amelia!

00:12 Kim: Today we are talking with photographer Ian Taylor and his exhibition [#TheExcuseMeProject](#) at The North Wall Arts Centre. Ian started this body of work as a project to memorialise the brief interactions that we have with strangers, throughout our lives. So Ian thank you for being here today. Could you tell us a bit about yourself?

Ian: My name's Ian Taylor, I've been a professional photographer for more than 20 years. I wouldn't say that I've got a speciality in terms of genres that I photograph, basically anything that needs a picture, I'll shoot.

Kim: So a jack of all trades.

Ian: Yeah something like that.

00:41 Kim: I'm really excited to chat with you today because in your work is this, street art. What about it that appeals to you? I mean what is it, I guess, first of all, and what about it appeals to you?

Ian: (Laughs). Um, street photography is becoming much more popular in terms of genre, if you like. There's an awful lot of very good purveyors of the art online. And it's just something that I saw a lot of, and a few years ago I thought okay I'd like to have a go at it myself. And you never quite know what you're gonna find. You might find an interesting location, an interesting viewpoint, an interesting shadow on the ground...and so sometimes you've got to act really super quickly to catch that fleeting moment. And other-times you just got to see the potential, and then wait for something to happen. It's often described as being a hunter or a fisherman - so you either have to hunt the image out, or you just sit still and wait for the image to come to you. I kind of think of it as, you need to be both. You need to have the ability to see a picture, to visualise a picture, given any particular location, but then you also need the ability to, when you see your prey, to act quickly, and to capture the image straight away. So it kind of, it, puts you on the spot. It's a real good test of your abilities in many different ways. And I just find it really interesting, you never know what you're gonna find.

Kim: Always a surprise. I find it fascinating, the analogy you just used and it makes me think of the chicken-egg debate, you know, does the photographer or the subject arrive first.

Ian: Yeah, yeah, very much so.

02:11 Kim: Yeah - and it's an idea of the candid. Trying to catch people when they're in the everyday, not in a strictly posed position, right?

Ian: Yeah - very much so. You always have to go out with a completely open mind. You never know what you're gonna come across, you might come across a scenario that needs portrait skills, or you might come across a scenario that needs action skills or landscape photography skills. Are you shooting in flat? Or in light? Or are you shooting in high contrast sunlight and shadow? So you need to adjust your settings and the sort of picture that you're trying to achieve, accordingly. But you also have to be really careful as to what you do photograph when you're out and about. So, there's obviously laws involved, in terms of what you're allowed to photograph, and where you're allowed to be when you shoot it. Um, so basically if you're on public land you're allowed to take pictures of anything you can see. The analogy is basically if your eyes cannot trespass, so your camera can't trespass. If you're on public land. If you're on private land, then it's down to the landowner as to whether or not they let you take pictures on their land. So -

Kim: Interesting.

Ian: There's that legal side of things as well. But there's also more interestingly, a moral and an ethical perspective to it. So photographing, for example, there's a lot of sensitivity around taking pictures of children. Parents, understandably, become very very defensive, when they think their children are being photographed. Or even the vulnerable, the homeless, or people who are incapacitated because they've been in a car accident - or anything like that. So you always have to have your moral and your ethical head on as well. Yeah, you need to be sensitive all the time. You always have to have that in the back of your mind as you're taking pictures.

03:58 Kim: It's something that maybe we don't consciously think of when we look at the photograph, that behind that photograph is the photographer - and so what the person, or the subject sees is not just, you know, nothing, it's actually another person looking at them. I'm wondering, what kind of challenges did you face then when you went out?

Ian: Street photography in general, it's kind of what I've just been talking about. It's kind of where your personal morals and ethics lie. You know, I always have in the back of my mind, would I want that picture taken of me? So that's something to consider. In terms of The Excuse Me Project, it was almost answered for me because I would be talking to the people that I was photographing. There's always a permission granted by asking somebody, "Do you mind if I take your picture?" So that question was kind of taken out

of the equation. And I would never question it, if somebody said no, then "fine no problem at all, apologies for taking up some of your time" and walk away. And there was some really interesting people that I met, and I thought you'd be great a subject for this, but they said no. There's kind of that element of it, but then, you have other challenges involved for those pictures in terms of what's in the background of this person's portrait? Do I want a picture with lots of other people in it? Can I avoid that if possible? So your attention is focused on the subject. So then your artistic eye comes in, as to how you position yourself when you actually take the picture.

05:22 Kim: So with The Excuse Me Project, you went and introduced yourself to people around oxford.

Ian: So yeah. That's how it all started. Um, I've always been interested in these brief interactions that we have with complete strangers. Like, I've never met you before, and so we are gonna talk today, and we are going to have a conversation that's going to be recorded and put down on the internet for posterity - but in ten years time will you ever remember me? Will I, with respect, ever remember you? And it's always sort of fascinated me, I've always thought about those sorts of things. Will you be remembered or whatever. So then it became a can I combine street photography with memorialising these brief interactions that we have with total strangers but then I wanted to do it slightly differently from the way it's been done before. Lots of people have gone out on the street and taken pictures of people who are dressed wildly, or whatever. But what I do is I talk to the person and I'd find out just a little bit of information about them, that just adds a different dimension to the portrait that I've taken. I don't take up much of their time. It's just enough to take a quick picture, and you know, what's your name, what do you do for a living, where do you come from? Then when people look at the pictures, they've got that extra level of interest in terms of the unpredictability of the answers that you're going to get. I wasn't even sure if anyone was going to be interested in these pictures. It kind of started off as just a thing that I was interested in doing. But then, lots of friends and family saw them, and I put them online and people liked them, and fascinating, in terms of the community aspect of it and seeing who's in the place that you're photographing. So it started off in Oxford but then with hashtags that you can include with pictures these days, you can tag it to any different location. So I've done a series in Oxford, a series in Burford, in Chipping Norton, in Woodstock, my own village, Middle Barton - and you can just tag the location for the different pictures, so people can sort of log in to #ExcuseMeBurford, was one of the tags that I used, so they can just type that into instagram and they'll go to all the pictures that were shot in Burford. So it's kind of like, multi-dimensional in terms of the ways you can access the pictures, but also in terms of the way it's shot, I didn't think it's really been done this way before. The whole project is like really open ended. I can do this anywhere and produce a set of pictures for a location or I could tag it to events, I can tag it to locations, and it's just kind of like an ongoing, ever-growing catalogue of pictures that I've got of complete strangers that I've bumped into on the street.

07:51 Kim: And there seems to be a true fascination with the everyday person, and their everyday experiences, almost like it's an endless source of content that we

were curious about. From the things we watch on TV to the images that we seek and the stories that we look for. Why do you think it is, that people love and are interested in other people's everyday lives?

Ian: Because we are all curious about other people. We have all done it. We have all stood in the queue -

Kim: We're nosey.

Ian: Yeah. We're curious, we're nosey. I was trying to avoid that word but there you go, you've thrown it out there so we will use that. No, we have always done it. When you're bored waiting for a train, you look at people and you think, I wonder what they do for a living? I wonder what their story is? So I think we are always curious about that. This just gives us a little glimpse into somebody else's lives. And we also always compare ourselves, rightly or wrongly, to other people. There's kind of a fascination with what other people do and are they more successful than me, or how are they different from me, and it's basic human curiosity I guess. What I try to do is just get enough information to tickle your curiosity bone, and to make you think, ok well that actually makes me ask more questions than the ones that you've answered with the information that you've given. So, it's a different dimension to the picture. But yeah, I think we are all just fascinated by other people, aren't we really.

09:12 Kim: I think you're completely right, and with almost 700,000 people living in Oxfordshire it has a humanising effect to those numbers, to the people that we live around. I think that sometimes, I don't know if you feel the same way, you walk around and it kind of goes in a blur as well, there's so many people - it's almost like stimulation overload. But when you can isolate a few examples, and actually have a bit of a personal traction with them, even through a photograph - that has a humanisation process, that I think is really needed in communities.

Ian: Like I say, I was tagging pictures for a location, but then to actually diversify that into a community project, in terms of the different areas of Oxford that i could go to. Would I find different types of people there? I don't know. You know, the centre of Oxford is full of tourists, full of academics, um and there's sort of the suburbs and the more outlying areas, like your Headingtons, like your Cowley Roads, Jerichos - you get more residents. And so it's a different sort of person if you like. So you can sort of build that community library in that way. Yeah it's been an interesting experience but because of the complete randomness, of who I stopped, who I asked, I never know what I'm gonna get, or who I'm gonna get, or where they're gonna be from. You know, I thought well it's an Oxford based exhibition so therefore I need to get people from Oxford but I don't know they're from Oxford until I've stopped them and asked them By which point, if somebody says "Oh I'm from Birmingham", I say, "Oh sorry I can't take your picture then you're not from Oxford", you know,- I can't do that. I wouldn't do that. Because it's people that I meet in the place rather than the people from the place.

Kim: Interesting - people you meet in Oxford, rather than the people who are necessarily from Oxford.

Ian: Yeah.

10:54 Kim: Which are still part of the community, I mean, I think a large part of the population of central Oxford is the University, most of the people are transient, because they're only there for a few years. I'm wondering if you have one or two examples of people you introduced yourself to who really surprised you.

Ian: Oh yeah - I often get asked this. And my catch-all answer is I just say to people they're all memorable because they're all interesting. Everybody is interesting in one way or another, and it's often very unexpected. Um, but yeah you know, everybody has got a story to tell. Everybody's life is a story. Everybody's life is different. I mean there are a few that you kind of think ok - I was not expecting that. Um, a young lady I met in the middle of Oxford she was an employee of Disney in Orlando. And my immediate thought was if you're not cast as Snow White then they're missing a trick there, because you look exactly like Snow White you know. She had the straight black hair, the red lipstick, - and another chap I stopped in Oxford is a professor of quantum physics. And when you look at his picture, there is no way you would have guessed that from the way that he looks. I don't want to describe him too much, but have a look out for the chap in the cap smoking the little cigarette with the sunglasses on. And you just think, -

Kim: I will

Ian: How is he a professor of quantum physics? But, the other thing of course is that I think people are taken, not off guard, but they're so surprised that I am asking these sorts of questions that they are completely honest with me. The chap I photographed during lockdown, the chap from my village. He's an ex-Dj, from pirate radio and the questions evolved as I did the lockdown series, and I think we are going to touch on that later, but I asked him about something interesting in their lives, and his interesting thing was that he had met John Lennon in Pear Tree services when he was on leave from pirate radio in the 1960s.

Kim: Wow!

Ian: Just happened to bump into him, with someone else that he knew, who was a roadie for The Moody Blues. You know, hearing these stories and stuff about it - like I say, everybody is interesting and everybody has that sort of slightly unusual thing, that makes their life story unique.

13:04 Kim: I think it's really engaging if we are always looking for something, in someone's story, that's worth telling, we also know that there's something in our story worth telling. In your experience having gone around different places in Oxford, the different locations, did you notice different trends, what were some thoughts you had on that?

Ian: I've lived in and around Oxford most of my life, so I know what a diverse community it is, and I know that in the middle of Oxford you're going to get more academic people and on the suburbs you'll get a different sort of person. The people that would I meet in the middle of Oxford were from a more diverse locations, so like I'd say, "where do you live?" and it could be Birmingham, it could be America, it could be China, it could be the Netherlands, it could be anywhere whereas people in the more residential areas, were like "I'm from Oxford." But you get the diversity in terms of ethnicity, in terms of gender, in terms of what people do for a living - that's what's fascinating. Some of the pictures I took in places more around Oxfordshire, like Burford, like Chipping Norton, tended to be much less ethnically diverse, that's for sure. And I've had comments before of why haven't you photographed more people from non-white backgrounds, if you like, in those sorts of places - and I just had to say, "because I didn't see any". It's quite interesting the difference in ethnicities between different places. Not to say that people don't live there, but when I was out and about on that particular day, nobody that I asked that was non-white, if you like, said yes. It's been quite an interesting journey in terms of the sorts of people who would say yes and who would say no.

14:43 Kim: There is, I think, a really important difference between representation of diversity and tokenisation.

Ian: Everywhere I go, and every-time I go out to take The Excuse Me Project pictures, there is no quota in my head. I just go out and I talk to people. You know, I go where it takes me.

Kim: Yeah

Ian: And if certain people are out and about on that day then they're out about on that day. I have no control over it. It's totally random.

Kim: You're meeting strangers regardless of who they are, where they come from, you don't know anything about them yet.

Ian: There's people who always stand out and I must admit I'm drawn to people who look a bit different from the average. Because I kind of think they're going to have a fascinating story I wonder what their story is. But at the same time, some of the most interesting answers to questions have come from people who are just completely normal.

Kim: It's that phrase - it's always the quiet ones.

Ian: Yeah that's it. They haven't got pink hair or a hat with horns on, or you know, anything like that. These people weren't expecting to be photographed. It's such an honesty to the portrait. They haven't had any hair done or makeup done, or anything like that. It's just a very unusual request from a complete stranger. It's a very honest type of picture.

15:52 Kim: If someone doesn't know they're about to be photographed, is it less performative, less of putting on a version of yourself you want people to see.

Ian: I don't think they do, because it's so unexpected. It's not like they've got a chance to prepare themselves for something that often in times people feel very uncomfortable having done, and most people will just stand there and be themselves. I don't give them any direction, I don't pose them in any way. I might change my viewpoint, then I can adjust what I can see in the background - but that's kind of all the creativity taken away in some respects by having just that, no, this is you, this is you in this moment in time, where we are right now, look at the camera and I'll take your picture. And one thing that I've noticed is that men are more likely to say yes than women.

16:45 Kim: Do you think that you as a photographer also factor into that?

Ian: This is something that I've considered as well. I'm a middle aged, white, man. And I think all of those elements have something to do with how people react to me. It's not something I ever try to play on. I treat everyone exactly the same. I ask everybody exactly the same thing, in exactly the way. I don't want that to become an element of generating the pictures, generating the work.

17:11 Kim: It's really interesting discussions to have because I think we take for granted sometimes looking at photographs, and not the hurdles or the considerations that are taken into account by the photographer on the other end. You've obviously given this quite a bit of thought. I want to continue on that line of thought but segue into your series you did during lockdown. Where I know you had to shift your focus and your methodology. How did you manage that? And what limitations were you met with?

Ian: It's yeah, my immediate thought was oh my goodness - how am I going to take pictures of people when I am not allowed to meet people? It was a very, yeah it was an interesting mindset. All of a sudden, the ability to travel into Oxford was taken away, the ability to meet people was taken away. I don't live in a big village, so there's not many people to meet when you're out and about anyway. I also wanted to make it different to the original pictures. Because it was such a unique time, well it is, still, such a unique time, that not only did I walk around my village for my daily exercise as we were allowed to do. But I also opened it up through the local village facebook group, to say look I am doing this project, is there anybody who wants to be a part of it, and I can arrange to meet you to take your portrait, for part of this project. And a few people got in touch with me, through that method. So it wasn't just me bumping into strangers anymore, because obviously I know a lot of people in the village, so they're not necessarily strangers anyway the people that I bump into. But I also opened it up for people to approach me. Part of it was, I put several pictures out to show people what the project was all about, and then people would come up with their own ideas. Say, "oh yeah my husband wants to be involved as well." Or one chap who contacted me said "can you take pictures of my whole family because I've got teenage and young 20s children, they're all at home at the

moment, this is probably the only time that we are all going to be at home together, and I really have cherished the time that we have been together through lockdown, because we have been forced to be together and we have actually all got on" - which I thought was really sweet of him. So you know, I photographed his whole family as part of the project, but he approached me. Interestingly, it wasn't somebody that I had ever seen around the village ever before, so I wouldn't have got that set of five pictures without him seeing the work that I posted on facebook and approaching me. So, the approach to actually generating the pictures changed slightly but then the extra questions that I added in as well made the pictures different. And I thought long and hard about the sort of things that I was going to ask people apart from, what's your name, what do you do for a living, where do you live. Because I don't want to be too intrusive, but I also don't want to make it part of, "how has lockdown affected you", or "how have you been affected through this pandemic?" I wanted to remove it from that. So I just came up with, "how long have you lived where you live?" And "tell me something interesting or surprising about your life, that nobody would have thought about you - or something that you're proud of that you've done". But I left it as vague as that, so people could come up with anything that they wanted to. And that's when the chap came up with about meeting John Lennon for example. One chap said, oh I accidentally shut down broadband services for half of France - which I thought was quite interesting. And makes you think okay well how, so I have learnt the story of that - but I've left it as vague as that on the picture, because I want other people to think, oh my goodness what happened there? And the one little boy, he was with his Mum, and I photographed his Mum and her interesting thing was that she hand-raised orphan deer in the house when she was a child. Which I would never have expected her to come up with that, and her little boy who I think was 7 or 8, obviously when I'm photographing children I always ask the parents permission first - so she was right there, she gave permission, and his thing that he was proud of was that he recently went over a weir in a canoe. Which is brilliant, I love that - that's so sweet and so eight year old boy.

21:24 Kim: Yeah it's just so human. Bringing that to your online exhibition, people can now, through their computers, meet some of those people in this kind of virtual encounter.

Ian: Absolutely, absolutely, I've often thought what would this year have been like if we didn't have the internet. And so having that change in focus in terms of the original The Excuse Me Project pictures and then the lockdown pictures as well - and I'm really really grateful to The North Wall, for wanting to include those pictures within this exhibition now. Including pictures from different locations around Oxfordshire, brings us the Oxfordshire kind of element, but also the lockdown element and finding more out about people adds a different dimension so I'm very grateful to The North Wall for agreeing to include those pictures.

22:10 Kim: We're just happy to have it in, and definitely happy to have it virtually. I was wondering, especially for our listeners and those who will be looking at your project, are we allowed to ask you what is something you're proud of? Or that we don't know about you?

Ian: Yes. A couple of people have asked me exactly that question when I have asked them their question. I'm like "no no no no no, don't turn it around, this is about you, not me." But it has made me think about it a little bit. The two things that I come up with are, I saved 12 people from drowning when I worked in a water park in Pennsylvania. So that was something that I am immensely proud of. There are 12 people walking around today who wouldn't have been, had I not been there. When I ask people this question I always say it's got to be about you - it can't be I am proud of being a dad, or I am proud of my family - it's something that you have done, that you are proud of. And the other thing that I am immensely proud of is that I held a Guinness World Record for 10 years - for the wakeboard marathon.

Kim: Wow!

Ian: So I wake-boarded, non-stop, for 6 and a quarter hours, and nobody had ever done that before and nobody matched or beat that for 10 years. From 2004 to 2014.

Kim: Wow, amazing.

Ian: If you have the Guinness World Record book from 2007 I am in it.

23:42 Kim: Go look it up! You'll find Ian Taylor. It's making me think, because I want our listeners to also be able to answer that question. It's kind of hard to look into yourself, or at your past and say, you know, what am I proud of? Or what am I most proud of? And it being about you, and like you say, not about your family or someone else. I hope that everyone listening has an amazing time looking at the virtual online exhibition and do encourage you to follow us on social media and answer our question, as to, What are you most proud of? Especially when we are so harsh on ourselves I think during this lockdown. We always get down on ourselves for not doing enough. But you know, there's a pandemic out there - so it's okay. (Laughs).

Ian: This is a little bit of non-pandemic positivity. So -

Kim: Yes! I love that.

Ian: It can only be good. Thank you everybody for listening to the podcast, it's been fascinating chatting about The Excuse Me Project, it's always interesting to have to think about why you've done what you've done, and hopefully it will all make sense to people. So do have a look at the pictures, follow me on instagram The Excuse Me Project. Yeah maybe I'll see you in the street - stop me and ask me to take your picture.

Kim: It's been lovely.

Ian: Thank you. It's been a pleasure, absolute pleasure.

Kim: See ya! Ian Taylor's exhibition [#TheExcuseMeProject](#) will be featured as a North Wall digital exhibition from the 2nd February until 20th February 2021. Thank you for listening to this episode of North Wall Connect.

Amelia: If you want to hear more - don't forget to subscribe.

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Kim: Stay connected - and until next time!