# Making a House a Home

BY Millie Stephens
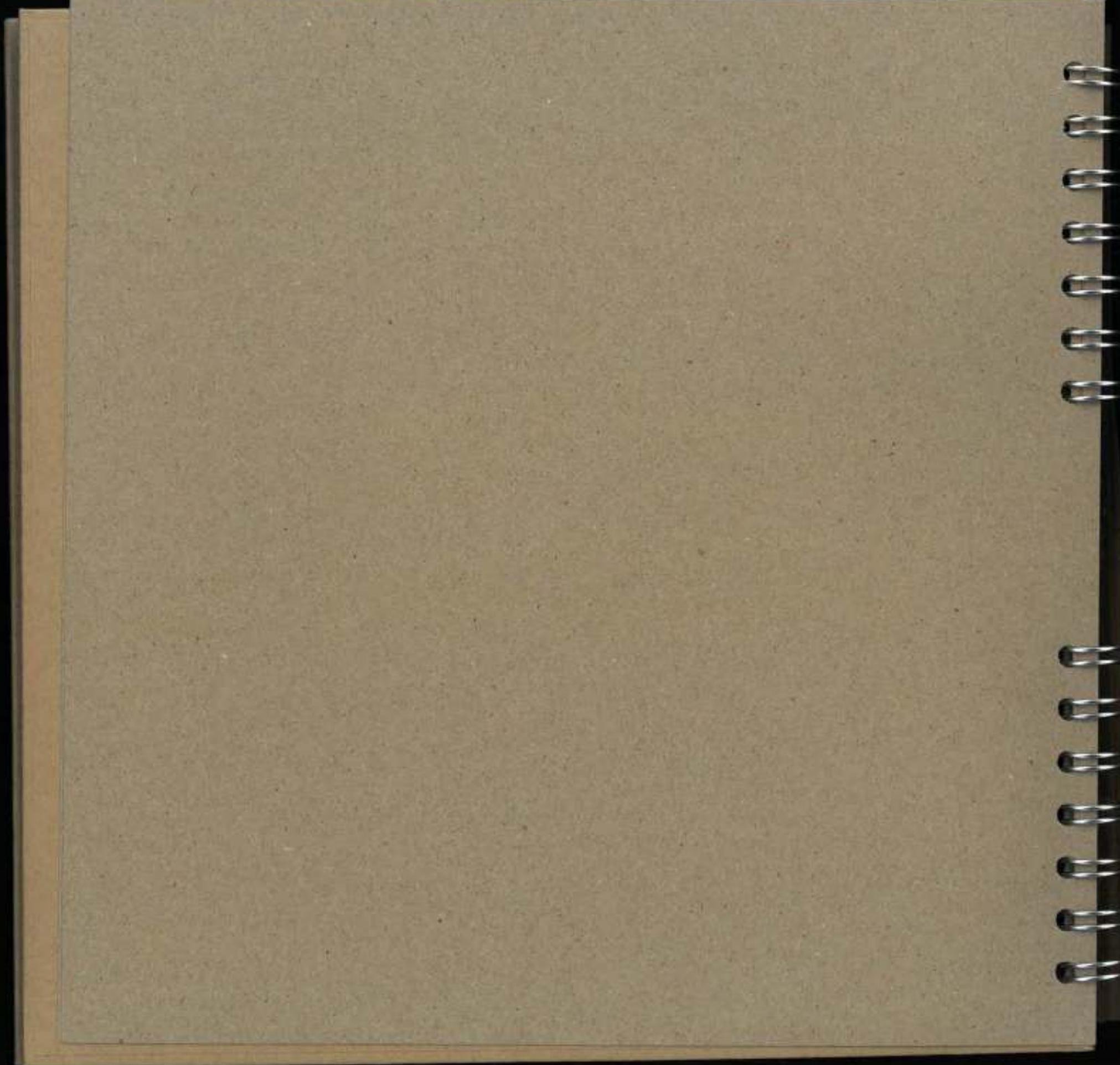
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'Making a house a home' is a social documentary portraiture project where 15 students across the city of Leeds were captured in their university bedrooms.

Alongside each photo is a personalised collage which represents each persons room & personality.

Themes of memory, identity, expression, temporality & community are explored throughout.
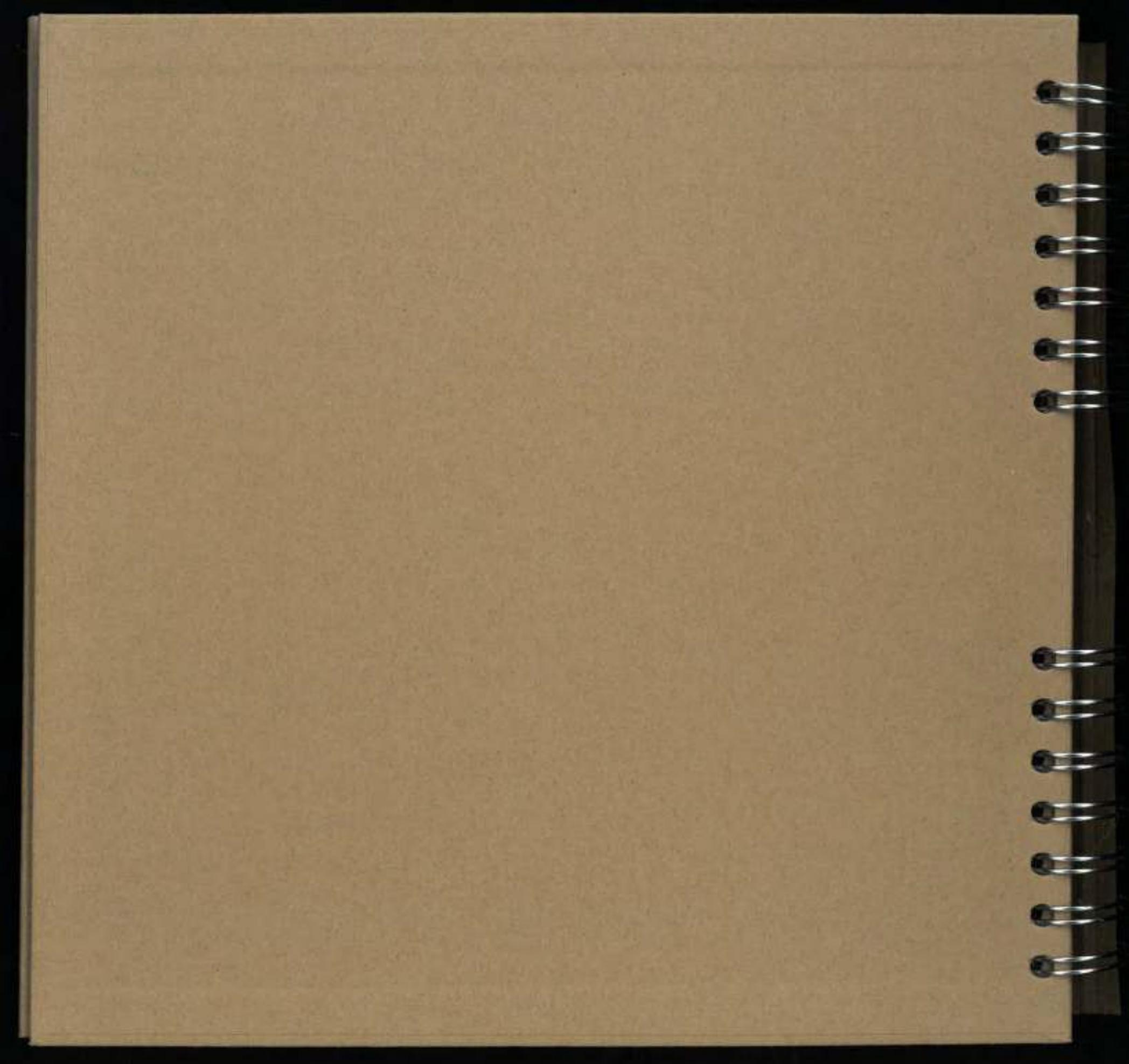
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BA Film, Photography & Media
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☆☆ Josh, 20 (he/him)
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Leeds Art university
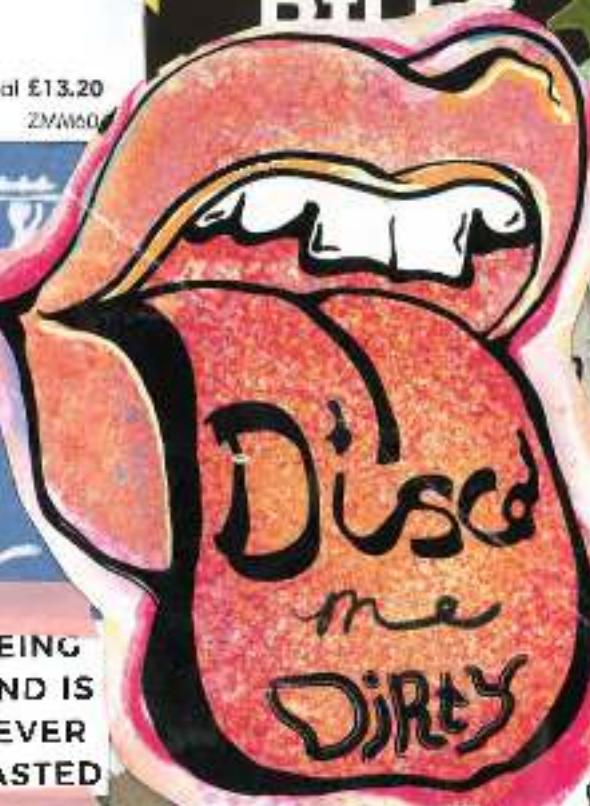
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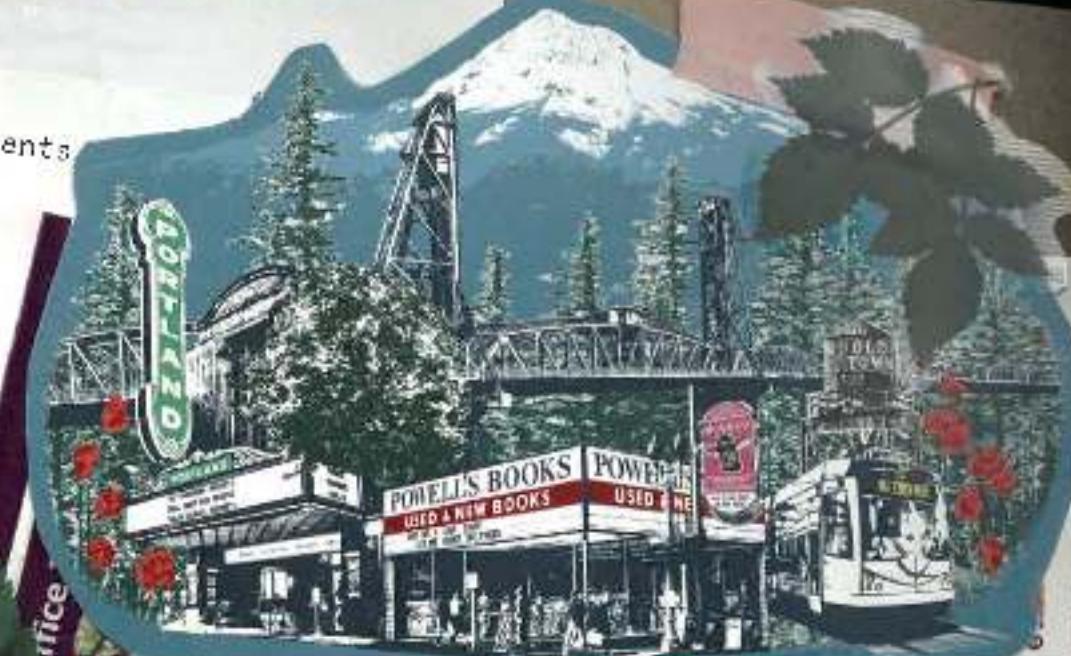
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    if (check != 2 || height < MIN_DIMENSION || width < MIN
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        { // check dimensions
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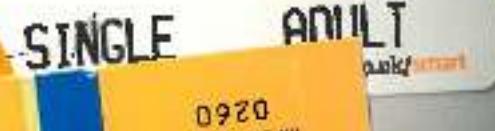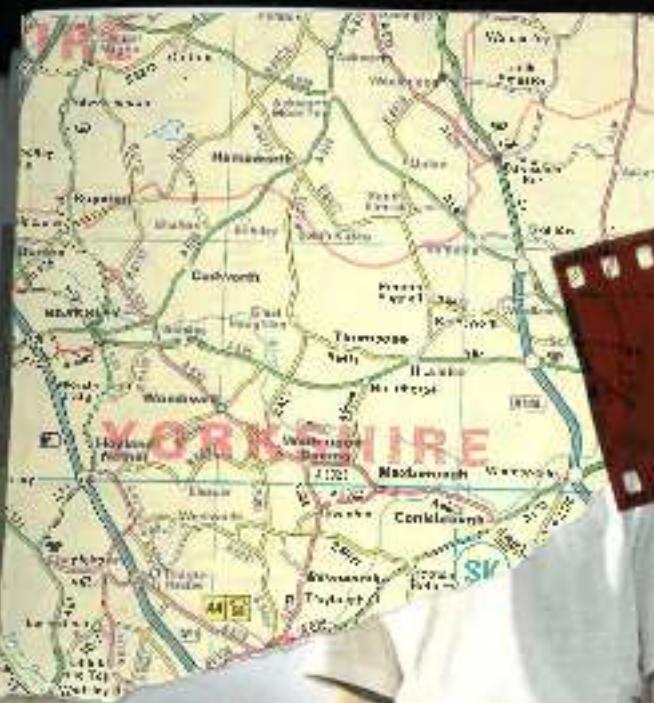
Kirstin
21 (almost 22 !)
She/her

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University of Leeds

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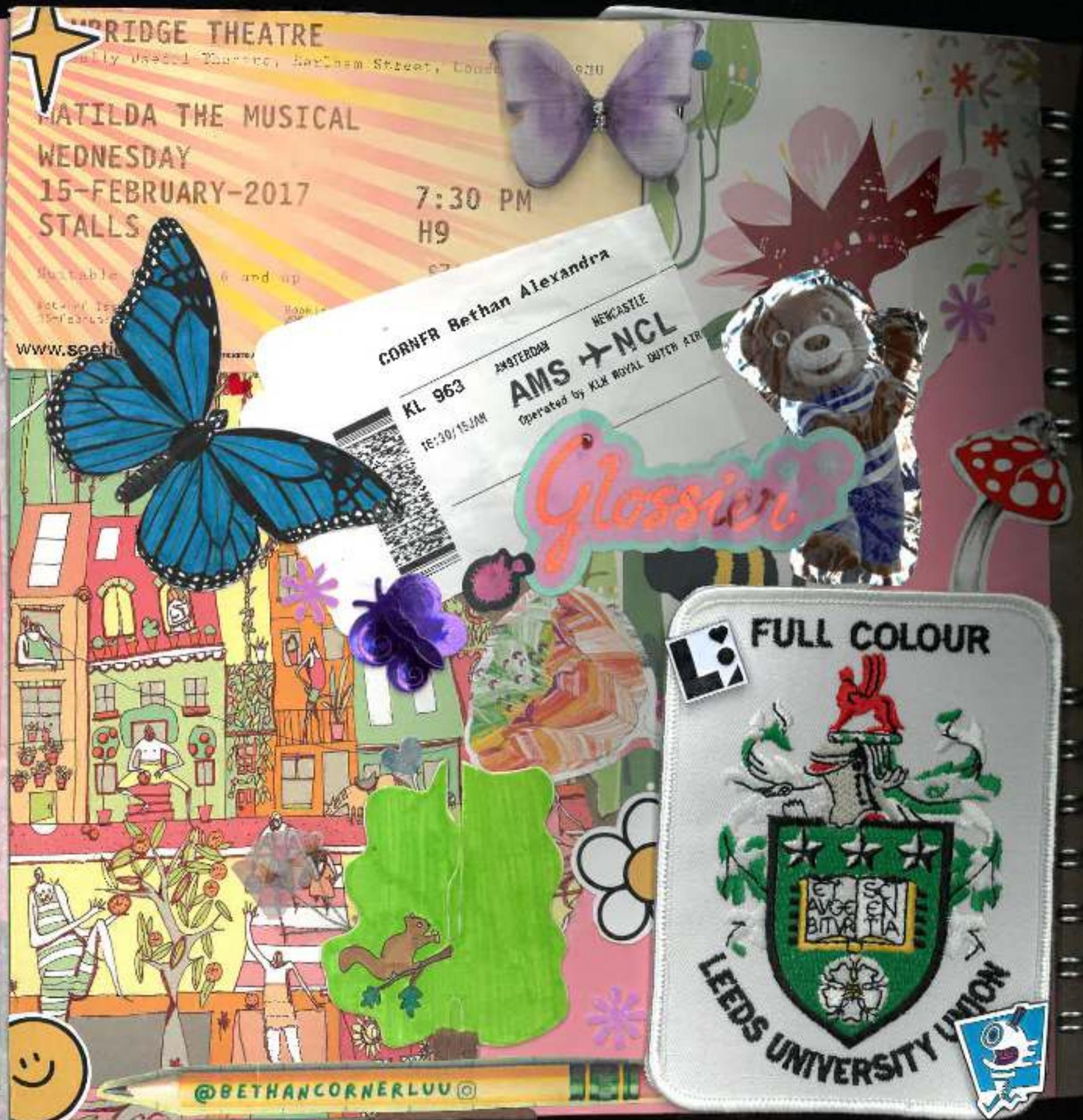
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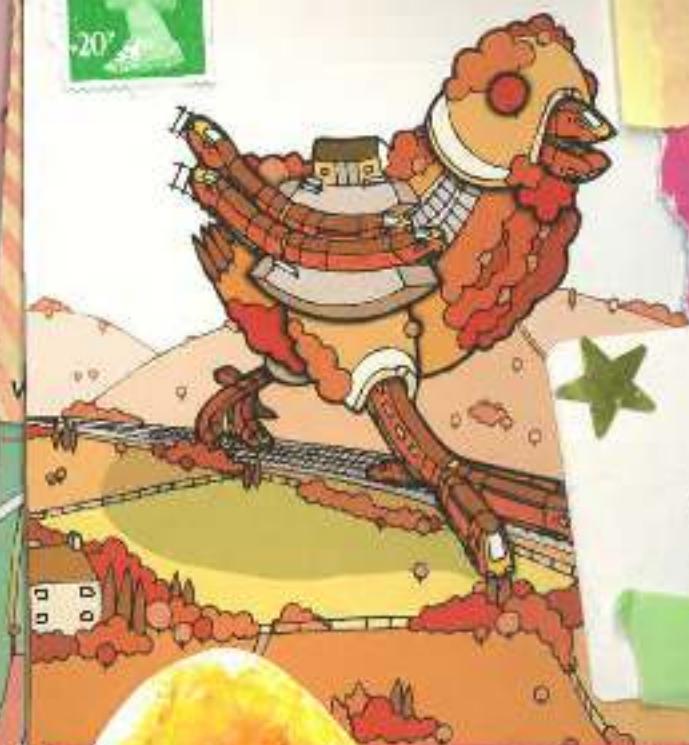
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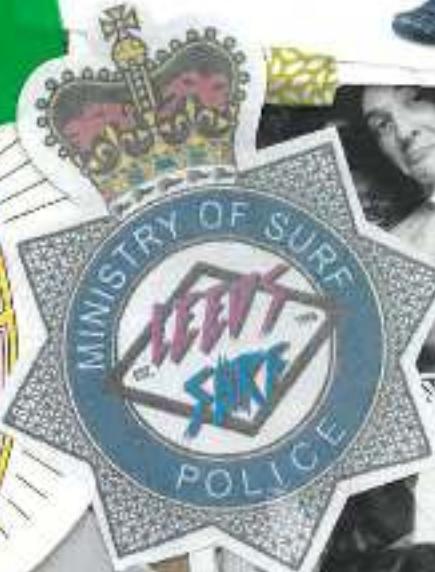
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SHE/HER

BA FILM, PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEDIA

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Investigate photography's role as an archival tool.
Making a House a Home

Section 1: Essay

"I look around at the rooms that I did not see as rooms but more as a landscape for my emotions, a biography of memory." (Spollen, 2008, no pagination). *Making a House a Home* is a social documentary portraiture project which explores photography's role as an archival tool. The project captures 15 university students in their bedrooms, and focuses on five themes: memory, identity, community, expression and temporality, each of which overlap repeatedly in my following research and analyses.

When photography is used as an archival tool, it explores the mediums relationship with events, Sontag details that the act of taking a photograph is an event within itself (1977, p.177). I aim to investigate this idea to question why we tend to cherish the photographs taken at the start and end of our university careers, with moving in days and graduation photos, but neglect the importance of documenting the in between stage. This project aims to highlight the importance of the middle stage, the stage of emerging adulthood, looking at the normalcy of university living, by capturing intimate photos of students in their private spaces. The morbid reality of transitioning to adult life when university begins can be summarised by Badger: "The photograph, while evoking life, also inevitably evokes death." (2010, p.11) although our life seems to be just-beginning, we have to say goodbye to childhood and let that part of our lives exist only as a memory. Many refer to university as the *best years of our lives*, so why do we disregard capturing the day to day, and only use our phones as a means of convenient documentation? I intend to create images which "alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe." (Sontag, 1977, p.3), why should only significant life events be considered archive worthy?

The presentation of artistic work is always an essential part of the viewing experience for the audience, it "gives photographers a voice as well as style" (Badger, 2010, p.223), this is especially true within photography, whether that be through the means of photobook, exhibition or digital website. My decided presentation for this project will be a physical photobook, which will act as an archival medium, mirroring the practice itself, it will serve as a time capsule of students living in Leeds between 2022-2023. Despite the dominance of digital art technologies in the present day, physical photobooks remain in mass circulation.. (Neümuller and Martin, 2017, p.5). I intend to explore the significance of the physical book and draw attention to the importance of photography as being 'read' (Badger, 2010). The justification of creating a physical book also relates back to three of my key themes, memory, expression and temporality. Because of its association to memory, the photobook often takes the form of a family album, a size which can aid "the construction of family image and… memory while also evoking a certain sense of belonging" (Erkonan, 2016, p.257). My book intends to mimic the family album style of personalisation and intimacy and combine this with several scrapbooking characteristics. As previously addressed, our university years are often fondly remembered, therefore the physical photobook will act as a reminder of each subject's current reality and aims to be used as an artifact for them to reflect on in years to come. "The book format is not only a good tool for showing photographic work, but also the perfect place for artistic experimentation." (Neümuller and Martin, 2017, p.4). I will use my artistic voice to amplify the voices of my subjects when collaborating in the production of this book to create personalised collages next to each individual image, allowing the audience to get to know them better. Notions concerning temporality within the presentation of my project relate to the physical materiality and "multi-sensory experience of holding a book in your hands" (Neümuller and Martin, 2017, p.4). The haptic qualities of physical photobooks evoke unmatched experiences of *thereness*, inviting the audience to interact with the scene in a way that a digital alternative would struggle to replicate. (Di Bello et al., 2012, p.3).

Because of the intimate nature of the project, it is important to allow my subjects to have agency over their depictions and identities. I intend to replicate the processes of community archives to aid my

research and collaborations. Community archives evoke a sense of co-production, creating work which allows the subjects to "take control of their own histories and share their experiences, knowledge and expertise." (Popple, Prescott and Mutibwa, 2020, p.2). I am determined to create an *honest* representation of the different types of students living in Leeds, and, because of my social documentary approach, will frequently work with my subjects in order to do so, which will only improve its accuracy. If I were to work solely and not regard my subjects opinions, ideas and experiences I would create images which aren't a true reflection of student living, resulting in an unreliable artifact which could misinform those who come to view it as an archival piece of media. The significance of collaborations within this project will not only improve its notability, but open up possibilities for "collective memory-making and identity formation" (Roeschley and Kim, 2019, p.28). By sharing their personal experiences and being involved in the creation of an artifact, my subjects will get the chance to interact with their peers, most of who they haven't met before, and bond over their collective memory.

"Analogue photographs are given particular value, the description of them as 'special' and 'precious' relating primarily to their singular existence" (Keightley and Pickering, 2014, p.582), my choice of an analogue medium format camera for this project was a conscious decision, as I attempt to make the whole process of production and consumption feel special and unique.

When compared to digital photography, analogue is far less disposable and immediate, with developing and processing times countered into the whole experience. Aura, a phenomenon explored by Walter Benjamin in 1973, can be applied here in relation to the reproduction of art. When using analogue cameras, a photographer is challenged to "take his time and consider the quality of the image" (Lahue, 1981, p.7) due to the limited shots per roll, rather than continuously shooting in the hope of capturing one great image. In this sense the overshooting of digital photographs results in a lack of "presence in time and space" (Benjamin, 1973, p.3), by merely reproducing similar shots which dominate little significance of their own, whereas the analogue photographer must be in the moment, which in turn, creates a closer connection to their work.

"Photography manifests itself in a concrete and tactile form, both with regard to the carrier of the image, and its presentational form." (Breitbach, 2011, p.32), the haptic qualities of analogue photography add to the intimate and unique nature of the project. "a photograph is a three-dimensional thing" (Edwards and Hart, 2004, p.1), often treasured as an artifact, displayed in many different locations such as homes and galleries, within albums and frames. The material nature of analogue photography begins with the loading of film, this directly addresses the digital way of shooting, which transfers subjects into data and numbers, rather than as existing 'things'. The whole process of shooting and developing analogue photographs focuses on each frame as a physical object which "exist(s) in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience." (Edwards and Hart, 2004, p.1). This is essential to this project as it invites the audience into the specific social setting, of the students bedroom, to live their experiences with them.

Aesthetic qualities are one of the main factors leading the analogue comeback, with film cameras becoming a staple in homes across the globe and social media sites creating vintage filters, with scratches, torn borders, washed out colours and polarised effects for audiences to mimic the nostalgic medium (Caoduro, 2014, p.67). I want to go back to the roots of this for my project as it explores notions of authenticity and intimacy, by using analogue film I am able to honestly assess the concept of *nostalgia for the now* and link back towards my overarching theme of archives. "Several factors contribute fundamentally to the feel of an analogue film. Some of the main ones are image contrast, colour palette and film grain." (Newson et al, 2017, p.684), I intend to analyse these aspects when reflecting on my photographs.

My inspiration has come from a variety of different artistic practices and photographers, with Daniel Meadows' work being a key site of motivation. Meadows describes himself not as a photographer, but a documentarist (Daniel Meadows: Early Photographic Works, 2012), who thrives off working with people to tell their stories, doing so in a number of ways, from still images to video and audio interviews. His work is often collaborative, his subjects are gifted agency over their depictions, which

is especially true in his 1972 *Omnibus* series in which he discovered numerous "invisible histories start[ed] to emerge" (03:25, Daniel Meadows: Early Photographic Work, 2012). Meadows frequently revisits his projects years after they take place, for example the *Now and Then* series (Figure 1). I'm interested in revisiting this project and my subjects in 10+ years' time, to compare their new spaces and emotional growth to that of their earlier years. The documentarist's 1973 collaboration with Martin Parr has also served as a source of inspiration, the two photographed the residents of June Street, investigating the truth behind the location, and created an important part of Salford's collective memory. Their work has inspired my exploration into photographic archives, life at university is fleeting and is over before you know it, forcing you to move onto adult life and leave that part of you behind.

Figure 1, Michael and Peter McPartland. (1955 and 1974, Meadows)

Two female photographers, Tina Barney and Adrianne Salinger, have also heavily influenced the concept of this project. Both women work with analogue photography and regularly explore identity. Salinger's book *In My Room* captures an honest picture of teenagers in their bedrooms, "Our bedrooms tell stories about us. They become the repository for our memories and the expression of our desires and self-image." (Salinger, 1995, p.7), I aim to expand her approach further working with the age bracket just above these teenagers, to see how it differs. Usually, especially in modern day publications, photobooks are clean and minimal, however Salinger opposes this, creating a book that fits perfectly with her subjects, as chaotic and messy (Figure 2), this is something I wish to explore too to depict the lack of perfection in our young adult lives, and embrace the chaos of university life.

Figure 2, Danielle D. (1995, Salinger, pp.42-43)

"Why does the photographer always have to stand behind the camera? I want to show that these pictures and these people are part of my life. I belong with them." (Barney in Boris, 2014, p.28), to contrast to Salinger, Barney often incorporates aspects of herself within her work. Within *Theater of Manners* her models are always situated in relation to herself, often exploring and expanding on the close relationships she has with them. I will take inspiration from this concept by not only working closely with each subject to create a personal connection through frequent and open discussions, but also I intend to photograph myself and include this image within the project.

A scrapbook can be described as a media diary (Bragg and Buckingham, 2008, p.3), an autobiographical private identity definer which gives the creator the freedom over messy expression of personal information, all in the form of "notes, messages, photographs, symbolic tokens and

snippets of meaningful items." (Good, 2012, p.559). The Rookie Yearbook has been a source of inspiration when visualising the production of my own scrapbook, especially its collaborative nature which usually isn't apparent within typical scrapbooks (Figure 3). The Rookie Yearbook's editor in chief, Tavi Gevinson, discussed her take on why art needed to be published. "This is the stuff that needed to be in pages adorned with doodles and glitter; that is revisited… and that couldn't be just stared at on a screen for such an occasion. I mean, being able to actually HOLD art and writing that you love is kind of sort of really special." (2012, p.13). Gevinson highlights the significance of dressing a page, describing the style as "pure aesthetic enjoyment" (p.15), which is the aura I'd love for my work to evoke.

Figure 3, Confessions of a Fangirl. (2012, Gevinson, pp.188-189)

I'm hoping to achieve four things in this project, firstly to investigate what makes a house a home within the student sphere. One of my main aims is to capture the individual character and personality of each of my subjects and explore why creating a safe space away from home is so important. The five key themes of identity, memory, community, expression and temporality will be examined as I progress and I will analyse five of my final images against each theme. In creating this project I hope to create my own archive and work with others to produce a community project that honestly depicts student living in Leeds this year. Photography's role in creating historical artifacts has been of particular interest to me throughout my studies, contributing to that by archiving an important part of Leeds' student history would be a perfect way to finish my time in the city. Photography and art are important tools for collaboration and this project will be a great opportunity to expand my network within the students community in Leeds working with a diverse range of people I would normally not connect with. Finally, I wish to improve my technical skills as a photographer and artist, through this project I am exploring mediums which I have had minimal experience with and developing my professional practice with the Hasselblad camera.

Section 2: The Process

My central idea of photographing students in their houses hasn't changed, but developed since the beginning of the project, with themes of archives and memory coming to the forefront of my practice. I initially wanted my images to look like film stills, instead of the nostalgic documentary portraits I ended up creating, this change happened because of my growing interest in creating a collaborative archive with my subjects, and focus more on the person within the space, rather than just the space itself. During the ideation stage I was unsure if I should focus on just the bedrooms of the individuals or capture the whole household, I changed my mind after a few test shots and more research into the importance of bedrooms as a solitary space of control and identity expression for young adults (Lincoln, 2015, p.87).

I delayed my subject call to the new year as I wanted to solidify my intentions and become familiar with the Hasselblad camera, which I hadn't used before. I searched for subjects in a number of different ways, with social media, physical posters and word of mouth being the main points for

success. I used my contacts within the student community and their external circles, asking them to share information about my project across their social platforms and groups. Utilising social media allowed me to expand my reach to students at the University of Leeds, Beckett and Leeds Art. This was something I wanted to achieve to get a more diverse range of students portrayed in my work. I created multiple graphics intended for social media use in the visual tone of the project. (Figures 4 & 5). The design of the posters was key in representing the nature of the project and conveying a personalised and intimate feel, something I really wanted to communicate from the get go. I pinned the posters around the student union and different buildings on campus, making sure to vary the places they were situated to expand the reach of the project and find a range of students studying different things. As well as university buildings I ensured I displayed posters in key student hubs around the city centre including pubs, bars and cafes.

Figure 4 & 5, Subject Call Posters.

When choosing my subjects, it was important for me that they all sit between the bracket of 18 and 25 years old and live away from their hometown. Professor of Psychology Jeffrey Arnett defines this specific era of our lives as *emerging adulthood*, which is "neither adolescence nor young adulthood but is theoretically and empirically distinct from them both" (2004, p.469). Arnett expands upon Erik Erikson's 1968 work on developmental stages, which looks closely at freedom in terms of identity, autonomy, intimacy, sexuality and achievement. Arnett details this shift in life where "many different directions remain possible … when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course." (p.469). My focus on emerging adulthood is essential to my practice, as I investigate the "psychosocial mortarium" (Erikson, 1968, p.155) of student expression and free will as they discover their space within society, learn to live independently and configure their own identities.

Shooting on medium format film was essential to the project, although I had not previously worked with the Hasselblad, I decided to challenge myself as this medium would give me the best results and desired look when communicating my five central themes as previously discussed. Because of my limited experience, I used the first academic semester to practice using the camera, inputting settings and using the flipped viewfinder. I shot on Kodak Portra 400, after extensive research into different film types and their looks, this is because of the films dynamic range, colour payoff (especially on skin tones) and fine grain.
I always took digital backups when shooting, and used this camera as a light meter in order to get the desired exposure of each scene. This allowed me to be comfortable with the settings and calm my subjects as I chatted to them and got to know them better as I set up. It is so important that my subjects were relaxed and comfortable in each photo, if they were nervous you would be able to tell in

the images and that would disrupt the desired intimate nature of the project. After each shoot I asked my subjects if it would be okay for me to take close ups of different aspects in the room that I hadn't incorporated in the previous photos, this would allow me to get a better sense of who they were and inform my collaging in the book which I will discuss in more detail later.
I ran into some difficulties when shooting, with frequent overcast weather, several rooms didn't allow for much sunlight, so after the first roll was shot, I discussed how to improve the quality of light with the media school technicians and decided that instead of bringing in external lights, which could look too staged and inauthentic, I would push my film to ISO 800. This aided the control I had over my images, allowing me to adjust my shutter speed and aperture to provide better quality photographs.
My images are not without imperfections, with several light leaks and poor focusing, however I think this only adds to the intimate nature of the project and reflects the imperfection we experience in our emerging adulthoods.
My photos were all developed by Take it Easy Lab who did an amazing job of highlighting the colours and tones of each scene. I scanned the photos in using media school facilities and only adjusted the saturation on a few images to improve the cohesiveness of the full collection. I chose not to edit the photos as this would retract from the choice of medium and required me to improve my in camera abilities.
Again, I used media school facilities to print my images on matte card. I conducted multiple trails to determine the size I wanted my image printed, but settled on 1500x1500 pixels to display as many details as possible and invite the viewers into the scene.

The book is integral in the presentation of my images and project as a whole, therefore I dedicated a lot of time into composing the layout of my work. After photographing each subject I gave them all a small notebook with questions to answer about how they make their house a home, what their favourite thing in their room is and what makes their space special. Their answers informed not only my analysis of the photos but the collages I made and how I represented them in the book. I wrote each notebook's instructions by hand to create a level playing field and irradicate the notion that the photographer has power over their subjects. I decided to interview my subjects in this way instead of an audio interview to reduce pressure and formality, encouraging them to use the book as a diary, to draw, write and express themselves however they felt.

As well as the book, I asked my subjects to provide me with things to go in their scrapbooks, little artifacts that represent them or their space, which included, but wasn't limited to tickets, posters, labels and stickers. These mementos created the foundations of my collages and tied the images to their extended identities. Collaboration is at the heart of everything I've done in this project, working with my subjects, although sometimes was difficult to navigate (due to the number of participants) was so important in creating an archive that was an honest representation of them all.

This project was extremely enjoyable but did come with some challenges, especially relating to my type of subject. Initially I struggled to find male subjects, however moved past this with the help of my network who spread the word about the project to their external groups, which resulted in many other men interested in being involved, 3 of which I used. If I were to conduct this project again I would reach out to more international societies within the university, in order to capture another perspective of university living. I only felt the need to rephotograph one subject, Kirstin. This was because I wasn't happy with the framing of the initial images (see Figure 6) and felt I didn't capture the creative and fun aspects of her room. I do feel that if I were to do the project again I would dedicate more film to each subject, in order to really play with different angles and not limit my creativity.

Figure 6, Kirstin (1st Shoot)

Section 3: Image Analysis

Image 1: *Sam*

This particular room was my favourite to photograph because of the tiny details present in further inspection, such as Christmas cards and poems. When describing her choice in decorations Sam explained that "there are so many events I've been to that I want to remember" (2023, p.4), which relates back to my chosen method of presentation, a physical scrapbook, their multisensory and sentimental nature is reflected in Sam's room as she combines her love of art and memories to exhibit some of her favourite things. Sam appears very relaxed in this image, although she isn't physically dominating the frame, her pose and expression still evoke a strong sense of confidence, reflecting the self-assurance she feels in her identity. The room takes over the majority of the frame which express her character and personality. She described a home as being "defined by the memories you make in it" (2023, p.5), and practices this memory recollection with signifiers to create a homely environment. Perhaps this image may become a part of the rooms decoration, as a memory of her time in Leeds this year, adding to the archival nature of this project.

Image 2: *Sadie*

I found that out of all rooms I worked with, Sadie's room felt the most mellow, perhaps because of the minimal light available, or the lack of university work on show, it felt very 'lived in'. The shoot was an intimate experience, she played the guitar while I shot, which acted as a soundtrack, creating a greater sense of relaxation, something Sadie stated was a very important aspect of her living space (2023, p.3). She is sat cross legged with no shoes (almost like a child) on carpeted floor, highlighting the safe space she's created as she leaves her childhood behind. Using the Hasselblad camera has paid off here as I wasn't aware of the light leaks until after the film was developed, which created a sense of a fleeting moment. The intimate nature of shooting on film took away any distracting elements and forced me to be engrossed within the scene, something I believe will translate to the viewer. The set 'dressing' can also highlight the temporal nature of being a student, with clothes spilling out of boxes, and books leaning on each other. The stereotypical student room is messy, which I think this room resembles, but in a cosy and organised way, nothing seems out of place.

Image 3: *Willow*

My next subject lives in a studio flat, when describing her living experience Willow discussed the harsh reality of living alone and frequently feeling homesick, however decorates her "room with an aim to combat this, like an extra layer of armour" (2023, p.3). Despite her lack of housemates, she creates a space that evokes a sense of community, with old press passes, art and posters from a variety of fandom communities such as Doctor Who and Disney. Willow describes herself as "an extroverted introvert [whose] social battery often runs out" (2023, p.1), despite this she still seeks to be surrounded by her community and identity through her room's décor, a space that she uses "as a place to recharge" (2023, p.1). Willow exudes pride in this image, her central framing and smile dominate the scene as she stands delighted with the artwork displayed in her room, many of which were created herself. Her role as a graphic designer adds a different layer to the communities she's part of, as a producer, she's fully emerged within the fan identity. Although this image was the hardest to capture, due to the small amount of space, I loved working with the vibrant colours in her room and trying to incorporate each aspect of her different communities in the frame.

Image 4: *Kirstin*

If you remove Kirstin from the photo, you wouldn't be able to tell whether a man or woman lives there, she expresses her gender identity through the androgenicity of her room. Kirstin favours predominantly masculine hobbies which feature in her room design with a football scarf, boots and several skateboards. To compare this image to Figure 6, it is evident that when reshooting we focused more time in selecting which part of the room to showcase and paid more attention on Kirstin's position within it. Her plain outfit lets the room do the talking, by solely dressing her bedroom Kirstin only opens up to those close enough to visit her safe space. Despite the busy background, she acts as

the focal point of the image and her composed demeanour reflects the calmness she feels in her room. A common theme seen across this project is the practice of collecting tokens that evoke memories, Kirstin chooses to display things she's "collected to represent (her) and make it feel] more homely" (2023, p.5) she focuses the expression of her true self privately at home.

Image 5: *Elliot*

Elliot describes himself as a "visual person" (2023, p.3), his identity is explored in this image as he is surrounded by an array of musical elements from DJ decks to guitars. Similarly to Willow, he is constantly immersed in his musical identity, and decorates his room as a way of feeling connected to things he loves (2023, p.3). His room manifests his thought process of making music with numerous tangled wires resembling the unstructured process. The music making experience can often be quite cathartic, so it is notable that Elliot decides to use his bedroom as the point of creation, the lack of separation between work and home here accentuates Elliot's passion. He is one of the few fortunate students to have a large bedroom, which is used to house his equipment and as a space to be creative with friends (2023, p.1). This calls into question the limited space we have at university, and whether this can reduce our identity expression and limit character development.

Overall I have absolutely loved working on this project, it has taught me a lot about myself, not only as a photographer, but the way I express my identity and personality externally. I believe that each of my images explore the five themes set out at the start of this essay, and define the personalities of my subjects in an intimate and personal way. I've really enjoyed the challenge of this project and am pleased with the final result. As I come to the end of the venture I intend to revisit my work in around 10 years or so, to recapture the people I worked with and see where they are in the future, creating a brand new updated archive to go alongside this one.

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