

Joanne O'Brien interview with Emma Campbell

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SPEAKERS

Joanne O'Brien



Joanne O'Brien 00:00

So Maggie and Michael Ann are more self consciously feminist in their fullest, you know, in terms of their whole practice. You know what? So probably, you know, that would be probably more, more useful



even for



because my focus is I thought it was really interesting that, like, still in when I started my research 2012 That Fiona Rogers from Magnum still feels the need to run a project about showcasing women photographers still. And so I kind of was looking into that and how, the different groups of women photographers changed. And as you know, so was trying to look for women's photography collective. In the UK or Ireland, now, and the closest I find is, there's a group of women in Dublin, who do a thing called a telephone tree. So they respond to each other's photography, but it's not really the same as like a collective or group or whatever. And even the firecracker thing by Fiona Rogers, its people already, you know, go make the work individually, and she just kind of showcases it or gets a grant for that kind of thing. So I just thought it was really interesting that maybe it's changing slightly now because of the, you know, global crisis or whatever. But people weren't very overtly Polit political for the last maybe 10 or 15 years. And I well,



Joanne O'Brien 01:32

actually, the husband tried to think of the name of the woman, it was a woman who did. She was involved in a feminist group in London, and was activist group. She's a photographer, and she was doing subconsciously, feminist work. was hard, because a husband stopped going on,

but it's much more informal. It's not, it's not likely to setting up a group, you know, as in, you know, we set up an agency. So it's, you know, but there is still happening. I don't think it would be fair to say there's nothing happening. Actually, yes. Last time, I was confused. For a while. She She was photographing men, I think.



And I can't remember the nature of her work now.



Joanne O'Brien 02:44

So hello. So she was part of a group of photographers and women who are doing stuff. And they will be exhibiting in places like in Hackney, and this place called a fan.



finder. Yes. And, yeah, the page



Joanne O'Brien 03:06

on all street roundabout, which has gone down a lot of informal shows, last shows photographers who are aggressive one way or another.



Yeah. And it is the bestseller Morningstar in the cookie cutter. Just there. Yeah. Like the chair. So, questions, more formal questions I have initially, so. Yeah, so you talked about being involved with lesbian line when you move back to London after university in Dublin? Yeah. And also been involved with the Irish Irish women united. So I guess I would like to know what your motivation for being an activist around those issues were and how much of that involved your photography



Joanne O'Brien 03:56

well, when when I was involved in Russia united, I wasn't a photographer. Okay. I was a student of history.



Oh, that's right. You did the ancient history.




Joanne O'Brien 04:06

 Joanne O'Brien 04:00

I did. The history behind mediaeval history, right and not ancient history. And so my motivation for being if you want my motivation for being involved with Irishman United because it will be well, basically I suppose I had always felt like, I always thought that women gotten a bad deal. You know, there was an awful lot of I resented the fact that women were put down so much verbally. When I was growing up there was just stopping trying to make misogynistic remarks. And so I actually witnessing the way the interaction between my parents Friends, you know,



between that general generation that

 Joanne O'Brien 05:06

convinced me that I was never going to get married, which I stopped to be that I didn't accept the fact that women were seen as inferior. I thought I cannot afford to accept this. This is just ridiculous. I'm not going to accept it, right. So growing up, I was quite a tomboy. I didn't really like the traditional roles that women were expected to play. You know, I wasn't really




into dolls and clothes and so forth.

 Joanne O'Brien 05:46

And I, I just thought it was incredibly boring. limited,



limited. Yeah.

 Joanne O'Brien 05:53

I was an avid reader. So I was conscious of all the words. Yeah, growing up, very conscious.



It's funny, those last two things come up a lot in a lot of the women photographers, interviews that I listen to. So the idea that the jobs or the rules that they would be expected to do, we're limiting. And quite a few of them ended up doing it in opposition to their parents wishes, and also the reading at all, every single person that I've listened to in the reading really loved reading, so.

J Joanne O'Brien 06:26

Yeah, so I mean, I felt that it was just yeah, that was the worst of all worlds. I mean, I can remember at the age of five, reading, Little Women, and loving the fact that these women were particularly Joe, so you know, a bit disappointed when she got married. Yeah. Then the other hand, I thought that fellas she married was quite an interesting guy used to be not your conventional kind of fellow. And he was an outsider,



as well, yeah. From somewhere else. So

J Joanne O'Brien 06:57

you know, he was German or something, or Austrian or something. I can't remember now. He's my immigrant to America. Like I thought that was, you know, that was interesting. But we were brought up as well. My mother was very progressive.



Right? Yeah. And you went to quite progressive school as well. Yeah,

J Joanne O'Brien 07:19

I went to drama school, where was mixed education mixed, you know, denomination and gender. So you know, and it was, it was a very, it was a lot of self expression. There's a lot of discipline. I mean, there's a huge amount of discipline in terms of the work you did you, you got through a lot of a lot of work. I look at children now school, what are they learning? Everybody says the same. They really are wasting their time. Because you've got all that brainpower, your your mental energy, you should be using



a lot of tests and curriculum knows well, so terrible.

J Joanne O'Brien 08:03

We have an exam.



There must have been exams and we had to do work, which was marked all the time. Yeah.

J Joanne O'Brien 08:13

Anyway, it was a very, it was a lot of art, a lot of music and theatre, play acting. So it meant that you felt and this is something that my mother had always given us anyway, she was God has crayons and paper from an early age she should be expressing ourselves. And indeed, the highest, you know, compliment was that's really original, right? Okay. So, my parents were very progressive we you know, plus politically there would have been anti model particularly anti apartheid. So, we never had oranges



and electron

J Joanne O'Brien 09:06

Yeah. So, it just grew up, we suppose, we did feel different from the kids around us, we did because we will want to mix marriage



the Irish version of a mixed marriage

J Joanne O'Brien 09:23

and then you know, we jam. So again, no two are not new concepts



are different. Yeah.

J Joanne O'Brien 09:38

Which is an interesting thing. And we know that some things can be said in one language and not. Yeah, so all those things are very



important really.

J Joanne O'Brien 09:52

And I guess also, you know how to do the Catholic thing you know the Catechism so you own You know, one thing that does give you is it gives you a sort of a sense of some kind of discipline. I mean, some kind of a framework. Yeah. Right. So having to learn the ins and outs of any framework is an intellectual exercise,



even if you don't agree with you don't agree with it. Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 10:19

Right. You know, so we had a thorough education, I suppose from loads of law. Obviously, I was the one my husband and I also liked you know, running around climbing trees. Yeah, making dance.



I want to remember you said that you and your siblings made up another sibling? Well, we did for each other was fantastic. It was brilliant. Yeah, so we were very imaginative.



Joanne O'Brien 10:51

Yeah, so basically, all that sort of stuff fed into, you know, I think I realised, I think it was some picked up some book one day, in hajus, beggars in Dublin, it was some kind of 70s, you know, thing, but society and want to change that wasn't sociology was a bit more of maybe, but it was kind of more populous. And that was about concepts. It was sort of like, I remember the idea that, that things were all in a continuum. I remember learning that. So basically, you know, wasn't a big step to go from? Well, you know, it was a certain step in terms of deciding where to devote energies. But the idea of that there was injustice in the world was sort of always there. Yeah. You know, I remember my father sitting watching Elvis Jerison of the television. See, they love her now. Right. But she had to go through hell. You know, they were very conscious of



considerations, good lighting.



Which is, you know, which is really progressive even know. Yeah, for some people. Yes. You read.



Joanne O'Brien 12:15



So yeah. And then when I joined when I like, then when I came out, I mean, I was involved in



it, because you came out in Dublin in an era when very, very few people would have.



Joanne O'Brien 12:30

That's true. I mean, I was the only hourglass been on the whole UCSD campus at the time.



But, you know, you just feel like you



could affect you when you're young, you know? And did it ever cause problems for you?



Joanne O'Brien 12:49

Yeah, did I think it did with the history faculty, they didn't really rate me as a result.



So I didn't do very well. I wasn't given much help. And I didn't do very well at college. Because



Joanne O'Brien 13:06

yeah, I don't think that they really, you know, I didn't have any any political, you know, cultural capital, and so to speak, you know? So, like those, you know,



I was just,



and what about your peers?



J Joanne O'Brien 13:19

Well, actually, half the class came mean, wasn't I was doing pure history. So it was a small group is about 1214 15 of us, right. And half of them came to me privately on Sunday, they all experienced either had experiences or thought they might have experience where I was very interesting. But it was, yeah, I didn't. I was most of my, my social life. I mean, I was working when I was a college today, to pay for and so most of my life was outside college. You know, I mean, most of my political life, I was involved with this gay group, and then with my Irish from United, and so I was, you know, oriented towards outside college. I wasn't really,



I mean, I did go to things at college, you know, like, in

J Joanne O'Brien 14:06

age or whatever. My main focus



was outside College. Right.

J Joanne O'Brien 14:13

So, yeah, I mean, it was a bit of a step to go from the barangay politics to get involved in women's politics, but a couple of women persuaded me I should come along to this meeting.



So there's always been a bit of an overlap between the two groups, hasn't there? Yeah. Yeah.

J Joanne O'Brien 14:31

And then the problem is well, is that is always this historic. There's always this problem with mixed gay groups anyway, that the misogyny of gay men is just quite difficult to deal with. And, you know, actually, paradoxically, straight men, because they have a vested interest can be much nicer to deal with sometimes, you know, then getting there. Yeah, you know, so anyway, but I got involved with Irishman united and that was really seem because it was an umbrella group, it was very big. There's loads of people come to me and they have all these debates and discussions. And it was quite interesting because, you know, you, you know, you learn a lot. You know, I didn't read that many feminist texts, I have to say, I sort of picked it up as I went along.





Yeah. And also, I think, as well, for something like feminism, it's your it's involved in your everyday life experiences, you've experienced the sexism. So yeah, you almost don't need somebody to tell you what your



Joanne O'Brien 15:33

memory you keep on being incredibly depressed. It was just an incredible catalogue of violence and misogyny. And she was forced to remember what was called now remember, right, being all these, I did read something. But to be honest, I was so busy working and trying to keep up with the studies. Yeah. And doing politics. I was involved with Banshee.



Did you hear about that? Is that the one of the publication that was the publication



Joanne O'Brien 16:07

that was the magazine?



Published? Was Alpha Smith.



Joanne O'Brien 16:15

No, no, there was a kind of there were people who, who, who now are known as kind of the key feminists, right of that era. Because they were in the Evergreen institutions. I mean, you know, to take away from what I was doing, yeah, basically, she was in UCD. She was pushing. You know, like, presumably, she was involved in some kind of pushing some kind of feminism in UCD. When she I was involved in the UCD women's group as well. And I returned from London, right to the euro, as she was not



involved in that. Fishing Boat.



Joanne O'Brien 16:54

Tours, right. Okay. But at the time, she was too busy or too grand or whatever. She just didn't need it, really. So she was not involved. Right. So there's people, there's a difference between people who are grassroots activists and people who are doing espousing things on an

intellectual. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, she may have had to take some flack. Presumably she did. Right? Within? Yeah. Yeah. In the academy, right. Yeah.



But it's a different ivory tower experience is a very different



Joanne O'Brien 17:27

experience. Really, I mean, you know, like, the history department, for example, there's no buddy who advocated history, feminist history, or women's history, nothing. When I want to do it different. I was who was my supervisor who wasn't home as socialist, the first door, he was just like, you forget that you're often just dismissive. You know, you want to do this, right. So, you know, there's a difference between people who are doing things or what you're doing, which is putting stickers on back. We used to do things like that, you know, and didn't



you set up the fake condom shop? Or was it rigid,



rigid?



Joanne O'Brien 18:14

And again, it was this way. We set we decided, because I think the downline market closed down. So the stall on the Download market was no longer you could No, they couldn't or not that I ever worked on. I never did that. Okay, campaign because I was away anyway, when that was going, think. Plus, you can't do everything.



Ya know, they talk about activism burnout quite a lot. So yeah.



So basically, I think, you know, the, the



Joanne O'Brien 18:48

there were different things that people did. I mean, I was interested in Bouchy. So I was involved in that. Somebody like our speed was up to probably a Mexican in an, you know

involved in that. somebody like our speed was up to probably a verizon in cap, you know, although people like that tended to be people who actually had a personal stake in it. Yeah, I didn't.



Did you write for Banshee? Yeah,



Joanne O'Brien 19:07

most of them. Don't ask me why. I remember having an argument somebody who wrote this feminist history article and I remember saying to her, Listen, you can't we can I can say this, because this is completely a historical not even, right. Right. And I was like, treated like some kind of why was I being so you know, obstructive to this call? But I couldn't I can't whatever is getting in the way of



actual facts. Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 19:38

Useful is leading, maybe wishful thinking anyway, but ya know, I was involved in that getting the magazine now and other actions I presume, I remember getting photographed outside the mansion house. We see what happened was well was that we Were we ended up as virtually the only active option United ended up as one of the only active groups on the left, because you have the clamp down, right by the states. Right. And that was a huge clamp down on



that socialist Republican activity.



Joanne O'Brien 20:27

And that, in turn made me realise that we have to look to the north as well that we had to think about that we couldn't ignore that and couldn't just be a bobble, bobble,



pretend it wasn't, you know,



Joanne O'Brien 20:43

I'm afraid not everybody agrees with that they couldn't do it. It was rolled up



with that's funny. It's one of the things that I've highlighted of your quotes from the previous interview, which, which is you said, we're very involved in women's issues sexuality, contraception, nevermind abortion. So there was a lot of dissent in the grip or disagreement when it came to issues like the North. Yeah. And then you said it felt like having become aware of politics first or gay issues, and then women's issues, then realising it's all linked up to what was happening in the north that you couldn't just ignore something? If you're interested in progress, and it had to be progressive as well. That's right. Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 21:18

Yeah. You know, us couldn't really morally, physically, intellectually. I felt people were able to end up in a cul de sac. Yeah. And so people did, you know, become irrelevant. Yeah.



Because it only speaks to a tiny amount of people.



Joanne O'Brien 21:39

I mean, the, the, you know, the husband, stuff written about partition, but really, it probably will never be really property, you know, analysed until after the fact. Hopefully, eventually, you know, because it has a huge effect on people. Yeah.



Massive effect. And



Joanne O'Brien 22:05


it holds the whole country that absolutely. Women look as a way to cope with the night. Yeah. Sorry. She's



terrible. Yeah. Was it? Yeah, the



really interesting thing about North is the very first bit that they had when Stormont was reformed. devolve power was an abortion. Very first. So, yeah, I

 Joanne O'Brien 22:37

mean, it is a big, big issue like it is. A lot of work has been done by people I know, in Dublin, who, you know, fought and fought for. And, you know, here comes another referendum or we have to go again and again, he's the kind of bet wire if you like, or it's the psychological kind of nightmare. Collectively of the of the body politic. Yeah, right. In the south. Yeah, I think our news very, is a step too far. So people are feminist, many



countries.

 Joanne O'Brien 23:22

Some people anyway, it's just really isn't that a huge problem is the issue as far as I can say, ya know, people coming out saying I've had, yeah,




and that's very powerful. Yeah, it really is. It's what changed it in France and Germany. So

 Joanne O'Brien 23:39

that's what has to happen.




personalised and political. Yeah. Right.

 Joanne O'Brien 23:47

So anyway, but But so, yeah. So yeah, yeah, we're



talking about the Irish woman united. I was just wondering what your motivation was. So it's generally like looking around in Ireland and seeing how women were spoken to and treatment of women and how that was linked up to everything else. Yeah,

 Joanne O'Brien 24:08

basically, how women were discriminated against women were seen as second class citizens. You know, and just, I mean, even somebody similar I similar so I knew people who were a college who, because there were blocks that could sign on and get paid, and go to college, where the rest of us do, obviously, yeah. You couldn't do that as the one you couldn't get. You couldn't get oh, unemployment you couldn't get wasn't a reply was just call. It wasn't called. I kinda was called, but you couldn't do it.



Under still the marriage bar at that point? I think, um,

 Joanne O'Brien 24:48

it was fading. It was fading. I think marriage bar was fading, but it was still. It was still there. Yeah, yeah. I mean, there was there was middle class. You know, Rational women as well, you know, who were involved in campaigning about these things. We were a kind of a, you know, younger, you know, and more. You know, all sorts of people in the group, yeah, you know, more very well buried.



And then so when you did start photography, I know you talked about how you're just interested in, in people and other experiences and travelling and other stories. But when you started photography, then were a lot of these not just feminism, but other things that politically motivated you was that in the back of your mind? And then you were starting to make work?

 Joanne O'Brien 25:42

Yeah. I mean, basically, I want to tell stories about record People, stories of people who didn't get in the history books necessarily make a record. Right. So my motivation as a photographer, certainly at the time, and still, to some extent, I don't do a lot of political photography. Now. I mean, at the moment, I am doing something, but that's not true. I still do. But I wasn't I don't run out to demonstrations every day of the week anymore. But that was many anyway. But I wanted to tell stories, I wanted to create a record. You know, I'm interested in history, I'm interested in creating a record I'm interesting is what will come that, that you know that we have some evidence of inflammation? Yeah.



It's really interesting. It's partly why I'm doing this project. But yeah.



J Joanne O'Brien 26:43

So so I'm very interested in that. I mean, I just recently did an MA in in, in historical research, my project was looking at the coffee houses in the mighty house of London 6090 Sending bodies and comparing the Molly houses and the coffee houses and asking if the way that men behaved in these places was similar to each other. Because again, we have had an a centralised, we had to have a centralised view of gay life. Right, yeah. But now it's time to start reintegrating back into, you know, historically in terms of scholarships going on. And nobody had looked at them for about 20 years, you know, the more he has a so it's to try and show how a fact is part of everyday life it was going on. Yeah. Right. And, again, I think that's sort of something that always interests me that what's happening on the ground or something? It's very hard to research that stuff. Yeah, very hard to get information. There's no First, there's no first person accounts, from Molly's point of view of a molly house, unfortunately.



So it'd be writers visiting. Yeah,

J Joanne O'Brien 27:58

it'd be basically, the only thing we've got is the these people from these societies in the Reformation and miners and budding agents, we then wrote reports, report, then used in court cases, which have gone to the record, right. So you know, so this makes it very difficult to, you know, you've got this whole thing where, basically, they're just gorgeous, and abject beings, you know, rather than then. So, but that's a digression. So, isn't it interesting to create a record, it's very important to create a record, and I know that a lot of people do, you know, still are interested in doing that. Like,



yeah, well, I knew that, listening to Jenny's original interview that she was very interested on the impact of war and on women and everyday life and how of course, everyday life has to carry on. Everyday Life has to carry on, regardless. Yeah. And I think that's really interesting, because I often think about when we're taught history, you're mostly taught it, you know, in a succession of wars. As if, as if that's the most important.

J Joanne O'Brien 29:14

Interesting, yeah, yeah. Jenny, that's one of Jenny's big things over the years. Good work. And I think probably, yeah, how everyday life goes on how people live what they do.



And was it there? They're already reading um, you're already schooled. Give you the interest in that kind of historical?

J Joanne O'Brien 29:43

Yeah, I suppose I was always interested in history. I mean, you know, always always found it fascinating, you know, stories about the My father was a great storyteller, as well. You know, so, you know, the whole idea of stories was, you know, telling stories, so I would have been quite happy if I got a job as a radio journalist and go off and interviewing people. I want to tell stories, you know. I'm not very keen on to some extent. Well, I'm not keen on didactic stuff. I like people to show don't tell, you know. Yeah. So, you know, you present the evidence and leave it loose. Yeah. Viewer, the reader or whatever, you know. Yeah. So photography is, is very good for that, although it's very new to many other ways in many ways. You know, because you can you can you contextualise



it and then yeah, you know, and all that stuff around,



you know, you

J Joanne O'Brien 30:50

can't have a photograph without words. Well, then other people say, Well, you can actually this depends on the context. Yeah, you know, me I have to say that the arguments around the arguments around structuralism, post structuralism, all that sort of stuff that left me cold. Right. Yeah. Right. Because effectively, that was just undermining any effort we might make. Yeah, right. So effectively, that was actually quite a reactive, non progressive thing. In many ways. It was, despite the vaulted



Well, I find it really interesting. The other thing you talk about camerawork. And that you've done a, a piece for camera work in Derry, not kind of largely about Northern Ireland. And I know from reading about Joe Spence and other people talking about their involvement with camera work, that after a while, it became almost like quite intellectually elitist. Yeah. And that people got pushed out, because if they were seeing as, as too on the grind, or too involved in community projects, or whatever, and then it was interesting to hear you talking about doing that piece for them. And they totally changed it. From an you were writing it from an insider experience from being on the island and then an English person.

J Joanne O'Brien 32:16

Yeah, it was very, was a piece about the historical context of the troubles I was trying to show what progression or progressive there had been, I mean, it was like saying, you know, but it was trying to explain the situation and try to it wasn't, it was about wasn't particularly about

photography, it was an introduction to an issue on Northern Ireland the camera what we're doing, and I wrote it with you know, and then wrote with the help of a friend of mine who was at the time you know, good historian good, much better writing these sort of things. And me, we do as I wrote it, but he gave me some insights and, and it was awful. It was most appalling experience. So embarrassing.



I remember one of the things Jenny said she was told by two of the women who were involved was that she wasn't feminist enough because she was living with I think it was add at the time. She was a bit shocked by this as well. So yeah, so that people are most used use their I guess cultural politics as a way of excluding people.



Yeah. Yeah. Awesome.



So in terms of Hackney flashers, because they I talked about them as coming pre format and obviously there's an overlap with the members. So hi, where are you have the Hackney flashes when they were around? Are the working?



Joanne O'Brien 33:57

I think I was aware of them. Yeah, but I think I saw them an exhibition and so on. I met I it's very hard to remember no so long ago, but I imagine that that they that their work was a comfort to me, you know, it was it was a nice to know that people were doing this stuff. It didn't occur to me to ask them to join them or anything like that. I lived in South London, and they are in Hackney Hackney seem like a long way away. Because they've been going for a long time. And they've been going for a while, I think when I became aware of them. So yeah, I mean, I imagine. I mean, were other people, other photographers, you know, there was other. Of course, we didn't have the web, but, you know, you you saw images or you saw books, or we saw, you know, stuff that was being done. Don't ask me to remember where they were And



so there would there have been like a, I guess, a network because of exhibitions and because of or wasn't more network because of the types of issues that that particular type of photography was about.



Joanne O'Brien 35:22

The network's just give me that question again.



Well, I remember a few people have talked about how they met other photographers, because they were at the same demonstrations. Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And then some people said they met other photographers, because have gone to exhibitions. So and that's quite different. You know, so one's about the politics and one's about the photography.



Joanne O'Brien 35:44

Right. And I don't know, maybe exhibitions, know about people demonstrations. I can't even remember how I met that van was one last week to join on she did not because van was more aware of migrants, immigrants, because of her interest in black culture. She was aware that it would be good, or she thought it would be good to have some buddy who's Irish in the group, right. She had been she had photographed in Ireland as well. So she had not political, cultural stuff, right. Yeah. But she was more aware. Anyway, then really? Anybody else in that group? Right? Oh, have more of a sense of what it was like to be outside



an outsider, right.



Joanne O'Brien 36:40

And I met her.



I remember how I met her. I think she rang me up. And



I met him. First time I met her. She





Joanne O'Brien 36:48


seen my work, or she something because I used to work for her. She'd seen it but she used to work for





a magazine or newspaper Produced by the International Marxist


 Joanne O'Brien 37:01
group, or its supply that


 was called socialist challenge.

 Joanne O'Brien 37:08
And she had seen my work was she seen it? There? Was she seen it? In spare rib? where she'd seen it right. Or maybe she saw in entire city limits? Oh,

 people talk with Tilikum attack. So yeah, sounded really interesting.

 Joanne O'Brien 37:28
Yeah. Because the first little rap that I had published in a magazine like that was in the city minutes. And it was actually a demonstration, after a socialist feminists conference, outside the police station in Pinnacle, because two of the women who had been invited all from Northern Ireland to speak at the conference, had been held by the police on the way over. And so the conference voted to go down well, and processed as a police station. And I took a photograph of this. And I gave it to, you know, how to published in city limits. So that I think that was the first book. I can't remember the sequence now, but it was definitely one had photographs published in in lefty papers. Also in the Irish post.

 So the left wing are here a stone, the left wing press was really important for your early work, then really? Yeah, yeah, it was

 Joanne O'Brien 38:31
great. Because I used to get pictures in there as to drop them off every week, I suppose I've demonstrations and so on. And then there was another paper published by the Socialist Workers, which is called, and there was another guy who I knew who was working for them. He I thought was a very good photographer, but I was only a beginner. So I used to watch local heat zone, and watch and learn, watch and see what he was published by him in that paper, and other people, too.



That's quite counting. Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 39:07

So I could see, well, how could I have done that better? You know, you know?



Yeah, because what works is a picture in a series doesn't necessarily work for somebody wanting to hold the front page or whatever.



Joanne O'Brien 39:22

Yeah, that's right. You know, how would you sum it up? One picture? Yeah. You know, and oftentimes frustrated because, of course, the paper would want to show something that showed the size of the demonstration, right? Whereas you, as a photographer would think well, actually, something that's more telling would be one or two people who've got really, you know, good expressions, and holding, you know, relevant placards. That would be more punchy? Yeah. That'd be visually better than something which is just say yeah, see a people. So the the political considerations versus the visual considerations were always kind of.



Yep. It's not quite the same. But when I am the early days when I did gig photography, and I used to take lovely like, like shots with the lights, and then I started started to realise that they only use it if it's a full if you see the full face of the performer. So, yes, quite. Yeah. So you think that's my file? So your work?



Joanne O'Brien 40:33

She learned from you know, she was there? I think maybe she knew somebody who knew me knew me. Or maybe she didn't even see my work because I can't visualise the Iranian socialist challenge, to be honest. I just can't. But maybe she did. But I think she knew someone who knew someone. So she rang me up. Yeah. And



she would have been, she would have had work inspired, like you mentioned. Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 41:01

So she must have been how much work I would have had spare time because I really was you

so she must have been how much work I would have had spare time because I really was, you know, starting off. But remember that about the art centre, she was teaching a photography course down there, and she said once to come down after the class or whatever before I remember. Anyway, so she, she didn't, she more or less invited me to, to, to join the group more a sight unseen. If you'd like to know, generally, she really knew my work. My work wasn't very good. I mean, it was very much beginners. You know, and it got a lot better. Obviously, you know, because I worked very hard. But I remember when we, when we set up. When we were doing the exhibition for



the launch format, we have an exhibition of a photographer's gallery. As you probably know,



Joanne O'Brien 41:54

Val said she would help me she kind of took me under her wing. And she said she would show helped me make my prints for the exhibition. So I went to her house over in Hackney and we spent a day in the darkroom making these very large prints. And it was amazing to me, because she hands on hands off. Yeah, I mean, I had, I wasn't,



wasn't a



bad printer, because, again, I spent an awful lot in the darkroom. But I just



Joanne O'Brien 42:32

it was like a step up was like a masterclass. Okay,



so she's a good printer. tastic



Joanne O'Brien 42:38

get a picture out of a negative that was so thin, you can hardly see anything on it. I guess



in those dark blues clubs. She's photographing black

J Joanne O'Brien 42:49

people. Yeah. Yeah, she was an amazing printer. She showed me about how you do ferricyanide and how you got shortly Scott very, very used very cyanide to brighten the image. And how you dodging or all these things, but more very confidently. I mean, I knew some of this. I was watching a video actually on YouTube. The other night, my cousin once said to me about this guy's famous musical arranger, and he went, he never knew much about music, you know, what means the reading



was really, really interesting. This guy.

J Joanne O'Brien 43:25

He said, He taught me everything I knew in 15 minutes. Wow. You know, basically he and you got suddenly got to grips with the concept. Yeah. And that was like me. I mean, I then have to go on and apply it, and use it and learn and become it's like being a concert pianist being being a printer. Right? You have to do it. Yeah.



So what what kind of mentored you?

J Joanne O'Brien 43:50

And yeah, it is so mixed. They're not? I mean, I didn't ring her up and ask her for advice. You know, she's quite prickly. But yeah, to certain extent, yeah. There's a great quote actually was named and I said, photographer said, some like brass or something like that. That the negative is the score and the print is the performance lovely, because it's quite true because you make the same print the same picture print the same picture at different points in your life and you will do quite differently. Remember, fake I've been talking about how she went through a phase of oral prints are incredibly dark.



I've seen a lot of exhibitions, it was incredibly dark.

J Joanne O'Brien 44:45

Anyway, yeah. So it was I was doing I was doing a job in the mornings cleaning. And I was just spending my days taking pictures, you know, working



on and something which one of the other photographers brought up was that and I hadn't thought about it or hadn't realised, was a lot of members of original members of format were lesbians as well. Yep, that's true. That's that's not mentioned in history books anywhere chess. What was interesting was true.



Joanne O'Brien 45:21

I mean, it was Yeah. It was made was Maggie who was Raisa there was this Tao who has a name so Pam Isherwood?



struggled finding all the names.



Yeah. I mean, Brenda,



Brenda.



Sally, Greenhill. She's, yeah,



Joanne O'Brien 45:54

she wasn't invulnerable. The majority of this has been.



Definitely. And you think, because there's a vowel Williams asks one of the other photographers interviewed about the impact of having children on a woman photographers career specifically. And I noticed that the first three oral history archive things that I listened to none of the photographers had children. Oh, yeah. A boy. Boy.



Joanne O'Brien 46:40

Yes, true, actually, I'm sure that has, hasn't has any impact, mostly



because of the travel and the kind of precarious nature of the work.

J Joanne O'Brien 46:53

I mean, I remember thinking, not that I was in terms of charging unwanted children. But I remember thinking, but did you just absolutely. I couldn't imagine how it works is barely making enough money to keep going. Yeah, it reminds, you know, pay for a child. You know, it was beyond my can actually. Yeah, you know, I mean, I knew people who were single parents, and you were a lot of women were super barons, you know, by choice. Something I never wanted to do. I was a I was more interested in work. I was more I felt that work was the thing. reproducing the next generation wasn't really



that bored to me. So

J Joanne O'Brien 47:37

I definitely felt that that was more useful for me to be doing them to be bringing up a child. Yeah. Yep. Because it seemed to me everybody. You had to kind of you really had to drop both.



Yeah. You know, absolutely. Still. Yeah. So now. Yeah.



And I know that a lot of the work that format did was for trade unions, and some of the funding was from the Greater London Authority. Yeah. So have you done any work with trade unions before format? No, no,

J Joanne O'Brien 48:10

I haven't actually. It was great. I mean, I you know, I mean, it was really great because you felt like you're doing something you're being paid to do something you believed and



yeah, I often does that.



I mean, obviously as time went on, I became more



Joanne O'Brien 48:31

disillusioned about that about trade unions about how I burned their hours you know, I mean, you know, all sorts of things that are wrong with them. But you know, the there's sort of these structures that are very



top down all



Joanne O'Brien 48:47

that but by and large, they're better than the loadings are anyway yeah, given all those limitations. And I did some work for up in Northern Ireland which I really up up as it was called LAN which is no unison. Unison is was cosy now go and new be joined together. Okay. Right. All public service health service conveniens. Together,



jumped together. I don't know. Sometime



Joanne O'Brien 49:20

in the 90s I think I did some work for for newbie. I met through my work for city limits. I was asked by the picture just there to go to Belfast with the Campbell and interview. Burned McCluskey. She was there she was what burned a Devon recently but burned at Maxis and also at that point I met mine isn't Cormac



amazing? Yeah. And is



Joanne O'Brien 49:56

really got into the idea that Um, I could take some photographs for a campaign that they were doing to try and stop cuts against just you basically, various things. She saw me as somebody

who could be useful. Right. So I did some work for them. And indeed, just recently, someone that works appeared in silver eyes his life. That's right.



Yeah. I know about the film. I haven't seen it.



Joanne O'Brien 50:30

Very moving film, she was an amazing



person is incredible. Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 50:33

I spent some time with, funnily enough, I don't remember is that probably the wasn't that trip was another trip. Because they got me over a few times to work for them. I did stuff in the divots, that first trip, right, because they were Bob the campaign to get the dentist demolished. Right. As well as photographing Bernie, I also did something you know, in a hospital, where they were trying to come they were campaigning for the, the laundry system to be better. So the staff were dealing with bags and laundry, lining the corridors and so forth, in the Royal Victoria. And then I went, I must have gone back and did other things. And then the middle of, of the second or third trip. I remember going down to Dublin for the night with Iris. She said he said to me late in the afternoon, and go down to Dominica I didn't want to come. It was really nice, because so we went down the train together. We had a really good chat, and we basically connected, you know, various things that we shared one, which was I was from a next marriage, and she was married Catholic. And so, you know, the whole sectarian issue was something that was close to our heart. But from, from a, you know, a slightly different perspective on a lot of people. Yeah, absolutely. So because I feel Protestant, you know, really, because my mother was Protestant. So my mother's brothers. And so I was brought up with those kinds of ideas about, you know, I love that northern directness, for example, which you don't get as much obviously. I love the idea of the progressive side of Protestantism. Very important, which is formed by politics. Yeah. Right. So those sort of things do sort of values we shared. Yeah. And the idea that you personally go out on a limb again, that was something you



shared, you know, because I come out when



Joanne O'Brien 52:55

I was younger, nobody else around you know, stuff like that. He she had gotten involved with with with Vanderburg. Has she been her agent? Yeah. You know, when she stood for

parliament, amazing thing to do with her age.



She was she was



Joanne O'Brien 53:14

anyway, she was a real hands on person, real hands on leader as well.



So then, did you did you become friends? Or did you do more work with students?



Joanne O'Brien 53:28

I did more work with her. Yeah. We were very friendly. I can't say we became friends because



she was just so busy. Right? And you



Joanne O'Brien 53:38

were buyers in London. But, you know, we certainly were in very good terms. And when I did the book on Bloody Sunday, when I had the launch of the book I invited her to come and speak at the launch. And she did and that was like many many years after we first met you know, so the connection remained so



the smooth for you because I know there were quite a lot of negatives but for you the positives of format were the type of work that you were able to do



Joanne O'Brien 54:10

yeah yeah definitely.



And were other people did similar work was it all trade unions

 Joanne O'Brien 54:21

or no, that was sheet of grey she was straight actually she was voluntary union work and I presume Maggie didn't know she worked for now go. And Brendan was to draw stuff I presume Jenny wants to draw stuff as well.



She she just stopped for the TCM Sure.



Yeah, she definitely did. Yeah.



And was there anything then bounded really



do okay?



Because she was carrying on with her or what she was doing before? Yeah, she

 Joanne O'Brien 55:01

wrote, as well as technical.



And I saw the negatives. I know that you said you would have endless meetings, kind of torture. And that you, you were have it here? Yeah, I thought it was a good idea to set up an agency is a great idea, actually. But at the same time, I was conscious, having worked in so many groups and being through so many groups with people on issues and whatever, that people have different agendas. And what you need to do is be very clear about your agenda. And then you talk about you being the only Irish person and how some of them weren't very politically aware, and how frustrating that was.

J Joanne O'Brien 55:42

Yeah, it was very frustrating, because you go, I go over to Northern Ireland from time, you know, I wasn't there all the time. Any means but to come back? Oh, my God, just just dreadful, dreadful situations. And first of all, no one asked me what it was like, or how I got on, there's just no interest at all. Right? It's alienating. And then I got involved in doing a book about Irish woman's experience of living in England. And I took that's



really good. How did that come about?

J Joanne O'Brien 56:21

It came about because it was one of those things, you know, where sort of serendipitous kind of in the air, there was a woman, Mary Lynn, who really wants to work on a book herself. And another woman, I can't reveal his name. Because she dropped out of the project. He went off to South America for a year, what Mary Leonard asked me, she must have known about my work from I knew her sister, you know, something we all have together anyway. And and we started working on this thing we spent, we spent about a year first of all, reading all these books about migrants and how they've been done, to work out what we would do. And discussions. We will then married God who joined us after the Civil War and dropped out. So there were the three of us three is a magic number to work with, I think. And so we work together for five years. And we used to meet weekly.



And it was, this is while you were in format. Yeah,

J Joanne O'Brien 57:26

yeah. But it was effective. Often it was took place in the same day of the week, the media we meet at lunchtime, and Maori, and so



you're quite industrious,

J Joanne O'Brien 57:39

or very, very industrious.



But it was quite nice having this meeting with these who are, you know,

J Joanne O'Brien 57:51

earlier in the day, because they bolster me for the alienation, I would feel



so as well as the alienation. You felt here? Did you feel like? Firstly, there was, you know, did you personally experience anti Irish opinion? And then also, do you think a lot of people just ignored Britain's role in conflict? Or?

J Joanne O'Brien 58:13

Yeah, I mean, I think people, you know, when you put when you put down people, when you abuse people, you're afraid of them? Right? So this question, a lot of fear, yeah, there's a lot of guilt amongst a lot of, you know, English sort of lefties or English intellectuals or whatever, you know, people just the liberal, you know, but I felt that there was a certain amount, I mean, I wasn't a very easy person to deal with. So I was wasn't to be fair to them, you know, I probably was quite



prickly. Right. Like, that specific thing, or just in general, just generally, I



think, you know, because I felt quite

J Joanne O'Brien 59:00

an outsider, I had a very long experience, I have a long experience of being around groups as well, you know, and, and being involved in issues, whereas for some people, it was their first experience of being in a group of being involved in an issue. Yeah. You know, and there was an awful lot of people seem to think it was more like, self help therapy group. And action groups,



you know, yeah,

J Joanne O'Brien 59:27

That was that was an interesting experience. It was it made me think about how we should really tackle these issues. We shouldn't leave it to, to having no record from our point of view. Yeah. But that was seen as very, you know,



I can untouchable? View.



Joanne O'Brien 1:01:38

Yeah. But I, you know, I felt we were failing our responsibilities. If you look down the road, what's gonna be there, then, if we don't do it?



No evidence. And I argue that



Joanne O'Brien 1:01:53

we should photograph homeless people as well, for that reason. And I think people did. To be fair, people didn't listen to me their sacred cow. Feminists kind of representation was, was very hard for people to



assume they didn't really understand that you were trying to subvert it. Yet.



Joanne O'Brien 1:02:14

They didn't render did, I explained what I was doing.



People were just saying, I don't know how you could ask



Joanne O'Brien 1:02:23

to an incident where I said, Look I was trying to subvert or how could you even was really a visceral reaction?





Not an intellectual reaction. And not helpful.



That experiences like that then shaped how you interacted with the group?



Joanne O'Brien 1:02:48

I think they did. Yeah, but I mean, I think so. I think, you know, I made a decision, I thought, well, I can either leave, or I can stay.



And just get better. Yeah. So I decided to stay there looked around I thought was the alternative



isn't really alternative.



So the alternatives at the time were things like network, or I



Joanne O'Brien 1:03:23

didn't think network would have me anyway, I was too much of a still very much experienced. You know.



So in terms of colours



Joanne O'Brien 1:03:36

getting a lot better, obviously, but I didn't think, you know, I was known to be part of a format network. You know, like, I didn't know them. You know, he's, you. Some of the guys read it. Yeah,



it was I suppose it's about connection. Yeah. Yeah. And so the support format, in terms of offer support, I guess, to people selling your well in your work? And,

J Joanne O'Brien 1:04:03

yeah, very useful. You know, although, we have such a string of people in the office who seem to have very, very little empathy with, with what you were what, you know, with not so much with the feminist project, but with what it's like to be a photographer. When you bring in work, and you say, you want people to look at it, and they go, oh, yeah, believe they're



right, so dismissive, because

J Joanne O'Brien 1:04:30

they were basically too much caught up in the systems, the office



and regurgitating responses,

J Joanne O'Brien 1:04:37

you know, responding to requests and so on. They were very busy.




I used to my first job was a picture search and on that site,


J Joanne O'Brien 1:04:47


you're all very busy, and really, if somebody brings you a batch of pictures, you don't really have time to look at them, and that's quite demoralising.





And so would they have helped To facilitate say you go on to speak to picture editors or no? Did you just do that yourself? Yeah, yeah. And in terms of your book and everything that was just completely you doing that? Yeah. So that was really picture sales. It was pictures.


 Joanne O'Brien 1:05:19
Definitely, or maybe other people met socially.


 Like, hobbies, maybe they had a more heavy informal kind of sport thing they were all doing.


 But then I guess I think you mentioned as well about how I stood in photography can be because you're always working on your own. So you said you think that maybe some of them joined, specifically to address that side of it rather than the work side of it?

 Joanne O'Brien 1:05:53
I think so. Yeah, I think they do. They did. Right. Well, I don't know. I mean, it's awful. Really, I don't remember having very many useful conversations over the years with anybody about the issues of photography during the photography. Not very many anyway. I mean, sure, there must have been the odd one. But basically, it was learned by example, here, what people are doing in the meeting and think, oh, yeah, maybe that's a good way of approaching people would get every week we would everybody would start off by saying what they've done the week. And, you know, that was, I suppose that was interesting for me to hear what people will be doing.

 And if people share contacts or anything.

 Joanne O'Brien 1:06:42
Well, only as far as you know, if the unions jobs union jobs were shared, if you like, because they, I would recommend it to somebody in the union, they would

 rung me up, right by somebody else who couldn't do the job. Yeah.

 Joanne O'Brien 1:06:56
I'm sure that that that happened. And sometimes, occasionally, contacts was shared about oh, try this for



that. Or, you know, you should talk to see something but yeah.



And when I'm sure it didn't happen all of a sudden, but obviously, format ended. And I, I have been thinking about this and wondering if the effect of, you know, the creeping effect of the Satcher government and the lack of funding from the London Authority and trade unions having less money was on the horizon for a while, or was it a surprise, whenever it ended?



Joanne O'Brien 1:07:34

It was it was a big shock. Because money and Brenda bought the business from the rest of us, no longer a co op. And basically, the, there are a lot of overheads in running a business like that. I mean, my sales were, were pretty high, you know, when I must. I actually ended up being the probably the most. So like, in terms of libraries of making the most money for the agency, right at the end? One of the top two or three people. But no, this is not to be



almost 50% Because I know Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 1:08:23

So I would get my five on the quiz a month. So I'd be given they'd be get be getting that, you know, that was it'd be getting 500 A month as well. So there's a lot of sales. I built up a very big library. But we would do things like we'd have a like picture requests or needs, you know, we'd be told we need this we need up like,



we haven't been enough pictures. Oh, yeah. Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 1:08:53

But I think basically we had a bookkeeper who fucked up right? Big time where she didn't pay any corporation tax at all to mash reforms, still a call. We had a series of issues that we had, then they took the business over, but basically it was a time of digitalization. And we were digitising but it was very labour intensive to digitise the library.



I was in network photographers at the time.

J

Joanne O'Brien 1:09:34

Okay. Yeah. Right. And that I think digitalization did for them as well. Totally did for us in the end. And Maggie and Brenda might just might have been able to have kept the business going, but they were getting into other things as well. At the time, they both were

o

turning towards maintenance become a psychotherapist Okay, so

J

Joanne O'Brien 1:10:01

in that sense, there, I wasn't on the ball. Right? Okay, right? There may have been a way, I may not have been away. I'm not angry, but are just saying that that's there, I wasn't on the board, you're running a small business, you have to be fully dedicated to that job, you can't be doing something else. Especially at a time when your whole business is threatened by a major new development in the way that these businesses are wrong. The model is changing. If you can't, like a lot of people went out of business. A lot of people went out of photography when it digitised. Yeah, I didn't write, you know, I managed to survive.

o

I remember because I worked at BBC pitch publicity for a while as well. And we're going to need it from up above saying you could maybe two years into the job, you can only commission digital No, it's too expensive to commission, photographers. Photographers, we just had to stop working.

J

Joanne O'Brien 1:11:08

So they went to the wall or, or they whatever, because there's never a huge amount of money. So you had to find the money somehow to buy new equipment, learn new software, huge investment of time and money. And people. People just couldn't do it. What do you want it?

o

And then I remember as well, getting Corpus. That was when they were coming over and buying up the smaller pictures. And so yes, as well.

J

Joanne O'Brien 1:11:41

So Nia and photofusion, bought fast collection,



probably for some probably.



And Did you are you were you able to take any of your work from that or?



Not really? I mean,



Joanne O'Brien 1:12:01

to be honest with you, I stopped doing really I mean, I signed up. And I signed up with report, digital. And then it was just, I was really upset. By the end of format.



We How did you find out?



Joanne O'Brien 1:12:23

Brenda told us to a meeting and told us that we're going to close in three months or something very short notice. I think they chose towards meeting a few months before that, that things were not looking good. And then basically they were closing, no fracture failure failure. Maybe we didn't even know that. We did. It was pretty much a shock. But which I wasn't happy about to be told like that. Just after 2019 years, right? But we just got somebody's been in the office for about a year. They're really good person, you could just you could run libraries dedicated. Also could



respond when you brought in work



Joanne O'Brien 1:13:11

for the first time.



||

Can you remember who that was

J

Joanne O'Brien 1:13:24

have to look her up and like the contracts are shit. Her sister used to write about photography, the two of them, but the sister wasn't nice at all. She has a lot of slides. I'm a meeting her at an exhibition. And I just rushed over to the show of analogue and she was just so she's very nice. But she ended up doing all this work writing stuff, like values does.

o

This was to lose as well. So this Heron

J

Joanne O'Brien 1:14:01

wasn't his harem because there's some barbs in in both fusion

o

offers names as well. And when I could describe a person,

J

Joanne O'Brien 1:14:14

right, okay. Have you talked to them? Have you talked to Maggie? No. Maggie around the office at the end. That would be the person who ran.

o

So that person was a good person.

J

Joanne O'Brien 1:14:30

She was brilliant. She had a good eye. She politically was sound. She was really into photography as a as a thing. She refused for pictures. And she had respect for photographers. Were doing what she was lovely. She was just lovely. And then that was it. We have this woman. We've had all these other people who are like, oh dear, you know, I mean one woman who went on to write plays and it was Kara

o

and Jesus used us.



And so whenever somebody thought that was hard, it wasn't the one us we're a cooperative. You didn't decide that together



Joanne O'Brien 1:15:09

did often we made a mistake. Right? Okay. Yeah, I mean, I'm the one one call Monique something. Rogers. And I remember I was actually, like, I was actually, when she moved to the United States, I don't think we should employ. I don't get a good feeling of this woman. Doctor, because he would offer them the tax money.



Yeah. I remember reading something in Val's book, you know, the women of women, the other observers. And she said about being that you would have had chats about who you would supply pictures to and who you wouldn't based on the kind of group politics or whatever.



Joanne O'Brien 1:15:54

Oh, yeah. But just to finish that question, what do I do after four minutes? The answer to that question. Basically, I was so demoralised, having put in so much work, I mean, if you put in a huge amount of work, and it's always just goes into a vacuum, right. And I had put up with this for years and years and years, and it actually had really well me up so much that I just could not face starting doing that again, with Ford Fusion. I did try, because it was incredibly labour intensive, was even more labour intensive, because everything had to be key word, which was a real bloody hustle. And I just couldn't find the time. Yeah. And I remember I actually dug around for digital, John Harris, lovely man. But he was making new pictures. And you know, when you're doing pictures, he was delighted when I want to join. I was delighted that I liked and they



didn't offer you the help of scanning the images or anything?



Joanne O'Brien 1:16:56

Well, no, he was doing in Bristol.



Okay. Right. So he was a one man. And

J Joanne O'Brien 1:17:03

he basically is he was basically born with Stefan Corleone who's the son of the guy who set up the original Simon Goodman, the original report report, agency, right. And then the part of there was, was report and then Andrew Wyrick was involved with them. There's some kind of disagreement and underway. So it was on report, and then Johnson report, which was fine. I was happy to do them. Because Andrew was totally



doing his own thing, calling it the vault. Not that I have anything against Andrew. You know, I don't understand.

J Joanne O'Brien 1:17:44

So, in fact, in some ways, actually, ironically, you know, I felt more just on that point, I will feel more incompatible with you like, with some of these men photographers.



If you feel if you have more in common with their outlook, or

J Joanne O'Brien 1:18:01

what we were seeing, we see each other on the same demonstration system. Yeah, you know, you're beyond the same thing.



Yeah, and when you were in that picture, you know, that span quite a long period, obviously. 20 years did. Did you notice any change in the number of women who were doing photography? Yeah, that

J Joanne O'Brien 1:18:24

seemed to improve quite a lot of young women was even smattering of women on Fleet Street. You know?



Because there's, historically the the articles in the creative camera wasn't too bad. But uh, you know, obviously it was a bit more of a on guard magazine and BJP, but the early ads and BJP are the most sexist things I've ever seen. Yeah. So it will you know, that it doesn't surprise you.

are the most sexist things I've ever seen. Yeah. So it will you know, then it doesn't surprise you that not very many women were involved at seem very technically camera clubby,



so yes, yeah. Yeah. And



there's definitely a smattering of glamour photography featured in there as well. So, and the interviews with the women photographers were quite patronising, you know, but uh, but you didn't notice it changes around the kind of mid 80s Yeah, yeah,



they hadn't gotten was new Grossman or somebody who was named



Joanne O'Brien 1:19:25

to have Yeah, yeah, they were. It got better. I mean, I don't think I was an avid reader of the BGA to be honest now.



Going in and out of looking at a journal



Joanne O'Brien 1:19:39

I used to look at a magazine American magazine which was for people with to work with large format cameras 10 You




know, that listen to get it done silver could



do any other American one I know is aperture. No




wasn't sure

 Joanne O'Brien 1:20:02

And anyway, but that was just because it was good on photography interesting, you know, photography, not bloody ideology.



Yeah. You know. So after format, you had your work in photofusion reportage? Oh, yeah.

 Joanne O'Brien 1:20:24

But I wasn't very active member. I'm not a very active member of either of them.



Okay. So that's kind of where you're part of your archive still remain there. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And then the rest? Do you really just freelance yourself? Support yourself? Yeah.



Just get jobs do jobs and pictures.




After format, then where did all those people go? Who commissioned you not to take their pictures? And

 Joanne O'Brien 1:20:53

well, I used to still get work from them, you know, kept up with people. And I used to get work. Yeah, no, no, it wasn't a was just a library sales, which were like, commission work would go up and down the line, we say, and we're always a constant. So you work pretty much is to make, as I say, between four or 500 quid a month. So that was a real, you know, bedrock,



my income. That's the hardest thing is stability. Right. Okay. Yeah.

 Joanne O'Brien 1:21:33

was awful. It was really awful, you know, into the, after all that time, just to be suddenly told. I mean, it was so badly managed, you know?



And it wasn't, I guess it wasn't a kind of very usual business model either. Was Was there? What, at that point, it



Joanne O'Brien 1:21:52

was a fairly useful business model. Okay. The business employed people to sell the vectors.



Okay. So don't be in the early days, it was it was it was cooperative. And the



Joanne O'Brien 1:22:03

co op was very complicated. Because basically, the people around the office who employed



or on the opposite boards, were also members of the coop, so there



Joanne O'Brien 1:22:11

was no proper management structure. Right. Right. It was a nightmare.



And is that do you think that's just under lack of experience?



Joanne O'Brien 1:22:19

Lack of experience? Yeah. Definitely. Lack of experience. Yeah. Yeah.



And do you think, a contemporary version of format Do you think it would be? Well, a Would it work and be do you think it would be necessary?

J Joanne O'Brien 1:22:34

I think you could make it work, you probably would only end up with probably in terms of, you know, you probably have to have a model, which was quite a different model, in terms of how the people would do online sales. For the board digital does, yeah, John runs it more a single handedly, you know, you know, I think that could work you could have, you could have a thing where people will meet to discuss, work, you know, every two, three months.



And in terms of showing your work, not just print sales, were there. Were there many exhibitions because I know that these are involved in some of the festivals like spectrum.

J Joanne O'Brien 1:23:18

Yeah, we were that many exhibitions, I think, Mikey would know better than me. Man, he was very, always costly made the point that exhibitions were a lot of work. So So people kind of put on off, you know, an expense. You know, so yeah, we were quite, we didn't do we did an exhibition at Bristol. You probably know about that. Yeah, we do. Yeah.



The thing at the National Portrait Gallery, which Mike Lounge is organised, which is great, which is lovely. You know, my picture was a picture of a month

J Joanne O'Brien 1:24:05

from Margaret Foster, which I've actually taken for the independent magazine right. Now, so



I know there's talk of having another women's photography festival. Is there going to be some I think it's the original members of the signals festival. Oh.

J Joanne O'Brien 1:24:32

So wonder was up in Bradford?



No, I think it was in London. Okay. And I tried to get myself along to the we're having a meeting but this time last year, and I said that only original members of the signal ones were alive to the meeting, but they kept me informed but I haven't heard anything about it. And then Anna

the meeting, but they kept me informed but I haven't heard anything about it. And then Anna fall. And then Anna Fox. I think it's true. and organise something. I can't remember the dates but in the ticket. Okay. At some point, I wondered, you know, history kind of has these 20 year cycles? Yeah. And I'm trying to draw some parallels between what's happening now. And maybe what happened about 20. But, but 40 years ago, I guess it is now, because of the Conservatives and tattoos and all the rest of it. And I guess so, if there was a woman's exhibition now, do you think you'd make new work? Or do you think there? Is there something that you would want to show that maybe hadn't been shown before? Or maybe work with yours that you don't think it's been seen?

J Joanne O'Brien 1:25:44

I guess if I was seen out? Well, it would depend really on what kind of show it was. I mean, it was one of those Archie things where people just photograph, you know, rubbish in the street. I'm not interested, you know. Okay,



so I was thinking of Korean issue, I was thinking of Korean issue where Yeah, I had women photographers was explicitly political work.

J Joanne O'Brien 1:26:09

Oh, yeah. No, but I will be really international. Definitely, though. Yeah. But, you know, those kind of pictures of empty urban landscapes or fragmentary things, all these sort of all that kind of work. It's just not my bag, let's just say, you know, I feel very strongly that we, you know, there, it's very hard to do to make good work out of everything of the everyday stuff that's going on, that's a



challenge. And that you're actually

J Joanne O'Brien 1:26:47

you know, you can be ducking out of it, or you just evaded completely. If you just do stuff that's just fragments. It's more about became very fashionable. I remember going to show it the photographer's gallery about migration I was in the show was Gary about migration, some pictures of our Irish in London, and some beautiful pictures of a member of Hasidic Jews in North London, and there was some, there's some lovely stuff in the show, all stuff that would take taking time to do and now sees also thing by a woman about the Asian woman's experience. And all it was was a picture of our hands. And it was the same picture as a triptych same picture shown, you know, one way or the other way of the new way? That was it, that was a meaningful picture, reading Indian woman's experience. I didn't think so. To me. Yeah. Right. That sort of, I suppose a big of really when it comes to because, you know, I'm not interested. Right. And that sort of stuff. I mean, not saying that it's not lovely to take photographs and little

things and, and get pleasure, visual pleasure. And not to say that, but but to say that that's a meaningful picture about that experience. Yeah. Those pictures don't have a sweet factory in Donegal. And the pictures were just of loads and loads of sugar. Pouring out very few pictures of the actual workers. Yeah, that to me, is a shame. The missed opportunity.



Yeah. Could have recorded what those peers kind of removes the lived experience of Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 1:28:41

lived experience that I feel the challenge to? Yeah, that's a good way of putting it actually. Yeah. Yeah.



So what is you said, you're working on a book now?



Joanne O'Brien 1:28:53

I'm working on it as a collection of essays about Palestine, about the issue, the theme of the book is defending hope, working out with somebody else who is actually a lot more knowledgeable about this whole issue speaks Arabic and so on. And if you've been in person I have Yeah, just briefly. And I want to interview photographers, for the book about their work on the ground. And I don't want to follow up interview, you know, people who are in galleries, or people who work major obligations. I want to work for an engineer for people who are working on the ground to record what's happening in the community. And I have got some ones lined up. And I've got a woman though, who is been active still active, since that's a group that works out they're very, very good check. They're like, report digit You're



just very good



Joanne O'Brien 1:30:04

online agency but their collective I think, and woman to a French woman lived out there for yonks 10 years. Using garden this summer. She just did a series for example, hope something like my living room. Pack is I mean, Pa Q. And she did this my living room and basically it's people standing for what was our living room. Okay, the bombings, things my living room, my bedroom, you're really interesting approach.





Sounds fantastic. And



Joanne O'Brien 1:30:43

there's another woman called Imam Muhammad, who was lead who was only at the time the only female, local foreign journalist in Gaza.



I read about her in the last there was a women's issue of BJP and



she was right. Was she right?



Joanne O'Brien 1:31:03

Actually, the BJP has got quite interesting, a lot better. It's definitely got better. I think it's good. I mean, monthly. Yeah. I haven't seen it for a couple of I've been up to my eyes with the stuff. But But yeah, she's amazing. She's live firing. Do you either know, she was she was abandoned by these males at all? Because I thought,



because



Joanne O'Brien 1:31:24

they don't didn't agree with I thought I had a hard time I don't really cure and dismiss pink people not talk to me or, you know, a source of



shipped, right? Because you're a woman. Yeah.



Joanne O'Brien 1:31:38

So we're going on a job day for The Guardian. And just been with these guys who have their cameras or gaffer taped up, you swear to God and more to the Congo or something, like in the morning working on the streets and moments.



And there was just probably the flak jackets



Joanne O'Brien 1:31:56

really ignored me. You know, just get that kind of stuff



was a quote, I read from Fleet Street picture editor. And it was, it was about there was an article on women in photography. It was at the spectrum Festival, and Val Williams was talking about women's experience complete street. And one picture editor said, Oh, we don't send women to war zones, because they can't deal with the sight of blood. So that photographer responded, I think you're fine. I'd have to deal with blood at least once a month.



Yeah, oh, yeah. No, I



Joanne O'Brien 1:32:30

did work for the guardian for a while, but then I was gonna go. I was hoping to go up the tree, but you know, get a regular contract, and then eventually, maybe get on staff. So he really loved doing that sort of work. And it didn't happen, because the picture didn't really. And this is definitely true. Didn't want



his deputy did. But then



Joanne O'Brien 1:32:56

now they have women. Stephanie was my son. You know, he was the one who got supportive. Yeah, you support nice, man. These are pictures there. But the moment has passed. Yeah.



So what's the latest photography project you're



Joanne O'Brien 1:33:16

doing? Well, I'm doing this thing. I'm going to interview and photograph these people out in Palestine. And the other thing I'm supposed to be doing, which I haven't had time to do recently, but I've been doing a project about people's sense of Irish people's sense of place in London. And photographing people at a place that means something to them, in terms of the history of living in the city. And distrust is both first generation, you know, Irish born and second generation people here.



And



Joanne O'Brien 1:33:55

so, I'm going to do it as a blog. Right. Oh, interesting. Right. And so I've actually never what do you think of a call it London lightbox? Right. But because most people don't know what a light box is anymore?



Yeah. It might even Yeah. Anybody under the age of 30 won't know what to light boxes still is



Joanne O'Brien 1:34:26

quite the image of a light box is quite a nice



thing. And have you seen the project Humans of New York, you know, and so there's a photographer who goes run New York, and he photographs just people in New York and he publishes it was a really big quote from them. Just about that's what I want to do something and there are great pictures. And the quotes are lovely. It's about their life. Yeah. Humans in New York, Humans of New York. Thanks.



Joanne O'Brien 1:34:54

You know, I will have a look at that. That's interesting. And I want to do it in black and white. So I'm using dx. Oh, yeah. Read an interview with the BGA with Salgado. Eye Opener. That's what he used. Okay. Really? Yeah. He's not about digital. Yeah. Right.




But it's probably expensive large format digital.

 Joanne O'Brien 1:35:21

What do you know? He's shooting on 35 Now, okay. And he was using it like films, he's never look at the back of the camera. I just use that to get all the cars. What he had this amazing machine, right? Where he can get generate an actual physical negative from the digital fine print, and then they print them. Wow. Yeah, that sounds. So what he does is he tweaks that the image on Photoshop or whatever, and then produces this negative so I think the negative is more or less.



That's it straight. Well, wow.

 Joanne O'Brien 1:35:57

That's really good. It's printed. It's printed properly




through a larger with a silver print.



Yeah. And I guess it means it can make the negative. Yeah.



So that must be amazing.

 Joanne O'Brien 1:36:08

I don't know what that is. I didn't make inquiries.



And do you shoot a ticket? You shoot digital? Oh, yeah. Remember the pain of having to invest in a digital?

 Joanne O'Brien 1:36:23

Well, I will say light room



has just changed my life. Yeah.



Yeah. It makes it because the old days of having to go each individual through Photoshop so painful.



Joanne O'Brien 1:36:34

fucking nightmare. Yeah. Really was.



Yeah. Because even like, even when I was at university, we didn't get taught on digital film. Because now I see the students in the university in in Belfast open in the back of the film was never seen it before. Yeah,



Joanne O'Brien 1:36:57

there's nothing to be afraid.



On the magic of the Darkroom. Yeah. So see if there's anything else I haven't asked them. I'm gonna have to kick it. Oh, really? Sorry. No, no, I have to go. I've got my appointment at the British Library anyway, so I'm in the listening rooms because because all this is all in cassette, and the only ones that have been digitised are Joe Spence. And there's one of Maggie Mary's tips, which where she specifically interviewed about format, and it hasn't been digitised but it's been Oh, and there's another Who's the other one? J Harrison has been digitised as well. Judy Harrison. So the tips I've got are do Judy house. Yeah. Judy Harrison.



Joanne O'Brien 1:37:44

Oh, yeah, do you? Yeah.



So the tips. I've got our ball Wilmer, Maggie Mary. I did yours first because I have been more well, just because I'm a photographer from Ireland and the issues that I've done and, you know, living in I lived in London for 12 years. So there's a lot of resonances, I'd say it's my own work.

So Right. And I used because I used to work in that work, then that's fine. Oh, Jenny mustard. All right. Yeah. So I remember being really struck working there. That was only five women. Jenny Matthews, Julian Edelstein. Amazing. South African photographer. I can't remember her name. She won the oh, I can't remember name. A Harriet Logan. And I can't really



see working how I haven't



seen her work in years. But this other woman still is Julian Edelstein does like celebrity portraits. Yeah. So who the other tips Breslau?



Joanne O'Brien 1:38:46

Oh, yeah.



Lisa Coover, I can't remember her first name. Oh, yeah. Yeah,



Joanne O'Brien 1:38:56

she's from the 70s.



Yeah. And she lived up North somewhere. Yeah. So um, yeah, it's quite interesting, because one of the reasons that drew me to do this project initially, was when I had to write an essay for my master's. I was like, there's not enough done or written about the work made by women documentary photographers in the UK and Ireland systems. So, um, hopefully by doing this project, I'll have set up a little bit of a historical archive. Good for you. Thank you very much.



Joanne O'Brien 1:39:33

Pleasure. So do you currently work or do you take photographs at all?



I do. Indeed. You do.

