LIMINAL MIND

Three Offers in Leytonstone

A jobcentre, five years inside the Manpower Services Commission, and the apprenticeship that made everything else possible: London, 1981–1986

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Prologue — Embedded Observation Series — Liminal Mind Research Archive

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> *'Every page a victory. Who cooked the feast for the victors? Every ten years a great man. Who paid the bill? So many reports. So many questions.'*
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> Bertolt Brecht, Questions from a Worker Who Reads, 1935

I. Eight Months in South Wales

I left Birmingham Polytechnic's School of Photography in the summer of 1980 with a practice formed on the streets of Handsworth rather than in the darkrooms of Dorrington Road. I returned to Llantwit Major in the Vale of Glamorgan, to my parents' house, to the town I had grown up in and left at eighteen. I was twenty-one years old. I needed work.

For eight months I applied for jobs across South Wales. This is a simple sentence that contains a great deal of time — the daily performance of looking, the weekly rhythm of rejection, the accumulating understanding that the labour market I had returned to was not the labour market I had left. The Wales I came back to in 1980 was not the Wales of 1977. Three years had not passed without consequence.

The steel industry was contracting. The coal industry was under pressure that would, within four years, produce the most significant industrial dispute in post-war British history. The manufacturing base that had given the Valleys their economic coherence for a century was being systematically withdrawn — not through one dramatic announcement but through the accumulated weight of plant closures, redundancies, and the quiet rerouting of investment away from communities whose labour was no longer required at the price it commanded.

None of this was visible as a system from inside it. What was visible was the jobs page of the South Wales Echo. What was audible was the sound of the telephone not ringing. What was legible was the form letter of rejection, which eventually becomes so familiar that you stop reading it before it arrives, because the envelope already tells you everything.

> *Eight months of applications in South Wales in 1980 and 1981 taught me something I would spend forty years learning to articulate: that structural unemployment presents itself as personal failure. The system produces the condition and then requires the individual to explain why they cannot escape it.*

In the spring of 1981, a friend from Llantwit Major called. He had moved to London. He was living in a shared house in Leytonstone, in the east of the city, on the edge of a landscape I did not yet know. There was a room. I should come.

I came.

II. The Jobcentre on Leytonstone High Road

I walked into Leytonstone Jobcentre in 1981 not as a claimant but as a job-seeker. On the same day I was offered three positions. The contrast with eight months of silence in South Wales was so complete that it took a moment to understand what had happened. I had not changed. The labour market had changed around me, and I had changed my position within it.

The work of a clerical officer in a jobcentre was not benefit processing. It was something more direct and more human: people came in, browsed the job vacancies displayed on boards around the room, selected something that interested them, and sat down opposite you for a quick interview. You assessed the match, picked up the phone, called the employer, and made the appointment. The whole transaction might take ten minutes. Many many people a day, every day.

The jobs arrived on a teleprinter — a machine that clattered through its cycle and produced the listings on a continuous roll, the type formed by a spinning ball that struck the paper with mechanical precision. New vacancies coming in throughout the day, torn off, pinned to the boards. There was something almost market-like about it — a labour exchange in the literal sense, with matching happening in real time across a counter.

What the teleprinter could not print, and what the placing metric could not capture, was the texture of the people sitting opposite you. The rag trade machinist whose skill had a name and a lineage and was suddenly without a market for it. The casual labourer who would be back through the door in three days. The person whose situation required twenty minutes of careful conversation and whom the institution's rhythm allowed only ten. You developed, out

of necessity, the ability to read people very quickly — their situation, their capability, what they actually needed versus what the institution could offer them.

> *Five years of fast interviews across a counter, dozens of people daily, turned out to be an apprenticeship in reading people that I did not understand I was receiving. Ishiguro sat down in front of my camera in 1986 and relaxed. That capacity did not come from nowhere.*

III. The Placing Metric and What It Measured

The jobcentres of the Manpower Services Commission were measured on placings — the number of people successfully matched to jobs and sent to appointments. The metric was simple, clean, and almost entirely disconnected from what it claimed to measure.

A placing was a placing. A day's casual labour counted identically to a full-time skilled appointment. The restaurant dishwasher who would be back through the door on Friday registered the same in the performance figures as the machinist placed in permanent employment. The number went up either way. The manager's figures looked adequate either way. The underlying reality — that the casual placer had no security, no progression, no route out of the cycle — was structurally invisible to the measurement system.

It was soon identified that I was good at cold calling. For a period in my early twenties I spent part of each day on the phone to businesses across East London — restaurants, pubs, kitchens — asking whether they needed someone to drive or wash pots. The people I generated placings for would drift in after signing on for unemployment benefit, collect the appointment, do the shift, get paid in cash, and drift back again. The cash-in-hand economy and the official benefit system running in parallel, both parties understanding the arrangement, the jobcentre providing the thin institutional veneer that made the whole thing legible as employment policy.

It was not exactly a scam. Or rather, it was a scam that everyone was running simultaneously and nobody had an incentive to stop. The restaurant got flexible cheap labour. The worker got a cash supplement to their benefit. I got my placings. The manager got his figures. The MSC got to report activity to the Treasury. The only thing that was not happening was what the institution said it was doing.

> *The placing metric is the direct ancestor of the Liberty Converse wrap time, the Civica CX call log, the data integrity requirement the Welsh Government would impose on a housing association forty years later.*

> *Different institution, different decade, identical logic: measure the countable thing, call it accountability, remain indifferent to what the counting misses.*

The manager understood this perfectly. He had developed his own institutional response to it: a sleep in his office every afternoon. He had grasped that the placings would accumulate regardless of what he did between two and four o'clock, that the rag trade was contracting regardless, that the canal-side buildings were emptying regardless. His afternoon nap was not laziness. It was the rational response of someone who had understood that the institution's stated purpose and its actual function had completely diverged, and that nothing he did in his office would change that.

He was performing reflexive impotence before Mark Fisher had given it a name.

IV. The Canal Routes

Temple Mills Lane to Shoreditch

After two years at Leytonstone, I moved with a different manager to Shoreditch Jobcentre — positioned at the heart of the declining East London rag trade. The garment industry that had occupied these streets for generations was thinning: the machinists, cutters, pressers, and seamstresses whose skills had a name and a lineage were coming through the door in increasing numbers, their trades without a market.

I cycled to Shoreditch from Stratford every morning, taking Temple Mills Lane — the road that ran past the marshalling yards where nuclear waste trains screeched through at night, past the edge of the Clays Lane Housing Co-operative where I was by now living — through Victoria Park, and then along the Regent's Canal to Shoreditch.

The Regent's Canal in the mid-1980s was not the curated leisure amenity it later became. It was post-industrial infrastructure without a current use — the towpath unimproved, the water dark, the warehouses on either side either empty or occupied by exactly the kind of marginal businesses that could not afford anywhere else. The canal had carried industrial freight for 150 years. Now it carried very little. You could cycle its entire length through the back of a deindustrialising city and encounter almost no one.

I was cycling every morning through the physical body of what had been and was no longer — through the evidence of the same structural transformation whose human consequences I was processing at the counter. The empty warehouses were the upstream cause of the people sitting opposite me with their teleprinter listings.

The Shoreditch Artists

Behind the wonderful old facades of the grimy Shoreditch buildings, something else was happening. The upper floors and the derelict spaces that the rag trade was vacating were being occupied by artists. They were there because the rents were negligible and the space was generous — the same logic that had made Clays Lane possible, the same logic that fills any landscape the city has not yet decided what to do with.

This was not the so-called creative industries of today — the brand message factories, the content studios, the digital agencies that would eventually make Shoreditch synonymous with a particular kind of monetised bohemianism. This was something that preceded all of that by a decade: authentic, cutting-edge practice happening in amongst the declining rag trade, invisible to any institutional record, unmeasurable by any placing metric.

The machinists coming through the jobcentre counter were the end of one era. The artists behind the grimy facades were the beginning of something that would eventually price out every trace of what had preceded it. The Easynet pattern. The V2C pattern. The same cycle running through an entire neighbourhood — genuine creative purpose occupying the spaces capital has abandoned, making them legible, and thereby making them attractive to the capital that would eventually arrive to extract the value.

I met many of the artists not long after leaving the jobcentre. The conversations I had with them then — on the edge of what that world was becoming — belong to a different chapter. What matters here is that I was cycling past their buildings every morning on my way to count placings that didn't measure anything, and I knew something was happening in there, and I couldn't reach it from a civil service desk.

The Edgware Road and the Parallel Universe

I was desperate to move to the West End. My intention, never quite realised, was to visit photographers during my lunch breaks and find a route into photographic assisting. I transferred to Edgware Road Jobcentre near Marble Arch — a completely different institutional world from Leytonstone and Shoreditch, serving a more mixed, transient, cosmopolitan population in the Arabic quarter, the Lebanese restaurants and Middle Eastern businesses that gave the Edgware Road its particular character.

I extended my canal route. From Temple Mills Lane, along the Regent's Canal to the Angel at Islington, then overland through Kings Cross — still a chaotic, unregenerated transport interchange, nothing like what it later became — through Marylebone and into the relative prosperity of Edgware Road. The journey was a cross-section of London's class geography in a single daily commute, experienced at exactly the right speed.

The problem was time. The lunch breaks were not long enough to visit studios, make calls, build the relationships that would constitute a route in. I was within walking distance of the world I wanted to enter and structurally unable to reach it during office hours. The photography studios and picture editors and agencies were there. The jobcentre counter was also there. The distance between them, measured in minutes, was not crossable from inside a civil service working day.

> *I felt like I was working in a parallel universe. The world I wanted was visible from where I was standing. I could not get to it from here.*

By 1986 the streets around the West End were visibly transforming. The October 1986 Big Bang — the deregulation of the financial markets — was pumping money through the city at a rate that showed on every street corner. The restaurants, the boutiques, the wine bars, the trendy shops filling St Christopher's Place. I would divert there sometimes on the bicycle, that pedestrianised alley off Oxford Street, and stand for a moment looking at what prosperity looked like when it was performing itself.

The bookshops near SOAS — the School of Oriental and African Studies, the Bloomsbury academic quarter — offered a different kind of window: intellectual life visible, accessible in theory, but not in practice from a civil service salary and a placing metric.

The prosperity I was cycling through in 1986 was also, structurally, the prosperity being extracted from the communities I was processing at the counter. The Big Bang and the Thatcherite economic settlement were producing both the wine bars in St Christopher's Place and the casual labourers washing pots for cash. I was watching both ends of the same mechanism from a bicycle in the middle, and I did not yet have the language to say what I was watching.

V. The Gratuity and the Break

I had understood from early on that the short service gratuity — the pension entitlement available to civil servants who left before completing a full career — would be lost if I stayed beyond five years. The clock was always ticking. It created a horizon I could see from the beginning, a date by which the decision would be made for me if I did not make it myself.

In 1986, I left. The gratuity was a small sum — modest enough that the decision to spend it on photography rather than security required a specific kind of commitment to the proposition that the photography was the thing, not the fallback. I made it stretch. It funded

the white backdrop, the basic equipment, the early commissions — the infrastructure of a practice that the previous five years had been building without either of us quite knowing it.

The first editorial work followed. The 1986 diary — the dated portraits of Ishiguro, Banks, McFadyen, Januszczak, Chadwick, Hogan and the others that constitutes the most significant body of my early practice — was funded by the Manpower Services Commission. The state apparatus for managing the consequences of deindustrialisation paid, indirectly, for the portraits of the cultural figures who were defining what British intellectual and artistic life looked like at the moment of Thatcherism's cultural ascendancy.

> *The MSC gratuity funded the 1986 diary. The institution that counted placings that meant nothing paid for the portraits that meant something. I have been thinking about that inversion ever since.*

What the five years had actually produced — the thing I did not understand I was receiving — was an apprenticeship in reading people at speed, under pressure, across a counter, with no time and no second chances. Dozens of people a day, every day, for five years. Fast intuitive assessment of strangers — their situation, their capability, the gap between what they presented and what they needed. The ability to find the register that made a person feel seen rather than processed.

That is precisely the skill the portrait requires. You have minutes with a subject. You need to make them present rather than performing. The camera creates an unusual social permission — people tell photographers things they would not tell colleagues — but only if the photographer is genuinely curious and genuinely present. The jobcentre counter had trained exactly that quality of attention, without calling it that.

Ishiguro sat down in front of the camera in 1986 and relaxed. Miranda Richardson laughed as a pigeon launched from her hand in a London park. Robbie Coltrane let me into his Hackney basement with last night's curry still on the table. None of this happened despite the five years inside the MSC. It happened because of them.

VI. The Three Roads Revisited

I walked into Leytonstone Jobcentre in 1981 and was offered three jobs on the same afternoon. I have been thinking about the other two ever since.

Macleans Printed Packaging, Stratford

The first offer was from Macleans Printed Packaging, a manufacturing company in Stratford, E15 — one of hundreds of small industrial firms occupying the landscape between the railway marshalling yards, the River Lea, and the arterial roads of East London. Stratford in 1981 was a manufacturing district of genuine density: electro-mechanical engineers, galvanising works, glass specialists, textile merchants, printers, dairy operations, food wholesalers. An ecosystem of skilled manual work built since the Victorian period.

Macleans Printed Packaging is now largely invisible in the historical record. A single comment on a 2017 Spitalfields Life blog post about Stratford's lost industries — left by a former employee named Robert Land in 2018 — may be the only publicly accessible evidence that the company existed: 'Stratford was full of small firms, most of which are now gone and largely forgotten. Spittles Engineering, The International Refining Co and Macleans Printed Packaging are three that I worked for.'

The entire manufacturing district it was part of was compulsorily purchased and demolished by the Olympic Authority for the 2012 Games. Bowdens Glass, established on its site since before the 1820s. Goddard and Gibbs Studios, founded in 1868, who had made stained glass for Westminster Abbey. Parkes Galvanising, in Marshgate Lane since the 1950s. All gone for three weeks of sport. Macleans Printed Packaging named only in a comment, by someone who worked there, on a blog about a book about a demolition.

The Chart Printers

The second offer was from a company engaged in the printing and correction of nautical charts — almost certainly connected to the network of contractors serving the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, whose Admiralty charts had been the navigational infrastructure of British maritime power since 1795. The role would have involved making corrections to existing charts: applying the weekly Notices to Mariners updates that kept the printed record accurate, amending soundings, revising coastal features by hand.

The most likely candidate is Kelvin Hughes Chart Services, which had a strong presence in the East London corridor and operated a comprehensive chart management and correction service for shipping lines. The chart correction trade has since been digitised entirely out of existence. The skilled draughtspeople who applied those corrections by hand have no institutional successors. The Notices to Mariners are now electronic updates applied automatically to screens on the bridge.

> *Both of the roads not taken led into industries that no longer exist. The packaging manufacturer was demolished for the Olympics. The chart correction trade was digitised into obsolescence. On the same afternoon, in*

> *the same jobcentre, I was offered two positions in industries that were already, without knowing it, in the final decades of their existence.*

The Road Taken

The third offer was the temporary clerical role with the Manpower Services Commission. I took it. The three-month contract became five years. The five years produced the gratuity that funded the photography. The photography produced the 1986 diary. The 1986 diary is where the Liminal Mind practice begins to be legible as a practice.

The irony is structural rather than personal. The MSC was the state apparatus created to manage unemployment. I had spent eight months experiencing unemployment in South Wales. I arrived in London, walked into a jobcentre, and was offered a job administering the system that processed people in the condition I had just escaped. Then I administered it for five years, developed inside it the skills it could not name, and left with just enough money to begin the work I had always been moving toward.

The institution funded the thing it could not see. That is, in retrospect, the most precise summary of what institutions do.

VII. What the Prologue Connects

This chapter sits at the beginning of the Liminal Mind Embedded Observation Series because it is where the observation begins — not with a theoretical framework or a curatorial intention, but with a twenty-one-year-old from Llantwit Major standing in a Leytonstone jobcentre in 1981, being offered three jobs on the same afternoon, choosing the one that placed him inside the administrative apparatus of managed unemployment, and staying for five years.

The series that follows moves through seven further institutional encounters across forty years: Clays Lane Housing Co-operative, the NAAFI, Easynet, Cable and Wireless, the City of London, and Valleys to Coast. Each adds a layer to an understanding that was not available at the beginning. The methodology — embedded presence, attention to the gap between institutional front and institutional reality, the willingness to stay inside the contradiction long enough to name it — was not chosen. It was what happened when someone paid attention for long enough.

The thread from the Leytonstone Jobcentre in 1981 to the V2C customer service desk in 2026 is not coincidence. It is the same thread: the British institutional cycle of social purpose built,

extracted, and dissolved, observed from the inside, at the specific moment of maximum contradiction.

The placing metric of the MSC became the wrap time metric of Liberty Converse. The casual labourer drifting in after signing on became the Universal Credit claimant navigating the sanctions regime. The sleeping manager became the CEO using group language in an all-staff briefing while the regulator issued a Yellow viability rating. The institution's stated purpose and its actual function diverged, slowly and then completely, as they always do.

> *The chart correction draughtspeople are gone. The packaging workers are gone. The allotment holders are dispersed. The cooperative is demolished. The rag trade machinists have no successors. And a Welsh housing association founded to house the people the market would not house is building apartments in Cardiff. The building remains. The builders vanish. The purpose is unreadable. I was there. I am still reading.*

Methodological note: This prologue draws on personal testimony, the public record of 1981 unemployment statistics (Office for National Statistics; ScienceDirect, 'The class of 1981'), the Spitalfields Life post 'Remembering Stratford's Lost Industries' (September 2017) and the associated publication Dispersal: Picturing Urban Change in East London (Historic England, 2017), and research into the chart printing and correction industry. Macleans Printed Packaging is confirmed in the historical record by a comment left by a former employee on the Spitalfields Life post in June 2018. The chart company cannot be confirmed with certainty; Kelvin Hughes Chart Services and Cook, Hammond and Kell are identified as the most plausible candidates based on geographic and operational evidence. No confidential information is disclosed.

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