



The
Royal
Photographic
Society

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Number 46 Winter 2012

Contemporary Group Journal



View from the Chair

Our AGM will be held at the Grafton Hotel in London on 18 February. We hope that it will be a short one, because it will be followed by Gus Wylie Hon FRPS, showing and talking about his recent projects. For many of us, Gus will always be associated with his photographic record of life in the Hebrides. He has a long teaching career at the Royal College of Art, London and the Rochester Institute of Technology, New York. Also he has directed the Masters course in Fashion Photography at the University of the Arts, London.

Please bring images for feedback and discussion and possible inclusion in a future Contemporary Group Journal. We have the Bedford Suite from 2 pm to 5 pm, and so there should be plenty of time to look at prints. If anyone wants to continue afterwards, there is always the local pub for those

inclined. The nearest tube station is Warren Street, almost next door to the hotel. Please check TfL (Transport for London website) for any possible underground closures at the weekend.

Many AGMs are poorly attended and yet this is the one opportunity you have to express your interest in our group and put forward ideas for the future. We, the committee, try to do our best for you, but input from you, the members, is most welcome particularly when we try to arrange events.

At the moment we have an event in conjunction with the Yorkshire Region in Bradford (the National Media Museum) on Sunday, 15 April. Plans are being made for further events in Newcastle in the summer, and with the South West Region in November.

Brian Steptoe has been the treasurer for the Contemporary Group for many years and he would like to step down from that role, particularly as he is now helping me with the events and on occasion with the journal. It would be appreciated if one of you might be prepared to take over in due course. Brian is quite happy for someone to shadow him for a year before taking over completely and anyone considering the position is welcome to make contact with Brian to establish what would be required.

Best wishes,
Avril

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If you wish to submit articles for the Journal, please send all copy and images on disc to:

Patricia Ann Ruddle, 28 Malvern Avenue, York, YO26 5SG.
patriciaruddle@btinternet.com

Text should be in Microsoft Word and images are preferred in TIFF format, 16-bit colour depth, width 200 mm, 300 dpi minimum. Images are also acceptable as high quality jpegs, 8-bit colour depth. Colour space in Adobe RGB is preferred rather than sRGB. For other formats, please contact the Editor.

DEADLINE for the Spring 2012 edition is 31 March 2012.

Cover: *The big strawberry, Grays Farm* © Brian Steptoe

Contemporary Group Journal

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Contemporary SouthWest Group:

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Jenny Leathes ARPS	Nancye Gault ARPS
Michael Woodhead ARPS	Gabriele Kruckenberg-Tayler ARPS
Graham Hodgson FRPS	Lesley Treloar ARPS
Mick Medley LRPS	Ken Holland ARPS
Muriel Somerfield ARPS	John Evans-Jones ARPS

Photography that explores the photographer's personal view of contemporary society, environment, art or culture, usually through a themed body of work.

Editorial

Looking back. Looking forward. These contributions span two years. It completes a set of four issues since the committee decided that members would be better served with a reformatted, quarterly Journal. But let's think that this one, Winter 2012, brings a new year, one in which the Journal continues to embrace more work from more members, whether articles and photographs on continuing or finished projects, your musings or points of view.

In the article about the recently relocated Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool, Julia García Hernández writes about Mitch Epstein's exhibition *Stepping Back* that has finished. However, through her article we are also introduced to a gallery that was and will continue to be an influential and significant gallery in the north. It was a discerning decision to close their former space with an exhibition from their archives curated by Mitch Epstein, since he was from that 1970s generation of photographers whose work filled their archives. And then subsequently, they chose Epstein's latest project *American Power* to open their new gallery.

The productive South West Group literally blasts through these pages with submissions by twelve members. Their contribution was not only prolific, but professional as well. Indeed, too prolific because regrettably all their images couldn't be included. (P.S. South West members – don't forget: your contributions don't finish here – more please from all of you. Perhaps I can use some of your photographs in future issues? And Rod Fry ARPS, group organiser, who assembled the entire contribution, unfortunately isn't included – next time Rod.) This one-page editorial constrains me from commenting on all of your submissions. However, I'm confident that Journal readers will find your work enjoyable, informative and thought-provoking.

Articles by other members include Anne Crabbe FRPS, Mike Shanahan and Brian Steptoe FRPS. Anne's absorbing story of Chesham and its people is an important collection of photographs with enduring value, and one that she is continuing to document. Mike's *Hidden Voices* is a challenging, multi-layered article with much for us to unpick. He interweaves thoughts on, for example, "aesthetic appeal"; or his concern

with the word; for a contemporary narrative drive. Mike sent me a witty email from his iPad when he was trawling London galleries. He tried to understand Tacita Dean's *FILM* showing in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, but couldn't find any "narrative drive". However, the narrative drive is at the core of many photographers in these pages.

In Brian's article he writes that a photo's assessment based only on the technical is "biased and limited". This kind of evaluation is concerned with the "how" and not the "why" of an image. So, what do we think about, for example, Stephen Gill pushing the boundaries with items dropped on the film before exposure? Which came first – his concept that meant he had to use this process, or was it the other way round?

In my first issue (Number 43 Spring 2011) I wrote that process for me is important. Joy Gregory said that experimenting can lead to new practices, new ways of seeing. So does process matter? The how and the why – how do they relate? South West photographer Martin Howse ARPS chose b&w film and a medium format camera to challenge him to say something different about saturated autumn colours. Indeed, Mitch Epstein's large, colour-saturated photographs – did the technique spawn the idea?

We have more technical advantages than ever, whether compact videos, smartphones, iPads or even rolls of film. There's much to spark the how; so what's our why going to be? Or is it the other way round?

Chris Morris's other commitments meant that he has sadly resigned as our designer. This edition has been very much a collaborative effort between me, Brian Steptoe and Anne Crabbe. Brian has spent much-considered time on the layout to produce, what I hope you agree with me, is a splendidly designed issue.

The cover photograph by Brian is from his latest project. The strawberry marks the entrance to a pick-your-own fruit farm. I suggest that we see this entrance as a harbinger for all good Journal submissions to come in 2012.

Best wishes,
Patricia

Stepping Back

Mitch Epstein at the Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool

by Julia García Hernández

In the early months of 2011 New York-based photographer Mitch Epstein was invited by the Open Eye Gallery to curate the closing show of its Wood Street premises, its third location in Liverpool, which it had occupied since 1996. The resulting exhibition, *Uncommon Grace*, showcased a selection of 30 photographs from the gallery's permanent collection of over 1,600 prints, and served to draw attention to the Open Eye archive⁽¹⁾. The majority of the prints that Epstein selected, 1984 to 1989, pointed to a network of photographers working in and around Liverpool at that time including John Davies and Tom Wood⁽²⁾.

As curator, Epstein's selection of urban landscapes by John Davies, and Tom Wood's colour portraits of people at leisure in New Brighton, in turn pointed to his own themes and interests as artist. Epstein's career began when he had made "a commitment to photography in the early seventies"⁽³⁾. That decade saw the emergence of photography galleries in the UK, including Liverpool's Open Eye Gallery, launched in September 1977.

In October 2011 the Open Eye Gallery moved to its new location on Mann Island near the Pier Head, and in November opened to the public with Mitch Epstein's first solo UK show, *American Power*. Eight large-scale key works, taken from his most recent long-term project, were shown across the two ground floor gallery spaces. In his *Breakfast*

with... artist talk, Epstein spoke of the significance of his first UK exhibition at Open Eye and the British photographers who the gallery exhibited from the late 1970s onwards, for example, Wood and Davies who were his contemporaries.

During the hour-long talk, Epstein gave an articulate account of the project that had taken him across twenty-five states of America. His method of research - to map sites of energy production and consumption prior to travel - recalled his childhood vacations that had been mapped out and packaged by the American Automobile Association; he called his version "energy tourism".

Although explicit in its theme of energy, the *American Power* project has allowed Epstein to explore more broadly his interests as a practitioner such as the "notion of landscape", and the multi-layered process of picture making. His concern is not with current events or a journalistic practice, but with picture making "that is visually complex and conceptually layered"; that is "informationally" and "photographically rich".

Two images in the *American Power* exhibition, positioned opposite each other, explored the notion of landscape in relation to British and American landscape photographers. The photograph of *Poca High School and Amos Coal Power Plant, West Virginia 2004* was the first of four large-scale pictures in Gallery 1. It shares a visual relationship with John Davies' *Agecroft Power Station* from

1983, juxtaposing the power plant's cooling towers with a sporting recreation ground, and is, at first glance, about the relationship between "community and industry". In referencing *Agecroft Power Station* (knowingly or not), an image which features in Davies' book *A Green and Pleasant Land* (1987), Epstein's photograph carries with it Davies' discussion on landscape and gains meaning from the repeated re-contextualisation of Davies' image through exhibitions and publications. This referencing contributes to what Epstein aspires to achieve: the "interconnectedness" between the layers that make up a picture. The sporting activity at the Poca High School is American football and reminds the viewer that Epstein's earlier project *Recreation* looks at the theme of Americans at leisure.

While the exhibition's first image can be read as having a relationship to late 20th century British topographical photography, Epstein's image *Hoover Dam and Lake Mead, Nevada/Arizona 2007* refers to an earlier period of topographical investigation, notably the work of the American survey photographers that included Timothy O'Sullivan and Carleton E. Watkins. These 19th century photographers recorded a majestic and undeveloped landscape before westward expansion.

1. *Uncommon Grace*: Photographs from the Open Eye Archive, shown 14 May-12 June 2011 and formed part of Liverpool's Look11 Photography Festival.
2. For further information on this exhibition see the online article by the author at <http://www.redeye.org.uk/news/uncommon-grace> (accessed 7 January 2012).

Epstein uses the idea of "stepping back" in order to take in the "grandeur" of the landscape to evoke a time when the landscape was in its primal state and, although Epstein's image records a 20th century "human intervention" on a colossal scale, by "stepping back" Epstein allows the viewer to see different measures of time: the visual detail of everyday activity; the recent history; and a "deeper longer history" - the "long time". His approach is explicitly tied to the physical act of photographing his subject from a distance with, by this stage of the project, an 8 x 10 large format camera. The huge size of Epstein's prints is significant for a project that records a landscape in which the American flag is the width of a refinery and a truck stop is the biggest in the world.

Mitch Epstein's exhibition *American Power* signals another stage in the life of the Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool. With its new position within walking distance of Tate Liverpool, and in possession of a much larger and improved exhibiting space, the gallery is able to make more visible its discussion of contemporary photographic practices. This inaugural exhibition signifies the evolution of the practice and exhibition of photography since the 1970s.

3. All quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the talk *Breakfast with Mitch Epstein*, Open Eye Gallery Liverpool, 5 November 2011.

Epstein, Mitch. *American Power*. Göttingen Germany: Steidl, 2009. ISBN 978-3-86521-924-4.

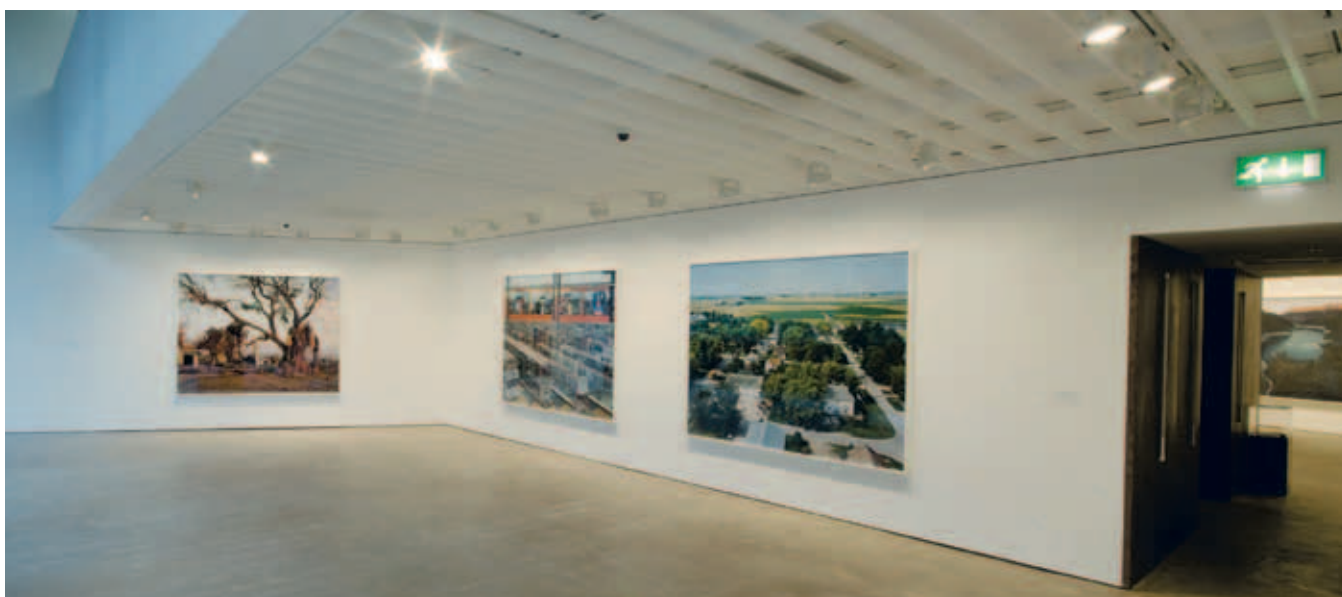
Davies gave a talk at the RPS Contemporary Group weekend *The Power of Photography* in 2011.



From: American Power: Hoover Dam and Lake Mead, Nevada/Arizona 2007. © Mitch Epstein. Courtesy of the Artur Walther Foundation, Ulm.



Gallery 1: From *American Power: Poca High School and Amos Coal Power Plant, West Virginia 2004* (left); and *BP Carson Refinery, California 2007* (right). ©Mitch Epstein. Photograph: ©Mark McNulty.



Gallery 2: From *American Power*. ©Mitch Epstein. Photograph: ©Mark McNulty.

Contemporary South West

by Rod Fry ARPS, South West Group Organiser

We formed in 2005 after the RPS South West Region and the Contemporary Group held a workshop at the Dolphin Hotel, Bovey Tracey. About 20 RPS Contemporary Group members living in Devon and Cornwall wanted to meet on a regular basis, to look at each other's work, share ideas and inspire one another in a non-competitive, supportive environment.

From the outset, news of the group spread quickly. Peninsula Arts of Plymouth University invited us to be part of *Resounding Images*, a consecutive series of photographic exhibitions from local, national and international photographers, held at seven venues in Plymouth. Hot on the heels of the group's first exhibition, a Crediton-based creative writing group invited us to collaborate and illustrate a collective book entitled *Leaving Traces*.

Under the stewardship of Gabi Krukenberg-Taylor ARPS, we embarked on our next project: a book and exhibition examining the question of change in

our region. Nine photographers' individual projects culminated in *Transient Witness*.

This year we were given the honour of sharing the platform at the RPS Historical Group weekend conference, which was held at Plymouth University. We were invited to show our latest exhibition entitled *Out of the Ordinary*. Jenny Leathes ARPS and I were invited to speak as well. Jenny's talk was based on her major project concerning urban regeneration in Cornwall, which featured in the Contemporary Group Journal, Number 44, Summer 2011. I was invited to speak on the group's activities in the context of amateur contemporary photography in the South West.

Since our formation, four group members have been awarded RPS distinctions, but more importantly we have been able to meet on a regular basis. As the current group organiser I am pleased to be able to share the diverse work of some of our members with you.

*Martin Howse ARPS
Jenny Leathes ARPS
Michael Woodhead ARPS
Graham Hodgson FRPS
Mick Medley LRPS
Muriel Somerfield ARPS
Vivien Kennedy-Howse LRPS
Nancye Gault ARPS
Gabi Krukenberg-Taylor ARPS
Lesley Treloar ARPS
Ken Holland ARPS
John Evans-Jones ARPS*

Lukesland Gardens, Ivybridge

by Martin Howse ARPS

Recently we had a field trip to these gardens. The day was overcast and misty at times. The autumn colours were well-saturated, but I had decided to work in mono, with medium format film, to challenge myself to get images that would say something about the character and peaceful nature of these gardens. By the time we had to leave, I had only covered about half the area and I look forward to returning sometime in the future.





The Old Concrete Building

by Jenny Leathes ARPS

In Camborne, Cornwall the last working tin mine, South Crofty closed in 1998. The main mine buildings are fenced off. The surrounding land is partly derelict, footpaths and cycle routes have been developed. In some places nature has taken over, trees and plants have grown.

Whilst exploring this area I came across this concrete building hidden away and well off the nearby footpath.

The building was probably used as a wash area for the miners. In recent years it has provided a hideaway or a shelter. The clues left are old mattresses, empty cider bottles, food rubbish, the odd plastic chair, a few bits of clothing and a sleeping bag.

What stuck in my mind was the bag of white powder and the large cable wires. I decided the powder was probably not sinister but felt these items had to be checked out. The local police were informed; they had no idea this building existed. I was told that I had provided them with 'useful intelligence'. The cables had been stolen for copper; the graffiti had revealed someone they were looking for. As for the powder, well that was just milk!



Crop

by Michael Woodhead ARPS

These images are part of a project on commercial forestry, with influences as diverse as Robert Adams's *Turning Back*, Paul Nash and Caspar David Friedrich.

A detailed look at the stumps and fragments resulting from the harvesting reveals unexpected sculptural qualities, expressing in close view the nature of the forestry process.



Miscellaneous Observations

by Graham Hodgson FRPS

I am reminded of the famous quote attributed to George Mallory when asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest: “Because it’s there.”

Some of my photographs beg a similar question: “Why have you taken this photograph?” To which the reply might be, “Why not?”

The problem arises when “Why not?” turns into “So what?” Just because it seemed like a good idea at the time doesn’t justify an image’s continued existence. There must be something about an image that continues to provoke a response if only in the mind of the photographer.

Although it is the general ethos of the Contemporary Group to work with groups of images which relate to a particular theme, perhaps on this occasion you will allow a miscellaneous selection whose only link may be in the eye of the photographer.



Expanding My Interest

by Mick Medley LRPS

I have fallen into the Royal Photographic Society Visual Art special interest Group for some time, and have enjoyed making, and will continue to make images which fall under this umbrella.

Throughout this time I have enjoyed an interest in the British landscape, enjoying walking in its varied terrain. Different moods are conveyed through the seasons, and capturing the beauty of this in the form of coloured images has been a passion.

In recent times I have found a desire to expand my interest, and moving toward the Contemporary Group is a natural progression to pursue my desire to expand my horizons. I have been drawn to the signs of man's presence in the landscape, often offering a cautionary warning to the unwary traveller. Sometimes these warning signs are not needed, because they state the obvious; at other times their meaning has been altered or changed over time. For whatever reason, these sometimes redundant signs have taken on a forlorn aspect, and far from being a warning about the landscape they occupy, have in fact become part of the scene.



Helston Community Centre

by Muriel Somerfield ARPS



Helston Community Centre was given to the people of Helston in 1857 by John Passmore Edwards, a Cornish-born philanthropist. It was originally donated as a Science & Art School but was added to in 1905 to accommodate a secondary school. Eventually the whole building became a community centre and a prime venue for adult education classes, a children's preschool, a ballet school, several clubs and associations, and the store and props for local opera and drama groups.

Although it was nominally owned by Helston Town Council, the centre was run by volunteers and the participants, and rent was paid to the Council. In 2009 the Council gave everyone notice to quit, emphasising that they intended to put the property on the market, the proceeds used to build a purpose-built community centre. This was fiercely contested by the occupants and a bitter dialogue ensued. The building was sold at a second auction for a sixth of its original asking price.

The Centenary of John Passmore Edwards was celebrated all over the country in 2011 from the Whitechapel Gallery in London to Truro Library. Helston did not take part. I have photographed the activities of the centre over the last decade and will continue to document its future.



South Crofty

by Vivien Howse LRPS

These photographs were taken during a Royal Photographic Society Southwest Region field trip around the area of the now closed, last working tin mine (South Crofty) at Tuckingmill, Redruth, Cornwall. The site has a mining heritage that dates back pre-1800s, and the closure has had a great impact on the local community. The Red River, which once owed its name to the minerals from the mines that discoloured it from its source, now runs clear through a recreational area built upon reclaimed land.





Mind The Gap

by Nancye Gault ARPS

Mind the gap ... between my thoughts and your thoughts; between what I see and what you see.

In interpreting the theme *Out of the Ordinary*, I have taken inspiration from the ideas of Raymond Tallis in his book *Michelangelo's Finger*, in which he explores the significance of pointing. He describes pointing as shared visual attention, a virtual reaching from the mind, which connects us to the world 'out there' and thence to each other, helping to bridge the gap between perception and reality.



Pointing at boats



Artistic license



Before language



Light switch

Memories

by Gabriele Krukenberg-Tayler ARPS

Perhaps it is a sign of age that people get interested in the past and their childhood. It definitely applies to me for the last years.

I went back to the city of Dortmund in Germany last year where I grew up, after 35 years. I visited the street where I lived for nearly 20 years and traced back my old playgrounds. Dortmund was more or less destroyed after the war, but soon industry started booming again. Between ruins and industrial sites were our playgrounds.

It was a time when children were left outside all day, and parents didn't interfere much in their doings.

Lots of these places have changed of course, but I found still unchanged areas, like the bridge dividing the city between the 'good and the bad' side. We were not allowed to the other side, but of course we did it. The Kiosk where we children bought sweets with the little money we had was still there, although more colourful. The industrial site where we played cowboys and indians or hide and seek was recognisable.

This visit was very exciting and moving for me.

The places I photographed are very ordinary to most people, but very special to me.





Melting Cultures

by Lesley Treloar ARPS

Photography is how I make sense of the world about me. I travel, I look, I record and document; it is both a necessity and a need. Empathy with my subject is paramount or it doesn't work - my rule.

Tribal cultures are undergoing a very rapid change within societies of India; the economic boom is increasingly pressurising the younger generation to forgo their traditional ways. During many months spent over the past few years in Gujarat, I have managed to integrate into some of

the local tribal communities. They have enabled me to document and record many aspects of their present but fast disappearing way of life.

The Rabari are semi-nomadic herders who live in communities. This is a tribal society scattered throughout Gujarat and Rajasthan, which is beginning to exchange desert tented homes for concrete housing. Some home necessities resist change - the family goat.





Battle Scars and War Wounds

by Ken Holland ARPS

At the close of World War II, Polish migrants settled in an old American Military Hospital at Ilford Park, Newton Abbot. They had suffered terribly at the hands of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.

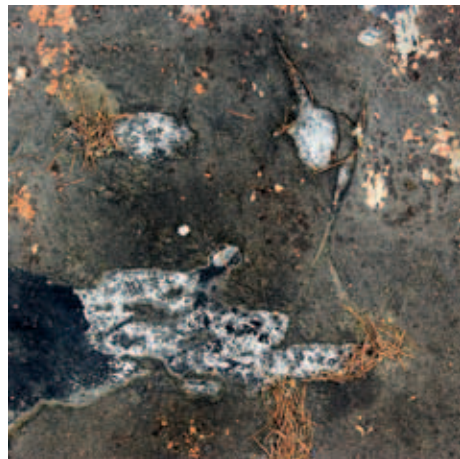
In 1993, they moved to new accommodation. The old buildings became derelict and were demolished: only the concrete bases of the buildings remained.

While walking across the floors, I began to understand the tragic story of these brave, but often emotionally-scarred, people. I saw faces, heads, eyes and bones. I shared their tears, heard their footsteps, and imagined the bloodshed. I empathised with broken families, recoiled from monsters and gazed through barbed wire. I felt bullet wounds and pock marks; I shivered with cold and peered into black holes.

However their spirit, courage, suffering and memories still live on: the foundations of the buildings providing images of the very memories which might so easily have been erased. The wounds and scars caused by the mechanical diggers echo the wounds and scars caused by the terrors of war, of the Nazi concentration camps and of the Soviet labour camps.

The story does not make easy reading.

These photographs are my own personal struggle to understand it.



Contemporary Photography meets Contemporary Art

by John Evans-Jones ARPS

Few galleries permit photography but the Saatchi is one where I can observe the visible interactions between the contemporary artwork and its viewers. To me, such interactions take the form of characteristics of photography such as colour, tone, composition and narrative.

These photographs were produced by a creative act between the photographer, the artwork and the spectator and they raise questions in my mind. Can contemporary art and contemporary photography meet other than in an art gallery? Does the word 'contemporary' have the same meaning in the two art forms?

All images © John Evans-Jones



Colour match - positive



Composition - tall tree, low hillside



Colour match - negative



Tonal match



Narrative - reading printout by sculpted printing press



Narrative - is it art? Shall we do lunch?

Hidden Voices

Art and the Contemporary Narrative Drive

by Mike Shanahan

A BBC *Culture Show* expert recently said, “Nowadays anything can be regarded as Art”. This throwaway line caused me to wonder how that observation might apply to some current issues concerning contemporary photography.

If an individual asserts that his or her photograph is a piece of ‘art’; then any actively engaged viewer must, presumably, examine work from that perspective. How then should we consider

aesthetic to which humans cannot help responding, without knowing exactly what has generated that reaction. Examples include feelings of love and hate; transcendent emotions stirred by music; and the movement of the spirit experienced when presented with monumental natural beauty. In the latter case, the intentional creation of an image designed to stir such feelings is generally accepted as a work of art. But, there remains a question as



In memory of Icarus © Mike Shanahan

contemporary photographs which are claimed to be works of art?

Sometimes, it is possible to resolve this question by applying the test of aesthetic appeal with reference to its original Greek sense of “sensation”

Immanuel Kant suggested sensations and feelings are stimulated by the hidden voice of the

to whether a manipulation of the senses, by for example, tear jerker films or the incessant use of the golden mean should now be considered to be a work of art at all.

Over the years the framework of art has been extended beyond generally accepted aesthetic formulations to encompass artefacts energised by

means of particular reference to specific thoughts, whether political, conceptual, playful, crass or startlingly inventive. The interweaving of such relationships into a narrative drive has been said to demonstrate the creative nature of the artist; and it is the degree to which such a narrative is developed that manifests the quality of the so-called artwork. Inevitably, it is often the case that such work exceeds the immediate understanding of those who have not applied themselves to the appreciation of that which is exhibited. However, should they wish to be reassured, then those who feel excluded may have their worries allayed if the more 'difficult' art is presented in a manner that includes a tug upon an individual's aesthetic sensibilities (for example, work by Anish Kapoor in the Tate Modern), or if the work is awarded monetary value by acknowledged experts (for example, Cy Twombly's scribbling), or has been the subject of professional critical endorsement. But the question remains as to whether much recent contemporary photography should be thought of as art.

Apparently, some contemporary photographers claim that their images should be considered from something entirely other than an aesthetic perspective, while intentionally leaving their viewers to decide what point of view is or could be intended. This creates an awkward conundrum if there is an absence of any discernible narrative drive of distinctive form and developed communication; for example, by a series of images enveloped within a socio-political context to engage the viewer.

Furthermore, there seems to be a developing dominant atavistic trend adopted by those with no apparent wish to engage with viewers at any level other than the quasi-aesthetic. Images are

produced and placed within a frame to easily be called 'well composed'. The technique employed meets the usual camera club criteria for a fine print. And the images are neither challenging, difficult nor necessary to understand. They are simply pleasing, tasteful and without any particular narrative drive or specific point being made. They remain within a generally accepted comfort zone. As a result any new or 'difficult' work has difficulty finding an audience. And so some contemporary photography is failing to develop any particular case for consideration as work of artistic merit. Indeed, there is a possibility that some neo-contemporary work is actually retreating towards the non-critical sanctuary of pictorialism.

Despite the above, I have no argument against the aesthetic in the context of enjoyment generated by various stimuli. However, the hidden voice that expresses itself via the aesthetic warrants a greater investigation within the context of contemporary society and contemporary photography. The aesthetic should not simply be used as a safety blanket within which one can wrap oneself as a protection against the fear of what may result from a deeper, intellectually-channelled investigation of the sensations delivered by challenging images.

There is, therefore, a possibility that although many of us are producing work that we claim to be personal and contemporary, we might not be applying ourselves to such an extent that we have the right to assert that our photographs should be deemed as art. Perhaps, indeed, many of us do not really want our version of contemporary photography to be regarded as, or considered from such a highly regarded perspective.

Or do we?

Photography and Photographs

Expanding boundaries

by Brian Steptoe FRPS

A working life in the computer industry instils messages about change – change is to be expected and to be welcomed. Change has been happening in photography at an increasing rate since it moved into the digital age. The spectrum ranges from manipulated and created digital artworks, to fine art prints and right through to video and moving film. Forms of presentation include still or moving imagery with text, sound, speech and music. Photobooks have expanded in style way beyond their role of just enabling exhibited works to be made permanent and available to wider audiences. Photographs have become just a subset of photography.

As a consequence, the photograph now needs to be seen in the context of its role within the spectrum; a spectrum where feelings, emotions and viewer responses are as important, frequently more important, than composition, lighting and technical quality. Even where the photographic print itself is the prime object, exposure to a number of exhibitions (outside the club and salon circuit) shows that the emphasis is about establishing context and atmosphere – untidiness, people half cut off, bright lit areas and other intrusions around edges etc. are the norms. There is rarely any emphasis on the ‘wow’ factor in photographic art, other than in wildlife or landscape work. Viewers and critics soon realise the need to unlearn all those things taught about rules of composition. Criticism is about seeing, interpreting, theorising

and then assessing whether the work is good, mediocre or poor⁽¹⁾. Critics need the attitude that change is to be welcomed – if work is still considered against criteria as they were in the past, then it is out of step with the modern world. Personally, I am well aware that although I think I have made progress in understanding and appreciation of the photobook form with its design, sequencing and text handling⁽²⁾, I am way behind in knowledge of filmic presentation – what is it that distinguishes good video editing, for example? And even the photobook form needs reconsideration when presented in interactive e-book form on tablet computer.

A method of assessment that is based on what the photography has to impart, what it means or how well it tells its story is universally applicable across the wide spectrum outlined. It is able to take into account all the stimuli, visual, spatial, aural and sequential that photography has to offer. Assessment based purely on technical content is biased and limited, being concerned with the ‘how’ rather than the ‘why’ of the work and being largely restricted to the photograph rather than the photography.

Stephen Gill’s⁽³⁾ *Outside In* photos were taken on a converted Rolleiflex, with items dropped onto the film before exposure. *Coming up for Air* photos are in Stephen Gill’s established style of part blurred effects from use of low quality cameras.



© Brian Steptoe, sequence of stills and sound track from video *Carters at Holyport*. October 2011



© Stephen Gill, from *Outside In*, exhibited at Brighton Bienalle, 2010

"I've taught myself to really step back and have that equal treatment of things," he says. 'I know that while photography is often seen as the amplification of something, it is also good at doing the opposite, quietening things and not enhancing them, and then perhaps you want to look at the picture, or study it, more.' ... Stephen Gill

1. Barrett, Terry. *Criticizing Photographs, An Introduction to Understanding Images*. New York, McGraw Hill, 2006.
2. Parr, Martin and Badger, Gerry. *The Photobook: A History, Vols I and II*, London, Phaidon Press, 2004 (Vol I), 2006 (Vol II)
3. Gill, Stephen, www.nobodybooks.com, accessed 25 Nov 2011



© Stephen Gill, from *Coming up for Air* (ref 3)

Chesham People

by Anne Crabbe FRPS

In June 1822, William Cobbett, the radical journalist and politician, came to Chesham in Buckinghamshire on his fact-finding *Rural Rides* round England. He described, "A nice little town lying in a deep and narrow valley, with a stream of water running through it ."And he adds," I never saw the country children better clad, or look cleaner and fatter than they look here."

The deep and narrow valley had supported mills since Roman times and the industrial boom of the late-nineteenth century meant that townsfolk had plenty of work in the brush and boot factories and the brewery. Now the Chess is frequently absent, partly because of its nature as a chalk stream, but also because of abstraction further down the valley. The last boot manufacturer has its goods made in India and there is one brush factory. The brewery closed in 1960.

Some twenty-five years ago I started my collection of photographs of contemporary Chesham People, some of them the direct descendants of those early-nineteenth century, well-clad children. It covers not 'the great and the good', although some may fall into that category, but men, women and children who have interested me and been content to participate in the project.

At local showings of the photographs and at an exhibition in 1993 at the County Museum in Aylesbury, I was thrilled at the interest shown by Chesham people but soon realised that this was mainly focussed on working out the intricate family relationships on display. A selection of twenty photographs was shown at the *Rencontres d'Arles Voies Off* Festival in 2006.

I am still adding to the collection. I wish I had started earlier.



Etta Meaden, Schoolteacher



Freda Bucknell, Watercress grower



James Green, Sweep

GROUP EVENTS

- February 18 Short Group AGM, followed by Gus Wylie talk and Gus looking at attendees work. 2.00pm in the Bedford Suite, Grafton Hotel, 130 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 5AY.
Contact Bob Gates bob@robertgates.eu
- March 18 Contemporary South West Group. 10.30am Dartington, South Devon, Contact rod@rodfray.eclipse.co.uk for directions to venue.
- March 19 Contemporary North West Group. Evening meeting, Days Inn, Charnock Richard services M6, between J27 and 28. Contact Ian Maxwell mail@ihmaxwell.com tel 01524 770278.
- April 15 A day of contemporary photography, led by Distinctions Panel chair Douglas May FRPS National Media Museum, Bradford 10.30am - 4.30pm. Joint meeting with RPS Yorkshire Region.
Contact Bob Gates bob@robertgates.eu
- April 25 Distinctions Assessments. Contemporary ARPS and FRPS. Fenton House, Bath. Applicants and observers may attend the Associateship Assessments. Contact Andy Moore at Fenton House tel 01225 325760.

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From: *American Power: Las Vegas, Nevada 2007*. ©Mitch Epstein. Courtesy of the Artur Walther Foundation, Ulm.

Mitch Epstein: American Power was shown at the Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, 5 November - 23 December 2011.