

Contemporary North Report

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Wendy North LRPS (design and layout)



Twenty-one photographers participated in the RPS Contemporary North meeting, convened by Patricia. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual meeting was hosted by Jim Souper ARPS via Zoom. Two new members, Richard Hall LRPS and Alexandra Prescott ARPS, were welcomed to the group. Eleven members presented work during the three-and-a-half-hour meeting, the number of presenters being limited by the time available.



Harry Silcock is an experienced street and travel photographer, normally capturing street scenes around the world.

Recent travel restrictions have limited Harry to his home city of York. Appropriately he showed an image of a beak doctor at the York market. Similar personal protective equipment (PPE) was worn by doctors in the London plague of 1665, which killed 100,000 (20% of the population.) The beak mask was a type of air filter which contained aromatic dried flowers, herbs, spices, camphor, or a vinegar sponge to counter bad smells (miasma), then thought to be the cause of the disease.

Sally Sallett ARPS showed two images of her feelings during lockdown, which are part of the RPS Contemporary blog series on COVID-19 and lockdown.



Sally saw this blog which triggered her to submit her own.

<https://rps.org/news/groups/contemporary/2020/july/we-are-all-in-it-together/>

A separate article on these blogs is in this issue of *Concept*. One of Sally's images shows the startled and frightened face of her daughter who works in a hospital operating theatre wearing modern PPE. The second image is called *Hanging-On* – the title itself is illuminating. It shows a washing line with items which have been important to her during lockdown. Sally's lockdown blog can be seen at:



<https://rps.org/news/groups/contemporary/2020/july/hanging-on/>

One of the consequences of National Lockdown, discussed by the group, was the proscription of travel and its impact on photography. **Adrian James** is fortunate in living within walking distance of beautiful countryside including the Woodhead Pass (altitude 1500 feet), the second highest trans-Pennine route in the Peak District through wind-swept wild moorland. Adrian's images were taken just below the top of the



pass on a rare still day, when the pass was covered in low cloud and may be interpreted as a metaphor for many of our lockdown feelings – quietude, desolation, isolation. In that respect they are similar to the work of Edward Hooper, Walker Evans and Ed Ruscha who depicted desolation and isolation using exterior images of American gasoline stations.

Thus, Adrian's exterior photographs evoke the same feelings of isolation as Wendy's interior photographs of empty chairs.

The topical themes of life and death were continued by the images of [Alexandra Prescott ARPS](#).

She has just completed a MA in Contemporary Photography (with distinction) from Falmouth University. She showed her photographic response to lockdown which contained memento mori, inspired by historic Vanitas paintings. She is also an activist for animal rights having worked for the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust which uses her images for teaching the public.

Alexandra's current images are reminiscent of the work of the French Algerian artist and activist Kader Attia whose work (sculptures, installations, collages, videos and

photographs include memento mori). The Museum of Emotion filled the Hayward Gallery last year. Attia created artworks that engage our capacity for thinking as well as feeling, and provoke what he calls a "real,

fundamental dialogue" about the world in which we live. Thus he examines ways in which the museum curating his "art itself may be transformed" into a forum for emotional response, capable of eliciting, exploring and even harnessing strongly held feelings of anger, sorrow, joy and grief. As contemporary photographers we could draw on Attia's techniques.



[Alexandra is also starting an online FRPS candidate mutual support group.](#)

Monty Trent has been a member of the Contemporary Group for many years, and has worked with Simon Hill FRPS, RPS President Elect in the Gamma Photo Forum. Despite this, this is the first time that he joined a Contemporary North meeting. He uses a small Ricoh 3G camera and showed images evoking powerful emotions of powerlessness during lockdown. His images were compared to those award-winning

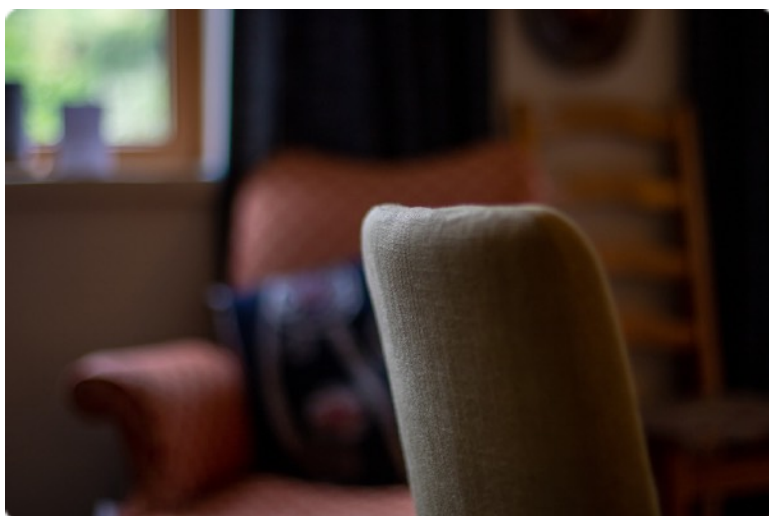


reflective images of John Blakemore in his collection of images *The Geometry of Light*. One of Blakemore's strategies was to sit with his eyes closed in the chosen location. After he opened his eyes, he found that this allowed him to "become attuned to the space and also to 'see' with greater intensity". Similar to the personal struggles during lockdown depicted by Monty in his musings (he has written a poem called "Life in Lockdown") and photographs, life during quarantine and the powerless struggle against the plague was examined in Albert Camus' 1947 classic existential book of the Algerian Maghreb epidemic of bubonic plague *La Peste* (*The Plague*), Camus' book explores how our lives and sorrows become instantly and unexpectedly meaningless in the face of a pandemic that spreads rapidly and unexpectedly, interrupting daily routines, reminding us that we can never be mentally or fully prepared for the exigency of pandemics. (It is interesting to note that a drama adaptation of *The Plague* is currently available on BBC iPlayer.)



After the meeting Monty said "I found Saturday's meeting inspirational and it has got me focussed on contemporary photography in a way that I haven't been since I moved here" and also said that he was going to take a new turn in his photographic journey.

Wendy North LRPS told us about her journey towards an Associateship, struggling to find a focus because she has diverse photographic interests and techniques.



Wendy has drawn influence from the recent online talk by Robert Friel FRPS who described his photography with a mobile telephone, using applications such as *slowshutterspeed*. The sentiments Wendy wishes to convey are memory and loss. In that respect she follows a route taken by Ioanna Sakellarakis whose work on Greek funeral rites, funded by the RPS 2018 postgraduate bursary, was recently featured in the RPS Journal.

Wendy endeavoured to rein in her diverse ideas by producing and then reviewing a *Blipfoto* photo journal – an online photo journal or electronic mood board. For this she took photographs every day during June and posted them on *Blipfoto*. She hopes that sorting her images into project sets may help her to find a focus for the direction towards an ARPS. A link to the photo journal is at: https://issuu.com/wendynorth/docs/june_2020_wn

The technique of generating a photo journal is not new – from an early age, Jacques Henri Lartigue devoted his life to collecting moments in time on his camera and arranged them into photo albums. Now there are 135 albums, a total of 14,423 pages, in which Lartigue arranged photos and wrote captions.

Some of Wendy's images show interiors which she said were partly influenced by

those quiet, domestic, everyday paintings of Gwen John, graduate of the Slade School of Fine Art.

Patricia remarked that in her opinion, Wendy's images chimed with what it feels like for her during lockdown, in as much as they capture feelings of isolation, evoking a time of memory and loss as well.

Although Andrew Hobbs didn't show any photos at this meeting, he concurred with the use of a photographic journal by saying "I am finding the habit of using photography to create a journal is a very stimulating one that encourages daily reflection. It has also reminded me that artists are encouraged to draw everyday and art students are often required to keep a journal. There is something about the practice of using a camera almost everyday that develops your eye and changes the way that I use a camera. Sometimes the images captured are no more than 'sketches' but have their own value and can lead to other things." He said that images could later be grouped together to form themes and developed further. 'sketches' but have their own value and can lead to other things." He said that images could later be grouped together to form themes and developed further.

Richard Hall LRPS. Firstly, he was congratulated on attaining his LRPS in the previous week. The digital panel was assessed remotely due to COVID-19 precautions. The images include performances in Lincoln Cathedral. Richard is undertaking a degree in photography at Lincoln College.



It is notable that his wife and son are all also undergraduates. They therefore form a community “bubble” of learning during lockdown (*After the meeting he joined the Contemporary Group.*)



Like Sally Sallett, Richard also produced a lockdown blog describing his project of photographing his fellow villagers which is discussed in a separate article in this issue of *Concept*. His blog may be seen at : <https://rps.org/news/groups/contemporary/2020/july/caythorpe-frieston/>

Richard generated a book of his lockdown doorstep family photographs and local business workers in 80 days, which to date has been purchased by 25 % of the villagers, and sent to the Martin Parr Foundation. The warm, homely images depict rural, middle England smiling through the adversity of lockdown. The project enhanced community spirit in the villages. Further discussion on the techniques used by Richard to print the book relatively inexpensively has devolved to separate meetings to discuss a Contemporary North book, proposed by Morris Gregory. There are 15 members of Contemporary North who are potential contributors to the book.

Robert Harris is undertaking a degree in Photography with the Open College of the Arts. He described some of the recent difficulties he has encountered. His work has focussed on a blended technique of heating printed images on overhead projection acetates and taking macrophotographs of the resulting process and then processing that image in Photoshop. He has equated the migration of heated ink with migration of the coronavirus. Unfortunately, relevant images were unavailable.

David Kershaw ARPS confided about how notwithstanding his art background, life membership of the RPS membership and Contemporary Group membership of ten years, he had felt depressed by lockdown and its ensuing isolation and therefore had no photographs to show. He is not alone; University College London and The Health Foundation (<https://www.covidsocialstudy.org/>) published that 69% UK adults report feeling worried about the effect COVID-19 is having on their life. The most common issues affecting mental wellbeing are worry about the future (63%), feeling stressed or anxious (56%) and feeling bored (49%).

Sometimes the images captured are no more than **Mary Crowther ARPS**, former Yorkshire Regional Organiser described her projects on documenting lockdown in the community focussing on how this affects young people.

Her images display negatives such as play equipment being taped off and positives such as appreciation and indulgences for key workers.



Finally Mary mentioned that she volunteers at the Overgate Hospice and communicates via Zoom with patients on a weekly basis with quizzes, teaching crafts etc., thereby countering patients' isolation.

She is raising funds for the Hospice by producing a book, postcards and a CD.

Peter Bartlett ARPS showed images he had taken during daily walks to adjacent villages of Upper Cumberworth and Denby Dale in West Yorkshire.

He endeavoured to document the ordinary, the banal and the sense of community to create a record of strange and difficult times when he tried to live in the moment and not wonder what would come next. These images are being compiled into a photobook to be titled *Strange Times*.



The next meeting will be Saturday, 19 September. 1.30 - 5 pm.