Millions of people pass through the Elephant and Castle and its maze of roundabouts without ever noticing the people who live there. It is a place to get through, a place on the way to somewhere else. Of course, it could be argued that there is a certain reality to all of this. After all, the Elephant has one of the most transitory populations in London. Many do not settle here for long. Even the people who live here are on the move. And a photographer who could set the time exposure on her camera for a century or so would register little that is permanent. This is a place with a continual history of dramatic change: from the bustling and fashionable 1930’s with its picture houses and mega-churches, through the devastation of the Nazi bombings, and on to the construction of large scale modernist estates like the Heygate. As this estate and others await demolition, and a new era of massive redevelopment around the Elephant begins, it seems that, from a historical perspective too, change is the only constant. The Elephant is continually and permanently liminal.

Paul Reas tells a completely different story. He reminds us that, however transitory, the human face of the Elephant cannot and must not be blurred into invisibility. This is no small matter. Take a very different but not unrelated example. Rowan Williams, in a moving reflection on why he finds photographs of the falling Twin Towers of 9/11 so morally problematic, suggests the following: “Perhaps it has something to do with how easily we do in fact concentrate on dramatic pictures to spare us from the personal reality. The terrorist, the suicide bomber, is someone who’s got to the point where they can only see from a distance: the sort of distance from which you can’t see a face, meet the eyes of someone, hear who they are, imagine who and what they love. All violence works with that sort of distance; it depends upon not seeing things.”

I am a newcomer to these parts. Months ago I was living in the City of London, deep in the engine room of global capitalism. Here decisions continue to be made that affect the entire world. At every moment, at the press of a button on a computer screen, billions of pounds, dollars and yen are traded and moved around the world. This creates another form of distance, for few of those who work in those great glass palaces can see the consequences of their actions on individual lives. Since the Occupy protests and my resignation from St Paul’s Cathedral, I have travelled less than a couple of miles. But from the human perspective, it feels like I have travelled into another world entirely and one deeply unfamiliar to many of those who work in the City. High up in those skyscrapers that dominate the landscape it
is easy enough to see the Elephant and Castle. But it is a view from a distance, a view that is not populated by faces and stories. From there, one is unable to see the human reality of work and pain and loss.

Paul Reas brings all this to the surface. His photographs of incense pots, for instance, bought from the open market in the Elephant, are fascinating indications of the sort of social pressures that the people of this area are subjected to. The point of these pots is that their contents are burned to provide help in particular situations: "break up", "court case", "money drawing", and "fast luck". The idea that such problems can be sorted out with the purchase of a can of incense from a Rastafarian bloke on the market is powerfully indicative of the hidden desperation of so many lives, lives that are too often hidden from view. And it is the feeling of anonymity, of not-mattering or being seen, that generates a widespread sense of worthlessness. Allowing all this to fester is what creates the conditions for periodic explosions of violence of the sort that we witnessed during last year’s riots.

Earlier this year, Paul Reas went back to Newport, where he learned his craft in documentary photography, to take some pictures of his old college that had recently been acquired to turn into luxury flats. After getting permission from the work’s foreman, he returned the next day only to be told that "the owners of the building, who are a group of bankers, don’t allow photography on their premises." He reflects: "How ironic that is. And how familiar to most of us as the world seems to be increasingly closing down to photography." But the story doesn’t end there, for when the owners of the building had left, the work staff let him in anyway. Reflecting on all of this, Reas pays tribute the generosity of ordinary people and their willingness to let photographers into their lives. He recalls what he learnt on the first day of college: "being a photographer is a privilege and the camera is a passport into other people’s lives" and that with this comes a huge responsibility. It is, he insists, only by responding to this responsibility with "dignity, respect, integrity, commitment, enthusiasm and knowledge" that the documentary photographer works out of the best traditions of his or her calling.

I have a friend who worked as a priest on an estate in Sheffield as it was being demolished around him. His favourite hymn was Abide with Me because of the line: "change and decay in all around I see. Oh thou who changest not, abide with me." As Paul Reas was completing this project of photographs, his own family home in Bradford was being compulsory purchased by the council to make way for redevelopment. It is his sensitivity to the human cost of ‘change and decay’ that makes this collection of images so poignant.

Giles Fraser
August 2012
PARC has received external funding from the AHRC and JISC and has led partnership funding on a range of projects including NAM (JISC) (Considering Vietnam conference, Imperial War Museum, 2012); New British Photography 1968-1981 (AHRC); ROAD: Arts artists and the Stop the M1 Link Road Campaign, 1984-1994 (AHRC). PARC’s core members play an important part in the Centre’s work. These include: Tom Hunter; Weeble Lovett; Sara Clardmann; Patrick Sutherland; Alistair O’Neill; David Moore, Pam Skelton and Paul Lowe. PARC has a growing number of research students, including Cerime Silva, Wasma Mansour and Sam Vaia, who are active in organizing seminars and masterclasses on behalf of the Centre.

Director: Professor Val Williams
Deputy Director: Brigitte Lardinois
Intern: Jess Starns
Visiting PhD Student: Wendy Short
Centre Administrator: Monica Takvam

Philippe Marquis and Patrick Sutherland and have also been organised by the Tate Britain. Three exhibitions were held at the Elephant and Castle, London and have been exhibited in numerous locations, from the now vanished subways of the south London. Work from the project was shown to the public in a number of publications entitled “From a Distance” and has been generously funded by Southwark Council, with additional support from Getty Images, LCC, University of Wales, Newport and C3 Imaging. The website www.theelephantvanishes.com will be launched next year.

All photographs © Paul Reas

The Elephant Vanishes is directed by Patrick Sutherland and has been generously funded by Southwark Council, with additional support from Getty Images, LCC, University of Wales, Newport and C3 Imaging. The website www.theelephantvanishes.com will be launched next year.