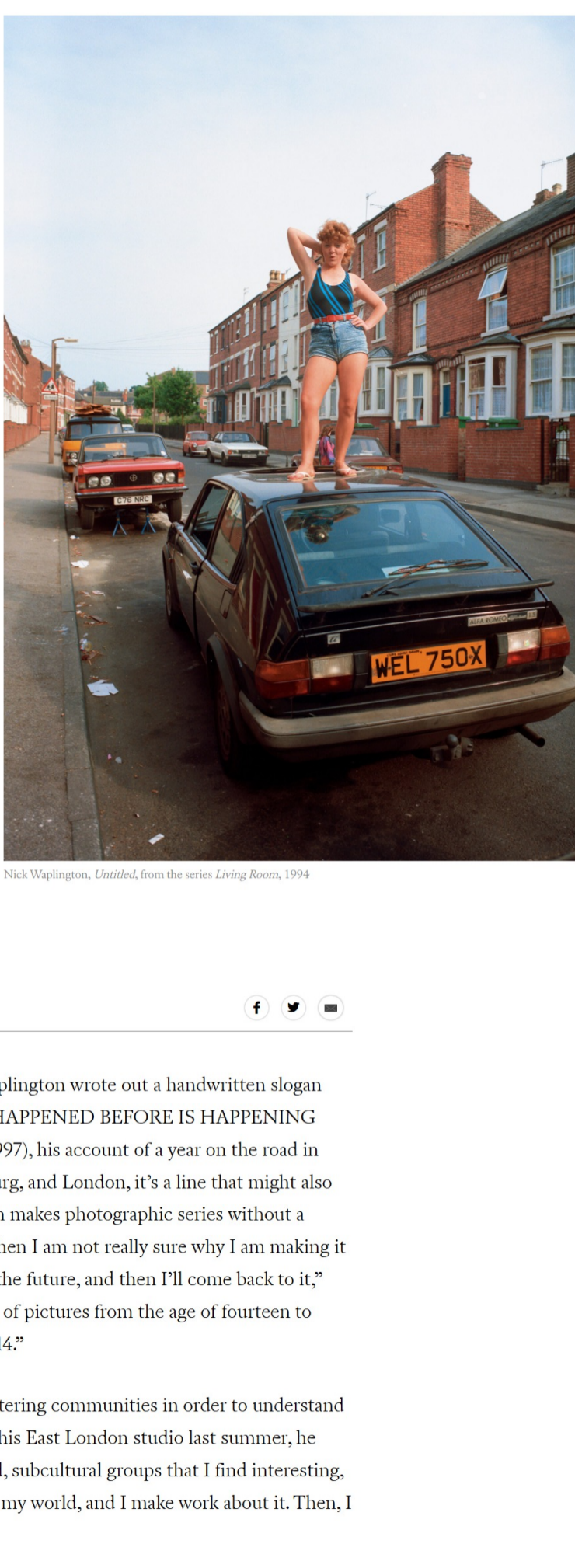


ESSAYS

Nick Waplington's Histories from Below

From Nottingham living rooms to New York dance floors and Los Angeles's surf scene, the British photographer has created records of subcultures that brim with life.



Nick Waplington, *Untitled*, from the series *Living Room*, 1994

Featured in

By Alistair O'Neill March 28, 2023



Aperture 250

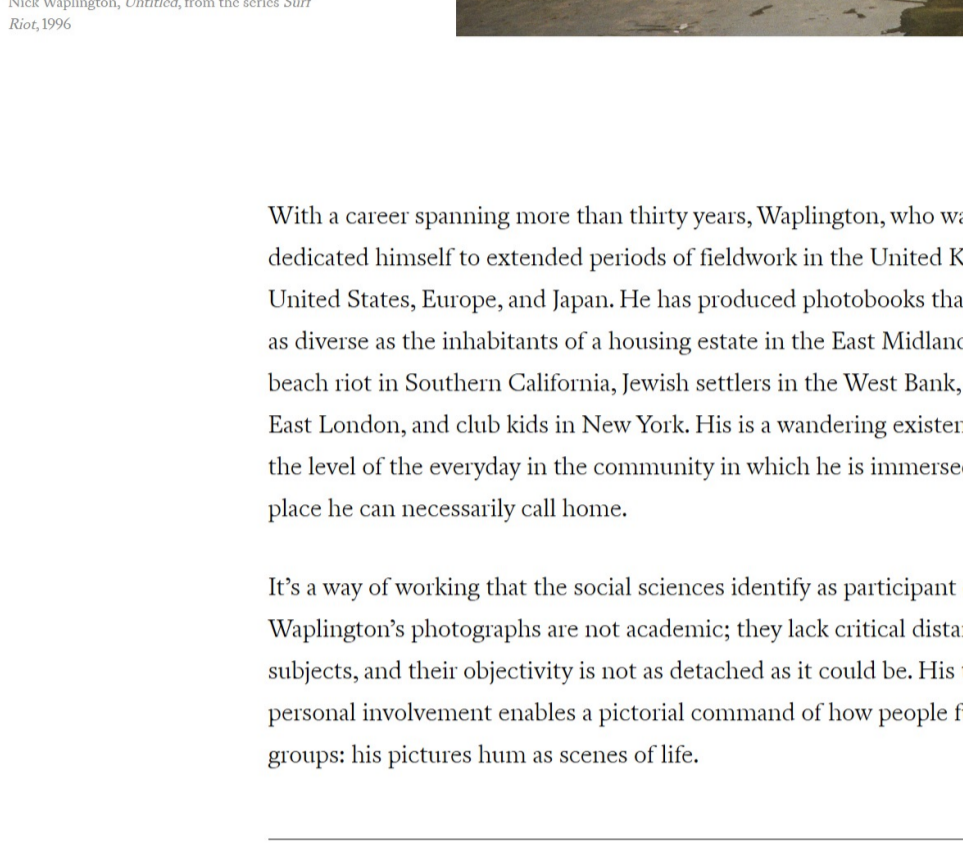
Tags

Nick Waplington

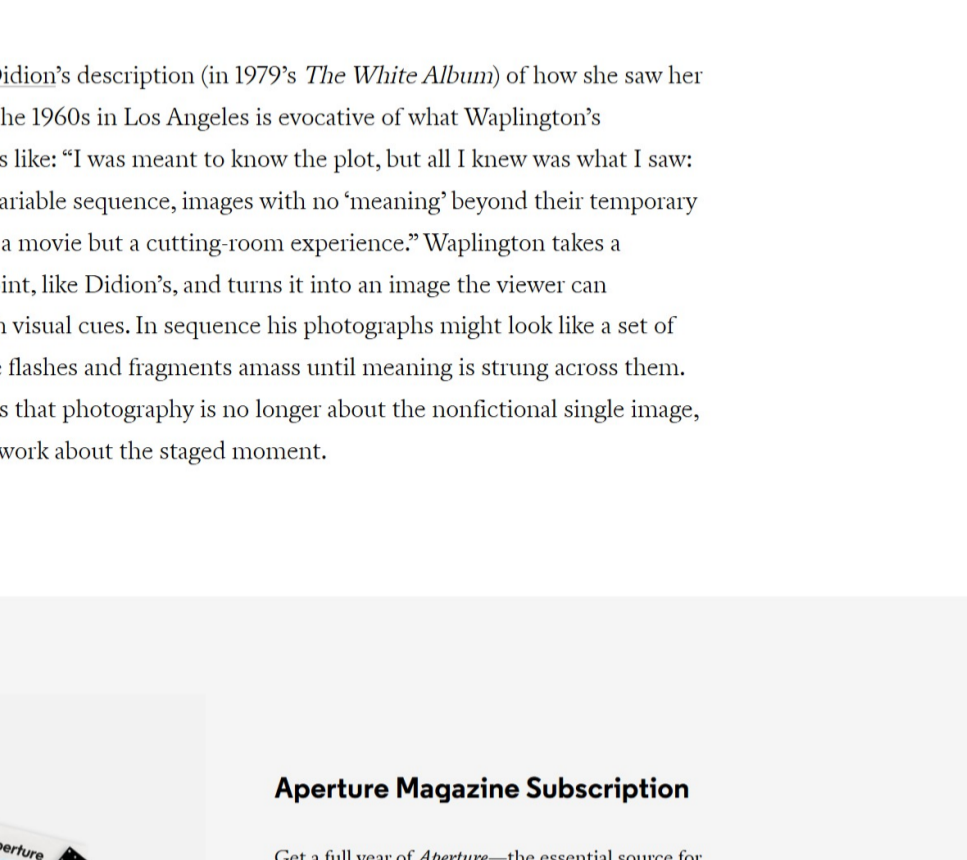
Aperture 250: We Make Pictures in Order to Live

In 1996, the British photographer Nick Waplington wrote out a handwritten slogan that states: "EVERYTHING THAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE IS HAPPENING NOW." Published in *Safety in Numbers* (1997), his account of a year on the road in New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Johannesburg, and London, it's a line that might also describe Waplington's methods, as he often makes photographic series without a sense of his final intention. "I keep work when I am not really sure why I am making it at the time. I build up an archive to use in the future, and then I'll come back to it," Waplington says. "For example, I took a lot of pictures from the age of fourteen to twenty that I only started publishing in 2014."

Waplington is committed to the idea of entering communities in order to understand them and, in turn, himself. When I visited his East London studio last summer, he told me, "I have an ability to seek out weird, subcultural groups that I find interesting, and I kind of submerge myself. It becomes my world, and I make work about it. Then, I present the work to the world."



Nick Waplington, *Untitled*, from the series *New York Club*, 1994



Nick Waplington, *Untitled*, from the series *Surf Zion*, 1996

With a career spanning more than thirty years, Waplington, who was born in 1965, has dedicated himself to extended periods of fieldwork in the United Kingdom, the United States, Europe, and Japan. He has produced photobooks that deal with subjects as diverse as the inhabitants of a housing estate in the East Midlands of Britain, a beach riot in Southern California, Jewish settlers in the West Bank, river swimmers in East London, and club kids in New York. His is a wandering existence, connected to the level of the everyday in the community in which he is immersed, but not to a place he can necessarily call home.

It's a way of working that the social sciences identify as participant observation. But Waplington's photographs are not academic; they lack critical distance from their subjects, and their objectivity is not as detached as it could be. His time-consuming, personal involvement enables a pictorial command of how people function in such groups: his pictures hum as scenes of life.

Waplington is committed to the idea of entering communities in order to understand them and, in turn, himself.

The writer Joan Didion's description (in 1979's *The White Album*) of how she saw her life at the end of the 1960s in Los Angeles is evocative of what Waplington's photography looks like: "I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience." Waplington takes a subjective viewpoint, like Didion's, and turns it into an image the viewer can recognize through visual cues. In sequence his photographs might look like a set of snapshots, yet the flashes and fragments amass until meaning is strung across them. His work confirms that photography is no longer about the nonfictional single image, but neither is his work about the staged moment.

Aperture Magazine Subscription

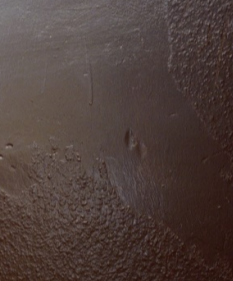
Get a full year of *Aperture*—the essential source for photography since 1952. Subscribe today and save 25% off the cover price.

Shop Now



Waplington currently lives in New York and London. The pandemic's ban on travel and social interaction arrested his embedded style of photography, but he made use of the time it granted him by taking stock of his archive in preparation for a survey publication, *Comprehensive* (to be published this fall). "I've had a trajectory where I make work all the time, and I don't exhibit very much," he says. "All I've done for the last thirty-five to forty years is make work, and then make books, and, very occasionally, do a show. This means that the amount of images is kind of crazy. Rather than use a bit of everything, what I am trying to do in *Comprehensive* is illustrate between five and eight projects in a bit more depth. When you open the book, you'll see a lot of pictures that you've never seen before."

Related Stories



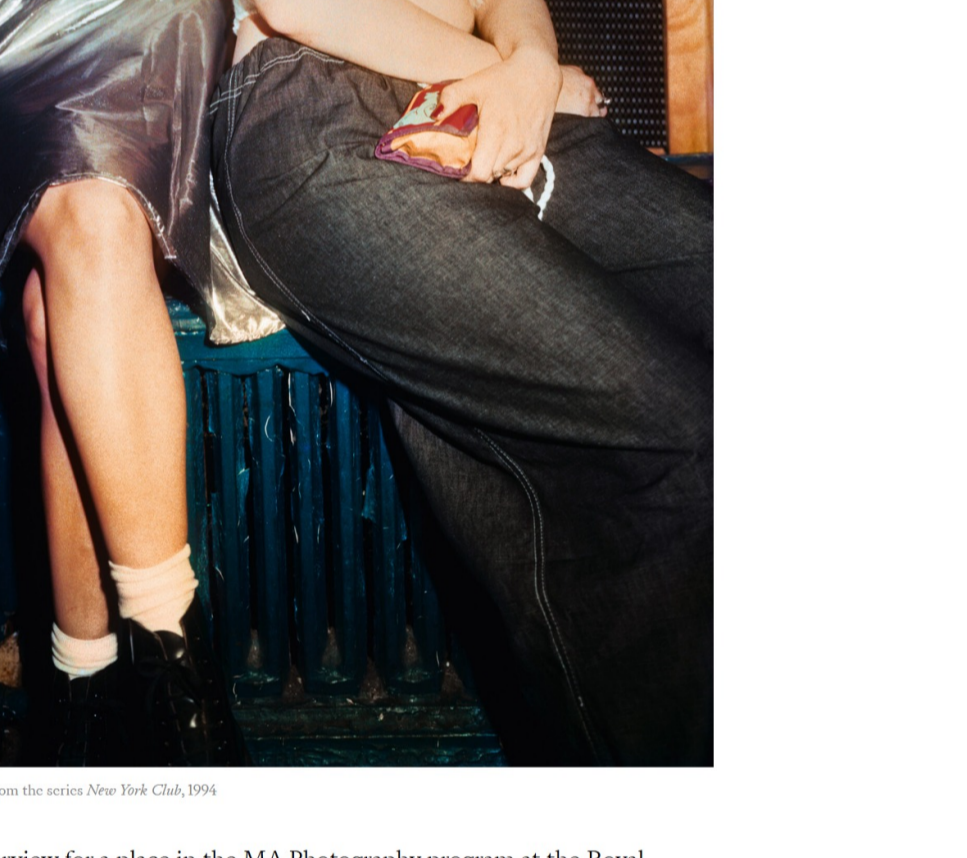
The Afterimage of Joan Didion

This approach provides a refreshing opportunity to reconsider previously published series, destabilizing the narrative threaded through the sequencing of images in previous photobooks. What Waplington proposes with this method is the showing of a new but, by reshuffling and adding to the deck. For example, *Living Room* (Aperture, 1991), his first publication, has fifty-nine plates, but they are drawn from five years' worth of photographs. So in *Comprehensive*, the highly edited, linear narrative of the original photobook will be exchanged for a more circuitous route, offering fresh intersections and insights.

This strategy also makes the work engage with the concerns of the here and now. In discussing with Waplington which portfolios will appear in *Comprehensive*, it becomes apparent that the historical trajectory behind the production of the bodies of images weaves them together in ways that aren't pictorially evident. The book not only reveals Waplington as a prolific image maker, focused on more than one project at any one time, but shows how he networked across distinct creative cultures in Nottingham, London, and New York from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s.



Nick Waplington, *Untitled*, from the series *Living Room*, 1994



Nick Waplington, *Untitled*, from the series *Living Room*, 1994

Living Room deals with life in the Broxtowe housing estate in Aspley, Nottingham, a predominantly working-class development in which Waplington's grandfather lived from the time it was built in the 1930s. Waplington's upbringing, in Surrey, was markedly different; his father had gone to university and was a nuclear scientist. Waplington started to take photographs, at age fourteen, of anti-apartheid marches and his friends skateboarding or partying; by the age of eighteen, he had become drawn to documenting life around his grandfather's house, and he would eventually apply for a degree in photography at Trent Polytechnic, enabling him to live and make work in Nottingham. It was during this formative time that Waplington honed his signature style, described in jest by the photographer himself as "that kind of Nick Waplington, 6-by-9 Fuji with the big flash gun of bounced flash, where things are happening in the corner, and the middle's kind of empty, or things are cut off."

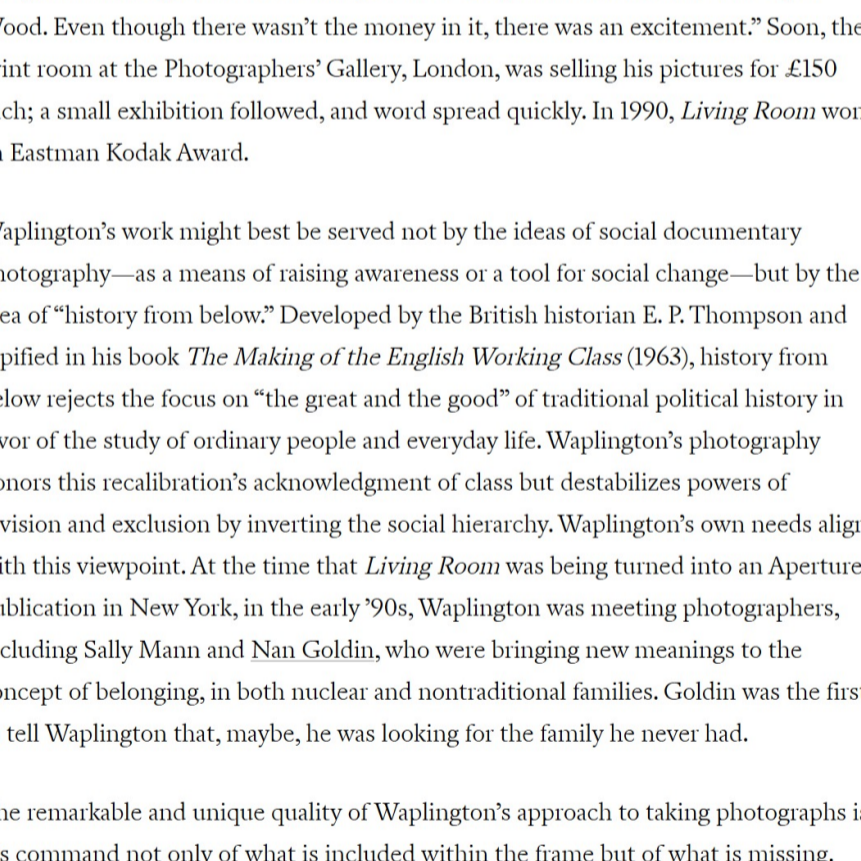
Living Room is ostensibly about domestic life, but, as the pictures weave and sway from one house into another in fully saturated color, there is no clear-cut sense of where one family ends and the other begins. Babies gurgle, fists fly, ice creams are bought, and humanity rolls on. "I really enjoyed being around those families, and the kind of looseness and fun and camaraderie that was going on in the estate. The ridiculous things that we would get up to were very different from the extremely rigid world of the Surrey stockbroker belt that I had grown up in, where my father, having come from that, was very keen that it was forgotten."



Nick Waplington, *Untitled*, from the series *New York Club*, 1994

In 1988, at an interview for a place in the MA Photography program at the Royal College of Art, Waplington learned that Richard Avedon would be visiting the following spring to accept an honorary doctorate—and would give a master class. Waplington asked if he could attend, even though he had not yet had enrolled in the course; afterward Avedon raved about his photographs. When Waplington was in Connecticut in the summer of 1989, a few months before starting his MA, a note from Avedon arrived back home for him, saying, "I really was impressed, moved by the work you brought to my class." Avedon asked about acquiring a set of prints. Soon after, Waplington was hanging out in Avedon's New York studio.

Having recognized Waplington's talents, Avedon primed him to follow in his footsteps and become a commercial photographer. He introduced Waplington to the fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi, for whom he took photographs backstage and pictures of fittings from the late '80s to 1994, at the rate of \$250 per day. At night Waplington was out in clubs, taking photographs at the Sound Factory, LimeLight, Save the Robots, and various after-hours parties. "Mizrahi paid for the film and processing for those pictures, not that he knew it at the time," Waplington says. "It was very nice of him that he never questioned it."



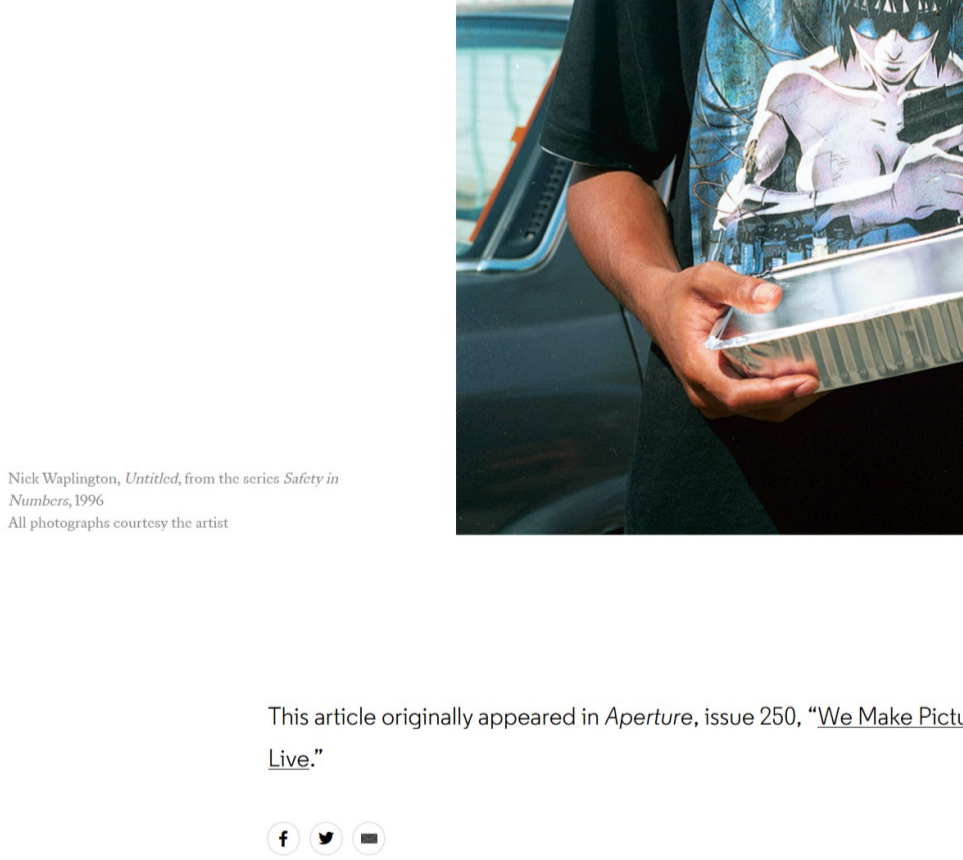
Nick Waplington, *Untitled*, from the series *New York Club*, 1994

It's hard to see a relationship between the two bodies of images, or to correlate how the days might have connected to the nights: one looks like the last days of Versailles (before grunge hits), the other, the start of *Felice Satyricon* (but with everyone in Lycra). Waplington says he always wanted to make art, and the experience only underscored that he had no interest in commercial photography. "What I wanted was to just make projects the way I wanted to do them," he says. "I came back to London and got a studio space on Brick Lane, with the Chapman Brothers and Sam Taylor-Wood. Even though there wasn't the money in it, there was an excitement." Soon, the print room at the Photographers' Gallery, London, was selling his pictures for £500 each; a small exhibition followed, and word spread quickly. In 1990, *Living Room* won an Eastman Kodak Award.

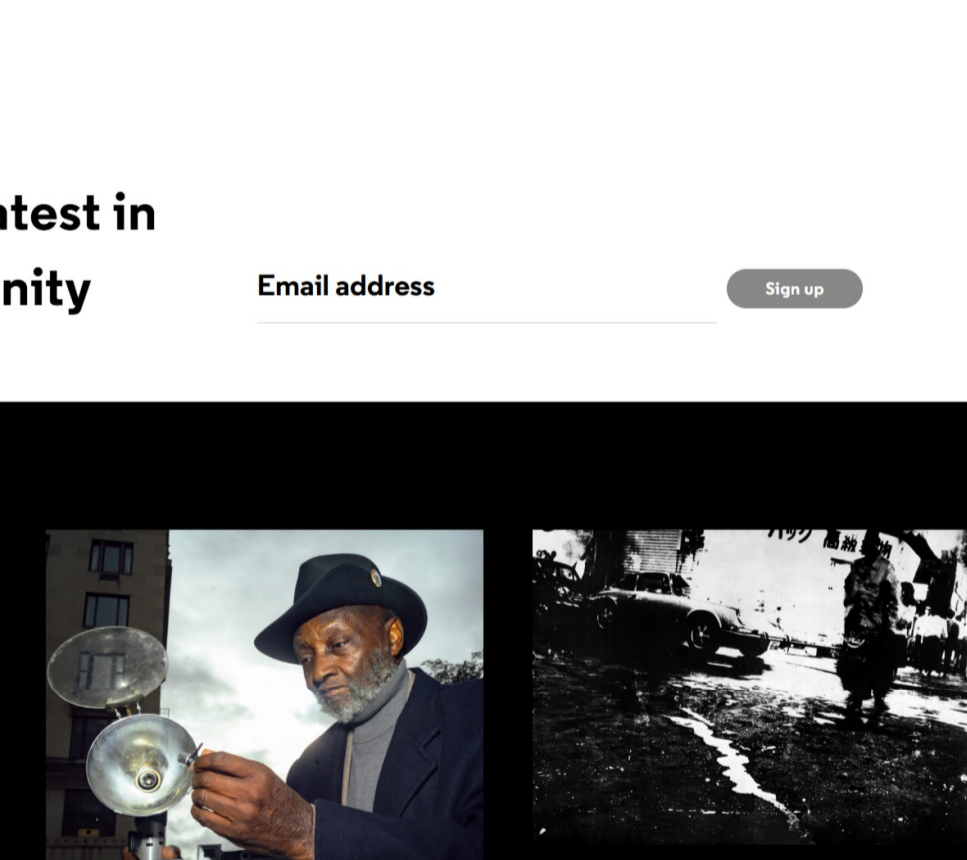
Waplington's work might best be served not by the ideas of social documentary photography—as a means of raising awareness or a tool for social change—but by the idea of "history from below." Developed by the British historian E. P. Thompson and typified in his book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), history from below rejects the focus on "the great and the good" of traditional political history in favor of the study of ordinary people and everyday life. Waplington's photography honors this recalibration's acknowledgment of class but destabilizes powers of division and exclusion by inverting the social hierarchy. Waplington's own needs align with this viewpoint. At the time that *Living Room* was being turned into an Aperture publication in New York, in the early '90s, Waplington was meeting photographers, including Sally Mann and Nan Goldin, who were bringing new meanings to the concept of belonging, in both nuclear and nonnuclear families. Goldin was the first to tell Waplington that, maybe, he was looking for the family he never had.

The remarkable and unique quality of Waplington's approach to taking photographs is his command not only of what is included within the frame but of what is missing. Ursula K. Le Guin calls what is left in and out in storytelling "crowding" and "leaving": "By crowding I mean also keeping the story full, always full of what's happening in it; keeping it moving, not slacking and wandering into irrelevances; keeping it interconnected with itself, rich with echoes forward and backward.... But leaving is just as important. What you leave over is what you leave out. And what you leave out is infinitely more than what you leave in. There's got to be white space around the word, silence around the voice." Le Guin is addressing a writer employing words, but it is no great leap to observe how well these ideas apply to Waplington's craft, especially the sheer physicality of what he pushes and pulls with his eye.

"The excitement never ends," Waplington says. "There isn't a day when I don't wake up excited to be getting on with it again. As New Order sings, 'There is no end to this.' I love it."



Nick Waplington, *Untitled*, from the series *Safety in Numbers*, 1996



Nick Waplington, *Untitled*, from the series *Safety in Numbers*, 1996. All photographs courtesy the artist.

This article originally appeared in *Aperture*, issue 250, "We Make Pictures in Order to Live."

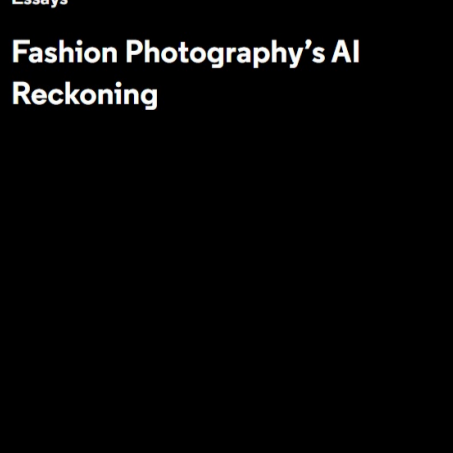
Tags: 1990s, Nick Waplington, Aperture 250: We Make Pictures in Order to Live

Alistair O'Neill is professor of fashion history and theory at Central Saint Martins, London.

Keep up with the latest in Aperture's community newsletter.

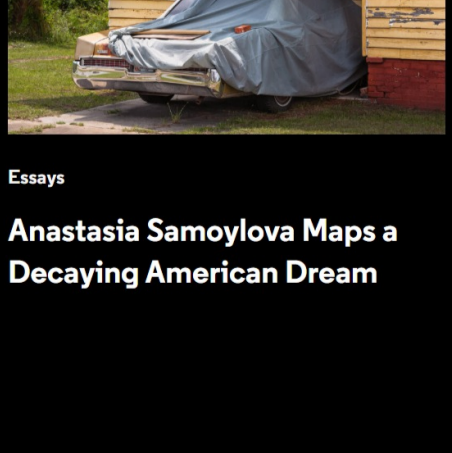
Email address

Sign up



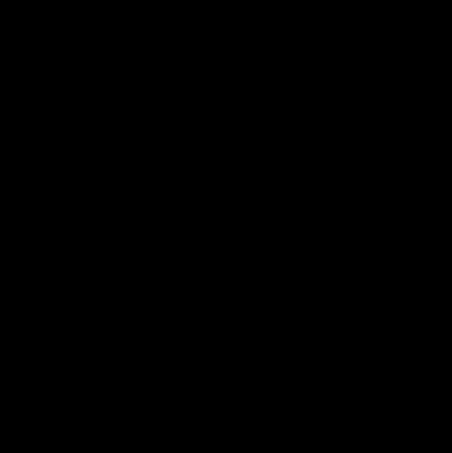
Essays

Why an Influential Stylist Turned to AI



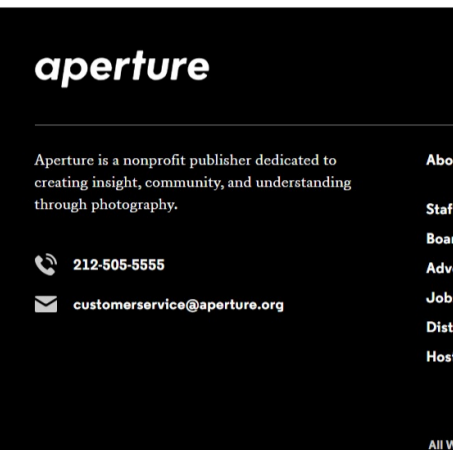
Essays

New York's Sidewalks Are His Studio



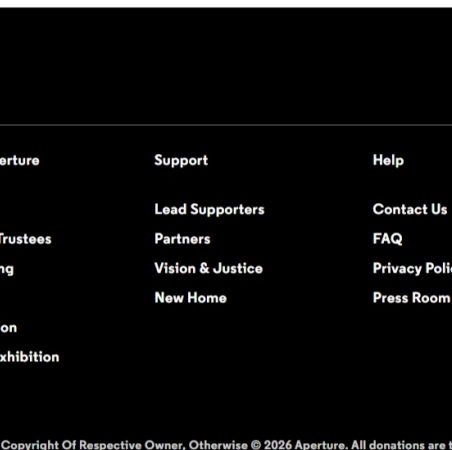
Essays

Takuma Nakahira's Essential Writing on Photography



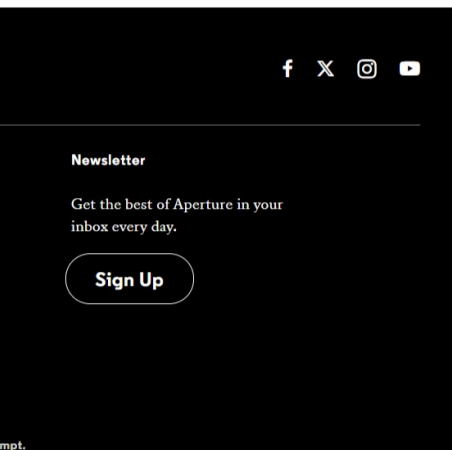
Essays

A Witness to South Africa's Postapartheid Landscape



Essays

Mimi Plumb's Prophetic Images of America on the Edge



Essays

The Woman Who Immortalized the Bauhaus

Essays

Fashion Photography's AI Reckoning

Essays

Anastasia Samoylova Maps a Decaying American Dream