

FROM A
DISTANCE
PAUL REAS
FIELDSTUDY
16

DELIGHTFUL FRAGRANCE
NET WGT. 1¾ OZ. (57 GRAMS)

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FROM A
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The buildings look sharp but the people are blurred into traces of movement, as if they were ghosts. I have something of a problem with our fascination with long exposure photography. Slowing down the shutter speed captures what is permanent but obscures what is transient. It is a technique can generate all sorts of exciting visual effects, especially in cities. It gives the impression of movement and energy, telling the story of a place on the go, a place that has direction and purpose. The slow shutter speed shares many of the same values as late capitalism. It suggests a booming economy, the dynamism of busy lives, the restlessness of the successful urban professional who always has somewhere more important to be. Paul Reas rejects this overly familiar trope, and rightly so. For the long exposure photograph robs the urban landscape of human faces. In such pictures, ordinary people have anonymous walkthrough parts in the great stage set which is the city of London. Someone recently described the Shard as “a photo opportunity without a soul.” Similarly, the long exposure photograph can easily capture the glamour of urban life but is unable to recognise the soul.

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







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The Photography and the Archive Research Centre was established in 2003 as the first of the University of the Arts London's research centres. It commissions research, organizes seminars, symposia, exhibitions, conferences and publications. It also hosts and co-edits the Journal of Photography & Culture. Past projects from the Centre include 'How We Are: Photographing Britain' (Tate Britain, 2007); 'Magnum Ireland' (Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2006); 'Daniel Meadows: Early Photographs' (National Media Museum, 2011); 'Growing Up in the New Age' (Street Level & Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 2012).

PARC work frequently with external partners, who include: University of Sunderland; Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow; Wolverhampton Art Gallery; Ffotogallery, Cardiff; Birmingham Central Libraries; the Imperial War Museum, London; Photoworks, Brighton; University of Western Ontario, Canada; Expressions of Humankind, Stockholm; Sune Jonsson Archive, Umea; MaxStrom publishers, Stockholm; University of Wales, Newport. Forthcoming projects include participation in the 2013 Sune Jonsson retrospective, the 'A Day' exhibition at Konsthall Stockholm and a new publication, 'Mythologizing the Vietnam War: Visual Culture and Mediated Memory' and the exhibition 'A Model War'. PARC also leads the Directory of Photographic Collections in the UK, an online resource for scholars and researchers.

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: Acme artists and the Stop the M11 Link Road Campaign, 1984-1994 (AHRC).

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This issue of Fieldstudy was edited by Patrick Sutherland and Monica Takvam to coincide with the LCC exhibition *From a Distance* curated by Paul Reas and Patrick Sutherland and co-curated by Monica Takvam.

Paul Reas was born in Bradford in West Yorkshire in 1955. He is best known for his two books *I Can Help* and *Flogging a Dead Horse* as well as very personal documentary projects. His varied photographic career also includes work for editorial and advertising clients of the highest level. Paul's work has been exhibited widely, nationally and internationally, and is held in a number of public and private collections. His work is represented by James Hyman Gallery and he is currently a senior lecturer in Documentary Photography at the University of Wales Newport.

Giles Fraser is the parish priest at St Mary's Newington in the Elephant and Castle. He was Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral from 2009 until his resignation in October 2011 as a response to the forcible removal of the Occupy London protestors. He writes the Loose Canon column for The Guardian.

From a Distance is the result of an invitation to photographer Paul Reas to respond to the regeneration of the Elephant and Castle in south London. Paul was chosen for his track record of personal, socially committed documentary work. *From a Distance* forms part of the Elephant Vanishes project, a long-term documentation of the changes facing this area. The project was launched at a study day organised by PARC and was built into the programme of the MA in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography for several years. A trilogy of publications entitled *Home*, *Community* and *Economy* have been edited from student outputs. Work from the project has been exhibited in numerous locations, from the now vanished subways of the south roundabout at the Elephant to The Photographers' Gallery and Tate Britain. Three exhibitions have also been organised by the Cuming Museum.

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.

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