

the BIGGER picture



the **redeye NEWSLETTER ISSUE 17 AUTUMN 2004**
information and opportunities for photographers

New writing on photography: putting theory into practice

In March 2004, Redeye tried something new: getting three thinkers and writers about photography each to host a public discussion on the subject of their choice, afterwards writing up the discussion in the form of an essay. The only restrictions were that the subject had to be a matter for continuing debate (no easy answers here), and that it had to have relevance to practising photographers.

The three resulting essays are published here for the first time. In *Back to Front*, artist Simon Grennan considers how photography subtly changes the relationship between the main subject and the background details. In *Mirrors and Windows*, researcher and writer John D Perivolaris discusses whether postmodernism has altered photography's role in providing evidence of the real world. Finally in *Locating the Margins*, curator Natasha Howes looks at the marginal and outsider spaces that photographers find so appealing, and what happens when these spaces are brought into a gallery.

The Photographs in this issue were created by students on the Redeye 2004 Summer Workshops and exhibited as part of the joint show Beyond The Ring Road at Gallery Oldham in November 2004. Contact Redeye for further details.



Photo: Peter Walker – vital.media@ntlworld.com

Back to Front: Realism and the photographic view by Simon Grennan

A curious effect of the development of photography is the creation or alteration of pictorial points of view. Photographs remain representations but, uniquely among methods of representation, they lay claim to a special connection to the things and situations they represent. Photographs show a residue of a moment's action from the past – the camera was there – in a way that no other form of visual representation does. Because of this participation in, this witnessing of events, we are able to view photographs as evidence and accept photographic representations as true and real.

This possible claim to true representation causes trouble for photography. It puts photography in a bind. On one hand, no viewer (and certainly no photographer) really confuses a picture of something with the thing itself. They are blindingly, obviously, categorically different. On the other hand, because the camera is a machine for witnessing, its testimonies continually nag at the viewer with the proposition 'I was there. It was like this.' This situation is fundamental to the way in which photographs achieve representation.

One effect of this is the creation of an extraordinary field of vision in photographs. Rather than the field of vision of rendering, painting or planning, which is determined by strict hierarchies of information (what to include and where to place it), photographs can be said to possess a democratic point of view. Everything is in place. Even careful manipulation on the part of photographers often can't override this fact.

This democratic pictorial point of view didn't appear with photography, although it is photography's default form. In the late Nineteenth Century some painters began to think that the strict hierarchy of information in traditional pictorial schema could be turned around, so that things with low pictorial status would become the centre of attention. The most famous of these painters was Courbet who, along with a group of sympathetic art critics, coined the term 'realism' for this switch.

'Realism' also attached a political purpose to the democratisation of 'point of view'. Whereas in the past, high status in the pictorial scheme meant high status per se, from a 'realist' point of view this high status was reserved for the everyday and ordinary. It seems no accident that 'realism', photography and the great modern democratic political movements emerged at the same time. 'Realism', carried forward to the present

through pervasive photography, is the pictorial schema that displays 'power to the ordinary', 'power to the background'. I presented this idea in a public seminar hosted by Redeye in Manchester in March 2004, illustrating it with examples of the work of five photographers – Arnold Odermatt, Cindy Bernard, Aithne Grayson, Peter Fraser and Grennan & Sperandio.

Odermatt's photographs¹ were made in Switzerland throughout the 1960s, when he worked as a forensic photographer with the Swiss highway police. His pictures represent an extreme position of image as evidence, and were made for no other purpose than to record the visible aftermaths of illegal and tragic events. As a category of witnessing, his pictures have been transformed by time. It is now impossible to say quite what the subject is – the tyre marks in the mountain road or the truck jack-knifed in the tunnel are no more subject than the uniforms of the police, the style of the vehicles or the perfect Alpine scenery. No single subject claims precedence over any other.

The photographs in Cindy Bernard's 1991/92 series *Ask the Dust* re-visit the locations of crucial scenes from famous Hollywood films. Curiously familiar, these scenes appear to be all background: the 'action' is long gone.² This highlights the fact that the cinematic construct creates strong relationships between subject, narrative and background. In the photograph *It's a mad, mad, mad, mad world* the eponymous film's signature palm tree 'W' is altered. Three of the trees have disappeared, but the background trope retains its compelling sense of déjà vu.

Taking this idea of an absent subject to another level, Aithne Grayson's 1995 series *Rape Sites* doesn't mine a sense of media familiarity in order to push the background forward. Instead, these images of subjectless back alleys, playing fields and country paths are determinedly blank. Only extra-photographic information provides the subject and points to the special dynamic between photography and absence. These pictures all show the places where rapes took place, but of course, the events are long past. The pictures witness nothing but background. Their blankness points to the limit of photography – to the things that that photography can't witness.

Peter Fraser's 1997 series *Deep Blue* also manages to signify absence.³ Often isolating an important subject against a 'neutral' background, Fraser's images point unexpectedly past the subject in view. A new satellite sits crisply against a paper backdrop, but what is compelling is each uncontrolled wrinkle in the paper, not the dazzling technology in front.

Finally, I presented a number of pictures by Grennan & Sper-

audio, part of my own work. *Everyone in Farnham* was conceived as a realist project in the terms outlined above. The streets of the small Surrey town of Farnham were cleared of motor traffic on a Saturday afternoon in June. Everyone in town was personally invited to come into the centre to have their photograph made and a team of 13 photographers shot film continually over the whole 50 minute closure. 3500 people appeared. These photographs are explicitly made by Farnham people, not behind the camera, but in front. The town steps forward to make the image.

Having presented the idea that this 'back to front' impulse is the default position of photography as a medium, I further proposed that this idea is frequently missed or misunderstood by photographers themselves. A lively discussion ensued, identifying a trend towards a greater fluidity of conception amongst photographers of the role of accidental or 'trivial' information in the making of the picture – a sensitivity described by one member of the audience as the recognition of 'noise as content'. John Berger's famous observation that photography is 'strong in evidence but weak in meaning' was mentioned, which was in some ways contested by the introduction by another member of the audience of Winogrand's equally famous explanation of his motive for making photographs: to see what something looks like when it's photographed. The seminar concluded with a re-statement of two dominant positions by the audience, expressing opposing opinions about a shared analysis: photographers struggle with the medium's propensity to elevate the trivial – its continual rush towards realism. For some this is photography's great advantage and for some its fundamental flaw.

1. See <http://www.artnet.com/ag/FineArtThumbnails.asp?G=0&aid=12769>
2. See <http://www.sound2cb.com/atdtrilogy/atd/index.shtml>
3. See <http://www.peterfraser.net/deepblue.htm>

Simon Grennan has exhibited, published and broadcast widely in the US, Britain and Europe over the last ten years; in New York's Museum of Modern Art, The Hayward Gallery, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Baltic Centre, Fantagraphics Books, DC Comics, Channel 4 Television, Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Seattle Art Museum and Sculpture Chicago. Simon was previously Director of Public Art Forum and Viewpoint Photography Gallery, Salford. Between 1999 and 2001 he was Development Officer for Redeye.



Photo: Michelle Davenport – michelle.dav@btopenworld.com



Photo: Annie O'Neill – ecs.annie.o'neill@oldham.gov.uk



Photo: Barry Rawlinson – barry_rawlinson@hotmail.com



Mirrors and Windows: Photography after Postmodernism by John Perivolaris

At the turn of a new millennium the representational capacity of the photographic image has been undermined to the point that a guru of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, has felt able to claim that ‘the Gulf War never took place’ (1991) since, according to him, its primary field of operations was the production and global circulation of empty images. More recently, the photographer Alison Jackson has based her work on Baudrillard’s ideas and the supposition that ‘the camera always lies’ to explore how in the age of postmodern simulation, when ‘the “real” subject becomes “not necessary”’, the viewer is seduced by photography to consume images that are ‘more important than the hard copy’ (Jackson 2004).

Simultaneously, the supposedly self-evident truths of the humanist tradition have also been problematised in the period from the Family of Man exhibition, in 1955, to Diane Arbus’s work in the 1960s, down to the cynicism of Martin Parr.¹ In Arbus’s case, recognition of everyone’s alienation, including the viewer’s, is still poignant when the latter’s gaze is democratically reciprocated by that of the photographic subject – be they ‘freakish’ (Arbus’s term, 1972: 3) or respectably banal – in a form of mutual identification.² Meanwhile, many of her photographs respect the unbridgeable distance between viewer and viewed, a critical development from the presumptuous familiarity of humanist photography, which assumes that the most exotic subjects are readable because of their universal humanity.³

On the other hand, in Parr’s work, there is a definitive denial of the human proximity on which humanist photography is based, on the part of a photographer who invites us to take a knowingly superior postmodern delight, at what is presented as alien rather than alienated, or even unreal, since his photographs can only work as parodic, *faux naïf*, versions of the genre of amateur photography, self-consciously reflecting their status as images.⁴ Yet, as Sontag’s 2003 book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, suggests the medium still bears the very real responsibility of representing reality in good faith, particularly the reality of suffering. I would argue, therefore, that the photograph’s unique gravity as evidence is as important as ever. That great essayist of the cinema, André Bazin, once wrote that ‘photography affects like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or snowflake’ (cited in Tredell 2002: 63). Nevertheless, more than ever before,

the photographer of the digital age is obliged to highlight the mediating role of photography. A difficult circle to square.

The Catalan photographer Joan Fontcuberta offers a clear example of the representational difficulties facing the photographer today. His work both ironises the mediating falsity of photographs as well as exploring their possibilities as ‘imprints of reality’ (cited in Caujolle 2001: 3).

Alternating between representation and trace Fontcuberta’s images test the boundaries of art and science (ibid.: 8). A series from the first half of the 1980s, *Herbarium*, is typical in its subversion of photography’s gravity as evidence. As in several other projects Fontcuberta perpetrates a hoax by presenting a series of still-life studies, drily classified in Latin and in sober black and white, of an apocryphal botanical collection, in fact consisting of assemblages constructed by him of found natural objects and industrial waste.⁵ Since then, he has concocted a hoax photographic biography of the mysterious fictional German scientist, Professor Peter Ameisenhaufen, produced parodies of museum and wildlife photography, and frequented taxidermists’ shops.⁶ He has also produced a series of supposedly undiscovered photographs made by great artists of the Twentieth Century, in a project that pokes fun at the scientific pretensions of art history.⁷ Other ‘scientific deceptions made possible by photography’ (Caujolle 2001: 12) are *Sputnik* (1997), a series celebrating the exploits in space of his fictional alter-ego, the astronaut Ivan Istochnikov, and *Sirens* (2000), which allegedly documents the archaeological remains of mermaids in Provence by parodying the form of a *National Geographic* report.

If in these projects representation overtakes reality, in the second strand of Fontcuberta’s work real objects and living beings resist their representation. They do so either by leaving abstract traces on photographically sensitised surfaces through the ‘frottograms’ (images made by the rubbing or scratching of real objects and live animals on these surfaces), and by reducing the distance between them and their image to a minimum (Caujolle 2001: 82) by means of shadowgrams (Fontcuberta 2001: 88-91). Fontcuberta literally uses objects and people as negatives for his shadowgrams or as abstractions in his ‘Haemograms’, from the late 1990s, which use drops of human blood between glass as transparencies from which he makes prints.

Looking at these images involves fascination with real objects, people and their blood, which are silhouetted, cast as impenetrably opaque or abstract. They become conspicuous by their absence, breaking the spell of images over us by inviting

us to reflect beyond the image frame to photographic processes that involve direct physical as well as visual interaction with the real world, in opposition to the detachment of voyeurism.⁸ In Fontcuberta's 'frottograms', shadowgrams, and 'haemograms' bodies and objects literally interrupt the images that would contain them, leading the viewer's imagination and experience to interfere with the image.

Alongside such subjective interference history may also be registered as another trace of the real. When the complete physical disappearance of those photographed is only prevented by memory and photographs, as in the case of the case of the some 30,000 Argentinians murdered and often erased from public records under military dictatorship during the Dirty War of 1976-83, then there is an urgent necessity that photographic images have credibility as memorials of the real. In these situations the absence that makes all photographs poignant becomes every photographer's prime concern as they literally attempt to re-member the fragments of a traumatic past. Such is the undertaking of the Argentinian photographer, Marcelo Brodsky. His 1997 project, *Buena memoria* [Good memory] is an attempt to fill in the missing years of the lives of those he left behind in Argentina while he was in exile in Spain. Feeling 'the need to work on my identity' (Brodsky 2004a), he found an eighth-grade class portrait taken in 1967, organised a school reunion of his classmates, and decided to embark on a series of portraits of the survivors using the group photograph as a backdrop.⁹

The class portrait serves as evidence of the lives and absence of his classmates. As such it can only have credibility alongside other corroborating evidence, such as testimonies, historiography, and other forms of recollection and narration. The stories of those photographed, whether they perished or survived, allow a network of relationships (in which the photographer is implicated) to be glimpsed. The photograph itself is covered in Brodsky's notes, information, and thoughts, while the Zonezero web exhibition of the project combines images and texts from Brodsky and others throughout. The photographs of current students' reflections in the glass of the 1967 photograph recognise the need to address the silence separating past from present and Argentinians from each other.¹⁰

Brodsky's work exemplifies an indispensable type of photography whose commitment to the real involves photography as a contextualised form of documentary that is also undertaken by other photographers attempting to address the legacy of the Disappeared. For instance, in her project, *Photos of You*, Inés

Ulanovsky also juxtaposes her images alongside family snapshots, letters, portraits of relatives of the Disappeared, and audio recordings.¹¹ The work of Fontcuberta, Brodsky, and Ulanovsky would seem to invite us to recognise that photographs are not enough. Photographs are never worth a thousand words; there is no equivalence. This is not photography's limitation but its potential greatness (especially in the age of multimedia) as a humanistic technology that opens spaces for different forms of meaning to meet and interact responsibly with the absent real beyond the frame, where meaningful seeing might animate our other actions, alongside the practice of our photography and our reflection on photographic practice. In these open spaces of meaning, as ever, the intentions of the photographer do not dictate the interpretations of an image, especially since the unprecedented contexts in which photographs are subsequently placed frame their possible meanings. Moreover, in the electronic age photographic images can range at high speed across a broader spectrum of meanings and uses than ever before. It is the effects of these resulting uses across cultures, including their gravity-free disembodiment in virtual space, that invite us to become ever more responsive to photographs' evidential consequences, seeing through the mirage of postmodern imagery to challenge the illusion of weightless licence it affords to inhuman acts carried out lightheartedly in the Abu Ghraib prison of Iraq for the benefit only of a camera.¹²

1. On the humanist tradition in photography see Perivolaris (2003).
2. See 'Mexican Dwarf' at http://www.masters-of-photography.com/A/arbus/arbus_dwarf.html. Also, 'Jewish Couple Dancing'
3. See 'Masked Woman in a Wheelchair', www.temple.edu/photo/photographers/arbus/arbusp4.htm
4. See images from Parr's *Common Sense*, www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/cruelandtender/parr.htm
5. For images from this and other series mentioned here see <http://www.nexusgeografics.com/sid/font/bin/GhomeEnglish.htm>
6. For these series see, www.image-ouverte.com/french/pujade9.html
www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/fontcuberta/pg1.html
www.kaapeli.fi/eko.fi/gallery/fontcuberta/1/fauna1.html
<http://www.el-mundo.es/cultura/arteXXI/fontcuberta/joanf5.html>
7. See www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/fontcuberta2/index.html
8. Christian Metz writes (1982: 59): 'voyeurism, like sadism in this respect, always keeps apart the *object* (here the object looked at) from the *source* of the drive (the eye)'
9. A virtual exhibition of this project may be accessed at www.zonezero.com.

com/exposiciones/fotografos/brodsky/grupo.html

10. Diana Taylor (1997: 13) writes that 'by 1990, forgetting had become official policy, much against the wishes of certain groups that had vowed never to forget'

11. See an exhibition of her project at www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/ulanovsky/index.html

12. Accessed at www.antiwar.com/news/?articleid=2444, on 7 October 2004

Works cited

Arbus, Diane, 1972. *Diane Arbus* (New York: Aperture)

Baudrillard, Jean, 1991. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Sydney: Power)

Brodsky, Marcelo, 2004a. 'Work Methods', from the 'Introductions' section of *Good Memory*, www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/brodsky/intros/method.html, accessed 5 March 2004.

Caujolle, Christian, 2001. Introduction to Fontcuberta (2001b: 3-15)

Fontcuberta, Joan, 2001a. *Joan Fontcuberta* (Madrid: La Fábrica).

Fontcuberta, Joan, 2001b. *Joan Fontcuberta* (London: Phaidon).

Grande, Chantal, 2001. 'Joan Fontcuberta: Essays on the Track', in Fontcuberta (2001: n. pp.)

Jackson, Alison, 2004. Printed 'Statement' accompanying her presentation at 'NoPhoto: Privacy, Permission and Personal Space in Photography – A Practical Guide for Photographers', a symposium organised by Redeye (The North West Photography Network), Manchester, 28 February

Metz, Christian, 1982. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press).

Perivolaris, John, 2003. 'Humanism Reimagined: Spain as a Photographic Subject in W. Eugene Smith's "Spanish Village" (1951) and Cristina García Rodero's *Espa_a oculta* (1989)', in *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative*, ed. by Andrea Noble and Alex Hughes (University of New Mexico Press), pp. 149-64.

Taylor, Diana, 1997. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War'* (Durham NC: Duke University Press).

Ulanovsky, Inés, 2004. *Photos of You*, www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/ulanovsky/index.html, accessed 5 March 2004.

John D. Perivolaris is a full-time specialist in Spanish and Latin American cultures at the University of Manchester, currently co-authoring a book on migration, photography, and visibility in Spain. As an internationally exhibited photographer and to accompany this book he is currently working on a series of photographs on spaces of migration in Spain.



Photo: Surena Primus – sherbet_h1@hotmail.com



Photo: Andrew Williams – andrew@appliedcommonsense.com

Locating the Margins by Natasha Howes

Although neglected by mainstream society, marginal and 'outsider spaces' have nevertheless held a fascination for photographers who utilise them as sites for their work. Drawing upon examples from contemporary practice, I will examine this trend, interrogating what it is about peripheral spaces that continues to attract artists and what happens when you bring those marginal sites into the gallery.

I want to differentiate between two types of marginal space. The first are non-places, sites which are seemingly empty or places lacking a distinct presence of their own, requiring either objects or the photographer to delineate their boundaries. The second type are more widespread, neglected places on the periphery of urban centres which are often targeted by property developers. The photographers I have selected produce images of both these types of spaces and what they have in common is that their works have an apparent emptiness. I am going to explore a variety of artists' strategies for confronting these spaces and then examine the tension generated by showing this work in a gallery context.

The first of these sites, the non-places, are places where nothing happens – almost negative space if you like – space which you would not normally notice. Graham Gussin defines the concept of 'Nowhere' as a non-state, a kind of Utopia, literally meaning no place¹. 'Nowhere' could include the space above the sofa in Uta Barth's *Ground #35* 1994 or the space between two houses in Wolfgang Tillmans' *Space Between Two Buildings II* 1998. The gap between Tillmans' two clapboard houses is suspended in perpetuity as a neutral, forgotten and overlooked space. It is only delineated or made tangible by the presence of the buildings on either side and by the fact that the artist has chosen to photograph it. Without this, it would be overlooked. Here there is an absence of matter, an immateriality. However rather than being uninteresting, this emptiness actually has the potential to be a productive space, a site of the imagination. Marginal sites become locations of possibility, sites of potential, where anything could happen.

The second set of non-spaces are sites on the edges of the city, marginal areas that are neglected by society and ripe for redevelopment. They are anonymous but have a sense of familiarity without giving away their actual geographical location. We all know them without needing to visit each one. This is a clue

as to their power as images – they have a universal resonance. Whether they were taken in Northern Ireland, Israel, Hastings or Hackney, they are interchangeable and have the potential to be anywhere and everywhere, so that our imagination can locate them as being within each of our own experiences. As artist and writer Soo Jin Kim suggests, '...non-places arrange and rearrange their co-ordinates in an infinite number of ways, becoming amorphous as well as ubiquitous, space becomes uprooted, unlocated, and interchangeable. Once it gains the potential to be more than one place, it has a freedom akin to the boundlessness of the imagination...'²

Effie Paleologou's residency in Hastings in 2000 aimed to show the town in a new way, a different version from the images in tourist brochures. She uncovered its nocturnal, secret life. At 4am, the town became a theatre of possibilities, full of mystery and imminent danger.³ She captured a psychological tension in the sites, a mixture of alienation and abandonment and the seductive unworldly colours of dreamscapes. In non-places, space seems to be trapped in time – we can only guess the past and imagine the future.

Marc Augé's defines 'non-places' as spaces that we pass through in our accelerated culture, the air, rail and road networks, airports, railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks and large retail outlets.⁴ We never spend time in these peripheral areas, we just pass through them on the way to somewhere else and we tend to overlook them because we have no personal or social investment in them.

Sophy Rickett is drawn to Augé's non-places, to the arterial motorway roundabout, the empty bridge or edge of a forest. She presents us with the negative space of the city, temporarily illuminated in the night sky before being returned to obscurity when her car headlights are turned off. She is more influenced by a state of mind rather than an actual location which explains why some of the pictures she took in Los Angeles are similar to the ones from Grizedale Forest.

Rickett uses dark and light in a formal way but also psychologically to create positive and negative space, drawing a parallel with consciousness and unconsciousness. The night becomes a dividing point between two registers of being. Exploring her attraction to these non-places she remarks, 'They transformed in my mind from peripheral background detail into being interesting in their own right. I would notice them more in the middle of the night ... their emptiness seemed so startling and surreal... When it is late and dark and I am tired and disorien-

tated from driving for miles through unfamiliar country roads, an out-of-town roundabout or junction or intersection appears in the distance like an oasis, a safe place, a relief even.⁵

Rickett's continued return to these sites, clearly demonstrates a strong personal investment. She states: 'But it is still the place, the location, that is the starting point for my work. I think in quite a personal way, I gain something from finding somewhere that really resonates and developing a routine, where I visit and re-visit it, sometimes with a friend, other times by myself. Each time I return, I remember why I have come back. Even if the photographs do not work or it starts to rain or the police move me on, the ritual of returning over and over is important. Somehow it transforms an inhospitable, anonymous nowhere place into somewhere familiar, somewhere that feels mine.'⁶

This is a crucial point; an artist develops a sustained relationship with a marginal space, revisiting that place until they really get to know it and manage to communicate its characteristics to the viewers, who have not encountered this site before.

Rut Blees Luxemburg also captures her images at night. Using long exposures and the sodium glow from the street lights, she uncovers the beauty in neglected urban areas. She wants to highlight what we overlook at night. A *flâneur* derives pleasure from the city and explores the streets in an essentially predatory way. In contrast, Blees Luxemburg does not have a voyeuristic relationship with the city and sees herself more as a poet wandering through the back alleys and wastegrounds. In her recent series *Liebeslied*, meaning love poem, each photograph is an encounter with a site. What sets Blees Luxemburg apart from other nighttime photographers, is that her somnambulant wanderings transform marginal areas into sites of almost painful beauty, which exude a highly charged sexuality.

Anonymous landscapes have also been employed by artists seeking to make increasingly political work. Ori Gersht makes work informed by his travels. In these images there is a high contrast between his seemingly empty pictures of the desert and the high tension of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The desert itself is a typical location of solitude and exile, either self-imposed retreat or enforced political expulsion. By the nature of their geography, deserts exist on the margins of civilisation. Gersht shows us a trace of human life in the tyre tracks on the dusty plains. He says 'There is a lot of mess and historical claims to this land, yet when you look there are some tyre tracks but there is nothing else. It's about the whole notion of our inherent history in the geographical reality of these places.'⁷ Simply because

you can't see conflicts actually taking place, the traces captured by the photographer remind us of the all too recent hostilities.

Another artist whose subject is contested territory is Willie Doherty, who since the 1980s, has focused on the conflict in Ireland. He avoids the imagery typified by media coverage of the situation, instead presenting an iconography of empty streets, landscapes and traces. By stepping back and away from the Troubles, he obliquely records their effects on places and the popular psyche. Doherty asks us to examine places that have witnessed traumatic events. He provides traces of incidents, leaving us with the aftermath of a violent occurrence. These places have been altered by what they have witnessed, making sure that we take note of these previously overlooked sites.

Unlike the country specific images of Gersht and Doherty, New York-based Michal Rovner sites the figures in her photographs and videos in an anonymous no-man's land. Her work is about the human condition and man's enduring spirit and capacity for survival in the face of threat and adversity. She is interested in the notion of borders, conflict and our fragile place within the political and physical landscape.

Using complex digital techniques she manipulates her images, making them grainy, adding colour washes and nearly erasing them so that only a trace is left. The silhouettes of figures against a landscape are haunting. Rovner gives no clues to the gender, nationality, circumstance or personality of her figures. Instead they stand anonymous, representing the everyman. At times the figures are duplicated or manipulated into less obviously human shapes, so that they become almost abstracted.

Whilst Rovner films her work in Israel, Lebanon and Russia, she is not interested in the specifics of site. By omitting clues to the locations, she makes a more universal point about human endurance which people from any country can relate to. Ambiguity is the key to the work of Michal Rovner as her images continually hover between realism and abstraction.

As we have seen many photographers are drawn to landscapes which show signs of human presence and traces of the inhabited world (for example road signs, brick walls, railways, motorways, pylons, hoardings). Tom Hunter is particular in his choice of landscape in which to site his pre-Raphaelite inspired tableaux. The backgrounds show the Lea Valley basin in Hackney, a former industrialised area which is now abandoned. Hunter calls it a "relic of the Post-industrial age."⁸ Now this neglected wasteland is overgrown with wild flowers. The trace of human presence is always visible – in *The Hackney Man* we see pylons

and train tracks behind a site on which people used to hold raves before they were made illegal. *The Vale of Rest* shows two Italian women returning to the place where their now demolished house was. Hunter is passionate about community and communal land rights and hints at this by showing us that the fencing around this scruffy area of land has begun to be prised away, as if to suggest it shouldn't be there in the first place. Tom Hunter's practice thus challenges the status quo that 'landscape imagery reflects and reinforces particular ideas about class, gender, race and heritage in relation to property rights, accumulation and control.'⁹

I now want to turn to The Gallery and what happens when you bring these marginal sites into the white cube, focusing first on peripheral urban spaces. Richard Billingham's *Untitled* landscape series, which he made between 1992 and 1997, are less well known than his family portraits. They portray the area of Cradley Heath in the West Midlands, where he grew up and show places that he associates with his childhood. They are emptied out of subject matter – there is a stark absence of people, especially when you remember that his other images are so full. These areas are on the outskirts of the town, indeterminate places that are neither country nor urban. Whilst on the one hand they evoke the history of British pastoral painting, they also suggest feelings of alienation and a real absence of community. They are familiar, everyday spaces, the type that we frequent on a daily basis while walking to the bus stop. We never usually notice them because of their banality, and as viewers, we do not deem them important because unlike Billingham, we do not have an attachment to them.

When these images are exhibited in a gallery context, I would argue that their meaning changes. In his book *High Art Lite*, Julian Stallabrass charts how the depiction of the pastoral has moved from rural to urban, and particularly to the landscape of the inner city within contemporary art practice. He cites William Empson who argues in his book on the pastoral in literature, 'The essential trick of the ... pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings ... in learned and fashionable language'.¹⁰ What he is saying is that simple ideas were expressed in a complex way – you take a 'low' theme and express it in a high style. To give you an example from Richard Billingham's catalogue, the landscapes are described thus: 'their blankness reinforces a sense of hopelessness in a Proustian search for lost time.'¹¹ In essence the pastoral is an art which is about working

people but not necessarily for them.

When you bring these works into the Gallery context, something changes. However much we try to broaden the demographic of galleries and attract people from all social backgrounds to see art, unfortunately gallery going is still the mainstay of the middle classes. What worries me is the idea that middle class people don't live in or near to these marginal sites, don't explore run down areas of a city at 4am, don't frequent illegal raves in Hackney, don't go looking for the traces of violent conflict. When this gallery-going public are in the safe confines of the white cube, they will be titillated by the edgy pastoral fantasy. As Stallabrass concludes 'The pastoral is a product and an expression of [bourgeois] safety.'¹²

If we associate marginal sites with lower socio-economic groups, and you accept the fact that there may be a certain lack of engagement and experience with this segment of the population by middle class gallery goers, then there is the potential for condescension. The 'cultured' middle class viewers may look down on these scenes – and using 'connoisseurship', they may make judgements about these types of spaces. There is an insurmountable distance between those who are looking at these marginal sites where experiences are lived and those who actually live those experiences.

In moving from rural to urban scenes, artists are now articulating a new language of the pastoral. They are not trying to communicate with the same audience that was viewing Constable and Gainsborough's work. They are trying to make art for a new urban audience and develop a critical voice. The worry is that the edginess and political aspect to the work is not reaching its fullest potential in the gallery context. We must be prepared to question aspects of the gallery and it is a challenge for curators to think creatively to reach out to new audiences and to allow the full critical voice of this work to be heard in whatever context it is shown in.

Finally I'd like to return to the work of Uta Barth to examine how a gallery context can affect the first type of non-spaces. Barth's work has an emptiness, a void – her locations, which are often interiors, are essentially non-places. More interested in perception and vision, her work is less about the subject, and more about the process of viewing. She takes pictures out of her window, where there is not much to see – trees, bushes, a telegraph pole. She always blurs her images, focussing the camera on an unoccupied foreground. These unframed, empty pictures present only background information, implying the absence of

subject and call into question the function of images as ‘containers of information.’ In the series *Ground*, in which the title refers to foreground and background, her images show landscapes and interiors that refer to the compositional conventions of still photography and painting. The artist reflects, ‘We all expect photographs to be pictures of something... The problem with my work is that these images are really not of anything in that sense, they register only that which is incidental and peripheral implied.’¹³ Barth describes how the subject is not fixed within the image on the wall, and is instead indicated to be in front of that so that the ‘location’ of the work hangs somewhere between the viewer and the wall, in the empty space we are looking through.

What happens when you bring her works into the gallery is that they take on a site-specific quality. The interior scenes of windows, door frames and corners of rooms seem to mimic those same architectural features of the gallery. Since most empty corners look alike, when you hang a picture of a corner in a gallery, it tends to be read as relating to that particular location.

What this demonstrates is that the Gallery is not a neutral space and can change the context and reading of images, whether that may mean blunting the work’s political edge or altering the way it can be viewed. This happens to a certain extent with all art that is shown in a white cube, but when you exhibit work like Billingham’s and Barth’s, these changes are more marked.

In conclusion, what I have demonstrated is that there are a great many artists who use marginal areas in their work for a variety of reasons. Whether it is to open up a space for limitless possibilities, to make a political statement about specific geographical conflicts or more universal points about the human condition, or to relive childhood memories, what is beyond question is the attraction that marginal locations have for the photographer.

Gilda Williams, in her introduction to *Cream 3*, highlights the theme of emptiness as an important strand of contemporary practice. She describes art that verges on nothingness has an immateriality and impermanence.¹⁴ I agree with her assertion that it is possible to make nothing in a meaningful way. The artists that I have used to illustrate this essay all do so. There is something which links these emptied out images – each artist offers us a hint, a clue, a suggestion with which the viewer starts their own journey. The content does not lie in what the images actually depict – but opens up a philosophical space, a space for exploration.

As with many of these works, the complete absence of narrative challenges us to invent one. What is so interesting about the apparent emptiness of these banal sites is the fact that they can be so meaningful, so rich in allusions and infinite possibilities. This is why photographers will continue to be drawn to the margins.

1. Graham Gussin *Out of it* in Graham Gussin and Ele Carpernter (eds) *Nothing*, London and Sunderland: August and Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, 2001
2. Soo Jin Kim *Uta Barth: The Space of Non-Place*, in Claire Doherty (ed) *Claustrophobia*, Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1998
3. Liz Kent *Spaces of Possibility* in Liz Kent (ed) *The Front: Effie Paleologou*, Maidstone: Photoworks, 2000
4. Marc Augé *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of super-modernity*, London: Verso, 1995 (trans John Howe)
5. Sophy Rickett interview with Kate Bush *Sophy Rickett Photographs*, London: Emily Tsingou Gallery, 2001, p5
6. *Ibid*, p6
7. Ori Gersht, quoted in Katharine Stout, Tate Art Now Brochure *Ori Gersht*, London: Tate
8. *Interview: Tom Hunter in conversation with Jean Wainwright in Tom Hunter*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003
9. Liz Wells (ed) *Photography: A Critical introduction*, London: Routledge, 2001
10. William Empson *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, London: Penguin, 1995, p 17, quoted in Julian Stallabrass *High Art Lite*, London: Verso, 1999, pp238-
11. Richard Billingham catalogue, Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2000, p5
12. Julian Stallabrass *High Art Lite*, London: Verso, 1999, p245
13. *Uta Barth Interview* by Sheryl Conkelton from www.jca-online/barth.html, Journal of Contemporary Art, 1997
14. Gilda Williams (ed) *Cream 3*, London: Phaidon 2003, p5

Natasha Howes is Curator (Exhibitions and Displays) at Manchester Art Gallery where she has curated exhibitions of Tom Hunter, Dalziel and Scullion, Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson and Dryden Goodwin. Recently she programmed Mary Ellen Mark’s American Odyssey and Twins which was the only UK venue of this exhibition, and is currently preparing the first solo show by Guardian photographer Don McPhee. She also curated a photography exhibition We are no longer ourselves including Rut Blees Luxemburg, Effie Paleologou and Sophy Rickett which toured to three venues in 2001 including Site Gallery, Sheffield. Previously

What can Redeye do for you?

Redeye aims to help photographers at all levels. You might not be aware of all the things it does – here are some pointers. Keep your eyes on your letterbox and the Redeye website for latest news of the Redeye programme; you can subscribe to the mailing list on the website.

For beginning and emerging photographers

First stop should be the Redeye **website**, with an ever-growing advice and info section, pdf versions of back issues of these newsletters in the archive, and a message board for general queries. It's worth coming along to a **free public meeting**, where you can meet and chat with other photographers. Redeye's **lectures** are always a source of inspiration and wisdom. Some of the Redeye **workshops** are aimed at beginner level; the ever-popular *Do You Really Want To Do This?* gives essential business advice to those starting out on a photography career. Redeye can also provide free email or phone **advice** on most subjects and one-to-one **consultations** if you want your portfolio assessed.

Professional survival

Many working photographers run into issues of finance, business and organisation. The Redeye **website** contains much useful advice and information, and back issues of the **newsletter** on these issues, which are also discussed regularly on the message board. The **email update** contains news of commissions and other opportunities. Redeye also arranges in-depth **research** on certain issues; the first such report, on photography publishing, will appear on the website. The 2005 **workshop** programme (announced Jan 2005) will include topics such as getting into galleries, colour management/digital workflow and location lighting, along with the guide to starting up a photography business, *Do You Really Want to Do This?* Redeye regularly provides email or phone **advice** and has wide contacts across the industry to help you find answers.

Developing your work

Redeye is very keen to help photographers develop artistically and technically. The **free public meetings** offer the chance to show or discuss your work in a supportive atmosphere. **Portfolio days** with high-level viewers are a great boost into a higher level of practice, and you can book a free one-to-one **consulta-**

tion if you are not sure whether your portfolio is up to scratch. The **lectures** by top photographers are for inspiration, while the **symposium** and **forums** can focus your thinking on aspects of your work and push you in new directions. Redeye's always looking at fresh and unusual formats for its successful creative **workshops**; whether they last a day or a summer; and technical subjects such as high end digital, lighting and creative development are regularly covered.

If you're interested in photography

The Redeye **lecture** programme gives you access to an eclectic mix of practitioners and an insight into their work and lives. The annual **symposium** discusses a topic of vital importance to photography; in 2005 it's called *The Photographer's Guide to the Future* and will look at recent and anticipated changes in work practices and markets. Come to a **free public meeting** for the chance to see work that has never been shown before. The **email update** carries news of photography exhibitions across the regions (you can subscribe on our website).

Helping out Redeye

Redeye depends completely on suggestions and help from volunteers. We welcome any suggestions for future events, speakers or news items; they can now be submitted directly through the website at www.redeye.org.uk. If you have a burning desire to learn more about a particular subject or see a particular photographer talk, click on the link at the bottom of the events page; there are other feedback forms throughout the site. These are all logged to be consulted when the next round of events are arranged. Redeye also needs people to help out, often to be ushers at events or to help on office tasks such as stuffing mailshots. Please email if you would be willing to help. And if you have a particular skill or area of special knowledge, whether photographic, technical, or potentially useful in any other way, email and tell Redeye about it.

What is Redeye?

Redeye is your network. Set up with public money, its aim is to make life easier for photographers and photography in the region. Redeye's current programme includes workshops, talks, seminars, discussion forums, portfolio viewings, and free public meetings.

Programme news

An additional lecture will follow the current series on 29th January 2005, at 2pm in Manchester Art Gallery. The Award-winning Zimbabwean photojournalist Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi, whose work is currently showing as part of the Visions of Zimbabwe exhibition, will talk about his experiences of working on the front line of Zimbabwe's troubles, in a climate of censorship, danger and arrest for photographers.

Please visit Redeye's website for latest news on talks, or call 0845 456 0260. The Spring programme of workshops, forums, critique and symposium will be launched in January 2005.

Join Redeye

It's free for anyone to go on the mailing list. There are two types: postal and email. The postal list receives this newsletter and leaflets about Redeye events. The email list receives a monthly update with summaries of Redeye events, and other photographic news including exhibitions, events and opportunities. You can go on either or both at the website or by writing to Redeye.

Not getting the email update?

A number of people have told us they are not getting the Redeye email update. Mostly they are Hotmail, mail.com and yahoo users. This is most likely because of 'spam filtering' by these and similar web-based email services. In order to continue getting the update, you need to do one of the following:

- 1) Check for the update in your junk mail folder.
- 2) In your Hotmail window, click on 'contacts' then on 'safe list'. Enter 'redeye.org.uk' in the box and click 'Add'.
- 3) If all else fails, check the Redeye website in the first few days of each month for the news roundup.

Redeye website

www.redeye.org.uk

- news and events from Redeye and photography
- the best place to sign up to the free mailing lists
- a growing library of essential advice and information
- a message board for work and discussion
- suggest Redeye events and speakers through feedback forms

Change of address

If you have changed your postal address or email address, please inform Redeye. This info can also be updated at the Redeye website by clicking 'subscribe.'

Free public meetings

These are very popular events to come and meet other photographers, see some work, and discuss things over a drink. They happen at the Richard Goodall Gallery, 59 Thomas Street, Manchester M4 1NA, at 7:30pm. Future dates are as follows:

Tues 25th January 2005

Tues 22nd February 2005

Weds 6th April 2005

Tues 24th May 2005

Contacting Redeye

Redeye has two part-time staff; director Paul Herrmann and administrator/co-ordinator Richard Evans.

Website: www.redeye.org.uk; email: info@redeye.org.uk

Telephone 0845 456 0260 (calls charged at local rates)

Postal address: Redeye, PO Box 232, Sale M33 3WZ

While every effort has been made to check information contained in this newsletter, Redeye cannot accept responsibility for any errors or omissions. The views expressed by those contributing to this newsletter are not necessarily those held by the Redeye group or the editors.

Newsletter compiled by Paul Herrmann. Layout by Leanda Ryan Graphic Design (0161 446 2005). If you quote from this newsletter please let Redeye know – it helps when we apply for funding. Use in any sort of educational or training material only permitted by prior permission. Copyright in all articles and photos remain with their respective authors.