EXCAVATING UTOPIA: Park Road

The Artist's Studio
St George's Hall
Liverpool

May / June 2011

whereas the highly rational societies of the renaissance felt the need to create utopias, we of our times must create fables

Francis Alÿs





Geoff Crossley
Portraits

Kirsteen Ashton
Park Road

Excavating Utopia: An Introduction
John Darwell

Collaborate:
"*to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavour*"

www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary
accessed 22nd March 2011

In the summer of 2010 a group of disparate individuals came together in Liverpool under the auspices of the Redeye Photographic Network 'Lightbox Programme' with the aim of collaborating on a new body of photographic work to be exhibited in Liverpool in 2011.

The nature of photographers (at least in my experience) is that such collaboration doesn't come easily and on the whole we much prefer, rightly or wrongly, to plough our own furrow wherever it leads us. Even though many of us are sociable individuals, when it comes to our 'practice' we prefer to be alone to find our own vision rather than work with others (even like-minded others are still others!).

A theme was chosen for the project to explore 'Park Road' as a concept/location that existed in most towns and cities in the UK, addressing the nature of life in Britain today. Over a period of months I have watched these ten, highly talented, individuals (from a position of safety as group 'mentor') deal with the pressures of working together to produce a body of photographs that balanced with the chosen theme and need for a shared vision yet that maintained the particular interests of each photographer.

Meetings were held regularly, work appeared and I watched in fascination as the 'I' became 'we' and the group bounced ideas off each other in a supportive and generous manner, each member of the group putting aside ego to use their skills in whatever form that took in support of the wider aims of the group.

The work came together under the title of 'Excavating Utopia: Park Road' and offers a fascinating look at contemporary life in the UK that is insightful and powerful, dealing as it does with the pressures that affect us all, and I'm proud to have played some small part in its production. It is a testament to hard work and determination and stands as a fascinating body of new work. Though most importantly for me it marks an exhibition of work by ten people I am honoured to call friends and I look forward to seeing what they all do next.

Against All Odds: Life on Park Road

Joanna Zylinska

Over the last half century, photography has become so ubiquitous that our sense of being is intrinsically connected with being photographed, and with making sense of the world around us through seeing it imaged. As David Bate points out in his eponymous book on photography, 'If I wish to travel, a photograph of my face is required to indicate my identity in my passport, without which it would be hard to go anywhere. I am likely to have already seen photographic images of my destination before I have even been there'.[1] Photographic images therefore arguably shape the world for us: they prepare us for things to come, manage expectations but also, inevitably, lead to alienation, cognitive dissonance and disappointment.

It is this latter aspect that is mostly highlighted in theoretical debates on photography. Understanding photography as a receptacle for negative affects is indebted to the tradition of thought going back all the way to Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*.[2] This little book is an attempt to exorcise death by reflecting on the images of the author's deceased mother -- a gesture which ends up wedding photography to mortality for the whole generation of artists and critics. The productive aspect of photography, its potentiality to organise matter, mobilise life and shape the universe for us therefore gets overlooked in many of its critical interpretations. However, its generative aspect -- which we may also call 'liveness' -- is an equally important facet of photographic practice.

We see photographically when we grasp things in an instant, the blink of an eye, when we actively produce things through sight -- doing so with our eyes and in our mind's eye, in a way that goes well beyond representation.[3] We could thus go so far as to suggest that all life is photographic: it is a creation of images in the most radical sense. Rather than just recall and catalogue the actual photographs seen in albums, guidebooks, galleries and on the internet, our imagination creates composites from non-specific photographic and cinematic images that had flicked in front of our eyes, contributing to the emergence of what we might call, with a nod to Victor Burgin, 'remembered media'.[4] Thus we are all photographers, no matter if we use a camera or not.

It is this sense of photography as an ontological practice of shaping the world that informs and organises the 'Excavating Utopia: Park Road' exhibition. The images presented here belong to a genre which could be described as 'the pre-photographic': a form of imagining an object or a location by constructing it from prior images, those residual in our individual and collective memory -- which is always inevitably remediated. For the artists exhibiting in the show photographic practice seems to be akin to archaeology. It is a way of excavating hidden traces, memories and artefacts in an attempt to make the present meaningful. Excavation takes on political significance here: it is an attempt to see beyond the increasingly threadbare landscape of the 2011 Britain under the Conservative-Liberal coalition, with its impending budget cuts, decimation of public services and assault on the arts. The 'Park Road' of this project inscribes itself into this somewhat bleak landscape. It functions as a twenty-first century utopia -- both a 'good place' and 'no place' -- in which individual recollection and collective fantasy meet political premonition and social nightmare. In its focus on national and global issues via the everyday goings-on of an average street, the exhibition offers an ironic commentary on David Cameron's 'Big Society'.

In the foreword to the second edition of his well-known book, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, French anthropologist Mark Augé suggests: 'Perhaps today's artists and writers are doomed to seek beauty in "non-places", to discover it by resisting the apparent obviousness of current events. They may do this by highlighting the enigmatic character of objects, of things disconnected from any exegesis or practical use, by putting a spotlight on the media that try to pass for mediators, by rejecting sham and mimicry'.[5] The artists gathered in this show seem to be responding to Augé's injunction.

Leila Romaya and Paul McCann's wallpaper reworks the enigmas of workaday ephemeral objects to be found on Park Road. Peeking into the private spaces of ornamented living rooms that posit a particular idea of 'Britishness', the duo attempt to salvage relics of the past and protect it against the tide of forgetting and decay. Such aestheticisation of the interior goes beyond highlighting the mere decorative aspect of days gone by: it points to the past as a repository of political alternatives, an archive of good and bad choices that needs revisiting during times of trial. Similar sentiments seem to resonate in Sharon Mutch's images of Park Road interiors, whose Hitchcockian atmosphere and displaced gaze of the viewer on both sides of the screen fills us with premonition and fear. Suspense and anxiety are also evoked by the empty miniature domestic spaces constructed by Katia Porter and Graeme Vaughan. The uncanny aspect of these interiors -- both familiar and estranged, domestic and psychic -- envelops the Park Road habitat in the aura of sinister beauty.

In some of the works Park Road's spatial alienation is confronted with human presence: often displaced into artefacts (as evidenced in Kirsteen Ashton's album-stored photographs) or postures (as seen in Geoff Crossley's mesmerising portraits of the road's residents, with the residents themselves looking like 'actors' who could be living in Porter and Vaughan's house). This kind of contrived domesticity and dispersed humanness opens up onto the wider vista of Park Road itself. The passers-by in Joanna Zylinska's remediated, ambrotype-like images of Google Street View are ghost-like figures that hint at the possible dystopian failure of the utopian promise. The skeletal, greyish blocks of flats in Rosie Hallam's

photographs take on a similar eerie aspect, with the flats themselves impersonating the transience of life on Park Road. The return of the mundane in Frank Balaam's pictures restores the sense of the familiar to the ghostly.

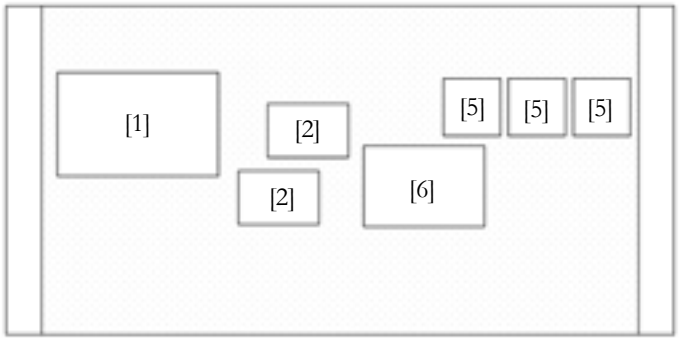
For Augé, the non-places of supermodernity such as airports, railway stations, bridges, hypermarkets but also, we could add, modern suburban semis, byways and thoroughfares, are all 'fragments of utopia, in the image of our time divided between passivity, anxiety and, despite everything, hope or, at the very least, expectation'.[6] It is this hope for survival and flourishing against all odds, the utopian belief that -- to cite Dr. John Hammond, the owner of Jurassic Park in the sequel to the original movie -- 'Life will find a way' that 'Excavating Utopia: Park Road' demonstrates. In this way, it also takes on and enacts what was earlier described as photography's 'liveness'.

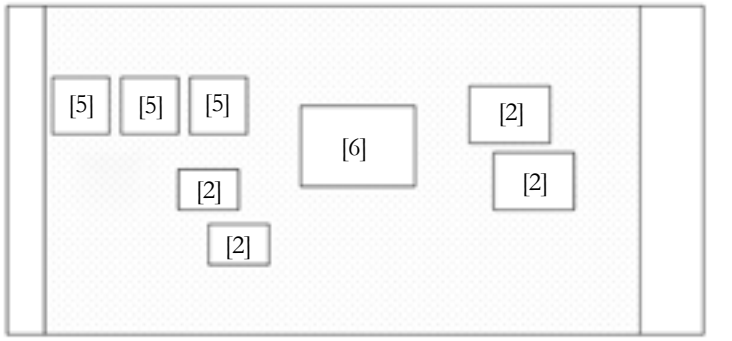
Joanna Zylinska is a writer, cultural theorist and photographic artist. She is Reader in New Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her latest book is Bioethics in the Age of New Media (MIT Press, 2009).

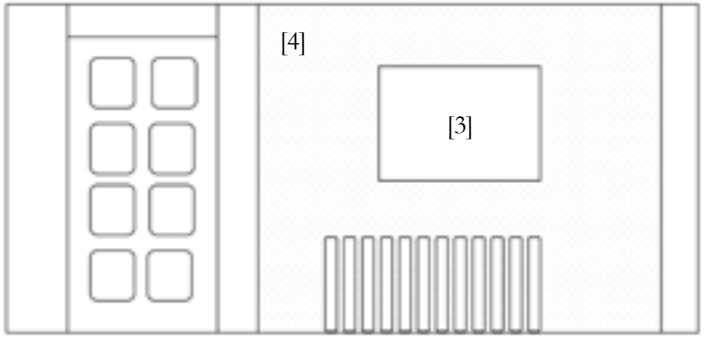
1 David Bate, *Photography: Key Concepts* (Berg: Oxford, 2009), 2.
2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981)
3 Sarah Kember, 'The Virtual Life of Photography', *photographies* Vol. 1, Issue 2 (September 2008): 175-203.
4 See Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).
5 Mark Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London and NewYork: Verso, 2008), xxii.
6 *Ibid.*

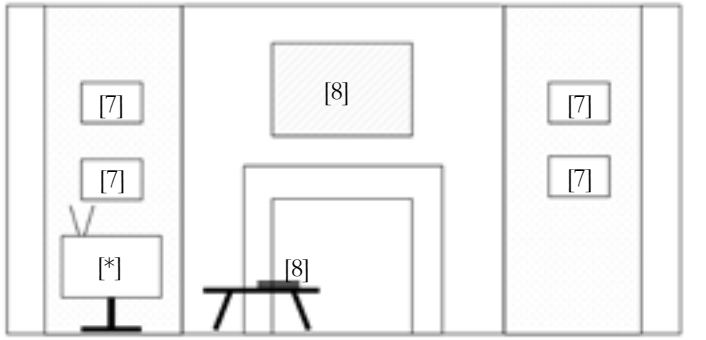


Leila Romaya & Paul McCann
Wallpaper









[1] Rosie Hallam
[2] Geoff Crossley
[3] Frank Balaam
[4] Leila Romaya & Paul McCann
[5] Joanna Zylinska
[6] Katia Porter & Graeme Vaughan
[7] Sharon Mutch
[8] Kirsteen Ashton

[*] Videos:
Joanna Zylinska "Park Road, London II" 3 mins
Leila Romaya & Paul McCann "Sound & Memory, Incidental Truths" 15mins





Rosie Hallam
Robin Hood Gardens

Katia Porter & Graeme Vaughan
Badezimmer



Sharon Mutch
Hallway

Artist Biographies

Kirsteen Ashton is a documentary photographer who uses images to challenge people's perceptions and beliefs. Her most recent work, "Shooting Young Offenders" exhibited at Project Space Leeds, follows the personal journey of a group of young offenders on an arts course designed to rehabilitate them.
www.kirsteenashton.com

On taking early retirement, **Frank Balaam** went to gain an MA in photography and currently works as a tutor in adult and higher education. His images have been exhibited at public and commercial galleries, including Dean Clough, Halifax, the Harris Museum, Preston and the Dukes Gallery, Lancaster. His more recent work, whilst documentary in style, directs its' subjective gaze at cultural and popular experience.

Geoff Crossley has been 'making art', in one form or another, through all his life -- primarily for his own enjoyment but also to help him think about issues and problems. Photography has become his chosen medium, allowing him to capture moments, ideas and details in people's faces.
www.imagefield.co.uk

Rosie Hallam is a London-based editorial photographer, working for national and international newspapers and magazines. She has covered a great array of assignments: from refugees returning from Malawi to Mozambique at the end of the war through to Romania's entry in to the EU. In 2009 she won The Press Photographer's Year, Photograph of the Year award and had a solo show, 'A Day in the Life of Birmingham Children's Hospital'.
www.rosiehallam.com

Paul McCann is co-founder and director of Twin Vision charity which uses photography, video and animation to offer a platform for expression. His current project, 'Moving Voices: A Collaboration with the Irish Travelling Community', offers a unique insight into the heritage and personal stories of Irish Traveller families on Merseyside. The resulting work will be toured in summer 2011.
www.twinvisionphoto.co.uk

Sharon Mutch is a visual artist and photographer who studied fine art at Manchester Metropolitan University. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, including at Les Rencontres D'Arles, PHE Madrid, and the Open Eye gallery, Liverpool. She is a co-founder of the artist collective, The Lost Soul, and of Stranger Service Station, an independent project and gallery space run by the Bluecoat's resident artists in Liverpool.
www.sharonmutch.com

Katia Porter is an artist and freelance photographer based in Manchester. She studied at the University of Bolton, Sheffield Hallam University and Central Connecticut State University. Her work has been exhibited in the US and Britain. She is currently working on a photo series with Merseyside Police, a companion piece to her Second Shift project completed last year with a police department in Connecticut.
www.katiaporter.com

Leila Romaya's early career as a photographer began in Italy, where she lived for seven years. Drawing on her previous career as a professional dancer, she developed a body of work through commissions documenting contemporary theatre productions across Italy. This resulted in exhibitions in Empoli, Cagliari and Liverpool. She now works in Liverpool as a freelance photographer and educational practitioner. She is the founder of the non-profit organization Stray Cat Media.
www.leilaromaya.com

Graeme Vaughan studied psychology, sociology and social work before turning to photography. In his self-published 'urban notebooks', he explores the meaning we give to our environments through our everyday lives. He was awarded Shots Young Photographers 2010 and SUNrise awards for emerging photography talent in the UK northern regions 2009. His exhibitions include: Warsaw: a notebook (CUBE, Manchester 2009), Palermo: a notebook (PIY, Nogent-sur-Marne, Paris 2010), Prague: a notebook (Truman Brewery, London 2010) and The Derby Detective Agency (Format Photography Festival Commission, Derby 2011).
www.photogas.com

Joanna Zylinska is the author of books on various cultural issues – from spiders and cyborgs to plastic surgery and bioart – and a Reader in New Media at Goldsmiths. She combines her writing with photographic art practice. Her recent exhibitions include 'Solid States/Liquid Objects' in the Shifted Gallery in Melbourne, and the co-curated show, 'Home and Away', exhibited at Bath Fringe Festival and at Castlefield Gallery in Manchester, and coming to the ISE Cultural Foundation in New York in December 2011.
www.joannazylinska.net



Joanna Zylinska
Park Road, London I

Participating Artists

Kirsteen Ashton

Frank Balaam

Geoff Crossley

Rosie Hallam

Paul McCann

Sharon Mutch

Katia Porter

Leila Romaya

Graeme Vaughan

Joanna Zylinska

EXCAVATING UTOPIA: Park Road
www.excavatingutopia.com

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Exhibition design & curation, Graeme Vaughan.
Booklet design, Graeme Vaughan & Joanna Zylinska



Frank Balaam