

Title: Forget Photography: The Arts Council and the Disappearance of Independent Photography in Neoliberal Britain.

(Paper given at Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, Yale University. 'Concerning Photography: The Photographers' Gallery and Photographic Networks in Britain, c. 1971 to the present. 25 November to 2 December 2021.)

Andrew Dewdney

ABSTRACT

This paper starts from the perspective that for some time we have been living with photography's afterlife in which contemporary photography is a ruined territory populated by archaic knowledge practices. The way out of photography explored in this paper is through forgetting the spectral presence of photography in order, on the one hand, to see the new conditions of the image and on the other, to witness the trauma of photography's several deaths. This is achieved by a trick of adopting the future present from which photographic knowledge practices of collection, exhibition and archiving appear as discontinuous with the present and capable of cold case reinvestigation. The art museum has absorbed photography through a process of modernist purification, continually expunging the hybrids of the contemporary image and hence, paradoxically, admits not a medium capable of examining the present, but photography as heritage.

In November 2014, Tate released a press statement announcing its 'continuing commitment to photography'. Like a guilty secret, the phrase introduces a note of doubt on the very thing it claims to have, a commitment to photography, as if Tate knew there was a whispering campaign which said, 'Tate has never been committed to photography'. Photography in Britain, under the odd title 'independent photography' delineated a category of documentary photography distinct from the commercial and industrial. Independent photography was also considered distinct from photography in contemporary art and was championed and supported by the Arts Council of Great Britain through a photography committee established by Barry Lane. Lane built up considerable influence within Visual Arts at the Arts Council, with an increasing annual budget to support independent photographers and award grants to independent photography and galleries. British independent photography was forged by the consequences of deindustrialisation and the callous support of a Conservative led state, which was resisted by communities and trade unions and led to social strife and displacement. This was the context in which renewed social documentary and community photographic practices emerged, which were disdained by the British art establishment. Barry Lane left the Arts Council in 1995 as a consequence of its decision to dissolve the photography panel, annexing its budget to visual arts on the very argument that there was no longer any distinction between photography and art. Thus, one obstacle to admitting photography to the art museum had been removed.

Introduction

This talk arises from a recently published monograph, *Forget Photography*, Goldsmiths Press 2021. I should also add that further discussion of some of the ideas and themes of *Forget Photography* can be found on Fotomuseum Winterthur's Blog, *Still Searching*.

In *Forget Photography* I advance the view that in computational image culture, photography has not simply died another death, but rather has the status of a zombie, or the undead. This condition creates a central paradox between, what is still understood as contemporary photography on the one hand, and its historical passing and memory on the other. Comical and popular as the zombie metaphor might be, it serves the purpose of forcing a break with conventional thinking about the continuity of photography in a digital form and thus invites us to look at photographic histories in a different light.

The specific method of the Cold Case

Forgetting Photography is an invitation, from the speculative position of a future present, to approach the cultural/historical form of European/US photography as a relic, a ruined territory, a medium made obsolete by its computational simulation. It is important to stress, as I do at greater length in *Forget Photography*, that the aim is not to erase photography from memory, far from it, but rather to remember it differently.

The Argument

The question, as it always is with history, is how to understand the present as the outcome of the past, or more radically, how the present might have been different, if events had taken another course. Or even in Foucauldian thinking how the present shapes the discourse of the past. All three of these scenarios play a part in forgetting photography. Over the last three decades of the 20th century, in differing ways, British documentary, photo-journalism and editorial photography, took part in an **historic social tragedy**, instigated by a global realignment of capital and labour. In Britain, the abject social displacement that followed de-industrialisation had its counterpart in photography, as selectively shown in David Mellor's valuable exhibition and book, *No Such Thing As Society* (2007). Independent Photography in Britain over the period being considered enacted two possible responses to radical social displacement, either to join the resistance, or to mourn

the inevitable loss displacement entailed, both paths, as it turned out, amounted to the same thing. But at the time British independent photography took both roads, by constructing, personal and mythic representational images of resistance and loss. Such imagery and narratives were articulated locally, regionally and nationally and continue to dominate the British cultural imaginary. Photographing Britishness is part of a longer historical process, which Paul Gilroy insightfully termed, post-colonial melancholia. The global economic and technological forces that in the Britain of the 1980s led to the closure of coal mines, steelworks, textile factories and car plants, throwing millions out of work, also radically and irrevocably changed the medium of photography. By the end of the period, in which British photography gained full and international status as art, photography had itself ended. Thus a double sense of mourning was enacted, not only for the passing of post war social democracy and its relative industrial stability under capitalism, but also for photography itself. In the same manner as heavy industry left the country by the end of this period, the image had left the photographic frame and gone elsewhere. But where, as the computational technical revolution took hold, was anything called photography to go? The answer suggested here, the first part of which has been explored by others, is that a selective version of photography was fully and finally assimilated into British art institutions, but with my addition, that it did so at the point at which photography as the mode of image production had ceased. This selective passage of photography into the art museum involved the purification of photography's hybrid participation in the world. A stripping out of the social relations and networks of the conditions of photography's production, in order that the image could be regarded in the same terms as any work of art in aesthetic modernism. In the polemic of forgetting photography, aesthetization is one manifestation of the photographic zombie.

Contested Histories

In the example used here, I draw a frame around the Arts Council and British Council's involvement in supporting photography and Tate's acquisition and exhibition of photography between 1979 and the opening of Tate Modern at the millennial moment and the year photographer Wolfgang Tillman won the Turner Prize. Not that these elements neatly begin and end within the political boundary of Thatcher's seventeen years in government as Conservative leader and prime minister and its ending with Tony Blair's

election victory for Labour in 1997. The historical period could be redrawn earlier, with the establishment of a Photography Sub Committee of the Arts Panel of the Arts Council in 1973 and could be extended to the launch of Apple's iPhone in 2007.

The question I am posing is, should we define the historical events that took place under the banner of an independent photography in relationship to a mainstream canon of photography, or might it be a banner for a different kind of cultural practice altogether? An alternative might be to draw lines of connection and continuity across cultural politics, in which elements of independent photographic practices of the 70s and 80s could connect with early practitioners of critical media network practices, the Hacktivists for example.

Post Industrial Britain and the rise of Neo-Liberalism

In a highly compressed timescale Britain de-industrialised, resulting in dramatic and tragic social dislocation. Politically, the ending of Britain's industrial economy and its realignment in a global deregulated mode of new technological production was overseen and orchestrated by an unbending, right wing, anti-democratic conservative government, known popularly by its leader's name, as Thatcherism. This is the bare bones of the matter, perhaps a British Labour Party in power over that crucial period would have ameliorated the economic transition through maintaining and adapting the welfare state, inaugurating regional development in collaboration with local authorities and trade unions. Certainly ideas about regeneration based upon sustainability, the transitioning of labour force skills, establishing workers co-operatives were all in evidence at the time. Against the progressive possibilities of civic and public reconstruction, the financial markets, investors, employers and business leaders, together the right wing press as expected, backed short term profit on investment and went with Thatcher and her 43 seat electoral majority - why working people vote for their own destruction, defeats me to this day – Thatcher set about dismantling the public sector, enacting anti-union legislation, the deployment of US nuclear missiles on British soil, the privatisation of public utilities, selling the public housing stock establishing a conservative minded national curriculum, whilst supporting educational segregation through selection. Thatcher's government set the British state on a path of supporting Reagan's cold war, a war with Argentina, war with the British Trade Union movement and war with the Catholic majority of Ireland. Putting it bluntly, Conservative British government under

Margaret Thatcher used the State to reinforce patriarchy, stoke white suprematism and demonise sexual and gender difference. That's probably enough said.

Independent Photography

It was as part of this historical conjuncture of globalisation and a reactionary state that independent photography emerged. The term remains something of a puzzle, encompassing the use of photography by fine art trained practitioners coming out of British Art Schools, industrially and commercially trained photographers as well as self taught photographers.

Barry Lane, the first and only Photography Officer at the Arts Council of Great Britain between 1969 and 1993, and Brett Rogers, who worked for the Arts Department of the British Council between 1982 and 2005, as Deputy Director and Head of Exhibitions promoted British photography and were responsible for recommending works to be collected through their respective organisations. Barry Lane built up considerable influence within Visual Arts at the Arts Council, with an increased annual budget to support independent photographers, award grants to independent photography and galleries. Brett Rogers was similarly drawing in a stable of independent photographers to represent Britain abroad. Rogers became Director of The Photographers' Gallery in 2005. Barry Lane left the Arts Council in 1993, as a consequence of the Arts Council's decision to dissolve the photography committee, dissolve its budget into Visual Arts on the very argument that there was no longer any distinction between photography and art.

Much of what could still claim to be the independent photography of the period is not included in Arts Council nor British Council collections, particularly that which enlisted in active resistance of communities to the state. The work of photographers in the left photo agency *Network*, or the feminist agency *Format*, which were supplying the left, feminist and progressive press daily with images of the resistance of communities and workers remains outside the canon. Much of the photography produced by community groups such as Camerawork, Blackfriars in London or Art in Action in Liverpool also comes under the heading of independent photography, but has not found its way into the selective canon either. Neither the extensive projects of Jo Spence and her collaboration with Rose Martin on Photo-Therapy have been taken up in any major way, their work was

until Jo's death exhibited in makeshift laminated touring exhibitions distributed by Camerawork and Cockpit. There were many other practices and practitioners of independent-photography, for example the work of Peter Kennard for the CND movement. Independent Photography of the period is better thought as a network of progressive image making practices in photography, print and film drawing upon the inspiration of John Heartfield and revolutionary Soviet agit prop, which included touring and temporary exhibitions, publications, journals, posters, fliers and banners. This radical heart of independent photography created an educational network of workshops, public access darkrooms, community and schools photography projects, local history projects, local and national conferences.

This little-known history of British Independent photography is an important piece of the puzzle of Tate's resistance to photography between the 1970s up until 2003. Tate's resistance was not only about the ambivalent status of photography in relationship to art, but also to the social dislocation and strife independent photography was depicting outside of the art museum. The radical edge of independent photography was revealing an image of the British state's war on the working class, Thatcher termed the miners 'the enemy within' as well as naming Marxist teachers as the enemy of education. Such an image of public strife made the British art establishment uncomfortable, they were after all bound to be concerned about their own patronage and patrons.

The belated admittance of photography by Tate, came too late for photography as a contemporary medium and in subsequent exhibition and display practice it was photography's afterlife that had been admitted, rather than the default image of visual representation. The commitment and desire of Tate to be at the centre of global visual culture, in which photography was now accepted as a contemporary art medium, was flawed by the deeper undoing of the singular temporal logic of the contemporary and by the new conditions of reproduction in which the temporality of the image no longer denoted a singular present. Tate had admitted not photography as a medium of the present, but a medium of the archival past in which photography now belonged to a commodified heritage culture. Tate had, not for the first time, played a safe conservative curatorial hand, by admitting, not the new mode of the image, but its deceased analogue predecessor. More

bizarrely, in the moment of admitting photography Tate unwittingly set up a new exclusion zone in order to keep the new ubiquitous, profane hybrid image and its prosumer audience out of the museum and in so doing maintained its purifying role. This can be expressed as the art museum's fear of the Internet.