

Songs in the Dark

by Matt Colquhoun

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Each year, at photography degree shows up and down the country, there are essays in publications that attempt to frame the work on display in a wider photographic context. This is usually a challenge for a number of reasons, but particularly on the BA (hons) Photographic Art course. Importantly, without its own recognisable “house style” and a focus on developing and supporting the individual voices of its students, each person who passes through the university has their own unique experience and as such the work they collectively produce is always diverse.

This is fantastic, of course, but what does this mean for the photography world at large? Where is photography now? Where is it going? It's difficult to say. These are the questions asked with an almost comic repetition in all manner of group exhibition catalogues and the vague answer to them all is often the same as well: photography's only constant is how it is always changing. The medium's pervasiveness and its influence on our daily lives means that even those with no professional interest in photography are often aware of current debates surrounding it and how, for instance, technological advances continue to mutate photography and expand its broader social implications.

Perhaps it would be better to ask what a degree show means for the students themselves. It is an event that they always knew would come; a formal demonstration of their skills and thinking; the end to their degree and the beginning of their relationship with the world outside the nurturing environment of a university. And yet it is also so much more. Once completed and opened to the public, a degree show can feel like the deep breath before a plunge. The last three years have been an experience that has led to this point and now these students have an opportunity to take a moment to reflect before continuing on with their lives and careers.

The individual experiences of these exhibiting students are usually overlooked in favour of placing the show itself within a much broader context. With *Leaving the Building*, such experiences – both positive and negative – are often hinted at, sometimes openly discussed. It would be detrimental to all to suggest such explorations were merely navel-gazing. The works contribute to a wider empiricism; a collective knowledge of how we all interact with and process the world around us.

John Dewey described experience as occurring “continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living ... Oftentimes, however, the experience had is inchoate. Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience.”¹ That is until we intervene and reflect and attempt to find order and meaning in life's chaos. For Dewey, the work of art comes into existence when the reflective composition of raw experience into *an* experience brings with it a new aesthetic experience unto itself. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari talk of the human tendency to attempt to anchor experience through the act of creation – “a child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing ... calm and stable, centre in the heart of chaos ... now we are at home. But home does not preexist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile centre, to organise a limited space.”²

These tendencies are present in many of the works that constitute *Leaving the Building*. Rosanna Blatchford finds her proverbial song in the dark through the act of beachcombing; Megan Vaughan loses hers when she can no longer see the stars. Alessandro Polledri considers the tendency of Italian families in Wales, as a result of historically negative experiences, to build walls and

gates round their homes; their fragile centres. Even the fundamental aspects of these reflections, such as our memories and photography's privileged relationship with them, are called into question in a number of works featured. Similar scrutiny can be applied to a degree show. Whilst it can feel like organised chaos in itself, it is worth noting how the title of the show, *Leaving the Building*, relates the work and the photographic artists themselves to their on-going experiences and the ones that will potentially come next.

Their experiences over the last three years has coincided with a time of uncertainty both inside and outside of the university. Culturally and economically, the city of Newport could be seen to be in turmoil. Last year, the closure of the Newport Art Gallery's temporary exhibition programme, as well as the staging of the last-ever BA (hons) Fine Art degree show prior to the dissolving of the course, felt like a blow to the cultural landscape of the city. The destruction of the much-loved Chartist mural a few months later felt like another and for many students the merger of the University of Wales, Newport, and the University of Glamorgan, to form the new University of South Wales, was an inevitably turbulent period where the established traditions and longevity of a number of arts courses were called into question.

1 John Dewey, “Having an Experience” in *Art as Experience*.

London: Penguin; Perigee: 2005, pg. 36

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “1837: Of the Refrain”

in *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Academic: 2013,

pg. 362

Upon the completion of an arts degree, it is understandable that such cultural losses as those listed above may start to feel personal. Each gallery closure and funding cut is not only a loss to a wider community but one less opportunity for students to engage with once they graduate. However, as previously stated, change is to be expected. Just as photography itself continues to change, so do the ways we engage with it. The internet and social media have opened up many doors in terms of meeting like-minded people and interacting with galleries, institutions, magazines, festivals and competitions both new and old, at home and abroad. On top of this, the new possibilities and continuing interest in self-publishing allows for unprecedented flexibility in the dissemination of work whilst independent crowd-funding potentially removes arts grants from the equation and allows audiences to fund projects that interest them directly.

These relatively recent developments, to name but a few, show that whilst established institutions and ways of engaging with the arts are in a continuing state of flux, there are many new tools available that will make the post-graduation experiences of these students very different from those who graduated ten years ago. These new developments have also resulted in higher expectations from a world they are only just about to enter. The

showcasing of their individuality and inventiveness will be a challenge but also imperative once they have left the building. Thankfully, if their time inside it has been anything to go by, they should be well-prepared for what lies ahead.

When radio DJ Frank Page first announced that Elvis had left the building, over the screams of those in attendance of the *KHKW Louisiana Hayride* in 1956, his words were immortalised in our cultural lexicon. His announcement confirmed the end of Elvis's performance, but also allowed time for reflection. He added shortly afterwards, prior to the next act coming on stage: "I must say this, for you young ladies and young gentlemen, you have been exactly that: young ladies and young gentlemen, and we are very, very proud of you for your performance here tonight. It's been so nice having you with us."³ It is impossible to judge how this degree show will impact on the lives of these students in the years to come, but it is worth remembering that Elvis leaving the building did not signal the end of the *Louisiana Hayride*, just as a degree show does not signal the end of student's engagement with photography and the world around them. Page's sentiment in particular is one worth remembering: they may soon be leaving the building but it's been so nice having them with us.

3 Elvis Presley, "Elvis Has Left the Building - 16th December 1956", *The Complete Louisiana Hayride Archives 1954-1956* (Memphis Recording Service, 2011); track 26