

Visible Economies
Photography, Urban Experiences, Economic Conditions

Texts from Edited Book

Foreword

Visible Economies presents the work of artists and photographers Sutapa Biswas, Emma Charles, Anna Fox, Immo Klink, Thorsten Knaub and Corinne Silva with texts by Eugenie Shinkle, Martin Newth and Fergus Heron.

Published to coincide with the 2012 Brighton Photo Biennial, *Agents of Change: Photography and the Politics of Space*, *Visible Economies* explores a selection of photographic works that involve established and emerging forms of urban landscape, documentary, and artists' moving image as creative representational strategies. The aim of this collection of works and texts is to propose a series of observations and conversations about the visibility of cities and economies, with a shifting focus between the two, revealing aspects of works that are political and those that are more poetic in describing public urban environments. Together, these works and texts offer suggestions as much as descriptions of how we congregate within and use such spaces as modern citizens.

Visible Economies is the first edition of *Ideas in Photographic Practice*, a new series of collaborations between the University of Brighton MA Photography and Photoworks. This publication developed very much through collaboration. Initially, it extended some of the ideas from the group exhibition *Capital*, held at George and Jørgen Gallery in the summer of 2012. I would like to thank George Lionel Barker, Ingrid Reynolds and Martin Newth for their energy and enthusiasm in organizing this exhibition and to participating artists in the exhibition Emma Charles, Thorsten Knaub, Karen Knorr, Martin Newth, Eva Stenram and Danny Treacy. For the development of this publication, my sincere thanks to Martin Newth and Eugenie Shinkle for their steadfast commitment and insightful essays. Further thanks are due to all the contributing artists and photographers, and to our designer Andrew Pengilly at A2 Design for such imagination and sensitivity in bringing these works together. Finally, thank you to Karen Norquay, Head of School of Art, Design and Media, and Joanna Lowry, Academic Programme Leader for Photography, Moving Image and Sound at the University of Brighton and to all colleagues at Photoworks, Emma Morris, Celia Davies, Ben Burbridge, Helen Wade, Deborah Bullen, Oliver Whitehead and all student volunteers. *Visible Economies* is a timely initiative, and in the best spirit of collaborations, looks forward to further conversations, ideas and work that it might encourage.

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Economies of Visibility: The City

Fergus Heron

Some of the most significant uses of photography as a form of social documentary in Britain could be considered as driven by major economic crises as much as by social and technological developments.

The uses to which such photography was put throughout its complex and fragmentary histories largely involved the urban environment and its inhabitants as visible subjects of economic conditions, usually those which resulted from the various kinds of structural failure that occur in modern market economies.

The officially commissioned photography of urban slum clearances during the Victorian age, the Mass Observation studies of the mid twentieth century and the independent art photography practices that emerged during the Thatcher years¹ might form a kind of uneven and discontinuous chronology of economies of visibility.

The main focus here will be upon two examples of photographic work that share financial institutions of the City as their subject. The City in these works is defined by the double meaning the British English language confers upon it as the financial and commercial area of London and the financial interests influencing the wider British economy. The two works explored here, while sharing similarities in their subject, involve significant differences in their approach and historical context.

Work Stations by British photographer Anna Fox is a body of independent documentary photography produced during the years between the passing of legislation that deregulated the financial service industries, and the last economic recession of the early 90s. The selected photographs here re-visit *Work Stations* in the current economic context and form a useful point from which to re-evaluate their significance.

After the Bell, a moving image piece by British artist Emma Charles, focuses upon a series of fragments of the architectural spaces, technical apparatus and maintenance work within a stockbroker company in London's Canary Wharf. *After the Bell* is a financial term used by traders for activity occurring after the close of the stock market. In this work, the term is used to refer to night workers who enter the space after trading has stopped.

Both of these works offer renewed reflection upon the visibility of current economic conditions and upon the forms of photography they deploy. In *Work Stations*, documentary photography is reconsidered as subjective and rhetorical. *After the Bell* restates connections between some of the founding principles of early documentary and newer image technologies within an approach that might be considered quietly expressive and poetic as much as descriptive and objective. *Work Stations* and *After the Bell*, in referring to visible and invisible aspects of financial trading from the recent past and present, enable reflection upon documentary art photography as a form of visible economy.

The term visible economy is proposed here in two senses. It firstly refers literally to the system of production and consumption of photographic images representing economic activity. As a subject, this activity offers a second more figurative sense

through which the word variant *economical* can be considered in relation to the construction of documentary meaning these images involve. Among the principal aims of documentary photography is the revelation of social truth. However, because of its form, documentary is often knowingly economical with that truth. Photography has long been discussed in terms of its paradox as document and picture - truthful record bound up in rhetorical form.

Recent critical writing has focused upon the relationship between photography, art and documentary, past and present. Much of this writing observes an increasing interplay between art history and popular culture in current photographic art that involves or references various forms of documentary.ⁱⁱ The points of connection formed between documentary, realism and dramatization within popular culture are consistent with the original definition of documentary John Grierson developed in the 1930s as 'the creative treatment of actuality'. Grierson, along with his peers Basil Wright, Humphrey Jennings, Harry Watt and Alberto Cavalcanti considered documentary as firmly rooted in and committed to the depiction of social reality, but equally, as an art and aesthetic concern.ⁱⁱⁱ The connection of Grierson's theory of documentary in the 30s with the meta-documentary practices of the conceptual art movement of the 60s and 70s is central to the development of contemporary documentary art photography. The latter deconstructed the social value of documentary, and in doing so, perhaps ironically created conditions for the re-emergence of its social and political potential.^{iv}

What emerges from the combined importance of the origins of documentary and conceptual art to different forms of current photographic art practice is an increasing subtlety in complicating our sense of reality and artifice. In connection, the works explored here, between them involve the dramatically incidental and the seemingly objective, a focus upon absence and presence, representation and resemblance.

Re-visiting *Work Stations* involves renewed focus upon the still image with text and analogue production it embodies. *After the Bell*, by contrast, involves quite different treatment of some current aspects of a similar subject in the moving image and through the use of digital technology.

Re-visiting Work Stations

Made between 1987 and 1988, *Work Stations* by British photographer Anna Fox has renewed importance in offering reflection upon some of the historical conditions that enabled recent economic crises to occur. *Work Stations* also embodies complexity in its understanding of documentary photography as a subjective rhetorical form rooted in reality. The work in book form contains thirty-five colour photographs, mostly accompanied by texts that add further layers of meaning to the images, rather than explain their content, departing from the convention of the caption. Anna Fox has acknowledged the use of image text in this work was influenced by the work of artist Karen Knorr.^v Knorr studied with Victor Burgin, a significant figure in British conceptualism, who considered photography a 'scripto-visual' image rooted in cultural theory.^{vi} With this subtle aspect of the legacy of photography that followed conceptual art, *Work Stations* involves an embodied, immersive relationship of the photographer

with the subject, investigating aspects of the newly emergent service economy of Britain in the late 1980s.

The book has an implied chronological structure with photographs organised according to a modern working day. Among these photographs, closely framed young male figures exchange uneasy, confrontational looks. Beneath one image a line of advertising copy reads 'Everyone knows business today has become more competitive, more of a battle'. The rhetoric of competition and military conflict dominate many of the texts that accompany the images.

One of the most intriguing and understated photographs is made in a large modern corporate interior, structured by an expansive blue carpet tiled floor and a far wall constructed from a grid of grey steel and opaque, iridescent panelling. The space seems at once transient and enclosed. In the centre of the image a cluster of suited male figures occupy a heavy wooden bench and desk unit upon which computers, telephones and filing units are situated. The materials and surfaces in this interior form a curious combination of high tech modernity and the conventionally traditional. The gaze of the camera and by extension ours as viewers is not returned. These figures neither regard us nor register our presence. In the foreground, another male figure is blurred into an abstracted, almost unrecognizable form. Beneath the image, a text reads 'To be real battleships they have to have at least one 40,000 square feet floor – big enough for six tennis courts'. The space of modern work shown in the image is counterpoised with the language of military technology, spatial volume and individual competition. The combined effect is a circulation of readings between image and text, each of which operate upon what is visible and invisible, inscribed and implied - a kind of economy of visibility revealing something of the reality of an emergent kind of institution and working practice.

After the Bell

In *After the Bell*, 2009,^{vii} artist Emma Charles explores the depopulated financial trading spaces of London after such practices have ceased. This work made in digital video exercises a complexity of approaches that are both filmic and photographic with subtle reference to the function of documentary, and to some of its historical techniques.

The camera in this work is consistently static. Therefore, the frame through which an image sequence unfolds is rigorously emphasized and foregrounded as an organising space that operates as a scene or setting. In this way, mundane everyday activities, or lack of activity, contrast in their realism with a pronounced artificiality in how they are represented. The mounting of the camera upon a tripod, set at various levels, situates our gaze as cast from an uncertain place and in uneasy proximity to the subjects and activities that drift in and out of the frame. The movement of the image sequence between brightly lit interior and dark exterior both includes and excludes the viewer from these spaces. The piece opens with a view across the Thames of the skyline of London's Isle of Dogs, then, a long take of the faces of clocks on the concourse of One Canada Square, Canary Wharf. The image of clocks, both conventional and digital recurs and refers to the time zone London occupies as key to its pre-eminence as a global financial centre and to the modern correlate of time, which is of course, money.

Subsequently, an array of information communication technology and a traders console is shown, its blank screen glowing blue. The only visible human occupants of the space, the maintenance staff, enter and leave the frame without registering the camera's gaze. The presence of these workers is significant in making visible a form of labour that involves the body. Work involving abstract exchange that these spaces enable is not visible here. The work itself as a moving image piece can be thought of similarly as virtual in form – a sequence of digital images – abstract data that comes into being only in its manifestation through the process of spectatorship. The work is presented in gallery exhibition screened on a monitor mounted on a low plinth. In this form, the work has an almost sculptural presence that physically embodies the technology it shows.

The digital origin of *After the Bell* and its depiction of advanced computing technology might also refer to the increasingly sophisticated computing and programming practices developed since *Work Stations* was made. These technologies, the programming techniques and advanced mathematics they involve, partly enabled financial consultants to invent the financial derivatives and bewilderingly complicated models for pricing debt that economists consider to be among the major causes of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009. The stark emptiness of *After the Bell* might also serve as a metaphor for the austerity measures the British Government took in response to the crisis. Together with public spending cuts, lack of consumer demand and decline in export driven growth to date have resulted in double dip recession.

The work of Anna Fox and Emma Charles discussed here make visible in different ways spaces where decisions are taken, actions occur and invisible transactions are undertaken with fundamental affects upon economic conditions and everyday lives. *Work Stations* involved the human body as an expression of confrontation, competition and celebration of individual material gain that drives modern work. *After the Bell*, more distant and formal in approach, only intermittently involves the body in impersonal corporate spaces that could be seen as a figurative aftermath of the aforementioned confrontation.

The artifice and subjectivity deployed in *Work Stations*, and the rethinking of time and the virtual in *After the Bell* could be read as core faculties of photographic works that are documentary in intent and symbolic in form, but nonetheless rooted in reality.

In the two decades between the works discussed here, a range of emerging photographers and artists working in Britain, among them Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, Sarah Dobai, Tom Hunter, Gareth MacConnell, Sarah Pickering, Nigel Shafran, Bridget Smith and Christopher Stewart engaged with photography as a reinvigorated documentary art concerned with the less easily visible.

In connection, considered together, *Work Stations* and *After the Bell* reveal something of the modern social and economic shift from the actual to the virtual. Through an economy of the visible and invisible, these works offer reflection upon the real effects of virtual financial exchange on everyday social life. *Work Stations* and *After the Bell* might imaginatively offer analogies with current economic forms through which we can form questions to address the social conditions they have produced.

Notes

ⁱ See Susan Kismaric, *British Photography from the Thatcher Years*, MOMA, New York, 1990

ⁱⁱ For observations about contemporary documentary art photography see *Documentary Noise: The Real Aesthetic* by David Bate in *Portfolio 51*, Edinburgh, 2010, *Straight Pictures of a Crooked World* by David Company in *So Now Then*, edited by Christopher Coppock and Paul Seawright, Ffotograllery, Cardiff, 2006 and the essays collected in *Theatres of the Real* edited by Jan Baetens, David Green and Joanna Lowry, Photoworks and Fotomuseum Antwerp, 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Cousins, *The Aesthetics of Documentary* in *Tate etc.* Issue 6, Tate, London, Spring 2006

^{iv} David Green, *Reconstructing the Real: Staged Photography and the Documentary Tradition* in *Theatres of the Real* edited by Jan Baetens, David Green and Joanna Lowry, Photoworks and Fotomuseum Antwerp, 2009

^v David Chandler, *Vile Bodies* in *Anna Fox Photographs 1983-2007* edited by Val Williams, Photoworks, Brighton, 2007

^{vi} Victor Burgin, *Seeing Sense* in *The End of Art Theory*, Macmillan, Basingstoke and London, 1987

^{vii} After the Bell, <http://vimeo.com/32048246>

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Visible Economies, edited by Fergus Heron is available from Photoworks shop at the following link

https://www.photoworks.org.uk/shop/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=143