

Brandt

a gradual realisation



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Introduction

The thread running through the second half of my Context & Narrative course is Bill Brandt. I sought to take a better organised, more deliberative approach to this course and tentatively planned each assignment before signing up. Once the John Coplans card had been played on the first assignment (parts of my body juxtaposed with those of a Rodin sculpture, see the Postscript), the third was always likely to centre on (what I had mistaken for) a mirror self portrait by Bill Brandt, the fourth assignment a discussion of his *Northumbrian coal miner...*, and the fifth a response to that image.

Some tutorial questions arose over the subject and presentation choices made for self portraiture and the brevity of the submission text (enforced by the meagre 300 word limit). This publication is intended both to address those deficiencies and to provide an overview of my work for the course.

Nick Blackburn, London, June 2020

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The photographic self portrait,
a partial and selective history
concerning authorship and the use of mirrors

The earliest known self-portrait, by Bayard in 1840, got the genre off to a flying start as it is performative, taken by someone other than the credited artist and contradicts from the outset my theory of gender self-portrait inclinations which will be described later. (The portrait was a response to the lack of recognition of his invention of the calotype process.) This, then, immediately raises the issue of authorship. Susan Bright [1] states unequivocally that,

In many instances it does not matter who pressed the button, as it is the artist who has conceived the idea, and to whom credit must thus be given.



Hippolyte Bayard, *Le Noyé* (Self-portrait as a drowned man), 1840

A pleasing example is given, Tracey Emin's *Outside Myself (Monument Valley)*, taken by her then boyfriend Carl Freedman while they toured



Tracy Emin, *Outside Myself (Monument Valley)*,
1994

her book *Exploration of the Soul* on a US road trip, giving readings from her grandmother's embellished armchair that they took with them for the purpose – these events (as with Bayard's portrait) were clearly premeditated, not spontaneous, and the credit therefore lies with Emin.

In the case of the Bill Brandt portrait copied for Assignment 3, I had long assumed that this was a mirror self-portrait by Brandt himself and learned only in my researches for C&N Assignment 4 that it was taken by Laelia Goehr (she had asked Brandt to teach her photography and took seven pictures at his flat in 1945. The negatives are now held by the V&A [2]). Under the circumstances and given the control which Brandt habitually exercised over his subjects and their settings, it is arguable that this might be regarded as a self-portrait, even though Laelia released the shutter.



Laelia Goehr, Portrait of Bill Brandt, 1945



Pierre-Louis Pierson, The Countess of Castiglione, c.1863/66

Another favourite exponent of sub-contracted shutter control is the Countess de Castiglione who, from the 1850s onwards, ‘commissioned’ (to use Bright’s description [3]) hundreds of self-portraits in a variety of guises over 40 years, all taken by Pierre-Louis Pierson. The Met calls this ‘raging narcissism’ [4].

Although Bayard’s early contribution was dramatic, it seems generally to be the case that female photographers are more inclined to elaborate, costumed, choreographed imagery than the male, who often favour simpler, impulsive shots, sometimes using mirrors. Furthermore, female artists often bring a greater creativity to mirror shots.

Perhaps the greatest self-portrait known (in several dimensions including deceptive complexity) is Ilse Bing's ...*with Leica*, 1931 which the artist chose not to publish for decades for fear (Larisa Dryansky suggests [5]) of being seen as plagiarising Florence Henri and Germaine Krull. There is no evidence of it having been exhibited, Dryansky states, "before the rediscovery of her work in the 1970s"



Ilse Bing, *Self portrait with Leica*, 1931



Claude Cahun, *Self Portrait*,
1928



Francesca Woodman, *Self-Deceit #4*,
Rome, 1978

At around the same time, Claude Cahun was expressing her various identities through self-portraits. In the 1970s Francesca Woodman left a legacy of intriguing self-portraits, many using mirrors which will never be explained as she took her own life at the age of 22.

Vivian Maier, an unknown amateur during her lifetime who came to fame by chance after her archive was saved from destruction, brings an artistry and imagination to self-portraiture in mirrors, windows and shadows that Lee Friedlander rarely achieves in his various volumes [6].

There are vital distinctions to be made between the mirror self-portrait, whether impulsive or elaborately staged, and the modern-day selfie. The self-portrait is a personal statement by the artist which, if a mirror is used, can, by including the camera, both affirm their role and add a frisson of demystification to the image. By contrast, the selfie is a technology-enabled, social-media-driven manifestation of a herd mentality of conformity to one passing fad and then the next.



Vivian Maier, Self-Portrait, 1955



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #2*, 1977

The person who reinvented self-portraiture for the modern age, albeit she did so nearly fifty years ago is Cindy Sherman. In *Untitled Film Stills*, a series of 70 images from 1977-80, some taken by friends, Sherman portrays a series of characters reminiscent of films of earlier decades, often with a hint of Hitchcock. Since then she has continued to lead the genre, enacting a variety of roles, often exploring and occasionally ridiculing societal norms

and extremes.

Much self-portraiture of the current century can be seen to derived from Sherman's work, although frequently more abstruse in concept and more contrived in execution: as John Coplans observed [7], writing in 1982,

No other art form rivals photography's capability to be meaningless, to topple into a void. As a hedge against vacuity, ambitious photographers cloak themselves in a knowledge of art.

Two recent artists who deserve a mention for bringing wit and panache to the genre are Sarah Lucas for her provocative Self Portraits series



Sarah Lucas, *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs*, 1996

(1990-98) toying with portrait stereotypes. And Sam Taylor-Wood (or -Johnson) whose delightfully titled piece, created as response to her second battle with cancer, greeted visitors to the National Portrait Gallery's ground floor in recent years.

In the submission text for the self-portraiture assignment I commented that in deploying masquerade in modern photography



Sam Taylor-Wood, *Self-portrait in Single-breasted Suit with Hare*, 2001

artists are 'assuming other personas for a variety of purposes ranging from self-aggrandisement to social comment' and that 'I tend towards the aggrandising wing'. By that, I meant that my approach to the subject did not have any serious political, social or psychological agenda, it was merely self indulgence. At its least it is my

visual equivalent of miming air guitar to musical heroes; a slightly more favourable reading is a set of easy, manageable targets not extended with virus restrictions a ready excuse; at its best it is a series of more-or-less witty responses to the work of some photographers that I admire. That leads us to the next section.

Notes

1. Susan Bright and Hedy van Erp (2019) *Photography Decoded*. London, Ilex, p.152.
2. V&A (n.d.) *Bill Brandt with his Kodak Wideangle Camera*. [online] vam.ac.uk, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O98772/bill-brandt-with-his-kodak-photograph-goehr-laelia/>, accessed 24 May 2020.
3. Susan Bright (2010) *The Self-Portrait in Contemporary Photography*. New York, Monacelli Press, p.14.
4. The Met (n.d.) *Scherzo di Follia*. [online] metmuseum.org, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/269214>, accessed 24 May 2020.
5. Larisa Dryansky (2006) *Ilse Bing: Photography Through the Looking Glass*. New York, H.N. Abrams.
6. Lee Friedlander (2011) *In the Picture Self-Portraits 1958-2001*. New Haven, Conn, Yale University Press
7. John Coplans (1996) *Provocations*. London, London Projects, p.205.

Rationales for the self portrait copies created, a reflection on the assignment

My tutor asked, “why ... have you chosen existing portraits of very well-known photographers (all men)? I think that you have to further unpack and explore that perhaps touching on gender and identity and masculinity etcetera”.

In the first instance, these were the self-portraits I knew and, in some cases, had used to support my contention that men tend to take simpler self-portraits than women. The advantage of simplicity made them easier to stage and when plans were overtaken by virus restrictions, there was no need, nor any opportunity to expand my horizons. I had intended to take some shots elsewhere (notably the Kubrick in the bar at Tate Modern and the Maier shop security mirror equivalent in Lidl's Bromley) but most could be done at home and the Maier was substituted while awaiting a shopping opportunity.



Frederick Eberstadt, *Isabel Eberstadt*, 1965



After Eberstadt, February 2020

So the fundamental answer is practical simplicity, but lest it be thought that I have avoided masquerade and gender diversity, let's not forget my reworking of the first assignment with the *Dolly Parton Challenge* in my Mondrian frock, evoking Frederick Eberstadt's 1965 image of Isabel Eberstadt in a real YSL.

And, while Lewis Morley's 1963 shot of Christine Keeler is rightly considered to be the work of the photographer, recent

publicity surrounding the sale of a contact sheet from that session [1, 2] suggests that the subject insisted on retaining her underwear, despite strong pressure from the photographer and especially the film producers who commissioned the shoot. There is therefore some merit in attributing a degree of co-authorship to Keeler herself and this has led to the provision of a bonus piece in this edition of the series on page 30.

While it might have been a safe and easy set of subjects, it did offer the advantage of lending thematic consistency to the series, a factor that has led to criticism of many of my previous submissions on this and other courses. While choosing dead old men may be considered a weakness the fact that it allows the subjects to be largely in monochrome and involving mirrors is a balancing virtue. Perhaps a Cindy Sherman film still would have been a stronger choice than the Maier.

Similarly, concentrating on Brandt for three assignments has bolstered the consistency of my overall course response and enabled this publication.

Notes

1. Robert Dex (2020) '*Shy side*' of *Christine Keeler* to be revealed among rare photos in Sotheby's auction [online]. standard.co.uk. Available from <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/christine-keeler-sothebys-auction-rare-photos-a4364561.html> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

2. Eleanor Sharples (2020) *The naked truth about THAT racy photo* [online]. DailyMail.co.uk. Available from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7879577/Christine-Keeler-shoot-took-three-rolls-film-perfect-photo-wasnt-nude.html> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

Assignment 3, Self portraits



Prop, June 2020

Bill Brandt



Self portrait after Laelia Goehr's 1945 portrait of Bill Brandt, March 2020



Laelia Goehr, Portrait of Bill Brandt, 1945

I had mistaken Brandt's for a mirror self portrait. When I learned that it was taken by Laelia Goehr, I nevertheless left it in the planned shoots, arguing that authorship might remain with the subject irrespective of who released the shutter and citing Cindy Sherman and Tracey Emin.

Brandt is holding a 'Kodak Wide Angle Camera ... used by police for recording crime scenes' [1]. He described its acquisition in *Camera in London* [2],

One day in a secondhand shop, near Covent Garden, I found a 70-year-old wooden Kodak. I was delighted. Like nineteenth-century cameras it had no shutter, and the wide-angle lens, with an aperture as minute as a pinhole, was focused on infinity.

What I'm holding is a photograph of just such a camera from an image kindly provided by Antiq Photo, Paris stuck on cardboard. At the time of writing it is still on sale for €3,500.

Manuel Álvarez Bravo



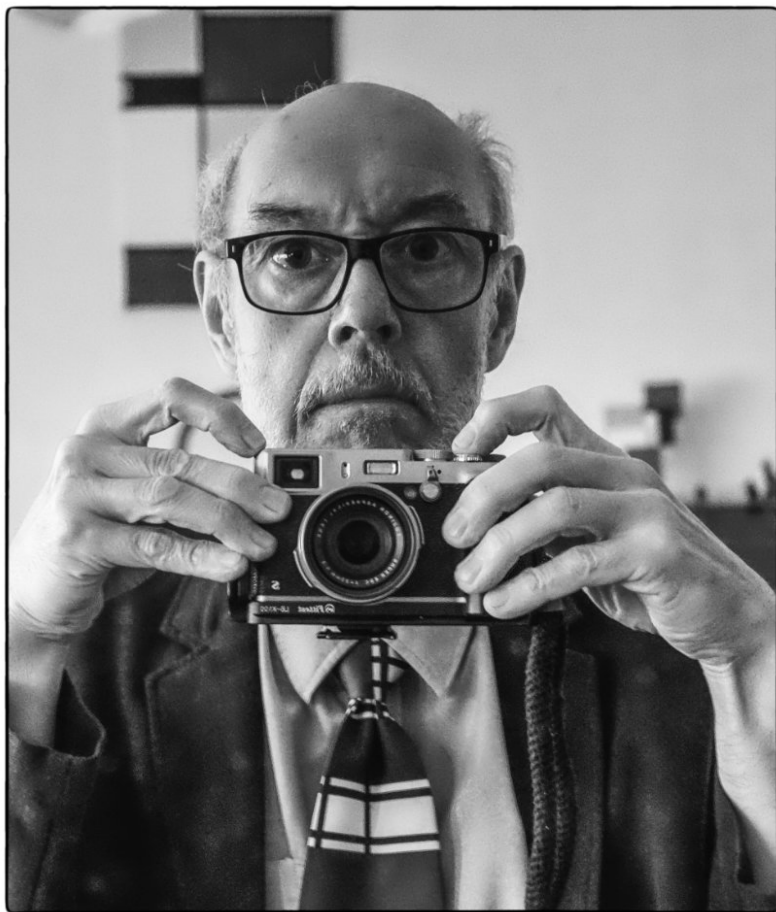
Self portrait after undated Manuel Álvarez Bravo self portrait, April 2020



Manuel Álvarez Bravo, self portrait, n.d.

This was the least pleasing and least successful of the series. This is not unconnected with the fact that it is the least inspiring source. It is a prime example of my male self-portrait gaze (see a mirror, take a snap) theory, mentioned elsewhere and was in the list from the outset for that very reason.

Stanley Kubrick



Self portrait after 1949 Stanley Kubrick self portrait, March 2020

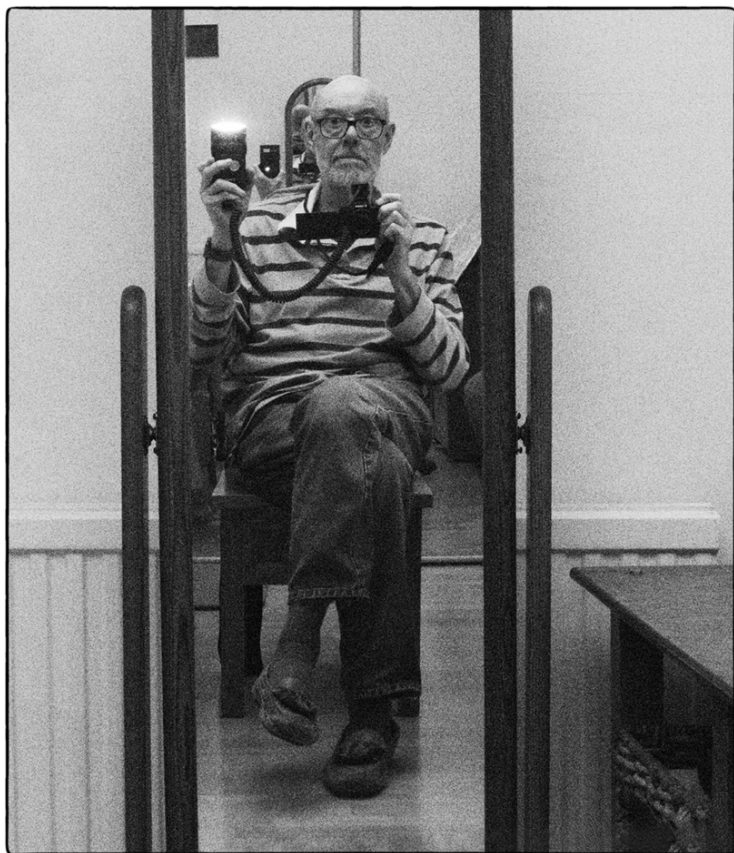


Stanley Kubrick, self portrait, 1949

I had been surprised to learn that Kubrick had a career as a photographer before turning to films, but not surprised to learn how good he was at it.

The intention had been to shoot this in the bar at Tate Modern, but it had to be done at home, which gave the opportunity to curate the background. One of the delights of the Covid lockdown has been observing what the famous reveal while being interviewed (whether by choosing the items in view or by failing to do so). I chose a fake Mondrian and a fake Hepworth.

Willy Ronis



Self portrait after Willy Ronis, 'Autoportrait aux flashes', 1951, April 2020



Willy Ronis, *Autoportrait aux flashes*, 1951

This was a later addition to the list, discovered while researching self portraits for the course. Most of these examples feature the artist plus camera, reinforcing their identities as photographers. Here Ronis extends that principle to his lighting kit too and the debris of discarded, used flash bulbs (if that is what they are). This seems to be a more deliberate and considered pose than Kubrick or Alvarez Bravo.

It was shot using the only camera I have that works with the flash lead I bought for that purpose. I deemed the two essentials for the image to be a visible flash and the framed mirror. The Mondrian shown in the Kubrick is partially visible.

Ilse Bing

This image has been removed from the version submitted
for C&N final assessment as it was made during EyV.

EyV Retrospective *Self portrait with Fuji after Ilse Bing, June 2019*



Ilse Bing , *Self portrait with Leica*, 1931

Note for plagiarism detectors: this was taken during EyV and was omitted from the C&N assignment as a subject for that reason.

It is included here because, as noted in the opening article, I consider it to be about the cleverest self portrait there is. Little has been written about it, presumably because little is known.

Larisa Dryansky suggests [3] that it was not published at the time it was taken because Bing thought she might have been criticised for plagiarising Florence Henri.

I found it extremely difficult to replicate. I imagine that Bing noticed the effect (in what looks like a hotel dressing-table set of mirrors) and then set about photographing it.

I have presented every image for the current course in 6x7 (or 7x6) format. This is an exception because it was taken for an earlier course.

Richard Avedon



Self portrait with Keir Starmer after Richard Avedon's 'self-portrait with James Baldwin', 1964, March 2020



Richard Avedon *Self-portrait with James Baldwin*, 1964



Masks, Corbyn, Starmer and Avedon

This was another late find.

It is difficult to take a photograph deliberately and ‘correctly’ out of focus. I should have taken it normally and added the blur artificially.

The Corbyn mask (from eBay) was too large. Starmer conveniently arrived in the post as part of his campaign for the Labour Party leadership.

Vivian Maier



Self portrait after unspecified Vivian Maier shadow self portrait, April 2020



Vivian Maier, Self-Portrait, Chicago, June 1976

This was not the Maier homage I had planned for the Assignment, that's on the next page. This was a chance shot, taken on our daily walk: I photographed the wing and then noticed my shadow. I did not have a particular Maier reference in mind, I just recalled seeing many shadow shots. It was only later that I found the 1976 shot, seen at a Huxley-Parlour Gallery show of the later 35mm works.

Vivian Maier II



Supermarket security camera, May 2020



Vivian Maier, Self-Portrait, 1961



detail

This is the intended shot, on a Lidl's security camera, first seen in the Bromley store. By the time I braved my local Lidl's, they had installed them there too.

The more I see of Maier, the more I enjoy her work.

Christine Keeler



*Self portrait after Lewis Morley's 1963 portrait of Christine Keeler;
channelling Wily Ronis, May 2020*



Lewis Morley, *Christine Keeler*, 1963

This is a bonus image for those encountering the series through this book rather than the original online. It arises from a simultaneous combination of being told that I had homaged too many men for the assignment and reading about contact sheets from the Keeler session going on sale.

As discussed elsewhere, given that Keeler claimed to have insisted on retaining her underwear [4, 5], overruling those who commissioned the session, it is valid to argue Keeler's joint authorship of the series. And it also allows me to keep vital kit on.



Contact sheet, 1 of 3

Not that it really matters whether the shots I am imitating are self portraits or not. The series could equally well be envisaged as homages to portraits by third parties.

The setup uses the same mirror as the Ronis shot.

Notes

1. Greg Neville (2015) *Bill Brandt's camera* [online]. greg-neville.com. Available from <https://greg-neville.com/2015/10/26/bill-brandts-camera/> [Accessed 28 May 2020].
2. americansuburbx.com (2011) *Bill Brandt: A Statement on Photography (1948)* [online]. americansuburbx.com. Available from <https://americansuburbx.com/2011/04/bill-brandt-statement-on-photography.html> [Accessed 19 May 2020].
3. Larisa Dryansky (2006) *Ilse Bing: Photography Through the Looking Glass*. New York: H.N. Abrams
4. Eleanor Sharples (2020) *The naked truth about THAT racy photo* [online]. dailymail.co.uk. Available from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7879577/Christine-Keeler-shoot-took-three-rolls-film-perfect-photo-wasnt-nude.html> [Accessed 28 May 2020].
5. Robert Dex (2020) *'Shy side' of Christine Keeler to be revealed among rare photos in Sotheby's auction* [online]. standard.co.uk. Available from <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/christine-keeler-sothebys-auction-rare-photos-a4364561.html> [Accessed 28 May 2020].

Assignment 4, Reworked



Fig. 1 Bill Brandt, *Northumbrian coal miner eating his evening meal*, 1937

© the estate of Bill Brandt

The assignment brief opens with the phrase ‘A picture is worth a thousand words’ and (without any further reference to it) asks for an essay on a single picture, deploying ‘rigorous and critical analysis’ (Boothroyd, 2017, p.92).

There are numerous published approaches to analysing photographs. Combining Barrett (2000), Shore (2007) and Szarkowski (1978 and 2007) with Barthes and Derrida from the course, any analytical method should consider up to five main aspects of a photograph’s trajectory from camera to publication and consumption: the subject; the photographer’s physical and technical choices; their personal attitudes; the display environment; and the viewer’s circumstances.

The image chosen as the central subject of this essay is Bill Brandt's *Northumbrian coal miner eating his evening meal*, 1937 (fig. 1). The denoted contents comprise an unwashed middle-aged man eating a meal at a table, watched by a woman of similar age who is not eating. The room decoration is not contemporary. The image's title (part of the display environment) establishes the period, the event and the setting and is an example of the clarification a title can provide, Barthes' anchoring.

Superficially, this might be considered a documentary image, a genre that Brandt ostensibly built his reputation on with his early photobooks, following which he gradually became a regular contributor to British magazines such as *Picture Post*. While little documentation has been found on this particular image or more generally about his visits to the North of England in the late 1930s, Brandt's manipulative and sometimes performative approach to seemingly documentary images is frequently described.

Hacking (2012, p.61) writes that 'some of the photographs taken by Brandt for his first book ... feature ... family and friends posing as characters in purportedly unmediated scenes of British social life' and Delany (2004, p.10) that 'his subjects had to be "in character"', placed on a stage with the necessary props'.

The connoted aspects of *Northumbrian coal miner...* are by definition subjective and personal to the viewer. Perhaps the most striking component (for me, the punctum of the image in Barthes' terms, defined by Bate (2007) as the 'aspect of the image that affects them in a particular and personal way') is the dirt on the subject's face, body and clothing which, we suspect from the title, to be coal dust: it seems strange to eat a meal without washing, however, pit-head baths were only introduced widely, starting in the 1930s (Wright and Herrera, 2017) and Orwell wrote that 'a majority of miners prefer to eat their meal first and wash afterwards' (*The Road to Wigan Pier*, quoted in Delany, p. 134). Given my upbringing (close to the South Wales coalfields and Aberfan), I am sensitive to

mining issues and interpret the image as an illustration of the oppressive conditions imposed on the working class in post-Depression Britain, but Brandt, perhaps partly as a result of his privileged background, seems to have lacked social concerns in this context and ‘never intended them ... for political propaganda’ (Brand, quoted in Hacking, p.61) and did not, in any case, publish the images for more than a decade (MoMA, 2003, p.19).

Other features of the photograph merit a mention: the female subject is not eating; a satchel hangs on the rear wall; the picture on that wall, partially obscured but showing a face, seemingly peering around the drying clothes. It is possible, even inevitable that the viewer will interpret such features in their own way, but given Brandt’s practice of arranging the scenery and choreographing the subjects, no sensible conclusion can be reached on their implications. This is a manifestation of polysemy, a Barthian concept that Salkeld (2018, p.56) defines as a photograph’s ‘capacity for generating multiple meanings’.

It is not suggested that the *Northumbrian coal miner...* or the *Coal-searcher ...* (fig. 2) were portrayed by actors, but rather that Brandt might have taken a directorial approach to the portrait subjects and settings.

I had naively accepted Brandt’s early British work as straightforwardly representational and was, at first, disappointed to learn in research for this essay that many of his images were staged.

Some photographers take what might be considered a more authentic approach to this mixture of documentary and portrait photography. Brandt



Fig. 2 *Coal-Searcher Going Home to Jarrow*, 1937

© the estate of Bill Brandt

was working in the 1930s. In the 1970s, Tish Murtha, from the North, but a photography student in South Wales, photographed one of her early series in the seedy New Found Out pub in Newport (fig. 3). As a 6th-form Newport schoolboy in the '70s who sometimes visited that pub at the end of a night out,



Fig. 3 from *Newport Pub*, 1977
© the estate of Tish Murtha

I can state unequivocally that the regular clientele would not have accepted any directions from a police officer, much less a photographer: Murtha had to embed in the community and to gain their acceptance to work there. A detailed comparison of Brandt's 1938 *A Night in London* with Murtha's pleasingly anagrammatic 1983 *London by Night* will be pursued separately.



Fig. 4 *Kirsty and Si (with Bandit)*
from *Small Town Inertia*
© Jim Mortram

More recently, Jim Mortram, who dropped out of an art degree and returned to his native Dereham, Norfolk to care for his mother, documented the living conditions of friends and neighbours. His blog *Small Town Inertia* became an exhibition and was published in book form in 2017. This level of relationship with his subjects constitutes

the highest possible degree of knowledge and involvement and is likely to result in images that show them sympathetically and authentically, especially as he published the photographs alongside his subjects' extensive comments on their circumstances, in the case of fig. 4.

All the millionaires and that, they are sat there in their big houses

and judge us. The benefits people always fob us off, every week. They say, 'You can't expect us to give you money straight away' and, yeah, that's alright but you don't know how we have to live, what state we have to live in and you're there going home to your nice food, to your brand new car, a seven-bedroom house and we're left here and no one has a care in the world.

from Small Town Inertia, Jim Mortram

Reconsidering Brandt's approach, I have always supposed that many photographers manipulate their subjects, for example, I cannot see how some of Cartier-Bresson's (fig. 5), Ronis' (fig. 6) and also Murtha's (fig. 7)



Fig. 5 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Rue Mouffetard, Paris*, 1952

Fig. 6 Willy Ronis, *Le Petit Parisien*, 1952

Fig. 7 Tish Murtha, from *Elswick Kids* 1978

Fig. 8 Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1936

© the artists, their agents or their estates

street photographs can be anything other than contrived.

Even Lange's iconic *Migrant Mother* (fig. 8) has come under increasing scrutiny. First the whole basis of the FSA photography project has been undermined by the examination of director Roy Stryker's (perhaps) well-meaning but patronising instructions to his photographers (McDannell, 2004, p.20). Then, following an investigation by Associated Press, the "Migrant Mother" (actually a Native American) herself, Florence Owens Thompson, spoke of the way Lange had exploited her. Since Thompson's death in 1983, her family (the children in the photograph)

have struggled to correct the myths and misconceptions that have grown up around Lange's image and Thompson herself (Dunn, 2002).

Ultimately, it can be argued that engagement with and understanding of a subject, leading to an honest representation, is more important than whether the furniture has been rearranged, and I should have been more concerned about Brandt's failure to do the former than with his tendency to do the latter. Nevertheless, Brandt's use of 'family and friends posing as characters in purportedly unmediated scenes' (Hacking) remains, in my view, a step too far in artifice.

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Assignment 5, Reworked



Fig. 1 *Welsh photographer after Brandt's Northumbrian coal miner*, June 2020



Fig. 2 Northumbrian coal miner eating his evening meal, 1937
© the estate of Bill Brandt

I mapped out my approach to Context and Narrative before beginning the course, largely in an effort to achieve some consistency and cohesiveness, noted to be lacking in my EyV submissions. The plan included writing about Bill Brandt's *Northumbrian coal miner...* for Assignment 4 as I had long regarded this as a striking and complex photograph. I also intended to create a response to the image for Assignment 5. When my tutor suggested producing a booklet (or zine), from my Assignment 3 output, this quickly grew into an extended piece about Brandt and about my changing awareness of the subjectivity of documentary photography as the course progressed.

While I was prepared at any time to abandon the Brandt plan for C&N, a better, more fluent set of ideas never came to mind and when virus restrictions were imposed for most of the course, the plan served my purpose well.

That I am drawn to such an image can be readily explained by my working class Welsh upbringing and coming to maturity during the period of Margaret Thatcher's closure of the mining industry. That conditioning triggers connoted associations for the image concerning the conditions endured by manual workers and their families in earlier times.

The specific denoted contents are numerous: the unwashed miner, the attentive partner, not eating; the hanging satchel; and the tilted picture whose subject peers round drying clothes. Most of these details can be contextualised, if not explained by: the poor provision of pit-head baths (Wright & Herrera, 2017); the size of homes in inter-war working class communities (GLA, 2011, p.13); and George Orwell's comments on hygiene priorities in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Delaney, 2004, p.134).

The 80 years that have passed since the photograph was taken have brought changes in perceptions of the genre and its subject matter. On documentary photography in general, images of social significance going back to Lewis Hine in the early 1900's are acknowledged to have played a part in bring about improvements in working conditions, nevertheless,

it is described pejoratively as ‘propaganda, albeit of a beneficent variety’ (Neighbour, 2013). There are parallels between Hine’s work for the National Child Labour Committee and Dorothea Lange’s output for the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s and, again, while some benefits arose from that project (Dupêcher, 2018) and Lange (1960) herself had fond memories of her work and specifically of the iconic, *Migrant Mother* photograph, more recent studies have questioned Lange’s treatment (both aesthetic and moral) of the subject, Florence Owens Thompson, and her family (Stein, 2020).

Turning specifically to Brandt’s image, the miner’s appearance, once a signifier of workers’ oppression, would now raise alternative sensitivities regarding *blackface*.

The portrayal of the secondary subject, presumably the miner’s wife, in a submissive role and without food would now be regarded as derogatory and an act of gender discrimination.

The role of even straightforward documentary and investigative photography is nowadays called into question, with subjective choices and judgments being recognised at every stage of the process from choice of subject, viewpoint, lighting, processing, picture selection and editing, titling and anchoring, display options, then the varying subjective perception of the viewing public. This is even more the case with Bill Brandt, who brought a performative approach to ostensibly documentary images (as noted in Assignment 4, he used ‘family and friends posing as characters in purportedly unmediated scenes of British social life’ (Blackburn, 2020)). Little has been written about his 1930s projects in Northern England (for example, they are barely mentioned in Delaney’s 336-page, 2005 biography), but it is assumed that the subject was a miner, not an actor.

I felt it appropriate when responding to Brandt’s coal miner to caricature or falsify every aspect of the image, beginning with the title, *Northumbrian coal miner*, which became *Welsh photographer*; both areas with mining associations, but in my case the job could not be denoted by per-

sonal physical appearance and so I replaced the meal with photographic paraphernalia. I then sought physical, photographic-ly-themed equivalents for every item depicted in Brandt's original: my wife sat beside me, holding a reflector which both balanced the chosen harsh, direct lighting on my face and enshadowed hers; the picture on the rear wall is a vintage Ensign Cameras poster; the largest camera bag to hand replaces the leather satchel; "drying" 35mm film replaces the drying washing; the table is cluttered with mixed-format analogue equipment, emphasised by the landscape format and low angle of view, including the coiled air-pressure cable release, controlled by my wife, thereby suggesting a partial rebalancing of the "relationship" and also a reference to other self portraits and questions of authorship raised in Assignment 3 .



Fig. 3 *The Set*

The pastiche continued with the exaggerated post-processing, choosing a faux-vintage finish in Nik Silver Efex preset, *Yellowed 2*.

Assessment criteria and Reflection

Quality: The concept was suitably complex and challenging.

Creativity: It was implemented imaginatively and with some flair.

Technically the image fulfils the assignment brief and my stated intention.

It is regrettable that there is no longer any imperative for physical prints.

Context: The analysis of the genre, the source image and of this response, especially in the rework, was thorough and to the point.

The project rounded off the course and consideration of Brandt quite effectively.

Reflection

The assignment specification asks for ‘a stand-alone image of your choice ... work that has been controlled and directed by you for a specific purpose’ (p.122). The project meets those criteria and resulted in an image of reasonable merit that complements other output on the course.

Aesthetically it is a satisfying outcome, although if I were reshooting, I would lose the reflector as it is too distracting and use a larger developing tank to substitute for the ceramic artefact in Brandt’s.

Morally / ethically / politically when the photographs are juxtaposed, attention is drawn to two aspects within Brandt’s, the living conditions of working families and the relationship dynamic within the family: in those terms the photograph succeeds.

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Postscript, Assignments 1 and 2

In the interests of completeness, although there was no Brandt connection, I will touch upon the work submitted for the first two assignments of the Context and Narrative course.

The first called for ‘two sets of photographs telling different versions of the same story’. My first idea was to contrast two religious faiths, ideally one ornamental, the other austere, but this foundered when, having photographed Southwark Cathedral, I failed to find a synagogue, mosque or temple that allowed interior photography.

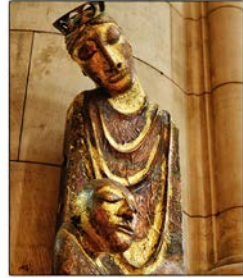


Fig. 1 Mary and Jesus, Southwark Cathedral



Fig. 2 Rodin, *John the Baptist*, V&A

I chose instead to show my body parts juxtaposed with similar bits of Rodin's *John the Baptist* at the V&A (fig. 2).

The images produced were a conscious reference to the work of John Coplans and, as noted, are the reason there was no Coplans in the self portrait assignment.



Fig. 3 *Hand and Thigh*, Assignment 1, January 2020

The second assignment was titled ‘Photographing the unseen’. My reading of this was to take photographs where this is not commonly done or is explicitly prohibited, although the subjects might not be intrinsically ‘unseen’. A case in point is the Houses of Parliament where photography



Fig. 4 Spy Pen
© Croydon Gadgets

is banned and personal cameras are not allowed into the chambers, and yet proceedings are routinely broadcast. I bought a £13.99 Spy Pen Camera (fig. 4) on eBay but, because photographing some of the subjects ostensibly covered attracts serious punishments, choose not to confirm whether I actually had done so and some of the output has been intentionally blurred beyond

indictable recognition.

The subjects chosen were a cinema screen, John Soane Museum, a chamber of Canterbury Cathedral, a urinal, a market stall, a Magistrates’ Court (perhaps) and the House of Commons (perhaps).

The original submission was one image from each (fig. 5), but my tutor suggested reworking the project in groups of three (fig. 6).



Fig. 5 *House of Commons* (perhaps), March 2020



Fig. 6 *Cinema*, March 2020

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All the photographs by other photographers are listed here. See the note on copyright in the Introduction.

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Miscellaneous notes

Referencing in the book is inconsistent. This is because I favour numbering, but Harvard-style is required for the course essays.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due:

to my tutor, Wendy McMurdo, for telling me to make a *zine* of assignment 3, which became this document.

to Ellen Lupton for editing *Indie Publishing*, a fine book.

to Robert Green for recovering T. J. Cobden-Sanderson's Doves Type from the Thames and then digitising it.

And finally

When I began this photography degree in June 2018, I wrote,

I am old, keen on photography and subject to gear lust. My main interest is in photographing statues and other public art: I intend to branch out into architectural photography.

In June 2020 I restated my now, more generalised goal,

To produce a visual representation of something that merits this attention in such a way as to do the subject justice.

All these judgments are necessarily subjective and the terms deliberately ambiguous.

Arising from my studies, I have developed an interest in three areas of photography, each in varying proportions of theoretical and practical endeavour, these are self portraits, photo-manipulation and the vernacular.

Of the projects created for course assignments so far, the only one likely to be pursued with any vigour is *Forbidden Zones*, Assignment 2 of C&N.

Regarding broader matters, one main and enduring failing in my coursework is lack of coherence and consistency, both thematic and stylistic.

Two leitmotifs are being applied consistently, adding a little conformity and a degree of branding to my output:

Every image for C&N is in 6x7 format, in tribute to perhaps the most pleasing camera of all time, the Pentax 67 (this applies to all my images produced in the past year or so, not just for the course).

I am also continuing, relentlessly, with my image border formatting, despite this being questioned by both tutors and in the EyV Final Assessment feedback. I have written extensively on the technical and aesthetic justifications for this, but ultimately it is merely a subjective choice of how a photograph should be *finished*. To me, a more interesting question is what image or series will cause me to stop using the border?

The website that represents my OCA degree work is another idiosyncrasy. I wrote to my tutor in the feedback exchange on Assignment 3,

On the ... question of website design, I will not over-dignify it by calling it a personal aesthetic, but I choose to present a reluctant web site that takes time to navigate and with images that do not swipe. While it is no doubt true that if a site does not engage a visitor within a few seconds they will scoot off elsewhere, that's fine with me. I would rather gradually infiltrate the web with content that lurks in the search engines and attracts occasional visitors serendipitously at various entry points.

Given that the virus has forced OCA to go digital for assignments and final assessments, I might have to create another, more easily navigable, smaller and simpler site purely for assessment purposes; I might even have to do it on Wordpress. If that is the case, so be it, but I intend to continue building a single labyrinthine site covering the whole of my degree.

The full site is at baphot.co.uk

The simpler and more easily navigable site has now been built for final assessment and exists as a sub-domain at cn.baphot.co.uk.

Nick Blackburn, London, July 2020



Bill Brandt, portrait by Laelia Goehr, 1945

