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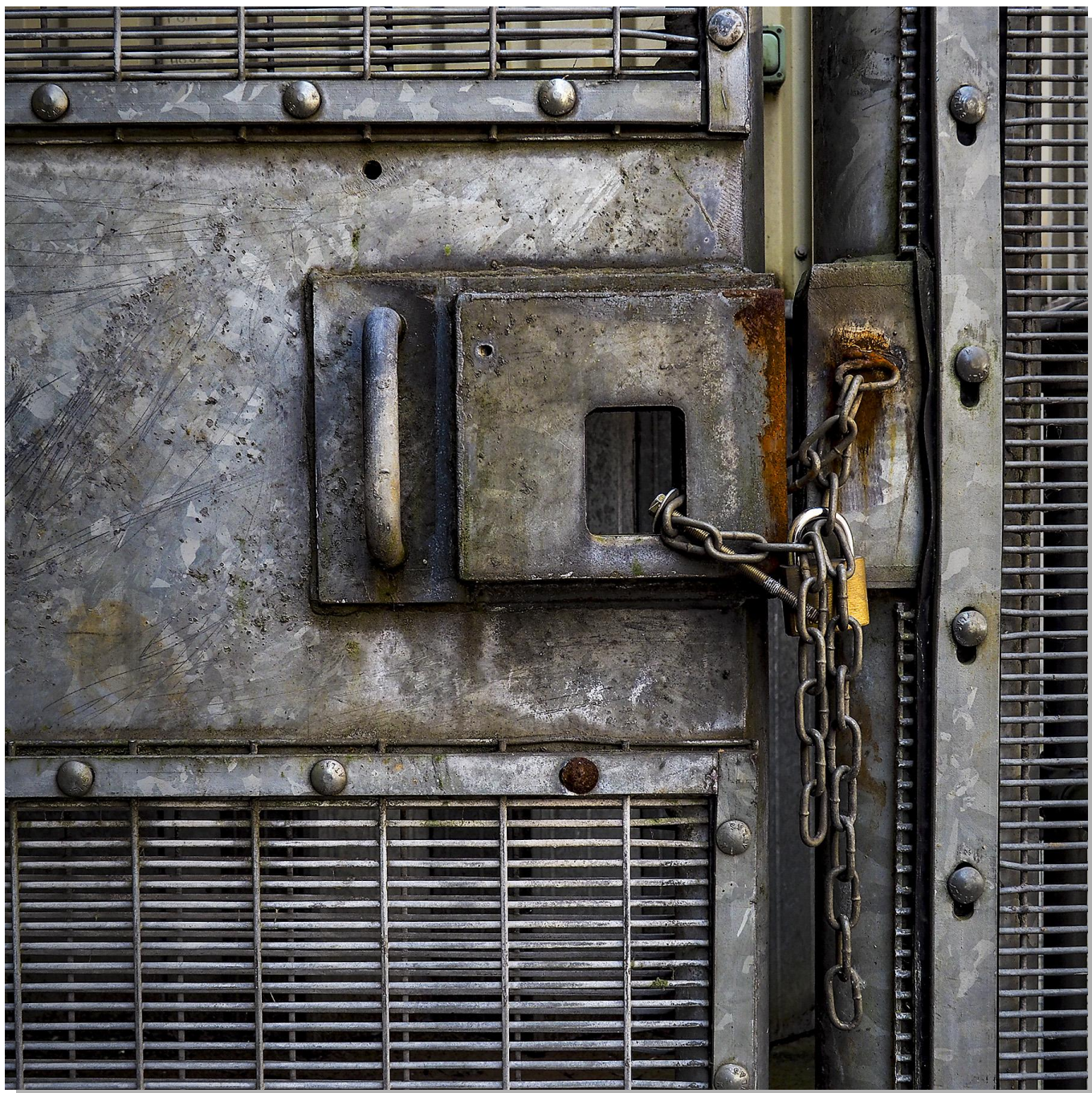
CONTEMPORARY
GROUP

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April 2020

The Newsletter of the Royal Photographic Society Contemporary Group



Editorial

Our front cover picture speaks with some eloquence about what many of us are currently experiencing. The Coronavirus has changed the lives of millions of us as we lock ourselves away, either partially or fully to avoid infection. That image taken by Ken Holland evokes, along with his others from the same series published in this issue, an experience of incarceration of a very different kind. In this case, life in a Victorian prison.

It's an example of how photography can both convey insights into the experience of people distant from us in time or space, and at the same time illuminate our own experience. We feature other photography in this issue that speaks powerfully about things both past and present. Mark Richardson's pictures of the Offa's Dyke long distance footpath show how our species casually despoils the natural environment, barely aware of it at the time. Brian Steptoe's series taken on Brighton's West pier over 20 years ago, depicts how far at the time this Victorian structure had fallen into disrepair before it was finally destroyed by fire in this century. In Alan Cameron's North West Report we have evocations both of central Manchester and India.

We here want to make Concept one of the go-to places to find great photography by members of the Contemporary Group. To that end we are working on ways to enlarge and improve some of the images so that they can be better savoured, as well as looking to improve general resolution. We hope you like the results so far. Inevitably it is possible there may be room for fewer pictures being featured but hopefully that is a price worth paying. We hope you enjoy the changes to the design and layout too.

Our current life under lockdown is producing an outburst of photographic creativity in many places. Not least in the RPS Contemporary Facebook group. If you are not yet a member of this photographic community do take a look.

Please contact us if you have comments about this issue, particularly concerning what you like and what you'd like to see more of. If you'd like to write for us please contact me about your idea.

Romney Tansley ARPS
Concept Editor

April 2020



In this issue

View from the Chair

What Next?

Shepton Mallet Prison

RPS Contemporary Group Postal Portfolio Scheme

SouthWest Contemporary Group

How Luck plays a Part

Contemporary NW Meeting report

About Concept

Cover photo
Shepton Mallet Prison Gate
© Ken Holland ARPS



View from the Chair

Alan Cameron LRPS

I am privileged to have taken over the Chair of the Contemporary Group from Avril Harris. She will be a hard act to follow.

There was a smaller than ideal gathering for our AGM in HQ early last month. Little did we realise that the doubts we had about holding the meeting would be amplified so significantly just a few days later.

Travel for most of us is now confined to our permitted daily walk. It seems almost that we were in another world two months ago when I came home from an incredible journey around parts of India. Suddenly one's horizons have become necessarily more constrained.

AGM Day

Despite the fact that few so few people attended, the AGM was extremely good. We quickly dispensed with our required business and at the end we made a presentation to Avril.

We presented her with a Photo book in appreciation of all that she has done for the group over many years. Those of us there were able to write our own messages of valediction, but I am delighted to say that people who could not come were able to send me some lovely messages of thanks. Avril, thank you so much. We hope you enjoy your photography for years to come.



Those of us who made it to Bristol were then enthralled by the talk given to us by Teresa Eng.

Teresa is an amazing person. When I say that we were enthralled, I almost said, "entertained," but that would not sum up Teresa's talk. She talked about her recent photo books, one of which arose out of her horrific experiences as a documentary photographer working in the infamous Calais Jungle.

Teresa was working on a project about displaced migrants when she was brutally attacked. This must have been an incredibly painful experience, both physically and psychologically, and difficult both to come to terms with and, even more so, to talk about with strangers.

Her slim book, *Speaking of Scars*, is a profound and moving journey from the attack to the trial of the perpetrators. She found that her photography, the thing that had led to her ordeal, became a way of dealing with her trauma. It became a coping mechanism, something that allowed her to manage the experience, and, as she puts it, "...to transform the unspeakable into a visible language." I have her book beside me on my desk and I find its message gets deeper with each viewing.

While I see from teresa-eng.com that *Speaking of Scars* is sold out, her books *China Dream* and *Self/Portrait Artists* are available.

In *China Dream* Teresa explores her reaction to China, her mother country, which she left when very young. We are presented with something that is familiar to the photographer through



contact with relations in Hong Kong, but is at the same time completely foreign to her. Images mix humanity, through close contact with people, and artefacts e.g. slogans cut into the leaves of succulent plants, with something that might have come from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. *Self/Portrait Artists* is, by contrast, a study in the behaviour of young Chinese people and their interaction through social media. In it Teresa contrasts the heavily retouched and stylised selfies taken by her subjects with how they really are. In their youth culture, it is expected that images posted on-line are created to be almost part of a fantasy world; so young women try to show themselves as prepubescent and the men as something more macho. Teresa's contrasting images reveal, in their stripped back reality, something more profound, and in some cases, much more beautiful than the creatures the selfie artists have created as if in a competition to infantilise themselves.



In the afternoon Teresa advised several of us on work that we had brought along with us. Ken Holland and David Grimshaw brought images to be included in panels, while Avijit Datta and I brought books. We all got to provide some input to what was a fun end to the day.

Thank you once again to Teresa for coming to speak to us, and to all of you who took the time to come to Bristol often from great distances.

Photography in the time of corona virus

We seem to be living the curse, "May you live in interesting times." Despite the way it is often introduced, this is not a Chinese curse, but whatever its origin, it seems to apply just as much as my appropriation of the title of Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the time of cholera*.



I do hope that your days in lockdown are not a barren wasteland of ennui. Suddenly the quotidian, the ordinary ability to go out, visit shops of our choosing, theatres, cinemas and restaurants, is something to be valued. Hardest of all is of course our inability to enjoy everyday contact with loved ones and friends, but I for one am trying to keep some sort of normal life going.

I intend to make those books that I've procrastinated over and maybe one will be good enough to submit for my ARPS. I am also trying to keep my local camera club going.

Next on the list is a Webex call with members so that we can meet in the ether. My Chairman's night is coming up and I'm going to try that on-line too. We'll miss the tea and biscuits of course, but you can sneak those in to your computer room.

I will also hold my next local CG meeting via the web, so that we can at least keep talking to one another.



I am trying to record photographically what I see on my exercise walks. When we see locked playgrounds we wonder how parents are explaining these to their children. But with Spring definitely sprung, trees in leaf and flowers in bloom, it's an opportunity to exercise our photographic muscle. It's also also a chance to take a personal record of something we hope never to see again.

Someone posed a question on Facebook about whether one was a pessimist, realist or optimist in these times. I tend towards the optimistic myself. I like to think that some of the ingenuity we exhibit during lockdown will remain and can continue to be used. I hope you do too and soon we shall see Happy Dayz again.

In the meantime, in the rallying call of our times - Take care.

Most of all, keep snapping,

Alan



What Next?

Mark Richardson LRPS

Having achieved my LRPS it seemed only natural to stay on the distinctions journey and go for my ARPS. Racking my brain I decided to set out on a long distance path. I would split it into 15 equal parts and shoot whatever I saw at each point.

Offa's Dyke long distance footpath runs within an hour of my home in Shropshire. It seemed the ideal subject and I would take photos every 12 miles. Starting at Prestatyn I was soon photographing whatever I could find. I had been warned that an idea can change when you embark on a photographic journey and so it was for me.

Wherever I walk on this route I invariably find man's 'footprint', whether in the form of plastic, soil erosion, leisure activities or sheer carelessness. I quickly changed my plan and decided to focus on that instead.

This is a really beautiful walk - running through areas of outstanding natural beauty and skirting the Brecon Beacons national park. But again and again you find violations of the natural environment. Why would a dog walker hang a bag of poo in a tree or a long-distance hiker pee in their water bottle and dump it by the side of the road? While thousands of walkers' feet have removed the soil and left a rocky path, deforestation has resulted in the sides of hills being washed away leaving only scree and bare rock.

The path follows roads through towns where rubbish overflows. Elsewhere static caravans, however well painted, blight the landscape.

When taking photos I have learnt to look up and down as well as in front of me and this often changes my perceptions about what's needed. Some of my pictures are intended for my final panel, others are just part of my exploration of our environmental impact. For me the overall message is that we need to see beyond the beauty and our own sense of achievement and ponder what we are doing to the landscape and environment.



Shepton Mallet Prison

Ken Holland ARPS

Nationwide lockdown, social distancing and virtual imprisonment: it all brings to mind a recent visit to Shepton Mallet Prison. First built in 1610, it housed Napoleonic prisoners, British and American servicemen, and more recently civilian prisoners, and closed in 2013. Now open to the public, prior to redevelopment, it is still largely as it was, and visitors are free to explore almost at will.



I tried to capture the feeling of incarceration in this forbidding place. And it would be easy to record just stark facts. But as I walked through the building it was as though I were an inmate. That is what I hope to convey here.

Off the oppressive large central space, the atmosphere in the cells with the doors closed is claustrophobic. The toilet facilities lack privacy, and the exercise yard exudes a grim malevolence. Razor wire is everywhere, and escape is nigh impossible.

Fortunately I was able to leave when I wished, which is more than I am able to do from my own home in April 2020!





RPS Contemporary Group Postal Portfolio Scheme

Duncan Unsworth

In this scheme we each circulate our images to other members, each of whom reviews and comments on what they have received. Unlike Instagram or Facebook this involves looking at prints or small books rather than on a screen, which many members of the scheme feel is a bonus.

The mechanics of the scheme are that there are two circuits with about 10 members in each, and four or five boxes in each circuit. On receiving a box you add some work but also comment on the work submitted by others. It is generally recommended that boxes are passed on to the next person on the list within three weeks, as it can take up to a year for the boxes to complete a circuit. During this period of lock-down we are also e-mailing each other pictures of our responses to the situation.



Provided the situation allows it there are plans for a group weekend later in the year.

The value of the box scheme can be seen in these words by Douglas May.

“Twenty years is a long time to be doing something and to be still having the same enthusiasm for it as when I started. For me photographs are for sharing and not for hiding away on my computer or as prints in drawers. As a contemporary photographer exploring subjects that interest me and writing about them is fulfilling. Circulating sets of photographs with the ideas behind them creates a sense of anticipation as to how others will react.

In our portfolio such reactions are measured and reasoned, often with members disagreeing with each other. It is good for me as a photographer to get an indication when I have got a point across and to contemplate why on other occasions I have not. It is also good to know that the comments are coming from those with a like-minded approach. It is stimulating to apply my mind to the work of others and to how to articulate a response. The form of the constructive criticism is challenging and a very enjoyable way to spend an evening.

The work that we see is very varied and I am amazed at the quality of it which I enjoy time after time. The portfolio is also a prompt for me to make work.

For details about the Postal Portfolio please contact Duncan
duncan.unsworth100@gmail.com



SouthWest Contemporary Group

Adrian Hough LRPS

The Group met on 1st March at Dartington in Devon, with seven members present.

The meeting began with a discussion of several items of business.

- The South-west Contemporary Group pages on the RPS website are still pending.
- The National Contemporary Group AGM is due to be held on 14th March, however, bookings are currently low and one of the booked speakers for the afternoon has withdrawn.
- Ken Holland asked the group for its opinion on a proposed revised format for 'Concept', something which found favour. The deadline for copy is still the first of the month for publication the following month.
- There was an initial discussion on the possibility of a SW Contemporary Group book and/or exhibition. This will be taken further at the next meeting..
- There was a general discussion on the assessment of distinction panels.

The rest of the meeting was occupied with a consideration of the wide range of work which had been brought along by members.

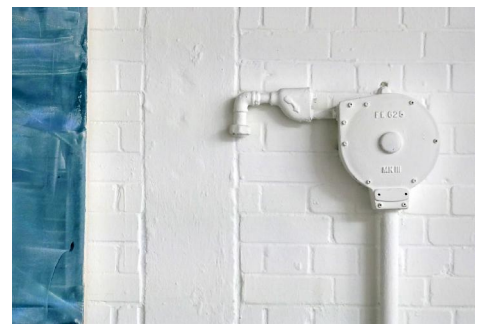
The first prints were the work of Vivian Howse who showed a work in progress which consisted of a stunning set of mounted A3+ prints of trees and woodland in a variety of

styles: colour, monochrome; split toning; and selenium.

Ken Holland showed a series of mini-panels of five prints, some monochrome and some colour, showing Shepton Mallet Prison, Auschwitz; Furniture in Abstract, Mediterranean street-scenes and Jazz.



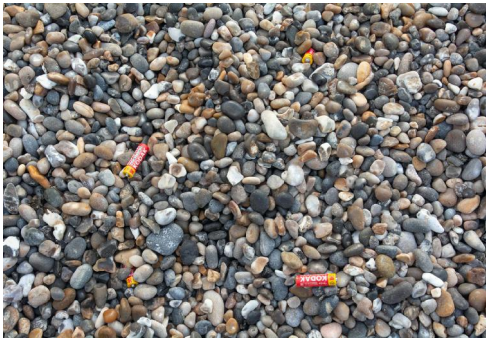
John Evan-Jones showed a range of images in which he viewed Art Galleries themselves as an art-form. In these he focussed on galleries which were adapted buildings rather than purpose built. One particularly fascinating aspect of the work was the detail which remained from their original use, such as pipes, switch-gear and brick-work and how this provided a fascinating juxta-position with the actual art-work.



Martin Howse (using conventional darkroom printing) showed two sets of prints. The first was a set of rock-formations taken during the 'Blow away the cobwebs' meeting of the South-west RPS region in January. Unfortunately, Rod Fry was unable to be with us and so we were unable to put his geological expertise to use in analysing the rock strata.



Martin's second set were context portraits of former pupils of the 'Green School' at Helston, all taken in their home environment on monochrome film with his 6x7 roll-film camera.



Adrian Hough also showed two sets of images, the first were all taken in the space of 45 minutes on a local pebble beach two weeks earlier and depicted the various items which had been left as litter or washed up. The second set were a few images taken from his collection from Greenland, but now printed and edited.

Finally, Graham Hodgson showed us his work in which he written limericks and then inserted them into photographs of various appropriate locations as if they were actually a part of the local landscape.

Having completed the viewing of printed images, the meeting turned to the important matter of food and drink, during which much was also discussed. Lunch completed, it was then the turn of the projected image.

Vivian had two sets. The first was an exploration of a magnolia tree, moving closer and closer into the detail. The second set was a well-known Cornish Garden in which various areas of plants had been covered in some form of bio-degradable woven material to protect them during the winter. The plants were now breaking through and the material was beginning to decay.

John had recently been to Tenerife, narrowly avoiding both the sandstorms and Coronavirus quarantine. The images had been taken at various times during the previous seven years and showed various aspects of life which don't make the tourist brochures. These included mock arty tourist pictures; dumped rubbish and things surrounded by red segregation netting; buses; unfinished buildings from 2008, now abandoned and already starting to decay; and images which showed that Health and Safety was not a particularly high priority for many people.

Carol had recently been honing her technique by studying shadows in other people's images and then producing and looking back for examples of her own work.

Ken had several further sets of five images, including one set where everything apart from a key person has had their colour desaturated and one showing places from his childhood.

Finally, Graham led us through a humorous yet serious (as well as philosophical and ethical) consideration of whether the use of images from google-earth could be considered to be genuinely the work of the person who compiled the images.

The Group will next meet on Sunday 12th July, again in Dartington. Any Contemporary Group members who is interested in coming along should contact Adrian Hough at contemporarysw@rps.org



How Luck plays a Part

Brian Steptoe FRPS

In April 1999 I made a trip to Brighton. I found that visits to the remains of Brighton's West Pier were possible, with the proviso that a hard hat was to be worn and that a disclaimer of responsibility for any personal injury was signed. At that time, hopes were high for restoration of the pier, although these were later doomed by fire destroying all but a few metal parts of the structure. At that date the pier was Grade 1 listed by English Heritage and stated to be a Building at Risk. The pier was designed by Eugenius Birch and built from 1863-66. I was one of a small group touring the pier, led by a guide from English Heritage.





Contemporary NW Meeting Report

Alan Cameron LRPS

The meeting was held at Samlesbury War Memorial Hall 7th March 2020. Three members were present and apologies received from four members.

Website

We discussed the CNW website where the renewal fees are due in May and that of the Royal.

Alan has heard from Andy who would like to relinquish control of the website, which has very little new content for some time.

Although John has said that he would like to see the website continue, those present felt that the passive nature of a website made it less attractive than it once was.

It was agreed that there should be a public Facebook Group for CNW. Alan will set it up and make Nigel and Admin. (NB. Group created on 13th April.)

Work for discussion

All three attendees brought some images for discussion.

Brian Williams followed on from our previous meeting with a series taken on Oxford Road in Manchester on a cold winter's morning. All Brian's images were shot in one session and captured the expressions and garb of the cyclists very well. We wondered how effective the cycle helmets would be with a woolly hat underneath it.

Nigel Richards has recently helped his daughter move into a new flat in Salford, not far from where Romney lives. He chose to go out on a misty evening and to capture the feeling engendered by the cold and the mist.

The work engendered some debate about what constituted Contemporary Photography and whether there were rules about what did and what did not constitute contemporary image making.

Nigel had had a debate with a judge at his camera club who decreed that our work was not "Contemporary Photography."

We all agreed that circumscribing contemporary photography somewhat missed the point as capturing the mood of somewhere or some point in time in a series of photographs fits nicely with whatever definition one wants to append.

Alan's contribution reflected the chaotic road of northern India. The ubiquitous tuk-tuk of course featured. The first image showed an over-loaded urban tuk-tuk careening around a



roundabout outside the park where the Taj Mahal is found. This was made more real by viewing a short video which barely captured the noise and apparent lack of rules. In the countryside of Rajasthan travellers come across agricultural vehicles powered by water pump engines. These are often gaily decorated and will carry workers and produce around the country at a sedate pace. The owners apparently pay no road tax on these vehicles and they only seem to occur in this state.

Buses are a common sight in India and unlike the railways which no longer permit it, passengers travelling on the roof are frequently seen.

On the outskirts of Jaipur the car was stopped at a level crossing just behind one of the local buses and it appeared that the passengers were climbing down its back. The travellers could see a gate of girders with a top bar at the height of the bus roofs which meant that all the people had to dismount. Behind that were the overhead electrical cables for the trains, hence the gate and the need to get down. One man could be seen climbing down the side of the bus only to disappear in a window to find a seat inside.

Date of the next meeting

The next meeting was set for Saturday 2nd May at 13.00.





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Next issue: due for publication mid-June 2020

Articles and features:

please send to Romney Tansley by 1st June

romney@tansley.co.uk

text in Word format,

images in jpg format max 2Mb

A higher resolution version of this newsletter can be found at:

RPS

https://issuu.com/royalphotographicsociety/docs/concept_april_2020_hi_res

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