

## **Contextual Framework for ‘Lifting the Curtain’**

As a photographic work, ‘Lifting the Curtain’ is multilayered. At its heart it is essentially documentary. The photographs record the urban landscape of East London as it is today but also evoke a sense of the past, revealing remnants of older phases of urban development mixed in with present day architecture, signage and ‘street furniture’.

It is also a conceptual work. By choosing locations visited by Charles Booth and his associates when conducting their socio-cultural survey in late Victorian times and juxtaposing historic texts from Booth’s survey with the photographs, I offer up a comparison of the past and present. My intention is to illustrate the transient nature of the urban scene in East London and at the same time to engage the viewer/reader in imagining the past events and to invite them to consider a range of social issues – both past and present.

My decision to make the photographs at night and in the early morning is also part of the conceptual framework. The absence of people and the dramatic lighting give the images the feel of an empty ‘theatrical stage’ onto which the viewer is invited to project the scenes witnessed by Booth (as set out in his texts). The absence of people and deep shadows in the photographs also serve as metaphors for the transience of life and people passed and give the work a psychological charge. The link between shadows and the past is echoed in the East London scene by Horace’s quotation ‘Umbra Sumus’ or ‘We are Shadows’ which is to be found on a plaque above the entrance to the former Huguenot Church (now a Mosque) on Brick Lane in Spitalfields.

Given the multilayered nature of the work it is perhaps not surprising that I have been influenced by both documentary and conceptual photographers/artists. In this paper I set out my thoughts on these influences with reference to documentary, conceptual and aesthetic considerations. I also discuss the critical underpinning of the work, which relies on Barthes’ ideas on photographic meaning, and Eco’s concepts of openness in works of art.

## **Photographic Influences**

### **Documentary Photography**

A key early influence, which perhaps set me on the path to making ‘Lifting the Curtain’, was Joel Sternfeld’s ‘On this Site’. (1) Sternfeld describes the work as documenting a “list of places [he] cannot forget because of the tragedies that identify them.” (2) Sternfeld visited the places where these tragedies, such as murders and environmental disasters, took place and photographed the scenes, which most often bears little evidence of what took place there. The photographs are shown alongside brief somewhat terse texts that explain what happened at each location. The juxtaposition of the text invites the audience to engage with the photographs as memorials to the past events and to use their imagination to visualize what took place there.

David Gillanders’ work ‘uncivilised’ is another influence. (3) It is a series of photographs of the places where murders took place. The images were combined with texts from court transcripts and newspaper articles. Gillanders’ texts are narratives, which describe the sequences of events that led to the murders. Whilst the images show no traces of what took place there, the texts prompt the viewer to imagine the gruesome scenes. The images are in black and white and are dark and moody. The text and image is presented side by side as part of the same panel and the text is styled to look like the font of a typewriter, referencing the official source of the material. (See Figure One) A number of elements from Gillanders’ work gave me food for thought, in particular his ideas of including the text alongside the image

as a single integrated artwork, using stylized text font to reference the source of the material and his decision to use a moody aesthetic for the photograph to engage the viewer psychologically.



Figure One: *uncivilised* image/text panel David Gillanders

Simon Norfolk's *Bleed* is about the ethnic cleansing which took place in Bosnia in the 1990s. (4) A peculiar feature of this war was that those committing these atrocities were very aware that they could well be brought to account for their 'war crimes'. Many of the victims of the mass killings were moved from their initial burial places to secondary sites, in an effort to cover up the crimes. Norfolk photographed known sites of secondary mass graves. The images are accompanied by extended captions that explain what happened at these sites. Many of the photographs are close ups of patterns in the frozen ice and snow of the landscape. (See Figure Two) There is no evidence of the past events. Norfolk plays on the idea that the lack of evidence in the photographs is a metaphor for the way in which the perpetrators sought to hide their crimes. Norfolk's work demonstrates that even a photograph of a scene that is essentially an abstract landscape can serve as a site for contemplation of past events and shows how metaphor can be used (as part of a conceptual design) to convey complex ideas.

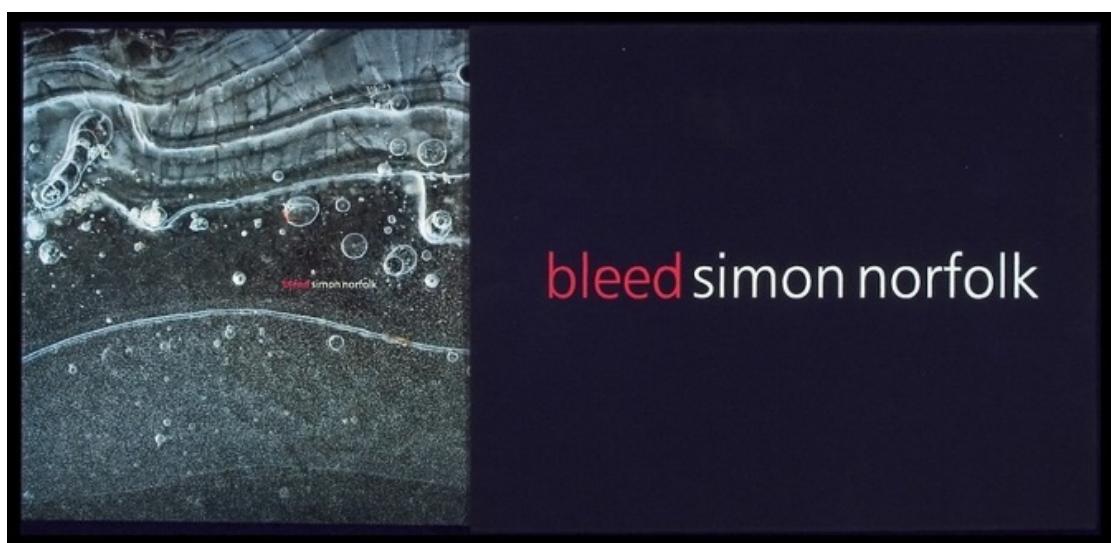


Figure Two: Book cover *Bleed* Simon Norfolk

Chloe Dewe Mathews' *Shot at Dawn* is a more recent work published in 2014. (5) In this series of photographs/texts Mathews revisits places where captured deserters were shot during the First World War. The photographs are accompanied by texts giving the location, the names of the soldiers executed and the time and date of the execution. As with the works of the other photographers above, there is little or no trace of the executions in the present day photographs. I recently had the benefit of listening to Mathews speak at the Brighton Photo Biennial. She talked about how we project what we know about a place into an image and search for signs of these associations. She also commented that the absence of people in the images speaks to the absence/death of the people fatally connected to these places. The multilayered nature of her work is something that I am seeking to achieve with 'Lifting the Curtain'. I was also interested in the way she has chosen to present the work. In her book for example a great deal of space is given over to the text to avoid it being swamped by the larger, colourful photographs. She places the text on the right hand pages of the book. (See Figure Three) This unconventional approach ensures that the text is the first thing that the reader sees.

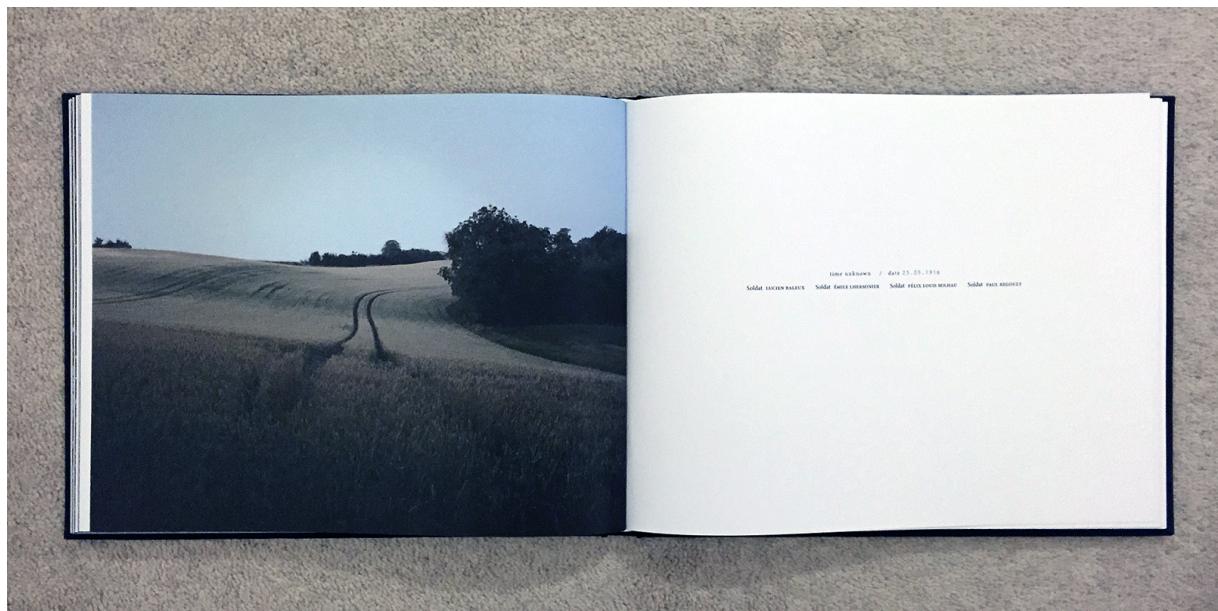


Figure Three: *Shot At Dawn* book design Chloe Dewe Mathews

### Conceptual Photography

As I said earlier, it is my intention that 'Lifting the Curtain' should invite the viewer to consider social issues. In view of this I decided to research the work of conceptual artists who use photographs and text to explore political, social and cultural questions.

I started with Victor Burgin, who was an early practitioner in this genre, but I found his work very complex and difficult. Many of his series require prior knowledge of his references to enable the work to be understood in his terms (albeit understanding the work in his terms is not a necessary requirement). His work frequently references Freud for example. Looking at Burgin's work made me realise that there is a risk with conceptual work that the viewer/reader will get lost and give up.

I moved on from Burgin to consider other artists and have been most influenced by Karen Knorr and Anna Fox.

Karen Knorr has been a practising photographer in the UK since the early 1970s. Her work in the late 1970s and early 80s was concerned primarily with class relations and cultural values. *Belgravia* (1979-1981) for example is a 'series of black and white photographs with ironic and humorous texts that highlighted aspirations, lifestyle and the British class system under the neo liberalist Thatcher era in the late 70's and early 80's' (6) Her series *Gentlemen* (1981-1983), which was photographed in St James's clubs in London investigates the patriarchal and conservative values of Britain at the time of the Falklands war. These series work well because of the subtle interplay and resonances between image and text. Knorr's work is not concerned with the places depicted in her photographs, but rather what they stand for and the values and aspirations of the people associated with such places.

The photographs and text are shown on panels with the image at the top and text below. Ample space is allowed for the text, which complements rather than anchoring the meaning of the images (see comments on Barthes's idea of text in relay below). Knorr works on the presentation of the text to emphasise key words and phrases. She does this by the way she breaks up the text, line by line, by her choice of font and by choosing to use capital letters for certain words. In *Gentlemen* Knorr constructed the texts from parliamentary speeches and news reports, refashioning them to convey her intentions. She goes to some length to make the texts not look like captions. In fact they look rather like poems. This serves to distance the text from the anchoring role that the caption fulfills in the media.

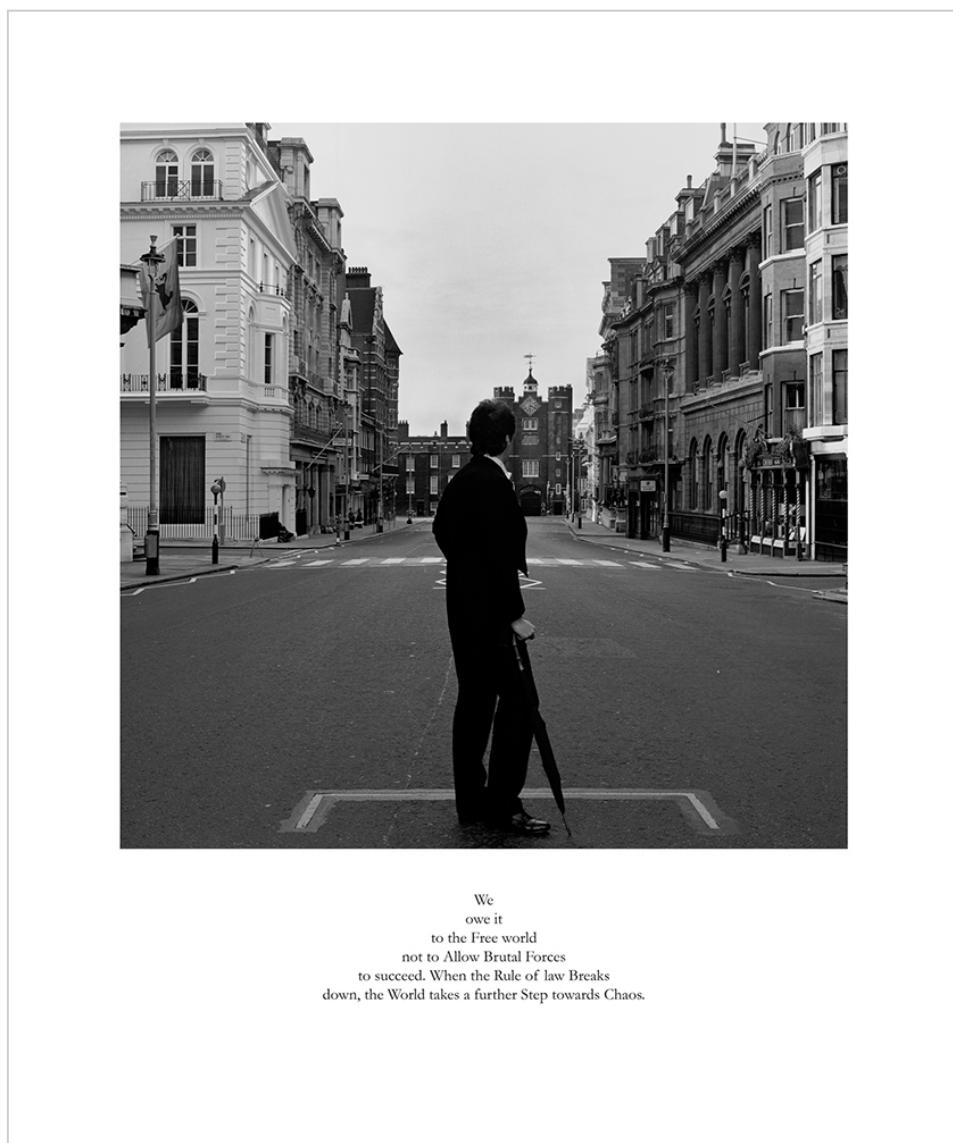


Figure Four: *Gentlemen* Karen Knorr

Anna Fox is another British conceptual/documentary photographer who in her early career worked extensively with image and text. She too was concerned with social issues and cultural values. Her series *Work Stations* for example tackled the highly competitive nature of work in Thatcher's Britain. (7) Her series *My Mother's Cupboards* I found particularly interesting. This small work is about the claustrophobic relationship between her mother and father. Fox's approach to presenting such a complex and intangible subject is both effective and amusing. She juxtaposes quotations from her father with photographs of excessively fastidious drawers and cupboards maintained by her mother. Her father's words are generally outrageous and often profane. The photographs are quiet, neat and ordered. The violent quotations are presented in a florid italic font, which is presented in silver, rather like on a wedding invitation. This lures in the unwitting reader, only to find that the words are most often a violent invective. The work is presented as a small book and a great deal of space is allocated for the text. The images are small and in a way appear to be dominated by the text. All of this conveys much about the relationship between Fox's two parents.



Figure Five *My Mother's Cupboards* Anna Fox

My research of the work of Knorr and Fox has demonstrated how through considered use of image and text it is possible to convey intangible ideas and raise questions about cultural and social values and to present an open dialogue requiring the active involvement of audience to create meaning. I also learned that for image/text works to be successful, careful consideration needs to be given to the spatial relationship between the image and text and that fine details such as how the text is divided up and the nature of the font used are very important.

#### Aesthetic Considerations

As I explained above as part of my conceptual design I decided that I would make the photographs at night or in the early morning. In order to explore how this approach might work I spent some time looking at the work of other photographers who have made series of images shot at night or in twilight.

Simon Norfolk has again been a particular influence. In his work *Burke and Norfolk* he shot many of the photographs in the early morning light giving them a blue tone, which one gets when making photographs during twilight. (8) (See Figure Six) He has expressed the view that this is a deliberate strategy which represents 'an expression of disappointment: he sees a country laid to waste by 10 years of futile occupation, and he sees the violent imposition of imperialist values'. (9) Here the aesthetic approach links directly to the underlying concept, just as I am hoping to achieve with *Lifting the Curtain*.



Figure Six: *Burke + Norfolk* Simon Norfolk

Another photographer who has made photographic series involving nighttime photography to convey mood is Todd Hido. In his series *House Hunting* Hido presents a series of photographs of apparently innocuous houses. (10) The images were all made at night and the benign houses are transformed into psychologically charged places. There is a sinister feeling about the photographs which is hard to place and the lights in the houses invite speculation about what is going on in there – behind closed doors. Looking at Hido's work reinforced my view that making the images for *Lifting the Curtain* at night or in the early morning would add a psychological charge to the photographs.



Figure Seven: *House Hunting* Todd Hido

One of the consequences of deciding to photograph in low light is that the lighting in the images is dramatic, with a strong chiaroscuro effect, high contrast, saturated colours and deep shadows. People viewing the photographs have called them 'beautiful' but I am not sure that I would use that term. Some might feel that it is inappropriate to use 'beautiful' images for subjects dealing with human suffering and such like (my work deals with subjects such as poverty, exploitation of labour, ghettos, immigration and so on). I don't subscribe to this school of thought. My sense is that one can only communicate if one gains the attention of the viewer/reader and that a key tool that the photographer has to achieve this end is to produce images that are aesthetically strong. The contrast between the 'beauty' of the images and the 'ugliness' of the texts creates a tension that I believe makes the work more effective.

### **Critical Underpinning**

#### *Barthes Image Music Text*

My starting point when considering the critical underpinning for my work was Barthes's seminal essay *Rhetoric of the Image* published in his book *Image Music Text*. (11) His comments on how image and text work with one another in what he calls the advertising image are particularly relevant. He points out that text can be both denotive and connotive, containing both a literal and symbolic message. At the literal level the text 'replies ....to the question: *what is it?*' (5) At the symbolic level the 'linguistic message no longer guides identification but interpretation'. (12)

Barthes describes the most frequent use of the linguistic message as anchorage and in this form the text 'directs the reader through the signifiers of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others'. (13) This is the form most commonly found in press and advertising where the creator is seeking to direct interpretation. He also refers to text used in 'relay', where text and image stand in a 'complementary relationship....and the unity of the message is realised at a higher level, that of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis...'. (14) This is exactly how I hope my use of text and image in *Lifting the Curtain* will operate. My intention is that the text will prompt the viewer/reader to imagine the scene that Charles Booth witnessed and to project this narrative onto the 'empty stage' of the image.

He points out that 'the two functions [anchorage and relay] of the linguistic message can co-exist in one iconic whole'. (15) It is likely that this will apply in the case of my image/text presentation for *Lifting the Curtain*. The text will not only stimulate visualisation of the 'story' but also cause the viewer to fix interpretation of certain signifiers in the scene.

Barthes goes on to discuss the unprecedented nature of photography as a form of representation. In particular he concludes that photography creates 'a new space-time category: spacial immediacy and temporal anteriority offering an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and *there-then*'. (16) This capacity of a photograph to invoke a sense of history is relevant to *Lifting the Curtain*, where my aim is to encourage the reader/viewer to imagine past events.

*Rhetoric of the image* is a term coined by Barthes to refer to the way in which images create meaning through connotation. Barthes points out that connoted meaning will vary from person to person depending on their knowledge (practical, national, cultural, aesthetic and so on). Whilst admitting that this leads to ambiguity in meaning for photographs (polysemy), Barthes sees no problem with this. He suggests that the language of the image comprises the totality of all meanings.

He goes on to discuss the difficulty in analysing connotation because of the absence a universal language for interpreting signifiers. Clearly, my own image/text pairings for *Lifting the Curtain* will be subject to different interpretations depending on the background of the particular viewer/reader. I am totally comfortable with this. Indeed, my intention is that the work is open to interpretation and needs the active

participation of the viewer/ reader to create meaning. I will return to this point when I discuss Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* and its relevance for *Lifting the Curtain* below.

In a second essay *The Photographic Message* Barthes once again talks about the interplay between text and the photograph in the press. (17) He suggests that the 'image no longer illustrates the words' but that the text is a 'parasitic message designed to connote the image'. (18) He also suggests that the effects of connotation varies according to the way in which the text is presented – 'The closer the text is to the image the less it seems to connote it,' (18) He singles out the caption in particular as being so close to the image as to be overwhelmed by the denotive power of the photograph. These observations are highly relevant to the way I organise image and text in my presentation of *Lifting the Curtain*. I do not want the text to appear as a caption, but rather as a separate piece of information to connote the image 'to quicken it with one or more second-order signifieds'. (19) I need to think through how I arrange the image and text within the image/text frame or other means of presentation. Barthes comments reinforce the observations I made above on the work of Karen Knorr and Anna Fox where it is clear that they have carefully considered the spatial arrangement of image and text.

#### Eco *The Open Work*

I have also been much influenced in my thinking about *Lifting the Curtain* by Umberto Eco's ideas of 'openness' in works of art as set out in his seminal work *Opera Aperta* (The Open Work) and in particular by his Essay *Poetics of the Open Work*. (20)

In this essay Eco begins by defining what he means by 'openness'. He refers to the conventional application of the term, in which an author (artist) 'arrange[s] a sequence of communicative efforts in such a way that each individual addressee can refashion the original composition as devised by the author' [my underlining] (21). In Eco's terms 'openness' is about works that are open in a 'far more tangible sense' (22). Such works are 'quite literally unfinished' (23) and require the active participation of the audience to derive their meaning. Eco gives several examples of musical works that fit with his view of 'openness', such as Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*, Boulez's *Third Sonata for Piano*. In these pieces the composers allow the performer to select from a series of note groupings or to choose the sequence in which sections of music are played.

Published in 1962, Eco's ideas on 'openness' anticipate major themes in critical thinking which gained precedence from the mid-sixties onwards — the ideas of plurality/polysemy in art and the death of the author (or conversely the rise of the reader). The conventional view prevailed in his native Italy at the time was that of Croce, who viewed art as a mental phenomenon in which ideas are communicated from the mind of the artist to the spectator without change — Eco was radically opposed to this.

Eco was greatly influenced by his interaction with avant-garde artists and by his study of James Joyce. He considered that traditional art forms lead to representation of a conventional view of the world. He sees the 'open work' as an appropriate response to the modern world. Traditional art reflected the 'conception of the cosmos as a hierarchy of fixed, pre-ordained orders'. (24) 'Openness' on the other hand offers an experience much more analogous with our experience of the modern world in which life is less ordered and there is great skepticism of metanarratives. Once again Eco appears to be anticipating later philosophical thought — in this case Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*.

Eco perceives an 'open work' as essentially ambiguous, offering a range of potential meanings. However, he also says that a successful 'open work' must produce 'controlled disorder' (25), in which the author offers 'the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work *to be completed*' but which 'remains the world intended by the author'. (26) Eco gives the example of Brecht's plays, which he views as open works. He suggests that they appear to 'elicit free and arbitrary response' from the audience. (27), but are constructed so that any response is directed towards Brecht's Marxist view of the world.

Eco also points out that we should not imagine that openness operates only at the level of indefinite suggestion and stimulation of an emotional response. In this regard he once again refers to Brecht's plays which 'offer a series of facts to be observed', but do not 'devise solutions'. The solution is seen to come from the 'collective enterprise of the audience'. (28)

Eco's idea of 'openness' is an important underpinning in my strategy for *Lifting the Curtain*. I see the images and texts as 'facts to be observed' (as per Eco's view of Brecht's Epic Theatre) requiring the active participation of the viewer/reader to determine meaning. My strategy is to direct the viewer/reader to consider particular issues in both past and modern contexts, but not to tell him/her what conclusions to reach.

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