# OPEN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS PHOTOGRAPHY 3: YOUR OWN PORTFOLIO

## LIFTING THE CURTAIN PRESENTATION STRATEGY AND APPROACH

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This paper documents my proposals for presenting *Lifting the Curtain*. It forms my submission to my tutor for Assignment Five of the Photography 3: Your Own Portfolio course. I set out my overall strategy for presenting 'Lifting the Curtain', along with detailed proposals for designing and producing a book and an exhibition. The paper concludes with my plans for implementation.

## **Presentation Strategy**

I was very taken by this observation by Angela Kelly in her essay Book, Exhibition, Lecture, Website – Revisiting Catharsis: Images of Post-Conflict Belfast (1) which I read recently:

The photographer in the digital age no longer needs to work towards a single material form or end point. Work may gain new traction long after it was first conceived or developed. Each new context can suggest a new audience or can lead to a new interpretation of the work...

As Kelly suggests, the presentation form for 'Lifting the Curtain' need not be restricted to a single format. I should also be open to reconsidering the form of presentation over time should new opportunities and venues emerge for showing the work. So my strategy as presented in this paper should be viewed as a starting point. Other opportunities may arise in the future.

It is clearly important that the form of presentation fits with the concept/strategy for the work and enhances its overall impact. 'Lifting the Curtain' relates Charles Booth's 1889 socio-cultural survey to modern day East London. One way I could strengthen this link further is to echo the way in which Booth presented his work. This took three forms:

- i. A book in 1902-3 the final version of his work covering the whole of London was published in seventeen volumes.
- ii. A display of his Descriptive Map of London Poverty, 1889 this was a huge display some 16 feet across. The map was exhibited at both Toynbee Hall and Oxford House in East London (both were philanthropic organisations helping the poor).
- iii. A lecture format Booth gave a series of lectures about his work.

This would suggest that the book format, displays of prints and a lecture format are the most appropriate forms. All three offer the potential for a design that encourages the type of interaction I am hoping for between the viewer/reader and the work. They allow juxtaposition of image and text to encourage the viewer/reader to connect them; image and text can be displayed so as to give each equal prominence and the reader/viewer controls how much time to spend viewing the work and is able to move backwards and forwards between image and text. These design elements encourage active and thoughtful engagement of the viewer/reader.

I therefore decided to base my presentation strategy on an exhibition of prints, and a book. The lecture format I will put to one side at the moment. I see this something that might follow on from successful publication of the book and staging of the exhibition, as was the case for Booth.

Whilst these are the forms of presentation I plan to use, an effective strategy must also tackle the difficult challenge of creating an audience for my work.

Throughout his survey Booth and his team used Toynbee Hall Settlement in Spitalfields, East London as their headquarters. Several of Booth's 'secretaries' were members there. Toynbee Hall is still going strong today and its vision remains 'To eradicate all forms of poverty'. I believe that linking the presentation of my work with Toynbee Hall offers a unique opportunity for me both to create an audience for my work and at the same time to do something to help the fight against poverty in East London. My idea is to use 'Lifting the Curtain' to raise money for Toynbee Hall through sales of a book and prints. I would pay for the printing and book production and any funds raised would go to the Toynbee Hall charitable foundation.

I have spoken to Toynbee Hall and they are very happy to work with me on this. I have been very clear with them that using my work to as a fundraiser is in both their interests and mine. I hope to raise money for them and at the same time promote my work.

## **Book Format**

Many factors need to be considered when designing and publishing a book. What physical form should it take? How should it be structured and sequenced? What method of production should be used? How should the book be sold and so on? My thoughts on these matters are set out below.

## Structure and Sequence

I decided to organise the book into three parts: an introduction incorporating a foreword written by Toynbee Hall and an artist's statement written by me; the main body comprising of the images and texts; and a reference section giving details of the sources of the texts and maps showing the locations of the photographs. The introduction presents a contextual framework within which the work should be viewed. The main body presents the work itself and the reference section provides additional data to enable an interested viewer/reader to interact with the work in a more informed manner and validates the integrity of the texts used.

I have deliberately kept the introductory paragraphs brief. Inclusion of the foreword by Toynbee Hall adds weight to the work and positions the relationship between Toynbee Hall and Charles Booth. [I am currently in the process of getting Toynbee Hall's agreement to write the foreword. They are reviewing my draft and I am hopeful that they will agree.] My artist's statement explains my interest in East

London, how I came to discover Charles Booth's survey and the nature of the work itself, i.e. juxtaposition of modern day urban landscapes with historic texts drawn from Booth's survey. It does not comment on the fact that the images were made at night and early mornings when no one was around. My intention was that the absence of people and the dramatic lighting would give the images the feel of an 'empty theatrical stage' onto which viewers are 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 past and give the work a psychological charge. I allow the viewer to form their own views on this during their interaction with the work.

In the main body I present each image/text pairing on opposing pages of a two page spread with both the image and the text centered on their respective page. I have chosen to present the text on the right hand page and the image on the left. This is contra to normal conventions and is an idea I got from looking at Chloe Dewe Mathews' book 'Shot at Dawn' (2). This emphasises the importance of the text, as the eyes of the Western viewer will fall naturally on the right hand page first. It also further differentiates the text from a normal caption which most often is subordinated to its image by the way it is placed on the page (below the image or on the left hand page or at the rear of a book). The text is centre justified and broken up/arranged so as to further differentiate it from a caption and draw attention to its autonomous status. This also allowed me to place emphasis on key words at the end of each line — an approach used by both Karen Knorr (3) and Anna Fox (4) in their image/text works. Finally, I decided to use Roman Antique font as this closely mirrors the font used in Booth's book. This style also connotes the past.

The narrative flow of the book takes the form of a series of episodes (from both past and present). I decided to start the book with a photograph of a point of arrival – a landing stage on the Thames where many of East London's immigrants would have arrived in Booth's day. The associated text comments on the perception of immigrants. I return to the river for my final image that looks out across the river to the Docklands development at Canary Wharf with a text commenting on the outcomes of re-development. In sequencing the image/text pairings between these points I have grouped them according to the social issues to which they relate – housing, working conditions, class and race relations, poverty, crime, social relations and redevelopment. Where there is more than one image/text dealing with a particular social issue I have used my aesthetic judgment to decide on sequencing. By grouping in this way I hope to emphasise through repetition the nature of each social issue under consideration.

## Physical Form of Book

There are several ways in which a book such as 'Lifting the Curtain' could be produced: as a handmade 'artists' book, as a folio of prints with associated texts or as a conventional book. For each there are many detailed parameters to be determined, size, aspect ratio, hard/soft cover, type of paper, type of binding etc.

My use of the book format is intended to echo Booth's original presentation approach, which included publishing his work as a conventional hardback book. The availability of on-line book printing services such as **blurb.com** also makes short run book publication relatively economic. As I intend to produce around 35 copies (30 for sale and 5 for my own purposes) the facility to produce multiple copies, relatively quickly and at reasonable cost is very important. My total inexperience in producing handmade books and folios and very high cost of commissioning the production of books/folios in 'one-off' form rather precluded these options in any event. I therefore decided to produce the book in conventional hardback form and as I already had first hand experience of **blurb.com** I decided to use this service for its production.

The next question I considered was the size of the book. I judged it critical that the images in the book are of a size that enables the viewer to see important elements clearly in order to appreciate the subtle interplay between image and text. For example, in the image of Wentworth Street, which shows part of the historic Petticoat Lane market, it is very important that the viewer can read the names on the shop fronts in the background. The text refers to Petticoat Lane being the 'exchange of the Jew', but the image reveals that the market is now largely Asian. This shows what has changed, i.e. it was formerly Jewish and is now Asian, but also alludes to what has not changed, i.e. it continues to be the 'lounge of the Christian' — a place that satisfies the colonial fascination with the strange 'other'. I produced test copies of the book in two formats, 10×8 inches and 7×7 inches. The former is roughly twice the size. Figure One shows the comparative sizing.



Figure One: Lifting the Curtain – Book Size comparison. 10×8 inches top, 7×7 inches bottom

The images in the 7×7 inches version are quite small and in truth it is not possible to make out the detail in the background. With the 8×10 inches version the names on the shop fronts are readable. Ideally I would have preferred a slightly larger format for the book that would make the background even clearer, but here a second factor comes into play – cost. An 11×13 inches version of the book in hardback form costs around twice that of the 8×10 inches. As I am self-funding the production of the books this is an important consideration, so on balance I decided to go with the 10×8 inches format.

I produced a number of test versions of the book using various qualities of paper that blurb.com offer - Standard (118 GSM), ProLine Uncoated (148 GSM matt paper), ProLine Lustre (148 GSM lustre paper) and ProLine Pearl Photo (190 GSM photographic paper). I rejected the matt paper very quickly as the photographs appeared very flat, with low contrast and saturation. Shadow details were also lost in many of the photographs. Whilst I liked the weight and quality of the Proline Lustre paper I had significant problems with reproduction using this paper. The first test version of the book with this paper had small scratches on the surface of many of the photographs. blurb.com replaced this copy but the replacement also had small scratches (in different places). I decided that this paper would be too unreliable for my purposes. The Standard paper produced high quality results but the weight of the paper made the book look thinner. The Proline Pearl Photo version was of a very high quality with no defects and a weightier look, but at a significantly higher cost – an additional £15 per book. On balance I felt that the Standard paper would work well for copies of the book I plan to sell to raise money for Toynbee Hall. Using this paper would also enable me to price the book at £25 making it more affordable and hopefully more saleable. For my own purposes, I will also produce 5 'artist proof' copies of the book using the higher quality Proline Pearl Photo paper.

The final point I considered with regards to the physical form of the book was the nature of the book cover. I had already decided on a hard cover book to echo Booth's survey book. The question remained however as to whether to have a cloth bound book with no cover, a cloth bound book with a dust cover or book where images and title text are embedded onto cover (blurb.com call this imagewrap and the appearance gives the book a contemporary feel). Ideally I would have preferred a cloth bound book with no dust jacket and with the title text foil stamped onto the cover and spine. This would have given the book the feel of an old book, such as Booth's. In practice however blurb.com only offer this facility for orders in excess of 300 books. This is way beyond the number I have in mind (35 books). As an alternative I researched the possibility of producing the books through blurb.com and then using a third party printing service to complete the foil stamping. This, however, turned out to be impractical as foil stamping can only be done on flat surfaces and it would not have been possible to stamp the title and author name on the spine of an assembled book. This I judged to be a critical limitation. I felt strongly that the contemporary feel of the 'Image-wrap' cover was inappropriate, given the subject matter and so decided on the option of a cloth bound book with a dust cover. I selected a relatively sombre image for the cover to give the book a sense of gravitas.

So, in summary, I decided to produce the book in 8×10 inches format, with a cloth hard back and dust cover. I plan to produce 40 copies using *Standard (118 GSM)* paper to be sold as a limited 'signed' first edition. These I hope to sell at £25 per book, with the aim of raising £1000 for Toynbee Hall. The cost of each book including shipping and VAT would be £23.50 or £900 for 40 copies. With advance sales to friends and colleagues along with sales to the public during my planned exhibition I should be able to achieve this relatively modest target. Should demand outstrip my supply, I would issue a second edition and sell this directly to the public through **blurb.com**. For this second edition, I would increase the price to £30 and donate the profits, c. £5 per book, to Toynbee Hall. In addition, I will produce 5 'artist proof' copies using the higher quality *Proline Pearl Photo* paper, which I will use for presenting my work for assessment and when showing my work to galleries where I hope to exhibit my work.

#### **Exhibition Format**

I have set out below how I would like to present my work in an exhibition format. The key issues I discuss are the sizing of the prints, the spatial organisation of the image and the text and supporting information to be displayed at the exhibition.

## **Print Sizing**

The size of a print dictates both how the viewer relates to the image and the amount of detail that the viewer can distinguish within it.

My aim with 'Lifting the Curtain' has been to engage the viewer in using his or her imagination to project a past scene or narrative into the modern day urban scene in the photograph. It seems to me that a larger photograph will enable viewers to better imagine themselves within the scenes depicted. This was also the view that Chloe Dewe Mathews put forward when discussing the exhibition prints for her 'Shot at Dawn' series at a presentation she gave at the Brighton Biennial. Lucy Soutter has also commented that '...the general consensus appears to be that large-scale photographs signal tremendous ambition and demand to be taken seriously. At the same time, they fill the viewer's entire field of vision, producing an immersive experience of visual detail that can be almost overwhelming' (2). I recall experiencing the sensation of 'overwhelmed' when viewing Zarina Bhimji's large prints at her 2012 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery. Since my work was made on a medium format digital camera I could very easily, without loss of clarity, produce prints up to 40×50 inches.

A second reason I would prefer larger prints is same as I gave when discussing the size of images in the book format. It is important that viewers are able to see clearly small details within the images to be able to connect the image and text.

A key concern with large prints however relates to the size of possible venues for showing my work. The prints will need to be appropriately sized for the venue. I discuss possible venues later in this paper, however it is likely that in most cases 40x50 inch prints would be simply impractical. Also I am hoping to sell prints to raise money for Toynbee Hall and it seems to me that there would be a very limited market for very large prints. A further concern with very large prints is the relationship between the image and text. Very large prints could overpower the text. This of course depends on way in which the text and image are arranged spatially. I will return to this point later.

As a reasonable compromise I have decided to size the images at roughly A1. This has a major advantage that I can obtain ready-made frames in this size, vastly reducing costs of framing. For example the least expensive form of framing for an A1 print at *The Printspace* in London would cost £130 per print, i.e. £1300 for 10. This would include printing and mounting onto dibond. As an alternative I have sourced readymade 80x60 cm frames via the Internet. These would cost £250 for the frames for 10 diptychs plus £360 for the digital c-prints, giving a total of £610. In other words a saving of nearly £700. The lower cost of production would also enable me to price the prints lower so as to better encourage sales.

So weighing up my desire to produce large prints against the practical constraints of space constraints at venues and cost for producing the exhibition my preferred option would be to show the images as framed prints of 60×80 cm.

## Spatial organisation of image and text

When I have shown my work to-date, in HashtagPhotography Magazine and at the PhotoMonth Open, I have presented the work as composite image/text panels as in Figure Two. This has enabled me to control the allocation of space for the image and text, in situations where I have little or no curatorial involvement with how the work is installed.



Figure Two: Bethnal Green Road, ©Keith Greenough 2014

There is however a downside to this form of presentation in that it seems to reference advertising and magazine editorial presentation. Others have commented on this when I have posted the image/texts to on-line forums. This form of presentation is the same as used by Victor Burgin and Karen Knorr in their image/text installations made in the 1980s. For them it was important to reference advertising/editorial conventions. David Brittain commenting on Karen Knorr's work stated 'By parodying the conventions of advertising and editorial photography, Knorr unmasks their techniques of persuasion' (3). In my work I have no intention of using parody as a device for conveying meaning, so the reference to editorial/advertising copy is possibly distracting.

In the situation where I am staging the exhibition and have full curatorial control, I am able to consider other forms of presenting the work, which do not inadvertently reference editorial/advertising photography.

Typically in the white cube gallery the photograph is magnificently framed and the caption text is place underneath on a small card or inscribed on the wall. The text is clearly represented as subordinate to the image. I began to think about how to present the text so as to avoid this problem and came to the view that a major factor is the framing. If I were to frame the text and place it alongside the photograph, how would this affect the perception of the text? I believe it would elevate the text beyond the perception of it as merely a caption and give it equal status along side the image. My thinking was confirmed when I studied an installation of Sophie Calle's 'True Stories work, see Figure Three.



Figure Three: Sophie Calle 'True Stories' installation

I also wanted the text to be seen as a 'document'. The source of the text is of course documentary – Booth's book and papers. So, I decided to print the text on a sheet of high quality watercolor paper, which I 'floating' mounted within the frame. The text sheets to accompany the 80x60 cm images will be sized 5x7 inch floating and mounted in 10x8 inch frames. The text will be formatted as in the book. Figure Four shows a photograph of a life size mock-up of my proposed installation for each image and text.

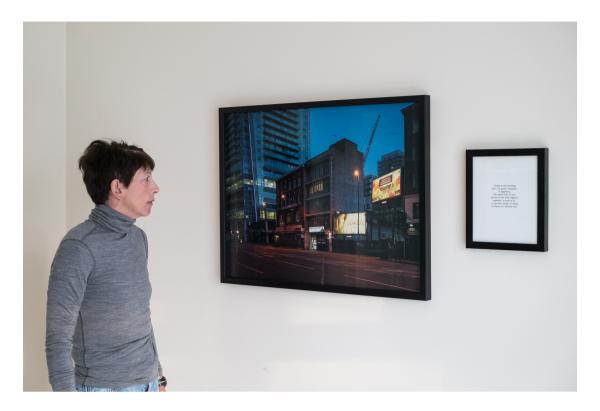


Figure Four: Life size mock-up or diptych

Another facet of this diptych design is that the viewer would need to approach the framed text to read it and then to step to the side and back to view the image. This shuttling back and forth between the image and text frames requires the active engagement of the viewer/reader in interpreting the work and also emphasises that the text and the image are separate 'facts to be observed' to paraphrase Umberto Eco's comments on Brecht's Epic Theatre (4).

## Supporting Information

In addition to the diptychs there is also the question of what other information I provide for the viewer in an exhibition format. I decided to borrow from the lessons learned during the book production and to include a wall panel showing my artist's statement and a further panel showing the maps and references for the locations and texts (see Figures Five and Six). Each diptych will also have a small title card, giving the location represented.

#### LIFTING THE CURTAIN

The idea for this book grew out of my fascination with East London and how it has been shaped by its history. It has been a site of continuous change for centuries - change driven by industrial growth and decline, waves of immigration, wartime devastation, and more recently post-industrial redevelopment and gentrification.

My interest led me to Charles Booth's 1889 socio-cultural survey, 'Life and Labour of the People'. Booth's view was that 'East London lay hidden from view behind a curtain on which were painted terrible pictures'. He believed that the mythology overwhelmed the reality. His mission was to lift the curtain and reveal the truth.

Lifting the Curtain revisits Booth's East London through a series of photographs of modern day places juxtaposed with texts drawn from his 1889 survey. The locations pictured are places Booth and his associates would have visited. The texts describe what they witnessed.

Whilst the images and texts are testimony to the changes which have taken place in East London, many of the social issues that Booth observed over 100 years ago still have resonance today.

Keith Greenough, December 2014

Figure Five: Artists Statement panel for exhibition

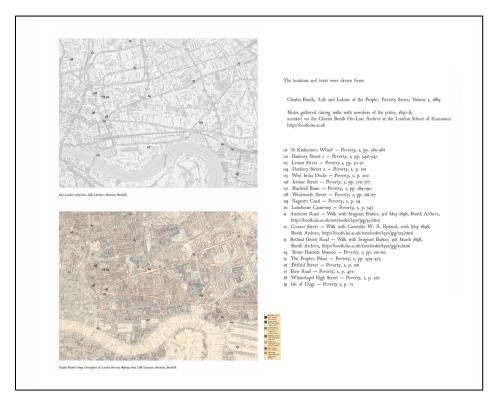


Figure Six: Maps and References panel for exhibition

I constructed a CAD maquette of how my exhibition would look, including the diptychs with 80x60 cm images and the information panels (see Figure Seven). A larger scale print of this is given in Attachment One, along with larger images of the mock up of the diptych installation.

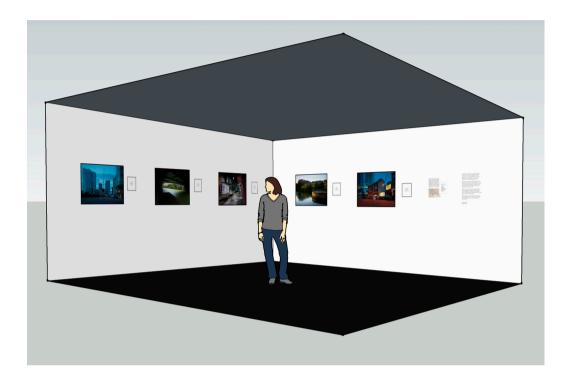


Figure Seven: CAD maquette of exhibition installation

## **Implementation**

In this section of the paper I set out my plans for publishing and selling the book and for staging an exhibition.

## **Book Sales**

I plan to publish the book in advance of my proposed exhibition. By splitting the book launch and exhibition I hope to be able to promote my work over an extended timeframe. I will be able to print copies of the book as soon as I have finalised the foreword being written by Toynbee Hall. Copies should be available for sale from April onwards.

As a first step I will set up a sales location on my blog www.photo-graph.org, in which I will ask people to register their forward interest in buying the book. I will promote this by publishing an article on the Toynbee Hall website, email circulation to friends and colleagues, and posts on Flickr forums, my Facebook page and my Twitter account. This way I will be able to gauge the level of response before ordering the books en bloc and dispatching them to those who have registered their interest. Payment will be by cheque or via Paypal.

I also plan to send press releases to local newspapers and bloggers. These include local community newspaper East End Life, The Docklands & East London Advertiser, Hackney Citizen and Spitalfields Life. The latter is a well-known local blog that has from time to time featured articles on Booth. The link with Toynbee Hall will I hope encourage the media to take an interest in my work. I will also look into advertising my work in The Big Issue, given Booth's connection with poverty and housing conditions.

The second wave of promotion for the book will be linked to the staging of the exhibition. Here I would plan to hold a private view and book signing to open the exhibition. This will in effect be a wine and cheese party open to all comers.

## Staging the Exhibition

I would hope to stage the exhibition at a venue close to Toynbee Hall in Spitalfields. My plan would be to do this as part of the East London International Photography Festival, PhotoMonth 2015, which takes place in the autumn. This would enable me to 'piggy-back' on the publicity for the festival and potentially reach out to a larger audience than would be possible if I were to go it alone. To achieve this I will need to find a suitable venue by late June 2015 so that details of the event can be incorporated into the programme for the festival.

Toynbee Hall itself is not ideally suited to an exhibition as the rooms that they do have are generally in use for their educational and advice services. Moreover, the people visiting Toynbee Hall are most often seeking help, and are not in a position to purchase expensive prints or a book. There are however a wide range of possible venues close by, which include small galleries, theatres, cinemas and cafes. I have identified a list of such venues, which participated in PhotoMonth 2014 (see Attachment Two).

My plan is to contact these venues from February onwards, starting with those close to Toynbee Hall and working outwards. I plan to visit the venues with a view to persuading them to host my exhibition during the autumn. I will go armed with a portfolio of prints, a schematic of the installation, photographs of a mock up of the diptychs and a copy of the book. The length of the exhibition will depend to some extent on the commitments of venues to other events and cost. Ideally, I would like to run the exhibition for 2-4 weeks.

The cost of the exhibition venue is unknown at this time, although I have selected the possible venues on the basis that they are relatively inexpensive. A small, dedicated gallery space at the *Rag Factory* in the heart of Spitalfields for example would cost around £150 per day or around £1800 for a two week period. Gallery 320 on the other hand which is in the less fashionable Bethnal Green would cost around £500 for a two-week period. I will need to weigh up the pros and cons of possible venues when I have determined which are prepared to stage my event.

I hope to sell prints at my exhibition with the monies raised going to Toynbee Hall. I have yet to decide on pricing for the prints. I will do this in conjunction with the gallery owners closer to the opening.

As a contingency if I am unsuccessful in finding a venue, I plan to hold an evening 'book signing' event in the library at Toynbee Hall. At this I would be able to display a limited number of prints mounted on easels on tables around the library. This event would be supported by an on-line exhibition. Such an event could be included in PhotoMonth 2015 and listed in their catalogue.

The exhibition will be publicised through the umbrella of the promotion for the 2015 East London International Photography Festival. I will also launch a second wave of promotional activity in my own right by sending out further press releases and mounting a poster campaign closer to the exhibition opening.

Additionally I plan to continue to submit my work to open and group exhibitions to establish the reputation of my work and increase my credibility with the owners of the galleries where I hope to stage the exhibition. To date my work has been published in HashtagPhotography Magazine and has been shown at the 2014 PhotoMonth Open in East London (see figures Eight and Nine). I also hope to show the work at the 'Memories' exhibition in Oxford, which is being curated by John Umney and Penny Watson, fellow OCA students. I am on the lookout for other outlets for my work.



Figure Eight: 'Lifting the Curtain' in HashtagPhotography magazine



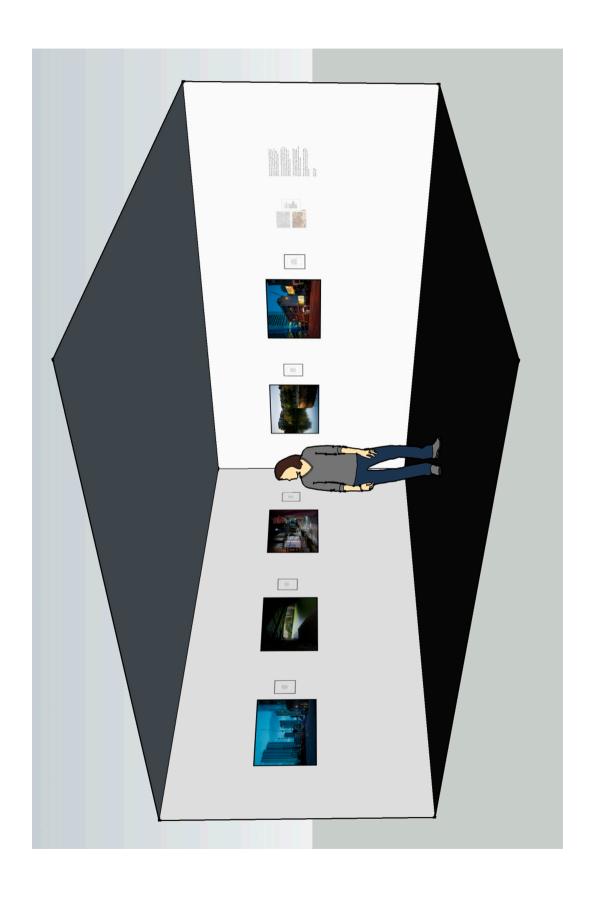
Figure Nine: 'Lifting the Curtain' at the PhotoMonth Open 2014

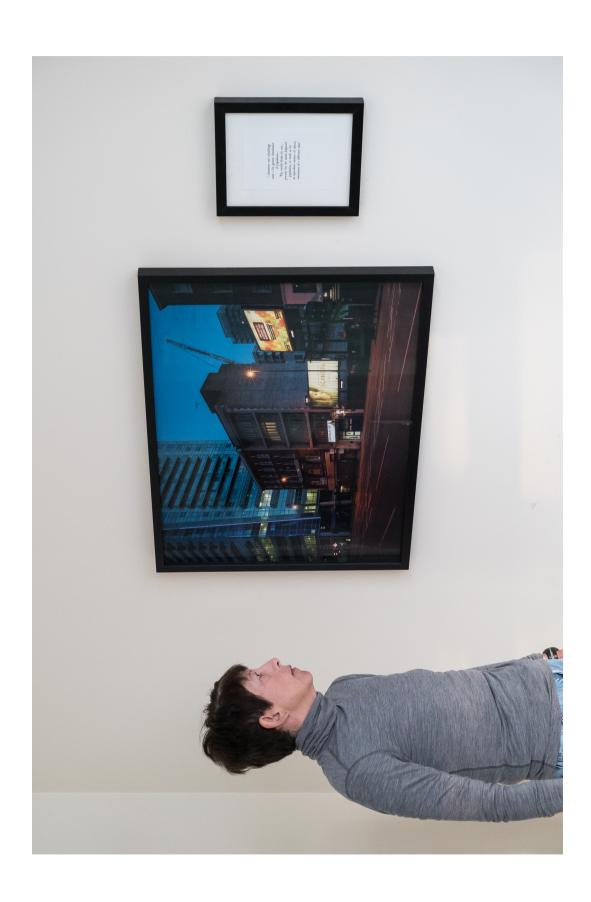
All together the publication of the book and staging the exhibition is likely to cost around £2500. This is quite expensive, but I view it as an investment towards establishing my reputation as a photographer and at the same time as an opportunity to give back to East London through charitable donation to Toynbee Hall.

## References

- 1) Wilkie T. et al (Eds.) (2012) *Photography and the Artist's Book* Edinburgh: MuseumsETC
- 2) Soutter L. (2013) Why Art Photography? Abingdon: Routledge p. 41
- 3) Britain D.(Ed.) (1999) Creative Camera: Thirty Years of Writing Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 193
- 4) Eco U. (1989) The Open Work Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 20

Attachment One: 'Lifting the Curtain' Exhibition installation (CAD representation and images of mock up installation











## Attachment Two: List of Possible Venues for 'Lifting the Curtain' Exhibition

## **CRAFT COFFEE**

68 Sclater Street, Shoreditch, E1 6HR

www.craft-coffee.co.uk/

#### **CURIOUS DUKE GALLERY**

173 Whitecross Street, EC1Y 8JT

curiousdukegallery.com/

#### **DARNLEY GALLERY**

1a Darnley Road, Hackney Central, E9 6QH

www.centreforbetterhealth.org.uk/

## DOOMED GALLERY

65/67 Ridley Road, E8 2NP

www.doomedgallery.com

#### **ESPACIO GALLERY**

159 Bethnal Green Road, E2 7DG

www.espaciogallery.com

#### **GALLERY320**

320 Bethnal Green Road, E2 0AG

www.gallery320.co.uk

#### **IDEA STORE WHITECHAPEL**

321 Whitechapel Road London E1 1BU www.ideastore.co.uk

#### KAHAILA

135 Brick Lane, E1 6SB

kahaila.com

#### **KOPITIAM COFFEE SHOP**

66A Whitechapel High St, E1 7PI

#### **RAG FACTORY**

16-18 Heneage Street, E1 5LJ

www.ragfactory.org.uk

#### **RICH MIX**

Cinema and Arts Centre

35-47 Bethnal Green Road, London E1 6LA

www.richmix.org.uk

#### **SUZZLE COFFEE**

47 Brick Lane, E1 6PU

www.suzzle.com

#### THE TOWNHOUSE

5 Fournier Street, Spitalfields, EC1 6QE

www.townhousewindow.com/visit/