

All Fur Coat and No Knickers

MFA Dissertation

Rob Stead



**Rob Stead looks at the keys to understanding
Is love in the eye of the beholder?**

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Declaration of Academic Integrity

I confirm that this essay is all my own work, and that where quotes, paraphrases and ideas of others have been used; they are properly credited and referenced.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Rob Stead'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Signed _____

Date: 14/5/2021

Dedication

I'm very grateful to Jan, my wife, who has encouraged me to pursue my passion for photography. In later years she bought me my first camera and my latest 'decent' camera. She even said 'why not do a Master's in photography?' and then encouraged me at every stage.

I would also like to thank everyone who took part in my photography project:

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Cover: Emma 'Dolly Doowop' Dowdell and Peter Cocks, Folkestone Harbour, 19 August 2020

Abstract

This reflective essay looks at the thinking behind my practice and my final portfolio work, **Well Grubbed Old Mole**. It explores the theories often rooted in the 1970s and applied to photography¹. Whilst these have helped shape my thinking, and my objective to look at Brexit populism from a Laclauian perspective, the assisted portraiture didn't produce the expected result; that is, illustrate a Brexit 'imagination' through metaphor. A reconsideration imposed by Covid lockdowns and in light of 'new' ideas² resulted in an inclusion of my daily snapshots to help tease out the issues, which includes identity change. A conclusion is photography can only hint at profound change. Rather than a macro defining image a more rewarding approach, and one suitable for today's digital world, is to tease out, often unresolved, issues and only hint at them, knowing the viewer will interpret them in a way that makes sense to them. Such an approach is more rewarding for both the photographer and viewer.

¹ 'Thinking Photography', 1982, edited by Victor Burgin nicely sums up some of this thinking.

² These 'new' ideas are covered in 'Photography: Theoretical Snapshots', 2009, by JJ Long, Andrea Noble and Edward Welch.

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Introduction

In June 2016 the UK voted to leave the EU. The week before I got married for the first time at the age of 55. It took a further four and a half years to finally leave the EU and, whilst some good might come of it, the fear is it will negatively impact on the UK and its people. The decision had a profound impact on my own sense of identity as it represented the opposite of everything I valued and cherished. My first friend to leave the UK was Jewish whose father had previously fled Nazi Germany. My photographic practice has tried to document this profound change by capturing my own journey - from living in London in June 2016, to Folkestone, to Belfast and finally Donegal in 2020 – in the form of a daily photographic journal.

Encouraged by photographic, sociological and political theory - and influenced by other recognised photographers - my practice has also attempted to engage with other people - some were known to me and some complete strangers - to see if they'd been equally impacted by attempting to tease out what concerns them and then trying to capture this in a unique and interesting way. Whilst the Covid pandemic has diluted the impact of Brexit, which I see as a populist movement, my practice hasn't captured my initial expected results; both in the way of my own 'changing identity' and as a populist 'imagination' in the assisted portraiture. This has led me to review my practice and expectations.

This reflective essay therefore addresses some questions raised:

- 1) is photography, or specifically my practice, able to capture my sense of profound change?
- 2) is photography able to show a populist movement or the themes encompassed by it?
- 3) does my practice benefit from my chosen photographic theories?
- 4) has my practice failed because it wasn't able to capture the 'right' images?
- 5) or perhaps it hasn't failed but the images and what they portray were not expected; they possibly have the wrong aesthetic or subject matter,
- 6) or were my expected results wrong and my practice has in fact revealed an equally valid 'truth' and documented an important historical moment in a quiet way?

Picking up on the last question, it's almost as if the private world of social media outrage doesn't have a reality in real life and this makes it difficult to capture. Also, as an EU Remainer my images cannot be said to be unbiased; some people, in fact, turned me down stating in no way would they engage with my project.

This dissertation will explore theories and ideas as they related to my practice and others that might have been more appropriate. It might be that my preferred theories are too rooted in the 1980s when I was a politics and sociology undergraduate; looking at post-Marxist thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937) and Ernesto Laclau³ (1935- 2014)

³ Laclau's ideas and the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, which he founded, influenced left-wing parties Syriza (Greece) and Podemos (Spain) and helped them achieve electoral success. See The Guardian: <http://rob.st/laclaufigurehead>

and other ideas that have also informed some of the photographic theories. It might be that photography, or my practice, simply can't capture the 'grand' macro political issues I wish to address but are rather better at capturing day-to-day micro snapshots and hinting at personal psychological changes. It might be that 'my story' isn't seen as worthy compared with other migration stories⁴ and therefore doesn't fit an expected visual narrative and meaning rooted in social activism and hardship. Being middle class with access to resources some images might be compared with mundane and 'mindless' expected life moments - holidays, weddings, etc, - rather than hidden secrets or the exotic. But this is what constitutes my life, largely free of trauma and crisis, and therefore has an integrity to it. But why do I feel I need to document my life this way? Perhaps it does reveal a need? This also raises the question what is meant by 'changing identity' so the work of Jennifer Todd, which informed the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement, will be explored for its photographic resonance.

I conclude theories are helpful for giving direction and setting ambition but one conclusion is no single 'magical' image can sum everything up; it has to be done as a series of images which perhaps can only hint at profound change, particularly over such a relatively short time dominated by lockdowns. Presented in a newspaper format, called **Well Grubbed Old Mole**, with the addition of text to help explain and justify, also seems appropriate for my practice and this is discussed. But what counts as a good image - a balanced composition perhaps which is aesthetically pleasing - persists as a nagging doubt, so what makes for an interesting, worthy or engaging photograph is also explored.

⁴ I refer in particular here to 'A Seventh Man' by John Berger and Jean Mohr

Selection, execution and technique is clearly important but rather than camera club perfection my aim is 'integrity', defined as being honest with a strong moral principle which, contrary to my expectation, has actually helped me make sense of the past few years.

Theories and Ideas

I'm old enough to remember Thatcherism following the economic crisis in the 1970s, the breakdown of the post-world war consensus, the collapse of Bretton Woods following the Nixon shock of 1971 and the reshaping of the EEC/EU based on Bretton Woods principles - which the UK eventually joined in January 1973 - partly to counter the negative impact of free-floating fiat currency, the de-dollarisation of the German economy and the wish to maintain peace. Against this backdrop of 'economic crisis' and change there was a 'left shift' in ideas which informed radical art's 'thinking, writing and work of various artists and critics' (Walker 2002, 6). The equal and opposite rise of the far-right energised me politically with the Rock Against Racism events which were held to counter their hate.

Bob Jessop⁵ argues Brexit represents a similar organic crisis of the British State and society which previously enabled the rise of Thatcherism as a neoliberal and neoconservative project with an authoritarian populist appeal with authoritarian statist tendencies (Jessop 2016). However, although there was a noticeable rise in the far-right, particularly on social media, this didn't seem to be reflected in a rise of left-wing art, radical, collective, or even popular culture or ideas. The shift to a fragmented individualised world

⁵ Bob Jessop was my politics tutor at Essex University and led a long debate with Stuart Hall in New Left Review (NLR) about the nature of Thatcherism and its Hegemonic appeal. See for example NLR 147 and 153.

seems to be complete with people more concerned about their personal trauma or psychological growth than the idea good politics helps shape prosperity, good behaviour and fulfilment; perhaps even as a counterbalance to anomie. This is not to deny trauma but it is open for manipulation and abuse which is what I think happened during the Brexit referendum campaign.

Much of the Brexit debate however was around language and the reshaping of language, particularly the use of metaphor. As Gramsci pointed out:

'the whole of language is a continuous process of metaphor, and the history of semantics is an aspect of the history of culture; language is at the same time a living thing and a museum of fossils of life and civilisation.' (Gramsci 1971, 450)

Laclau gives this more substance by arguing we shouldn't dismiss populism as 'mere rhetoric' and an 'adornment of a social reality' but is in fact the 'very logic of constitution of political identities' and metaphor 'establishes a relation of substitution between terms on the basis of the principle of analogy.' (Laclau 2005, 19). In other words, Laclau says metaphor, as a substitution for something that is troubling, and analogy (to show and explain) are used to give political meaning to people's lives and in doing so shapes a new political identity; a political identity shaped through meaningful 'discursive articulation' (Laclau 2005). Edmund Burke, in an earlier work, expands on metaphor as one of four master tropes; that is, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Or more helpfully for the photographer; perspective, reduction, representation and dialect respectively (Burke 1962, 503). Later, Lakoff and Johnson, describes metonymy and synecdoche as subsets of

metaphor and make the central point that we live by metaphors. It's not just the words but the metaphorical conceptual system itself that's important. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 77). Likewise, John Berger states 'metaphor because it is through metaphor that...we seek for meaning' (Berger 2013, 120).

Stuart Hall, similarly, argues cultural identity isn't formed in isolation but only when it comes in contact with others that we come to know oneself. Rather than the centred self – I think therefore I am - Hall talks about the de-centred self who borrows from language, the mediation of the super-ego and things like the time we live in, in terms of a Marxian base/superstructure analysis; 'aligning subjective feelings to the objective place we occupy, identity this stitches the subject into the structure' (Hall 1992, 276). In 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', Hall argues that cultural identity is undergoing constant transformation; is not only a matter a 'being' but of 'becoming', belonging as much 'to the future as much as to the past' (Hall 1990, 225).

My initial idea was to engage with these ideas as they shape my interpretation of events and try and apply them to my practice. My own identity was undergoing a similar change; informed by a deep hurt from being accused of being a traitor or 'social justice warrior' and a frustration there appeared to be an actively promoted conspiratorial misunderstanding around what the EU was about in its historical context and the issues we face; namely the need to collaborate on things like climate change. Initially my instinct was to fight back by overemphasizing the prevailing ideologies in the leave camp and thereby

calling them into question as an act of subversive affirmation⁶; defined as an artistic performance that relies on 'a language-mediated order of culture' (Lacan 1994) which reflects internalised cultural and symbolic rules, particularly by appealing to the super-ego. Chris Killip's book *In Flagrante*, which he insists 'is a fiction about metaphor' (Killip 2014, plate 5), has extra depth, I argue, because it affirms what we know to be the impact of de-industrialisation on people's lives but he does so by challenging our sense of social order and prejudices at the level of the super-ego. The super-ego being the mediator between cultural rules, the reality of life, and the 'pleasure principles', notably the desire for sex (Figure 1). The super-ego being a type of conscience that punishes misbehaviour with feelings of guilt (Freud 2002).

In the Brexit context I struggle however to see how I could capture such powerful images. For example, how do you illustrate what I perceive to be the second collapse of Bretton Woods, this time under the management of the EU, using disinformation whilst using metaphorical devices that prick the super-ego? Such a grand narrative, I started to think, – the capturing of a new hegemonic 'common sense' by the leave camp using a Laclauian analysis – has become too complex to be limited to just metaphor, certainly for the photographer for whom metaphor seemed to be the only tool of the trade, and the interaction between the viewer and the image too unpredictable to make the strong political point that I wished to make. In a post-structuralist world of simple binary opposites meaning, or changed meaning, can only be hinted at particularly with photographs now too ubiquitous for primacy to be assumed to be given to meaning in the way intended. Stahel, in

⁶ Slavo Žižek, 1993, in defence of Laibach is said to have defined the term 'subversive affirmation'. See: <http://rob.st/laibachnotfascists>

an interview, commented 'semiotically speaking, photographs are only slightly coded images'....'photography functions as a kind of subtraction from the world, which itself is an only slightly coded structure' (Stahel 2003). This has been further complicated by the fact that photographic meaning, like with much discourse, certainly around Brexit, has become privatised with less happening in the public space.

What I mean by this is Jo Spencer, for example, in the 1970s attempted to overcome individualism and substitute it with cooperation – whether as a feminist or socialist - (Walker 2002, 242-243) and Hall et al in 'Policing the Crisis' claimed youth culture, as a collective act, was characterised by a 'revolt into style' and 'a struggle for the control of meaning' and 'the search for excitement, autonomy and identity – the freedom to create their own meaning for their existence and symbolically express those, rather than simply accepting the existing dominant meaning' (Walker 2002, 19). In the Brexit context opposition appeared to be less about such grand collective objectives linked to EU membership but more about things like personal trauma and atomised transgender politics. I fear though my age has made me blind to some of the things and concerns that were going on. But I think it's safe to say the 'hegemonic project', the reshaping of common sense, was with the leave camp. As Laclau argues 'dislocation' caused by such things as an economic crisis 'opens up the possibility of new articulations, forging of new identities, production of new subjects' (Laclau 1990, 40).

Laclau argues populism - for him to promote a shared 'good sense' rather than a ruling classes self-interested 'common sense' - required the articulation of an imagined alternative coupled with an antagonism. In Brexit populism the antagonism, which I felt

strongly, was towards people like me, the liberal elite, and the obvious, migrants. I then wondered if a simple documentation of my life could engage with this antagonism at the level, to quote Lacan, 'the symbolic' as I feel this antagonism 'becomes important in the imaginary order by identification as it forms the locus of alienation' (Lacan 1994).

Alienation, I argue, in the Marxist sense of feeling alienated from the product of one's own labour, which I see as a major issue in the 21st century and another unaddressed reason for Brexit.

Guy Debord and the Situationist movement bring some extra insight to the Marxist definition of alienation by arguing social relationships are increasingly being expressed through the reification of objects as a form of commodity fetishism. Photography brings this to life by the codification of images, which includes the face, as a spectacle; an illusion understood by photographer, participant and observer (Wells 2004, 195-197). This has some worrying implications as Lombroso's criminal facial characteristics still live on in the popular imagination although it has long been disproved.

Windows, Mirrors and Mosaics

As a photographer I felt I knew what I wanted to say – that is, engage with the ideas of post-Marxist thinkers such as Laclau with regards Brexit populism – but I didn't know how to say it so I turned to photographic theory.

Szarkowski, who according to Joel Meyerowitz invented the language of photography (Martin Parr Foundation 2021), famously divides photographers into one of two camps; one

‘a mirror, reflecting a portrait of the artist who made it’ or ‘a window, through which one might better know the world?’ (Szarkowski 1978, 25). This difference was also reflected in style - the mirror group being darker, framed closer – and subject matter– the mirror group covering universal issues such as love, hate and loss, without reference to place, with suggestion being more important than description (Szarkowski 1978, 21-23).

Whilst happy to put myself in the windows group, amongst photographers I admire, I found myself having to be a ‘thinking photographer’, as exemplified by Burgin’s book of the same name, in a way I found I was poorly equipped to deliver on, both in opportunity and in control of the image to be able to deliver my stated objective; to illustrate and concerns I felt over Brexit as a strong political message. I was presented with ideas, often rooted in ideas of the 1970s which I understood and used to interpret the events, but only one ‘tool’, metaphor, to deliver on it using a technique - that is capturing the world as a window - when what I really wanted to do was express myself as a mirror but not so obliquely. I must confess I sometimes don’t get the messages in some art photography seeing it as simply style over content. I don’t understand, for example, why an image in black and white is more profound than in colour. I understand its historical context but as Meyerowitz pointed out in a recent interview with Martin Parr black and white simply reduces the description to greys (Martin Parr Foundation 2021). Yes, aesthetically there might be a difference or reason, perhaps a colour is too distracting, but I would argue limiting the information within an image doesn’t help my cause where if anything I want to capture more information than less.

By not following these 'rules', by not falling into one camp or the other, I felt in danger of being accused of just being another mindless photographer. As John Tagg states 'Thinking Photography self-consciously staked out a site for photographic theory and scrupulously separated itself from what it stigmatized as the myriad forms of mindless practice' (Long, Noble, and Welch 2009, 18). Perhaps there is another option; a mosaic of techniques, approaches and meaning.

New Ideas

Recently I've felt in danger of becoming disinterested in photography, partly for reasons mentioned (an inability to be able to express myself), which up to this point had served me well. Prompted by the death of a close friend, and turning 50, photography meaning for me was derived from a simple daily journal as an aide-mémoire. Spending a little time each day both capturing and reflecting on the best image that summed up the day has been a real pleasure and joy. This pleasure was also being crowded out by a sense they were 'mindless', or I was psychologically in need of a 'weapon' to colonise my environment or my photography expressed some dysfunctional in society akin to Sontag's comparison that the Abu Ghraib prison photo reflected an increased complacency with violence in American visual culture (Long, Noble, and Welch 2009, 49). There is some truth in Sontag's observation the snapshot, or popular photography, is a social rite and a 'defence against anxiety ripe to be manipulated by advertising and a tool of power and a coloniser of new spaces' (Long, Noble, and Welch 2009, 57) but photography can have another purpose or meaning, particularly in the digital age. The 'snapshot', requiring no skill, has an important function in which, as Zuromski observes, 'the subject...generally has considerable

personal and emotional significance for the photographer' (Long, Noble, and Welch 2009, 53) and whilst much is circulated privately, often just within the family, their function spills out into public in interesting and unexpected ways. The use of portraits of missing family members, for example in South America and recently in Northern Ireland, to shame those responsible for their deaths is a good example of this (Long, Noble, and Welch 2009, 63).

'In a nutshell, in the display of images of the disappeared as forms of political protest, the photograph's metaphoric abduction of its subject from the flow of time powerfully evokes the real practice of disappearance whereby human subjects are violently abducted from the flow of life.' (Long, Noble, and Welch 2009, 69)

A family portrait therefore, in the right circumstances, can be a powerful political weapon and make a strong statement. In a similar way, turning everyday images into something powerful and political, I started to wonder if I could approach my practice by borrowing some of the ideas of Roman Krznaric. Calling it outrospection – the opposite to introspection – he advocated developing what he called an empathetic habit; engaging with others and listening to their story to promote radical social change and personal growth. One positive of the modern world of social media and photography is that we are now uniquely placed, Krznaric argues, to understand the lives of others. Empathy, even, could be 'captured' in museums where you could go and chat with people to further understand their lives (Krznaric 2012, 135-167, 2014).

My Practice – Two Strands

My portraiture work is therefore a combination of these ideas, my sensibilities, wish to try something new and get to know people as if in a museum. I wanted to *make* rather than *take* photographs and develop a style by experimenting. I was intrigued by the idea of the punctum and wondering if it could be artificially induced by asking people to hold an object of hope. This punctum would also hopefully serve as a metaphorical device for revealing people's private thoughts, even at the level of myth. For me the journey - standing in the footsteps of giants, great photographers such as Vivian Maier and Gordon Parks (Figure 2) - was equally as important so I decided to use film and develop the images myself. Film would also serve as a metaphorical style for the past and as a practical illustration the past wasn't 'rose tinted'; film being more unpredictable than digital. I was also keen for place – a strong theme in Brexit - to feature as much as the person so the viewer explored the full frame. 'All of it' as Joel Meyerowitz would say⁷. Historically I'd tended to rely on a low depth of field and different points of view so I tried to restrict myself to F8 or above to ensure everything was in focus and to try and remove myself by photographing from the same position with the person centre and filling about three quarters of the image. I was also keen to allow people some input into the image themselves so as well as an object they could also select a location from a list I provided. These locations were either known to me or more widely amongst locals and had a significance. I also hoped they might hint at the material conditions that underpinned Brexit and prove interesting historically. Ideally something in the location, in a visually complex layering, would also bounce off the object or

⁷ Joel Meyerowitz discusses using the full frame in a number of interviews, including this one: https://youtu.be/Xumo7_JUeMo

subject to further add an extra dimension or intrigue. For example, in the portrait of Lord Boateng there is a modern version of a 'listening ear', an early radar system, which metaphorically hinted I heard him as a teenager and acted upon his words (Figure 3). Inspired by his election acceptance speech as MP for Brent South in 1987 I subsequently volunteered for years for the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Also, feeling people were quick to judge me detrimentally and incompletely as a 'snowflake' - a dehumanising metonymy used to disparage one's political opponents – or a Remoaner – the opposite synecdoche to 'the people' - I decided to photograph the whole person. I was also keen to reduce the metaphorical concept and spectacle the face represented the whole person by photographing the whole person (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 37) and, in combination with other elements in the image, to provide extra historical, social or cultural meaning; what Barthes refers to as stadium in order to punctuate the punctum (Barthes 2020, 32). I accepted this might make my images harder to 'read' but I was keen to go on this journey; to experiment, to embrace the punk spirit of the 1970s, to work hard, to create opportunities and see if anything magical would come of it.

Whilst there were some similarities with the objects people held – books, records, etc – and the concerns people had – climate change, etc – only one, held by Henry Bolton (ex-UKIP leader, Figure 4) was overtly Brexit related. Most were concerned with personal growth, which is perhaps because of the way I framed the photoshoot, but I was slightly surprised how a pressing issue for me wasn't widely shared, certainly in the held objects (example Figure 5).

The other strand to my work, to form a multifaceted project presented in a newspaper format called **Well Grubbed Old Mole**, is the daily snapshots which I've used to 'tell my story'. These are important to me, taken with little regard to an audience and are 'private', although I share many on social media. They predominately feature my wife, Jan, as a subject, and in general improve the normal appearance of things, focusing on the happy moments and good times, often with friends. Whereas the assisted portraiture requires a degree of trust by the viewer in the photographer to tell the truth - a trend we're increasingly seeing in a world sensitised to 'fake news' - these daily snapshots, whilst equally untruthful, are nevertheless probably judged to be trustworthy because, I suspect, people don't have much to lose by accepting them and knowing the conventions for how we capture our lives (e.g. private moments for public consumption). To borrow from Debord they are a spectacle, an illusion, which takes advantage of new technology and social media.

Interestingly, I suspect, the assisted portraitures don't have the resonance I wanted with viewers because not unsurprisingly I deliberately chose to challenge or experiment with expectations. The dairy snapshots equally don't resonant, perhaps, because they're too personal; being a glimpse into someone's personal life. This might change over time as the personal sentiment drops away to reveal an historic importance; much in the same way historic family photos are now seen as important in understanding our social history.

Formulaically the tricks for making a photograph appealing – low depth of field, use of lighting, colour or black and white, filters, focus on the face, etc expressed as a style – are increasingly well understood, leaving less room for originality that really challenges because such a challenge, by its very nature, potentially makes a photograph aesthetically less

appealing. There is a tension here. The quality of appreciation isn't therefore within the photograph itself but rather in the cultural values, codes, personal investment (often whether you recognise the location or subject) and in the viewers relationship with the photographer. Photography is also competing with what John Berger argues is the invention of 'a number of mysterious' and 'metaphysical qualities' by a small elite, painters and their patrons, to differentiate their paintings from quick and cheaper photography and the 'myth that the portrait painter was a revealer of souls' (Berger 1969, 42).

We also live under the misapprehension photography can reveal someone's 'identity', particularly in a single image. Phillip Prodger puts it like this:

'Identity is not a fixed thing, and no person is one-dimensional, so the idea that a single photograph can stand in for the totality of a person is a polite fiction at best.' (National Portrait Gallery)

Jennifer Todd, a researcher on peace and collaboration in Northern Ireland, sees identity change as being particularly important with institutions and political arrangements established to facilitate a changing identity away from conflict and the researcher, or photographer in my case, being minded to their own beliefs, judgements and practices (Todd 2018). Reflecting this ongoing changing nature of things Prodger, whilst recognising the importance of some single images, puts forward the point of view a series of images can often better capture this sense of a complicated and evolving identity. He says:

'Narratives no longer have to be complete to be meaningful. Photographic storytelling is more about the networks, nodes, and webs than it is about concise statements. In this world, relationships between images become central. Viewers and artists alike are constantly constructing realities from images, wiring and rewiring like neural networks' (National Portrait Gallery).

Conclusions

Taking all this into consideration my practice started off with the misapprehension it could capture someone's identity in a single portrait and capture the mood of Brexit populism with people like museum pieces. I also attempted to develop a style of my own by analytically trying to work out what works and then trying to apply my own, but different, formula. I have a personal resistance to 'capturing someone's soul' – although some images capture people better than others - preferring instead an attempt to capture an empathetic understanding of someone's life. What I now realise is that the strong political message I wished to make can be made by capturing a series of images - apparently inconsistent and without a clear obvious message - because an attempt to capture a changing identity, in the face of life's challenges, is equally important.

As mentioned, I'd been recording events in my own photo journal and as my thinking evolved, and Covid lockdowns limited options, I later felt it appropriate to incorporate my own journal images within my practice particularly when I realised my portraits couldn't capture my hopes in a single image - that is, how Brexit had impacted on people – even with a deliberate metaphorical prop. These simple images, in a Laclauian sense, might also act as

a form of subversive affirmation by challenging the antagonism within the Brexit populist imagination and therefore giving them a tension⁸.

Putting these images in a newspaper format, which attempts to tell a story, has an integrity to it by making the best use of photography, as a unique medium, by doing what it does best; that is, capture moments quickly, cheaply and without direct appeals to other forms of art for validation. The combination of the two – journal and portraits as part of a story for others to interpret - could equally be worthwhile and, in fact, best reflects photography's unique quality and application.

My practice, presented as **Well Grubbed Old Mole**, is a blended collection of assisted portraiture, photo journal, selected images, quotes, Brexit diary dates, text and interviews. Their collection as one work addresses Brexit populism from my perspective and whilst I initially thought it would be a definitive statement the more I engaged with theory and the practicalities I realised this wasn't possible or necessarily desirable. Theories rooted in the 1970s, whilst having an intellectual vigour to them and underpin my thinking, my practice has probably benefitted more from subsequent ideas based on photography's social role both as a practitioner and participant. In other words, the selection and taking of images for publication has benefitted from an internal discussion I've had with these 'new' ideas and my personal sensibilities and politics. Interestingly, as a demonstration of another social function of photography, my practice has also allowed me to come to terms with Brexit. Just a little bit mind you.

⁸ Tension being something Professor Donovan Wylie says makes for a great photograph.

A ten-minute talked through video: <https://youtu.be/B7fPBcP4xB0>

Well Grubbed Old Mole: <https://cdn.rob.cloud/Well+Grubbed+Old+Mole.pdf>

Dedicated web page: <http://rob.stead.me.uk>

Figures



Figure 1. Chris Killip. First Day Out, Skinningrove, North Yorkshire, 1982.



Figure 2. Gordon Parks. Untitled, Mobile, Alabama, 1956.



Figure 3. Lord Paul Boateng, East Cliff, Folkestone, 28 August 2020

'I have two hopes; books are available and read worldwide and people take inspiration from Paul Robeson, a cultural icon and social activist.'



Figure 4. Henry Bolton, The Grand, Folkestone, 2 September 2020

'This Lion, a recognised symbol of Great Britain, is worn and tired but Brexit provides us with an opportunity for renewal so we can take our rightful place in the world and address some of the failings of the past 40 years. This is not about nationalism, but patriotism.'



Figure 5. Jo Blach, Dungeness, 2 September 2020

'A plant represents for me regrowth as I plan to retrain as a therapist from being a teacher.'

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