

## Julian Stallabrass

So, Matthew, you ask me to write about some shows that have lodged in my mind, but—and I know that these rules are arbitrary so as to be productive, like Georges Perec writing a novel without the letter 'e'—I am only to choose shows from 1987 onwards (though the one that stays with me most is the first I travelled to London to see), and I must confine myself to shows seen in this country (though those seen abroad, with the heightened charge of travel, have often affected me more). And what is that last injunction about? Isn't the art scene here navel-gazing enough?

If it's not to be a mere parody of academic bean-counting (you tell me this book will have an apparatus), or worse some more or less lauded critics' pick of the best, the only sense I can make of this project is that it is about memory. So what follows is only what is remembered, without recourse to catalogues or any other sources. It is bound to be partial, unreliable and probably in parts simply false, yet what I will try to do is to account not only for what is remembered but how and why. After all, how often are shows remembered for the art in them, or only for that? Maybe it's best, too, since all these memories overlay one another, to write out this thing as one chunk—I hope that this doesn't screw up any chronologies or other categories you've got going.

*The Art of Photography* is a title that contains both a claim and a reassurance. Seeing photographs in the Royal Academy was a novelty, particularly in a nation so slow to grasp the conceptual shifts and financial advantages involved in moving tranches of photographic production into the 'art' category. If photography was to be seen there, it had to be on conservative ground, reflected most dramatically in the decision to begin the largely chronological display with black-painted walls from which early prints and plates stood out as if in a jeweller's display, lightening through various shades of grey as the decades wore on, and leaping into a blaze of modernist white as the photographic medium apparently achieved autonomous self-consciousness in the 1920s. The photographs displayed to illustrate that path seemed to embody various modes of perception and memory; the metallic surface of daguerrotypes was once crawled over by the eye intent on registering every detail, the picture being a panorama of such details—the facades of Parisian buildings, for instance—none of which were given much priority; now they are less studied for their detail than wondered at for the very fact of their survival.

Beyond those old, slow pictures what emerged as the rooms lightened was an increasing concentration on single details and moments, on incidents, either pictorial (a sudden shaft of light) or to do with subject matter (a finger pointed in accusation). The picture that I cannot forget from first seeing at that show was among a group of photographs entirely new to me, taken by Soviet war photographers and soldiers during the Second World War. Dmitri Baltermants had photographed a group of women on the Kerch peninsula, picking through the corpses of men fallen in wet, churned-up ground beneath a menacing sky to find their loved ones, and weeping over them when they did.



**Figure 1** Dmitri Baltermants, *The grief from the series *That's how it was...*, 1942*

Then in the most recent photographs shown, new creatures made to hang in museums, it was not exactly that incident had been abolished in favour of a new panoramic vision but rather that panorama had become incident, or lack of incident had become the incident commented upon, and that everything in these photographs seemed still, less the freezing of movement than the recording at one instant of an eternally immobile condition—of a barcode scanner bleeping or the keys of a computer tapping.

The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of photography, which this show celebrated, came midway in the political murk of Thatcherism, as it, apparently endlessly, destroyed lives (one casualty was very close to me) and tore up the social fabric. In that setting even this conservative, nostalgic display of modernist enlightenment struck an elegaic but still optimistic chord, holding out the possibility that there were ways of making pictures that meant something and could even change things. It also came as people began to think out the implications of digitisation of photographs, though long before it became a widespread consumer technology, releasing a flood

of virtual blemish-banishing and teeth-whitening. Strange, though, to find out later that the Baltermants, made for a war propaganda machine, was manipulated using old technology, the sky that did so much to echo the women's grieving being slotted in from another photograph: a salutary reminder that politically charged art and even realism have many mutations.

If memory serves me right, I saw the Otto Dix exhibition at the Tate on my own. It is the depictions of war that stay with me most, the large paintings of trench battle certainly (though I can't be sure now that I am not thinking of other pieces shown in Berlin) but particularly the little graphic images, with their cruel and remorseless fixing on the details of horror. Photographs of the time seem hazy by comparison, lacking in contrast, and Ernst Jünger's contemporary remarks on the inhuman quality of photographic vision seem to apply more closely to Dix's work than photography itself. That graphic detail of the still image fixed on some traumatic moment has a close relation to memory images engraved on the mind by horror or pain—so-called flashbulb memories. Dix seems to strive to bring those moments to those who were not there—or those in his own time who had managed to forget—to forge his own trauma in the minds of his viewers. Their immediacy is an invention, of course, for Dix, like many other chroniclers of that war (Remarque and Graves come to mind) could only begin to construct their accounts years after the war's end.

It's been a long time since I saw this show, and I can't be at all sure what remains in my mind from its viewing.



**Figure 2** Otto Dix, *Der Krieg*, 1924

I remember spending a lot of time with the prints, and being impressed by their range of technical accomplishment as well as the systematic character of their exploration of wartime cruelty, yet the images in my head are blurry, mere shadows that await reactivation when the image is seen again (probably in reproduction). Worms crawling around the socket of an eye. Leering officers pawing ageing prostitutes. Corpses and the living hardly differentiated in a large painting in hazy tones of blue and grey. If that transmission of trauma did not work, in my case, if I am not condemned to relive Dix's scenes over and over in full clarity, that seems to be bound up with artistry and mark-making, with never being able to forget (as some photographs can make you do) the process by which such marks are made and with its speculations about their maker.

What pleasure is granted in the viewing of such scenes? Perhaps their very antiquity in the age of pilotless aircraft and mobile special forces means that they can be viewed safely as historical artefacts. Perhaps there is pleasure in mourning an old, lost generation, and with it the great emotions and grand ideals of past times, knowing that an insurmountable barrier protects the modern mourner, as the industry around World War One literature seems to attest. Yet the pleasure in seeing these pictures may be more subterranean than that, if the identification flits between victim and perpetrator: who cannot ask themselves in the circumstances portrayed what they might be capable of?

Rut Blees Luxemburg's photographs of London at night—council estates and multi-storey car parks—are shot on large cameras at long exposures, and are lit by streetlights. They are often of neglected or down-at-heel places, and the results are a mix of warmth (partly lent by the jaundiced tones of the sodium lamps) and distance, longing and a vicious pleasure in the details of decay, as she engaged, as many German photographers do, in a simultaneous combat with and mourning for modernism, and perhaps for analogue photography.



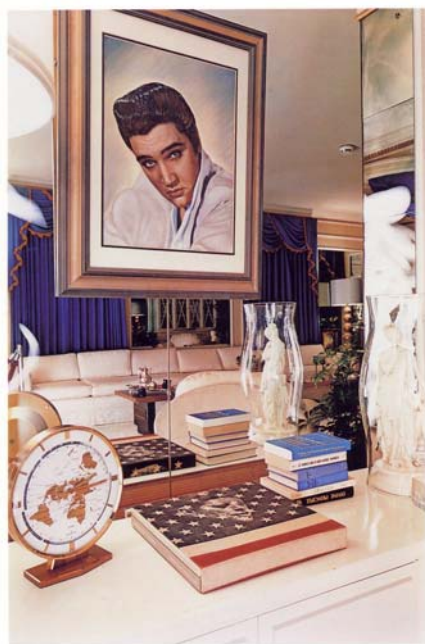
*Liebeslied*, a show at Laurent Delaye Gallery and a book (so my memory of the former has no doubt been altered by looking at the latter) moved on from the ruins of modernist architecture to dwell upon smaller scale and more intimate aspects of the nocturnal urban landscape. It is a slow examination in which light is burned slowly onto film over seconds and minutes. The city at night is surveyed slowly as though it were the landscape of a lover's body, with the Thames lapping against some steps, puddles in a muddy backstreet, undergrowth casting areas into deep blackness, the combination of blurry and sharp shadows of branches falling over a wall. The city at night, then, as seen by someone in love wandering alone, metaphors proliferating. As in many photographs, perception is bent by desire, as light is bent by water, unreliable colour becomes its agent, and a

specific vision is formed—here pictures as memory capsules containing a melancholic, nostalgic and romantic dose.

The work engaged me because of its proximity to my own interests, forcing a recognition in me, and at the same time naturally a distance and an evolving critique. It also stays in the head because it was a show seen with friends, at a time when there was a group of people, including Rut, who I'd see at shows regularly for drinking, laughing, discussing, joshing. Laurent Delaye is a small gallery and would attract a particular crowd: to walk in at a private view and find those people was to be wrapped in warm belonging and congeniality, and those feelings strongly affect the way I viewed the works. That is a good part of the reason for private views, of course: inviting a specific group of people, and warming them with alcohol and each others' company is an effective way to propagate the work. It isn't that such crowds are not critical—they can be highly so—but that they are a consensus-forming machine. I've often got a lot from attending closely to what the machine says; yet there also seem to be times when it is necessary to not engage with it, especially when you need to think about the basis of all such cultural and social exclusivity, those left outside.

I saw the last show in the company of my little daughter, who was then eighteen months old. I don't get to see so many exhibitions these days because of her, and I don't mind much. She sleeps for a while after lunch, though, and when I feel energetic enough to negotiate London transport with toddler and push-chair, I can see a show in that time. This is what I tried to do with *William Eggleston* at the Hayward, but she wouldn't sleep. So I saw part of the show with a rocking motion as I moved the push-chair back and forth, and sung to her through some of it, at the same time gazing at Eggleston's recent pretty, gentle pictures of Kyoto, not dwelling on them much but trying to gut them for their point in the shortest amount of time. And part of it pursuing my daughter round the gallery, her squawking loudly with delight at being able to explore a new space and see new people, or with her in my arms looking at pictures. Naturally enough, you look at pictures differently, like this: you find yourself saying things like, 'there's a flower' a lot. It's as if (in Bourdieu's schema) your social capital had suddenly been drained away, and you are reduced to looking at art only to identify its subject matter. I think she liked the colours, though, as did I.

Wandering with a camera is something I no longer do much either, which bothers me a bit more than not seeing shows. Seeing Eggleston's pictures brought back a taste of that activity, of the strange mode of attending to the world that is required by the lens, of photographers' tricks to bring diverse objects, shadows and reflections into an arrangement that speaks of an occult coherence. Looking at the earlier pictures that made Eggleston famous,



of uncanny fragments of domestic interiors, parking lots, diners and other flotsam of Southern Americana, even with the pictures of people (particularly of a couple of decorative girls who seem to sink under the weight of their own existence or the heat), the strong smell of loneliness arises. Photographers of this kind, those who continually put one foot before the other without knowing where they are going, who seek without quite knowing what they are looking for, haunt places and spy on objects, people and animals. The coherence they lend the world in their pictures speaks of emptiness, alienation, of the unbridgeable distance between people, of the odd personality of objects photographed and their own apparent isolation and disconnection. In an old book, Raymond Williams argued that modernism favoured the voice of the exile, of those sundered from any form of community and solidarity. This still seems the typical mode of art-making and discourse, to the extent that entire ranges of human emotion and experience are exiled to expression in kitsch. With a force so cogent and complete, one must ask what function it serves, that the marks of distinction are so bleak. Is it purely the structural matter that since mass culture is so saturated with sentiment, that the only mark of distinction is

disillusion, or does the cultural elite derive some positive benefit from its exercise? My daughter, running around, shrieking, lapping up the attention of strangers, her whole being attuned to wide-eyed exploration and sociability, was a living refutation of the pictures.

