



*It's Just a Matter of Time*

Toby Blackman

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Front Cover    *The Path* (2019), author's image (6x6 cm negative)

Fig. 1            *The Path* (2021), author's image (12x12 inch handmade print on Ilford gloss photo paper)

Of the paths leading out of this history, the one I took has led me to consider the space and time of visual representations in which components of identity coalesce.

Victor Burgin (2004)

## SEPTEMBER

I stand on the Hunter's Path late in the afternoon. It's late in the afternoon of 14 September 2019; I am in the remains of a hot, bright day, the sunlight is picking out the rise, the bend ahead of me.

I have loaded a roll of Ilford HP5 black and white negative film – a 60 millimetre wide, twelve-shot strip of emulsion-coated transparent plastic film, spooled in a light-tight cassette. The processed roll of film forms a set of 'negatives' – master images once commonly made on thin sheets of glass, or paper – from which all positive prints will derive. Negatives are handled and stored with special care. Right up to the point at which they are lost, as I have proven to myself.

At some point in the last ten years, I lost my entire negative collection. I could blame this loss on the sheer number of house-moves made over the years, but that would suggest loss were simply a consequence of movement. Only a few, specific sets of negatives remain in my possession, forming a partial, temporal, spatial archive comprising disconnected situations, landscapes, cities, streets and internal spaces.

I stop, stand to one side on the path to position myself in the shadows, and remove the top half of the cover from my medium format camera, a twin lens reflex Yashica Mat. It is simple, robust, entirely manual, and completely reliant on a separate, handheld light meter in use. Each quarter-turn of the advance crank pulls a six-centimetre, unexposed length of film into position behind the camera lens, creating a square negative and yielding twelve shots per roll of '120' film.

I work slowly and carefully to frame a mirrored, inverted image on the frosted glass plate atop the Yashica's body. The tactile, focus control knob is on the left, and the simple, discrete shutter release is on the right; the balanced movement and action of my hands seek equilibrium of pitch, roll and yaw.

Operated at waist-level for handheld exposures, the twin lens reflex camera sets up a perspective and field of view distinct from our own eye level, centring an embodied camera as a mediating space.

*Are the hands holding me a safe pair of hands?*

*I am shifted awkwardly at first; the adjustments made seem wild and over-compensatory. I am a particular thing.*

*I frame the path ahead and reflect its inverted mirror.*

*It's getting late. We shouldn't be here. We shouldn't be here today, not at this time, not with these thoughts. We should be two hours further down the road.*

*I am difficult to work with.*

*The temperature is not making this any easier. We shift position and attempt to remake the image. The setting light dances on the gravel, creating optimism, and leading us further into the gorge.*

Cold, weighty, worn, and satisfyingly ergonomic, the light meter's needle twitches and responds to orientation, position, and context continually. Intuitive and revealing – of the condition, context, light, shadow, and moment – the light meter is delicate yet purposeful, augmenting subjectivity and guiding me in the situation.

The light meter's leather case is a deep, dark brown with a gold embossed logo, *Sangamo Weston*, matching the brass zip, branded Lightning, which is secure, tight, and bound by accurate, parallel stitching. It is a beautiful case, which speaks to care and custodianship through photographer-object interaction.

*I worked with someone else a long time ago.*

*I am an object out of time. I do not know how much time has passed, but I know that I am once again in the familiar hands of a photographer.*

*I am held, and directed toward the limits of the site, toward the light relief, and dark recesses of site.*

*I offer a set of values – yet I reserve the right to continually revise them – remarking upon the situation in an ongoing narrative act.*

The momentary interplay of light, landscape, photographer and camera – of optics, field, body, and archival material – is captured in sequential, square regions of exposed photographic film. I turn to a line from Peggy Phelan, 'I'm dizzy with mental blurring: history is physiology; etymology is narrative; speech is vision.'<sup>1</sup> The negative formed, archived in the light-tight camera body denies immediate return to the situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Peggy Phelan, 'To Suffer a Sea Change,' in *The Georgia Review*, v.45, n.3 (Fall 1991), pp. 507-525, (p. 522).

'There is no transforming in photography. There is only decision, only focus.

John Berger (2013)

## MIMESIS: REPETITION AND DIFFERENCE

I have booked time in the Photo Parlour on the top floor of Karlsruhe House, Queensbridge Road in Nottingham to work in the dark room today.

My mind returns to my first sensorial experiences of the dark room in the School of Architecture at Oxford Brookes University.<sup>2</sup> The sound, smell, and spatial discipline of the dark room seems immediately familiar; I am struck by the clarity of the sonic memory of the dark room particularly. The space is active, and very much alive. The continued movement and flow of bodies, hands, liquid, and light. Movement and flow are deliberate calm, temporal and spatial outward from the strip of black and white film placed in the enlarger.

My reference today is the contact sheet, a print produced by laying the negatives directly on a sheet of chemically sensitized paper and exposing this in the dark room for fifteen seconds.

My choice of resin-coated, gloss paper for the prints I am making is deliberate, and subjective. Fibre-based, textured papers disrupt the surface, and the light in a way may undermine the precise, demanding, and accurate character I seek to invoke. For this work, observing tradition, and working precisely within the constraint feels subjectively, and autobiographically appropriate.

*[Space] is first of all my body, and then it is my body counterpart or 'other,' its mirror-image or shadow; it is the shifting intersection between that which touches, penetrates, threatens or benefits my body on the one hand, and all other bodies on the other.*<sup>3</sup>

The enlarger lens produces image-space outward of the six-centimetre square negative in the dark room. I co-ordinated my choice of 12"x16" paper size with the process; slicing four, one-inch test strips under the red 'safe light' of the dark room creates a twelve-inch-square sheet. I raise the enlarger head to produce a full-frame image within this square, maintaining an approximately equal margin.

I am using the same box of coloured enlarger filters – designated from 00 (soft) to 5 (hard) – I purchased in Jessops, Oxford in 1994. The box feels familiar in my hands, the worn laminate

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<sup>2</sup> I was 20 years old when I took a photography third year 'elective' degree class run by Iradj Parvaneh in the School of Architecture. Bob was 46, my age as I write this today; an inter-biographical moment around which my thoughts pivot today. Iradj was a kind, supportive and generous man who valued care, rigour, and discipline; he instilled in me my love of photography and the dark room. I hadn't seen him in a long, long time when I learned of his passing in 2018, but I felt it deeply. I will always remember Iradj when I work in the dark room.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), p. 184.

corners giving way to the cardboard, connecting the artefact to the many days on which it was carried in my shoulder bag to and from my student home in Headington to the dark room on the fourth floor of the School of Architecture.

I work methodically, recording the duration of exposure producing each one-inch-wide test strip.

The printing process performs a second reversal of the negative, restoring light and dark to their normal order, and make permanent the latent image.

I am present in the space, adjusting the temporal, spatial position of the image. Scale, framing, focus, and temporal duration are intimately, individually calibrated in the dark room.

A full-frame test print establishes the ground for writing a set of remarks upon time, describing the choreography of movement between the lens of the enlarger and the surface of the photographic paper and its duration. The spaces of the image which must 'dodge' the light, and the spaces of the image which must be 'burned' by the light.

I control the speed of the development, and the depth of the black by placing a coloured filter in front of the enlarger's image-projecting lens, working towards a print attaining the range of contrast in the negative.

Movement, stimulation, and agitation are vital. Stasis would result in over-dark spaces during exposure and mark the surface during processing and development.

Processing of the exposed photographic paper requires chemical development, neutralisation, fixing and washing. The exposed paper is moved carefully through a series of liquid processes, receiving specific, timed immersion and agitation in each of three shallow plastic trays to first 'develop' the silver halide in the latent image to metallic silver, second, neutralise development in the 'stop bath,' and thirdly, 'fix' the image by dissolving undeveloped silver halide from the light-sensitive emulsion. Finally, the photographic print is washed under continual low pressure in a water bath to remove the processing chemicals and protect the image from fading and deterioration.



*All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view, even when the other is our own machine.*<sup>4</sup>

The print indexes time in the material space of exposed photographic paper.

Have I destabilised time on the Hunter's Path?

For Ian Borden, '*Dialectical imagery [...] tends to destabilise time, making it discontinuous, pushing it outside historical, periodised time.*' From the length of the photographic exposure, across the intervening space of time, and through the duration of printing, time and space have been arranged and sequenced, reforming and reindexing the register.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' in *Feminist Studies*, v.14, n.3. (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599, (p. 583).

<sup>5</sup> Iain Borden, 'Imaging Architecture: the uses of photography in the practice of architectural history,' in *Journal of Architecture*, v.12, n.1 (2007), pp. 57-77, (p. 66).

What I find utterly terrifying is mourning's *discontinuous* character.

Roland Barthes (1977)

## A DSQUIETING SLIPPAGE

My brother visited our mum in January 2019. She was in the ICU, in Royal Cornwall Hospital, Treliske. Drew was *marked* by the visit.

The driver turned right across my right of way, *through* the centre of my bicycle. The impact was heavy. The time, and space of the collision remain clear in my memory. I was thrown clear, and struck my head on the kerb, the helmet shattering and absorbing as much force as its construction was designed to. The overload of force travelled into my thoracic spine, damaging my C5 and C7 vertebra. It was a bright, clear, dry Sunday afternoon, 11 September 2009.

I am profoundly, painfully aware that my mum is in terminal decline by the summer of 2019.

The muscles in my neck, shoulders, and at the base of skull are protecting me. They go into spasm. This is the start of the nerve and mobility problems.

Rehabilitation, through physical therapy, acupuncture, strength, and range of motion exercises is slow and partial, yet ultimately, empowering. Initially, I cannot extend my neck more than 10 degrees, and whilst this will ease with time, I can no longer sleep on my front, with my head turned to the right. I learn this by trying to do so.

I adopt disciplined, conscious adjustment, making, and remaking my own body in space, and work to modify my movement.

Two weeks after visiting mum I felt a familiar pain in my left shoulder. Almost ten years earlier to the day I was hit by a car. Rapidly, my body, and my nervous system returned to the site of the accident. First, I lost grip strength and sensation in my left hand first, suggesting a slipped or herniated disk, and then, over a month-long period my condition worsened.

Pain became continual, and intense, extending over my left shoulder and down my arm, radiating from the epicentre which lie in my thoracic spine, the site of the damage caused ten years ago. Sleep was gone. By November I was medicating, prescribed Codeine and Diazepam for pain relief and muscle relaxation. Stopped-down, emotionally mute in relationships, volatile in the everyday.

Mum remained hospitalised for most of 2019, spending only days at home at a time, before experiencing a ratcheting, incremental worsening of her condition. Dad drove the seventy-four-mile return trip from their home in Helstone, Camelford near-daily.

We spoke daily.

We *speak* daily.

Mum passed in the early hours of Saturday, 11 January 2019. I woke to a text message from Dad shortly after and called him immediately. He was devastated. Drew drove from his home in Surrey to be with him later that day.

*There are mornings so sad...*<sup>6</sup>

My physical pain lifted, sensations returned, and mobility eased within a week. I have never felt as wretched, nor as emotionally spent.

These mnemonic sites seem to be organised by the determinants Barthes referred to as the 'already read,' the 'already seen.'<sup>7</sup> A disquieting slippage.

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. by Richard Howard and annotated by Nathalie Léger (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011), p. 244

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Sequences of Actions,' in *The Semiotic Challenge* (New York, 1988), p. 141.

This is a story which relies on numbers, precise measurements of the body's timing.

Peggy Phelan (1991)

## SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard essays our first home and the conditioning effect upon the development of our spatial, temporal patterns of movement and positioning. Brian Dillon suggests it is the space of the home itself which plays out over time through this embodiment.

*It is the empty volume that we get used to, that makes our bodies move in particular ways, that forms habits and physical attitudes which persist, awkwardly, after we have left.*<sup>8</sup>

I have spoken to Dad every day over the last two years. We talk about everything and nothing. More recently this has been in a video call, but sometimes we just talk on the telephone. We frequently explored our memories, juxtaposing the time and space of individual thoughts, forming and reforming situations, editing sequence and arrangement, time and space.

*The house works specifically on our bodies: making them accord with its own geometry, encouraging us to move around in it in ways that will stay with us for a lifetime.*<sup>9</sup>

Recently, Dad spoke of the first home in which, ‘we each had our own space.’ I have an incomplete spatial memory of the home. The memory of my bedroom is partial and positional, the knowledge of it situated in my body.<sup>10</sup> There are elements and events – temporal, spatial and material – which are ‘burned’ into my memory, and others which are ‘dodged,’ time, space and light forming ‘transitional spaces between objects and subjects.’<sup>11</sup>

I remember my own bedroom, on the first floor, to the right of my brother’s bedroom at the top of the stairs, my door perpendicular to his, casting light from the hallway onto my bookcase and over the bedroom wall. A poster of the NASA Space Shuttle is fixed with *Blu Tack* to the *Artex* coated, textured wall. A handful of partially painted scale models – cars and aeroplanes – sit on top of the gloss painted, desk height bookcase, the bookcase itself full of the novels, comic ‘annuals’ and non-fiction books of my childhood.

*Drew and I had it all growing up. Fun, stimulation, love, and laughter. Bob would indulge Drew and I our weird behaviour and our pedantic demands - from angling the light from the hallway ‘between the C and the E’ of my Space Shuttle poster EVERY SINGLE NIGHT, to ‘evenly distributing the*

<sup>8</sup> Brian Dillon, *In the Dark Room: A Journey in Memory*, reprint edn (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,’ in *Feminist Studies*, v.14, n.3. (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599, (p. 583).

<sup>11</sup> Jane Rendell, ‘Forwards,’ in *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis: Spaces of Transition* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 226-239, (p. 228).

*blueberries' in cakes for Drew - Bob understood our childhood anxieties and struggles, and enabled us to grow out of them (I mean, people still have to hold me by the edges, but Drew's alright).*

I remember the joinery – skirting, architrave – is painted gloss purple, but I might be mis-remembering this, superimposing the shared bedroom of the previous home, my imagination appropriating this *representational space*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Victor Burgin explains – citing Henri Lefebvre – that, ‘*Representational space* is space as appropriated by the imagination,’ in Victor Burgin, ‘Introduction,’ in *In/different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, (California: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 1-36, (p. 27).

Pain's present tense, endless tension, makes the story impossible to end.

Peggy Phelan (1991)



## CODA

I woke early and sat gathering my thoughts in my parents' new home. Mum and dad moved here relatively recently in 2017. It felt unfamiliar. The rooms felt like someone else's. The spaces and fabric of the home were mute. They held other people's stories, framed other people's development, love and loss.

The living room is space of joy. Sundays are filled with music. Mum and dad play records on their Garrard turntable.

I took a detour on the long, hot drive from Nottingham and visited Castle Drogo for the first time.

Set in immaculate formal gardens and overlooking the Teign Gorge, Castle Drogo was designed by Edwin Lutyens for Julius Drewe and built between 1911 and 1930. It remains the last castle to be built in Britain (Drewe's idea). Constructed entirely from granite, Drogo is bold, sculptural, and pursues one of Lutyens' central themes, *rhythm* – in light, space, and structure.

I had not – I *have* not – visited as often, or as many times as I would like to have done. Neither time nor distance were kind measurements, separating us by six-to-seven hours driving over three-hundred-miles.

Mum's health had deteriorated quickly in the time and space of a year. The effects of the stroke revealed themselves rapidly. The incremental, cumulative events of a lifetime were quick to remove light, space, and structure. Creative rhythms replaced with the rhythm of daily dressings and medication, before, finally, bleak intervals in space and time, lucidity, and presence.

I walked on to the Teign Gorge 'classic circuit,' a circular path which joins a singletrack trail, the Hunter's Path, and descends to the floor of the Gorge. I carried my medium format film camera around my neck and stopped to take two shots on a bend on the Hunter's Path, simply – it would seem – to be present and active in a place.

It was the last weekend I would see my mum.

*I'm on my way.*

*I'm on my way.*

*I'm on my way.*

PRAXIS



*Fig .1 The Path* (2019), Author's image.

## CASA NATALE

One of my favourite family photos captures Mum, Drew, and I standing outside Casa Natale di Giacomo Puccini, in Lucca, Italy. Dad took the photograph, from the middle of the street, with the three of us stood on the narrow pavement to the right of the entrance door. A simple brass sign discretely announces the building in centre-justified text:

FONDAZIONE

GIACOMO PUCCINI

CASA MUSEO

The section of the building framed in the photograph is captured as a part-elevation; the façade and the picture-plane are parallel in plan. The photograph gathers several elements distributed across the facade: the entrance door and its stone architrave; discrete metal intercom and doorbell housings; a brass sign and its stone base; the bottom of an external wall light, and a small rectangular protrusion in an otherwise predominantly smooth, plastered elevation. The plasterwork is mottled and crazed; cracks have opened over time and through wear. The buildings movement – expansion, contraction, structural – have created these fissures, recording and revealing elapsed time, environmental exposure, internal and external spatial events. The plaster is darker in two regions of the photograph: around and above the entrance to the left of the image – appearing to emanate from the intersection between the simple stone architrave and the smooth undecorated plane of the façade – and to the right of the image – one to two metres above my head – forming a cloud-like region that hangs as it gathers, diffuses as it rises and extends beyond the top right of the frame. The architrave springs from a square block to form an arch bisected by the photograph just before it reaches the centreline. Diffuse daylight is coming from the right, throwing the subjects and objects of the camera's study into a hazy, minimal relief. The door reveal appears deeper than it is; the architrave is just-proud of the façade plaster plane. The entrance door itself is dark, panelled timber, fitted beneath a top fanlight with radial tracery, the face of the door recessed just-beyond the plane of the external wall. Further to the right, just off-centre of the photograph, the brass plate of the museum sign is set – in turn – off-centre on a larger stone slab fixed to the façade, throwing the façade into relief.

The photograph is certainly organised, but in terms of both the image composition and the subjects in the frame, it is very much informal. Mum is centred in the image, wearing a short

sleeve orange blouse and a pair of white cotton shorts. None of us in the image are tall. Mum was 5'3" at her tallest, before she lost an inch or two in height post childbirth, injury, illness, traction, and in old age. She would proudly claim this was 'average height,' but Drew and I never took this seriously. At our young age in the photo, Drew – three and a half years younger than me – stands at mum's shoulder height, whilst I stand at mum's eye level. Drew is wearing a royal blue t-shirt and leaning-in as he stands close to mum's left. His hands are clasped at his front, whilst his mouth hangs open in a natural, contented smile. The three of us occupy the lower third of the landscape format shot.

The roof of a small, dark brown car parked in front of us lies on the true centreline of the photograph; I now realise that mum is ever-so slightly off to the right, the right side of her face touches the centreline. The little brown car is cropped mid window, driver's eye height, and too difficult to identify for me beyond the era of its design and construction. It is likely a hatchback, or perhaps a small saloon, with distinct design clues dating to the late 1970s or early 80s: wide C pillars at the rear with black plastic housed vents; rain gutter running the length of a welded steel roof, slender B pillars between front and rear doors, and minimal A pillars between the leading edge of the front door and windscreen. The raked windscreen and shallow-angled rear window form diagonals which lead us into the image; they would converge a foot above mum's head, where a coincident dark grey patch lies in the plaster.

Mum's blouse and Drew's t-shirt are vibrant, 'popping' against the muted colours of the façade, and the dark brown of the car. The draped folds of mum's blouse produce a tonal range which resonates with the highly polished brass signage, which presents yellow through brown, via gold and orange. I am perhaps half-a-foot to the left of mum – my brother, Drew is much closer – I am smiling, and my head is cocked towards my mum as Drew's is. I am wearing a pale grey, capped-sleeve t-shirt – neutral, almost washed out – allowing the subjects of my interest, gaze and love, my mum, and my brother, to occupy my study of the photograph and the memory of the situation, bound in space and time.

*A photograph is effective when the chosen moment which it records contains a quantum of truth which is generally applicable, which is as revealing about what is absent from the photograph as about what is present in it.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, Penguin Modern Classics new edn (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 20

Dad is present in his absence from the image, stood in a narrow street, *Corte S. Lorenzo* just off *Piazza Cittadella* in Lucca, Italy in 1982. The street is no more than three metres wide. He is near us, generating the smiles and emotional warmth from mum, Drew and I that are captured in an out of focus photograph with evident film grain. The lack of accuracy in the focus allows me to connect now with the essence of the subject: the happiness, and the non-verbal dialogue of the family. The unbound joy of mum's broad smile and her body language speak directly to my dad in the street. Accuracy would, I suspect, only bring the passage of time into focus.

*For Bob.*

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