

John MacLean – Artist’s Statement

Neighbourhood. Sixty-nine photographs taken in John MacLean’s immediate locality of Tooting Bec, south-west London, between 1 March 2008 and 24 May 2009. Published as an A5, 44-page book.

“If I couldn’t find material to do an artwork walking around the block once, I wouldn’t do it” - Robert Rauschenberg 1955.

“Throughout the history of photography, practitioners have frequently looked to fresh, unfamiliar locations to generate new work. Inspired by the methodology Robert Rauschenberg employed to make his Combines, I decided to try an opposing strategy. Why not, I reasoned, photograph the place that was most familiar and least far-flung? So, I began to produce a large body of photographs ‘taken’ within a strict, five-minute walk of my house.

What emerged, over a period of 15 months, were the new approaches that surface when a photographer, forced into a corner, has to photograph his way out. The resulting book, *Neighbourhood*, is part diary, part archive, part lament on the passage of time, part psychogeography and part playful push-and-pull of photographic conventions.

The book’s preface takes the form of a seemingly random assemblage of black dots arranged in relation to the icon of a house: an allusion to a pattern of work. A date and time for each image is supplied in an index, thereby creating a diary of the thought process that evolved when each photograph taken was fed back to influence the next.

The self-imposed geographic limitation is central to *Neighbourhood*. It compelled me to explore, camera in hand, every narrow street and yard of my locality - places that had gradually become dulled by a layer of everyday familiarity. In the past, I had mustered a state of adrenalin-fueled, heightened awareness by travel to exotic places; suddenly this was conspicuously absent.

Walking had no destination, so a process of drift resulted. I began to slow down. I began to hope that by avoiding ideas that could be identified in advance, something unexpected might emerge. By returning to the same terrain repeatedly, minutiae and increments of change became apparent. Chance encounters were embraced whilst themes and patterns were allowed to crystallise. Process had become an integral influence on the work.

As months elapsed, it became apparent that my mood on any given day could react with the ambiance of my environment and influence the resulting images. Good work made on one day could colour the next, just as a lack of success might instigate a redoubling of effort. Frequently, the frustration at the shortness of my leash would catalyse new directions of thought. I discovered an appetite to photograph in a provocatively oblique way, a thrill in creating ambiguity between surface and depth, an interest in visual dislocations and a desire to elude the tyranny of the single, time-locked image. Increasingly, I welcomed allusions to the cinema and art that I was studying during the same period.

Finally sixty-nine images were chosen and stacked together, they constitute a curious archive: one that charts the movement of objects and people; that records growth and decay. A musing on photography’s potential to acquire value through its ability to outlast - in some cases immediately - the subject it records.

Addendum

A project running parallel with *Neighbourhood* required me to travel to Los Angeles in 2008. The intention was to visit locations of seminal photographs from the 1970s. Standing where Stephen Shore had set up his camera in 1975, holding a copy of the photograph he took that day, brought to mind Garry Winogrand’s famous statement, “I photograph to see what something looks like photographed” - a privilege only available to the photographer, unless the viewer is able to return to the original location, image in hand. This thought led to the inclusion of a map of image locations in *Neighbourhood* - a veiled invitation to discover the source of each photograph.

Subsequent serendipity revealed a new facet of the work with the arrival of Google Street View. Now each of my photographs can be compared, on the internet, with those seen through the dispassionate eye of a camera designed solely to collect objective information.” John MacLean 2009.