

# CHRIS KILLIP: THE LAST PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE WORKING CLASS

The German industrial city of Essen, in the middle of what used to be the Ruhr iron-and-steel belt, is an oddly appropriate setting for the retrospective exhibition “Arbeit/Work” (2012) by the Manx-born photographer Chris Killip.<sup>1</sup> Killip photographed in Britain throughout the 1970s and ’80s, mostly in the northeast. In 1988, he created the exhibition and book *In Flagante*, which earned him the Cartier-Bresson Prize, and, indirectly, a professorship at Harvard University, where he has been teaching since 1991.<sup>2</sup> He has scarcely exhibited in the United Kingdom since 1990. Recently, his newer work has been shown in museums in Germany and France.<sup>3</sup>

This reticence over exhibiting Killip’s work in the U.K. has something to do with the shift of photography and photographic criticism toward fine art since the late 1980s (Killip’s work does not *look* like fine-art photography), but it has far more to do with his uncompromising stance regarding his subject matter. Working as a photographer’s assistant in London in the late 1960s, Killip went back to the Isle of Man for his first book, *Isle of Man: A Book About The Manx* (1980).<sup>4</sup> He returned to mainland Britain in the mid-1970s, settling in Newcastle just at the moment when the oil and IMF crises, deindustrialization, and redundancy became the defining conditions of life in northern England. Denied permission to photograph in places like the Swan Hunter shipyards, he turned instead to photographing the consequences of the disappearance of work. Killip immersed himself in small working-class communities like Skinningrove in North Yorkshire, where the closure of an iron and steel plant effectively ended all possibilities of local employment, and, most extraordinary of all, Lynemouth Beach in Northumberland, where in the late 1970s and early ’80s a small community of travellers, ex-miners, and others eked out a living harvesting sea coal that washed in on the tides (the result of a local mine dumping its mixed rock-coal waste directly into the sea).

Immersion in these communities reinforced Killip’s attitudes toward what he was experiencing. The opening lines of the epigraph to *In Flagante* capture this exactly: “The objective history of England doesn’t amount to much if you don’t believe in it, and I don’t, and I don’t believe that anyone in these photographs does either as they face the reality of de-industrialization in a system which regards their lives as disposable.”<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising that *In Flagante* was read as a savage critique of Thatcherism. A book on the working class, covering fifteen years of industrial decline, it contains not a single picture of wage work. In fact, its cogent lucidity, acclaimed in the critical



rhetoric of the time,<sup>6</sup> was due in no small part to Killip’s gradual immersion in his subject matter. He was based in Newcastle starting in 1976, photographing at Skinningrove for several years and living for fourteen months in 1983–84 on and off in a caravan at Lynemouth Beach. He also photographed the Pirelli factory workforce at Burton upon Trent in 1989 and spent months on the shop floor. In immersing himself in these communities, he built relationships with those he photographed that were much closer than reportage, or even documentation, normally allows. This immersion largely determines the nature of his photographic contribution.

In a sense all photography is observed life. What varies is the degree of observation and the kind of approach to subjects—the physical, psychological, and political distance—that artists take. Killip has a sharp take on this. The second half of the epigraph to *In Flagante* reads, “To the people in these photographs I am superfluous, my life does not depend on their struggle, only my hopes. This is a subjective book about my time in England. I take what isn’t mine and I covet other people’s lives.”<sup>7</sup>

This unusual admission of implication in the lives of the subjects of his photography brings to mind György Lukács’s comment

## Above

*Father and Son Watching a Parade, West End, Newcastle (1980) by Chris Killip*

on the ethics of the essay writer: that bound to one's subject matter, the work of the essayist must be to discover means of expression adequate to their truth. For Killip, truth in this situation, politically and photographically, means the truth of those he photographs as persons *beyond* their identification with, or reduction to, redundancy and deindustrialization.

One result of this stance is that when Killip photographs, he produces portraits. This was already true of his book on the Manx. Over the last thirty years it has steadily become evident that this is his real *métier*.<sup>8</sup>

Killip's book on the Isle of Man is not a political book, but portraiture took on a political edge when the photographer returned to mainland Britain in 1973–74. It was not only the old industrial fabric that was breaking down at this point; so too was the postwar social democratic project. Two portraits taken in Huddersfield in 1973, *Whippet Fancier* and *Brass Band Member*, capture something of this shift. They are darker and more equivocal than those from the Isle of Man taken only a couple of years before. Seen in the context of what comes after, they portend the world Killip had begun to portray, a world where the institutions that had secured "the North," and especially the working class, were disintegrating—faster and more comprehensively than anyone at the time thought possible.

At times Killip portrayed deindustrialization more or less directly. A pair of pictures in the retrospective do this with some poignancy. The first shows a street end in Wallsend, on the Tyne, in 1975, adjacent to the Swan Hunter shipyard. The nineteenth-century terraces sit under the bow of a ship under construction (somewhat ironically, its visible name is "Tyne Pride"). The next picture is the same scene in 1981. The streets are in process of demolition. There is no ship. The yard is gone. There is only dereliction.

Such direct representation of what is happening is rare. More usual, and more compelling, are urban landscapes—Huddersfield, Castleford, Killingworth, and North Shields—curiously drained, as if at a point of abandonment. The formality of these pictures, largely empty of life save for perhaps one or two figures almost lost against the emptiness surrounding them, only emphasizes the sense of stasis and exhaustion.<sup>9</sup>

Portraits remain the main work across this period: sometimes of groups of figures that seem to harken back to an older world of working-class life (a whole series of figures on a beach that echo Henri Cartier-Bresson and feel closer to the 1930s than the 1970s). More telling of the social and psychological conditions of the times is a series of pictures in which the figures seem lost or oddly uncertain (a man sitting with his child against a graffiti-covered wall in Newcastle; a superb but enigmatic double portrait of a man carrying his young son on his shoulders from 1980) or are reduced to fragments (the torso of an old man perched atop a wall in Pelaw; a hunched woman at a bus stop in Middlesbrough).



These photographs contrast, sometimes sharply, with those from after 1980 that sense another world coming into being, a world registered less in the landscape than through changing bodily relations and the poses of figures. Pictures of glue sniffers on a beach in Whitehaven, the stance of a teenage boy on the beach in Skinningrove in 1983, and punks in a club in Gateshead in 1985 all point to the emergence of a world wholly other to the traditional working-class culture that Killip pictured only a few years before. A few photographs mock what this new culture is becoming (piles of cans in a supermarket in 1981), or point to the emptiness of the idealizations that were once sustained (mayoral robes on display in the civic center in Jarrow—the place that originated the famous "Jarrow March" of the unemployed to London in 1936). The underlying thrust of these pictures is clear: these are photographs of what Killip described in a landmark 1985 exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London as images from "Another Country."

These pictures drawn from across the northeast were to become the core of *In Flagrante*, but this book was supplemented—and increasingly so as one works through it—by the photography Killip undertook, first in Skinningrove between 1981 and 1983 and then at Lynemouth between 1983 and 1984. These communities were small enough that Killip could form personal relationships with those he photographed—however ambiguous, even tense, these sometimes were. The two locales provided Killip with what might be called "localized points of revelation": communities that were less metaphors for the political and economic struggles of the 1980s than fragments of it, each epitomizing larger processes of transformation and destruction. But these were also communities attempting their own forms of survival, a struggle against the "disposability" that Killip attempted to witness and register both through photographing the conditions of such a struggle and through group and individual portraits.

Deceptively bucolic in the selection shown in *Arbeit/Work*, the photographs from the small coastal village of Skinningrove—where after redundancy there was an attempt to create a substitute economy around inshore fishing—are some of the most difficult to view in the exhibit. There are no saving graces



here, just the implications of the near impossibility of wresting a living in a recalcitrant context. Nonetheless, this is not reportage. The involvement is closer, if more ambiguous, and less a simple “given” than in the Isle of Man pictures.

The full presentation of this work waits, but Killip has now provided a fuller version of his photography at Lynemouth—for which, in retrospect, the work at Skinningrove looks like a preparation. Killip describes encountering the extraordinary site of Lynemouth as thus:

When I first saw the beach in January 1976, I recognized the industry above it but nothing else I was seeing. The beach beneath me was full of activity with horses and carts backed into the sea. Men were standing in the sea next to the carts, using small wire nets attached to poles to fish out the coal from the water beneath them. The place confounded time; here the Middle Ages and the twentieth century intertwined.<sup>10</sup>

Lynemouth lies at the very northern tip of the old Northumberland and Durham coalfield, at the point where the seams run out under the North Sea. Until 2005, the Ellington mine sat right on the beach. Coal had broken away from underwater seams and collected along local beaches for centuries. In the 1970s, the mine began to tip the mixed waste that was no longer economical to sort directly into the sea. Wave action gradually separated the rock and the coal. Since coal floats, tides and storms carried some of it back onto the beach. For a few years there was sufficient coal being washed ashore that it was just possible for a small community of travelers, ex-miners, and others to eke out a precarious living from harvesting it on the tides or gleaning it from the beach.

**Above**

*Helen and her Hula-Hoop, Lynemouth, Northumberland (1984) by Chris Killip*

**Facing Page**

*Crabs and People, Skinningrove, North Yorkshire (1981) by Chris Killip*

Killip tried to photograph the first day, but was violently driven off. It took seven years of persistence, and a modicum of luck, for him to finally be able to photograph on the beach. What he produced in the fourteen months he lived there is evidenced in examples in the retrospective, but the much fuller presentation, where the scale of Killip’s ambition in making a complex collective portrait can best be seen, is in the book *Seacoal* (2011).

*In Flagrante* is a “subjective book” (Killip’s words) about objective historical processes and their human implications. *Seacoal* is different. It is an essay, considered retrospectively, twenty-five years after the photographs were first taken. Then, the community that Killip photographed looked like a marginal moment of Thatcherism. Today, the political irony of *Seacoal* is that what it shows—the struggle for survival and a sense of worth in the context of a faltering but unforgiving economy—is what the global “good society” looks like for many.

*Seacoal* consists of two sets of works, carefully interlaced. The first are individual pictures—mostly portraits—of stunning force. These are pictures that, in an almost high modernist sense, attempt to capture the essence of the situation within a single image. Some of these are among the most memorable images in *In Flagrante*. Take, for example, the portrait of Helen, aged around eleven, which closes *Seacoal*. She seems almost to be slipping off the bottom right edge of the photograph. Behind is the detritus-strewn beach, the line of surf above her leading the eye back to what is both inconspicuous and all pervasive, a pile of coal won from the sea—and won, we know by the time we have reached the end of the book, with considerable difficulty.

Portraits without context, seen outside the context of the conditions determining or at least framing ways of living, run the risk of disconnecting the subject. The second set of photographs in *Seacoal* deals with this problem by offering an understanding of the conditions of life at Lynemouth. Sequenced at once logically and almost musically, orchestrated and interlaced with considerable care, these pictures take us from the beaches where the coal was harvested through the conditions that both determined and enabled how the community could function.

In this sense, the book is less a collection than an essay, an almost systematic examination of how Lynemouth beach functioned as a community. Eugene Smith spoke in the 1950s of the possibility of the photographic essay as essay, i.e., as neither collection nor illustration to a text, but as *itself* a mode of understanding. With some exceptions—most notably David Goldblatt in South Africa in books like *The Structure of Things Then*<sup>11</sup>—photography has been slow to take up this possibility. Even as the photobook gained currency, it has taken time for the severe limitations of exhibition value (understood as “collection”) to become apparent. *Seacoal* therefore represents a different kind of understanding of what photography might be able to do. It also helps to make sense of Killip’s work after he left the U.K. for Harvard in 1991. His straightforward photographic work after this date, in Ireland<sup>12</sup> and in some photography around the conscious theme of “history,” is not important. What matters is Killip’s sharpened



sense of the possibilities of the photographic book, not as a collection of photographs but as an essay, a direct contribution to understanding.

This is not irrelevant politically. One of the consequences of the abandonment of the project of political progress after 1974 was that unless it could be rethought in terms of the monetized economy (as the “undeserving poor,” “illegals,” and “economic refugees”), the “working class” became an embarrassment for progressive culture and politics. It has been widely assumed that we can have understanding of the world without reference to class—and almost without reference to history.

Forty years on, we are beginning to understand something of the price we pay for this. The rise of a politics of resentment that globally assumes increasingly right-wing, nationalist, and socially conservative forms is only the other side of a global culture of inequality that now presents itself as the natural order of things. Both feed off the fact that the double denial of history and class eviscerated defense of the egalitarian project<sup>13</sup>—and left politics to the tender mercy of those determined to establish the primary interests of wealth. The results are seen today across the political landscapes of Europe and North America.<sup>14</sup>

Photography will of course claim innocence in this respect. After all, it no longer tries to photograph the world in any serious way. However, the complexity of the project and the demands of “exhibition value” have proved less amenable than might have been thought. In any case, because photography is a negotiation with the Real, politically it is always a negotiation with history and class. By erasing these realities, and handing them over to

be denied or transformed into “art,” photography weakens its own capabilities. Collectively, photography today is probably less intelligent about its capacities in dealing with the world than at any time in its history.

This is where we come back to Killip’s project and particularly to his work of the last decade that has seen the production of the essays *Pirelli Work* (2008)—his portraits of the shop-floor workforce in the tire plant at Burton in England—and *Seacoal*. This means not only that they seek to offer a truth concerning the subject matter to which they are bound, but also that this subject matter is, in the end, the past grasped in the present as a way of understanding our situation vis-à-vis how we can act in the future.

In photography, the vehicle for this is the essay. The essay offers photography the chance to finally do what it has always promised to do, that is, to be a genuine reflection upon its times. If one side of photography is the presentation of encounters (and is politically the achievement of the anonymous portrait, bringing into public visibility those hitherto excluded from it)<sup>15</sup>, the other is today the essay, through which it offers, sometimes almost against itself, a reflection on history.

*Arbeit/Work* as a whole, both as exhibit and catalog—and in their different ways, the books *In Flagrante*, *Pirelli Work*, and *Seacoal*—owe their collective force to the fact that they combine the first of these in the context of the second. Taken together they offer a demonstration, not, of course, without its limits, of the possibility of the photographic as a means of understanding our times. At a minimum, this is suggestive of what a photography capable of understanding its own historical possibilities might do. But what else would be an adequate project for the capacities it can uniquely offer?

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NOTES 1. “Chris Killip: *Arbeit/Work*” at the Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany, February 4–April 15, 2012; Chris Killip, *Arbeit/Work* (Göttingen, Edition Folkwang/Steidl, 2012), catalog of the exhibition at the Museum Folkwang, 2012. 2. Chris Killip: *In Flagrante*, text by John Berger and Sylvia Grant (London: Sackler and Warburg, 1988), photobook of the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1988. 3. *The Essen retrospective will go to Madrid and Paris. There are no plans for it to be shown in Britain.* 4. Chris Killip, *Isle of Man*, text by John Berger (London: Zwemmer/Arts Council of Great Britain, 1980). 5. *In Flagrante*, epigraph. 6. See for example, Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History*, Vol. 2 (London: Phaidon, 2006), 299. 7. *In Flagrante*, epigraph. 8. *In the Essen retrospective there are some wonderful examples of this; in fact, both exhibit and book begin with a series of eight portraits, ranging from seven-year old Cian Quayle at the table in the Isle of Man to the modelist Martin Amis.* 9. Killip has something of a talent for using formality to emphasize and intensify—and not dissimulate—content. 10. Chris Killip, *Seacoal* (Göttingen: Steidl/GuinZagal, 2011). 11. David Goldblatt, *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998). 12. Chris Killip, *Here Comes Everybody*: Chris Killip’s Irish Photographs (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009). 13. John Berger put it this way: “A people or a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act than one that has been able to situate itself in history.” John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1972), 11. 14. A recent commentary caught this well, that today we have shifted from being disgusted by poverty to being disgusted “by poor people themselves.” Suzanne Moore, “Instead of being disgusted by poverty, we are disgusted by poor people themselves” *The Guardian* (February 16, 2012), [www.guardian.co.uk/comments/free/2012/feb/16/suzanne-moore-disgusted-by-poor](http://www.guardian.co.uk/comments/free/2012/feb/16/suzanne-moore-disgusted-by-poor). 15. I explore this theme of the politics of the anonymous portrait in my essay for Chris Killip, *Pirelli Work* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006).

**Above**

*Tyre Builder, Pirelli Tyre Factory, Burton upon Trent, Staffordshire (1989)*  
by Chris Killip

# afterimage

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TO ADRIAN RODRIGUEZ, WITH LOVE  
*Melanie Willhide*  
(INSIDE COVER SPREAD)

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*Flying/Falling* (1984) by John Divola; © John Divola

