

Interview - Lewis Bush

Written by E-International Relations

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Lewis Bush is a photographer, writer, curator and educator. He originally studied history, worked for the United Nations and then began working as a documentary photographer. His work explores the diverse operation of contemporary power, ranging from the destructive impact of property speculation and redevelopment on his home city of London, to the systemic inequalities of the art world. He has recently completed *Shadows of the State*, which maps the covert radio stations used by intelligence agencies, and in 2018 began a six month residency examining the offshore finance industry in the channel island of Jersey. Bush's projects have been shortlisted for commendations including the Tim Hetherington Visionary Award 2017, the Luma Rencontres d'Arles Dummy Book Award 2016 and 2015, the Photo Espana book award 2016, and the Bar Tur Photobook Award 2015 and 2014. Bush has curated and co-curated several exhibitions including *Media & Myth* (Format Festival, 2015), *Very Now* (London College of Communication, 2016), and *It's Gonna be Great* (Copeland Gallery, 2017). Bush is lecturer on the MA and BA (Hons) Photojournalism and Documentary Photography courses at London College of Communication, and a visiting tutor at many other institutions. Bush has written extensively on photography for a range of print and web titles. Between 2011 and 2016 he also ran Disphotic, a blog on photography and visual culture. Lewis' new book *Metropole*, a document of the brutal uprooting of London's foundations at the hands of corporate developers, is out now with Overlapse.

Where do you see the most exciting work happening in your field?

Thanks for asking me to take part in this dialogue, and that's an interesting question to open on because I feel increasingly unsure about what my field is. A year or two ago I would have said it was documentary photography, but since then I've found myself far less certain of that. For the sake of answering the question though, I think the field that most interests me at the moment is one which might be termed investigative photography, or perhaps investigative documentary, a form of photography which borrows in many ways from investigative prose journalism. A few examples of this might be Mathieu Asselin's recent book on the agrochemical company Monsanto, Edmund Clark's collaboration with counter-terrorism investigator Crofton Black on the US extraordinary rendition program, or Mari Bastashevski's exploration of the trade in surveillance technologies. This rather investigative way of working is not exactly new to photography (you could see Lewis Hine's exposé of child labour or Alice Seeley Harris' documentation of atrocities in the Belgian Congo as early examples), but the approach seems to be particularly useful right now at a time where there are so many issues which can't be unlocked by other approaches.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I think the main realisation over time has been how little I understand the world, a growing sense of the complexity of it and the impossibility of trying to model or explain even a very small part of it through tools like photography and text. I see that all too clearly when I look back at some of the atrociously open-ended projects I attempted when I was first experimenting with photography. In terms of shifts in thinking, the time spent studying history at the University of Warwick was a formative experience in a number of ways. Partly, it equipped me with a set of fairly rigorous methodological tools that have proven very useful since, but also because it was here that I encountered ideas about the politics of knowledge and technology which have often underpinned the choice of topics I explore and the ways that I do so.

Interview - Lewis Bush

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How do you use photography to bring history and the present in conversation with one another?

Photography lends itself to this dialogue perhaps more than most media, in the sense that one can only really photograph what is passing and has already past. And yet photographs are of course always encountered now, in the present. I think that makes them uniquely suited for constructing these sorts of dialogues. Something that another interviewer raised with me is that as historians we don't get taught to use photographs in particularly thoughtful ways. Specialised photographic history aside, many historians just treat images as a way to illustrate the 'proper' history of text, but they are fascinating historical objects themselves in all sorts of ways and are highly effective at activating the sort of conversations you mention.

In *Images of Power*, you and Mark Duffy bring together artists who seek to confront the year in which the UK voted to leave the EU and the US voted Trump in as President. Stylistically, how do artists go about confronting such a momentous moment in subversive ways? Methodologically, what was your thinking behind the selections you made as a curator?

For that exhibition my co-curator Mark Duffy and I were interested in photographers and artists who engaged with the image of politics generated by politicians and political organisations, and the ways that many of these artists worked to subvert the intended meaning of these images. Much of the included work was directly appropriative, re-photographing or reworking official imagery, and it all had a dark humour which very much attracted us as well. While the exhibition wasn't a direct riposte to Brexit it was certainly inspired by it.

After Trump's election we followed this up with another show called *It's Gonna be Great* which focused more directly on his self-image. His sense of self is fascinatingly warped and again very suited to a photographic critique, because of the way one can so effectively distort reality through photographs as well as representing it more faithfully. So in this case many of the artists we selected were doing exactly this, like Alison Jackson for example who poses lookalikes in compromising situations and photographs them with paparazzi aesthetics. In terms of our methodology though one thing Mark and I very much agreed on was that in some ways the photographs were only one element of the shows, and we wanted them as far as possible to be multi-sensory experiences in complex spaces that people can explore.

What were your intentions in *War Primer 3*? Is your own political ethos voiced through this artwork?

The work was initially a critique of the artistic duo who created *War Primer 2*, a clever rehash of Bertolt Brecht's 1955 book *Kriegsfiabel* (later translated into English under the title *War Primer*). My version was an appropriation which attempted to draw attention to the inequitable economics that underpin the photography and art worlds, in this specific case the use of unpaid student interns in the production of *War Primer 2*. Most people in these creative fields profess to hold progressive, egalitarian viewpoints but don't think twice about engaging in practices which exploit inequalities in economic, social or cultural power, which bothers me enormously. So my aim was to draw attention to this inconsistency, and to act as a bit of a reminder of how easy it is to perpetuate or benefit from inequalities without even thinking about it. The book has since been through several revisions and while it is still about this core subject I have tried to adjust it so that it addresses the issue of economic inequality in the world more widely, and its relationship to various forms of conflict. While Brecht's original book was largely a critique of the Second World War, he frequently connects conflict and economics which seem to go beyond the usual Marxist thinking about capitalism and conflict. This also seemed highly appropriate as an idea to return to given the current state of the world, where wars and violence are as much driven by economics as by ideology.

How do you go about visualising state practices of espionage which are typically hidden? And are you attempting to directly subvert or offer a counter-narrative to the 'paranoia, conspiracy and misinformation' which surrounds such clandestine sites?

I think a useful starting point with any project, particularly one which is about an evasive or opaque subject, is to ask in what ways the topic you are looking at visualises things, including the ways that it visualises itself. In the case of intelligence gathering that presented lots of possibilities, the most interesting of which to me was satellite imaging.

Interview - Lewis Bush

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This is a technology which has gone from being the peak of secret technology in the early 1960s to something which is more or less familiar and accessible to all of us. This transference from the secret state to wider public use also means that we can see locations which were essentially invisible when they were first constructed, because there was no anticipation that they would ever be exposed to public scrutiny in this way.

However, it is a mistake to assume as people often do that familiarity in itself equals literacy, and satellite imaging is a nice example of that. Working on *Shadows of the State*, where I was using this technology to reveal covert communication networks, it became apparent how ambiguous and open to interpretation satellite imagery can be, and that its interpretation can be as much a matter of instinct and guesswork as anything else. So, in this sense the project became a bit of a subversion of some of the narratives of spying, a practice which emphasises accuracy and knowledge but which frequently employs technologies and methods which often inherently limit these things.

In terms of the project as a whole, to some extent I'm not sure it entirely subverts ideas about paranoia and misinformation as it does reinforce them. The open source nature of the research and the unverifiable nature of the sites involved means that the definite nature of these sites will remain uncertain, but that question of the authority of information was also an interesting sub-theme I wanted to explore in the book.

What role does the aesthetics of the image play in your projects? Do you at times intentionally try to resist aestheticizing the subject you depict?

There are certainly areas of work where it can be very problematic, as we see from regular debates in photojournalism for example. I think in general with the things I'm working on the idea of beautifying the subject matter is generally not controversial, partly because I'm not generally looking at the effects (for example the 'victims' of an event) in the way more reactive photojournalism might, but trying to uncover something about the causes instead. I'm also not really that interested in making intentionally aesthetic images because that plays to an audience and a market that I'm not very interested in. Perhaps most of all though it just seems like a bit of a luxury when the subjects under consideration make any sort of visualisation so difficult that producing some sort of relevant image is enough of a goal and a challenge, whether or not it is beautiful.

Global finance might seem like an unusual subject for visual art. How do you use photography, for instance in *the Memory of History*, to reveal stories about the European debt crisis in a way that perhaps cannot be told through words alone?

Finance is an immensely difficult subject to visualise because its core activities are highly complex, completely abstract, and distributed in locations which make access difficult or impossible. One of my research interests are visual responses to this topic and I would say there are very few photographic works about the topic which manage to penetrate through the surface of the subject in a way which is useful. An example of this I think is the work of Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann, who have photographed algorithmic trading firms, and reveal in the process how little there actually is to see at the heart of finance. Another example is Eline Benjaminsen's work on the same subject, which seems to suggest that even finance workers themselves struggle to understand their field. This is the subject area I am currently working in as part of a residency in the Channel Islands and so I say this not from a position of criticism of artists who have tried and struggled with this topic, but one of understanding as I have many of the same problems.

In the case of *The Memory of History*, the focus was less on the financial systems that triggered the 2007 crisis and global recession and was more about looking at the way the resulting economic and social strain triggered problems in unexpected ways. I was particularly interested by the way some of the popular narratives about the European Union and its successes in resolving the continent's fractious past dissolved in the context of the crisis, with a wide range of national and international historical grievances and anguishes re-emerging. These in turn informed many of the debates about economic policy, a very obvious example were the constant comparisons in Greece between the various plans to bailout the Greek economy in return for very painful economic restructuring, with the German invasion of Greece in 1941, an occupation that Greeks were themselves expected to pay for.

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Talk to us about your current/upcoming projects (whichever you'd rather talk about, or both)?

I am currently working on a few different photographic projects. One I briefly mentioned before looks at the intersections of international finance, history and Brexit in the Channel Island of Jersey. This project is still very much in development and so perhaps it's better to say less about this one for now!

The other project is an exploration of the moral ambiguities of space technology through the figure of Werner von Braun. Today he is probably best known as the architect of the Saturn V rockets which were used to undertake the Apollo moon landing in 1969. This legacy hides an altogether darker story however, as prior to 1945 von Braun had worked to develop ballistic rockets for the German military, including the V2 rocket – a militarily ineffectual 'vengeance' weapon, the only purpose of which was to indiscriminately kill allied civilians. Despite this, his membership of the SS, and his alleged implication in concentration camp brutality, von Braun's technical knowledge meant he escaped prosecution at the end of the war and was relocated to the United States to continue developing military rockets, including the first to be armed with nuclear warheads, before finally going to work for NASA.

For me, his story is a fascinating opportunity to explore the complex politics of technologies, the myths and ideals that space exploration is largely founded on, and the way space technologies and projects are frequently dressed in a cloak of civilian respectability even when they in fact have distinctly military origins and intentions. In terms of a book form it also presents some fascinating and challenging storytelling possibilities, drawing inspiration from the experimental narratives of writers like Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut.

What is the most important advice you could give to young artists interested in using photography to make politically relevant and subversive art?

Perhaps to ask first of all if photography is the right tool to address the subjects they want to explore and talk about? The longer my engagement with photography becomes, the stronger my sense becomes that it is actually very inadequate for addressing a lot of issues, and I think that's part of the reason why, as I mentioned earlier in this discussion, I am finding myself looking more and more into other fields for ideas. Also to ask themselves who exactly they want to speak to with their work. *Shadows of the State* was an interesting experience because while I've always orientated myself towards the photography world, that book was far more successful with people interested or active in areas of communications, radio and spying than it was with my usual audience. That has caused me to reconsider who I try to talk to with my work, and why.