

Consciousness breathing: Paul Graham's American trilogy

By David Chandler

'If you aren't certain about things, if your mind is still open enough to question what you are seeing, you tend to look at the world with great care, and out of that watchfulness comes the possibility of seeing something that no one else has ever seen before. You have to be willing to admit that you don't have all the answers. If you think you do, you will never have anything important to say.'

Paul Auster, from his introduction to True Tales of American Life, 2001

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line.

Henry David Thoreau, from Walden, 1854

We are in *The Present*, turning and unfolding the pages of Paul Graham's 2012 book of that name. The photographs we see are taken on the streets of New York, or rather they monitor those streets. For there's something systematic in Graham's tracking of people over short sequences of two or three images, the photographer's focus following their movement or shifting among the crowd from person to person, from picture to picture. Street corner vantage points are taken up, and held, sight lines are drawn, and as people drift in and out of the frame the photographs appear to replicate Graham's mind wandering, his quality of attention varying: a odd gesture registering here, an awkward posture there, a look of confidence perhaps, then something more fragile, a trace of anguish; or more simply a coincidence of stripes rippling across a scene. A black woman in a vermillion dress steps from the shadows and casts her own shadow on a yellow taxi as she passes. It's a chromatic luxury – one of many in *The Present* – that in the following picture begins to unravel and dissolve away into the city.

Elsewhere in that city people walk towards the camera, they cross the street and Graham's camera checks their progress, once twice, and again. They are physically there, in action, but often lost in their thoughts, oblivious to the moment captured, to the way their arm might be resting on their bag, to their melancholy expression, to the picture of their own presence. The camera seems to reach out to them in this way, its light sensitivity like a touch; a transmitted thought that generates a kind of intimacy. It's an illusion of course; there is no meeting of minds here, after all, the crowd is a good place to be alone in. But the extreme care taken, the quality of close observation and Graham's evident interest in minute details – the creases of human existence – *feels* like a connection is being made; fleetingly so at the point of the exposure, but permanently in the photograph, drawing us the viewers into an act of great recognition and empathy. And this tangible sense is given weight by the repetition that is so central to the structure of the work. The frozen moment of the photograph is unlocked by the inclusion of another, taken a moment later, a fraction of a second or maybe more – and then in some picture sequences a minute may have past before we stare again into the same slice of urban space. But what this reiteration confirms, reinforces, is the very process of watching itself, and the physical presence of the photographer (so often the absent presence) in time and on the street; a standing, shuffling figure amongst others, his camera trained at eye level looking out across the endless permutations of bodies moving through the built environment, at all the visual surprises this generates, at the points of coherence and chaos, the absurdities and incongruities, and at the constant flow of possible human stories.

And as we, too, contemplate all this through the pages of *The Present*, Graham's shutter clicks away in our imagination, taking on an intermittent, metronomic quality, the sense of echo and anticipation

gradually playing into the way the pictures are read and the book is experienced. Photography cannot replicate the way our eyes observe the world, but here it seems to mimic the reflexive visual adjustments of human sight. Using the power and precision of the camera lens, Graham elegantly reminds us that seeing is linked to cognition, and so is a form of intelligence; and that, in turn, the act of photographing is a profoundly embodied experience. In this extraordinary piece of work the operation of the machine, the tick of the metronome, is also a heartbeat.

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Following *American Night* in 2003 and *a shimmer of possibility* in 2007, *The Present* is the most recent of what has come to be seen as an important trilogy of works made by Paul Graham in the US over the last fifteen years or so. Although they were not conceived as such, there is a compelling case for regarding them now as unified series of works, linked not only by common subject matter but also by underlying themes and ideas that have developed, in part, from Graham's response to the social landscape of America since he began making photographs there in 1998. It is true that the three works – and from the outset we should be more specific and say that they were principally books at the point of conception – gain much of their immediate visual charge from this new national context, from an encounter with a specific cultural geography and with what are at times desperate social circumstances. Yet the works also represent a significant shift of tone in Graham's practice. His work has always generated momentum through its abrupt changes of subject and approach. But in his American trilogy the shift and its implications seem more far-reaching. As a process it might be usefully described as an 'opening-out'; not simply in the sense of an outward looking view, of journeying and social interaction – although the work is all of these things – but also in relation to a more fluid form of picture making that has moved away from the single definitive image towards short integrated sequences of pictures. In one sense this is an editorial decision on Graham's part, to reveal more of the 'flow' of his practice; to suggest more of the searching involved in what Vilém Flusser has called 'the gesture of photographing', acknowledging the tentative 'movement of doubt' working away inside each encounter with a subject. It suggests what Graham has described as 'a less forceful, more inclusive attitude', a 'rejection of absoluteness and finality' as a more fitting response to the tenor of his times. But embedded in this, too, almost as a natural consequence of his changing priorities, has been a renewed emphasis in the American work on the critical potential of vision, as an acute, but also fallible sense, and importantly as a *process*, one intimately connected to the development of understanding as it changes, moment by moment, through time. So Graham's loosening of the picture-making reigns in fact belies a profound reconsideration of how photographs might function and communicate with the viewer. And, vitally for him, it has also re-affirmed the photographer's primary condition of seeing and recording the world directly as it ebbs and flows around him.

In 2010 during the making of *The Present*, Graham gave a presentation at MOMA, New York, in which he endorsed this primary condition of photographic seeing for what he characterised as an indifferent art world, one that habitually misunderstands the medium's unique, distinguishing qualities.

It was a timely intervention; one that also gave him an opportunity to voice the personal credo that his recent American work had, to that date, so persuasively articulated in visual terms. It is, he said, ‘through force of vision’, that photographers ‘strive to pierce the opaque threshold of the *now*, to express something of the *thus* and *so* of life at the point they recognise it. They struggle through photography to define these moments and bring them forward in time to us, to the here and now, so that with the clarity of hindsight, we may glimpse something of what it was they had perceived.’ In this, he suggested, we begin to unveil ‘the creative act at the heart of serious photography: nothing less than the measuring and folding of the cloth of time itself.’

From the time he started working outside of the UK during the mid-1980s onwards, most frequently in Europe but also temporarily in Japan, Graham’s work began to push the photographic image to expressionist extremes and, like the German photographers he was becoming friends with at the time, such as Michael Schmidt and Volker Heinze, his work gained much of its energy and atmosphere from the stark, revelatory exposure of things close to hand. Works such as *New Europe* (1988-92), *Empty Heaven* (1989-95), *End of An Age* (1996-1998), and the short series *Paintings* (1997-1999), for example, are dominated by a dark, flash-lit interiority only occasionally relieved by brief glimpses of daylight. Reality in these works is very much at the service of the camera, metaphors for social unease and historical trauma are wrenched from hidden corners, appearances become diffused, and colour – always at the fevered centre of the work – is calibrated to psychological intensity. *End of An Age* in particular represents something of a passionate finale to this period of work. Its embracing of photographic ‘mistakes’ – rich colour casts, blur, red-eye effects – was in part a riposte to the spectre of sterile photo-shopped perfection in photography at the time, and after more than a decade of challenging assumptions about what ‘good’ or legitimate photographs might be, *End of An Age* became a full-blown, summary assertion of Graham’s own agency and control, as a photographer and printer, over the entire, uninhibited, unregulated range of the photographic vocabulary. But more personally, the work’s portraits of young people – they are examples as much as individuals, a sampling of a youthful condition poised at the close of the century – were a vehicle for Graham to reflect back on his own youth, and to affect a form of closure on a particular time and experience. For all its hothouse intensity, an air of suspended time and even exhaustion permeates *End of An Age*. The work was both a climax and a kind of epitaph, and in 1998 soon after it was completed Graham started visiting the US more regularly and began making the first photographs of an as yet undefined project, one eventually published as *American Night* in 2003.

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Some of those first pictures, taken in New York during 1998 and 1999, where sunlight cuts through the murky air of the streets like a corrosive force, now burn away at the centre of *American Night*. They have some of the dark intensity of Graham’s European work, but immediately take us into a very different cultural space. The languid, introspective subjects of *End of An Age* had been a generation of what Graham called, ‘monocultural kids’, representatives of a white, western social model already

consigned to the past; a sense of decadence, and even social detachment, inflecting the work's feeling of exhaustion. A strong atmosphere of fatigue and depletion also defines Graham's first American photographs, but now the African American people that loom out of the pictures appear in various states of distress, struggling, physically and emotionally with their environment as if being worn down by it. Even light – such a balm for those young Europeans – now appears an element of oppression.

The change of tone feels stark and extraordinary. And it is almost the first instance in Graham's entire body of published work when we find him, in any concerted way, out on the street, in that very particular circumstance of making pictures as the life of a city flows around him. Most of the work for *American Night* was made between 1998 and 2002, a period during which Graham was essentially in the process of moving to the US. In fact he didn't settle permanently in New York until the work was almost finished. So it's important to think of him beginning to photograph in America, and on the street, as part of a more general orientation and exploration in a country that was about to become his home. But what we discover in those first pictures for *American Night* is that this quickly took on a more urgent sense of purpose in his work. Placed now in the troubled core of that book along with other photographs made in a similar vein over the next four years or so, those early images form part of ten-picture section which preserves something of Graham's initial, visceral response to the very palpable social and economic divisions in the country and, more specifically, to position of race at the heart of those divisions. As Graham has said: 'anyone who comes to the United States with open eyes cannot fail to be moved by the racial/social inequalities here. It's the elephant in the room. To make work here, and *not* take that into account seems to me to be plainly ridiculous, and it makes you part of the problem...'

Yet part of what is so disconcerting about these photographs, part of the almost startled view of street that Graham asks us to share in, is that the act of looking is in itself bound up with a sense of discomfort. As Graham quickly reacts to the people around him, his lens loosely framing or closing in on them, the operation of his camera in these pictures is comprehended as an immediate, *felt* response to the physical conditions of the street. This *feeling* is reinforced by the body language of those he photographs; a woman who stares and clenches her fist, a man who grimaces as he bares his chest to the light, a man in a wheelchair who shields his face, maybe from the sun, maybe from the photographer, and another woman who sits at the curb-side and turns to meet the camera's gaze, a trace of anger in her weary look. The potency and instability of vision in these pictures, so wired to that intervention of corrosive light, seems symptomatic of a deep malaise within the experience of African Americans in the city. A condition given a sombre prognosis by the two photographs that bookend the section, both of which depict people with damaged vision. Their white surgical eye patches signal the peoples' frailty but also suggest a link between their bodies and the distressed fabric of the city, one layered by remnants and inscriptions, whose graffiti and old posters act as a kind of camouflage, an ageing surface against which the people have already begun to disappear.

From his earliest work Graham had been interested in the ways in which the camera might explore tensions between the visible and the invisible. But in these New York photographs those tensions are more explicitly dealt with, the dichotomies of light and darkness, presence and absence, visibility and blindness assuming an uncanny and almost febrile physicality. And yet, wrapped around them in *American Night* is an even stranger play about what is seen and not seen. If the city is the book's dense, dark epicentre, on the pages before and after it, we find its alternately pale and radiant reflection; another, hinterland America emptied out into different forms of blankness. In one, the images are so overexposed that they barely register on the page, the falling away of visual information demanding a relative increase of effort from the viewer, placing a new strain on the process of looking. But what is partially seen is in fact hardly there; the milky mirages are a succession of American non-places; wind-blown urban deserts of sweeping roads and their ramshackle accretions of roadside architecture, through which, in the mid-distance, the diminished, lone figures of the American poor conduct a faltering passage. All seems inert, absent, detached: as though the removal of colour and substance from the photographs had detected another more pervasive form of stilling, another deeper social disease.

Presence, of a kind, returns with peculiar force in the pin-sharp, full colour photographs that interrupt this series at erratic intervals, in which large and immaculate suburban houses glow in the Californian sunshine. The pictures complete Graham's envisioning of endemic inequality and help make *American Night* into a formidable viewing experience; the intrusion of intense colour saturation into all that bleached overexposure jolting the eye from poverty to affluence, cold to hot, effort to ease in a way that folds our awkward reading of the book into the social selectivity of sight that forms its overarching narrative. But inside this is another quieter but more insistent idea about the slow and systematic erosion of the human spirit; which, brought to its knees in the opaque pictures, has evaporated entirely into pristine Californian real estate: two scenes of a gradual disappearance enacted in plain sight.

American Night remains an uncompromising body of work. Its unsettling structure and its obscure white pictures a typically audacious transformation of experiments and mistakes that combine to make severe demands on the viewer, demands that still divide opinion more than a decade after the book's publication. There is something particularly provocative in the fact that Graham's first-seen American photographs were a series that defied viewing, and that the poetic and historical consciousness of his work is embellished in the book by faintly printed texts, from Herman Melville and José Saramago, that only become legible, become visible, with careful angling of the book towards the light. In his title alone he was invoking an historic, and potentially daunting litany of other projects, Walker Evans's *American Photographs*, Robert Frank's *The Americans*, Lee Freidlander's *The American Monument*, Stephen Shore's *American Surfaces*, Joel Sternfeld's *American Prospects* and so on. So in some ways *American Night* represents a confrontation with, at least in photographic terms, an almost sacred text, and at the same time finds its place as part of a wider process that has been called 'the continuous remaking of a nation', which, as David Campany has recently pointed out, can be seen as part of the American condition:

'...perhaps more than any other nation modern America was and is a restart, a remake, a second attempt, a project...a work in progress. The American experience is ongoing. It is in a state of constant becoming and thus needs to be monitored. As a result, the country has a more sovereign and integral relation to its self-image. America is not so much out there to be pictured, or even out there as a picture; rather the act of picturing is a primary act of diagnosis, definition, and self-assertion.'

Like Robert Frank fifty years before him, Graham was an outsider and so had an oblique view of that self-image, but *American Night* was conceived to reflect, to 'diagnose', a national condition and was planned very consciously to span the country's four compass points, Graham finally visiting Atlanta in 2003 specifically to complete the geography.

There are echoes of the modern American canon throughout the final book, conscious memories of other landscapes, other journeys and other streets. There are even hints of Jeff Wall's tableaux melodramas in the book's central section, here repatriated to the streets and the photographic lineage they came from; and in the white pictures, there is an uncanny pre-figuring, too, of Doug Rickard's screen grabs from Street View in his *A New American Picture*. But in the making of *American Night* Graham was at pains to avoid any obvious comparisons and to banish any hint of nostalgia. Once again by teasing out new potential from the photographic process, from its full tonal range, he was able to critically revitalise a fading language and wrench the past firmly into the present. And in doing this he also snaps the viewer awake, breaking into the common reverie of exchange between photographer and viewer by demanding renewed effort and attention and an unprecedented, testing form of hands-on engagement with the book as an object.

The conceptual rigour of *American Night*, structured around the idea of a 'play within a play' – the more recognisable 'street photography' of the central section a deliberate foil for the de-familiarising misty inertia and colour flashes of outer pages – builds on Graham's work for *End of An Age*, whose portraits are arranged to suggest a gradual turning movement or *pirouette* through which its young subjects also fall under a kind of gently forensic examination. Both projects testify to the growing importance of the book in Graham's thinking at the time, not simply as a primary site for the photograph but as planned and resolved works in themselves. In both *End of An Age* and *American Night*, common 'errors' of the photographic process were the catalyst for Graham's ideas to develop, but in each case single photographs and the picture making process became finally subservient to the editorial strategies that define the books' structures and bring the works to fruition.

But for Graham, by late 2003, travelling and photographing in America, the experience of visiting places, meeting people, being on the street, had taken on a momentum of its own. And it was the particular quality of this routine experience, with its minor acts of discovery and a growing feeling for social space and the textures of peoples' lives, that began to draw Graham into a new pattern of work,

one in which the act of photographing, the apparently simple, reflexive process of looking, noticing and recording ordinary things, would emerge in all its variety and complexity as an idea in itself.

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The banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? (...) How are we to speak of these common things, how to track them down, how to flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they are mired, how to give them meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what it is, who we are.'

Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 1974

A shimmer of possibility is an American epic of the small and incidental. There are no vistas here, no real landscapes: little sense of the great continent in all its glory. The book's sense of place remains localised and intimate, but across its twelve meandering volumes Graham's short, interlocking sequences of photographs trail back and forth across the country, joining different cities – Chicago, San Francisco, Minneapolis, New Orleans – and disparate qualities of space and experience – New York and North Dakota – to create an open, national sense of scale. And yet what this amounts to, the narrative summary, the bigger picture, remains almost impossible to grasp, as evanescent as the title suggests. Like the many route-less journeys across the country Graham embarked on between 2004 and 2007, the twelve books are in no order, each is complete but also a fragment of the whole, and to look through them is always to ponder different options, to follow new combinations, often finding oneself back in the same volume again, the same picture sequences, the same streets, returning and repeating a process like the photographs themselves. The sense of a survey is forever fractured here, as is the all-consuming logic of the road with its attendant series of decisive photographic documents and its drive to resolution. Instead *a shimmer of possibility* holds on to a prior point of fascination and delicacy. The book's sequences preserve the inconclusive art of walking, of urban wandering, its photographs like passing trains of thought simply noted, its realism – importantly for contemporary photography – non-ironic and direct. In fact, in their quality of quiet, often sobering revelation about lived experience, the *shimmer* volumes are like a collection of extraordinary personal notebooks; the blending of lightness and ephemerality in the photographs with the lavish attention of the production, an important distinguishing characteristic of the publishing project.

The space and depth of *shimmer*, so geographically spread out, so experientially specific, even confined, is largely a product of the restive gauging of Graham's camera eye, down towards scraps on the pavement, sensing the torpor of the streets, and then up into the sky, momentarily lost in a sunset, distracted by a sublime break in the clouds. Time unravels, and the cadences of an imperfect world, deflating and inspiring, connected and disconnected, rise and fall in one atmosphere. But the binding threads of the book, the pivotal points around which Graham and his camera move, are people, and in one important sense *shimmer* unfolds as a diary of human encounters; the imaginative scope of the photographs, and of the entire book, generally opening out from these extended nodes of intersection. It

is here, too, that we find the book's essential locus of intimacy, in the somatic space of one person meeting another on the street: exchanging glances, an expression, a few words, maybe a conversation. There are many of these instances in *shimmer*, where Graham met and spent time with someone, for a few minutes, sometimes for much longer, all the while noting things with his camera, adjusting, repeating, confirming, wondering.

Under an elevated freeway in Louisiana, for example, in another non-descript piece of edge-land, a man with a cat walks towards the camera, catching the photographer's eye as something improbable, but also charmed. Graham takes another picture as the man approaches, and then, much nearer, a portrait; they have met and spoken, the man posing without self-consciousness while another portrait is taken, reiterating the first. But something barely perceptible has changed, too, in the hair's breadth of a new second; a faint disturbance in the air perhaps, a tiny displacement of light, the car on the overpass having disappeared. In the next three pictures we see the cat, another independent spirit, stretching and watching in the concrete-ringed meadow; then back to the man's outstretched arm displaying a tattoo. He holds that position while Graham takes three more photographs: a casual enquiry and a gracious gesture of compliance. In the final image we see the man walking away, cat under his arm, towards the grey and forbidding Aloha Motel, and the brief exchange fades back into the great unknown of other people's lives. It is both nothing and something, inconsequential but made remarkable by the quality of attention Graham pays, and then conserves in the pages of the book; the narrative elements of a non-event, the man, his face, his cat, the space, the highway, the grass and flowers, the arm and the tattoo, the walk towards the motel, all precious entries into a contemporary archive of American facts, all details shimmering with possibility.

Most of *shimmer's* volumes revolve around one or two of these encounters; some are more detached but others are so close that the marks and abrasions of personal hardship and social deprivation are even more keenly felt: a woman in Chicago with silver hair, her stained silver jacket from The Lakeside Inn and Casino, clutches a single banknote; a woman in Minneapolis, a green waste bin taking her weight while she coins her scratch card; and then in Washington, a black woman with orange hair sits and stares while eating a take away, the discarded remains of other such meals littered around her on the street. In each case the intimacy of the picture sequence is matched by a tension arising from Graham's physical proximity to the people; the unflinching, prying gaze of his camera, marking signs of their waning dignity. The photographs play on this unresolved tension, but as the facts are duly noted redeeming human qualities continually assert themselves. Hands, in particular, recur as an important motif in all these photographs, as they do throughout the *shimmer* volumes, signifying touch and confirming the somatic realm the photographer has entered into, while bringing us, the viewers, closer to the terms of a sensory connection between people meeting and talking to each other that can't otherwise be seen. In this sense the sequences of photographs frame what Graham has called, 'a growing consciousness of the moment in the shy, tender meeting of strangers...the recognition of consciousness breathing.'

What *shimmer* makes explicit here is the act of photographing as a process of moving, seeing and thinking: an interplay between intention and discovery that evolves as each subject is negotiated. In his book *Gestures*, compiled in 1991 but not fully published in English until 2014, the Czech new media theorist Vilém Flusser saw this as a fundamental condition of ‘the gesture of photographing’, in which the attention and awareness of the photographer develops as new perspectives are found and new details are revealed: ‘the gesture of photographing is a movement in search of a position that reveals both an internal and external tension driving the search forward...’ Flusser calls this, ‘the movement of doubt...the philosophical gesture par excellence.’ He goes on to acknowledge that photographing people is a ‘complex mesh of actions and reactions’, a dialogue, in which, just as the subject always reacts in some way to experience of being put under scrutiny, the process of ‘observation changes the observer’ too. As he says:

‘The photographer cannot help manipulating the situation. His very presence is a manipulation. And he cannot avoid being affected by the situation. He is changed simply by being there. The objectivity of an image (an idea) can only ever be the result of manipulation (observation) of one situation or another. Each idea is false to the extent that it manipulates what it takes into consideration, and in this sense, it is ‘art’, which is to say fiction. Nevertheless, there are ideas that are true in another sense, namely, in really grasping what is under consideration. That may be what Nietzsche meant when he said that art is better than truth.’

This is the dialogue, the catalogue of gestures and the process of change, around which *a shimmer of possibility* turns; Graham moving, searching, following a thought, finding out, and grasping something enduring from what he sees, from those he meets. We can feel it happening throughout the book: in his meeting with the man and his cat, with the street hippy and his flowers in late night San Francisco, and with the elderly woman checking her mail box in New England. In each case the sequence of pictures firmly registers Graham’s presence, not only as an active observer but also as someone absorbing information and learning from what he is seeing. One of the many rewards of *shimmer*, as a viewer, a reader, is to be allowed inside this process, and, to some degree, to share in it.

This is a long way from the image of the photographer on the street that has flickered away in the photographic imagination since the advent of the Leica in the 1930s; the compulsive, almost frenzied figure, whose mythic striving for the exemplary picture conflates the intuitive and the instinctual with preternatural powers of anticipation, judgement and intelligence. So often these traits and the restless physical activity propelled by them have conjured predatory, even animalistic associations. Captivated by Robert Frank’s physical movements, Jack Kerouac described him as ‘prowling like a cat, or an angry bear’, reiterating the now pervasive hunting metaphor in which the passive subject is the victim of a violent intrusion. More subtly perhaps, Joel Meyerowitz remembers first hand experience of Frank ‘sliding and weaving his way’ around his subjects and ‘through their lives’. ‘Occasionally he would whisper something...but mostly he made his suggestions physically, in the way he moved...it was a

ballet. He was using his body to make photographs and his timing was precise.' Moreover, the successful street photographer has often been characterised as a figure that achieves, and relies upon, a heightened state of physical tension in which the body and the camera are necessarily fused, the act of photographing as organic and as automatic as the blinking of an eye. Truman Capote remembered once watching Henri Cartier-Bresson on a street in New Orleans, 'dancing along the pavement like an agitated dragonfly, three Leicas swinging from straps around his neck, a fourth hugged to his eye: click, click, click (the camera seems to be part of his own body) clicking away with a joyous intensity, a religious absorption.' Similarly the writer Malcolm Brinnin observed that 'while he is focusing on one thing, (Cartier-Bresson) quivers in the imminence of ten others... When there's nothing in view, he's mute, unapproachable, humming-bird tense.' And perhaps more than any other photographer, Garry Winogrand inherited the street photographer's mantle of animal intensity infused by that sense of balletic grace. One of his students in the mid-1970s has this extraordinary description of Winogrand working on the street; it's worth quoting in full:

'He had an amazing athletic ability when he held a camera in his hand. Honed by shooting hundreds of thousands, or perhaps even a million exposures, his technique was amazing because he was always moving. He also had some idiosyncrasies. He would walk the sidewalks, often caressing his face with his camera. He would sometimes flop his Leica from his right hand to the left... No matter what Garry was doing with the camera, his eyes were always looking for the next shot. His head would turn side to side. He was like a predator looking for his next meal. And when he saw his target, his problem so to speak, he would instantly meter the light by experience (I never saw him use a light meter), look down at his camera settings, make any needed adjustments; then he would literally walk up to the subject and snap the camera up to his eye and instantly freeze long enough to press the shutter. Then he would keep walking past the subject all the while lowering his camera and a 1/1000th later he was gone. After the shot, if someone acknowledged him with a grin or question, he would tip the camera to the subject as his way of saying thanks.'

One of the paradoxes of the exemplary street picture, of Cartier-Bresson's mantric 'decisive moment', is that it hardly ever represents the final resolution of all this high-pitched physical activity, but is more commonly a by-product of them, identified and selected later from frames of the same event that precede and follow it. To fully appreciate, to 'see' the picture, and to authorise the photographer's consummate skill and judgement at the point of exposure, it is necessary to withdraw the decisive photograph from this 'before and after' sequence and so elide from it any sense of the physical process, the 'movement of doubt', that brought it into being. It is only in the contact sheet, the traditionally suppressed object of the photographer's art (but which, perhaps ironically, Cartier-Bresson always said revealed the 'true' photographer), that a more rounded impression of photography as a physical activity developing through time, as a series of actions and reactions, becomes clear.

It is this more embodied sense of photographing, crucially preserved on the pages of *a shimmer of possibility* through the selection and editing process, that helps to give Graham's project its distinctive and radical character. As mentioned above, it was partly born out of the experience of working across America, the response to a new social landscape and to conditions of inequality both startling and omnipresent: a walk along almost any street unveiling the evidence. But Graham's ideas also developed from reviewing the work he was making, not in a contact sheet, but as he clicked through it as part of 'the workflow on a computer screen.' As he has said: 'the earliest series (of *shimmer*) were shot on film and then scanned, and going through them on screen and seeing the stuttering filmic sequence rather than a contact sheet, I began to notice this beautiful flow happening.' It can be seen in the first sequence Graham made for *shimmer* outside a motel in Pittsburgh, of an African American man mowing an entire hillside of grass with a hand mower, the 'snapshot' informality of the images suggesting the photographer's immediate, reflexive process of watching and noting this scene over a short period of time. The striving for a definitive single image here has given way to the impetus, the 'stuttering' sequential process that the act of photographing has set in motion.

As his work developed and as he began using a digital camera, the idea of the 'flow' began to shape Graham's practice more consciously – following a thought and following something happening on the street having a kind of synchronicity, part of the same process of opening up and paying more attention to the experience of the here and now. Look, for example, at his photographs of two people carrying shopping in Austin, Texas, the women's red top and the man's blue sweat pants colour co-ordinated with the large pack of Pepsi the man carries on his shoulder. There are nine pictures in all – two others noting distractions along the way – and there is almost nothing particularly memorable about the event, just a journey through another of those depleted roadside landscapes. In two pictures the people pass a cemetery, echoes of loss and remembrance momentarily in the background, but they walk on, anomalies in a landscape built for driving, and they don't look back. Graham's deliberately artless sequence of pictures hangs in the air and comes to nothing as the couple finally walk away into the distance. The sequence simply says 'this happened', it's an inventory of time and space, and yet an undercurrent of burden makes itself felt, too, in the weight of the Pepsi pack and the dilapidation of the surroundings; life going on, for better or for worse.

In some respects Graham's pictures mimic the endless vernacular production of digital culture, the automatic recording of everything and every moment by the enthusiastic amateur with a phone or a new digital camera. It's another story about heedless consumption as a social palliative. But in reflecting something of what John Szarkowski once called the 'texture, reference and rhythm' of the vernacular culture, of the 'ubiquitous amateur next door', Graham's work here also stands in counterpoint to it; the *difficulty* of photography now, as he has said, is its blanket infiltration of our lives, the challenge of the photographic artist is to impose himself upon that ubiquity, to be in the wider culture and at the same time stand apart from it.

Life's single lesson: that there is more accident to it than a man can admit to in a lifetime, and stay sane"

Thomas Pynchon, *V*

For a while in the mid-1960s William Eggleston would visit an industrial photo-lab in Memphis at night, spending time there during operating hours staring at continuous ribbons of small oblong images emerging from the processing machines. They were records of family events, holidays, weddings, children's parties, exposed on the same film but happening days or even years apart. He described it later as one of his 'most exciting, unforgettable experiences...and an education.' It was also a seminal moment for photography in general, and two things about it (at least) seem significant for Graham, and for *shimmer*. The first is a question of colour and form, and Eggleston's dawning recognition over those weeks of the boundless vernacular language of colour photography, with all its 'idiosyncrasies, informalities and candour', as a new crucible for the medium's unruly power. But the second is the very randomness of those photo strips, the arbitrary blend of domestic events that denote life rolling forward; the great intervening absences of time that each event bleeds into becoming the imaginative space where the lives fill out and change, and where they intertwine with other similar domestic worlds. Graham's sequences of photographs in *shimmer* also span gaps of time and place, their interweaving of narrative threads, their digressions and abrupt shifts of scene creating imaginative space and a sense of the country at large, while mirroring its social divisions and discrepancies and the unpredictable fluctuations of everyday lives that refuse to obey the laws of common sense. But this is not the pleasures and terrors of domestic comfort. In so much of the book private despair spills out into public life, onto the streets, and repeatedly that invitation of Graham's to *share* in his experience of contemporary America, is one where he forces us to look when looking is difficult, where, simply out of respect, we might rather avert our eyes.

Nowhere is this quite so acute as in New York, in the brown volume of *shimmer*, where seven photographs of an evidently troubled woman are edited together with eight fiery, majestic Dakota sunsets. The repetition here is, on the one hand, uncomfortably insistent, and on the other extravagant, almost indulgent in its replaying of a perennial photographic cliché; both a genuinely awed response and a kind of extended quotation. Back on the streets there is little sense this time that Graham has approached the woman. Although he moves to follow her, his pictures suggest a detached observation of her movements, again from frame to frame: the hand to the head, the deep draw on a cigarette – even the busy check of her oversize jacket seems to restate her agitation. The sunsets offer respite from the uneasy pressure of this inspection, but their burning also feeds back into the street photographs as a metaphor. In this way Graham's sequences deliberately compress emotional and representational extremes: the genre of impassive, hard-nosed street reportage finding a strange and unlikely alliance in the romantic sublime. Both sequences are American documents, yet both infer states of mind, too, and in their achingly real and mythic associations they represent a country of impossible contradictions. The sunsets evoke an ideal American space, but in human terms they are not actual spaces at all, merely backdrops for longing. In contrast, in the final photograph of the New York sequence, we gain a view of the city – blurred, chaotic, bright colour flecking its deep contrasts of light and shade. This is

the real human stage that the distressed woman, hand still clutching her head, will walk back into: the city as a place, as an image and as an idea.

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'The street in the extended sense of the word is not only the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters but a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself. Again one will have to think mainly of the city streets with its ever-moving crowds. The kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the onlooker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appeals to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, completely indeterminate figures. Each has a story, yet the story is not given. Instead, an incessant flow casts its spell over the flaneur or even creates him. The flaneur is intoxicated with life in the street – life eternally dissolving the patterns which it is about to form.'

Sigfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Reality*, 1960

If a shimmer of possibility was the product of journeying and wandering, of a roving camera eye that goes out to meet America, and sees it through a series of disparate encounters with people and places, the final part of Graham's American trilogy, *The Present*, is firmly located, its view radiating out from a fixed position, or series of static points, around which a city moves, 'eternally dissolving the patterns which it is about to form'. There is so much in Sigfried Kracauer's evocation of life on a city street that chimes with Graham's work in *The Present* (2012); that image of the spellbound observer whose sense of *being in place* is 'created' by what is happening around him. Yet the spark for Kracauer's passage is film, his words intending to evoke an affinity between our experience of the medium and the city's 'assertion' of that 'flow of life'. There are obvious visual connections between Graham's work, both in *shimmer* and *The Present*, and the frames of a film. He has suggested that *shimmer's* volumes are forms of 'filmic haiku', and his analogy between its first photographs and 'stuttering filmic sequences' might also apply to his work in *The Present*, albeit now pared down to two or three pictures. But as much as they open up photography's decisive moment by invoking the temporal flow of a film camera, the real affect of Graham's picture sequences is to emphatically reinforce the differences between the two media, and to assert the specific qualities of the still image that Graham has always been such a passionate advocate for.

The 'sharp contoured individuals' the elude Kracauer's imaginary observer/filmmaker, are the same pivotal figures that Graham's camera in *The Present* singles out in such extraordinary detail. It is exactly the drifting between these main protagonists, that occurs as Graham switches his attention, adjusts his camera's focus and introduces lapses of time (in the moment of exposure and through the editing process), that creates *The Present's* strange halting momentum, that stuttering forward again, the heartbeat echoing from the pages of *a shimmer of possibility*. If there were a more durable analogy

to film in *The Present* it would be to the freeze-frame, that function that lodges itself in the increasingly interesting fold between the still and the moving image. But Graham's finely tuned photographs belong to a very particular condition of seeing and thinking with a still camera. For Flusser this hinges around what he calls a series of 'abrupt judgements'; 'the photographer looks through a *categorical* apparatus and, in doing so, pursues the goal of grasping the world as a series of distinct images (definable concepts). The filmmaker looks through a *processual* apparatus, with the goal of capturing the world as a stream of indistinguishable images (indefinable concepts).' If we look, for example, at three photographs of a man in a black, short sleeve shirt and grey trousers crossing a road: the entire sequence represents perhaps a minute passing. The photographs denote time moving forward and what they make clear is that the operation of the shutter and the focus are in each case a response to apparent sights; specific visual stimuli that nudge Graham's impulse to make a picture as the scene and his awareness of it evolves: the man in his well of light, waiting, lifting his cigarette to his mouth; then, in the background, the woman in the green tee-shirt waits, too, lifting her hand to her head; and finally the man crossing the road, in focus again, and exhaling smoke. There is nothing 'decisive' in these photographs; across each image visual information is incidental and fragmentary, and there may other pictures taken between them in which we could track the time-bound events more closely. But what we glean from the three pictures included in the book is an impression of selective attention as it changes, and the acuity of that attention from which we, the viewers, can begin to grasp the texture of things and imagine ourselves into the scene. Once again, the photographs suggest the photographer's tangible, embodied presence on the street as an active observer; the matching of the camera's precision with the gentle, equivocal nature of Graham's deliberate repetition, enhancing that sense, too, of photographic seeing not only as a form of noticing and pointing out but as the basis of a human connection, a form of empathy.

Since its inception in the 1930s, modern street photography helped to redefine our conception of social space in the city: the private territory that people move within on the street could now be violated by the mobile photographer with a small camera who, even as they approached their subjects and brought the camera to their eye would remain distant; 'psychically outside the events they pictured'. This conflict is at the heart of the street photographer's traditionally predatory associations; nevertheless it has endured as an image and as the basis of a common practice. As we have seen, part of Graham's pattern of work in *a shimmer of possibility* was to conduct an entirely different form of street encounter, to make its duration and the nature of its physical, sensory space more keenly felt, and to openly erode the 'psychic distance' between the photographer and subject. In *The Present*, on streets with a different tempo, he steps away from that condition of intimacy as a framework for enquiring and discovering, standing back to take in a wider view of the street and the city as a stage across which people move. The private, discreet worlds of public space reassert themselves here as a multitude of unknowable individual paths, arriving and departing, crossing, merging and diverging – an offering to the photographic frame of an endless variety of tableaux.

But in structuring his tableaux around a central figure from the crowd, brought momentarily into sharp focus, Graham's photographs continually intimate personal narratives; drawing out the particular from blurry anonymity. And as these points of vivid particularity shift from person to person over two or three pictures, the sense develops of connections and comparisons being made. In a place where poverty and affluence and diverse working lives literally rub shoulders, social contrasts are an unavoidable condition of the street. Yet in Graham's comparative, weighing up of difference in the city, the sense of social observation and commentary, which came to the fore so pointedly in *shimmer* and *American Night*, continues to infuse the more general sense of heightened attention and fascination that *The Present* generates.

And again Graham uses the physical form of the book to underpin these ideas. The use of flaps to extend picture layouts and create additional space in a book has, in the past, been considered a luxury concession of the publisher's contract, a measure of confidence in the work and the book. But in *The Present* they are fully integrated into the book's complex structure and are a pivotal part of the viewing experience. If *American Night* introduced jolting contrasts and the strain of legibility to that experience, and *shimmer's* twelve volumes and interwoven picture sequences created a fractured entity of multiple options, the flaps of *The Present* feed into the plays of repetition and comparison in Graham's work by adding another layer of concealment and disclosure, and by activating another level of hand to eye co-ordination. Opening the flaps gives dramatic emphasis to the dislodging of the single photographic moment by revealing other alternative or comparative images and by folding an extra element of real time, the time of the street, the time of photographing, back into our experience of the book. In the time of turning, for example, the scene of a smartly-dressed African American man crossing the street is replaced by another showing his poor counterpart, making that same crossing, but as hunched and forlorn as the be-suited man is poised and elegant. In the time of turning we feel the city rearranging itself, as it does while Graham watches; people appear and disappear, either making way for others to emerge or, like the young Asian woman walking past a blue office façade, leaving an uncanny vacant space in the city, and a memory as the photographer's invisible subject.

Space, according to Heidegger, neither external object nor inner experience, is something we enable and sustain by our presence and by our actions. Our cities, our landscapes shape our existence and we, in turn, shape them, we live through them and they through us. But the built environment of Manhattan exerts a powerful presence on its streets, the deep canyons of space creating sharply defined areas of light and shadow, a visual abstraction that further frames, highlights and envelops Graham's figures as they move in and out of focus in his photographs. And these plains of dark and irradiated space also mark contrasting zones of visibility in the work. As people wander on and off the sunlit stages of the street, they cross boundaries of clarity and obscurity, some of which are defined by areas of murky half-light, while others are forbidding walls of darkness that threaten to engulf the passers by. In one exceptional photograph, for example, a man in a red tee shirt, swigging from a bottle, teeters on the brink of one such looming boundary as if about to enter a shadowy parallel city. It is a caught moment

of significant tension as, within the terms of Graham's work, the man's next step will also be a fall into the abyss of invisibility.

The partiality and fallibility of seeing, for which *American Night* was such a powerful extended metaphor, returns here as part of the fluctuating state of being on the street. It is a place where Graham's crystal clear points of description, the mesmerising details that confirm the capabilities and apparent certainties of his camera's vision, are haunted by reminders of sight as a continually compromised and fragile human sense. In this city of images seeing is continually tracked by the spectre of blindness. On the pages of *The Present*, in picture after picture, the blind make their uncertain way through the city; their white sticks a recurring sign in the images. People with eye patches also frequently divert Graham's attention, and more so than we might first realise; the visual evidence itself being partially obscured, hidden in the shadows or buried back in the sub-strata of the photographs. In this way the pervasive instability of sight in the work becomes clearer the more concentrated our own attention is, the more committed we are to looking ourselves.

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Rather than *duplicate* our impression of the world that moves around us, as film does, the still photograph intervenes and profoundly changes it, adding another layer to the potential of human vision by creating a space for examination and reflection. But the results are inevitably ambiguous. By re-creating reality, by *re-shaping* the world inside the flow, and by holding up a version of it for sustained and detailed analysis, the still photograph gives us something at once more formal and more legible but also more enigmatic. However, in contrast to the exemplary, single photograph, which is necessarily abstracted from the act of photographing in order to underscore that enigmatic quality, as the mysterious *possession* of something precious about reality that will always elude the naked eye, Graham's work in *The Present*, as it had done so intimately in *shimmer*, places the viewer back in the world of active, unfolding visual experience, with all its concentrations and distractions, its capacity for revelation and distortion, its wonder and its contingency. There on the street, Graham operates in a human dimension, his camera lens meeting people at eye level. As he focuses on individuals in the crowd, the blurred forms of others closer by, or brushing past him as he makes a picture, break into frame. He is conspicuously one viewer among a mass of others, and although his own image remains invisible, his embodied presence is reinforced and continually *felt* through the highly subjective quality of the short picture sequences that chart his responses to those human tableaux as they form and dissemble around him. Instead of the detached, objective spectator, Graham here places himself at the centre of a wider perceptual field in constant flux, where the process of seeing and the character of what is seen are bound together in a reciprocal relationship. In his last published essay, *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty insisted on the primacy of this relationship, replacing the traditional image of the observer with that of the *seer*: 'Immersed in the visible by his body, the *seer* does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world.' As Tim has suggested, it's

a definition that hints at Merleau-Ponty's sense of the 'magic' or 'delirium of vision': 'We live in visual space from the inside, we inhabit it, yet that space is already outside, open to the horizon.' Thus through vision, 'the boundary between inside and outside, between self and world is dissolved. The space of vision both surrounds us and passes through us.'

Distinct from Graham's other American works, *The Present* communicates something of this 'delirium' of vision. As much his practice has 'opened-out', here the edited picture sequences also have the function of *containing* the visual stimuli that threatens to overwhelm him: the balance between flow and control helping to establish the book's metronomic rhythm. But more essentially by acknowledging the city as a sight that 'surrounds and passes through' him over time, Graham moves back *inside* the traditional paradigm of street photography, *replacing* its drive towards formal abstraction with a more inclusive practice of seeing and thinking that suggests the dissolving of that boundary between the self and the world. The political undertones of visual inconsistency rumble on through the book – that feeling of an unspecified social malaise rooted in perceptual failings – but Graham also remains in thrall to those 'kaleidoscopic sights' and 'visual complexes', and 'the innumerable suggestions they offer'; the casting of the city's spell that also *creates* him in the act of photographing.

If working in American work has prompted Graham to examine more closely how the acuties and fallibilities of vision play into socio-economic and cultural narratives, the change of context over the last fifteen years has also allowed him to reconsider some core principles about how his photographs might be made and edited, and about how they might communicate with their audience. But perhaps even more fundamentally, the experience of coming to America has provided him with the opportunity to simply look again, to develop a new, more open and responsive way of seeing that is continually refreshed by what is seen. In many ways New York, an entity unto itself but also something of a microcosm of the country he now lives in, has become the ideal context for Graham's restive eye; a city of eternal movement and provocation that demands a certain creative vigilance and an enquiring watchfulness. As the last word in Graham's American trilogy, *The Present* is, above all else, about the discipline and the inexhaustible stimulation of this watchfulness. It is about sight as a gift and a responsibility, and the great facility of the still photograph to draw us back into seeing more intensely, more productively, while reminding us of our contingent place in a world where things can change without warning, in the blink of eye.

