

THE  
PATHOS  
OF  
**DISTANCE**  
IN  
TWO  
PARTS

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Figure 1: Phil Hill (March, 2020) Stephen, member of the Watford Deaf Society & Window #2198

## Introduction

'The Pathos of Distance' considers a personal separation from the idea of community through the Barthesian concept of the idiorrhythmic; how we live together and separately within our own individual rhythms: *"there's nothing contradictory about wanting to live alone and wanting to live together"* (Barthes, 2012: 4-5). It is my autobiographical and socially abstract sense of connection to a community where I have lived for the past 6 years, after a long period of moving from place to place; born out of a generational sense of tenuous job security and the liminality of the rental trap (Ahmed, 2018). Robert Putnam puts it best when he states: *"for people, as for plants, frequent repotting disrupts root systems. It takes time for a mobile individual to put down new roots"* (Putnam, 2000: 204), so I am posing the questions: Does the concept of community exist? Is it in decline? Or is the problem of connection actually me? (Figure. 1).



Figure 2: Phil Hill (March, 2020)  
Mark from Elim Food Bank &  
Window #2225



Figure 3: Eli Durst (2019) Gwen in circle from 'The Community'

### Community of Distance

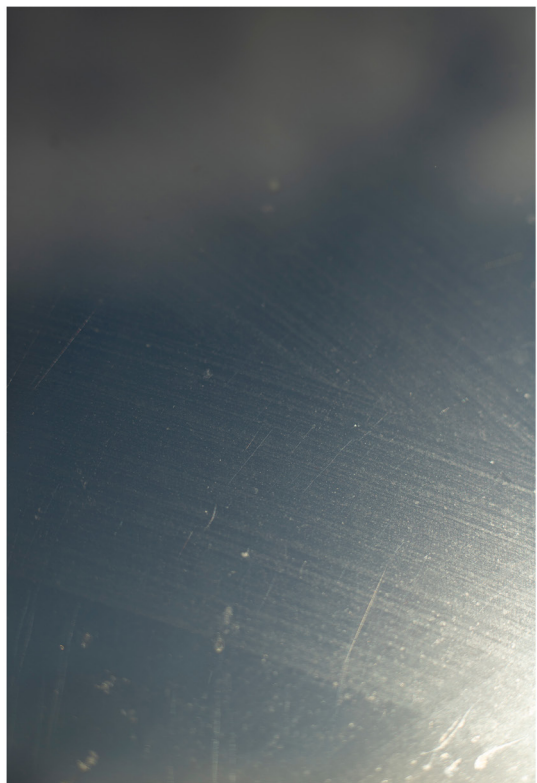
Susan Sontag described the camera as being *"a kind of passport"* (Sontag, 1979: 4). I use it to move into situations that I am not normally afforded. Socially, I am introverted, yet curious; a camera moves between these plains, allowing me to hide, to have purpose, to ask questions and to experience, albeit superficially – akin to watching some kind of interactive theatrical performance, theirs or mine, which I can either direct or observe, but always with the intention to construct, in this case, portraits of people in my community (Figure. 2). The camera has trained this distance into me. However, photographing community can be a space to explore the metaphysical aspects of how we connect. As Eli Durst posits, *"It's human and absolutely necessary to seek answers to existential questions about death and morality and purpose"* (Durst in Zoo, 2019: 49), where he is exploring the interior community spaces, which define parts of American society (Figure. 3). On the surface level, they appear benign, yet as Durst states *"also deeply charged as a centre of ideological production"* (Durst in Angelos, 2019).

My own inquiry is in part autobiographical and subjective, however no less charged and ideological. For example, my landlord put my home of five years on the market and I found that I am needed to move on once again; there are elements of existential angst in the continuing uncertainty, forcing me to ask the same questions of morality and purpose that Durst suggests. As a result, these societal connections are something that allude me and the reason why I present it through the works' placement of the actual and the





*Figure 4: Phil Hill (March - April 2020) Cephas, primary school caretaker & Window #2207*



*Figure 5: Phil Hill (February - March, 2020) The Pathos of Distance: Part One. Helen, Harebreaks wood volunteer litter picker & Window #2233*



Figure 6: Phil Hill (March, 2020) *The Pathos of Distance: Part Two. Harebreaks Community Hub & Window #2052*

conceptual (Figure. 4), which seeks to display the iddiorrhythm of separation and distance via an aesthetically disparate sequence in two parts (Figure 5&6).

### **Actual: Documentary Aesthetic**

Durst's work utilises a documentary aesthetic (Figure. 7) in the same way Alec Soth did for 'Songbook' (Figure. 8). These images are black and white with strong directional lighting, which play on our learned knowledge of the photograph that construct authority and 'truth.' Barthes notes: "*The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force*" (Barthes, 1981: 88-89) and John Tagg highlights the comparison to how the FSA project of the 1930s (Figure. 9) began to shape our understanding of the photograph as this purveyor of truth (Tagg, 1988: 12); images in this style create a nostalgia, and longing for a community existent of the past. My practice uses elements of this documentary aesthetic intertextually as the evidential authority is inherent in all images. (Figure. 10).

I am motivated to utilise colour and a naturalistic accessible quality to engage audiences outside of the esoteric photographic base. However, I acknowledge that no image is neutral and at least some of my audience may not realise this construction, as Tagg notes: "*it has been argued that this insertion of the 'natural and universal' in the photograph is particularly forceful because of photography's privileged status as a guaranteed witness of the actuality of the events it represents*" (Tagg, 1988: 160), which provides a useful tool to disseminate the work as the naturalistic and actuality existent in some images (Figure. 11) creates an accessible method to engage with the more conceptual and metaphorical elements of the project (Figure. 12), either consciously or unconsciously.





Figure 7: Eli Durst (2019) from 'The Community'



Figure 8: Alec Soth (2014) from 'Songbook'

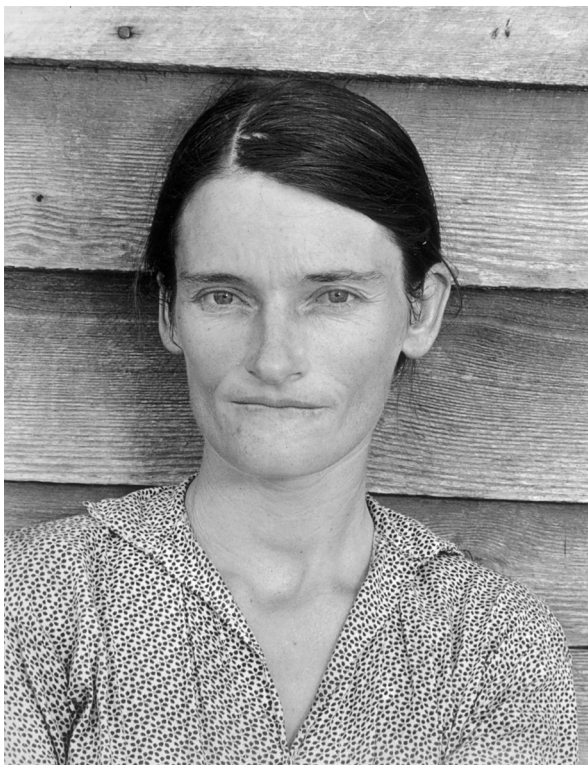


Figure 9: Walker Evans (1936) Portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs



Figure 10: Phil Hill (February, 2020) Claire, volunteer for Harebreaks wood



Figure 11: Phil Hill (February, 2020) For sale sign seen through front room window

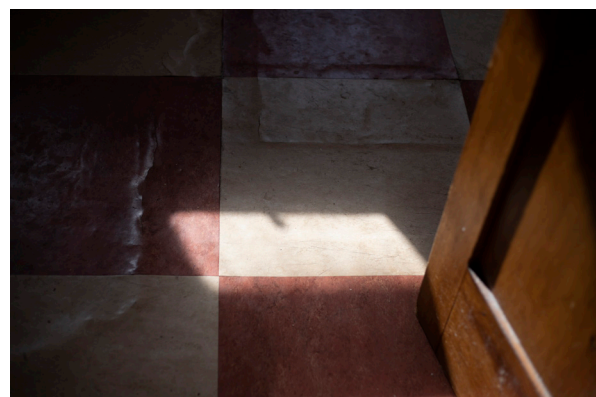


Figure 12: Phil Hill (March, 2020) Light reflected on Kitchen Floor



Figure 13: Phil Hill (March, 2020) Unused image from portfolio. Darcie Colouring on the kitchen table during the daily Covid-19 briefing



Figure 14: Phil Hill (March, 2020) Light on Kitchen Table (With colouring marker on it)

### Conceptual: The Virus and the Abstract

Until now, my photography has always been located in the ‘actual’ (Berger, 2013: 8) and ‘iconic’ - how I thought about representation is in these terms (Figure 13). However, as Peter Lamarque discussed: *“resemblance cannot be sufficient for representation”* (Lamarque and Olsen, 2004: 347). Insofar as I react to the Covid-19 Pandemic, my work has evolved and become more conceptual, more abstract but remains indexical (Figure. 14), in part as a reflection on how society is also abstract, as a way to represent this idea of existential anxiety - a pathos of distance that Barthes places value within community (Barthes, 2012: 132). Additionally, this is not something that can be tangibly photographed in its actuality; practically, it is not possible to photograph in the way that I approached groups and individuals previously (Figure. 15). The anxiety born from my own connection within my community and impermanence somehow translates to a wider feeling of uncertainty and threat for all of us under Covid-19. Paradoxically, the pandemic means that we need to socially distance from community, yet is the very thing that will save it.

Conceptually, community and societal idiorrhythms exist within the realm of the domestic environment; it is the manifestation of the separation from others and where existentialist questioning continues. Clare Gallagher creates *“quotidian still lifes”* (O’Hagan, 2020), which comment on the underappreciated functions of the home, primarily completed by women in society (Figure. 16), and although I am not positioning myself with the same intention, there is an inherent tension to her images that translates into my look at the community’s retreat into the home (Figure. 17); the anxiety of gender inequality present in Gallagher’s images is mirrored by the anxiety of being confined to the domestic realm.





*Figure 15: Phil Hill (March, 2020) Billy, barber on St Albans road*



*Figure 16: Clare Gallagher (2020) From 'Domestic Drift'*



*Figure 17: Phil Hill (April, 2020) Light reflected into Darcie's bedroom*



Figure 18: Phil Hill (April, 2020) Window #2236



Figure 19: Phil Hill (April, 2020) Window #2198

## Rectangles

We are the “*civilisation of the rectangle*” (Barthes, 2012: 114); it is the shape that defines our existence and fences our communities through the environment and architecture. Barthes’ also states these shapes are a form of power and control (2012: 114); for example, I am also confined to the view and distance imposed by my camera’s rectangle viewfinder. The window is another rectangle that becomes vital to a community isolated and indoors and constrains it. My windows became an overlooked job, owing to the need to move home, a busy family life and demanding career (Figure 18). I live on a busy road, the windows get quite dirty, yet now all I have as my link to the outside community, is the view through the windows. I have focussed on the obscured view through my windows, yet there is an aesthetic beauty to them; the way the sun hits the built up layers of pollution that coat the glass, as Junichiro Tanizaki states “*for us the act of inhabitation is mostly performed in cahoots with the sun*” (Tanizaki, 2001: 1) admiring the subtle beauty of patina and aesthetic quality of degradation (2001: 18). The windows are a barrier to the community; my idiorrhythmic separation. I have created an image, which focusses on the dust and dirt over the iconic subject beyond the glass (Figure. 19) to metaphorically provide this barrier and highlight the reason the community connection is broken, and by extension my own.





Figure 20: Uta Barth (1997) *Field #20*

Much like Uta Barth, who removes the reader's attention from the actuality of the subject (Figure. 20), - in my case the outside world - and create an experiential sense of looking of the inner space. (Barth in Mirlesse, 2012).

The windows also project inward, creating the visual manifestation of Plato's cave (Plato & Waterfield, 1998) onto the interior - shaping our perception of reality (Figure 21). For Sontag, the allegory is again linked to evidential force and a belief of the world through images: "*Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph*" (Sontag, 1979: 5) and by photographing the manifestation I can raise questions of our new internal reality and force the reader to make comparisons to how life was before the pandemic (Figure. 22).



Figure 21: Phil Hill (April, 2020) *Light on living room ceiling (and a moth trap)*

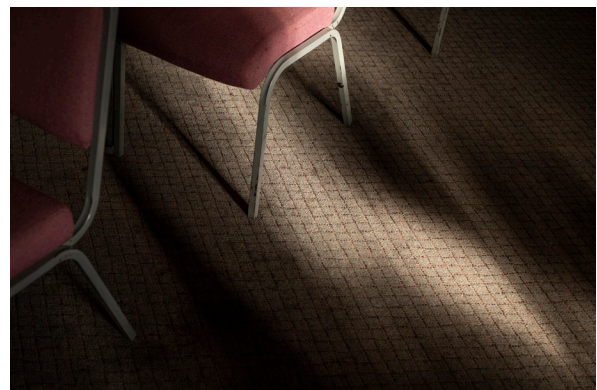


Figure 22: Phil Hill (February, 2020) *Light on the floor of Elim Pentecostal Church*





Figure 23: Huck Magazine (2018) Spread from 'Coming of Age' issue

## Dissemination

The work exists in the topicality of the pandemic related to the impact on our communities. In its immediacy, my work could be used to illustrate the impact of isolation on community within the editorial context. For example, a publication such as Huck Magazine has themed issues (Figure. 23) and deals with culture and politics, which could feasibly include one on the aftermath of the pandemic. My portraiture in this context provides a basis to show a community in its natural and universal state, whereas the conceptual elements to my work provide an ambiguity of interpretation and for the reader of my imagery there is a reduction of the intentional fallacy; for an editor of such work, this creates the space in which image and text can work together. Of course, I wish for my work to be seen in its independent entirety and within the context of the idiorhythmic intention that I set out to create; portraying the dominant message of personal separation and distance. Therefore, I would expect we will move to re-connect our communities and reflect on the impact on our society; my work could position itself effectively in the existential discussion that may result.



Figure 24: Clementine Schniderman (2019) From 'It's called Ffasiwn'



Figure 25: Clementine Schneiderman (2019) Spread from 'Ffasiwn Magazine'

I am interested in the book as a means to disseminate the work. It is an opportunity to construct a narrative which is mine to tell, as Dewi Lewis notes of photographers: *"it is their story to tell, not mine, so it is really important that they have made this first edit. From that point I am there to challenge them as to why they've chosen particular images or a particular sequence"* (Lewis in CreativeHub, 2020: 44), which is in contrast to other publication, who have their own editorial constraint, leading to uncomfortable compromise. That said, the photobook could be considered esoteric, where Simon Norfolk noting that they are the domain of a small demographic of photographers created for other photographers (Norfolk, 2019) and the expense can also be prohibitive and limiting to the meaningful exchange of my intention. A more accessible approach is how Clementine Schniederman produces work in collaboration with the communities of her subjects and aims to share this work with them, supporting a more faithful representation of the subjects (Figure. 24). Schniederman creates books of her work, but also produces zines that are shared locally (Figure. 25), which is inclusive and a method I feel my work should occupy.

## Conclusion

I set out to photograph our idiorrhythmic community, not expecting that the separation would become literal. The disparate result of my work creates a sense of this separation metaphorically, however owing to the impact of covid-19, it also heightens readers' awareness of my intent; a work created during this timeframe will ultimately connote feelings of the period isolated from community, which is the pathos of the work. There is an opportunity to continue exploring the concept of Iddiorrhythm and community when, on the other side of this pandemic, we seek to re-establish our connections; in that sense, my initial interest in this concept will become one for many. However, Covid-19 has also highlighted how individualistic we can be and the systemic inequality that exists within the community. These will be important topics of discussion as I develop my project.

In the short term, there is an element of the unknown and I will need to continue to develop my conceptual approach during this period of lockdown. Ultimately, I would want to continue creating portraiture, which is where I feel much of the strength of the work is. What I have discovered during the course of developing my practice however, it that it is important to embrace the conceptual within the work as this is where the ideas can be fully realised from an aesthetic and phenomenological standpoint.



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