



Anne Testut, Le Musée Grevin

# Fotofeis

PORTFOLIO invited artist and freelance curator JOHN STATHATOS to spend a week in Scotland to review Fotofeis, the Scottish International Festival of Photography which took place during June.

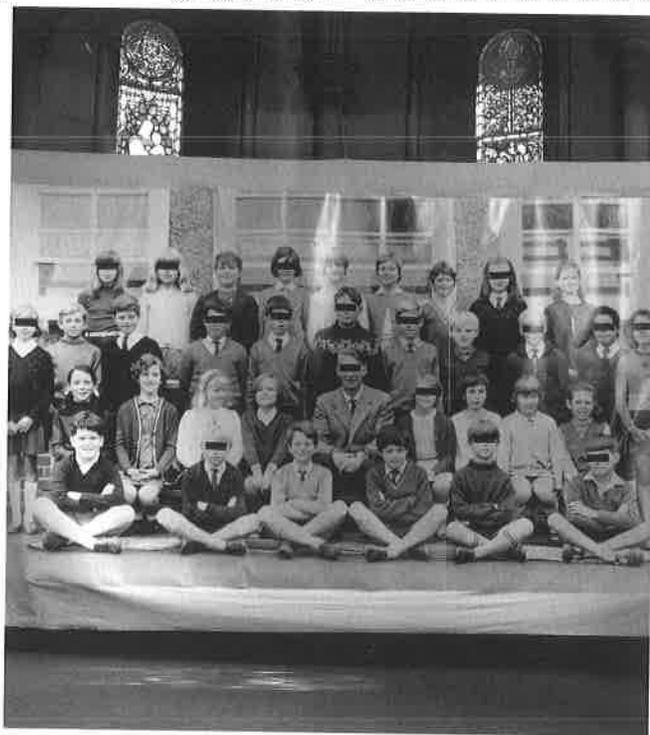
**After years of discussions, proposals and counter-proposals** of one sort or another; after endless debates up and down the country; Britain finally acquired its first and very own international photography festival – or at least, it was the first since Salford, back in 1980. The absence of such an event at a time when it seemed as though every last village across the channel could boast one was a source of constant annoyance, but for some reason nobody seemed able to get one of the things off the ground. Until, that is, Fotofeis rolled around in June 1993. The Scottish International Festival of Photography, to give it its full title, had been simmering away quietly since 1989, and now, under its director Alasdair Foster, it had finally come to town – or, more precisely, it had come to almost every town north of the border.

The most unusual aspect of Fotofeis was the fact that unlike any other such event in the world, it was based not in one city but in four, each the centre of a larger Scottish region: Edinburgh for the South-East, Aberdeen for the North-East, Inverness for the Highlands, Glasgow for the South-West. Furthermore, each of the four was given a particular theme around which exhibitions and events were structured. To further emphasise the de-centralised nature of the event, the entire administrative apparatus spent a week in turn in each of the four cities, while the Fotofeis Roadshow mobile gallery toured the back roads of Scotland. With 149 exhibitions taking place in over eighty venues up and down the country, this was without doubt the largest event of its kind ever held.

It was also, needless to say, one which proved physically impossible to see in its entirety. In the course of preparing this

article, I visited 53 exhibitions during a one week period; unfortunately, I was unable to cover the Highlands region, whose special subject was “New Imaging”. With this exception, it would be fair to say that I saw the most important exhibitions in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, as well as a few others in smaller towns. I did not take in any of the conferences or seminars, nor did I have time to visit what an outsider must inevitably qualify as the lower echelon of events - local workshops, library and archive exhibitions, regional documentary projects and so forth. Of necessity, what follows in the first part of this article is an overview of some of the festival's highs and lows, starting with Edinburgh and the subject of ‘Family’.

The single largest project in the South-East region, and indeed in the entire festival, was *Public & Private*, an ambitious collaboration between Stills Gallery and the Institut Français d’Ecosse. Virtually a mini-festival in itself, *Public & Private*, curated by Alain Reinaudo of the Centre d’Art in Herblay, presented the work of over thirty artists from France, Britain and the Netherlands in eight different Edinburgh sites, ranging from the Talbot Rice Gallery to a deconsecrated church and a British Gas conference room. Subtitled ‘Secrets Must Circulate’, the exhibition set out to explore “the fundamental dichotomy between what is ‘public’ and what is ‘private’, [bringing] together the theme of voyeurism, where the photographer (and therefore the viewer) penetrates another’s private space, with that of exhibitionism where the relationship of viewer and viewed is reversed”.



There can be no doubt that Stills, and in particular Rebecca Coggins, the exhibition organiser, put in an impressive amount of work in coordinating, planning and executing this ambitious project; the results, unfortunately, proved uneven. The basic flaw at the heart of the enterprise was the extremely narrow, even simplistic interpretation of curatorial parameters; in a classic case of what Terry Eagleton has called "this fashionable turn to the somatic", the term 'private' was interpreted almost exclusively as dealing with sexual identity, while the 'public' aspect of the proposed agenda (and its potentially fruitful political ramifications) was virtually ignored. In an essay published on the week of the exhibition's opening, Eagleton pointed out that "there is a glamorous kind of materialism about body talk, which compensates for certain more classical strains of materialism now in dire trouble"; 'body talk' was a good description of much of the work on offer.

Another and equally irritating tactic in evidence was a dated and rather jejune conviction that every aspect of an artist's life and everyday activity must be of overwhelming interest; hence, for instance, Marion Bataille's grids of polaroid prints illustrating such fascinating trivia as *Presents People Gave Me*, or dozens of self-portraits of the artist looking sullen, each carefully annotated with a date.

For some reason, by far the best work in *Public & Private* turned out to be installation work by British-based artists, including Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion, Jane Mulfinger, Lea Andrews and Sharon Kivland. The Dalziel/Scullion piece consisted of three frosted glass cubicles facing looped film projectors which cast tiny images of the seashore onto the front of the glass; a perfect, fragile and nostalgic piece which, like Mulfinger's, had everything to do with memory and almost nothing to do with the overall theme. The Mulfinger installation in Bellevue Church included five tons of gravel covering the vestibule floor, ten chairs piled high with braille books, one of them open, and electric fans which riffled the pages of the open books; at the same time, slide projectors tucked away under the chairs projected found black and white images across the pages. The images all referred to sound (a motor car, a crying baby), but the piece was silent except for the crunching of footsteps upon gravel.

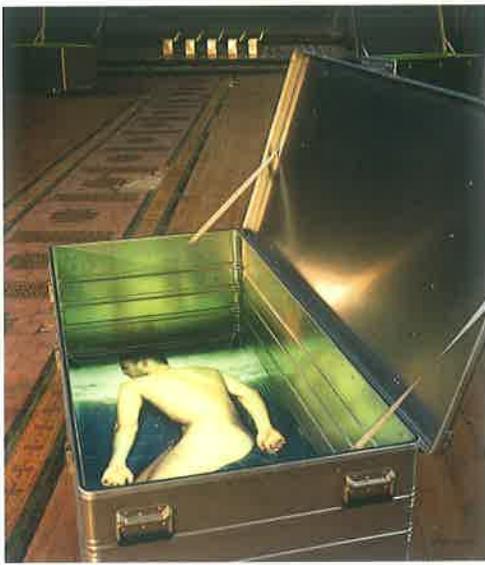
On the other hand, the French contributions, though making up more than half of the total, were particularly weak. Many were of minor or parochial interest, others proved ridiculously self-indulgent. In the first category came the work of Hervé Guibert: sensitive but unremarkable small images of incidental detail, mostly interiors, by an influential young writer who died tragically young. Otherwise one got Pierre et Gilles, those perennial standard-bearers of gallic kitsch, with colour prints of pretty boys pretending, very unconvincingly, to be dead, or else far too many variations on the found/fake news photograph conceit. Characteristic of the obsession with 'body talk' was the inclusion, in an exhibition of otherwise contemporary work, of prints by the late Pierre Molinier, the by now seriously over-exposed creator of androgynous, fetishised self-portraits from the sixties.

The other major Edinburgh exhibition was *Intimate Lives: Photographers and their Families* at the City Art Centre. This was an interesting, well-curated show which brought together a substantial body of work by eight photographers of various ages and nationalities, from Lartigue to Colin Gray. Probably the most interesting work was that of Anne Testut, who places members of her immediate family into strange, tongue-in-cheek allegorical tableaux which simultaneously mock and commemorate the fortunes of the French urban bourgeoisie. A more recent piece entitled *The Judges* took a different tack; nine portraits of her younger siblings and cousins, identically posed and dressed in black, stare levelly across the room at the viewer. An ambiguous, gravely beautiful work.

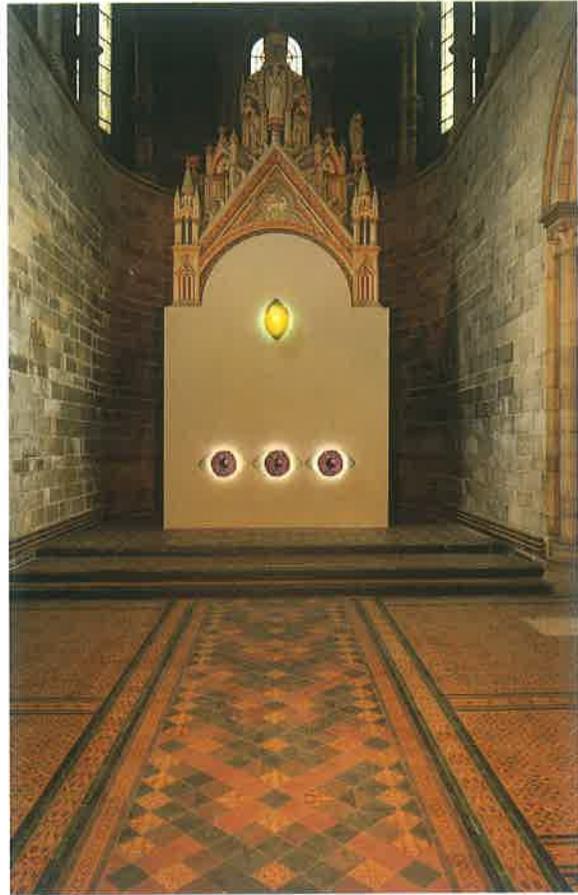
Nan Goldin contributed images from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, which though also somewhat over-exposed of late is extensive enough to provide at least some unfamiliar items. As usual, one was struck by the quite astonishing degree of narcissism displayed by the photographer's vast circle of acquaintance; it must, at times, be like living exclusively in the company of a gang of hyperactive teenagers.

The debate will no doubt continue over whether or not Sally Mann's images of her children are exploitative, but there is no doubt in my mind that they are profoundly dubious in both intention and execution. The counter-attack deployed by the photographer and her supporters always revolves around the suggestion that any offence must be in the eye of the beholder, but this seems to ignore at least three disturbing points. One is the prevalence of pictorial elements mimicking traces of violence on the children's bodies - grass stalks like scars, water pooling like blood. Another is the omnipresent nudity, given the fervent modesty most six-to-twelve year olds demonstrate when left to their own devices; and the last is the frequency with which Jessie, from age five onwards, assumes (or is encouraged to assume) a pose of sexual knowingness: hip thrust forward, candy cigarette in cocked wrist, like a parody of a teen-age whore. I may have a dirty mind, but I don't think I would leave any child for which I was responsible in Sally Mann's care.

The only Scottish artist represented was Maud Sulter whose contribution, despite the enthusiastic catalogue text, proved disappointing. Specially commissioned for this exhibition, *Significant Others* never really made it off the drawing board. Blowing up a nondescript group of family snapshots to over a metre wide proved insufficient a strategy to give them any real interest, nor did the addition of hand-written titles like *C'est Moi* to a photo of the artist as a child make the project any more endearing.



Patrick Raynaud, Public and Private, Secrets Must Circulate



Helen Chadwick, Eat Me  
Public and Private, Secrets Must Circulate



Jane Mulfinger,  
Without Hindsight; Within Earshot  
Installation Commission for Public and  
Private, Secrets Must Circulate



Boaz Tal, Works

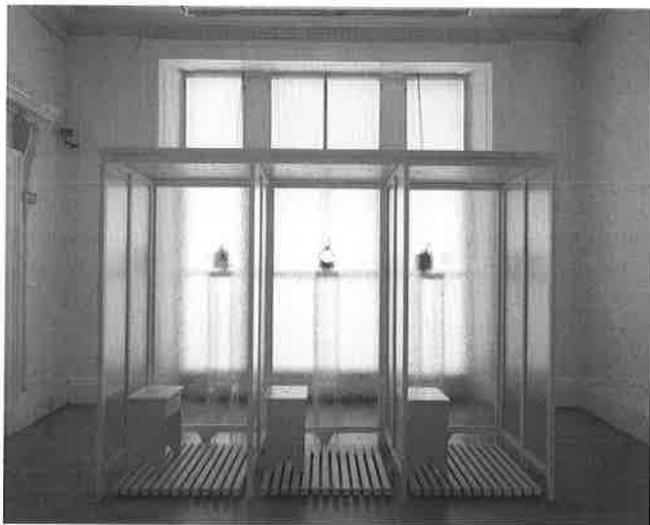
The Portfolio Gallery presented an excellent *Ralph Eugene Meatyard* retrospective, the first British exhibition by this remarkable American in over a decade. Meatyard is one of those awkward, unclassifiable mavericks who seem to appear with particular frequency in the Southern United States (Frederick Sommer was another), and who are so hard to fit into conventional photographic history. The exhibition included examples of his less well-known semi-abstracts such as the 'motion sound' and 'no focus' series, but despite some recent critical re-evaluations, his best work remains the obsessive *Lucybell Crater Album* and the strange images of masked or blurred children which he made throughout the 1960s. These last, for which he usually posed his own children, succeed in communicating a sense of the often alienated otherness of children without ever lapsing into sentimentality – an interesting contrast to Sally Mann's corrupt idyll.

Elsewhere in Edinburgh, some good overseas exhibitions struggled to survive hostile environments. In the cafeteria of Queen's Hall theatre, Joachim Schmid showed a partial selection from *Taking Snapshots*, a monumental analytical survey of German amateur photography throughout the course of the

century. His elaborate system of thematic groupings both contributes to and subverts academic photo-history, whilst simultaneously acquiring the status of original artwork in its own right. In another cafeteria the Israeli photographer Boaz Tal offered an inspired (if fortuitous) mirror to the hothouse writhings of Pierre Molinier with his nude re-enactments of great moments from Western art. Oblivious to the domestic clutter of a tiny Tel Aviv flat, Tal and his family star in an *Expulsion After Masaccio* in which the artist's son stands on the staircase waving a plastic sword, while the baby urbanely offers a rubber pacifier to his distraught (and undraped) mother.

Finally, mention should be made of David Hatfield's exhibition at Inverleith House. One tries very hard to like Hatfield's work, for he is clearly a likable man, and the work is intelligent, elegant and well-constructed. Drawing on childhood memories of the Yorkshire dales, it combines large-format contact prints with painted text and items such as a strand of barbed wire or fragments of sheep's wool, but sadly, the whole well-meaning exercise never quite gells. The execution is perfect, but the full flood of memory which the artist so desperately seeks to invoke is stalled by the excessive apparatus. Tellingly, the most successful piece, *Swifts*, consists of just one word and five images.

Aberdeen (and the Tayside region) was awarded potentially the most promising of the four festival themes, 'Photography Plus' - in effect, mixed media and photo-based fine art photographic practice - but it turned out to be the thinnest and most disappointing. The Aberdeen Art Gallery ended up housing more than half the exhibitions in that city, which, even given that some were on the small side, was remarkably generous. In fact the Art Gallery, a large, non-originating venue with many rooms to fill, is precisely the kind of municipal institution most likely to benefit from an organisation such as Fotofeis; in the event, the gallery took on board a total of twelve exhibitions, and clearly spared no effort or expense in doing well by them. Of these, three in particular deserve mention.



Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion  
Commission for Public and Private, Secrets Must Circulate