

Paul Trevor

Like you've never been away

Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

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In 1974, a project began to document poverty in Britain's inner cities. Under the collective title, Exit Photography Group, Nicholas Batty, Chris Steele-Perkins and Paul Trevor photographed life in some of the most deprived residential areas of London, Birmingham, Newcastle, Glasgow, Belfast and Liverpool. The outcome of the project was a book called *Survival Programmes*, published in 1982, the bleak title of which was taken from an interview with a resident who was referring to television wildlife programmes. The book is a substantial resource containing un-credited individual black and white photographs, interview transcripts from anonymous contributors describing aspects of their lives, and a compilation of statistics relating to aspects of Britain's economic situation at the time. Contrasting this relative objectivity are a few, yet poignant, images of wealth and the British establishment: a rather generic, commercial-style shot of investment bankers at work in the City, a shot of a Trades Union Congress meeting, Margaret Thatcher at a rally. The television set, a relatively new household necessity, is a recurring motif throughout the book, and without these, the viewer might easily mistake the photographs as being made decades earlier. In one of the most interesting images taken in a community hostel on Christmas day, Her Majesty addresses a rather unimpressed man and a pitifully modest Christmas tree. It is an uncompromising book, and hopefully the tatty condition of the library copy I looked at is testimony to the project being held up as an impressive example of social documentary practice of the period.

Although not stated in *Survival Programmes*, Paul Trevor was assigned to cover Liverpool for the project and spent six months living in a high rise

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photographing on the streets of Everton and the area now known as Toxteth. Trevor has been re-visiting the project for some time, and in 2007, the images were re-shown at the Side gallery in Newcastle, celebrating the 25th anniversary of the *Survival Programmes* publication and exhibition in that gallery. Presented at the Walker Gallery are fifty-eight images, some of which were published in the original book, but most are being exhibited publicly for the first time. This current show is a part of the re-engagement of the project and the community, and in one respect is functioning as a vehicle to identify some of the people in Trevor's original images, whom he has the intention of re-photographing.

The overwhelming majority of the images in this show are of children, and although it isn't stated in the exhibition's rationale or really alluded to in the title (one could interpret it as being some reference to Never Never Land), the exhibition is very much about childhood. In most of the images the children are up to no good; play fighting, lighting fires, jumping on stolen cars and snogging. But there is gentleness within this chaos and a sense of endearment towards these little rascals.

The project was featured on a local television programme, which is looped in the gallery and gives the audience a good insight into the project, depicting for example, how Trevor held workshops with local residents to identify and contact some of the people in his pictures. Trevor was particularly keen to track down one boy, who stared into his lens holding up a broken picture frame. For Trevor, this image persisted over the years, as metaphor for the actions of the photographer. Sadly the boy in the photograph, Robert, died from an overdose in his twenties.

In a lot of images the children are quite evidently playing up to the camera, the conspicuous, incoming southerner finding it difficult to shake the novelty of his presence and his trade. ('No one knew what a camera was until you came round', remarks Gerard Muldoon in the video, who appears in a photograph pointing an air rifle at people on the street from the third story of a block of flats.) Trevor did however manage to blend into the community, and there are plenty of candid images that capture the tougher side of life.

There is a very simple shot of a boy in a gym, standing on a chair to raise him high enough to take a swing at a punch bag, which seems to say something about punching your own weight in an uncompromising world. The backdrops to some of the images are extremely bleak. In one image, fires smoulder by a half-destroyed row of terraced houses, in front of which three filthy faced boys look blankly at the camera, like shell-shocked survivors in a post-apocalyptic landscape.

Although in some of the photographs there is a romanticism of the situation, the real nostalgia lies not in the images themselves, but the knowledge that a project like this simply wouldn't be possible in the UK nowadays, amidst the paranoia around photographing children. That is not to say that these sorts of images aren't being captured of children today; they are taking them of each other and taking responsibility for their dissemination themselves, rather than being taken by an outsider. But the quality of these images professes the value of the contribution of a dedicated, professional's observation.

Trevor has certainly made a very different, more comforting body of work from this contemporary edit, in comparison to his images in the *Survival Programmes* book, but this show is for a different time and serves a different purpose, even though there are certain socio-economic parallels with the situation today. Visiting the gallery during half term, it was quite refreshing to see different generations of a whole family genuinely appreciating a body of work: the parents' memories being triggered by streets long since demolished, and the children sniggering at the shenanigans of their parents' generations.