

# Peter Mitchell performs Photography, Life aboard the Unda Wunda\*

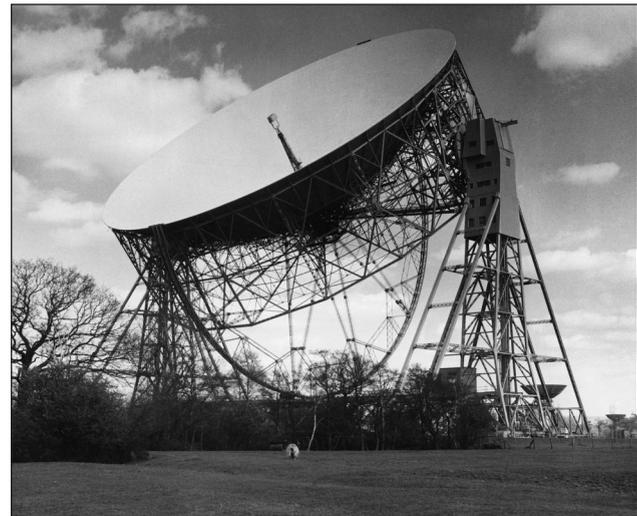
Val Williams

Diary entry 3 June 1977 from Peter Mitchell's *Bugs in Utopia*, published in *MEMENTO MORI*, 1990.

*Days like this I can chase the sun right across Leeds and never stop snapping! The burned-out synagogue on Louis Street, Elysian House (a factory, some name!) over Wortley way, a rusty gas-holder on Canal Road (beautiful in the sunlight) and dandelions all over Quarry Hill, where the bright orange nursery had suddenly vanished. Down on the 'Workers Press' part of the precinct in town, a spot of street theatre was in progress, where a very convincing Queen (a bloke wearing a cardboard head and a bust) was being berated by a chap in a battered top hat. The theme was "Stuff the Jubilee". Union flags made me remember the flagpoles on the front of the flats and wonder if flags had ever flown from them.*

Peter Mitchell's *Memento Mori*, a reflection on the Quarry Hill estate in Leeds in words, photographs and archival material, was published in 1990, representing the culmination of almost two decades of observing, photographing and writing about the city, and developing ways of weaving fragments, stories, photographs and typography which were unique in British photographic practice. Working from his apartment in the run-down district of Chapeltown, in Leeds, where he has lived since the late 1960s, Mitchell has emerged as a solitary storyteller, a proponent of the picaresque, a narrator of how we were, a chaser of a disappearing world.

\*The Unda Wunda Diving Submarine was a clockwork diving submarine toy produced in the 1960s. Peter Mitchell owned one and it was sailed in the Pocklington Canal during the summer of the River Derwent Commission project in the early 1980s.



Mitchell's work is wistful – it deals with loss – of buildings and enterprises, of histories, of the fabric of everyday lives, of memories. In a 20<sup>th</sup> century echo of the 17<sup>th</sup> century memento mori painting, Peter Mitchell's assemblages of writings and photographs utilize contemporary photography's own symbols of mortality – abandoned domestic interiors, post industrialization commercial buildings, people lost in a landscape. Mitchell creates a carefully crafted sense of bafflement – Everyman confronts the Monolith – which works in parallel to (and denial of) his knowledgeability, his persistent photographic methodology and the assurance of his writing.

Peter Mitchell's place in his adopted city of Leeds is also an assured one. From the once graceful terrace of Spencer Place, his vision is through the prism of urban decay in Chapeltown, the decaying inner city where Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, committed his first murder in the 1970s, where riots took place in 1975 and 1981 and where the seismic shifts of migration have seen Jewish, Afro Caribbean and Asian communities become transient populations. For almost fifty years, Peter Mitchell has observed Leeds from this vantage point, positioning himself as a picaresque typographer, a collector of scarecrows, an airman in a metal plane, and a visitor from outer space. Now, we would call him a psychogeographer, a *flâneur* – but back in the 1970s, when photography

in Britain was desperately seeking an identity, it seemed as if Peter Mitchell was simply another young independent photographer, looking beyond the familiar methodologies of documentary in an attempt to establish a personal space of practice. Looking back now, at Mitchell's work, it is clear that photography was a useful method, suited to the contemporary age, with the fashionability and versatility that he would have observed as he worked in London on the Buchanan report in the mid 1960s. Mitchell combined the fast and the modern medium of photography with the ability to create nostalgia, loss and the *memento mori*.

The complexity of Peter Mitchell's photography lies in the ways that it is not what it appears to be. In his foreword to *Strangely Familiar*, the selection of Peter Mitchell's photographs assembled by photographer Martin Parr for the Nazraeli Press in 2013, Parr refers to Mitchell as 'a fine documentary photographer' (PP9), and also remembers how Mitchell's 1979 Impressions show *A New Refutation of the Viking IV Space Mission* was 'baffling' to the British photographic community. But Mitchell's work was only surprising within the narrow prism of black-and-white British photography and photojournalism of the time, with its very particular set of tropes and preoccupations. Cast the net wider, to the work of the Situationists, to the writing of Guy Debord, to the conceptual photography of Keith Arnatt and Richard Wainwright, and it becomes more intelligible, less out on a limb. Go back even further to the survey work of Benjamin Stone and contemporaries, when the primary purpose of photography was to record and create visual heritage, and Mitchell's work can be seen very much as part of a photographic, as well as an art continuum. In *Strangely Familiar*, the diary entries which had been such an integral part of Mitchell's self-edited and designed publication *Memento Mori*, and of *A New Refutation of the Viking IV Space Mission*, became captions at the back of the publication, rather than an integral part

of each photographic work, arguably displacing the work from its picaresque, story-telling roots and positioning it within the trajectory of Seventies British contemporary independent photography, where images were seen as needing to speak for themselves, to be read as texts. Though a beautiful book, *Strangely Familiar* did not progress understanding of Mitchell's work as conceptual. The riposte would come in the 2015 publication *SOME THING means EVERYTHING to SOMEBODY*.

Interesting then, that Mitchell chose to position himself not only within the emerging independent photographic community, but also that he saw himself very much as a regional artist, with exhibitions in Leeds, Sheffield and York forming the basis of his exhibition history from the 1970s to the 1990s. Working in the Yorkshire Triangle of influential public galleries, Mitchell was able to introduce a number of *tours de force* of photography, design and text, which sat very well in the sympathetic, youthful Yorkshire museum culture of the time. The Graves Art Gallery was, in 1978, under the directorship of the dynamic Julian Spalding, and the Education Gallery within Leeds City Art Gallery was run by Shelia Ross, later to become Mitchell's longstanding partner. Over in York, the site of the 1979 'Viking IV Space Mission' show, the Impressions Gallery of Photography was the second photo gallery to be opened in the UK and had helped to establish the careers of Martin Parr, Daniel Meadows and a number of other young British photographers.

To accompany his 1975 exhibition at the Education Gallery – *An Impression of the Yorkshire City of Leeds* – Mitchell published an A5 leaflet, printed on heavy cream paper, designed by the Winged Cobra Workshop (aka Mitchell) and using a capitalized antiquated prose setting to describe his work:

'*BEING A plain person's Guide to the discovering and navigating of the City by the less dramatic but equally interesting Features of the Landscape.*' Mitchell's

leaflet bears a similarity to the title page of the first edition of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, in which the protagonist is also positioned as a wise innocent navigating society and bringing us his impressions.

*An Impression of the Yorkshire City of Leeds* was the more ambitious production *Now You See them, Soon You Won't*. Staged at the Graves Art Gallery in Sheffield in 1978, it was subtitled *Some Undramatic Pictures by Peter Mitchell and his Camera* and the exhibition leaflet was again designed by Winged Cobra. This small publication is all that remains of this haunting project, but it is significant in that it established Mitchell's use of diaristic writing, of short, idiosyncratic captions as the facet of his work which would set him aside from all the other emerging colour documentarists who began to make their mark in the burgeoning British photography scene at the beginning of the 1980s. Mitchell's photographs of Yorkshire buildings and the people who inhabited them, the tone of both his photographs and his words, harked back to earlier, perhaps imagined notions of 'Britishness', without a trace of nostalgia. Mitchell's tone, in these writings and photographs is jaunty, self-deprecating, a mixture of the folksy: 'Mr Wood's greenhouse containing his prize vine' with the wistful: 'Crown Court. Another fine alleyway on its way out' and the personal: 'Carina repairs hoovers on a Saturday. She is nice.' There is something faded, ghostly, unreachable about *Now You See Them Soon You Won't*, like a silent puppet show where the characters have slowed, their gestures becoming indistinct, blurry. Carina the Hoover repairer, Mrs Clayton and Mrs Collins in their 'ex butchers shop', Mr Rueben, Eric Massheder who works with dripping, Mr and Mrs Hudson and Mr Pearson. All of them stood still for Peter Mitchell and his camera all those years ago in Yorkshire, in front of their shops, by their machinery, at home, all became characters in Mitchell's seemingly humble, but actually very grand Yorkshire narrative.

The grandeur of Peter Mitchell's Yorkshire narratives is exemplified in his two studies of fabulous structures – the Quarry Hill Estate in Leeds (in *Memento Mori*) and the planet Mars (in the *Viking IV Space Mission*). In both of these projects, Mitchell positions himself as the explorer, the performative artist creating spectacle, inviting an audience (small and specialised at the time) to enter his constructed worlds. Rather than simply documenting the end of the Quarry Hill flats, Mitchell recreates their final days as a kind of alternative universe, a northern Knossos, a failed Ozymandias, both through photographs and through the diary extracts titled 'Bugs in Utopia'. The entries are dated from 1974 to 1978, and bookended with excerpts from 1988.

In 3 December 1977, Mitchell notes: '*Often I take to just wandering around the flats trying to figure it all out. Certainly it feels a very mysterious place. It is like stepping in and out of a time warp; in and out of different worlds; from dangerous places to safe places. I was reminded of City Beneath the Sea, a film I'd seen as a kid. The diver explores the long-forgotten sunken city just as the earthquake strikes and the long-silent bells ring out their last defiant gesture (even underwater!) as the towers crumble and fall in slow motion. But Leeds looks solid enough! Well then, how about the Titanic? When the giant artefact is located (years hence when the seas have dried up) with all its earthy bits and pieces hanging out, will the discoverers be at a loss to know what it did and why it was so big?*' [*Memento Mori*. 1990. p. 13]

From the demolition of a set of 1930s municipal apartment blocks to a submerged city and the enduring legend of the Titanic, there is a leap of the imagination, which may seem extreme, but it was apt enough in the 1970s, when social orders and political structures were changing rapidly. The tide had turned against mass high-rise public housing, and was beginning to reject the kind of

paternalism that Quarry Hill represented, with its communal laundries, playgrounds, parades of shops. Bitter wars by unions against government were being fought out. Margaret Thatcher had become leader of the Conservative Party in 1975, and Prime Minister in 1979, signalling an end, in her doctrine of 'no such thing as society', to the prevailing notion of the protective state. In his painstaking research into the history of Quarry Hill, Peter Mitchell discovered that the 'country estate within the city', that Leeds Council had imagined, complete with village green and extensive family and community facilities was, as early as 1943, seen as a flawed development, described by one writer as *'England's loneliest colony, this story of Leeds 3,00 who refuse to mix – Refugees from Singapore, Shanghai and Hong King; munitions workers, engineers, window cleaners, Jews, Catholics, members of the Church of England; Yorkshire folk and Southerners; old age pensioners and school children; families of 11 and hermits on their own – all live in Quarry Hill Flats, Leeds' city-within-a-city, most self-contained yet the loneliest community in England.'* [Unattributed Press Cutting. *Memento Mori*, 1990, pp. 50]

By the 1950s, Quarry Hill had attracted the attention of thieves and vandals – 7500 tulips destroyed in 1957 and sets of children's swings in 1951. By the early 1970s, the flats needed extensive repairs and the decision was made to demolish. In January 1974, Peter Mitchell had decided to photograph the decline and eventual destruction of the complex: *'Walking Quarry Hill, a vast curving estate of flats scheduled for demolition because of an original construction fault (I was told). They were by no means empty but had a real feeling of impoverishment clinging to them. But this wretched three day week and emergency measures make everything feel like wartime.'* [Bugs in Utopia, *Memento Mori* p 10].

In this England of strikes, conflict and privation, Quarry Hill must have seemed like an extreme symbol of loss to Peter Mitchell, modernist, optimistic urban explorer, who as a resident of Chapeltown had put his faith fairly and squarely in the ability of the inner city to survive. This giant conglomeration of buildings, only just over thirty years old was as doomed as the Titanic, as lost as the 'City Beneath the Sea'. In his photographs of Leeds in the Seventies, Mitchell had been drawn to the small scale – the shop on the corner, the small factory, and the one-person business. Among the demolition, which overwhelmed Britain's northern cities in the 1960s and 70s, these had survived – too insignificant, too individualistic perhaps. Mitchell's journey from these small urban landscapes to the monumentalism of Quarry Hill marked a change not so much in his methodology which remained the same combination of writing, photography and local research, as in attitude. The demolition of Quarry Hill was momentous – he flew flags from the roof of one of its doomed buildings which read, in semaphore 'Goodbye World', he photographed through fields of poppies in the burning summer of 1976, referencing the battlefields of the First World War and noted, like an explorer, the strange sites of human habitation in the deserted flats: *'One bedroom had a double bed with neat eiderdown over it and a photograph of a wedding couple in a silver frame on the bedside table as if the occupants had just popped out to the market for a minute. Or had they just been murdered in the next room'* [From a diary entry date 3 July 1977. *Bugs in Utopia. Memento Mori. p12.*]

The Quarry Hill flats became for Peter Mitchell, a site for performance as well as a site for documentation. Here, he could imagine other lives, position himself as the curious interloper, climbing to the roof, descending to

the boiler room, researching, investigating. The square photographs he made with a high performance Hasselblad distanced him from the documentarists who formed his peer group – more like a museum photographer photographing exotic objects, even the most distraught interiors are calm and beautifully lit. In a deserted flat in Neilson House there is a tableau of a dressing gown, a piece of armour and a poster for cornflakes, and in another a ruined fireplace with an opened magazine propped onto its mantelpiece. A flat in Priestley House has kept its delicate ceiling light and an armchair, and a white and gold wardrobe complete with two-tone women's shoes. Large Op Art murals decorate the walls of a flat in York House. The inhabitants have departed but their traces remain, a touch of warmth among the ruins.

When Peter Mitchell was invited to make a new exhibition for the Impressions Gallery of Photography in York (which had opened just a few years before Mitchell began to make his chronicle of Leeds) he established the scenario of a new space mission, reporting back from Mars, and from that altogether stranger place, Leeds. How peculiar this place appeared to be, ruined almost, dotted with crumbling enterprise, unmechanized, with a population of small ambition and humble desires. Life on Mars was barren, windy and hot but this was a crumbling mystery. Writing in Issue 5 of 'Photographers' in 1979, the art historian David Mellor remarked of Mitchell: *'He has, I think, avoided letting the Viking IV Space Mission slip into standing as a perverse literal example of the 'alien eye' mode of documentary'*.

But perhaps Mitchell did see himself as a kind of alien, perhaps he always had – the Londoner in Leeds, a life lived in transient communities, a conceptualist practical joker amongst hard-

headed documentarists. Leeds was all around him, forcing its attentions almost, but he could not see, visit or explore Mars, it was unattainable. What was the "refutation" in this new imagined space mission? Only perhaps that it was a figment of the imagination, just as his re-ordering of the post war planning havoc of 1970s Leeds into a harmonious universe of building, façade, people and stories through photography was a refutation of the misplanning of the present. His work perhaps refuted too the contemporary documentary photography where his work had become situated, almost by accident. Mitchell performs anti-documentary through positioning of himself as a space explorer flying to Mars. Attached to each invitation to the Viking IV exhibition was a tiny lead plane trailing a red paper ribbon.

The sense and meaning of the Viking IV project is elusive, hidden and slippery. Like the 1950s radio programme *Journey into Space* which frightened already timid post-war British children, it is a kind of mournful comedy, laden with complex language, which is confusing and awesome.

When Mrs Collins and Mrs Clayton welcome us onto the Mission with a cheery red badge, we hop aboard. They are so nice and ordinary. What could go wrong? As Peter Mitchell gleefully waves us into the dark and cavernous underbelly of the rotting hulk of Quarry Hill, we do not fear that we will meet the wrathful Leeds Minotaur, and go along without a thought. Mitchell's comforting, slightly antiquated language, with its echoes of Al Read and Eric Morecombe and all those cosy comics does not threaten darkness or terror, or hauntings. But Mitchell leads us into dark places, more fearsome than we had imagined – the ghost train has real ghosts and Mitchell is perhaps not so jolly as we thought.

The first caption in *A New Refutation of the Viking IV Space Mission* reads:

*Utopia Planitia. 48° North 225.6° West. 23 July 79 Local Lander time the historic first picture from Viking Lander 4. It shows rocks and fine grained material. The X-Ray fluorescence spectrometer shows the land to be a mixture of iron-rich materials, iron hydroxides, sulphate and carbonate materials possibly of volcanic origin. The horizon appears to be sloping but is in fact level. The 8 o tilt is probably due to a rock under one of the Lander's footpads.*

*(From Photographers No 5. A New Refutation of the Viking IV Space Mission. Impressions Gallery of Photography 1979. Ed, Val Williams. Caption 1.)*

Mitchell's fascination with materials continues throughout the sixty-five photographs in the series. There is the shale, rock and ore of the Cumbrian Coast, the 'terrible east face' of Quarry hill Flats, gravestones. Silver plate, the concrete mass of cooling towers, the magnificence of Kay's warehouse 'Shades of the Nile in Leeds'. As in his study of the Quarry hill flats, or the 'Yorkshire City of Leeds', Mitchell is concerned with solidity, man-made or natural, things that shouldn't just disappear overnight, but in the time of reverse planning and anti-modernism, were gone the next time you looked – 'now you see them, soon you won't.'

More than a joke, less than science fiction, Mitchell dares us to refute his remarkable construction of Leeds seen from Mars or Mars seen from Leeds and plays on what we do not know, or what we fear to discover – a spectacle either beyond our wildest dreams, or too disappointing to even register. His work has some of the cadence of John Cooper Clarke's 'Belladonna' (2005): 'between the rollerama and the junkyard /where the panorama looks like Mars'. In one way or another, it's all to do with faith – in the past, in the resilience of memory, in streets and

shops, and factories and people, in the wild desires of architects and the hopes of the civic.

By challenging the notions of documentary photography and the idea that the photographer is necessarily a visitor, an outsider, a traveller an observer, he argues for the embeddedness of the photographer, his place within neighbourhood and community, the importance of inside information. Mitchell is at home among inhabited ruins, crumbling civilisations – Mrs Lee's dress shop which burnt down the day after closure, the Flag Factory doing overtime for the Queen's 1977 Jubilee, a decayed synagogue in Leeds, Morris Glyn Woodturners, about to close down, a defunct station in Sheffield where the trains run through but nothing stops.

### *Postscript: Some Thing means Everything to Somebody.*

Peter Mitchell's 2015 publication is his only 'contemporary' book. He is known, otherwise, only for his photographs from the 1970s and 80s. *Some Thing means Everything to Somebody* with its various hieroglyphics, its handmade type, is a study of autobiographical materiality. It acts as a coda to Mitchell's earlier works, a kind of archive section, a selection of his favourite things, from an Anglepoise desk lamp, which was a present from his mother in the 1960s to a pile of diaries, some cats, some exhibition posters, the Unda Wunda, Martin Parr's *Bad Weather*, a snow dome from Warsaw and various pieces of correspondence. Among many other things. Left as this, the selection might have looked a little twee and over idiosyncratic – why should we care, in the great scheme of things? But this threat of tipping over into a winsome eccentricity is overcome by the inclusion of a series of photographs of scarecrows. Blinded, disfigured, handless, made rigid by poles, these show, yet again, the bleakness of Mitchell's imagination. One hangs

from a tree like an ironic inversion of a Klan lynching, another appears to be bloodstained, faceless contorted in a field of snow. Yet another is stabbed through the torso by a long pole, there is a robot, a terrible tattered woman, and a crumpled figure lying prone. Peter Mitchell's scarecrow photographs refute the deceptive cosiness of his Leeds photos, stalwart people giving it a go outside their humble shops, flying in the face of progress. Notwithstanding the enigmatic Mrs Collins & Mrs Clayton, the nice woodturners in Leeds, the inventive Mr Jakimavicius or the three jolly Butchers, Edna, George and Pat, or the endearing vestiges of childhood – the Hither Green Famous Five Club, some cigarette cards of chickens *Some Thing means Everything to Somebody*, like all Peter Mitchell's work, is a study of the macabre, a cry of loss, a composite picture of a battalion of ghosts.

### Afterword and partial bio.

Rudi Thoemmes, who has become an honorary citizen of the Peter Mitchell universe over the last few years, asked me to write this essay, to place Peter in the context of British photography of the time. I had researched in this period in British photography before, tracing the journeys of Daniel Meadows' Free Photographic Omnibus across Britain for the publication *Daniel Meadows: Edited Photographs*, published in 2011 and in the monolithic Martin Parr story, now published in two editions by Phaidon. But Peter Mitchell is much more indefinable than these two stalwarts of the independent photography movement. Their motivations were easier to describe, their influences more clear, their strategies more worked out. Peter Mitchell is more slippery. 'Now you see him, soon you won't', as he might say.

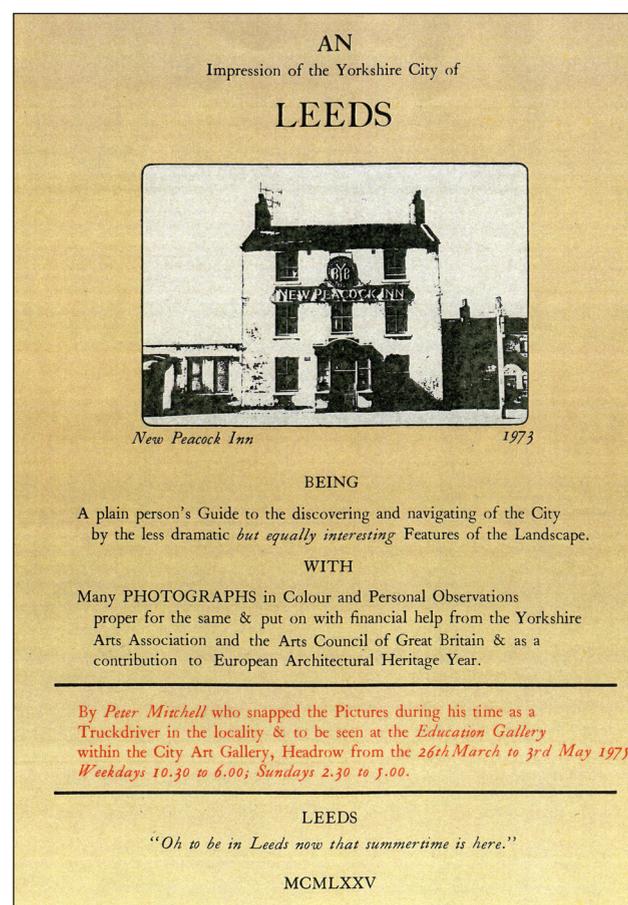
So I'm not sure that I've succeeded in what Rudi asked me to do, and it's made complicated because I was there at the time, implicated, to an extent. I worked with Peter Mitchell on the Impressions Viking

4 exhibition, hearing snippets about the Yorkshire Ripper, spending long evenings in Leeds pubs before coming out into deserted Ripperfear streets, visiting the ascetic flat in Chapeltown where it always seemed a few degrees colder inside than outside and having very many phone calls. I too entered the Mitchell universe for a few months, and left as intrigued as every other visitor. I also commissioned Peter to join a group of photographers to document the River Derwent, which was being threatened by development, and that was when I first experienced the Unda Wunda submarine.

Since the late 1970s my meetings with Peter Mitchell were much more spasmodic – I left York and came south to London to work on exhibitions such as *Who's Looking at the Family?* at the Barbican and *Warworks* at the V&A. But Peter Mitchell's work kept coming back – Susan Bright and I included it in our Tate Britain show *Who We Are* in 2007, and a few years before that, I made an exhibition with Gordon Macdonald, which included work by Peter and by Euan Duff, at the Gardner Centre, Sussex University (another utopian Sixties building) as part of the New British Photography project.

It was good to be at the Rencontres photo festival in Arles last year and see not only Peter's photographs in their red frames, but also the exhibition crates that we made all those years ago. I sat down on one of them to have a rest. It was very hot and good to have a moment to contemplate. The photos looked as interesting as ever and the bright red crates had stood up well to the passage of time and innumerable knocks as they travelled across Britain in the 1970s and 80s to galleries, museums and colleges with British Rail's Red Star delivery service. I'm grateful to Sam Stourdze, the director of Arles, for inviting me to come to the Rencontres to see the Viking IIV show reinstalled for a new audience and to judge the Arles book prize – two great experiences- and to Rudi for asking me to write this

piece and for being very patient while I did so. And of course to Peter, for inviting me, and you, and all of us, into his strangely peculiar world, his enigmatic 'Now you see them, soon you won't' spaces of place and time, play and menace, his gnomic 'something means everything to somebody', with its scarecrows supplicating like beaten beings, and to an individuality which laughs in the face of definition. Where does Peter Mitchell sit in the history of British contemporary photograph of the 1970s? Outside it of course.



Val Williams is UAL Professor of the History and Culture of Photography and is Director of the Photography and the Archive Research Centre (PARC) at the London College of Communication. She is also a co-editor of the *Journal of Photography & Culture* and Director of the Moose on the Loose Biennale of Research. Current projects include a new exhibition for Turner Contemporary with Dr Karen Shepherdson, continuing work with Dr Sara Davidmann on the 'Ken. To be destroyed' project and a partnership with Gordon Macdonald and the Tish Murtha archive to produce a new publication of this remarkable photographer's work.

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**Q: Do images need captions?**