

for LONDON INDEPENDENT PHOTOGRAPHY

**FLIP**

Arun Misra interviews:  
**David Bate**

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# Where is Photography Headed?



*A Decisive Gesture* © David Bate

*'Sometimes it is an important role to re-imagine our experience, not just of reality but our dreams and existence. There is a politics of the imagination here, to wonder how it could be otherwise....'*

## The fLIP interview: Professor David Bate

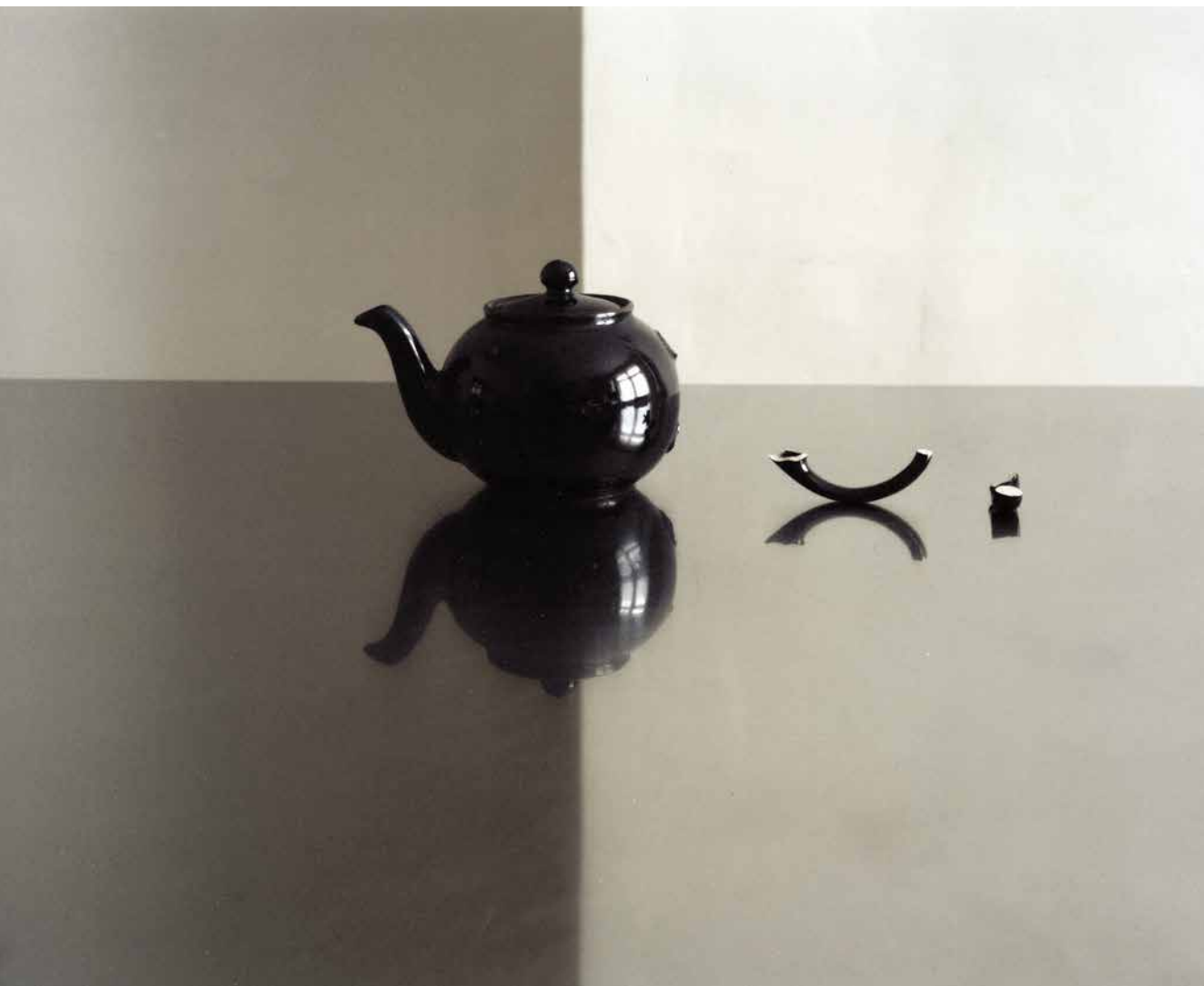
Arun Misra, Editor



Professor David Bate through cyberspace © Arun Misra. 2020

At the time of this interview the United Kingdom was in full lockdown due to the covid-19 pandemic. The country was gripped with fear, anxiety and grief. By 30th June there were over 44,000 deaths. Social distancing was the norm and social contact was limited. With severe restriction on mobility and meetings we agreed to have our discussion via cyberspace.

David is a pre-eminent critical thinker. He is Professor of Photography at the University of Westminster, the author of several highly acclaimed books on photography and art, and an educator and practitioner with an international reputation. We spoke about David's formative experiences, photography education, and his views on current issues and challenges.



*A Badly Handled Thought* © David Bate

**Arun Misra** *How did you first become interested in photography?*

**David Bate** I started photography as a teenager. Probably like many other people I bought a camera when I started to travel and wanted to take pictures of things. It was a SLR film camera. You have to imagine or remember a period with no digital cameras or mobile phones and film was itself not cheap. The only access to representation, aside from picture postcards, magazines and books, was do-it-yourself photography. The first roll of film I shot was mostly of my place of work - at that time in a garage. I recall people finding it

strange I took photographs at a work place, rather than on holiday, at family rituals or of friends, etc.

**AM** *What are your personal photographic passions at the moment?*

**DB** I am just proofing a monograph book called *Photography as Critical Practice*, which is a collection of some of my own photographic works, projects that toured in galleries internationally or were published at the time, but not currently available. They appear sequentially alongside and interspersed with essays written at about the same time. So it has been an interesting process to

put these together. I'd like to select another set of works for another book. Working with commercial galleries, as I did from 1990s until about 2009, meant working on something 'new' (like fashion, art always wants the 'latest'), so spending a little time on the past work has been interesting. The book has a lot of experimental works, for example I had started working on computers with photographs in the early 1990s, but went back to film later on. I am now back working with digital materials, although differently. As always my interest is in images and their relation to subjectivity and social processes, the way that social and private 'psychical' worlds collide or are intertwined through photographic images and language.

**AM** *Can you talk a bit about your approach to looking at photographic works? What do you look for when looking?*

**DB** There are probably three modes of looking. One is like everyone else: a transient casual everyday looking, that is, browsing across screens of one sort or another, the images that are part of something, a magazine, advertising billboard, gallery wall, etc. A second is that of a 'concerned viewer', someone who looks in a bit more detail because something about an image interests, fascinates and causes you to look twice. Then a third mode, which comes from art and art history, looking at an image more intently as a mode of analysis, following the way your own eyes and mind drift around it and, at the same time, thinking about what it is that you are looking at, how it is organised, what the eye is drawn to in the different aspects of the picture. There are all kinds of different techniques around this, but it is basically an 'analytic' vision. Some artists or photographers squint at a picture to increase its contrast and look at it for longer, art historians will look at the structure of an image, scrutinize the details and bring all these back together to the gestalt or whole meaning of the image. This last 'analytic' vision ought to be used in post-production work too.

Each of these three 'visions' have their own merits and uses, and none are probably only rarely ever completely separated in practice.

**AM** *In 2018 you were awarded the Royal Photographic Society Education Award for your*

*contribution to education. Can you tell me what you find particularly rewarding about teaching? What transformations do you see in students?*

**DB** I suppose I still think of myself as a student ... It might sound like a cliché to say that 'I am still learning', but it is true. And, since higher education is, or should be, a place for the production of knowledge, then it makes sense to be working there. Interaction with students is obviously a crucial part of that, and certainly this has changed over time. The idea that knowledge can be 'bought' like a product is alien to me, it's a struggle and every person has to make it on their own terms. These are highly individual struggles, yet each of these students has something in common as part of a group together. It is often hard to explain how that aspect is important, certainly at MA level. Learning a software or how to print is relatively easy, but knowledge about using these or other techniques intelligently - and this includes what people call being 'creative' with them - requires a level of work that does not come easily to many. The gratification, if any, comes from the individuals who develop their work into something new and become articulate. So, it is this difficult process of education that is the interesting part, whether it involves practical work, writing and speaking or all of these. It is also wonderful to see so many graduates, like yourself, take up roles not only as photographers, but also contributing to its presence in and as contemporary culture.

Photography is still a minority art in many ways, despite being utterly pervasive as a common social practice. Despite its new popularity in art, education and online, it is still often ignored and marginalized by major institutions.

There has never been such a time with so many possibilities, so many courses on offer, at least in the UK. Yet it is a difficult time too, the obvious mutations of photography into an online data-based industry, the archaic feel of some established rhetorical forms of photography being peddled as new and the waning of any coherent theoretical project to understand these shifts. At the same time, and this may be a contradiction, it feels like there are moments today when everything is very open, that there is a lack of established boundaries and rules, which means new things can happen

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spontaneously and quickly. These open historical moments come and go, so it is important to grasp them when one can - before they close down again.

**AM** *LIP members are increasingly interested in making Photobooks and Zines. Your view has been that the way in which photobooks work is under-theorized, and that we are still thinking about photography in terms of the 20th Century. You have talked about Robert Frank's photo book 'The Americans' as a kind of beat poem where the experience of turning the pages leaves one with an after image, a kind of mental imprint which lingers and works psychologically. How should thinking about photobooks change?*

**DB** Photobooks have become the lost objects of the history of photography, now increasingly recovered thanks to the work of many people, but notably to Martin Parr for actually collecting them and Gerry Badger working with him on writing up those general compilation histories (the Phaidon published Photobook volumes). It is worth noting that they were not the first or last to compile chronologies of such books, but they did a lot to draw attention to them. More than artist's books, which also obviously intersect with a photobook history (especially in the 1960s and 1970s when conceptual artists starting working with photo series in small books or zines), a visual book based around photographs has become increasingly popular.

While this is all great, there has been little equivalent critical work concerned with how these books 'work' as books. So, if you take one of the most popular selling photobooks today, Alec Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, it is very clearly structured around a landscape/portrait alternation of images. It is like a silent movie, a sequence of images with no soundtrack, but also with no 'plot'. Even very short early cinema movies developed a storyline plot. Visual photobooks often don't have a story or plot, but they do have a structure. It is this structure, the specific sequence of images that enables the viewer to make an imaginary journey through them. These are the structures that need understanding. Gerry Badger has pointed out that photobooks are different, some can appear like a 'stream of consciousness', a diatribe, a literal sequence of movements in pictures, or like a dream

sequence - apparently nonsensical but having some more or less obvious manifest and veiled meanings. Some books and zines might work through repetition, or serial mediations on a specific motif, like a house at night, or people reading. The analogy here is with literary theory, which has been very interested to study the structures of novels, poetry, prose, fiction and so on. I do not see much or hardly any work on this in photography. You don't need theory to enjoy a book, but to someone like me interested in theory, is it not also possible to make better books by understanding something of how they work? I'd say this analytic work can also be a part of the pleasure of looking at them.

**AM** *Turning to your own work - Can you talk about 'Bungled memories'? There are images of broken things and text that says: 'Political error'. What inspired this?*

**DB** I am not sure that saying what 'inspired' me will help anyone with the work, but I suppose you mean: how did it start? Basically, I'd broken a plate and it was on my kitchen table and I was looking at it, and decided to take a picture of it. Since it worked out well I did another one, later on when eventually I broke something else I took another picture and so on, though I hasten to add this was over years rather than weeks. More formally, it is an image-text piece, based as the series title implies, on a 'bungled action' or 'mistakes'. The idea of mistakes is clearly linked (in the Introduction to the work) to the classic proposition of Sigmund Freud: the Freudian slip. In the book where Freud discusses all this as slips-of-the-tongues, saying the wrong word (or 'mis-speaking' as it is sometimes called today), bungled actions or forgetting things like names or appointments, are all forms of psychological 'mistakes' that interested Freud. He called the motivation for these errors 'unconscious' symptoms, because they are all more often than not (in fact always in his argument), symptoms of another thought activity interfering with everyday normal automated actions. We write these trivial events off as accidents, mistakes and silly errors, but Freud recognised a causality to these 'mistakes', of which we are not actually conscious of at the time.

In my work the pictures, made in a quite traditional



*The Wrong Idea* © David Bate

still life format, show quite un-traditional broken objects in the pictures. In the history of art a broken object was often to show a social or personal catastrophe, for example, a broken mirror as a collapsed vanity or a 'broken' social status. William Hogarth or the then equally popular eighteenth-century French painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze for example both used such motifs to signify some kind of family, personal or political catastrophe. I am doing something similar with photography - without explaining it in the work. I use a 'text' or title to suggest a social dimension to the scene of breakage in the image.

So, the word 'A Political Error' and a broken wine glass - what kind of 'political error' might relate to the situation in which a wine glass is broken? Is it so difficult that the work asks the spectator to speculate on that? But a spectator can also ignore the title and just look at the picture and perhaps

even enjoy just looking at it. I would say that is also a legitimate right in art. We have enough social situations already which dictate to us what a picture means or what we should do with it in advertising, newspapers, online and so on. It is legitimate to do what you want or like with an image in a gallery. It is also legitimate for me as an artist to add another level to the work for anyone who wants it, not to 'explain' the image, but to offer another space for reflection, for a social imagining about it. If someone wants to just look at the images, fine, they will see a whole set of broken objects - which is not so common to see in still life photography. They might just think 'this guy breaks a lot of things', or something else, like 'I like that one, but not that one'. I think this process in art of 'not-knowing' what something means, is often used to criticize art, as in 'I don't know what that means', which means either 'it is stupid' because it makes me feel stupid' or elitist because I don't



know what it means. Art and the experience of it is really about becoming active as a spectator in relation to a picture, where we have to do the work to think about what it is for, which is something we are not encouraged to do elsewhere.

Of course, anyone is entitled to think or say anything they want; however, this is why art is also so important. Because of the fact that the meaning is not given in art, it is so alien to other areas of social life. We should not lose this possibility to dream, as a political act of reflection.

So, I add the titles for those who do or don't want to read them, because I want the work to have several levels of potential meaning, if anyone wants it. In any case the text-titles do not add or fix the picture's meaning, they offer another space: for a day-dreaming, perhaps outside of capitalism.

**AM** *Post truth – does it matter? Where does the notion of truth and authenticity fit in contemporary art photography?*

**DB** Yes, truth matters. Yet, this issue of what is true or real has a long history. Since Plato at least, and it certainly mattered to the Realist movements: all those artists and writers in the nineteenth century and since who disputed what was considered 'reality'. However, I am not sure 'truth' ever mattered that much in art in the popular sense of 'Trump truth' politics today. Whereas, it does matter very much in the social systems of public information, judicial systems, and so on... But in art? Why is truth so important there, unless as a realist? That is not the only goal or aim of art, to be an alternative media outlet. Photography does have that history, of galleries being set up to show pictures that newspapers refused to publish, for example. That was part of the genesis of London's The Photographers Gallery. Yet I would argue we should not underestimate how important the imagination and 'imagining' is to any society, and if the arts are allocated this role it is because sometimes it is an important role to re-imagine our experience, not just of reality but our dreams and existence. There is a politics of the imagination here, to wonder how could it be otherwise, whether that is some new figuration of 'beauty', or a different narrative, which can have a 'dissensual' effect on the social and aesthetic world we occupy.

Photography has been stuck with an old nineteenth century debate about reality and appearance and depth ever since it was invented. Whether what we see is ever all there to see, is surely ever more

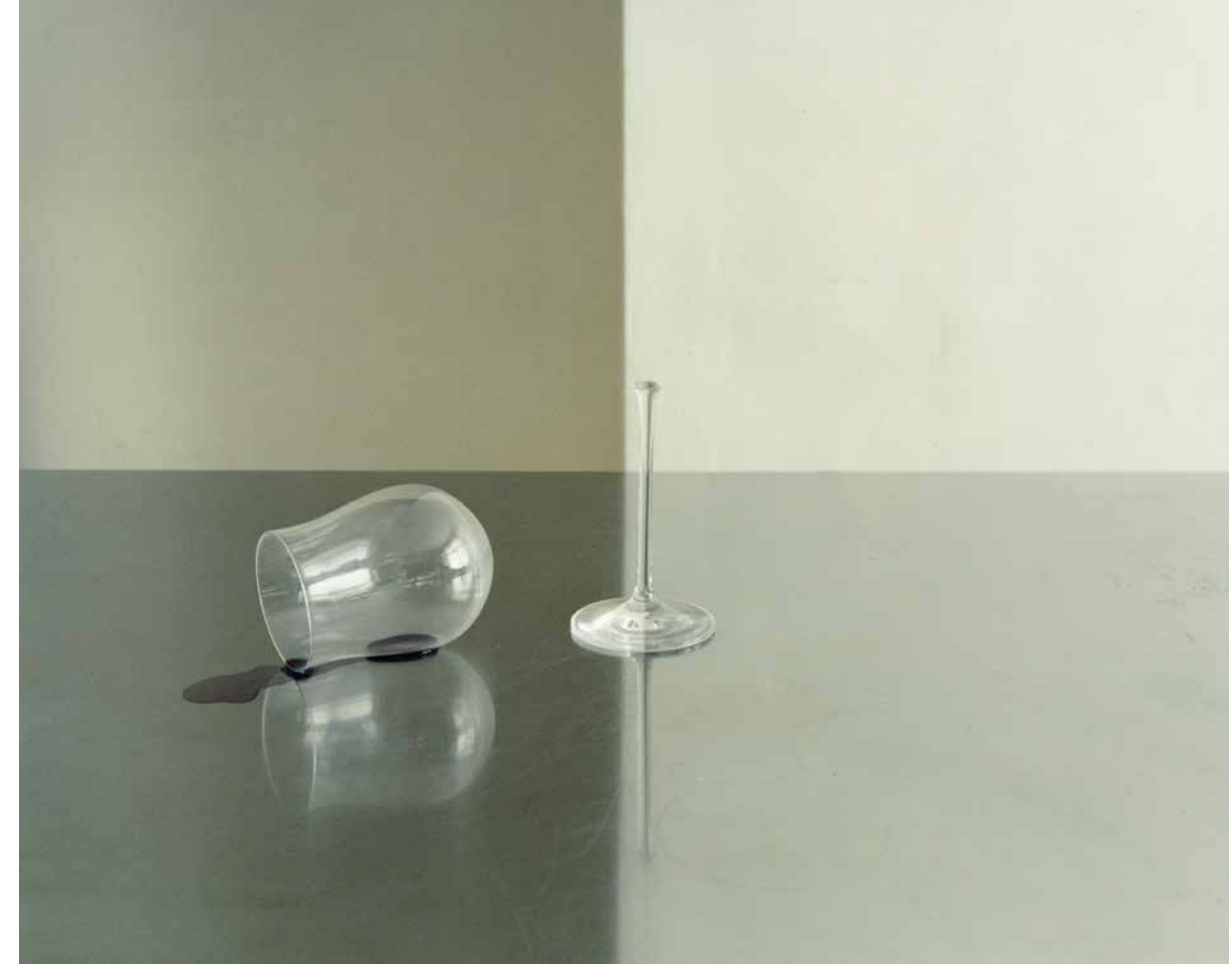
obvious today. We 'know' that when we make a camera phone image it 'mediates' between what there is and what we see, and thus 'what is real' depends on where we point it and at what we click the digital shutter. This is what it means to say that taking a picture is a point-of-view, and this is in a soft sense of the term a political choice. We could say this shows 'a' truth, but it is never the whole truth. If the idea of 'post-truth' means that truth does not matter anymore, is this not also symptomatic of the fact that we are more aware that truth and power can be separate things? Trump has tremendous power, designated by his office as President of the USA and the media presence to assert truth, even if trivially: the photographs of his inauguration ceremony do not represent the right number of people. The history of photography's relation to power and truth, through news, advertising, political regimes, and now social media, is littered with examples of the abuses of power and photography used as a truth-effect mechanism.

**AM** *Can we turn to the works of Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama? Moriyama won the 2019 Hasselblad Foundation Award and is celebrated for his radical approach to both medium and subject. His work is cited as occupying a unique space between the illusory and the real. What makes his work so evocative and lasting?*

**DB** I'm a fan of his work and pleased he was given that award as recognition. If the normative value of photography is 'communication' then the way he uses and introduces the mediation of monochrome grain to interfere with that is one of the striking features which he acknowledges he partially got from William Klein. There is in the tradition of Japanese aesthetics a very different valuation of light, or rather, of darkness. Shadows are not negative spaces in Japanese aesthetics; unlike in Western theory darkness is something to get rid of, as in the 'Enlightenment' for example. So there is something of this in his work that speaks, alongside our fascination for the subject-matter and themes he works with. They tend to be quite socially motivated, yet the visual treatment of them involves us in distancing from these ideas too. It is a very seductive technique.

**AM** *How do you think photography as an art form may develop over the next few years?*

**DB** The role of archives and photography in memory, both cultural and personal, is already having an increased importance and presence



*A Political Error © David Bate*

*'And, given the current Covid-19 pandemic, we may expect an acceleration of many things, including online art and culture, which will surely come faster now as part of our everyday life....'*

everywhere, because there is so much that has been produced and never seen, that enunciates 'history' in a way words do not. This is crucial globally and in particular in areas of the globe where an established history is contested, or simply absent, censored. A recent PhD student, Ana Janeiro, made an important piece of work based on family archives from the fascist and colonial era of Portugal, an era that only finished in the 1970s. 'The archive' is already an emergent and important practice with significant social consequences.

Other themes have already emerged in our discussion, the importance of the growth of data-image dynamics and their dialogue with the

real, sculptural forms of the image, immersive technologies, photo-virtual hybrids, through to what is sometimes seen as a response to that: the passion for old and obsolete photographic techniques, sometimes mixed with new themes about social or private space, and inevitably, an ecological discourse, often framed by more traditional forms of geographical photography across different parts of the world.

And, given the current Covid-19 pandemic, we may expect an acceleration of many things, including online art and culture, which will surely come faster now as part of our everyday life. And who knows what and where new forms and practices might



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come from, out of that.

**AM** *It is believed that anxiety can help with creativity and artistic expression. Have you ever experienced this and did this help with your work? What tips can you offer to those photographers exploring methods of creative expression?*

**DB** If you mean something like art as 'therapy' or having a 'therapeutic' effect? It may possibly help some people, or it may not! There is a long history of linking the artist to melancholia and depressive states, or forms of social madness. The idea of art as a kind of cathartic process, either for the producer or the audience is a very powerful idea. The popular image of artists is that they are often a bit mad. Yet, this is often where confusion arises as the compulsion to

make photographs and the drive to show them has a whole complex of motivations. Then it also has to be mediated through technology, whether it's a camera, computer, brush or pencil. How is photography an expressive form? Being creative is not driven by technology, but features as part of it, for example, when making an image evokes an anxiety it is to do with the question: 'what is it that I am doing here or want to 'say'? This is a question that haunts all creative work, and why some people find solace in it, almost as an existential question about existence. Certainly, most of these ideas or themes and subject-matter are in front of everyone, 'hiding in plain sight' as the expression goes. I don't mean literally in front of you, like a nose, although that is sometimes the case, but as already in your mind but which has just not been recognised as there yet. After that, the

1% inspiration, the process is 99% perspiration, to get the idea to 'work' and find its form to function as image. This process of identifying a thing and making it into a representation may sound simple, but it involves a lot of work, both psychologically and technically, which sometimes even talented people can't be bothered to follow through. And, if it is any comfort, most artists have projects that never worked out, so, yes – anxiety, as fear of something unknown, is definitely a useful part of the production process.

**AM** *What are some your favourite photographs?*

*Editor's note: This is an abridged version of my interview with David Bate. The full text is available from the fLIP page of the LIP Website and includes discussion of photography theory.*

David's book, *Photography as Critical Practice*, is published by Intellect Books and is available from: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/photography-as-critical-practice>

left: *Forgetting a Foreign Word*  
below: *Mistaken Memory*  
photos © David Bate



**DB** A difficult question... there are so many and depending on when you'd ask me a different answer. Probably any of the classics, from Fox Talbot to Atget and Berenice Abbot to early Cindy Sherman. I have an image on my wall by Paul Nougé the Belgian surrealist from his work the *Subversion of the Image*.

*Thank you, David, for your time and for sharing your insights with us. It was a real pleasure talking to you.*