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January 2014

Interviewed by **Walter Lewis**

[John Darwell](#) is an independent photographer, well known for his long-term projects that reflect his interest in social and industrial change, concern for the environment and issues around the depiction of mental health. His most recent work, *After Schwitters*, appears to show a change in emphasis to a self-reflective, almost meditative, practice.

[Walter Lewis](#), Research Associate at the [WALK Centre](#) at the University of Sunderland, met up with him to discuss.

**Walter Lewis:** *I had perhaps better start by explaining where I am coming from in seeing you as a potential WALKing photographer! Just thinking the concept through, I found myself referring to Henri Lefebvre's idea of culture being a spatial phenomenon and thus if we are to project forward ideas of alternative culture, one way is through alternative spaces. When I came across After Schwitters I became aware of looking at something which was spatial and alternative. In comparison to your other work, these were part of a process to somewhere else, and then I was intrigued by the fact that when I heard you talking about this work on Schwitters, you suggested you were seeking to photograph what was not there – it was about echoes. It all seems to revolve around a search for almost 'hidden' knowledge?*

**John Darwell:** That's interesting. I have this kind of mantra that I talk to when I am talking to the students. I always say I don't want to see you going taking photographs of things, I want to see you taking photographs about things. Donkeys years ago when it first dawned on me that that is essentially what I am trying to do, it also dawned on me that as soon as you start talking about something it frees you up to address issues in any way that you want – including allegory and metaphor – because you are no longer saying 'this is a photograph of this whatever'. Rather this is a photograph about something, and that something could be totally unrelated to what is in the image. It's about what it becomes because of connections that you invoke. Thus I would argue that the dog poo bags are not really about dog poo they are about the madness of government decisions and bureaucracy, and how we actually f\*\*\* things up at every level, even within our own microcosms.

But also for me *After Schwitters* was – and I think it is hugely important and something I am only just starting to work through and to understand – one of the few projects that I have done that is not basically a polemic. The Schwitters work is something that is maybe more associative with trying to find out where you belong.

It isn't about Kurt Schwitters, it is about John Darwell. I make no bones about it, essentially he's just the catalyst to get me to take a journey. But his journey is not my journey. There are, though, enough parallels between the two for it to become interesting enough for me to want to do it.

This photographer has done the politicised bit – been the angry young man – and has kind of become more reflective because I'm looking at myself and how I fit within the world. I can still do the political ranting – I still photograph the empty shops, the mail that keeps coming – I'm still trying to express that anger but it's a different approach of contemplations of who I am.

**WL:** *...and where does the act of walking figure in this new John Darwell?*

**JD:** I think the whole idea of walking – although can I use 'mooching' instead – becomes part of the process. Certainly for me I have never had a methodology in terms of where projects come from. I don't sit down for hours – never have – and think what am I going to do next. Projects have usually come because of the environment I was in. I would see something that I would become intrigued by it – and usually because I was walking. When you are walking, you are more attuned to what's going on around. I think that to me the idea of walking is not about when I am taking the photographs but it's the gestation period that leads up to the photographs.



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There is also the *1000 Yards* project which is very specifically the idea of me walking this river. Not just meandering but walking a very very tight stretch of river – because I was walking the dogs – over and over and over again. I really got to know this particular stretch by seeing it on a daily basis and in a way becoming a part of it.

Mind you, to call it a river is almost too much – it's not that grand, it's about from here to that next table – but you'd find just by walking it on a daily basis you'd see things that the casual observer wouldn't see. Sometimes you'd go down there and there would be a heron whacking the hell out of an eel on the banks or you would find a trout's head on the barbed wire where someone had obviously caught it and chopped its head off, or, you know, in some cases you'd get quite macabre. One morning I found a whole pile of ducklings' heads where a mink had obviously had them.

I must have walked it more or less every day for years. It was only after years – six or seven years – of doing this twice a day I thought 'I'm going to start photographing'. It wasn't because I wanted to say anything but just because I wanted to start photographing. In a way, my walking had become part of my creative process and that certainly continued with Schwitters.

**WL:** *So how did you get started with Schwitters?*

**JD:** I was invited to do the project in the first instance way back in 2007 by Littoral Arts who said 'We've got the Cylinders site [in Elterwater] related to the painter Schwitters. We want someone to document it before we do it up – any interest?'

'I'll go and have a look,' I said, 'but I'm not going to just take pictures which say this is what it looks like – I'm not that kind of photographer.' But I did Cylinders site and for me it was like 'right that's it, clunk, done Schwitters'. I got paid for it, the exhibition went on, went to Texas and did stuff there related to it and then it was kind of almost like a slow burn after that of having taken this thing out of the box, I found myself opening another box of it and saying 'well actually.....'.

**WL:** *So was Schwitters the start of your change in practice?*

**JD:** My work had changed prior to that time. I know exactly when that happened – when I was doing the *Black Dog* during my PhD. My work changed quite distinctly and I moved away from the political with a big P to the Personal. It became very much me looking at my own stuff and my own interests. I finished the PhD in 2008 but I'd finished the photographic content two years earlier 2006ish – and then I did Schwitters part I [Cylinders] in 2007, so I can start to put a chronology together and that actually makes sense of how my work was changing.

Other projects came. *1000 Yards* started to be produced and then Schwitters started to come back into my conscience and I was fortunate that the University gave me a sabbatical and I was able to follow it up

What intrigues me is that I wasn't interested in Schwitters himself and in some ways I wasn't even interested in his work, what I was interested in was his journey. He started in Hanover and ended up in Elterwater and I kind of reversed the process. What was fascinating was to look for echoes. These echoes were not just about the physicality of Schwitters' work but were also things that were interesting to me psychologically in that they fitted into the way I wanted to look at things and to what I wanted to address.

What was kind of fascinating was to actually walk the spaces and think, 'the pavement I'm walking on now, the woods that I'm walking through at the back of the house, they are all where Schwitters walked and where he went.' In some ways it was that psychological sensibility of thinking, 'yes, I'm quite literally following in his footsteps' that became interesting and to then look at these spaces as a kind of detective story to ask 'what can I find that would have fitted in to his world? what did he see when he was looking in these streets? How did such and such become part of the Schwittersesque?'

**WL:** *.....so now you are telling me it's more about you than Schwitters? In that sense how far did you take it when you were selecting the images for the final shows? Did it matter whether you could find Schwitters in those, if they were saying something about you?*

**JD:** Yes and no... what was fascinating was that I usually have a pretty good idea of the outcome when I'm working on a project. I know what I've got almost as soon as I have shot it. But here, I didn't get the opportunity to shoot, and then put it into a lab before I continued shooting. I'd go a week or ten days shooting and come back with 400 rolls of film all of which would be banged through the lab at once.

I can remember the contacts coming back from the Isle of Man – the first place that I went – I just thought 'are these rubbish? what the hell

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have I done, I have no idea what is going on in these pictures!' This same thing occurred again in Norway and again in Germany. It was only when I started to refine what I was looking for – and I was more confident – that I was able to think as far as, 'This is either the best thing I have done or it is rubbish and at the moment I don't know!'

**WL:** *So there was almost like a repeat of the creative process in a selection and editing exercise?*

**JD:** It was different, but it wasn't a physical difference. As I looked at the contacts, I tried to make sense of how that fitted with what was going on in my head when I took the pictures. I guess if I'm honest I was – and I can see them, I know which ones they are – also looking at the history of photography at the same time and so I do have my Walker Evans picture, and I do have a Duane Michals and a Peter Fraser or who ever it happens to be. In some ways I was using Schwitters both for me to go and explore this detective story which was fascinating in itself – that idea that 'this is the street that he lived in, this is the house he lived in, that's his house so there is the view that he had out of the window to that woods at the back – whilst also at the same time I was conscious of my own history of development so kind of thinking 'how does this fit in with how I take pictures?' and 'how am I thinking about taking pictures in the future?'

When I was taking it I was very much aware that what I was doing might not work – that I might take these pictures and they might just be rubbish. I was also technically very aware of trying to do something quite specific.

**WL:** *Are you comfortable with this progression of your practice?*

**JD:** A lot of these parallels I have outlined were subconscious – I haven't verbalised them before though – and in a way that was what the whole project was about. It was about Schwitters movement and that movement becoming my movement, but my movement being a very different movement to his. I deliberately sought out stuff – maybe I always do – that most people wouldn't have looked twice at whether just a piece of old fence with stuff growing through it or whatever. To me it became about that idea of escape and it is interesting the pictures that I thought were going to be great, I then didn't use because in the end they don't excite me.....but this kind of fits in with the whole Schwitteresque.

**WL:** *How much of an expert did become, or try to be, in Schwitters?*

**JD:** None at all

**WL:** *So you've just taken Schwitters as a skeleton?*

**JD:** The project, as you say, and I myself moved on. I think Schwitters was a kind of catalyst to allow me to go out and explore my own preoccupations.

**WL:** *Could it have almost been anybody – or were there things in his life that you equated with?*

**JD:** I think there was that idea of moving – of rootlessness, if I dare I say it – and then that idea of almost being unrecognised. Schwitters ended up in Ambleside selling – well swapping – paintings for food. He'd gone from this artist whom MOMA were looking at, to being just some weird German guy who painted. I'd be playing cold psychologist if I'd said it was an autobiographical thing – it self evidently wasn't – but there were enough elements in his life that I could relate to. He didn't mean to end up in the Isle of Man and he certainly didn't mean to end up in Elterwater, and it's these kind of unseen processes in life that in my experience take hold of you. You think you are in control but there are so many other things to factor in, that you never actually know where you are going to be.

**WL:** *Was there anything that catalysed the change though?*

**JD:** Life throws these curved balls at you and I was quite ill for a long time – physically ill – which then became the depression... which became the *Black Dog* work. You kind of go through these journeys – in fact I had cancer in my leg and just by chance they found it. If they hadn't, I would have lost my leg at least. This was in about 1990. I was in hospital for months having all sorts of stuff done and ostensibly that lead to me doing the PhD.

That PhD completely changed who I was as a photographer. This was up to about 1993/4 – by which time I had done the hospital bit and was

working in Liverpool mostly using crutches and a tripod! Then it changed when I'd got into the PhD.

Where I am going next is kind of taking me somewhere else again – another layer. I don't want to go and take picture 'of' things. I guess for the last decade it's all been about memory, but photography being the beast that it is, you have to find a means of exploring that memory through the world around you, and to maintain a balance you have to look at the bigger picture [outside] your own world. I guess in a way that's what I did with Schwitters.

**WL:** *So are there therefore no politics in the Schwitters stuff in that it is about you, for you, or is it about you and what you have discovered and therefore, politically, are suggesting it to other people. The difference being that it's about a way of being rather than a comment on what is going on somewhere?*

**JD:** I think it's both. I think it has to be both. If it was just the former it would be hugely self indulgent – which I'm not beyond – but to be of interest I think it also has to be about addressing something to do with the world in which we live. You may be looking inward but from the perspective that you are sitting in your surroundings and making yourself aware of everything that is happening around you. So I guess you can't separate the two out – or I certainly don't think I can. Even if I am talking about me, I am also addressing things that are important to me albeit not in the way of a complete polemic the way I would once have done.

**WL:** *Do you continue to work with film?*

**JD:** Roll film is my ideal means because I will shoot on an average day 40 or 50 rolls – that's, what, 500 images – because I don't edit in my head – wish I could it would save me a fortune, I could take out all those pictures I don't want and leave the ones that I do without going to the lab! I get caught up in the moment and if you look at a contact sheet of mine there might be 9 or 10 images that are all of the same thing...the difference is minute, but there's one that works best, that's the one I'm looking for.

**WL:** *Within the Schwitters work there are some pictures, certainly by John Darwell standards, that verge on to the pretty, pretty.*

**JD:** Do you think so?

**WL:** *....was that allowing yourself to go there – to challenge critical comment with aesthetics – or is it just the mellowing of age?*

**JD:** I can see now – I can certainly say now – that there are some on the island in Hjertøya in Norway. Yes it was deliberate, because I thought 'I can do this'.

**WL:** *So why had you not done it before?*

**JD:** I think I was quite conscious that there are two or three in there that are landscape and I could have quite easily left out. But I made a conscious decision not to. In Hjertøya more than anywhere else because it was this island in the middle of a fjord and became a part of me. I spent three days on this island and the only way I could get there was on a museum boat that would take me out, drop me off, then I'd just walk around the island. It would then come and pick me up in the evening. Did this for three days and it was like being on holiday!

It was beautiful – the weather was like the last week here. Full of sunshine and the last afternoon I was there with my last roll of film that I had been eking it out because I'd been in Norway for a few weeks then and I was literally squeezing the last pictures out. But then I could see this wall of black coming over the mountains on the other side of the fjord and as they came to pick me up on the boat the rain followed us back across. But I couldn't photograph it because I'd run out of film!

The beautiful and the sublime met whilst I was there. The following morning the plane that was taking me back to Oslo couldn't take off because the weather was so atrocious, so I felt I wanted to have taken the pictures because it was part of where I was. It was part of the experiential sensibility of being there. It's one thing being on my knees photographing a bit of old ticket on the ground, but there was also the view and the trees and the blue sky that were as important to my sense of being there. So I put them in where I could.

I think that by putting the two together – conventionally beautiful and those regarded as less beautiful or the ones where you would be more quizzical and ask, 'why on earth did you photograph that' – the contrast makes the Schwittersque even stronger. I think it needs the

conventional aesthetic to accentuate the other and also because it was part of my journey. I could have taken them all out and said 'I don't do that - I'm a serious photographer'...but that was me yesterday. Today I put them in.

**WL:** John, thank you so much for such an open and illuminating conversation. I just hope that I can do justice to it in the transcript that I produce.

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*For John's personal website and a wide range of his images please click [here](#)*

*For more on the WALK Research Centre at the University of Sunderland please click [here](#).*

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