

ST
CENTURY

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

An ambitious exhibition and accompanying book attempt to distil the essence of contemporary life through the work of 140 leading photographers. It all began with a seed planted many years ago explains curator William W Ewing HonFRPS

PHILIPPE CHANCEL LEFT
Construction of the Burj Khalifa tower, Dubai, from the series *Datazone 2008*

Of the towers certain ants construct, their relative size would be comparable to some of Shanghai's tallest buildings. Chancel's depiction of the construction of – probably for a brief time – the tallest building in the world, Burj Khalifa, reminds us of the work of industrious ants. Like them, humans can only erect such structures through

huge collective efforts: mastering of geometry, the material sciences, trial and error – in short, human intelligence. The Burj Khalifa is, at 828m, 473 times the height of a person, compared to 136 times the depth of the deepest tunnels in ants' nests. The 'tallest building' game humans play never ceases, as nations and cities compete for the skills of a coterie of star architects, hoping to gain attention, prestige and corresponding financial rewards.

WHERE DOES AN idea for a major project originate? Sometimes it just pops into curators' heads – seeing something, reading something, hearing something – but I suspect the seeds of ideas are often planted much earlier.

In the case of the project behind the book and exhibition *Civilization: the Way We Live Now*, I can put a precise date to it – 1962. It was my first year at university and I had been forced to take a course called civilisation, which opened my eyes to the wider world and past human achievements. That discovery propelled me into the study of anthropology, a training that remains fundamental to the way I interpret the world – and how I see photography.

More recently, about 10 years ago, I mentioned the idea to Todd Brandow, director of the

BEST SHOTS

DONA SCHWARTZ

BELOW AND RIGHT Dona Schwartz's two series, Expecting Parents (right) and Empty Nesters (above), may be seen as interlocking parts of a whole, or as independent bodies of work. Schwartz takes as her subject parents and children, the first series dealing with couples anxiously (or serenely) awaiting the arrival of a tiny human being; the latter coming to terms with the moment when their child, now

become an adult, flees the nest. The photographer, who originally trained as an anthropologist, is extremely sensitive to the shifts in social relations: her couples are heterosexual, gay or lesbian, and of mixed race. They are posed in the rooms of their progeny, and the environments they have created speak volumes as to their parental hopes and aspirations. Schwartz's report is respectful and



PROFILE

WILLIAM A EWING HonFRPS
An author, lecturer, curator and museum director for more than 40 years, Ewing received the Society's award for Outstanding Contribution to Photography in 2016

moving. We see our fellow beings struggling with the weight of their responsibilities, doing their best to give their children the best of themselves they can offer.



◆ Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography, who in turn talked to Spanish curator Bartomeu Mari, later director of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, South Korea. Mari agreed we would produce an exhibition of the project together and take it around the world. Andrew Sanigar, an editor at Thames & Hudson,

joined forces with us for the book, and Holly Roussel, a China specialist, came on board as co-curator. Besides Seoul, the exhibition will tour to national museums in Melbourne, Beijing and Marseille – the latter being appropriately the location of the Museum of the Civilisations of Europe and the Mediterranean.



What does civilisation – admittedly a big word – mean? What does it encompass? It is one of those terms upon which everyone agrees until we try to define it. Even the chairman of the International Society for the Study of Civilizations admits his members can't agree. But as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss

DONA SCHWARTZ / STEPHEN BULGER GALLERY

once said: 'We should feel free to use a word any way we like, as long as we say explicitly what we mean by it.' A civilisation – there have been many, but perhaps at the largest scale no more than some 30 – is an aggregate. It is the sum total of human behaviours in a given territory: the economy, the polity, the religion, the system of food

DONA SCHWARTZ / STEPHEN BULGER GALLERY

production, medicine, education, defence, organs of control, the culture and the society. We speak of Greek, Mayan, or western civilisations in such broad terms. Civilisations are cumulative, building upon the structures and knowledge of the past, each generation adding a thin layer, like an onion.

Although existing civilisations have distinctive features – think western and Chinese – these features today are subject to homogenisation. We dress more and more alike (T-shirts, jeans, trainers), we drive around in similar vehicles (Hyundais, Mercedes, Fords), we consume the same products, watch the same films, ◆



LUCA ZANIER

THESE PAGES

FIFA: Executive Committee, Zurich, from the series Corridors of Power, 2013

LUCA ZANIER

FIFA made almost \$5 billion from the World Cup in Mexico, such is the colossal, planet-spanning

business that is professional football. Luca Zanier has done more to strip the behemoth of its

glamorous public front with this chilling vision of FIFA's boardroom than any written exposé

of its murky financial affairs could achieve. A room for engineering assent,

encouraging no stepping out of line. Dr Strangelove would have felt at home here.



ROBERT WALKER LEFT
Times Square,
New York, 2004

Walker has kept his keen eye on Times Square for more than 40 years, as the landmark evolved from a gritty but vital nexus of city life to a Disneyfied magnet for tourists. He sees the site as

a metaphor for the excesses and pathologies of contemporary life: 'Overconsumption and sensual indulgence are seductively encouraged by a hysterical mélange of signs and symbols, coupled with the notion that everyone is entitled to a few moments

of celebrity, regardless of real achievement.' Fear, too, is an effective advertising ploy ... how are you protecting your identity? Who is real in this picture? William Burroughs wrote of Walker's work: 'The whole city is a backdrop that could collapse at any moment ...'

SEAN HEMMERLE BELOW
Brooks Brothers,
WTC, New York,
12 September, 2001

Hemmerle's sobering image is a powerful reminder of the fragility of our built environment. A lesser photographer would have walked to that window and

focused only the grim ruins of the twin towers. But Hemmerle realised, perhaps only intuitively, that the full horror could be better imagined if a sense of lost order was communicated – a tranquil, well-ordered world that was the norm only hours earlier. Those flimsy shirts

have scarcely been ruffled. Still, the few which have fallen can only remind us of human bodies, many of whom are trapped in those tangled girders, while the light coating of dust lends to the picture an unearthly, painterly feel.



'Who now builds their own car, sews their own dress or grows their own coffee?'

ROBERT WALKER: SEAN HEMMERLE

• listen to the same music and worship the same celebrities. We fly from A to B in the same airliners. What is slowly taking shape is a truly planetary civilisation. The 2014 World Cup was watched by 3.2 billion people – more than half the world's population. Planetary civilisation is collective. Who builds their own car, or plane, or

smartphone? Who sews their own shirt or dress? Who grows their own coffee beans? And yet, how ironic it is that our great collective achievements – think of the Olympic games, which reaches down into every village on Earth for its talent, then spends billions worldwide – boil down to a handful of gold-medal winners?

Collective too are our greatest achievements – putting a man on the moon, decoding the human genome, landing probes on distant planets, seeing deep into our past with the Hubble telescope ... Photography is also collective. This sounds counterintuitive: don't all photographers work alone? •

How are you protecting your identity?

BEST SHOTS

VINCENT FOURNIER BELOW
Ergol #3 S1B clean room, Arianespace, Guiana Space Center, Kourou, French Guiana, from the series Space Project 2011

Vincent Fournier has nurtured a particular love of space travel. Although he has photographed many of its most representative

places – including the Yuri Gagarin Research and Test Cosmonaut Training Centre in Star City, Russia; the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan; the

space centres of NASA at Cape Canaveral in the USA; and Arianespace in French Guiana – his interest is not documentary, although the

images are certainly rooted in reality. It is instead the dream aspect that fascinates him, a collective dream he believes he shares with many others. He

has photographed the astronauts dwarfed by their high-tech environments, ready for their leap off the earth, but nonetheless still tethered to it.



‘Human beings, including photographers, are not solitary animals ...’

• Well, no. They need cameras and lenses, which they don't tend to build themselves. They use sophisticated technologies to take their pictures and distribute them, implicating invisible networks of technicians and scientists. Then there is their dependence on agents, dealers, editors, curators, drivers, pilots, lab technicians and even their fellow photographers, where brotherhood or sisterhood play a supportive role.

Human beings, including photographers, are not solitary animals. They are immersed in intricate webs of dependency. They are functioning, contributory members of an overarching civilisation. And they are

working everywhere, documenting or interpreting everything. Is there an area of civilisation where we do not find a photographer working? Factories, prisons, courts, theatres, schools ... from the rural village to the vast metropolis, they are hard at work, envisioning the world in which we live and sharing those insights with us.

These concepts led us to try to grasp this collective energy. We knew we would never be able to include more than a fraction of the highly skilled photographers working, so we tried to be representative – both of the major aspects of our civilisation, and of the photographic approaches to it.

The former meant structuring the project to cover these zones – hive,

control, flow, rupture, escape, next etc. And the second, to try to have the widest range of styles and genres.

We can well imagine being criticised for taking on such a complex and vast subject. But when we hear the words ‘human civilisation today’, doesn't some kind of picture come to mind? We see our exhibition as something akin to a satellite view of Earth. Pulling back, we see patterns emerge which aren't visible down there on the surface. We'd like to think our book and exhibition do something similar.

Civilization by William A Ewing and Holly Roussel is published by Thames & Hudson at £39.95

VINCENT FOURNIER

ADVERT