

Visual poem offers a glimpse into the London ends

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German born London based photographer Philipp Ebeling in his new photo series "London Ends" captured the very far corners of this mega city. He walked 250 kilometers clockwise, from London's south straight up to north along the Lee Valley Park, in ten days without getting back home. What happened inside Ebeling's lens during this time was almost magical. Sunlit estate house in Poplar for a fraction of second turned into warm pine scented resort, two men casually fishing on Thames river in Dagenham formed an idyllic scene, the time seemed to stop in innocent looking Grange Farm Estate while two ladies in the foreground enjoyed their milk dipped afternoon, and the black preacher in Chrisp Street Market appeared to be levitating in the greasy market air. The long lost places, unseen faces and invisible traces that lead to the heart of London's fully uncovered identity, were finally given a chance to revive. It suggests that Philipp Ebeling's "London Ends" is not only the story about reclaiming contours and drawing them back on map, but it is also disguised visual poem about one's love for city.

Why were you drawn to photography in the first place?

I have always loved the quiet power of photographs. To me photography is a powerful extension to our verbal culture. They work on an emotional level and cut right through language. I find that very attractive about pictures. They are still yet powerful.

After you finished the school in Germany, you instantly started travelling a lot. Why this urge to go away was so strong?

I grew up in a very small place where everyone knew everyone. I have never enjoyed being part of a tight-knit group of people, the gossip, obligations and unspoken rules that go with village communities and small societies. When I first started travelling, I was very nervous and self-conscious but I relished the freedom of being a stranger. I wanted to learn about the world around me, absorb every little detail. Photography seemed an obvious activity to keep learning about the world.

How did the London become your destination? One can feel the intimate relationship that you share with this city since the times when you still were a fresh arts student living in Whitechapel and exploring London by bike.

I came to London by accident via a layover on a return flight. I took the tube into a town I knew nothing about and had had no plans to visit and fell in love with the place. I was overwhelming and bewitching. I had just spent time in Asia, Chicago and New York, but London hit me like no other place. I never expected it but nearly 20 years later I am still here.

“London Ends” breaths out the melancholy of solitude. Why was it so important to you to capture these forgotten places? Did you try to “immortalize” the landscape of peripheries, the voices from otherwise silent corners?

There is also beauty and joy, a dash of nostalgia and I would like to think a pinch of humor. Yes I was conscious about the fact that my vision of London doesn't correspond with how most people would choose to represent London, but then that is slightly the point of Photography how I understand it. To show us something familiar in a new light. These parts of town are very representative of the city, every Londoner will know these places, yet they are rarely shown. They are overlooked. Like I guess lots of stuff that is very close to us is easily overlooked.

Can one owe to a city? Let's say London gave itself away to you, and when it was your turn to make a tribute.

We are shaped by our environment, I became a Londoner, but in turn we leave our marks. Some bigger some smaller. The city is malleable and so are we. There was a time when living in London was very hard work, when I was a student and even more so when I started out as a photographer. I have never felt like I owe the city anything.

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You once said that you believe that strong photographs transcend the subject matter. As if it was an invisible power that captivates the viewers. Could you explain this effect in your photographs from “London Ends”?

Most photographs are very much rooted in a place and time, they are documents. But good photos manage to go beyond their subject matter. They don't just show you what a person looks like at a certain time, say, they talk about people and the society they live in. They tell you stories and they have an emotional subtext we respond to. They become timeless. I try to make those types of pictures and I hope that I succeed to a certain degree. If I don't then 'London Ends' wouldn't be particularly interesting to non-Londoners.

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When making “London Ends”, did you reflect on the issue of capital's gentrification? Architect Norman Foster said that exodus of London creatives is inescapable process. What do you think?

Well first of all, it would be disingenuous of me, a white middle-class German who lives in Hackney to decry gentrification. Having lived in the east end for nearly two decades I can say that the quality of life here has risen exponentially. Gentrification has done lots of good to the East End. The biggest problem that London faces today is housing cost. It has always been expensive to live in the capital but in recent years the cost of living has risen much faster than wages and there is an acute shortage of living space. The government's response has always been to trust the market to satisfy demand, but unfortunately London's property market is now global, so that we have the mind blowing situation, where people in Malaysia new buy flats in London off-plan and treat them as a form of value store, not as a home. Those flats sit empty and locals have no chance to rent or buy them. I know lots of people with jobs who can no longer afford the capital and move away. Lots of my friends who are successful creative have gone that way. Surely if houses earn more money than jobs do, something is going very wrong. If London wants to be a sort of Singapore on Thames as the government seems to be threatening at the moment with a view on Brexit, then maybe the loss of creatives isn't such a big deal. But the London I love and to an extent explore in London Ends, is characterized exactly by the existence of people and places that don't subscribe to the official message, that are off-course, different, eccentric, creative. For that to exist it takes outsiders, you need immigration and you need living space. What London has always done really well is being non-prescriptive, allowing people to find their spaces and embrace a new thought. No city on the continent can claim that to the same extent.

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Do you think there is a potential than uninhabited parts of London could offer the shelter to current generation of London creative scene?

There are no uninhabited parts. There are plenty of underdeveloped parts left, like Woolwich or Tottenham for example that are rapidly being included into the city's art world narrative. I have recently visited artists' studios in both places and was amazed by the quantity and quality of creatives I met. The city is brimming with small creative businesses but even in far out places like that studios aren't cheap any more. It's come to the point where large property developers are actively seeking artists for their run-down industrial spaces, to make them more desirable when they are being developed on. That's a disgusting situation.

What is the primary emotion that you associate this city with?

That's a pretty even split between I-cannot-believe-my-luck-that-I-am-living-in-London and oh-my-god-I-will-be-stuck-in-this-place-forever

Do you have your own special place in the ends of London?

My home in Hackney.

If one would read "London Ends" as a map, where would one go first and where would one stay for longer?

Well there is a map in "London Ends". I did a massive walk around outer London three years ago. 250 kilometers in 10 days without coming home in between. I left my house walking east for two days and then south and clockwise around until I came back home from the north along the Lea Valley. The most exciting bit is east London, the prettiest is the south west. A fantastic adventure.