

The Vanished Present

From a way of seeing to a body of work

Chris George · August 2026

I. ONE INTEREST WEARING DIFFERENT CLOTHES

For more than forty years I have photographed buildings, industry, people at work, and places from which the people have gone. I have kept diaries, negatives, maps and plans. I treated these as separate interests: photography, abandoned places, archives, music, memory, entropy, consciousness, systems. I now believe they are a single preoccupation wearing different clothes.

It can be stated in two sentences.

*I look at the present and try to recover its absent past.
I look at the present while already sensing its future absence.*

Every scene I stand in is three things at once: the residue of presents that have vanished; a present that is itself vanishing; and the raw material of a trace that will one day be all that survives.

II. BEFORE THE OUTCOME WAS KNOWN

Compass Point was a recording studio on the shoreline near Nassau in the Bahamas, built by Chris Blackwell of Island Records in 1977. In the summer of 1980, Talking Heads went there with Brian Eno and made the album that became *Remain in Light* — now routinely listed among the most important records of its era. When I search for the building on Street View, I am not engaged in musical tourism. I want the ordinary hours of that August, when *Remain in Light* was not yet an important record but unfinished work: musicians eating breakfast, sixteen bars of tape being rewound, someone standing outside for ten minutes looking at the ocean. If a studio door opened and thirty seconds of a strange repetitive groove escaped into the evening, a passer-by would not think, I am hearing the future. They would hear some people making a record. Then the door would close.

The same pull takes me to Rudy Van Gelder's studio at Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, on the morning of 9 December 1964 — the day John Coltrane's quartet recorded *A Love Supreme*, and the last morning on which *A Love Supreme* did not exist. Cases carried through a door. Cars on the surrounding roads. Someone drives past a plain building, never knowing what is happening a few metres away. By evening something exists that did not exist that morning, and the surrounding world does not acknowledge the transformation.

Historical significance is invisible from inside the present. The landscape does not announce which moments matter.

This is the first principle of the preoccupation. There is no marker in any present that says THIS MOMENT WILL MATTER. We acquire hindsight only by surrendering, permanently, the experience of the moment before its outcome was known; the people inside those moments possessed something now inaccessible to us, and we possess something unavailable to them, and the exchange cannot be reversed. It holds for the wonderful and for the horrific alike. At Wannsee in January 1942 the lake remained a lake, meals were prepared, people travelled to work, and the physical environment did not transform itself to correspond with the enormity of what human beings were coordinating inside an elegant villa. History takes place inside ordinary reality.

III. THE HEADLIGHTS

The whole idea also exists at domestic scale. I sit in a room at night. A car passes on the road outside. Its headlights sweep across the ceiling; for a few seconds the room changes; then the light is gone. For the occupants of the car nothing has happened — they have driven along a road. Yet they have entered another person's experience and will never know it. The same event exists as two different realities, and only one of them is registered anywhere: in me, briefly, and then not at all.

We continually enter one another's experience without knowing. A bedroom light becomes a small illuminated rectangle in a stranger's distant landscape. A closing gate makes a sound heard by someone unseen. A photographer records an ordinary street, and forty years later that frame is another person's only route back to a vanished childhood. Most such events leave no record. Yet they happened.

IV. WORLD, EXPERIENCE, TRACE

The structure beneath all of this is a chain of reductions:

WORLD → EXPERIENCE → TRACE

Something is lost at every transition. Reality is vastly larger than what any consciousness can experience; experience is vastly larger than anything subsequently preserved. A photograph keeps appearance and discards temperature, smell, peripheral vision, bodily sensation, anticipation, and the knowledge available to the photographer at that moment. Memory reduces again. Language again. Archives again. History again. What survives is a trace — and the photograph, which promises preservation, in fact demonstrates loss. It says this existed and this has gone in the same breath. This may be why photography has held me for four decades while never once seeming sufficient.

It connects to the sentence at the centre of *Liminal Mind*: consciousness is not the ghost in the machine; it is the friction caused when a machine — biological or bureaucratic — attempts to process infinite reality into finite data. My work attempts to capture the heat of that friction. The gap between world, experience and representation is not a technical problem awaiting a solution. It is the subject.

V. THE INSTRUMENTS

What has become clear is that the current projects are not a portfolio of separate ideas. Each is an instrument built to work at a different point on that chain.

Quantum Memory works on the present that is vanishing now. Sixty working lives across coal, steel, slate, silicon, agriculture and engineering; grey knowledge held in bodies rather than manuals; a preservation window of ten to fifteen years that is biologically real and closing. It is the Compass Point problem run in reverse. Instead of standing outside a closed door decades too late, I am standing inside the room while the door is still open — making the record before hindsight has decided what mattered, because by the time significance is assigned, the bodies that hold the knowledge will be gone.

The World Below works on a world that has already vanished: the flooded workings beneath contemporary Wales. Its method is to photograph what can be seen while describing precisely what cannot. The coordinate determines the photograph, not pictorial preference; each surface image is paired with depth, seam, roadway, dates, plan reference — and a certainty rating attached to every fact. The certainty ratings are the friction made visible: the instrument refuses to pretend that the trace is the world. No underground access is sought, because the inaccessibility is not an obstacle. It is the point. I stand at the surviving coordinates and become conscious of what is missing.

Other Lives takes the preoccupation one step further, to presents that were never permitted to become pasts: five rooms of foreclosed lives in Thatcherite Wales, each held at the moment of maximum foreclosure. Room One is my own counterfactual — the Naval Artificer, the life that ends at 06:37 on 12 June 1982 aboard HMS Glamorgan — held, in sound, at the moment before 06:37. Where the archive preserves what happened, this counter-archive fabricates traces for experiences that history prevented and therefore never recorded. On 12 June 2026, the forty-fourth anniversary of the strike, I photographed the Aberthaw Power Station chimney falling, from my own estate. The landscape, as usual, did not announce the coincidence.

The Carrying Mechanism is the headlights at architectural scale. A structure is the fixed thing against which passage becomes legible: the crossing seen at one speed, the structure at another. Buildings carry the events that occurred within and around them whether or not anyone names the carriage. The project's discipline — nothing enters as fact until the specific instance is verified — exists because in this territory a false trace is worse than no trace at all.

And around and beneath them all sits the archive. A shipping container near Llantwit Major holds forty years of undigitised negatives: NAAFI postings, editorial work, the art world, the City of London. A 1986 diary records the dated addresses of portrait subjects, among them a young

novelist named Kazuo Ishiguro, written down when they were simply that day's job. I did not know I was handling history's raw material. Nobody inside a present ever does. The container is my own vanished presents in physical form, waiting to be reduced once more into whatever trace I finally make of them.

*The photograph promises preservation but demonstrates loss. It says
this existed and this has gone in the same breath.*

VI. NOT NOSTALGIA

None of this is nostalgia. Nostalgia wants something back. I am held by the fact that it cannot be brought back. I want to stand at the surviving coordinates — a studio, a street, a roadway beneath a field, a bunk space no one slept in after June 1982 — and become conscious of what is missing. The incompleteness is the material.

I do not need to invent a subject for my practice. The subject has been present for more than forty years; I simply lacked the language for it. The projects differ in medium and site, but they are one investigation, conducted with different instruments, into the same territory.

*The Vanished Present.
The past when it was still now.*