

# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CONTEMPORARY GROUP

The Group was established at a meeting in London in November 1989. This was convened by Edward Bowman, who for several years had been concerned that the Society had a lack of involvement in contemporary photographic practice. The exhibition "Through the Looking Glass: Photographic Art in Britain 1945-1989", held at the Barbican, London in 1989 was a turning point, showing a wide range of photography that was completely different from that exhibited by the RPS. Another influence was the existence of a number of "independent photographic" groups, such as London Independent Photography (LIP) and Independent Photographers of the South East (IPSE), which encouraged development of a personal style of work which was strongly opposed to the typical "competitive" camera club agenda.



The first Group Journal, published April 1990

The inaugural meeting, with 66 attendees, showed strong support for this new RPS Group. A donation of £5000 was pledged and organisation of the Group was agreed to be led by Paul Hill as chairman, with Virginia Khuri, Edward Bowman and the late Janet Hill, supported by a number of other established photographers including Michael Langford, Eamonn McCabe, Jo Spence, Colin Osman and Peter Turner. The Group was strongly supported by the then RPS Secretary Amanda Neville. These were exciting times. Janet and Virginia organised many workshops jointly held with LIP, at the Photographers' Gallery and in Clapham. Meetings also took place at Derby College and other locations. Workshops were held led by John Blakemore, Thomas Joshua Cooper, Fay Godwin and Mari Mahr.

From the start the emphasis of the Group was on 'personal' work, with meaning and purpose underlying its interpretation. There was a strong relationship in approach with final degree show BA and MA projects from colleges such as Westminster University and the London College of Communication.



*Page from Tessa Mills Fellowship artist book*

The disconnect between the styles of photography representative of the Group from that of established RPS membership remained and this often took the form of pressing for a clear definition of “contemporary” instead of recognition of the differences. In order to correct and clarify this, a revised definition was agreed in November 2013 - **Photography that conveys ideas, stimulates thought and encourages interpretation; photographs ‘about’ rather than ‘of’.** This definition emphasises that the definition of photography extends beyond just the visual image, to include purpose and value. Work is not distinguished for its conformity to standards of

technique or composition, but for the way in which its purpose is supported: “What does it say?”, “How well does it say it?” and “Was it worth it?” are the criteria applied. Dull and banal imagery is fine if that is what the selected topic requires.

Membership of the Group grew rapidly in early years and soon reached over 400. But some early members were attracted because they saw the Group as being about encouraging new experimental forms of creative image-making. These soon realised that this was not the case and numbers fell back to around 200.

By 1997, the Group was promoting individual member exhibitions, which were offered as framed exhibitions to small galleries around the UK. Annual or biennial Group exhibitions were also organised. This programme was started by Carol Hudson and taken over by Jenny Ford with success, with a list of 38 different individual member exhibitions. This ambitious programme eventually



Associateships per year. There is no requirement for distinction applicants to be Group members.

In 1999 the Contemporary Panel, led by Carol Hudson, created the first set of written criteria in any distinction category, which stated how contemporary submissions would be assessed. A requirement for a written text of up to 300 words was also initiated. The emphasis was on originality, with work to meet a candidate written text. Technical quality was to be suitability for purpose and it was made clear that there was no requirement to meet technical standards of salon-type exhibitions. Transparency was ensured by publication and explanation of these criteria in the RPS Journal. Attempts to improve the experience range of distinction assessors by including experts on contemporary photography from outside the Society were blocked by the requirement that they should be Fellows of the Society.

In 2004 there was an initiative to add installations, photobooks and individual site-specific exhibitions to the print and projected image forms for



*Sarah McKenna Associateship scrapbook installation, 2005*

presentation of Contemporary category distinctions and some exciting and progressive submissions came forward. These included scrapbooks, large framed prints, structural assemblies, backlit scrolls and photobooks.

Contemporary distinction advisory days covering both Associate and Fellowship level were successfully run from the start, with attendance limited



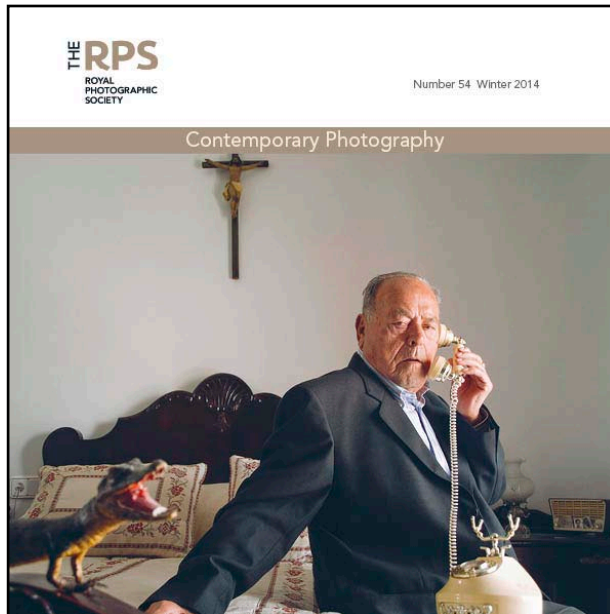
*Andrea Farrell full-size phonebox frontage Associateship installation, 2010*



*Vicky Hodgson ARPS, Identity Revisited, questioning the relationship between childhood and adulthood*

to this category. Attendees approaches to photography and their underlying aims were discussed, rather than simply looking at prints or projected images. These were learning events which had to be halted when the Society set new Advisory Day rules in 2012.

In about 2007 the Distinctions submission rules were subject to major revision, aimed at ensuring consistency of standards across all distinction categories. This well-meaning process was disadvantageous to contemporary work, which has by its nature different objectives from all other RPS categories of still photography. This resulted in a near complete change from the criteria first established for Contemporary submissions. In 2012 there were 15 successful Contemporary Associateships and one Fellowship. In 2013 there were 6 successful Associateships but no Fellowships.



*Winter 2014 issue of Group Journal*

The group published a newsletter 'Contemporary Photography' from the start, which was issued twice a year and limited to 16 pages in length. Criticism of infrequent publication was noted. This has now been corrected with a much admired quarterly Group Journal, expanded to 40 pages in full colour and edited by Patricia Ruddle. This has also been made available for on-line viewing on [www.issuu.com](http://www.issuu.com) since 2012 and readership is numbered in the thousands.

Local geographic groups were established, starting in 2006 with the South West group, the North West, Yorkshire and with formation of a Scottish group in hand. These all run regular events in their area. From 2009, a programme of annual weekend conferences with prestigious speakers has been organised at the initiative of the current Group

chair, Avril Harris. To date five conferences have been held, with over 30 speakers: photographers, curators and writers on photography, many of international standing.

Early attempts to run a Group website had met with intermittent success, but this improved when a previously separate



*First Group weekend conference, The Brilliance of Photography, 2009*

website was replaced by placing information within the RPS website. The Group had suffered from the lack of a formal website officer, which has now been rectified by Stewart Wall taking on this role. Our website has also been complemented by a regular eNewsletter, emailed to all Group members.

Membership had become stable at around 250, although this still masked losses and gains each month. However, membership numbers have been growing steadily over the last two years, now being over 320. This is attributed to the combined benefits of our quarterly Journal, our web and on-line offerings, our weekend conventions and the formation of active local groups.



*Daniel Meadows discussing Bill Jay, 2009 weekend conference*

The evolution of the Group reflects the abilities of the Society to handle guardianship of a group which is based around a different set of definitions of photography from other groups. The Group was started when Amanda Neville followed by Barry Lane were major RPS players. Since then its status has been variable to say the least, as the Society still has difficulty resulting from trying to apply common standards where these are not applicable, although at the present time it is undergoing improving understanding and growth. The original objectives of the Group remain and expand over time as the boundaries of what is considered "photography" change apace.

**These are exciting times again.**

**Brian Steptoe FRPS, Founder member.**