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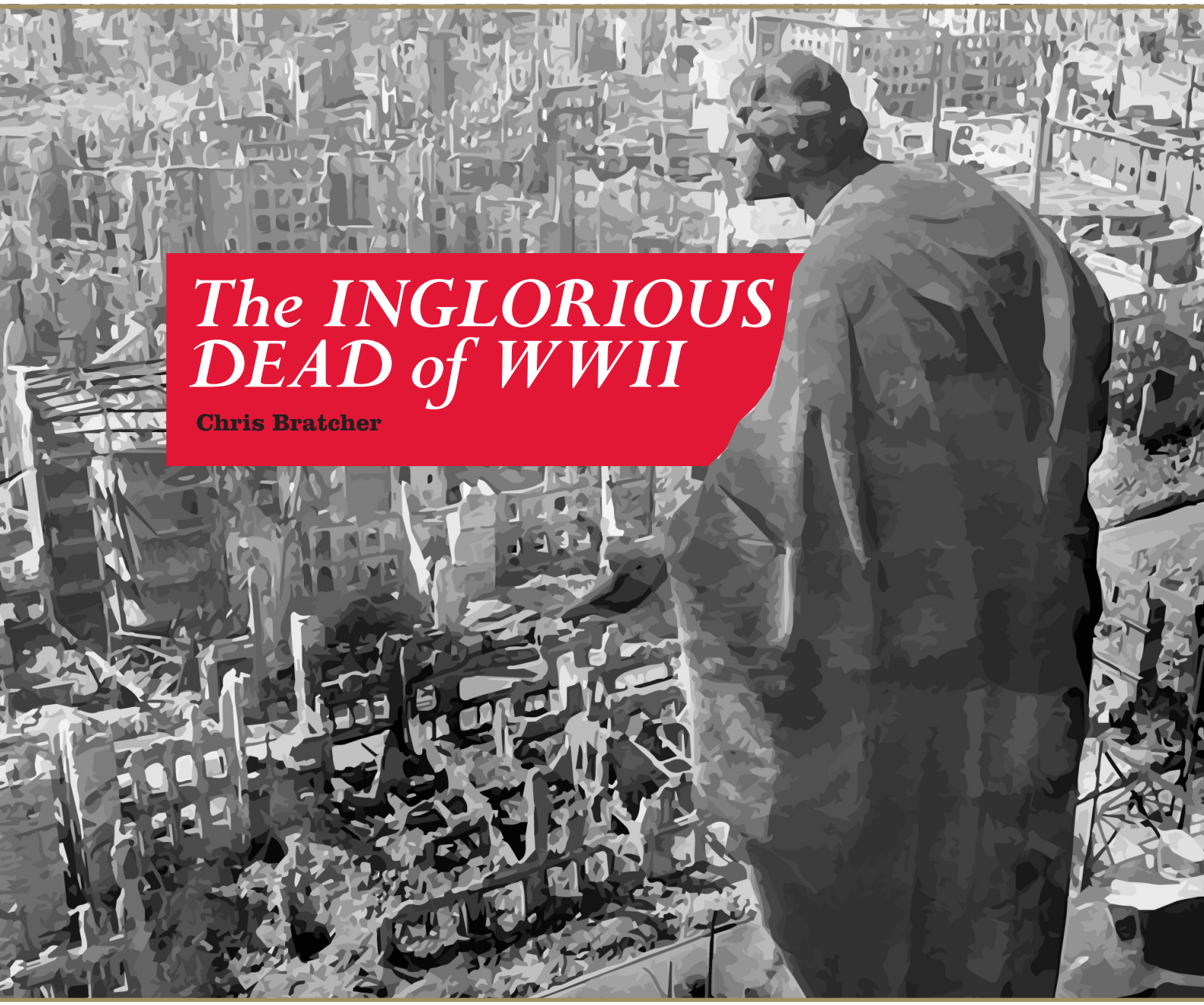

The INGLORIOUS DEAD of WWII

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In This Issue of the Ethical Record:

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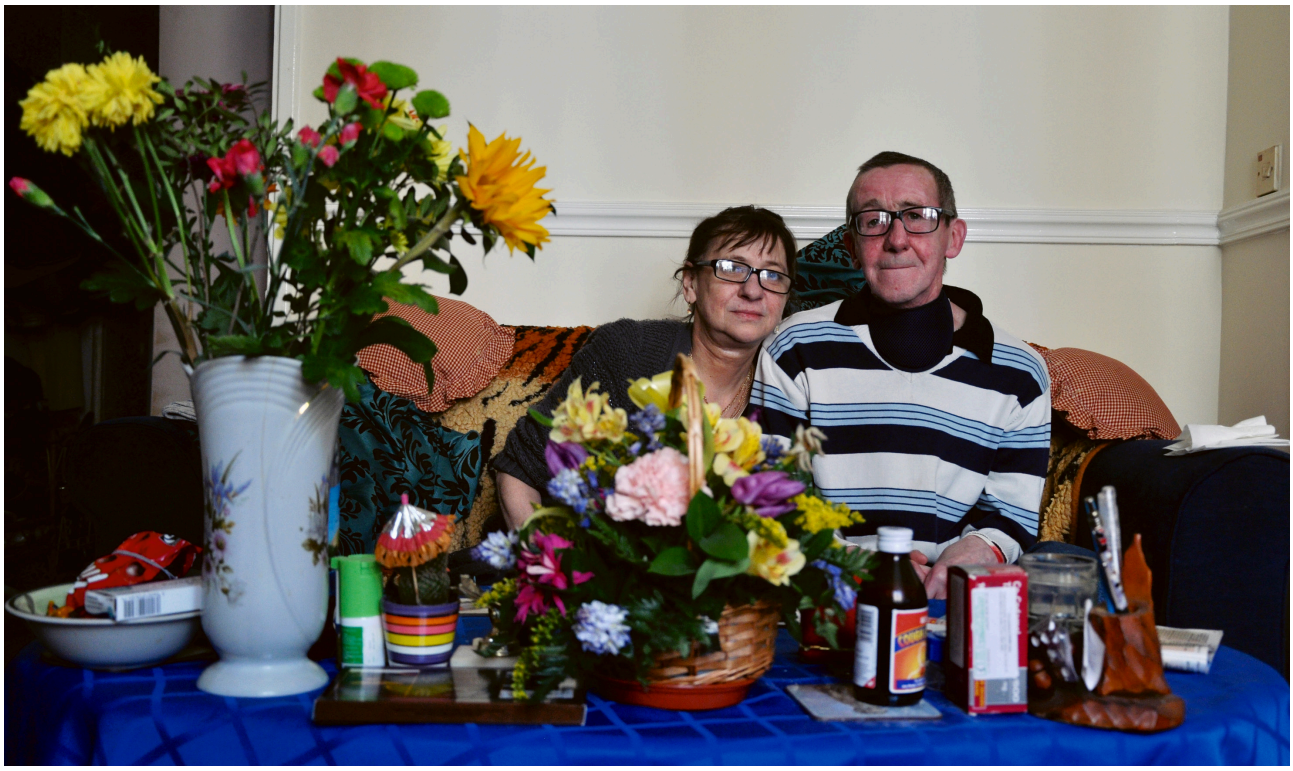
A Neighbours' Event: *building community through socially-engaged photography*



The exhibition currently on display at Conway Hall features two projects that utilised participatory photographic research to facilitate social cohesion and community networks within two different blocks of flats. One is located in Trnovo, a trendy area in Slovenia's capital Ljubljana, where I lived for two years from 2007-08, the other is on the Hughesfield estate in Deptford, south-east London, where I have lived since 2009. In both neighbourhoods, residents had raised concerns about the lack of neighbourly contact and community networks, expressing the desire to know their neighbours better and have more of a community spirit.

The concept of community and its romantic undertones needs to be approached with caution. The feelings of

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warmth, belonging and loyalty to a locality associated with community stem from the social Romanticism of the 19th century, a response to the Industrial Revolution and the "regretful" loss of tradition, which set up the dichotomy between the traditional and intimate and the modern and rational.[1] This was based on a nostalgic comparison between the good life in past rural settings and the problematic complexity of impersonal, rational urban life in the present. Community referred to a traditional way of life with close networks, clear moral values and sentimental attachment to place, incompatible with modern life in the city which was seen as fragmented, isolated and lacking cohesion.[2] In sociological writings, this nostalgic myth of community has been largely dispelled, with community now understood as being as much about exclusion as inclusion and as anything but a homogenous, stable and conflict-free totality.[3] However, in everyday discourse, such idealised notions remain, and community still conjures up romantic sentiments of "the good old days", which are lost in a capitalist society plagued by profound social inequalities, individual pursuits, and a decline in civic participation.[4]

This is not to say that community is not a valid concept; it may not have existed in the way social romanticists described, but ongoing debates in sociology and political philosophy demonstrate that the concept is far from redundant or incompatible with contemporary urban life. The happy, unified community may be a myth but people do seem to have an inherent need for social bonds, personal networks, and common values, as well as a sense of belonging.[5] In times when these values are threatened, particularly in a society where most interaction is defined in economic terms, the discourse of loss and recovery becomes especially important. These sentiments were strongly expressed in Trnovo and Deptford, so I decided to investigate the affective nature of community and how feelings such as solidarity, trust and a sense of collectivity might be created through participatory photographic research and repeated social engagements.

When asked to define community, neighbours said: recognition in the staircase, a "Hello" and "How are you?",

knowing who lives next door, feeling less afraid to knock next door if need be, some collective action such as the odd coffee morning and looking after the flowerbeds; but they also made it clear that they did not want to be in each other's hair all the time. What struck me about these comments was this idea of community as communication, as shared dialogue between people who know one another through casual interaction.[6] If we re-imagine community as communication, as fluid "social webs of people who know one another",[7] we need to focus on the social processes that achieve reciprocity, a sense of common purpose and collective action within a group of people, but without the force of constant commitment. The connections and mutuality formed, and the resulting visceral experience of community, might then enable people to face change together.[8]

With this in mind, the research projects sought to create repeated social interaction among neighbours so as to build up this shared dialogue. The first step was to introduce residents to each other, so I used photographic and textual research to put together images and texts to be used in a neighbours' event on site. This was to enable people to read and meet each other through texts and images in order to make the first face-to-face contact easier. Working *with* my neighbours in dialogue and making them co-producers of the representation of their own lives was crucial in reducing the power divide between researcher and participant,[9]

1 Sennett, R. (1974) *The Fall of Public Man*. London: Penguin.
2 Wirth, L. (1938) 'Urbanism as a way of life', *American Journal of Sociology* 44/1, pp. 1-24.
3 Cohen, A.P. (1985) *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. Oxon: Routledge.
4 Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
5 Etzioni, A. (1995) *New Communitarian Thinking*. The University Press of Virginia.
6 Delanty, G. (2010) *Community* (2nd edn). Abingdon: Routledge.
7 Etzioni, A. (1995) *New Communitarian Thinking*. The University Press of Virginia.
8 Amit, V. (2002) *Realizing Community*. London: Routledge.
9 Sinha, S. and Back, L. (2013) 'Making methods sociable: dialogue, ethics and authorship in qualitative research', *Qualitative Research* 0/0, pp. 1 – 15.

recognising that all knowledge is valid (and partial) and situated in human community.[10] Photographs add another dimension to participatory sociological research, further reducing unequal power relationships as images, produced in an encounter with participants, can produce sociological knowledge in their own right by revealing elements of participants' lives that would otherwise remain undetected[11] . In contemporary sociological research, written text is not seen as any less subjective than visual texts and, as such, a combination of images and text, produced in an exchange of knowledge through dialogue, seems the most effective way to provide critical insights into participants' social reality.[12]

It was also important to have this initial encounter in an informal setting on site to make it inclusive. In Ljubljana, I nailed the images and texts on the wooden sheds in the courtyard and organised a party on a warm spring afternoon and in Deptford it was home-baked cakes and tea in my flat with the images and texts hanging in my bedroom 'gallery', which I had cleared of any furniture. Not everybody came to the events; while this could easily be mistaken for a lack of interest, we need to understand that not everybody feels able to communicate in this way, as demonstrated by the subsequent visits by individuals who did engage with the material on their own terms. It must also be noted that not everybody participated in the project which, again, is not necessarily a sign of apathy as they participated in other ways such as providing food or drink for gatherings, providing encouragement, and showing interest by asking about the project. Overall, the gatherings, in groups or individually, and the printed material people could take with them was crucial not only in facilitating first-time encounters, either face-to-face or through images and texts, but also, as I learnt afterwards, in helping neighbours understand the purpose of the project better.

In the case of Ljubljana, it seemed enough for people to know who was who, to say hello and to feel less anxious, with the knowledge of who inhabits the building. Unfortunately, I was unable to follow this up further as my time in Slovenia had come to an end, but I left a folder of all the gathered materials with the chronicler of the building. When I returned in 2015, the poster for the neighbours' event was still in the glass cabinet by the gate. In Deptford, where I have lived for more than 8 years, for some the research has acted as a catalyst for further interaction, collective activity and a greater interest in building up tighter community networks. Together we have since engaged in what is known as Tactical Urbanism: small-scale subversive activities to make a space more liveable.[13] On an ad-hoc basis, we decorate spaces such as the 2nd floor landing or the courtyard with discarded paraphernalia to liven up the dismal and neglected communal areas. Our bemusement and audible laughter bring out others to join in and/or admire the curious displays, which have become a topic of conversation, especially when guessing who has added or removed a particular object (we have some secret participants).

Another important activity for developing a sense of belonging and membership was the transformation of the neglected courtyard into our own community garden after obtaining plants, mulch and tools from the council. With the need for regular maintenance, the garden continues be a topic of conversation, enabling encounters with old and new neighbours and passers-by. Those keen to have more neighbourly contact also engage in food exchanges, visits to each other's homes and the odd cup of tea and chat, and in a joint effort to have repairs and maintenance carried out around the block. Overall, there is much more chatter and laughter going on in the staircase, and people have commented on how much better they feel about living here. However, one must not forget that with the constant changes of tenants in some flats (some project participants have been forced to move out due to rent increases or other reasons), this created community is very fragile and with each new tenant the dynamics in the block change again.

However, what the project has achieved is to build the foundation for a shared dialogue, community as communication, a catalyst for building social networks without the force of commitment. Although the complexity of social bonds in such everyday banalities is invisible, it is the art of coexisting with neighbours connected by proximity. Sharing experiences, territory and daily practices helps to form connections, resulting in mutuality and the visceral nature of community such as a sense of belonging, trust and solidarity.

The exhibition continues until the end of January 2018. For more information, please visit: anitastrasser.com.

10 Benhabib, S. (1992) Situating the Self: *Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
11 Rose, G. (2007) *Visual Methodologies* (2nd edn). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
12 Chaplin, E. (1994) *Sociology and Visual Representation*. Oxon: Routledge.
13 Mould, O. (2014) 'Tactical Urbanism: The New Vernacular of the Creative City', *Geography Compass* 8/8, pp. 529 – 539.