

# Treatise on Living by the Younger Generations

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*But here's life's most limiting truth – it's always now, always here, never then and there ... It's already clear to me how much of life is forgotten even as it happens. Most of it. The unregarded present spooling away from us, the soft tumble of unremarkable thoughts, the long-neglected miracle of existence... she won't remember the way she set down the spoon and the sound it made on slate, the frock she wore today, the touch of her sandal's thong between her toes, the summer's warmth, the white noise of the city beyond the house walls, a short burst of birdsong by a closed window. All gone, already. (McEwan 2016: 163)*

*What shall I say concerning its mastery of and its waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organization — for the misery of life! Its contempt of simple pleasures which everyone could enjoy but for its folly? (Morris 1896:9)*

## Radical empiricism

It could be argued that European radicalism has its two grand traditions: the revolutionary and the romantic. The former is rhetorical in its declamations, beloved of binaries, and turns on its oppositionality. Its most celebrated present-day exponents include figures like Alain Badiou, whose declamations are unconditional, unqualified. 'Poetics' is still dominated by 'politics', to use the Aristotelian distinction that runs through Western art: in the last instance, political rather than artistic and ethical claims win out in art, at least usually. The other tradition, that of romantic radicalism, is more hostile to sweeping sociological categorisations, and is perhaps more complex. It is also associated with the claim that poetics are politics; or that within every true poetics lie an ethics, and this ethics must be bigger than any orthodox political commitment. That is to say, this belief rests on the idea that *forms*

*of life* are in themselves political. This tradition might be thought to run from Rousseau to Ruskin and William Morris in the nineteenth-century, through to Jacques Rancière in the twenty-first. Those invested in this latter tradition invest in what Rancière calls the “sensible” world rather more than the abstract categories of sociological investigation (Rancière 2004).

The tradition of describing the social world through broad-brush categories has attracted criticism from figures on the left rather than the right in the twenty-first century, from amongst others Rancière and Manuel deLanda (and earlier, Gilles Deleuze). John Peter Askew’s work echoes their renewal of a radical *empiricism*: the demand to pay special attention to the concrete and the particular, and avoid mere abstractions. Askew’s photographs demand that we see the elements of the world as *singularities*: as special phenomenon worthy of our undivided attention, rather than as mere exemplars of prior categories. This idea also requires attention paid to the sheer complexity and diversity of relations that exist between individuals, and to their historical character. In this philosophy, people are not reducible to the aggregates they have been bundled into by language. They are not merely or only the members of an ethnicity, a gender, a class, even though these characteristics are indeed fundamental to understanding who they are. This is to say, in Askew’s work as in Rancière’s, ‘politics’ is precisely a matter of understanding relations and the way the world is structured and organised. But this can only be undertaken through a close, patient investigation of the world-as-it-is, rather than relying on abstract categories that reduce people to symptoms of social forces, or ideas they can never inhabit. Askew, just like novelist Ian McEwan, knows that only art is able to capture the fleeting, variegated texture of lived experience and of historical time by itself capturing our imagination. Theoretical coinages can never capture McEwan’s “unregarded present”: that which either escapes the focus of our attention entirely, or which is never committed to memory, having never been dignified by becoming the subject of art.

We might say the *only* means for any artist to use photography today is to engage thoroughly with a world in all its particularities, as well as the peculiarities of its

dynamics, as if at a granular level. The more localised that world is, and the closer-grained, the deeper and more intensive the artist's engagement with it is, the stronger likelihood of their work being able to inscribe new truths about the world. Historical experience can only be 'caught unawares', as it were, and only by those who have the greatest regard for the details that reveal how we live now. Askew has a respect for the poetry of everyday life, and a respect for both the world of material objects as well as the most subtle nuances of our behaviour. As Rancière puts it, those who aspire to reorder our perceptual-political regime must first be attentive to the world as it stands.

### **'Realpoetik': towards a revolution of everyday life**

We might say the more reflective tradition of radicalism like Rancière demand what might be called a slow revolution: a revolution in our forms of consciousness, and not just in the realms of economics or party politics. The ultimate origin of this tradition might, as above, be thought to be Jean-Jacques Rousseau rather than Marx. Rousseau's identification of virtue with nature, his celebration of *youth*, and of camaraderie and friendship, and his aspiration towards a cultivated simplicity of living all echo themes that run right through Askew's work. These themes, it might be said, constituted some of the mainstays of what became known as Romanticism and early modernism. In England these traditions are perhaps most famously associated with William Morris's alignment of politics and poetics, and indeed combination of political activism with the production of poetry. For such figures, the reform of the world is undertaken by attending to it one object at a time, to allow the expansion of our consciousness. 'Art' is, in Askew's view as in Morris's, the means we have to become full imaginative beings in a world where the quality of our *attention* – that is, all of the resources of mind and imagination we possess – is so often determined by Gradgrindian calculation.

For Askew, it is, as it was for the Romantic literary critic William Hazlitt, the means we have to expand our circle of sympathy past those of our immediate acquaintance. As academic Paul Hamilton has argued "For William Hazlitt paintings become politically charged when their self-contained worlds make us aware of our creative

potential for renewing our own” (Hamilton 2015 n.p.). This is true of Askew’s work: his images are best seen as gifts for the imagination by which we might renew our own world. Hamilton has also coined the term “realpoetik” to describe how “revolution [was pursued] by other means in European romantic ... thought” (Hamilton 2012: 370). This ingenious coinage is exceptionally apt to describe Askew’s project. The terms in which European Romanticism has been described in recent research help us to clarify his commitments and ideas. As Hamilton has argued,

*In what is here dubbed Realpoetik the battle for what is to be political reality is fought on a rhetorical field whose free speech is exemplary of what politics should be... a pattern of pursuing revolution by other means is visible in the political revisionism and literary experimentation of ... Romantic radicals (ibid).*

In the Romantic tradition which Askew draws upon, the liberation of viewers and readers through art is equated with political liberation. Moreover, Hamilton observes that central to this project was “a counter-image of Europe imagined by Romantic period writers... as the experience of political opportunity” (ibid). The most fundamental facts about *We* might be thought that it is a ‘counter-image of Europe’; that it offers a space of ‘political opportunity’, realised through ‘realpoetik’; and that it pursues a kind of ‘revolution by other means’ whose form embodies the political reality aspired towards. Askew presents us with ‘another continent’: this too is Europe, but not as we know it.

### **The post-communist condition: Europe seen from its borders**

The world which *We* covers could scarcely be more localized. The very simplest description of it might be that it is an expanded portrait of a single extended family, the Chulakovs, in the city of Perm in Russia, made over two full decades from 1996 to 2017. *We* originated in a chance encounter. As Askew has recounted, he was invited to be a guest in the house of a family of strangers. This much is unusual enough; that Askew could forge a bond of friendship across generations and across

sexes, is rare. That he was been able to sustain a relationship with the family for two decades whilst (then) speaking little Russian is improbable.

To adapt a term that has gained currency since the series began, we Westerners are 'othered' by viewing *We*: that is, 'made other to ourselves'. Askew's work achieves this by revealing 'another Europe'. Perm is geographically and socially far removed from Moscow, some 1500 kilometres to the east. More important is that it is the singlemost easterly city in the whole of Europe. The next city to the east is Yekaterinburg, in Asia. Perm lies on the cusp of one world and other. For Askew, it is a pivot, a point of orientation around which we can orient ourselves to compare and contrast two different worlds. As the journalist Ekaterina Balakina puts it, "while the whole world thinks that Europe ends at Perm, its citizens are convinced that it begins there" (Balakina 2011 n.p). The series provides a means of eliciting empathy for people some 3000 miles away, at the opposite end of the continent. *We* portrays other ways of life that are at one remove from our own, and which are themselves subject to enormous, indeed world-historical changes. The resulting body of work enables Western Europeans to begin to register how we too are connected to the historical changes that Perm has experienced. Moreover, it invites post-Brexit English audiences in particular to recognise themselves as being located at the far western fringes of Europe, in the way Perm is at the far eastern boundaries.

Askew's extended engagement with the Chulakov family, and the city of Perm across a timescale of two whole decades, has enabled him to investigate how a single family (at a distinct remove from the metropolis) has been subject to historical forces affecting us all. Since Askew began work on *We* in 1996, the end of Communism brought about the advent of globalization. Since that juncture, many of the historical processes that Askew was conscious of but had not named had only recently begun. At that point the term 'globalization' barely had any common currency. The long-term consequences of the revolutions of 1989-1991 were only hazily beginning to become apparent. At that juncture, political discourse about the future had become dominated by utopian neoconservatives like Francis Fukayama. Arguably, Fukayama only really made public, and made explicit the triumphalism of

the political right on both sides of the Atlantic in proclaiming “the end of history” (Fukayama 1992). Askew grasped full well at first hand, when living in the former Soviet Union for month-long stretches, that history had hardly come to a sudden halt. For the majority of working Russians, standards of living jolted vertiginously downwards before recovering over the space of a few years.

Susan Buck-Morss has described the years since 1989 can be best defined by the concept of a “post-Soviet condition”, echoed by Piotr Piotrowski as a “post-Communist condition”: a ‘condition’ that we all inhabit, whether in east or west (Buck-Morss 2006: 498; Piotrowski 2012: 42). As Piotrowski argues:

*Buck-Morss noted, for instance, that the post-communist condition is not only affecting Eastern Europe. In other words, it does not have a spatial but a temporal character and therefore describes a historic moment in which we are still situated. In other words, the post-communist condition described the historic and universal condition of [the] present (ibid)*

As Piotrowski has also argued, this has a significance for the wider world: “the [very] question of *the global* is one of the impacts of the post-1989 world... [this] process accelerated in 1989, not only because of the end of communism in Europe”, but certainly in large part (Piotrowski 2012a: 203). As he also notes, the end of Soviet Communism facilitated the rise of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri term “Empire”: the expanded arena of places subject to ‘financialisation’, that is, where people are subject to the whims of the financial markets, and their effects on what we can do or even be. As Piotrowski phrases it, “what is local in the frame of the Empire is global at the same time” (ibid).

We began as a means of thinking through how world-historical changes are felt and imagined, and lived out within what Askew calls “the everyday” (Askew 2016). The “everyday”, though, might be described as the space of a search for meaning, more than a set of subjects. For Askew, it is where any artistic practice that makes claims to political significance must be grounded. In his work, “everyday” moments are precisely those that are accorded special significance, as he coaxes unexpected or latent meanings out of them. For Askew, for his works to have value as artworks,

rather than merely as documents, their subjects must remain undramatic and drawn from quotidian life. Therefore the actions we see must reflect its rhythms, necessities, and repetitions. Only undramatic incidents can be pregnant with meaning and still leave these meanings unspoken or latent, rather than directing a clear narrative. Only undramatic incidents can provide the spur for a distinctive lyric poetry, which does not so much strike us or seduce us, as envelop us.

Observations of the most fundamental and intimate aspects of our daily lives, and our relationships with our innermost circle of family, are precisely the means to think about larger, historical processes. As Askew puts it, “exactly what are the costs, and the benefits of a [political] revolution on everyday life?” (Askew 2016 n.p.) This fascination has continued. But over the course of the two decades, Askew’s priorities, might well be thought to have turned inside out. After twenty years of photographing Perm and the Chulakovs, and having accumulated an archive of over 10,000 prints, Askew sees *We* as allowing us to *imagine* another revolution, rather more than observe the effects of one. In 1996, Askew looked for evidence of the effects of a revolution on everyday life, at the very eastern edges of Europe. It is now clear that Askew’s project is a call for a revolution of everyday life, which takes the eastern edge of Europe as an exemplar for how it is possible to live a simpler, less materialistic form of life. By examining one end of Europe as though from the perspective of its economic and geographical ‘opposite’, Askew asks how Europe, as an idea and a common culture, occupies our collective imaginary.

Of course, the ambitions of *We* are not immediately legible in any single image. The macrocosmic scope of Askew’s project is revealed through its extended timeframe, rather than through any obvious symbols. Rather, each characteristic gesture, glance, and gaze, and every nuance of interaction between the family members has been scrupulously observed and ‘brought to life’ through Askew’s camera. As for Hazlitt, it is only by granting others full recognition, and by grasping our own estrangement from the world that we can begin to transform our selves, and become our best selves. In this tradition, the first and most fundamental demand upon an artist is to re-enchant the world. As in Hazlitt’s scheme and in Morris’s, Askew’s art

requires political conviction and poetic imagination where one is the other and vice versa. We are required to *suspend disbelief* in the world that we are invited to share in, or more accurately are invited to *take* a share in by becoming part of, imaginatively.

The art historian Michael Baxandall once described how viewers of Renaissance painting had a “period eye”: that is, they learned to look in particular ways that drew in the skills from their ‘everyday’ lives (Baxandall 1972: 5). Baxandall believed that visual skills attuned to the close measurement of quantities were central to looking at paintings: the skills needed in mercantile activity, in both labour and consumption, permeated how images were seen. Viewers of art were adaptive creatures just like anyone else: they adapted to the reward structure of the wider society. Baxandall’s thesis begs the question relevant to Askew’s work: what skills have we internalised as normal, in the post-1989, post-communist, neoliberal age?

### **A common purpose: another commonwealth**

Picturing other subjects in a way that positions Europe as an imagined community or ‘commonwealth’, and in which art is a continued form of ‘commonality’, are both central to Askew’s creative process. Any ‘commonwealth’ or imagined community is created through an adherence to rituals and routines; in *We* we become party to the rituals with which one family’s lives are structured. We also share in the repetition of these rituals, crucially, across the series. Repetition is central to the way in which *We* is made, seen and shown, precisely because that is how rituals produce a ‘we’ or an ‘us’.

What might be called the slow adrenalin rush of encountering *We* in its entirety relies, similarly, on both the repetition and the intensity of our viewing, as much as our understanding of how repetition functions in the subjects’ lives. These are photographs to be returned to, again and again, rather than merely consumed and disposed of. What is unusual about Askew’s work is that the deliberate repetition of certain types of subject or genre achieves unexpected effects. Repetition is a structural part of the series, as the artist examines ‘the everyday’ and ‘the domestic’

and its routines. But rather than equating his own intentional repetitions with the repetitive tasks of menial labour, he invests the scenes with a heightened state of affect. Each return that we make to a treasured motif or place multiplies the number of resonances. Repetition is, quite counterintuitively, recoded to be associated with delight. The 'everyday' is precisely that which we have in common, and which therefore is of the very highest importance.

Repetition of certain motifs also works to sharpen our perception of what is valued and valuable. In this, Askew's work stands against the 'empathy deficit' that some take to define the twenty-first century West (Obama 2006 n.p.). Askew's position is also akin to that of Gerard Raunig and Christoph Brunner, who argue that:

*'the common' means the practices of interaction, of care, of living together in a common world. These are practices that do not allow for understanding human beings as separate from nature...the common [i]s the self-organisation of social relationships. Th[e] instituting of the common implies that it can be understood not as a being-common, but rather only as a becoming-common.*

(Brunner and Raunig 2015 n.p.)

'The common', in Askew's work, is that which is realised through a "political interest in a fairer – indeed a kinder world" (Askew 2016 n.p.). The artist's distinction between the two is telling. A 'fairer' world is one where economic inequalities would be less punitive. A 'kinder' world is one in which we ourselves, that is our private, 'best' selves, are allowed to 'prosper' and our relationships can flourish. 'Political' change is not only about restructuring our financial systems differently. It is about allowing each of us to be a full part of the 'polity' by developing into the most full, generous being we can be. We might call Askew's project a 'recommoning' of the realm of art through the celebration of the everyday and the commonplace. Here, art returns to its true role as a space of the intellectual and affective 'commons' in which ideas and experiences can be *shared*.

With regard to this, it is not insignificant that Askew initially studied economics before fine art. Born in 1960, he is roughly the same age many of the other Goldsmiths' College alumni whose work courted controversy in the 1990s. Askew's work could

scarcely have less in common with theirs: his practice can be seen as originating in a pointed rejection of both the models of art and the neoliberal economics ascendant in that decade (the one having facilitated the other). His pictorial world provides no sense of human beings as *homo economicus*, as competitive agent 'optimising' their positions over those of others. In Askew's world, social interactions are not a zero-sum game where if you win, then I lose. *We* is about the forms of life to which we might aspire – the age old question of what constitutes 'the good life'.

Accordingly, the work is itself made to be 'dwelt in', imaginatively speaking. Unlike many of his predecessors at Goldsmiths, Askew's approach has always been based in deeply personal, rather than controversial or provocative subject matter. Askew's materials are "the everyday" and "the ordinary", in his own words (Askew 2016 n.p.). As the critic and curator Simon Morrissey has noted about Askew's work, the artist's own set of "deeply emotional association[s] bec[o]me the beginning of [a] process of dislocation" (Morrissey 2001 n.p.). In place of brash immediacy, his work offers a slow-burning intensity, where rewards increase proportionately to the investment of the viewer over time. As a series or as individual images, *We* can scarcely be engaged with at a glance: it requires a particular type of looking. Accordingly, much of Askew's work, for all its apparent elegant simplicity, could scarcely be less immediate or direct in its mode of address. Rather, his practice is predicated on our close, sustained and repeated engagement.

Indeed, Askew's works test the limits of our perceptual regime in the ways that Jacques Rancière has described. In his earlier work he achieved this by emphasising what is unknown or unknowable in an image. The work *Presence* reveals or rather conceals a spectral figure sat in near-complete darkness. As Simon Morrissey has written, one of Askew's recurring preoccupations is "the beauty promised by concealment" (Morrissey 2001 n.p.). This is a work printed a full eighteen years after the exposure was taken, in 1996. An ultra-long exposure requires us equally to bear an extended gaze to register an image; and the knowledge that a new work is of, and about, a now-historical subject complicates our gaze. Though this work is of interest precisely because *We*, like all of Askew's work, is about the 'now-historical', that is, how the 'now' is historical. Unlike *We*, the work

*Presence* was shot on medium-format film but it shares similarities with Askew's other work. Resembling Robert Mapplethorpe's late, great self-portrait, it is filled with a quiet intensity that could be paraphrased as a sense of foreboding or a shattering stillness. As the title implies, such works refuse the usual chains of associations that photographs inspire or allow. Askew invites us to view them phenomenologically, in terms of their sense of presence, rather than hermeneutically as objects for speculative 'interpretation'.

Looking at *Presence*, we are required not merely to adjust our eyes to the negligible visible light but to imaginatively step *inside* it, to 'break the fourth wall' by immersing ourselves within it completely. In such works, it is more transparently obvious how Askew's ambitions for photography are like those that previous generations set aside for modernist painting. *Presence* is distinctly similar to Rothko's late black-on-black works, quite obviously, in its severe tonal restriction, symmetrical composition, and pared-down simplicity. It was once said of these works that viewers had to look at them for twenty minutes or not at all: that without our eyes adjusting to the light levels of the work, and to the temporality of the work, it could not function at all. Put another way, we suspend disbelief fully, and are engulfed into the image, or move on. Rothko imagined that his works would encompass us *within* them, and overpower us, as if they were images of the deity as seen in Judaism. His objective was not merely to create objects on a particular scale, but rather that his objects could not be readily assimilated into our consciousness. Without any obvious 'point of closure', narrative or otherwise, we are required to adjust *ourselves* to them. Askew follows this line of reasoning. His most potent works resemble objectified versions of George Bernard Shaw's maxim about the importance of the 'unreasonable man'. Namely, the reasonable man is one who adapts himself to the conditions that surround him; the unreasonable man demands that his surrounding conditions adapt themselves to him. These, in other words, are unreasonable objects, or better put, insubordinate objects that require us to remodel ourselves, in the light of the vision of the world they present.

## In visible light

Several of Askew's motifs in *We* include ones like that in *Presence*, i.e. ones at the very limits of visibility or of materiality. Alongside, there can be identified a discrete body of images that depict actions, where those actions are spontaneous, transient, and playful. A third set of motifs are still lifes of a quite distinct character, where we encounter objects of low cost, but which bear the marks of use, and care. In photography, it is paradoxically *only* the ordinary that can genuinely strike us as extraordinary. There are, after all, no extraordinary subjects left for a camera: at this point in photographic history the whole world has already been seen through the lens, and no-one could imagine otherwise.

The Chulakovs' family life offers us contrasting sensations of intimacy and immensity, and of intensity and immeasurability. In one image, looking across a group of children playing in deep snow, we glimpse a wall of trees immediately behind them. This could either be a local park, or, as Perm is deep in the Russian interior, the beginning of thousands of miles of trees extending indefinitely. There is no way to know how far they stretch into the distance. One obvious implication is that we might be looking at an immeasurably vast forest, straight from a fairy tale, Grimm or otherwise. The snow is so pure that the reflections created by it blank out any shadows: the white blanket fills exactly half the picture and the canopy of trees dominates the upper half. There is no sky here, suggesting there is no way out. The sense of scale is sublime. Against the snow, the colours of children's snowsuits are brilliant and jewel-like, exactly as in the pre-digital family photographs Askew so cherishes. Elsewhere, his image of a baby wrapped securely in a chequered blanket, lying over a bedspread with white and brown lilies, offers us an image of astonishing tenderness and intimacy. Astonishing, perhaps, because it does not feel burdened by any sentimentality. Again, Askew's eye for the power of visual rhyme and concordance is acute: the baby's auburn hair is echoed in the colour of the fabric's pattern. As in a Renoir painting, the composition is centralised, suggesting safety, permanence, and security. Everything is as it should be. The contrasts of the affective registers between these two images of childhood could scarcely be greater.

One conjures an infinite, fairy-tale landscape of limitless possibilities; the other, an enclosed, domestic space within which we can imagine ourselves having been gently cocooned.

Such works demonstrate that a single family, in its rituals and revelations, can offer all of the subjects that an artist needs. As Ian Jeffrey has written, Askew's overriding obsessions are with memory and history, and photography's relation to it. Jeffrey has noted before that Askew is a "Proustian artist" and that the only photographers in Europe whose work resembles his are Annelies Štrba and Jitka Hanzlová. This is a telling remark. Both are female, and their works stand at some distance from the tradition in which male photographers have mastered the world by controlling it through a lens. Both make work about the *longue durée*, though in comparison to Askew, they have a different relationship to the idea of documentary photography. However, as Isabel Tejada Martin has written about Hanzlová, "all [of] her series are portraits" (Tejada Martin 2015 n.p.).

This sentiment feels especially true of Askew's work: his still lives, in particular, are characterized with such tenderness and particularity, as well as being repeated across the series, that they feel to possess a distinct subjectivity. In *We*, we see numerous images of meals shared and savoured: or rather, we encounter the remnants left over from them, left as tokens of thanks, rather than the interactions themselves. The leftovers, and the images of them, have a metonymic relationship to the meal, as evidence of a communal experience. Meal-times have a special focus in the series, and not only because they are the points in the day at which the entire family becomes one unit, and we feel a sense of together-ness even as onlookers. These are moments of quiet grace that exert a powerful stillness, and an implacable intensity. Askew's image of meals shared, in particular, act to condense time rather more than narrate it. They symbolise the artist's faith in the power of companionship and being-in-kind. They make palpable that the family is a model community (or 'commonwealth', as it were) and they hint at how its bonds of affection are built and sustained. The meals are sacraments that the community performs in order to constitute itself as a community. Across the series, particular motifs are also

repeated, from marginally different viewpoints. A gently lit portrait of a single apple seems to appear more than once, only from a different angle. It punctuates the series, and intensifies our perception of it. The localized, micro-community which the sacrament of sharing foods creates is, of course, meant to be imagined in the context of the wider, global picture which is evoked in the timescale of the series.

As a radical empiricist, each thing in Askew's world, down to every apple, strikes us as *only ever itself*, though we might better say that it shares its 'best self' with us, just as Askew wishes to draw out our best selves. Picturing a better world requires the first step of picturing each object in it as worthy of respect and attention. As Ian Jeffrey has observed elsewhere, with reference to Askew's pastoral imagery in the earlier series *Twenty Five Years*, Askew allows his camera to "speak" his subjects. This is what Roland Barthes described as the purpose of myth, in *Mythologies*, though we might here say it is a correlative to the 'speculative realism' that has ignited recent philosophy. Barthes believed that "In myth... I *speak the tree*, I do not speak about the tree" (Rifky 2012: 15 on Barthes 1973: 145, my emphasis). The distinction is crucial for understanding Askew's work: each object is paid what he calls the "respect" it needs to 'speak', and speak as if 'on its own terms'.

### **Sculpting in time**

We can be usefully compared to bodies of work that it superficially resembles in order to distinguish Askew's ambitions. Askew has remarked that the magic of family photographs, for him, lies in the "jewel-like colours" that they seem to radiate out to us (Askew 2016 n.p.). In this a number of works in the series recall Andrei Tarkovsky's Polaroids of domestic interiors collected under the title *Instant Light* (Chiaramonte 2006), or at least follow similar principles of construction and exposition. Both artists delight in the play of light on heavily textured surfaces, where their mastery of the medium allows the scenarios they present to take on an intoxicating tactility or palpability. Inanimate objects are characterised through their patina of use, bearing the marks of their life-span. The world looks sculptural, and each object like a sculpture: of course Tarkovsky described cinema as a process of

“sculpting in time” (Tarkovsky 1987). Each motif is invested with its due weight and density, belying the fact that we are only looking at mere images.

Tarkovsky’s images are often illuminated with a milky, pellucid light, which envelops his human subjects. In several works, illuminated areas are framed by a door or window and set in the middle ground. The centre of attention is at a remove from us, as it is in Vermeer’s self-contained worlds. Each is a box-world; a miniature *tableau*. In Askew’s works, by contrast, we are often subsumed *within* light even when the light- source is distant. The ‘light-space’ of the image is our space, not a separate one. People are often unusually close to the picture plane, sharing an either charming or alarming intimacy with us. We are witnesses or participants, rather than distant observers. Our relationship to the figures in our field of vision is structured differently to that implied by Tarkovsky’s works.

Even in those images that resemble Tarkovsky’s, light is a means of communion in Askew’s world, rather than mere illumination or effect. In one image we see a single tendril hanging down from a tree in front of us, past a first-floor window. The tendril is garlanded with leaves that have become transparent in the high-summer sunlight, as the net curtain behind it has. The curtain floats gently in an afternoon breeze. The image is alluringly, wistfully evocative. In the way that we can when looking at our own family photographs, we can all but feel the heat on our skin, and the wind against our face. The work exacts a synaptic kick from us as though it was our *own* memories that had been made manifest. Askew plays with how our own, personal visual memory is entangled with the image-world of photographs outside, knowing full well that we see the world through those things that artists have invited us to look at.

The view framed by a window is a half-millennium old genre in the European painting, and runs from Renaissance alterpieces and portraits through to Bonnard and Matisse in the twentieth-century. And yet Askew finds new ways of vivifying this tradition of *intimiste* painting. Here, the leaves are entangled both behind and in front of the old wooden window frame. There is game of spatial push-and-pull set in train: the leaves transgress the boundary between inside and out. It is as though they

wanted to enter our space. Moreover, the leaves find their echo in the pattern of the net curtain. The image also speaks about the relationship of 'nature' to our man-made 'second nature'. Our crude attempts to represent the infinite diversity of organic forms using only repetitive mechanical means are drawn to our attention, very obliquely. As is typical for Askew's work, though, it would be impossible to summarise in a single sentence what the image is 'about. As in Vermeer's work, the poetics of the light-space itself, and the creation of a palpable sense of place start to provide an answer. The treatment of light and time itself, and how they suggest we might yet live, unite *We* with his other bodies of work.

### **Absorptive**

In another work, Askew complicates the distinction codified by art historian Michael Fried between "absorptive" and "theatrical" pictures (Fried 1981). 'Absorptive' images invite, rather than return our gaze. 'Theatrical' ones 'break the fourth wall' to address us directly. As the historian John Barrell has argued, the aim of 'absorptive' pictures is to create a highly particular kind of fiction: one which exacts a heightened state of suspended disbelief from us. As he argues:

*In proportion as the picture thus excludes the fictive spectator [by seeming to not address them directly] it gives the actual spectator a greater access to the world of the painting, which becomes the more real precisely because it has apparently not been painted to be observed, but simply is, independent of the observer (Barrell 1981 n.p.).*

As Barrell says, the world in *We* demands we acknowledge that it simply is, precisely because the images are both poetic or painterly tableaux *and* naturalistic 'documentary' images. Askew's style comes from a dynamic between these two ideas: it partakes fully of both of them. In our gaze is returned, but by a non-human actor, at a close proximity to the picture plane. Characteristically, Askew's concerns are complex and his means appear disarmingly simple. The domains of 'wild' nature and 'civilised' humanity are complicated. Ordinarily, 'nature' is coded as feminine, and 'culture' as masculine. But here, the figure exerting their 'mastery' of nature is a young woman, rather than an adult male. And the icon of undomesticated and

untempered passions, a 'wild' horse, appears more as an inquisitive interlocutor than as an untamed force-of- nature.

The massing of light and dark making up the image is also unexpected. The woman's face is seen in profile, with only her profile illuminated, such that she appears to have been cast in relief for a coin. The effect is that it is as though her features had been forged in light, and are characterised with a dignity unexpected for a young woman. The one other area illuminated in the foreground area is the woman's scarf. As in a Renaissance painting it is in Papal purple, and it is rendered sculptural by the raking light, making it look like the drapery in a Jan van Eyck. Again, Askew offers us "the beauty promised by concealment" (Morrissey 2001 n.p.) This is a portrait made through other means, where the sitter's identity is concealed rather than given exposition. Equally characteristic is Askew's Cartier-Bresson-like attention to visual rhyme and echo internal to the picture: the pure purple of the scarf finds a matching accent in a horizontal stripe of foliage.

### **No wealth but life**

Almost all photographers work in series, in some shape or form, but Askew's method of working, accumulating a body of work over years and decades, and printing works years after exposures were taken, remains unorthodox and unusual. *Presence* found its final form after a span of remaining in the studio for eighteen years; *We* has had a gestation period of twenty five. As Morrissey has also noted about his work:

*... all of Askew's work gestates over a protracted period of years. In this sense, the concept of 'time-lapse' is fundamentally enshrined at the very heart of the artist's working method. Askew often realises his series through the editing, re-photographing or recontextualising of images he has taken up to 20 years earlier. Even when not working at such a remove from the images' moment of origin, Askew consciously delays closure* (Morrissey 2001 n.p.).

As Morrissey noted, how Askew's practice is rooted in rethinking our relationship to temporality. We can only rethink the "everyday" by picturing it as precisely that: as based in repeated, accumulated experiences. Such a way of working allows Askew

to draw our attention, quite tangentially or obliquely, to the epic forces shaping our lives that can only be revealed in the smallest or most everyday details, that we ourselves scarcely notice. Deliberation in the editing process therefore has by definition to take the time it requires. This wilful withholding of work, in part to allow it to accrue meaning over time, and in part to have the space in which to see and sequence it satisfactorily, differentiates his practice from that of almost every other artist in contemporary art. It is true that certain predecessors in British art such as Craigie Horsfield process their film but refrain from printing work at the time, but they are few and far between.

The artist's own extended period of contemplation requires our patience in return, or even intentionally tests it. Ironically, it is only cameras, in their split-second actions, that can provide us with a sense of the *longue durée*. Askew begins to help us conceive of historical duration, and our place in European history. Again, it is only in the most concrete, particular, and localized details that such ideas can begin to be formed. Only the camera can collect and collate evidence of *how* lives are lived out, and hence allow us to dwell upon how the everyday is that which evidences historical pressures.

Askew reveals how lives other than our own are lived out precisely through implied contrasts. One point not immediately obvious on first viewing is that it would be difficult to order the series chronologically through the material possessions we see. In most contemporary photography, we can intuitively date an image from its fashions and technologies: the styling of clothes, laptops and mobile phones instantly date-stamp a photograph. In *We*, such distinctions are a little less clear, as over-consumption, and the churn of inbuilt obsolescence, are absent. The cast of characters seem rather less attached to their possessions, and more attached to their best selves than many of us. In the series we Western Europeans are made 'other to ourselves' by being invited to observe the differentials between our own individualism and excessive consumption, and the simplicity of life and *joie de vivre* shared here. In *We*, we do not experience any sense of privation, but become gently aware that necessity is the mother of invention. We are invited into a world where

people are not defined by their consumer choices, or their hoarding of wealth. It might also become apparent that our own inventiveness, and attentiveness to the material world, has been dulled by the sheer glut of goods surrounding us. *We* recalls Ruskin's famous adage from *Unto This Last* :

*There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence* (Ruskin 1860 / 1985:222).

As Ruskin did, Askew has no inhibitions about producing *beautiful* artworks. His new beauty, true to the tradition of the Dissenting conscience, is antithetical to luxury, just as it was for William Morris and for Ruskin. (In Morris's words: "The greatest foe to art is luxury ... Beauty, which is what is meant by art... is I contend, no mere accident to human life which people can take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life" (Morris 1880 / 1999: 37). Morris's axioms go some way to illuminating why *We* is of such importance. The processes of globalisation and economic liberalisation since 1989 have brought a mountainous bounty of things to Western Europe. Of course, since 1989, these transformations have been wrought on the art market as much as anywhere. As Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre have noted, much art has effectively been fully subsumed into the luxury goods industry (Boltanski and Esquerre 2016). Askew's work stands at such a remove from art objects that are created as commodities that it can seem wilfully opaque, or mute, in its poetic discretion. Images like Askew's, which are devoid of rhetoric or persuasion, now disorientate or alarm us. He asks us why we find an encounter poetry surprising or bewildering, and what we want art to be *for*.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm argued that since 1989 "[w]e have been living like kings" (Hobsbawm in Robinson 2009: 88). Hobsbawm used the present-perfect tense with due care: the statement was prophetic rather than celebratory, and his tone one of foreboding for the future rather than triumph at our mastery over the material world. We cannot all be kings. The environmental costs of our temporary

monarchical reign over the planet are becoming increasingly clear. Askew suggests that the post-1989 plenitude of goods has come at a high cost. His work stands in contrast to its age, in what it celebrates and sanctifies. The uninhibited joy and exuberance of Askew's protagonists is infectious – but is meant to be seen in relief to the stultifying consumption of the West. It exposes the relative poverty of our own collective relations – of our modes of intersubjectivity and of our affective lives. The younger family members seem to exist in state of irrepressible ebullience and joie-de-vivre. Their physical activities are charged with effervescence and vigour. It is not only the image of health and happiness, in the midst of material simplicity, that is striking. At the other side of Europe, the number of antidepressants prescribed has nearly tripled in a generation despite – or more likely because – of our unprecedented 'prosperity' (Sedghi 2014 n.p.). And the number of young women, in particular, with mental health issues has seen a "dramatic increase" (Campbell and Siddique 2016: n.p.). In *We*, women, in particular, appear to be seen as subjects rather than objects, and portrayed with the full range of subjectivity that men are ordinarily granted. It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast to how women are habitually portrayed in commercial photography.

### **Another genderscape**

With the rare exceptions of figures such as Štrba, the lyricism and tenderness with which Askew portrays his female subjects remains unusual in contemporary art. In almost none of his images are women objects for visual consumption. We might say, then, that the difference between Askew's pictorial world and our dominant 'image-world' becomes clearest in his portraiture of women. Comparing Askew's work to mainstream commercial photography allows us to classify and understand it more fully. It provides an alarming contrast to what we might call the 'genderscape' created by commercial and fashion photography across the twenty-year period that the series was created. In that time, fashion photography has even been embraced by the art world in various forms, as Laurie Simmons has argued (Simmons 2016 n.p.). But while there is certainly room in that field for creative experimentation, there is little sense that might lead to any genuine *emancipation*.

It takes an extended engagement with Askew's work to register the subtle ways in which gender is inflected in his work, or given new sets of associations. Simon Morrissey has noted that in the series *Flower*, Askew undertook the opposite operation to previous artists in making the flowers 'speak' in figurative and affective ways. In contrast to Georgia O'Keefe's flowers most obviously, he turned every flower's head away from the viewer, to desexualise them. Such a manoeuvre much might seem innocuous, yet it reoriented the gendered and sexualised way in which flowers are ordinarily read in art. The flowers take on a quiet dignity, rather than becoming emblems of a lurid sexuality. As Morrissey noted:

*The simple device of depicting the flower with its head turned away from the viewer anthropomorphises the bloom in an unexpected way. In comparison to the long tradition of depicting flowers as sexualised objects – so explicit in Robert Mapplethorpe's work for example – Askew's Flower appears modest, even demure. Yet it has a palpable, silent strength.* (Morrissey 2001 n.p.).

Askew's women are seldom "demure" – they exhibit a "palpable strength". If Askew can recode the way in which we picture flowers, it should hardly be a surprise that his picturing of human subjects is yet more inventive and surprising. Just as his flowers "evade" any "sexualised" reading, so do his female portraits. We might go so far to say that his portraits of young women do what his flowers do, and achieve the impossible: they anthropomorphise them. Which is to say that in photography, women remain objects and are only seen "as image" as Laura Mulvey noted forty years ago (Mulvey 2015: 15). In *We*, despite the subject matter often being young women, there is almost no sense that they are defined by their quality of "to-be-looked-at-ness", to use Mulvey's most famous phrase (ibid: 8). In mainstream commercial photography, and fashion photography in particular, gender is a fault line: the lens divides the sexes. Images are either of women or men, and are either *for* women or for men. In Askew's work the traditional equation of the male photographer as "bearer of the look" and female model as borne down upon or 'shot' by the camera, as the vocabulary of photography has it, is rewritten. What Morrissey calls Askew's "self-conscious evasion" of the traditional tropes of looking is, perhaps, clearest here of all (Morrissey 2001 n.p.) His subjects' unselfconscious intimacy and

candour is all but anomalous in photography. This is where a radical reordering of how we see the world can begin. As Mulvey exposed, commercial photography is seen as 'natural' or 'normal', and its visual codes are taken to be transparent. They can only be recognised as codes if we have the vantage point of geographical distance, or else from a temporal distance, or from through ideological 'distance'. Askew provides all three.

Askew knows that in picturing a world, we bring it into being. In art, each new world must act as a counterweight to the barbarity of the larger, dominant image-world. His pictures can therefore ask us this: 'how is this world different to our own'? To reiterate: one of the most startling differences between Askew's work and commercial photography is his insistence that beauty must be an "everyday" beauty or not at all. At this point in history there can hardly be a more radical position. It poses a special problem for a series created over two full decades in which photography has been completely revolutionised. In 1996, almost all photography was chemical; in 2016, it is almost all created as *data*. The entire series, from 1996 to the present, has been shot on 35mm film and printed as C-types: practices that are now anomalous rather than normal. Askew has remained consistent in his employment of 35mm film. Accordingly the series feels to share something with, or partake in the grand European humanist documentary tradition of the twentieth century from Lartigue to Cartier-Bresson, in which intimate moments are made monumental, and made public. We intuitively recognise both the distinctive, and now historic aspect ratio associated with 35mm film. The series is, in part, a monument to a technology we can see was particular to the twentieth century. Once common to every household in the industrialised world, photographic film is now only for specialists and purists. There has been a revolution in looking that is often falsely imagined to be 'democratic', and, Askew contends, requires a counter-revolution.

### **Revolution of Everyday Life: Treatise on Living by the Younger Generations**

Perhaps the closest parallel that can be drawn to Askew's position in art is that outlined by Raoul Vaneigem in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Vaneigem 1972). The introduction advocates an upheaval in our ways of seeing, in order to transform

our ways of *being*. It is worth quoting at length as the parallels are so numerous and striking:

*The world must be remade [and] these sentences, read and re-read, will have to do their slow work. The path toward simplicity is the most complex of all, and here in particular it seems best not to tear away from the commonplace ... One can escape from the commonplace only by ... mastering it, steeping it in dreams, giving it over to the sovereign pleasure of subjectivity... I have never pretended to reveal anything new or to launch novelties onto the culture market. A minute correction of the essential [values of living] is more important than a hundred new accessories. All that is new is the direction of the current which carries commonplaces along ... Is this dawning lucidity essentially new? I don't think so... Everyday life always produces the demand for a brighter light [because] there are more truths in twenty-four hours of a man's life than in all the philosophies. (Vaneigem 1972 n.p).*

Askew, just like Vaneigem, valorises qualities of “simplicity ... lucidity ... creativity, spontaneity, and poetry” (ibid). For him, as for Vaneigem, “The desire to live is a political decision” (ibid). His pictures, demanding to be read and re-read, enter the world to undertake their ‘slow work’ of transforming “the commonplace” into a place of “lucidity” and of a “brighter light”, literal and metaphorical. The original French title of the translation *The Revolution of Everyday Life* was *Treatise on Living for the Younger Generations* (Vaneigem 1967). We can, amongst other things, be seen as a treatise for living in which poetry is elevated to its rightful place. Here, three young sisters and their brother are the central actors, and the virtues of youth are given centre stage.

Vaneigem, as Rousseau's true descendent, identified virtue with youth, with camaraderie and friendship, and with a simple purity of lifestyle, in place of the pursuit of capital. As he puts it:

*Age is a role, an acceleration of 'lived' time on the plane of appearances, an attachment to things ... This link between age and the starting-post of measurable time is not the only thing which betrays age's kinship with power. I am convinced that people's measured age is nothing but a role. ... The consumer is killed by the things*

*he becomes attached to, because these things (commodities, roles) are dead. Whatever you possess possesses you in return. Everything that makes you into an owner adapts you to the order of things makes you old. Time is ...that adaptation to which people must resign themselves so long as they fail to change the world (ibid).*

The subjects of Askew's photographs are, in Vaneigem's sense, forever young. They avoid measuring their selves by the weight of their possessions and move lightly through the world. They refuse the role of homo economicus, and are, rather, homo reciprocans: actors who are fundamentally co-operative. (It is, perhaps, no accident that this concept originates in the work of a Russian, Peter Kropotkin, in 1902).

### **Serious games**

We should, as I suggested, be seen as the embodiment of an ethic, rather than the mere dramatization of a political ideal. That ethic proposes that the simple pleasures and freedoms of youth are a model for better living. This youth is not the Western entranced by its own reflection in a black mirror, or in a vicarious second-life online, or fixated with its branded commodities. In works where we encounter a young man performing an athletic handstand, or a wooden merry-go-round, Askew dramatizes the idea of 'serious play': of play being what humans are best at. We might say that for Askew, humans are at their finest when they are homo ludens, to use the phrase coined by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. When we start to notice this, it becomes apparent that many of Askew's images are of people behaving 'playfully'. At the level of subject matter, many of the pleasures that we encounter – of play, physical activity, family meals and conversation – are either ludic ones, or more importantly ones which are shared. What really characterises Askew's work is that it shares the character of play. By which, I mean that everything in his pictorial world is an end in itself, and neither a means to another end nor part of a status-seeking zero-sum game.

For Askew as for Raoul Vaneigem, art is the "weapon" we have to usher in an "age of happiness" (ibid). The only way in which we can wield this weapon is to rethink "the organization of appearances" from the ground up, or as Jacques Rancière has

rephrased the same argument, the 'repartition' of our world, seen in its infinite particularities. What Rancière calls the "politics of aesthetics" is, for Askew, the means of instigating new:

*...modes of participation in a common social world [which] are determined by establishing possible modes of perception... the distribution of the sensible sets the divisions between what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable... [because it is] a framework that determines what can be thought* (Sayers 2004: n.p. on Rancière 2004).

What is sayable, and thinkable, has changed enormously since Askew began work on *We* in 1996. Moscow, 1500 kilometres west of Perm, and London have been transformed by globalisation and financialisation. London is a world city where over 300 languages are spoken. There are now more billionaires in Moscow than anywhere in the world except for New York according to one estimate (Baer 2014: n.p.). We might imagine that Perm, as a relatively remote industrial city, would feel the effects of historical changes differently: Askew knows this is not quite so. A particular way of life is placed under pressure there, and Askew has examined what is special about it and what is being lost. The resolution of *We* marks the point at which a whole generation has passed after Soviet Communism came to an end and a new cold war is being talked about. We have a point of sufficient distance from which we can begin to see how the revolution has played out, and how another might yet begin.

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