

Fresh Perspectives on Contemporary Photography Dec/Jan 2007/£4.50

HotShoe



Philippe Chancel
Colin Jones
Axel Antas
Alessandro Vicario
Frank Herholdt
Crude Metaphors

HotShoe Dec/Jan 2007

Documentary

8 Philippe Chancel: North Korea

Shortlisted for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize, Philippe Chancel talks to Anna Sansom about his work in North Korea.

14 Colin Jones: The Black House

Well-known for his book *Grafters*, British photographer Colin Jones tells Bill Kouwenhoven about his new release, *The Black House*, and his extraordinary career.

Art

24 Axel Antas

Landscape photography with a twist from this London-based Finnish artist and BMW Photography Prize nominee.

34 Alessandro Vicario: Domestic Fragments, between Memory and Oblivion

Essay by curator Augusto Pieroni.

40 Crude Metaphors: Mr Mnemosyne

Images by Gabriel Jones. Text by Jeremy Hunt

Creative

50 Frank Herholdt: Consuming Gazes

Miranda Gavin delves inside the psyche of a brilliant narrator.

Hot Awards

58 Jerwood Awards

64 Observer Hodge Award

65 Photographic Portrait Prize 2006

Hot Shows

66 Alchemy at Purdy Hicks

Hot Books

68 Alec Soth: Niagara

70 Koudelka

72 Francesca Woodman

74 Jonas Bendikson: Satellites

76 New Releases

Hot Gear

83 Mamiya ZD

What's On

88 Our guide to what's on, where

Alessandro Vicario

Domestic Fragments, between Memory and Oblivion

Everything and Nothing: borrowing this title from David Sylvian's record is unavoidable in order to describe what Alessandro Vicario's works are about. The series, in fact, is perfectly reflected in the simple sentence: "everything and nothing" containing, in its apparent contradiction, the whole philosophy of photographic images and, as it were, of life itself. This 2003 body of work, made of about eighty pieces, has its own materiality: its relevance in terms of dimensions and position within the space of existence, the space of its perception. At the same time, though, it is but a handful of simulacrum: a crop of symbols, perfectly focussed on that nothing in particular they stand for, that almost something which is nothing anymore. Their nothingness relies also on the ephemerality of memory, both human and photochemical, and finally on the intimate connection of such memories to the private life of the author, which makes their truth hard to share.

We ought to recall that the fragments photographed in the series are parts of objects and places from the author's grandmother's house on the brink of being sold after her death. Places where Alessandro had grown up (see the doorpost where his grandparents marked his height regularly on Saturdays). Places where the passing of time was sweet, leading to the discovery of light, of its effect on the domestic atmosphere, on the colours and textures of the walls. That is why these photographs don't just depict objects and places, but rather feelings, caught as fragment for only fragments are left of times gone by. All that once was familiar to the boy Alessandro Vicario, for a brief moment of deliberate adult recollection, turns into a wide range of small monuments to his beloved memories.

That is how the series was born. As a collection of evidences; a desperate attempt to save from oblivion those parts of himself that were doomed to disappear. The same drive that Atget and Evans taught us to recognise behind their catalogue of the everchanging cities they loved. The same drive that made Roman Opalka or Nicholas Nixon start some of the most important documentations of the passing of time and the transitoriness of the self. This and the deep knowledge of the theory of photography as a mark, as an index of what "has been", give away Vicario's gentle and unobtrusive articulation as a cultivated professional photographer.

35/ Art

Below: *Front door.*



Vicario's photographs are the patient product of his coherent growth around the themes of memory and disappearance, an arty set of images, skillfully crafted yet totally incompatible with the glamour of fashion and of the art business. For each image and each sequence are born out of an urge to tell and recount the past, that makes them both frail and absolute, ephemeral and eternal. Qualities that are rather unfamiliar to the breathless boldness of hype photography.

Each of these images is but a memory of a memory, a trace of a trace. Like archaeological finds, they both embody and transfigure the real life they belonged to. Through their abstract spacelessness and their incompleteness, any sense of illusion is lost. Both the photographer and us are involved in a search for clues, focussing our glance on unpredictably telling details. The peeling off of a wall might reveal some previously unknown colour, the removal of a door plate has left its negative mark on the light sensitive wood, grandpa's portrait once removed from the wall somehow still lingers in the dusty shape of the frame. Where once stood an insignificant object (emotionally overcharged but for the author alone) now stands its hollow imprint, possibly the mark it left whether on a wall or on the memory of those who lived around it. Vicario's photographs take both the place of the memory and of the object, for their sizes and positions must be exactly the same of the objects they stand for.

It is worth remarking how this photographic research, in itself a true "Recherche", is also a profound and accurate metaphor for photography in itself. What is valid for the author's remembrance of a crack in the wall, or of a shade of daylight on a curtain, proves equally valid for any photographic record: it both keeps alive and kills, it verifies and also blurs identities, it preserves and displaces memories, thus allowing both remembrance and estrangement. The hasty onlooker might disparage Alessandro Vicario's photographs as having unremarkable subject matter or feeble emotional impact. But within the understated worth of these subjects lies their strongest value. Silently and starkly, these photographs depict realities so small and ordinary to approach namelessness, pointlessness. Their incredible vibrance derives instead from our understanding that almost nothing is not quite nothing at all. As goes Zenon's paradox, there is infinity lurking in the smaller lapses of time and space. Infinite is not just the possible combinations of composition: it is the million lives that could relive such banal details as the corner of a room, a spy glass, an abat-jour, the shadow of a long removed painting. Absence and presence altogether: this is the subject matter Vicario always deals with, although it mustn't be easy when your sitter is invisible, when the real subject of your pictures is something that the viewer would more easily grasp by thinking than by gazing.

"There is more mystery in the shadow of a man (...) than there is in all of the religions of the past, present and future," wrote Giorgio De Chirico around 1913. Now, we have a very peculiar artistic heritage in Italy. It stems from the Metaphysical painting of the late 10s and echoes into the tonalism of Giorgio Morandi and Felice Casorati in the 30s. Italian photography in the second half of the 20th century is rich with differently blended hybridations of that selfsame formal rigour combined with diversely intense insights and possibly with frequent

37/ Art

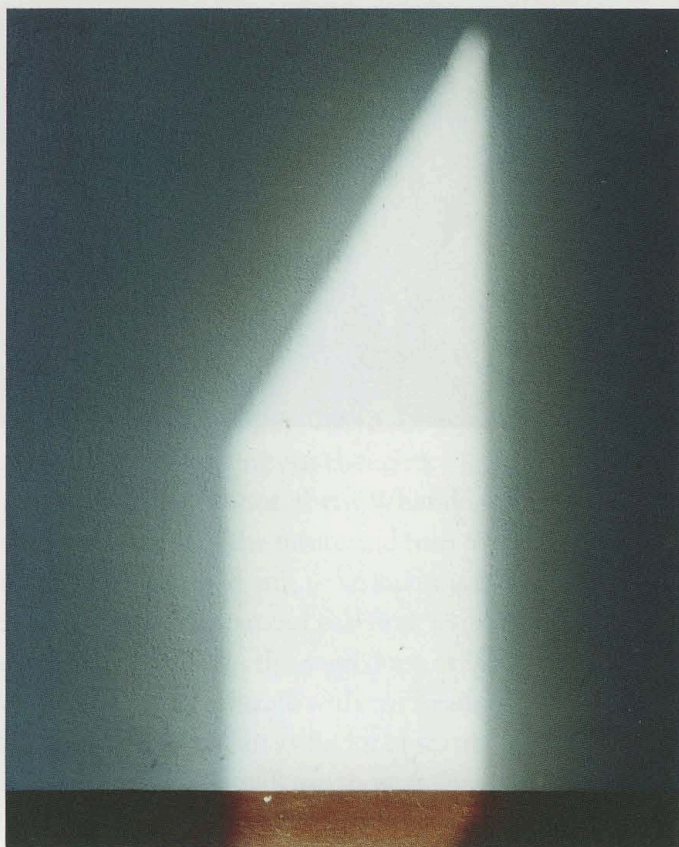
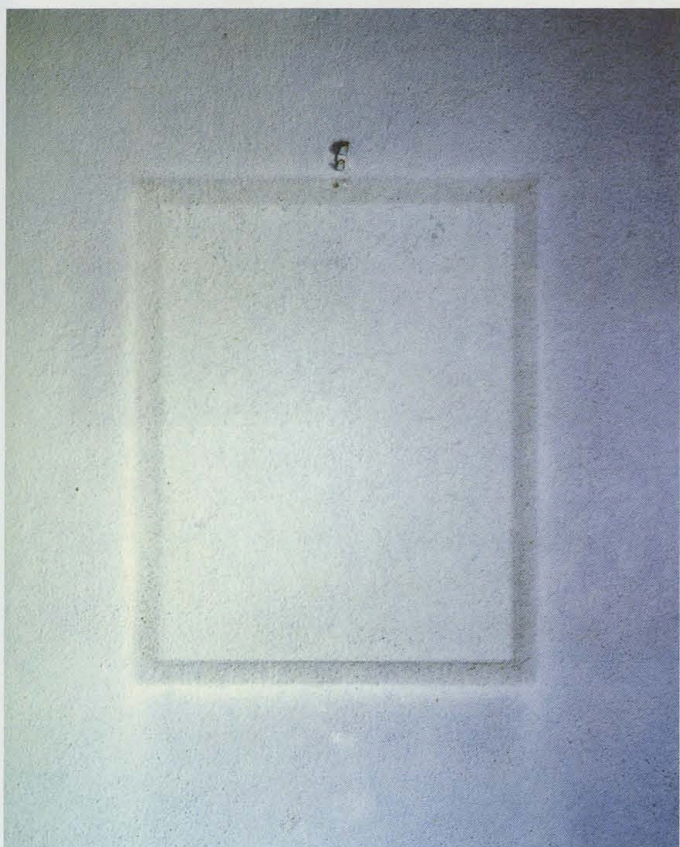
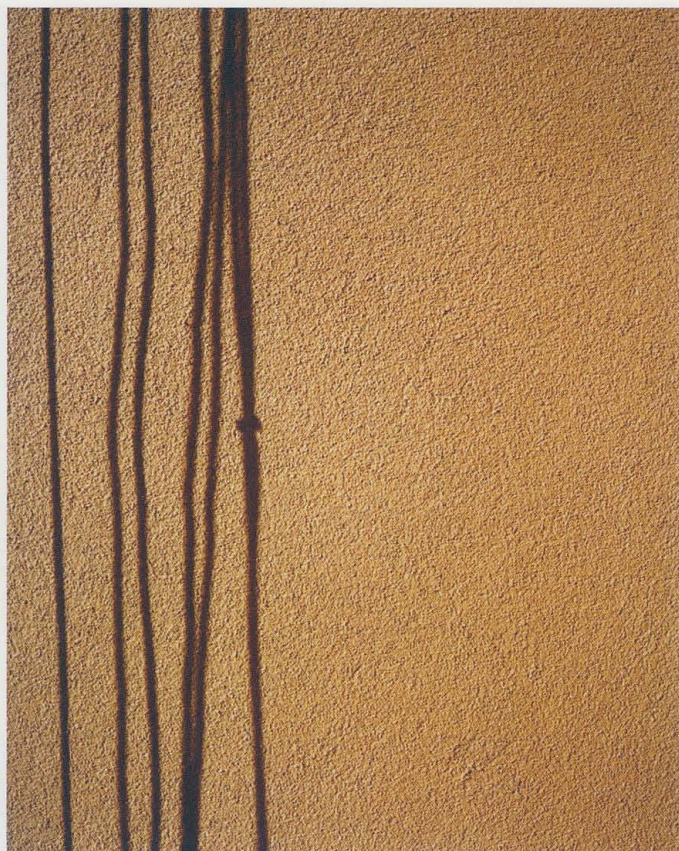
Below (left to right):

Kitchen wall, left of the balcony door.

Kitchen balcony wall.

Bedroom wall with the mark left by my grandfather's photo portrait.

Bedroom wall facing my grandmother's bed.

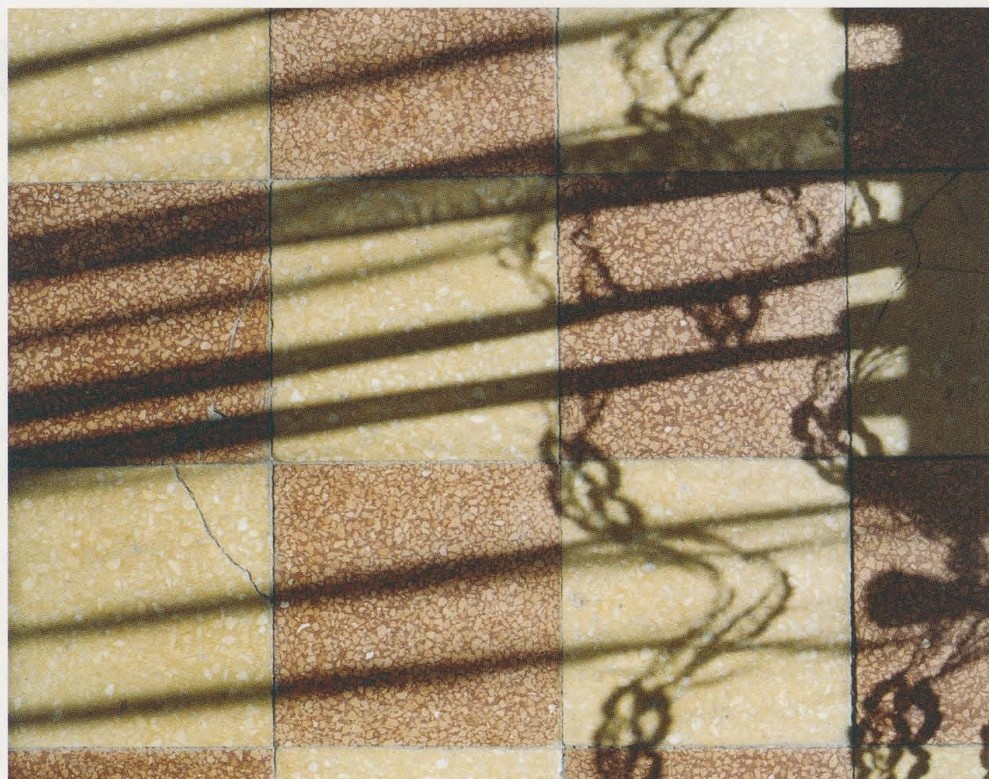


38/ Art



Opposite: *Hall floor.*

Below: *Floor, under the window, of the room I shared with my grandmother.*



conceptual ironic twists. Images whose main values are their careful blending of the commonplace and the essential, whose natural balance of history and timelessness, their hasteless growth – as that of a plant – provide inconspicuousness and perishability on one hand, structure and composure on the other. And results are hardly ephemeral, seldom flimsy, never unimportant. Luigi Ghirri must be recalled as being of pivotal importance in this line of growth. If Alessandro Vicario couldn't be contextualised outside of this cultural backdrop, it is as well true that he is not entirely inscribed, nor exhaustively explained, within this framework alone. There is also much we could add on the literary and philosophical side. I shall restrain myself to suggesting that his photographs might also be seen as perfect specimens of Georges Perec's notion of the "infraordinary": the careful collection of all the in-betweens that life is made of, of all the sidelines of sight and of experience. Photography often pays attention to the unseen details of ordinary life, thus refocussing and redirecting our thoughts.

How do these photographs refocus our glance, then? What do we learn from them? Not certainly to stop heading toward the future and turn inwards or backwards instead. Not indeed. The lesson, if any, to be learnt is a simpler one, yet a deeper one. Our future is nothing without our past and, in order to avoid that our past be our future, we have to act like the *angel* does, as Walter Benjamin notoriously wrote: walking straight into the future with our heads constantly turned to our past. And if our past is made of an awful lot of scattered images secretly concealed within ourselves, then we will use those fragments to build a stronger self, constantly pursuing new experiences, new images, new memories. Images forever doomed to be our everything. And nothing.—AUGUSTO PIERONI