In Light
Chris Wainwright

Introduction

In Light is the bringing together of two inter-related visual forms of urban enquiry, *Some Cities* and *Visible Radiation*, undertaken between 1991 and 2011.

Some Cities   2005–2011

A series of nocturnal cityscapes made whilst walking around the nine cities of Amsterdam, London, Los Angeles, Berlin, Istanbul, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong and Beijing. The title *Some Cities* makes a partial reference to the Italo Calvino novel *Invisible Cities* which questions the physicality and essence of cities and their common or transferable characteristics, that often make it difficult to distinguish one from the other. *Some Cities* similarly questions the authenticity of place, travel and location as the viewer is given no reference to the city where the individual images were made. The images are intentionally blurred and the distinguishing architectural features and inhabitants, that are clearly visible in daylight, are also obscured by darkness.

Visible Radiation   1991–2011

An edited selection of images from a 'light bank' of hundreds of photographs of urban light sources from numerous cities and sites around the world. The images are from both public and private spaces made during night walks around deserted, or semi deserted, inner city areas. The locations are left deliberately anonymous except where the site specificity has a particular reference to the important role light plays in creating or enhancing a particular context.

Through a City, Darkly

Joseph Heathcott

In the evening the city / Goes to Bed
Hanging lights / About its head
—Langston Hughes

The work of Chris Wainwright explores the struggle and collusion between light and dark — what is obscured by light and illuminated by dark — and pushes the prosthetic possibilities of the camera beyond its tolerance. In this publication, he examines the city of night as a site for the protraction of these struggles, and for what they reveal about our own vulnerabilities as urban inhabitants. Gathered under the title *In Light*, there are two groups of images, *Some Cities* and *Visible Radiation*, edited from hundreds of photographs taken in many cities across the world over the course of twenty years. This essay presents several terms germane to the images, and so provides a framework for engaging Chris Wainwright's rich body of work.

City

The city is both a result and a generator of human creativities. It is a compound of imaginaries that weave together beliefs, perceptions, values, resources, materials, and ambitions. It contains the tangible and intangible heritage of its millions, alive and dead, settled and sojourning, engaged and detached. It is a constantly changing cipher that never stays still long enough to describe. It is too great and varied for any one person ever to know entirely. It is an always unstable, uneven, and incomplete project of human design.

Night

The urban night is a plasmatic medium; we swim through it in strokes of light and dark. As night descends on the city, the light and dark abrade one another through a constantly oscillating array of shapes, in motion and at rest. These shapes carry charges of potentiality, communicating mass and material, metrics and vectors. They are the lines of communication between light and dark, and in aggregate they constitute the city of night. The struggle of light and dark within the urban night reveals the presence of mass — in the buildings, the people, the furniture, the objects, the stuff of the quotidian city. Daylight affords ample light to see the mass before us, but we do not see it. The mass is obscured by its artifice, that is, by its features, aesthetics, program, style, codes, individuality, and idiosyncrasies. At night, however, what we do not see becomes all the more evident; it is the night city wherein light becomes precious and meaningful. It is the night city that reveals more of its embodied energies and meanings. With the prosthetics designed into the camera, we begin to discern these vibratory embodiments and to decode these hidden meanings.

Text

Because the city as a whole is largely unknowable, we rely on a range of senses, people, and practices to interpret its disparate parts and, where possible, to arrange these parts into a story. Stories of the city often

well up from its inhabitants as a kind of autochthonous explanatory stratagem. But just as often stories of the city emerge from the focused efforts of raconteurs, journalists, scholars, activists, politicians, speculators, entrepreneurs, and artists. Because the city is powerfully organised along visual lines, where the constitutive relationship between light and dark shapes our perceptions of the urban, photographers are particularly well situated to contribute to the stories we tell about our cities. More to the point, because photographers play with the techniques of truth telling, they are uniquely positioned to disturb the textual, narrated city and to draw out its fragility and illegibility.

Information

In the course of our everyday lives, we come to know the material city primarily as information in the form of light, sound, smell, and touch. In the case of smell, information travels as molecules on the wind. With touch, we build electrical impulses from the contact of skin on surfaces. With sound, we deploy vibratory means to locate and to echolocate bodies and things in sonic space. With light, we derive information as it refracts from surfaces – millions and millions of surfaces, rough and smooth, planar and twisted, translucent and opaque. Photography is one of many disciplines dedicated to drawing information from the surfaces of the city, and like the eye, light is its medium. But is the city always what it seems? Is it the sum total of what we see with our eye, or hear or touch or smell? What is this phenomenon the city, beyond our capacities to know it with our bodies? And how do we evaluate what we see, how do we judge the information that comes to us, how do we know what we know?

Prosthesis

Photographers respond to and shape visual informatics using light-capturing boxes we call cameras. The camera is an ocular prosthesis that extends our vision through time and space, through day and night. Photography is that constellation of practices that deploy capturing and reproduction technologies to stretch the eye, store the image, and shape personal and collective memory. At its most technical, photography accomplishes our prosthetic aims through finely engineered tolerances: the ISO logarithm, the grind of the lens, the ratio of focal length to aperture, the molality of the silver nitrate solution, the structure of crystalline lattice in p-type doping of CMOS semiconductors. But photography is not merely the sum of its technical parts. It is also a bundle of meanings, a mode of envisioning, a way of organising the world around us – our selves, our passions, our dreams, our cities. Thus, the camera's prosthetics enables us to tell stories by shaping the information we derive from light – indeed, to shape the light itself to organise the information with which we tell stories.

Decay

But what kind of information reaches us from these embodiments and surfaces? In the best of conditions, we feel equipped to apprehend the city around us, to navigate it, to know it. But what happens when these conditions break down? Information in the form of refracted light shatters, distends, and recombines through a range of ocular ticks: the squinted eyelid, diseased cornea, rain-streaked windshield, stopped-down f, expanded aperture, foggy air, or generosity of pixels. As this recombined light gathers itself in the thick, conic

nervy bundles aback our eye or in the array of semiconductors atop a CMOS integrated circuit, it reformats the city in front of us into regional territories of light amid great swaths of dark. Light bleeds into dark. Dark encroaches on light. The familiar city of everyday life decays into indecipherable clusters of shapes and masses and becomes the every city of night. We gaze as through a fog. Such ocular distress projects the city into a blurred and uncanny state, rendering us vulnerable within it.

Uncanny

The nature of vision, whether in its organic or prosthetic form, both reveals and obscures the material city around us. Light brings us information limited to surfaces. Beyond the surface lay memory, conjecture, query, hunch, and the uncanny. When we move across a material boundary to see what exists beyond (we enter a shop or turn a corner or descend a staircase), we are confronted with yet another collection of surfaces, beyond which lay more unknowns. The material city, at least as we apprehend it with they eye or the camera, comprises an ever-receding succession of surfaces that shape light, and thus our perceptions of the material city, in a seemingly infinite array. Moreover, these surfaces are not static. They form and decay at different rates, shifting, dissolving, and recombining in an ever-changing mosaic. The ever-receding, ever-changing surfaces suggest that the city is not simply full of unknowns, but is, in fact, ultimately unknowable.

Truth

In our vulnerable states of not-knowing, we reach for the camera to capture the world before us, to control the decay – or at least to slow the rate of decay. Because the camera effects a prosthesis of vision, rather than vision itself, photography has traditionally operated through a social contract wherein we collude with the photographer to accept the truth-claims of the medium. Hence the old adage "the camera doesn't lie." But we know that photography is not a neutral practice or a disinterested technique. The camera is neither innocent nor debauched, pure nor adulterated, stupid nor omniscient. Rather, it forms part of an ever-shifting constellation of actors, equipment, technologies, ideologies, and meanings that converge around momentary acts of image-making. The photograph, like the city around us, comprises so many truths that it ceases to contain any one truth; instead, truth is negotiated ad-hoc, one image at a time. Some of these negotiations yield partial agreements among groups of people for limited periods of time, e.g.: we agree that the Eiffel Tower indicates Paris, or we accept that published battlefield images are authentic.

But these relationships are always subject to dissolution. It is the same in our encounters with cities. Is that Eiffel Tower in Paris or Las Vegas? Is that blur of light in Istanbul or Tokyo?

Trust

For Chris Wainwright and *In Light*, this is precisely the point of departure. It is not even a question of whether the camera lies or doesn't lie, whether it is neutral or imbricated. Rather, his photographic work articulates and exposes the fragility of the social contract itself. It demands trust explicitly, instead of assuming trust implicitly. It nullifies the tacit agreements about how we read images, and instead reconstructs trust from the engagement of the viewer with the artist at the point of contact. The work gathered for In Light manifestly refuses the implicit trust of the photograph while inviting a temporary condition of trust grounded in the act of

viewing. In the end, this reveals more about the city than meets the eye (literally). Chris Wainwright's photographs not only expose the million mini-contracts that shape our daily encounters; they also reveal, in the habitus of dark and light, our vulnerabilities in the face of what we know and do not know of our cities.

Joseph Heathcott is a writer, curator, and educator in based in New York, where he teaches at The New School (Eugene Lang College and Parsons School of Design). His work considers the role of collective memory and creative expression as everyday civic practices that shape the contemporary metropolis. His most recent photography exhibit *Post-Acropolis Metropolis* was shown at the Town Hall Gallery in Stuttgart, Germany. During the academic year 2010/11, Professor Heathcott held the U.S. Fulbright Distinguished Chair for the United Kingdom at the University of the Arts in London, attached to the CCW Graduate School and the Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN).