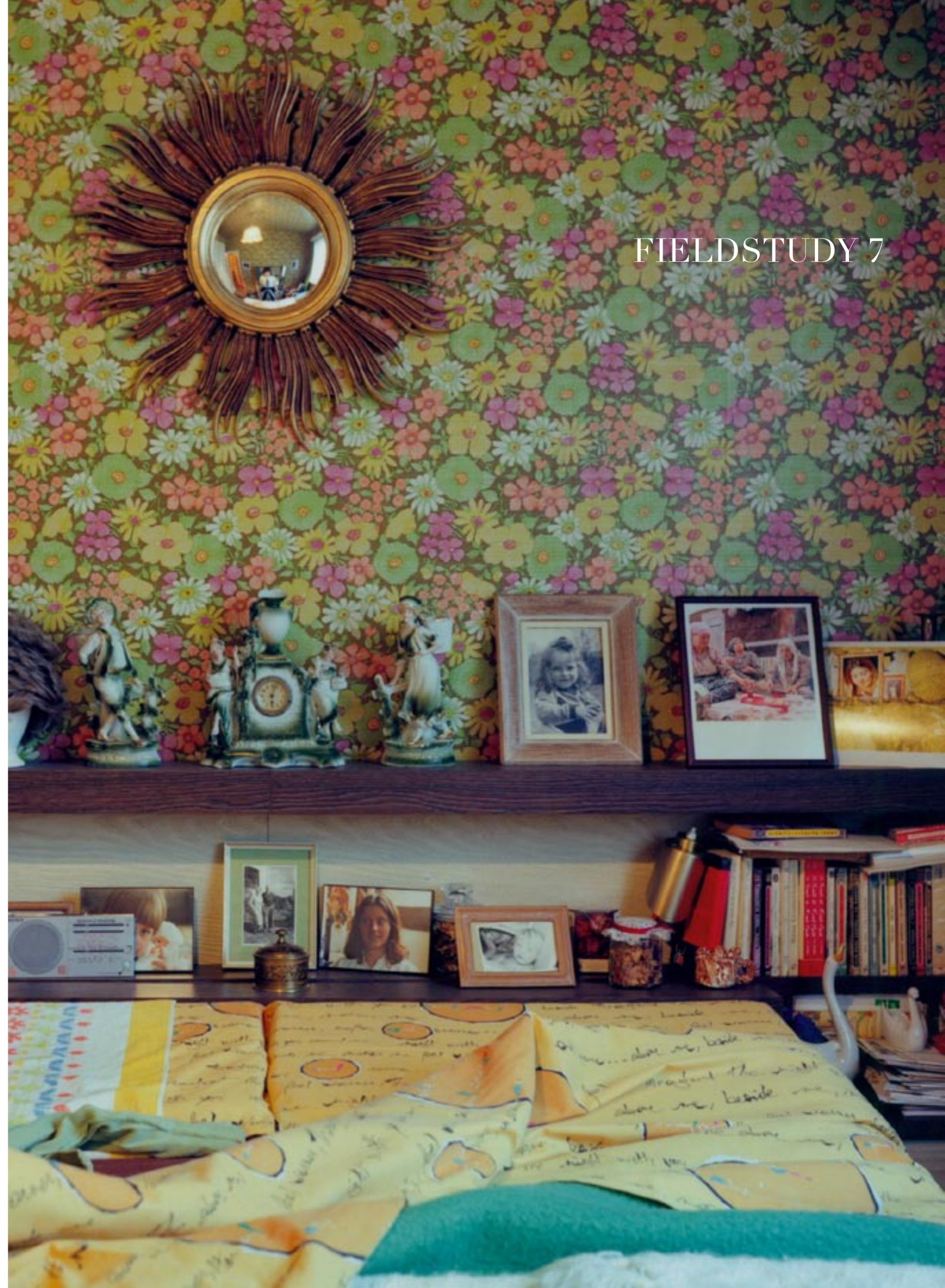


FIELDSTUDY 7



FIELDSTUDY 7





MARJOLAINE RYLEY
RESIDENCE ASTRAL
1993-2005

We tend to think of fires as destroying things: photos, clothes, objects and the memories that go with them, but when a fire broke out in the basement of Genevieve Tirloeq's apartment in a quiet suburb of Brussels it did not destroy the building or even burn anything, it left a thick residue of silky soot covering everything with blackness and dust.

My grandmother had hoarded and collected things for many years and as my mother and I began the process of trying to sort through her soiled possessions it was impossible to easily discard or throw anything away, because each new layer revealed a story, about her, and about us. Who we are and where we came from was declared in everything we touched.

It was I who first came across the incredible letter. Sent by my father's parents John and Phyllis Ryley to my mother's parents Hector and Genevieve Tirloeq in November 1974 about seven months after I was born, it revealed a correspondence between two concerned sets of parents, one living in Merseyside, England the other in Dilbeek, Belgium. My grandfather John Ryley appears to be answering a previous letter when he writes, "Like yourselves we are sorry that Peter and Brigitte have decided to "drop out" of society."

This letter both amazed and moved us, as we had not known of its existence. My mother was struck by how hard it must have been for her own mother watching the life her daughter had chosen from a distance. Seeing Genevieve not as the enemy in the way she had as a young woman, she gained a fresh perspective on the lifestyle choices she and my father had made in their search for a more fulfilling way of life; to live in communes, travel with a small child first to France and then to England, pick fruit and hops for money, and to avoid everything her conservative upbringing had declared as worthy.

After Hector's death in 1977 Genevieve moved from their house in the Flemish town of Dilbeek to Residence Astral a third floor apartment on a tree lined avenue in a quiet bourgeois suburb of Brussels. For my entire life I have visited her once or twice a year at this apartment. In 1993 as a photography student I began taking pictures and have continued to do so on every visit, building up an extensive archive. The wallpaper, soft furnishings, trinkets and collections of my grandmother's clutter, became increasingly exotic yet also very familiar to me. I loved to visit but also at times felt saddened and stifled. I could see quite clearly why my mother had rebelled against this oppression called 'home' and had chosen a new life in England.

When the fire struck in 2002 and my mother and I journeyed to Belgium it was under very different circumstances. It seemed my Grandmother's reign over her interior kingdom had come to an abrupt end.

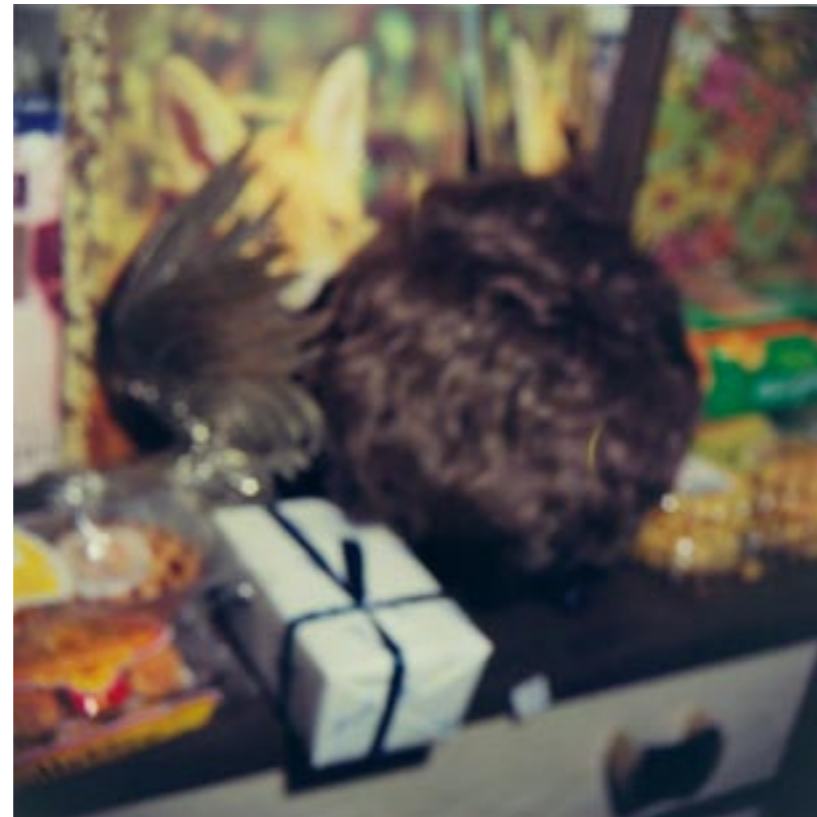
Genevieve and my uncle Philippe (who had all but moved in with his mother being unmarried and in his fifties) were awoken in the morning by the smell of smoke. They left the apartment and tried to go upstairs to fetch Madame Personnel their elderly neighbour. Smoke engulfed them and the fire crew found them unconscious in the stairwell. They were taken to a specialist military hospital on the outskirts of Brussels where the doctors worked tirelessly to save them.

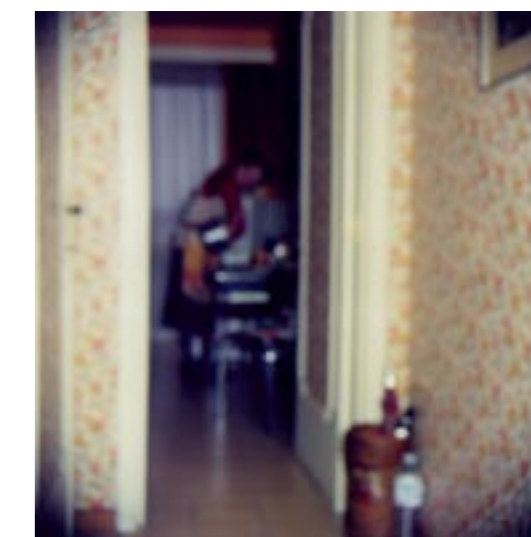
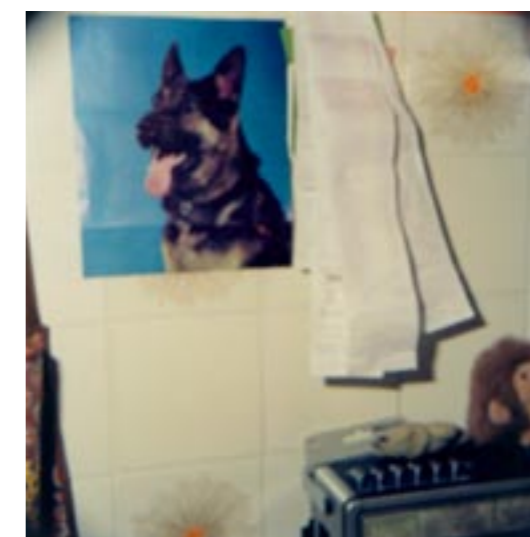
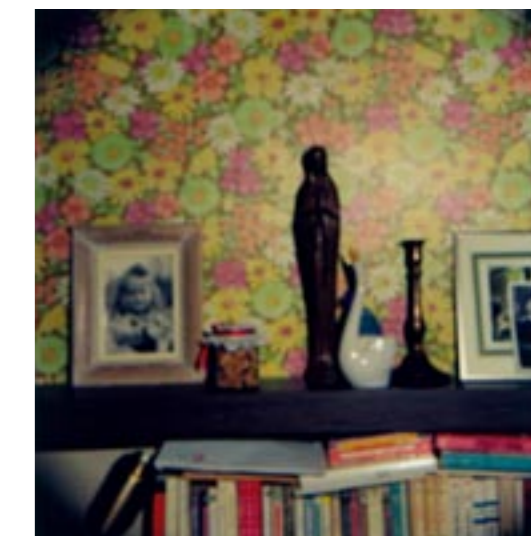
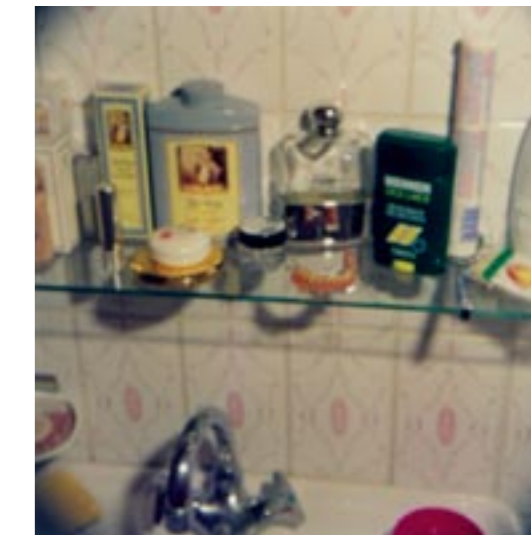
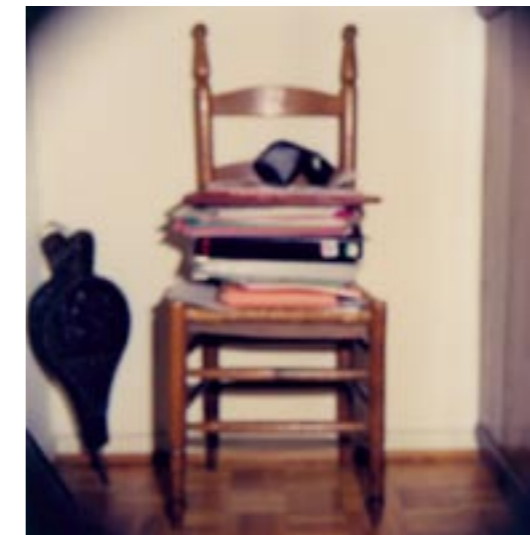
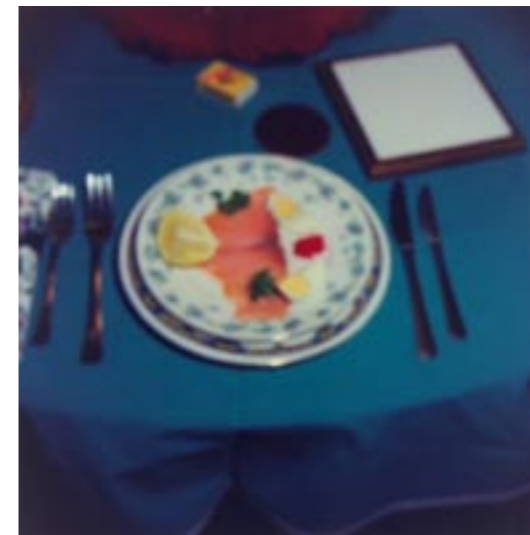
They were both in a coma for weeks. My uncle awoke first deeply confused and hallucinating, he had experienced dreams so vivid he could no longer identify reality. My slender grandmother swelled up, a worrying side effect of the many drugs she was given. Eventually she too awoke from her long sleep and they were moved first to another hospital nearer to her home and then again to their final place of recovery 'Les Petites Abeilles'. This wonderful rehabilitation

centre set amongst the flat fields of the Flemish Brabant set them firmly on the road to recovery.

If ever two people were given the chance for a new life it was them, yet three years on photographs taken after their return to *Residence Astral* both sadden and comfort me just as before. Only a few small changes are noticeable. The colour and intense pattern have gone, replaced by a more subdued décor. Philippe now spends many hours in his bedroom on his computer flight simulator piloting his aircraft all over the world. My grandmother Genevieve who fought so hard to remain in this world sometimes seems absent, although thankfully at times her former spark is still visible. Intermittent coughs remain as a reminder of that terrible time.

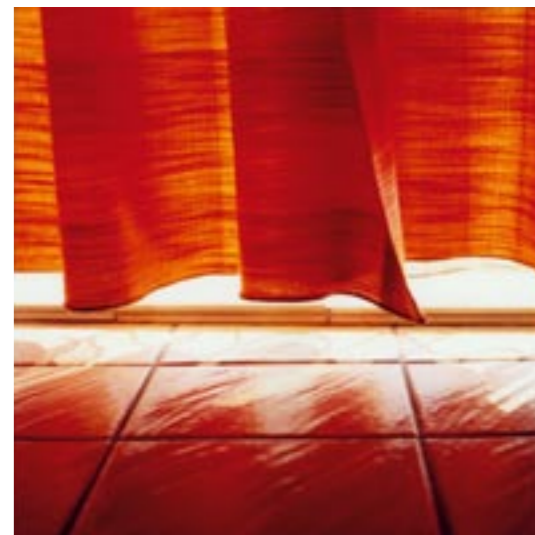
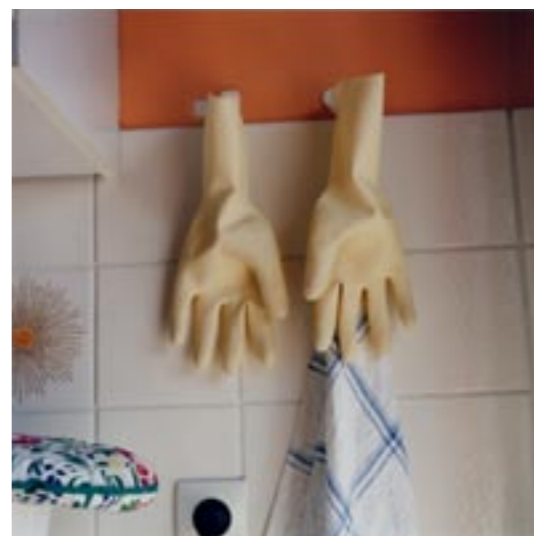
My response has been to photograph in a more intimate way, magnifying my view, getting closer to her and my mother, documenting every crease of fabric, wrinkle of skin, sign of life. I do not know how many more visits I will be able to make to *Residence Astral*, but in the meantime my camera allows me to see what I am afraid I will not see any more. And my mother writes, every word, every experience. We both have the same aim in mind: to capture it all, as it was, as it is, and as it might one day be.







Being in the apartment is like being saved. You leave the real world behind and step into a landscape in miniature. Within this embrace you receive nourishment, through food and warmth you shrink in size and become small again. As the hours and days drift by you begin to feel nauseous, you develop aches and pains of the body and soul. You begin to suffocate, to long for fresh air and real life. Longing to be somewhere else, anywhere else overcomes you. Slowly as the grip tightens you must bid for escape, run for your life. Once ejected from the killer apartment and all its comforts and promises you feel a surge of panic. The harsh light of responsibility shines on you again. The pain of misunderstanding and malnourishment return afresh. You experience elation briefly as you exhume your feelings, but the exhaustion returns. Your life is now your own again, and as the train leaves carrying with it the lingering scents of Brussels, once again life is full of possibilities. Yet how quickly you begin to miss and long for the apartment and all its comforts.





MOTHER-FOOD BRIGITTE RILEY

I feel drawn to the waffles, brown paper bag beckoning. It's not as bad as it used to be. I remember times when being in my mother's house induced an unbearable state of unrest, a desperate need for recognition that I was beautiful. All I felt was deprivation, a deep festering wound. Sneaking in the kitchen, gobbling up half finished packets of 'waffles', 'gallettes', 'chocolate pralines'. The thing is, in those days, you couldn't find those treats in England. They belonged to the land of childhood and possessed magical properties. Eating a Belgian waffle was a way of being reinstated into the right order of things, the way to redemption. After all, you ate the body of Christ at Mass. However to try and heal my Belgian soul, seemed to result in generating more guilt. My body, longing for true mother food, rejected my excesses, giving me a migraine lasting for the rest of my visit.

Food in my childhood held a very important place in life's priorities, it was also imbued with the power to kill, destroy my sense of self. Food could give and take life the way the ambivalent mother could. It could make you fat, which meant self-hatred, unlovable, exile. Belgian 'pralines', 'crevettes', 'gauffres' held the secret of finding my way back to my roots. The smell of rabbit marinated in red wine, black pudding, became the trigger for memories leading to forgotten stories. Growing up in "le pays de Cognac" the land of plenty, shopping with my mother would have been a feast for the senses, looking at shop windows, contemplating larger than life displays of gourmet condiments, something out of a painting by Breugel, a banquet at the village feast. You said thanks to God before eating, prayed so you'd never go without, yet the food I ate was cooked by mother. Eating my mother's food held the promise of both heaven and hell.

I remember my mother in the kitchen, wearing a flowery apron that matched her permed curly hair. A cloud of tension all around her, her smile, too good to be true. She always complained about the kitchen that it was "too small and dark" and that it was; "badly designed by an architect who didn't have the woman behind the stove in mind when he

created our house". An open air terrace, leading to a secluded garden seemed to take over the kitchen, a constant invitation to the inhabitants to escape from life's drudgery, which my mother seemed to cultivate. A housewife in the fifties, my mother seemed to have tried to achieve impossible ideals. My father expected his dinner on the table, and her life consisted of endless chores. Her lack of joy in performing them tainted our pleasure in receiving her nourishment with a sense of malaise and feelings of guilt. Not eating was a sin highly punishable by God, it was God himself speaking as she uttered her dreadful words; "children, you are lucky we are not at war, one day, God will punish you, you will be hungry". Sometimes, her mind followed a different track, she said that "we were driving her mad" and threatened to walk off and never return. Although I did not believe her words, her outbursts made me sad and scared. The truth was, you could never be sure.

I will always remember that day. I had been a disobedient seven-year old. The shopkeeper told my mother I had bought my own bag of aniseed sweets. At suppertime as the rest of the family was left at the table savouring a mouth-watering dessert of raspberries and cream, my favourite fruit. I was told I couldn't have any, then sent to the larder, to stare at undesirable groceries; haricots, dried prunes, tins of orange marmalade. I cried till my throat and chest seemed to rip, sitting on a crate of beer. Powerless, humiliated, I felt not guilty. If the raspberries I fancied so

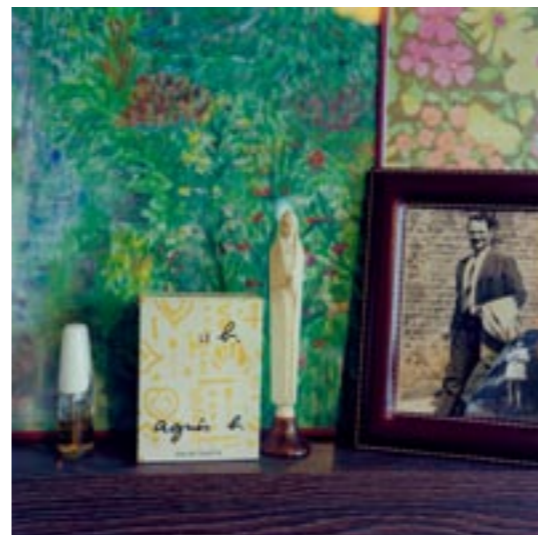
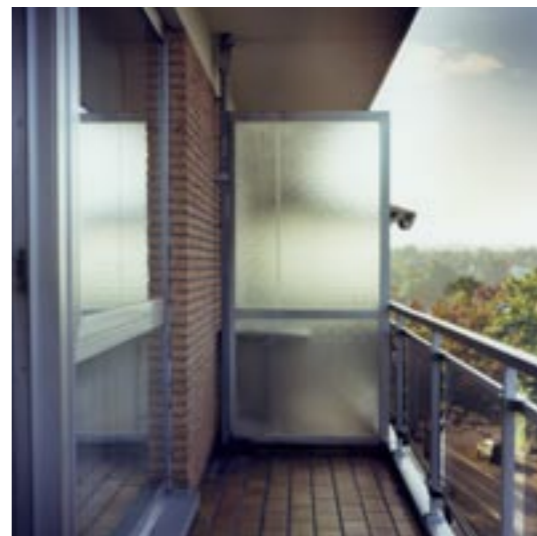
much and the pleasure they promised gave mother the power to inflict such devastating pain, if the forbidden fruit was just behind the door and nothing in the world was going to change her mind, well, it was too much to endure for my feisty soul. She was getting back at me.

There also were magical days, like baking day. Then the dowdy kitchen became the centre of creation. Sitting mesmerised, the kitchen table covered with the tools of the baker, I can see how the egg yolk mixes with melted butter, brown sugar, then transmutes into a new substance. "Make sure you flatten the lumps", she says. I am left to stir the

mixture for a while, as she sprinkles the flour into the brown earthenware bowl. I desperately want to help, be her indispensable apprentice. Only she knows when her creation has reached perfect texture. After the golden substance is poured into a tray and left to bake in the oven, comes the exquisite moment of licking the bowl. After that you felt warm inside, tantalising aromas of cinnamon, and gateau lingering on for the rest of the day. I can see a little girl flattening her own piece of dough with her tiny rolling pin, laying it on a small tray with her mother's help, covering it with apple slices. After a time in the oven, as long as eternity, comes the ultimate jouissance of retrieving and consuming my own 'tartelette'. Culinary events, singularly in sync with religious events, alongside my mother's mysterious moods and cycles punctuated our days and the wheel of the year.

Years have gone by, mother, daughter, granddaughter are gathered once more to share another Christmas dinner that we have cooked together. I am grateful, being privileged to receive food fashioned by my mother's old hands. The elusive search for quintessential mother food continues.





**IS THERE FOOD FOR YOU?
MARJOLAINE RYLEY**

Her eyes opened and a voice barely audible but very familiar asked “is there food for you?” from her hospital bed she still remembered her duty as carer and feeder of mouths.

Looking through the soot covered apartment as we cleared and cleaned we began to uncover the layers of her life. Her wedding dress, her jewellery, a swimsuit not worn since I was a child, a letter sent the year I was born by two sets of concerned parents.

The Marionettes were especially black. Being in the hallway they took the full force of the smoke surge. We has given them up and I had put them in a black bin bag, but as the day drew to a close I became aware of their smudged faces peering at me, imploring me not to abandon them.

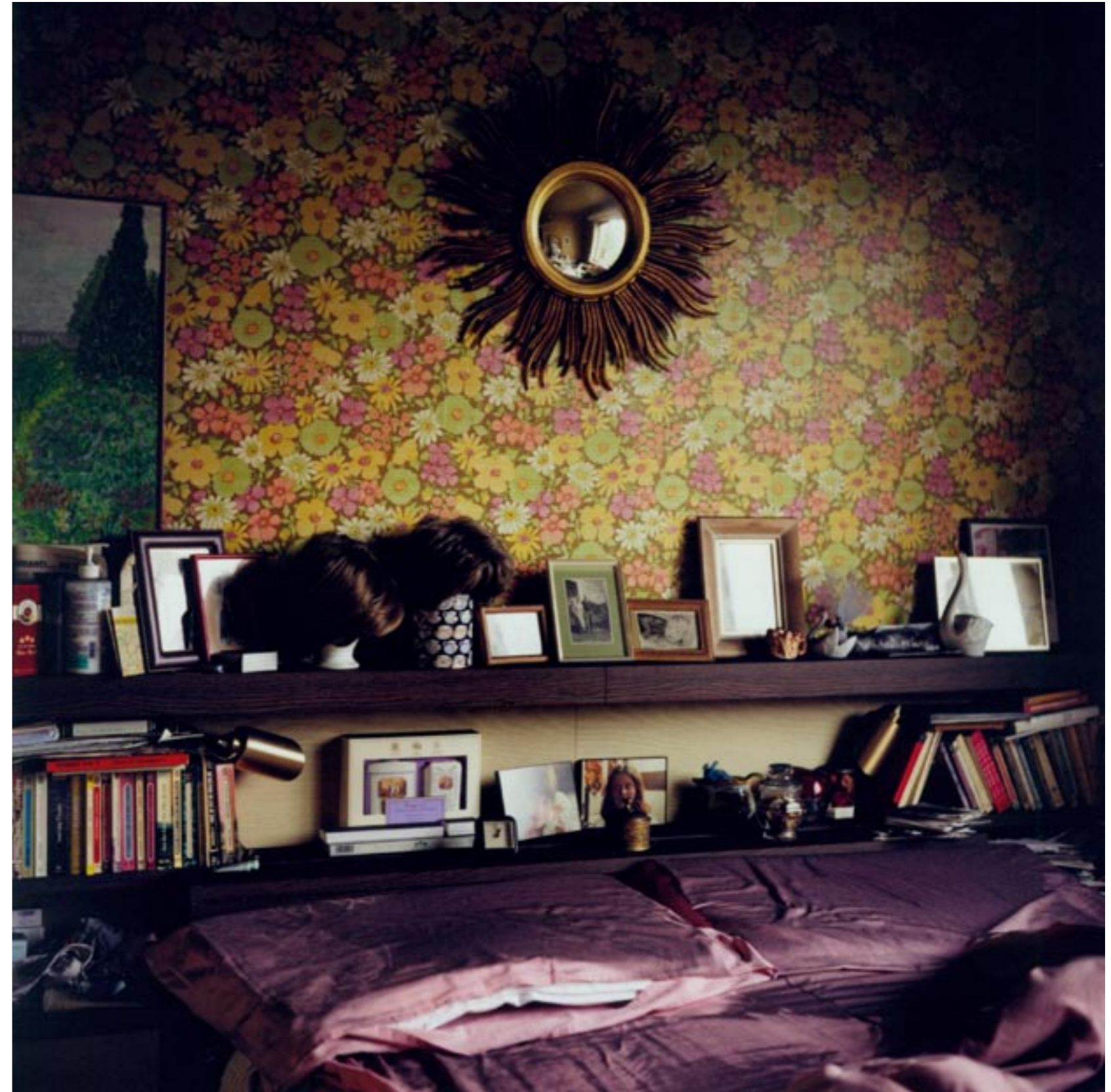
As I poured soap powder into the bath and gently washed the dolls clean I wondered if I was performing good voodoo, healing the sick in the process. They seemed to be smiling at me as I lay them out on the sunny balcony to dry alongside her wigs and shoes.

The doctors were bemused to see my mother dressed in the mandatory germ protection clothing standing over my grandmother’s bed, arms raised in an act of prayer and healing, and who knows if the trips made to the Lady of Miracles at Malin led to the slow recovery of my grandmother and uncle, whose prognosis by the doctors had been desperate.

Even my subdued uncle who caused the doctors much concern after the accident by his lack of coherence was labelled as having fugitive tendencies as he tried to escape from his hospital confinement. It seemed neither of them was ready to quit.

Sitting in the sun on the balcony in the white plastic chair that I wiped the soot from three years ago I am reminded of that traumatic time. But she has just appeared warning me of the dangers of sunburn, offering me a sun hat, a drink and little snacks.

Back in the apartment time continues to pass.







'Hilltop'
Heck Lane,
Winnal,
Merseyside, England
L48 1LB.

Dear Mr & Mrs Tirocq,

We were delighted to receive your friendly letter and the photographs of Brigitte, Peter and Margolaine. The photographs were very good and it was a pleasure to see you both looking almost as young as the young people! It was very kind of Mrs Tirocq to write in English and we were able to understand what she wrote without difficulty. I speak and write some French, but I believe your mother-tongue is Flemish.

We were sorry to learn that you, Mrs Tirocq have had a situation and hope that you are now fully well.

Owing to the postal strike in France we have had no communication from Peter & Brigitte since they left our house arrived in France.

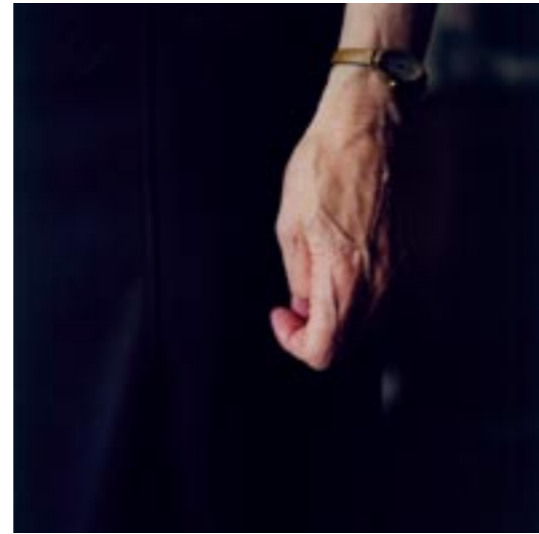
Like yourselves we are sorry that Peter and Brigitte have chosen to "drop out" of society. I respect their views but believe that society is best helped and improved from within. We must, however, be grateful that they have not turned to

drugs, dishonesty or violence. We shall all have fewer material belongings in the future so perhaps they are preparing themselves for the world of the future.

We hope very much that we shall have the opportunity of meeting you in the future. We have been considering the idea of moving to central France and asking Peter to meet us there. Perhaps it might be possible for all three parties to meet in this way.

With very good wishes to you both from

John Ryley &
Phyllis.



I LEARNED A NEW LANGUAGE
BRIGITTE RYLEY

When I was very little
I learned a new language.
'Annemieke', 'Greta'
'Marieka', 'Godelieve'.

These are the names
of the girls I went to school with
in the village of Dilbeek
'Kindeke, kapoentje, meisje'
I remember the names in Flemish
they wore golden earrings
hoops in their skirts.

My mother says hoops
and earrings are for peasant girls
so I can't have any.

My folks are Walloons.
I don't understand
why they don't like the Flemish
who pray to the *'Moeder'*.

I have two tongues.
It doesn't help.
My mother cannot hear me.

I listen to *Jacques Brel*.
'Le plat pays qui est le mien'
A land where church spires
reach to the sky like mountains.

In a town named *Ostrelande*
Lord *Hallewyn* murders young virgins.

It's a land of strange
apparitions, visitations, monsters, angels,
monsters painted by *Hieronymus Bosch*.

My mother loves to sing a song,
'La Mer, que l'on voit danser.'
'le long des golfes clairs'
My aunt loves to look out for the ferry
on its way from Ostende to Dover.
She had been all the way to England
had tea with Mrs Quinquell,
loved a boy called Roy.

My aunt Therese is a writer.
She says
it's a sin for a Catholic to remarry.
Maybe Lord *Hallewyn* was her husband.
Luckily she escaped.

Monsieur Marin is my grandfather
He stands on his head
tells me ghost stories.

I must only believe in
what is written in the bible
I steal a book on witchcraft
he hides under his bed
alongside works by *Rimbaud*
the poet of doom.

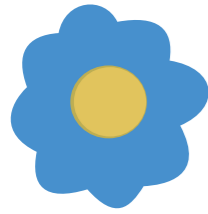
'Non rien de rien, je ne regretted rien.'
One day my time had come.
I travelled all the way to England.
'Don't think twice, it's alright'
I found a new life in a land of exile.

In my father's home land
the earth is so black.
'Il pleut dans mon coeur'
says Verlaine, *'comme il pleut sur la ville'*
men die crushed in the mines.

Mathilda, Mathilda
do you remember when you
found the golden ring
in the holy spring at *Orval*
brought to you by a giant trout.
Maybe my grandmother told me.
'Je ne suis pas d'ici'

We came from *Ostrelande*.
I found a new language
in a place of exile.





This issue of *Fieldstudy* marks the completion of the first year of Marjolaine Ryley's Visiting Fellowship at the Photography and the Archive Research Centre. Her fellowship was funded by the University of Sunderland. During her Fellowship year, Marjolaine has developed and archived her own work, and has also worked with PARC in its projects with MA Photography at LCC. Her presence at PARC, as an artist and as a visiting academic has been extremely valuable, and emphasizes PARC's commitment to partnership with external organizations.

Fieldstudy 7 continues PARC's interest in using *Fieldstudy* as a vehicle for new work by artists with whom PARC has formed partnerships. Following the editions conceived by Alison Marchant and Roma Tearne, both of which examined ideas of archive, Marjolaine Ryley's complex examination of the objects, ephemera and environments which make up a personal history are a fitting and moving further examination of this fascinating area of study and practice.

Marjolaine Ryley studied photography at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design and the Royal College of Art. She is based in Newcastle upon Tyne and is a senior lecturer in photography at the University of Sunderland. Her first monograph *Villa Mona – A Proper Kind of House* is published by Trace Editions.

Brigitte Ryley is the artists' mother. She is a UKCP registered psychotherapist and a writer. She has recently completed an MA in Creative Writing for Personal Development at the Sussex University.

The Photography and the Archive Research Centre is part of the University of the Arts London and is based at the London College of Communication, Elephant and Castle, London SE1 6SB. The Centre organizes study days, seminar programmes, conferences, research projects and publications. For information about its activities and past and future events, see the Centre's website at www.photographyresearchcentre.co.uk or contact Lorna Crabbe on lcrabbe@lcc.arts.ac.uk
t. +44 (0)20 7514 6625
Past issues of *Fieldstudy* are also available.

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