

# *Around Here: Photographing the Local*

Emma Lambert

*The paper will seek to examine the creation of the Local, a concept which is often seen as a geographical construct i.e.: 'where you are from', but is also often where the nuances and complexity of daily life are found and replayed and where the rituals and relationships are formed. Through practice based-research, and with reference to the writings of Taiye Selasi, Erica van Horn and Lucy Lippard these concepts are explored from the perspective of a village in the south-west of England. There is an intensely personal relationship with this place, where the family home holds the physical remnants of childhood, the intimacy and comfort of interior domestic space belies the exterior landscape it is situated within. Here, the woodlands are uncultivated spaces that, while temporal, remain timeless reference points, and contrast with the highly cultivated culture of village life. As the woods delineate the village borders, community groups and associations form the threads and networks that provide psychological framework of the village. From the whisky men who meet each month, where a different bottle of whisky is tasted and its merits debated, to the gardeners whose cultivated spaces reflect the characters of those who inhabit them. Accordingly, the physical curation of site and connection to place run in parallel with the enduring correlation between where we are a 'local' and what we call 'home'.*

“No-one comes out of nowhere; one room or town or locality can be made into an everywhere. The Universal is the local, but with the walls taken away”  
John McGahern

In 2007 I embarked on the making of a series of photographic portraits that would take me ‘home’ and has ultimately led to the development of a much larger ongoing body of work, evolved over a number of years, entitled ‘*Around Here*’. Home—Hemyock— is a village in the south-west of England, a place I have an intensely personal and enduring connection with, and the site in which I attempt to unravel questions about what binds people and place, and most importantly, what makes us ‘local’. *Place* and *Local* are terms that often elude specific definition. The former is at once a tangible and abstract concept, as Lucy Lippard suggests, it ‘is temporal and spatial, personal and political’ (1997:7). The latter is habitually described as a geographical construct—where you are from—but can also be something far less physically confined (Lippard 1997, Van Horn 2014). Both terms are used freely in everyday speech, permitting the assumption that they are also easily understood and clearly defined, yet in reality the opposite is potentially much closer to the truth.

Photography has become a tool, shaping the way I look at and understand the complexities of these ideas surrounding our relationship with place, and indeed our place within the world. Contained within the body of work are different strands, made at different times which have come together as a collection of images mapping the way in which I have moved through this work and the questions that have arisen as I did so. It has been a slow process, with long periods of reflection punctuating the creation of the different components, which has, in hindsight, been fundamental to the thematic development of the work.

The creation of these images has enabled a platform on which to contemplate how people create their own version of *local* and its relationship to *place*. In addition to the ways in which the idea of local is constructed as a ‘the material setting for social relations’ (Cresswell 2004:7) there has been a significant focus on discerning the characteristics of localness, and if or how they might be reflected through photography. From the physical, geographical and even metaphorical boundaries decided for us by unseen hand to the lifestyle and ethical choices that we make as to where and how we want to live. Developing a *sense of place*—place with an emotional attachment—can have an intense and powerful influence on our individual and collective identities, particularly where we lived in childhood (Cresswell 2004:7, Relph, 1976:37). Having grown up in this village, becoming aware of the notion of ‘being-in-place’ as a way of understanding the world has become particularly meaningful and influential to understanding my own sense of place. Human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan based these ideas in the context of *experience* – where he suggested that ‘through human perception and experience we get to know the world through places’ (Cresswell 2004:20), describing it more specifically as a pause in movement, where, according to Tuan, ‘the pause makes it possible for a locality to become a centre of

felt value' (1977:138). The transformation of place into local is at the heart of this body of work, they are 'entwined' yet distinct and powerful allies in what make us 'human':

*"Inherent in the local is the concept of place—a portion of land/town/city scape seen from inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar. Most often place applies to our own "local" entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke"*  
*Lucy Lippard*

Throughout this process I have been conscious of the trappings of being drawn into nostalgia and memory or caught up in idealised notions of place. My connection with the village is an important element of the work and my familiarity and emotional bond provide a gateway to engage with both the land and the people. It has also been crucial to recognise and work with the complexities of having both insider and outsider perspectives, and to find ways to leverage those to my benefit. Through the course of this body of work I explored the village from these perspectives; through the cultivated spaces and the wild, uncultivated places in the surrounding woodlands; the community groups and associations; the intimate spaces within the home; alongside the topographical composition of the village itself.

### **Cultivations: Tamed spaces, wild places**

My first venture into exploring the territory of home was expressed through *The Gardeners*, reflecting my early interest in the groups and associations which figure quite prominently in the structure and traditions of the community. I photographed members of the village Gardener's Association, in their gardens and greenhouses, discovering their individual, cultivated, curated spaces. Entering *their* place, I was guided by them, discussing the spaces as we moved through the landscape. Captivated by the broken, dilapidated greenhouses or the finely manicured flower beds and vegetable patches, the characteristics of these personal spaces were mirrored by the personalities of those that inhabit them.



Figure 1: Peter, from *Around Here: The Gardeners*, 2007

Reflecting back on this work I was struck by the contrasting, yet strangely harmonic relationship between these heavily cultivated places and the uncultivated spaces beyond, a metaphor, perhaps, for the highly cultivated culture of village life. It was the essence of community that initially interested me, but it was the way in which the gardeners used and shaped the land that caught my imagination and curiosity—how ‘gardens and ways of gardening convey ideas about cultural change, personal identity, lifestyle and relations in the home’ (Bhatti and Church 2004:38). The simple idea that we shape and are shaped by the land and environment that surrounds us, whether that be rural or urban, nearby or distant, cultivated or uncultivated. I was, then, inescapably drawn to those uncultivated spaces as a way to question the relationship between place, local and the land (or site) – where the (arbitrary) boundary between them has often been determined solely by an ancient deed.



Figure 2: *Christine*, from *Around Here: The Gardeners*, 2007

The village is surrounded by pockets of woodland, many of which hold the fragments of memories from my childhood, however much of it remains unexplored and unfamiliar. Photographing the woodlands has been ongoing throughout the development of the wider body of work. While simultaneously unfamiliar and comforted, in these often rambling spaces, untouched by human hand, I would spend a few solitary hours creating an almost meditative space, enabling my own connection and reconnection with the land, reflecting on the transformation of site into place and place into local. These spaces, for me, embodied another kind of temporality—the uncultivated spaces that represented an antidote to the constant movements and moments of village life. When we enter and spend time in a space or site, through the activities undertaken and the memories we attach to it, it transforms into place (Lovell 1998:6). For Yi-Fan Tuan, ‘the making of places at all scales is seen as the production of a certain kind of homeliness’ (Tuan in Cresswell 2004:24) and, for me, it is in that ‘homeliness’ we find an allusion of the local. Spending time in those different locations I became part of their makeup, at least temporarily, and my presence was swiftly covered over after I had left, the only record of my visit being the images themselves. The trace of our existence, through cultivation of the land, forms part of the layered history of a place, as Lippard observes ‘each time we enter a new

place we become one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity, which is really what all local places consist of' (1997:5).



Figure 3: *Quarts Moor #5* from *Around Here: The Woodlands*, 2016



Figure 4: *Old Orchard Copse #1* from *Around Here: The Woodlands*, 2013

## Communities and Connections

In *Living Locally* (2014) Erika Van Horn writes about her observations and interactions with the people and the land of her home, in Tipperary, Ireland. This is not where she is 'from' in the traditional, geographical sense, however through the course of the book she details experiences and small stories from which her own sense of locality has evolved. The simplicity of these interactions and the sharpness of her descriptions, as well as her evocative use of language aroused my awareness to something elemental to our underlying human 'being-ness'. This revelation has inspired a deeper interest in exploring the philosophical elements of 'local', and how this shapes who we are and how we function in our intimate spaces, within communities and within the land itself. Local, as I have come to understand it, is where the nuances of daily life are found and replayed—through our interaction with those that surround us and within the structure of a community. In the context of this village, as with many others, the community is its life-blood and the means by which a sense of belonging is formed.

In 2012 I became aware of The Whisky Men, a group of gentlemen who meet in a pub near the village on the first Thursday of every month. Each month a different bottle of whisky is tasted and its merits debated. The Scottish bonnet they wear is as much a part of the group as the whisky they drink and the nosing glasses used to savour it. The gentle humour of the bonnets was the source of fascination that led me to create these portraits, with the curious juxtaposition of the distinction of the group members and their careers. I was invited to one of their meetings, having been introduced by my father, a member of the group. I became an honorary member for that afternoon, joining in the whisky tasting and discussion, fascinated by the stories they told, cocooned in the back room of the pub during the bustling lunchtime rush, where, just beyond the archway the locals came and went.



Figure 5: Bob, Architect, Composer from *Around Here: The Whisky Men*, 2012

The portrait series was created during this meeting, much to their mild-natured amusement and curiosity. I had, perhaps, in that moment experienced someone else's 'local', embedding my understanding of the importance of the connections made and fostered in the community, reflecting Lippard's observations that, 'its about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there' (Lippard 1997:7). These connections become part of the intricate psychological framework of the village, stitching the community together. Indeed, the relationship between community and place, as Edward Relph argues, 'is... a very powerful one in which each reinforces the identity of the other, and in which the landscape is very much an expression of communally held beliefs and values and of interpersonal involvements' (1976:34). As a direct experience of this, it was through the village connections that I had that made the different strands of the body of work possible.

### Experience of place

For the writer Taiye Selasi, the concept of local was explored through the well used phrase, 'where are you from?'. Through this she questioned the logic behind the assumption that someone can actually be 'from' somewhere at all. Having been born in one country and brought up in another with parents from different countries, the notion of where she is from was not a simple as locating herself in one place. Through these ideas she came to use the term 'multi-local'. The most significant part of her take on multi-localness stems from how we might define *where* we are a local. In her proposition, a

three step test. Step one, your daily rituals, for instance, where you take your coffee everyday or where the shopkeepers know your name, essentially the things that we do and the places we go that shape the way we interact with the world. Step two, relationships, where and with whom are those interactions that shape your week. Step three, restrictions, to a greater or lesser extent, where are you able live. In our 'multi-centred society' (Lippard) each of these hold true for multiple locations often simultaneously where experiences overlap and combine, as Selasi proclaims 'my experience is where I am from' (2014). At the core of those experiences are the fleeting, ordinary, everyday moments that are forgotten in an instant, the conversations and encounters, welcome or unwelcome. These are, in essence, what creates the foundation on which the bigger, supposedly more significant moments occur, how communities forge associations and how locality is assured.

It was from these experiences of everyday encounters that I began to photograph the market days and coffee mornings alongside distinctive views and the simple 'signs of life' etched into the fabric of the village. These images represent the backdrop to other strands of the work, reinforcing the idea that 'place is primary to the construction of meaning and society. Place is primary because it is the experiential fact of our existence' (Cresswell 2004: 32). These locations signify focal points for the community—where the rituals and relationships are played out and a sense of local is formed—the land, as it has been shaped by dwelling places and desire lines, framing village life. This strand of the work is an ongoing process, marking a middle ground between my solitary pilgrimages to the woodlands and connections and conversations between myself and the members of the community groups.



Figure 6: *Saturday Market* from *Around Here*, 2013



Figure 7: *Untitled*, from *Around Here*, 2013

### Home, a dwelling, a place of being

Central to my relationship and connection to Hemyock is my parent's home. In one of the more recent strands of the work I have turned the camera around, capturing the private places and spaces and images of domesticity. 'The Local' is often thought of as external to the intimate, familial

spaces of home, where the private and the public in this context appear separated and defined, yet 'home', according to Cresswell, 'acts as a kind of metaphor for place in general' (2004:24). For each individual, 'home' is a distinctly personal experience that is profoundly significant to the way in which we experience the world (Tuan, 1977). This is then, perhaps, the point from which all understanding of locality is formed, as Cresswell, in reference to Gaston Bachelard, goes on to suggest "home is a particularly privileged kind of place that frames the way that people go on to think about the wider universe" (Cresswell 2004:25). It is this perspective that formed the springboard for my intention behind the making of this collection of images. Where the grounding nature of 'place as experience' is first felt (Selasi) and indeed where the interplay and interactions with others are first learnt (Van Horn). It 'is the foundation of our identity', according to Relph, 'as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling place of being' (1976:39).



Figure 8: *Untitled*, from *Around Here: The Home*, 2016

I have made images of the places within the home that, to me, represent my mother and father individually and collectively, as well as the traces of other family members, yet these also represent something far more than a single family's idiosyncrasies. By choosing to present these spaces absent of human presence enabled a quieter, more reflective representation of the ordinary every spaces of familial inhabitation, focusing less on specific identities, allowing for more consideration of the common functions and cultural reference points. I was keenly aware of the influence of nostalgia on my observations during the process of making these images. However, the presence of these images leverage but also provide a balance to the public and the private spheres represented through the other strands in the wider body of work. My thoughts around this strand are still forming, as the significance of home in relation to the local is perhaps more fragile and harder to grasp particularly as the concept of home is a contested and widely debated subject, where for one it can represent a space of comfort and stability, to another insecurity and uncertainty (O'Brien 2010:194, Mallett 2004:64). Through photographing these spaces I became more aware of the interplay between 'home' as the house where we live, or have grown up in, and the wider notion of 'home' as the (known and familiar) landscape



that surrounds it. One cannot exist without the other, where both have a distinct and pervasive influence on the creation of what is local.



Figure 8: *Surprise orange tomatoes*, from *Around Here: The Home*, 2016

The development of *Around Here* is ongoing and the ideas presented throughout this paper continue to inform the body of work. Each stage in the process of making has informed the next, opening up other approaches with which to explore these complex themes. At the heart of this work, my aim is to use the images to reflect on what makes us local, and it is clear the notion of place has a significant role to play within that. Yet, in wrestling with, and through negotiation of, these concepts I have also been afforded a more fluid and fulfilling understanding of how we attribute meaning to our everyday lives. The desire to further my understanding of my own place in the world is what drives the work forward. The body of work is more than simply a document of a small English country village, there is something more fundamental at play. The cultivations of the land that are shaped and shape their inhabitants, the daily rituals and interactions, as well as connections made and fostered. It is these that allude to something far more intricate and elemental, a springboard to a more universal language of being.

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