

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## BRITISH PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE THATCHER YEARS

February 14 - April 28, 1991

A new approach to social documentary photography exploring the quality of life in contemporary Britain, as demonstrated in the work of British artists John Davies, Paul Graham, Chris Killip, Martin Parr, and Graham Smith, is the subject of a major exhibition opening at The Museum of Modern Art on February 14, 1991. Organized by Susan Kismaric, curator, Department of Photography, **BRITISH PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE THATCHER YEARS** includes seventy-five works made since the late 1970s, when Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister. The five photographers are directed by individual intuitions about complex social problems, having lost faith in the simpler solutions and programmatic political stances of traditional documentarians. The exhibition is on view through April 28, 1991.

The policies and legislation of Thatcher's government greatly affected the social, political, and cultural climate of the 1970s and 1980s. During the same period, British photography has enjoyed a tremendous resurgence. While indebted to a social documentary tradition in Great Britain, this newer work reflects a more sophisticated understanding of the use of photography and of complicated modern social issues.

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Ms. Kismaric writes, "The current radical changes in British life have charged these photographers with an artistic mandate to look closely at the people and at the landscape in

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which they live. While the earlier British documentarians photographed the 'other,' those outside their social class, and generally of a station less fortunate than theirs, these photographers embrace what is closest to them. Their work reflects an affection for their country and fellow citizens that is unflinching in its description of the country's most extreme ills and the complex manifestations of economic change that are restructuring its society."

John Davies's black-and-white photographs depict the uneasy relationship between the bucolic English countryside and the architectural remnants of post-industrial England. Using a large-format camera and taking pictures from a high vantage point, Davies establishes a sense of seeing things objectively. Each detail within the frame is given equal visual weight, creating a balance between nature and man.

In Paul Graham's work, a series titled *In Umbra Res (In the Shadow of It)*, color portraits and still lifes convey the omnipresent tension of life in Northern Ireland. While his subjects seem ordinary--a man looking up, a worn countertop, or a commercial wedding portrait in a shop window--they take on a symbolic meaning. Often out of focus or partially blurred, these large-scale prints (up to 65 x 48") are both intuitive and expressionistic.

Chris Killip's black-and-white photographs, from his book *In Flagante*, portray the townspeople of Newcastle, a post-industrial city in northeast England. In the series, the photographer has captured punks in a frenzied dance, a young girl playing with a hula-hoop in a littered landscape, and rain-drenched protestors during the 1974 coal miners' strike. Killip's view presents Newcastle as a place of unrelenting despair, where, as Ms. Kismaric writes, "an irrevocable, unidentifiable force has undermined the individual lives pictured."

Martin Parr's vivid color images of Britain's burgeoning middle class are characterized by a dry sense of humor consistent with the country's satirical literary tradition. These photographs are especially suited to color as they describe the new-found materialism of contemporary Britons spending their money on clothes, furniture, and other items.

Graham Smith photographs friends and relatives, often in the local pubs of Middlesbrough, a depressed community in northeast England. In *The Dreams All Gone*, *Irish Club*, *Middlesbrough*, for example, a bleak future seems imminent for an attractive young woman as a drunken man leans against her. In Smith's work, details, such as the worn edges of a table, light reflected on a glass, and the wrinkles of skin, are captured by his large-format camera and flash.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 212/708-9750.