

Royal College of Art

N° 109

Imagining King's Cross

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Communication**



Royal College of Art
Postgraduate Art & Design

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Submission details

Researcher(s)
Anne Howeson

Title
Imagining King's Cross

Output Type
Artefacts

Output Components
Artefacts (drawings)

Dates
2015–ongoing

Dissemination
Cross Street Gallery, London; University College London, Drawing Room, London; Edinburgh University Conference; Government College of Fine Arts, Thrissur, India; Journal of Illustration; Varoom Magazine; Monocle Radio (please see full list provided in the dissemination section).

The Output

The focus of this creative body of enquiry is a place in transition. Working with historical photography from the London Metropolitan Archives, the research looks at the ongoing renovation and redevelopment in King's Cross, London, through the lens of collective memory.

Investigating the ways photographs can be merged with drawings to re-imagine themes of place, architectural regeneration and travel, the project is part of a longstanding inquiry into the neighbourhood of King's Cross (the largest area of urban redevelopment and regeneration in Europe) as experienced by generations of travellers and local communities.

Earlier research (for 'Remember Me' 2009) recorded, documented and commemorated parts of King's Cross and St Pancras before demolition and renovation began, and it suggested an architectural future for a place on the brink of transformation.

In this research, archival photographs of King's Cross station and its railway lands are used as a springboard for images that re-interpret and re-invent a place during significant transformation. They demonstrate the artist's 'duty as a bearer of

cultural memory' (Rainer Maria Rilke) by depicting the shared memories of local people and travellers who face social, cultural and architectural change.

Theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli's ideas on memory have informed the research: 'We are not a collection of independent processes in successive moments. Every moment of our existence is linked by a peculiar triple thread to our past – the most recent and the most distant – by memory. Our present swarms with traces of our past. We are histories of ourselves' (*The Order of Time*, 2017).

Memory, observation and written sources have been woven into this investigation in an attempt to overwrite and re-imagine the early photographic versions of a specific place, creating new and contrasting interpretations. The resulting hybrid images show that distant and recent memories can be made simultaneous through drawing, layered but separate – as in a palimpsest.

The images were exhibited in an exhibition at the Cross Street Gallery (17 September–1 October 2015). The research was also disseminated through conference and event presentations, a radio interview and an article 'Drawing and the Remembered City' published in the *Journal of Illustration*, 5 (1).



[fig. 1] King's Cross, 1930s (original photograph).



[fig. 2] *Burning Books*, 2020 (40 × 50 cm). Brexit, COVID-19 pandemic, censorship.



[fig. 3] The construction of King's Cross station, 1840s(?) (original photograph).



[fig. 4] *Ruin*, 2020 (40 × 50 cm).

Research Enquiry and Methods

Research Questions

- Can contemporary drawing and historic photography merge and collide to evoke the collective memory of a place in transition?
- What special characteristics of drawing give it the agency to convey themes of travel, change and urban regeneration in ways that are distinct from photography?

Research Methods

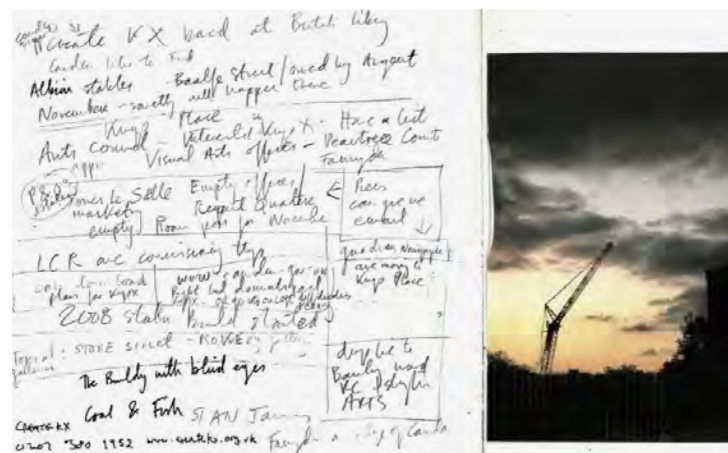
The primary photographic research was conducted over a long period, often at night, in the deserted 'edge lands' of the King's Cross railway lands before they were opened up for redevelopment. While officially open to the public, the area – described by Charles Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* as 'a tract of suburban Sahara, where tiles and bricks were burnt, bones were boiled, carpets were beat, rubbish was shot, dogs were fought, and dust was heaped by contractors' – had not been in full public use for many years.

Early personal reference photographs have been supplemented by ongoing research at the London Metropolitan Archives, where late 19th- to

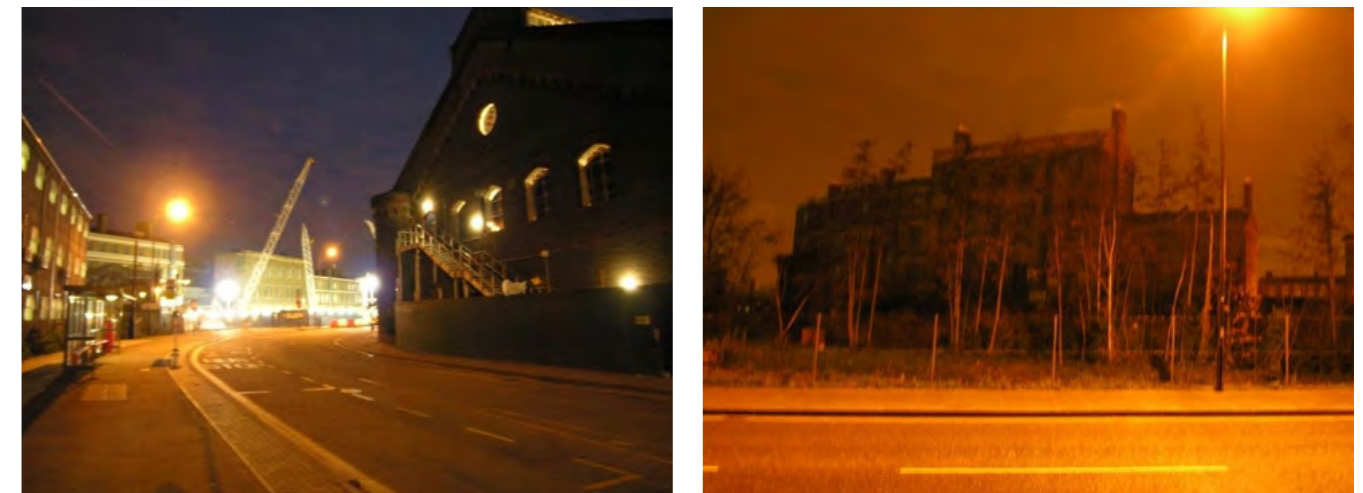
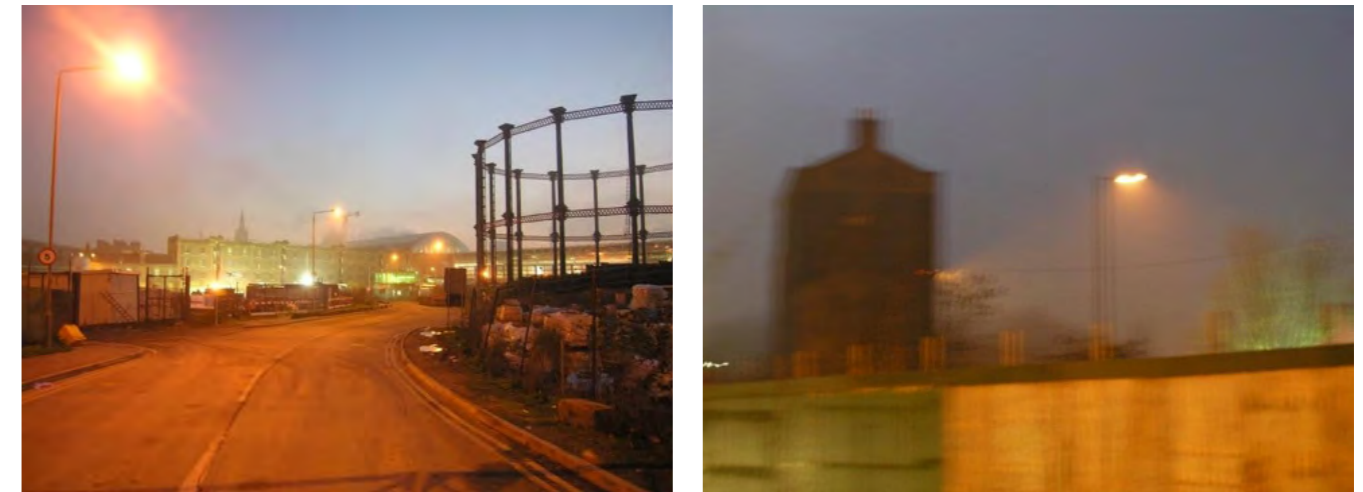
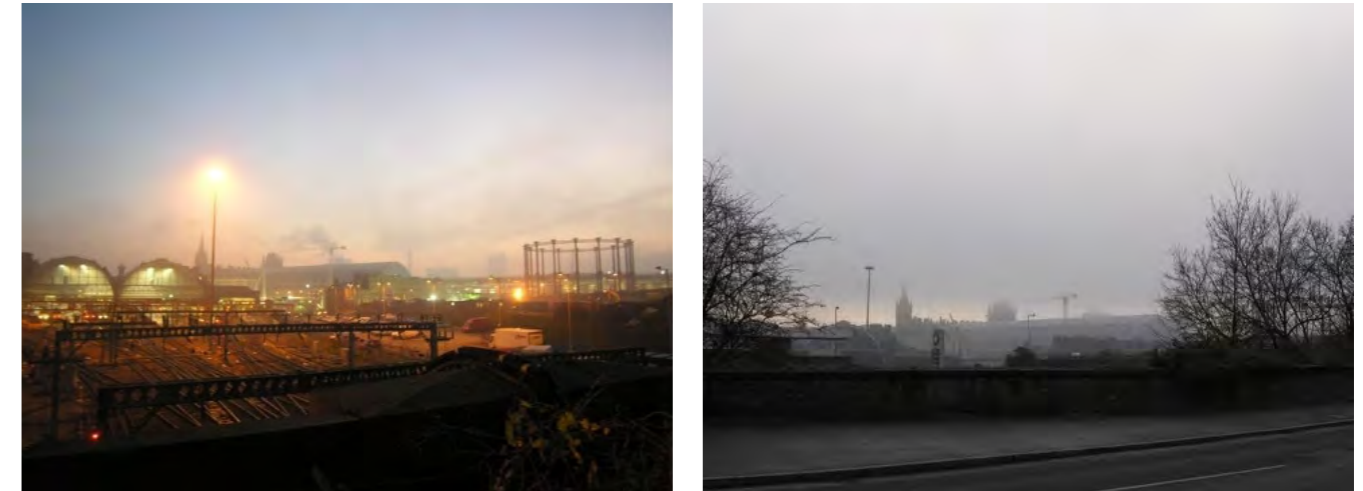
mid-20th-century black-and-white photographs (sometimes anonymous) from the archives have been selected. These photographs with figurative or architectural elements look at the early years of life close to and inside the railway stations.

Chosen images are cropped and printed onto heavy paper. Sections of the original black-and-white photographs are scratched, rubbed out or removed with white spirit and overlaid with opaque paint. Interventions such as colour and new figurative details are introduced. These processes allow a blending of people's disparate, unconnected recollections from different eras. In some cases, the drawing mimics the original photograph – without trying to copy it – by extending the edges and playing with the original 'story' [see fig. 19]. The imagery ranges from the mundane – commuting travellers meeting across time – to the psychological [see fig. 21], where unsettling anxieties about Brexit, pandemics and totalitarian states are evoked through the scattering of flashbacks and imaginings.

Drawing is used as the primary, secondary and final research method. The final 'photo drawings' do not begin as sketches, but grow incrementally and intuitively over the photographs.



[fig. 5] Primary research: drawings and notes for 'Imagining King's Cross'.



[figs. 6–11] Early personal reference photographic research (2005–2015). King's Cross railway lands (photographs by Anne Howeson).



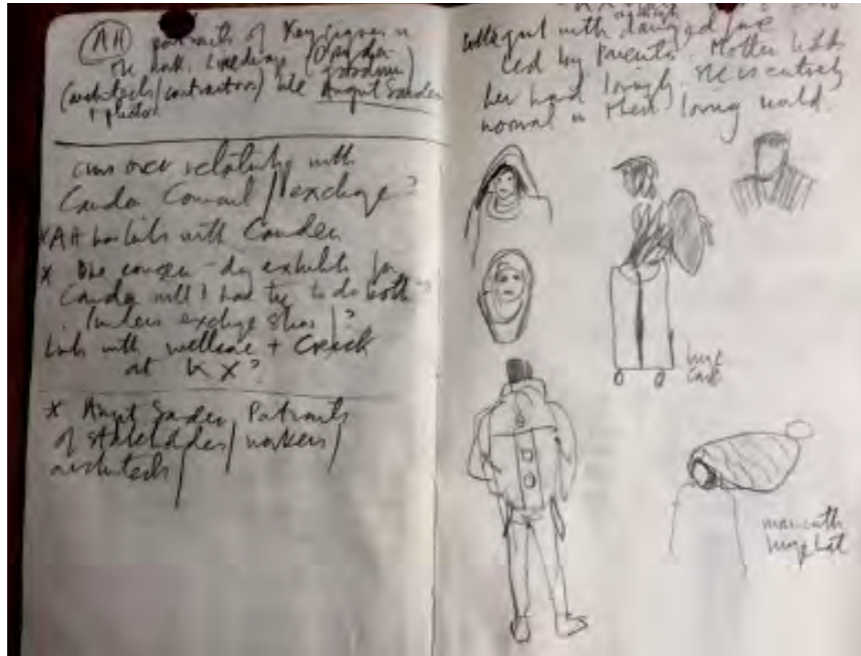
[fig. 12] Primary research: drawings and notes for 'Imagining King's



[fig. 13] King's Cross, 1930s (original photograph).



[fig. 14] *Different Journeys*, 2017 (40 × 46 cm)
(showing outline of original photograph extending beyond the drawing).



[figs. 15–18] Primary research for 'Imagining King's Cross' – travellers in King's Cross concourse.



[fig. 19] King's Cross station platform, 1889 (original photograph).



[fig. 20] King's Cross railway shed, 2020 (40 x 50 cm).

Findings and Insights



[fig. 21] King's Cross Regeneration and Revival', a stopframe animation, player.vimeo.com/video/210508928

The images demonstrate a distinctive way of portraying memory in a collision between drawing and photography. They offer a layered, time-based experience of place and how it connects to the passing fragments of our lives, and question the premise that the photograph – Henri Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment', the 'split second that reveals the larger truth of a situation' – is the definitive way to capture memory.

This practice of altering and extending the content of photographs by reprinting and drawing over them has no close precedent. While Howeson's research has links to the photomontages of John Heartfield and the photographic collages of John Stezaker, it differs in its use of materials (graphite pencil, Conté and crayon) and because its main focus is not surreal or overtly political but seeks to evoke the dreamlike and poetic atmosphere of memory and the unconscious in the context of everyday life. Memory, according to Marcel Proust, is an 'endless edifice of recollection'. Other practitioners who subvert photography by using embroidery on photographs, such as Maurizio Anzeri and Julie Cockburn, also differ in content as well as in process.

Howeson's research was informed by the film essayist Chris Marker's CD-ROM publication *Immemory* (1997), in which he describes fragments of memory in terms of geography: 'In every life we would find continents, islands, deserts, swamps, overpopulated territories and terrae incognitae [...] After a certain quantity, photos apparently taken by chance, postcards chosen according to a passing mood, begin to trace an itinerary, to map the imaginary country that stretches out before us'.

Another influence was Stefan Hertmans's book *Intercities* (2001), in which he writes: 'Forgetting is a strange power, because it makes memory possible. That is why all architecture from the past is something like the music of space, which surrounds us and sends us images that we have constantly to interpret'.

The act of imagining King's Cross visually interrogates the forgetting and remembering of incidents and moments from everyday lives in the context of a specific place. It seeks to re-interpret the images sent to us from the music of space.

Portfolio References

- Dickens, C. 2008 [1865]. *Our Mutual Friend*. Cotsell, M., ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Estrin, J. 2016. 'Henri Cartier-Bresson, Whose "Decisive Moment" Shaped Modern Photography'. *New York Times*, 3 August. Available at: [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/obituaries/archives/henri-cartier-bresson-photography](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/obituaries/archives/henri-cartier-bresson-photography) (accessed 15 December 2020).
- Marker, C. 1998. *Immemory*. CD-ROM. Chris Marker/Centre Georges Pompidou.
- Proust, M. 2003. *In Search of Lost Time. Volume 1: Swann's Way*. Scott Moncrieff, C.K. and Kilmartin, T., trans. New York: Modern Library.
- Rovelli, C. 2017. *The Order of Time*. New York: Penguin Random House.

Dissemination

Research for 'Imagining King's Cross' was discussed in the following symposiums/lectures/talks/papers:

Lectures

- 'One Day in the City – Metropolis Transformed: King's Cross'. University College London, London, UK, 14 June 2014 [Appendix 1].
- 'Drawing and the Remembered City'. Paper for Shaping the View conference, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland, November 2016 [Appendix 2].
- 'The Endless Edifice of Recollection'. Drawing Room Research talk, London, UK, September 2017 [Appendix 3].

Review

- 'Kings Cross as Palimpsest – Redrawing the Urban Landscape'. 2015. Cassone, February. cassone-art.com/art-news/2015/02/kings-cross-as-a-palimpsest-redrawing-the-urban-landscape/

Broadcast

- 'Section D: From South Korea to King's Cross'. 2015. Monocle Radio interview, 10 February. monocle.com/radio/shows/section-d/174/ [Appendix 4].

Publications

- Vormittag, L. 2017. 'Innovators – Public Realm: Anne Howeson's Kings Cross St. Pancras Project'. Stop-frame animation and interview. *Varoom Magazine* 36 (Rhythm) [Appendix 5].

Journal Article

- Howeson, A. 2018. 'Drawing and the Remembered City'. *Journal of Illustration*, 5 (1). [Appendix 6]

Additional Outcomes

- In 2019, the Wellcome Trust in London invited Howeson to select material from their archives for a Wellcome Stories project. The project was called 'Painful Realities' and was in collaboration with the medical historian Dr Jaipreet Virdi. wellcomecollection.org/series/XTg-5pRAAACUAP5U5 [Appendix 7] This project was also informed by a separate body of research submitted to REF2021 by Howeson as 'Drawing Narratives in Time'.
- 'King's Cross Regeneration and Revival', a stop-frame animation, player.vimeo.com/video/210508928, also used the print archives in its research dialogue with narrative and time. It was shortlisted for the Ruskin Prize 2017 and was featured in the 2017 *Varoom* interview [Appendix 8].



[fig. 22] *Painful Realities*, Wellcome Trust Commission, 2019 (adapted archival photograph from the Wellcome Collection).



[fig. 23] King's Cross railway shed. 'Imagining King's Cross' exhibition poster.

Appendices

- **Appendix 1** 'One Day in the City – Metropolis Transformed: King's Cross'. University College London, London, UK, 14 June 2014. drive.google.com/file/d/156Bnc1VdKvVgpQaOgLNCwJdQPpLc3OX/view?usp=sharing
- **Appendix 2** 'Drawing and the Remembered City'. Paper for Shaping the View conference, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland, November 2016. drive.google.com/file/d/1_1rfO9NRs9orrRYVcW2MzhV1IYu5UiJe/view?usp=sharing
- **Appendix 3** 'The Endless Edifice of Recollection'. Drawing Room Research talk, London, UK, September 2017. drive.google.com/file/d/1CFjDchYJL_10QKKQQtA9JzvqpszU-VkJ-/view?usp=sharing
- **Appendix 4** 'Section D: From South Korea to King's Cross'. 2015. Monocle Radio interview, 10 February. monocle.com/radio/shows/section-d/174/
- **Appendix 5** Vormittag, L. 2017. 'Innovators – Public Realm: Anne Howeson's Kings Cross St. Pancras Project'. Stop-frame animation and interview. *Varoom Magazine* 36 (Rhythm).

Film: player.vimeo.com/video/210508928

Interview: drive.google.com/file/d/1jiQ1HV-VQV4SvO0PvLjXnuXkBoPycQ1gz/view?usp=sharing
- **Appendix 6** Howeson, A. 2018. 'Drawing and the Remembered City'. *Journal of Illustration*, 5(1). researchonline.rca.ac.uk/3685/
- **Appendix 7** *Painful Realities*. 2019. Wellcome Trust Stories project. In collaboration with Dr Jaipreet Viridi. wellcomecollection.org/series/XTg5pRAAACUAP5U5
- **Appendix 8** 'King's Cross Regeneration and Revival'. Stop-frame animation. player.vimeo.com/video/210508928.

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