

Oral History of British Photography

Wilmer, Val, 1941- (speaker, female; interviewee)
1993-10-12, 1993-10-19

Recording

(TAPE 1 OF 7 SIDE A F3787 1 OF 7 ORIGINAL ON C459/46/01)

Interviewed by Michael Ann Mullen at Val's house

13th October 1993

Val was born in Harrogate in Yorkshire, although her father was born in India as the son of a Raj officer.

Her mum was from Purley in London. Her and her brother were born in the North because of the war.

Her father died the day before her 7th birthday and then moved to London – she talks about various difficulties in school

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She begins to talk about how the Girl Guides (at 11) really almost inspired her socialism.

The ideas of loyalty and decency that were taught there and that she learned her church upbringing has informed the way she still lives her life.

She talks about Jewish families concealing their Jewishness, very much so at that stage.

She told her careers adviser that she wanted to be a journalist and her teacher was a bit shocked.

MA: now it would be useful to talk about where your interest in Photography came from

[Her mother had a box camera and it would go on holiday with them, there was always a camera around, she took haughty control of her mum's photos and chucked out ones she didn't like and then began to commandeer the camera to take pictures herself. She believes she really thought about composition from 13/14, she found photo books on holidays and got her education from them.]

MA: how did you move on with photography?

V: "I literally tripped over photography one day, when I tripped over a book in the mud, "How to do trick photography", so I took it home and wanted to experiment"

[Her mother let her turn a box room into a laboratory/darkroom, she had a kind of a chemical bent, and she was also interested in how the human body was constructed. It was a Focal Press book. She tried ghost photography, using her

brother as a model! Boots wouldn't print them as a double exposure, but she went back and forced them too. A fellow cub instructor taught her how to develop films.

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She talks about Lilliput Magazine and Men Only magazine, had erotic imagery but also very good photographer's work as well.

She was interested in Painting and did Art
She ended up doing photography at the polytechnic by accident of a meeting with a neighbour who decided for her. So then she left school and went straight to the Regent Street poly to do a 2-year course, which changed to 3 years in photography in September 59. Got taught the basics of photography. In each year there were 8 men and 4 women which was fairly good representation!

She studied with Maggie Murray, Sally Burgess and Richard Greenhill (who eventually married).

She felt like she wanted to be a writer and not a photographer so at the beginning her heart wasn't in it. But she was a good learner and there was a high percentage of women (for the time) on the staff and on the course and she felt that had she been the only woman she would have found it very discouraging.

Without those role models, photography was a men's world and she talks about the women who took all the photographs for things at the time like 'A taste of honey' and that all these women were taking pictures and Edith Hart's pictures at the Whitechapel changed the dialogue around photography being art. So her entry into the male dominated photography world was softened by the presence of so many women.

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She started to write for different jazz publications and also done her first professional assignment, plus her and her friend joined the young communist league and the secretary of the branch was also the secretary of Wolf Mankowitz and was asked to write an article for the Challenge, always under a pseudonym – in case she ever wanted to go to America LAUGHS.

She shot her first assignment therefore for him.

She stopped going to church and stopped leading cubs.

She made contacts with jazz musicians through black barber shops in London.

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She gains her awareness of black consciousness now (this is in the early 60s)

It was a very cold environment including a lot of very predatory men so it was a little difficult.

A nice guy called Morris, showed her how to use a Leica, she says there was a lot of hostility from men, especially when she presented as a photographer, but this

man was very nice and they had a lovely platonic relationship which was nice in this particular milieu.

But then she knew a bass player called Russ Allen and he became a photographer, who opened a studio on Windmill street opposite a big music meeting place and studio (Archer Street)

So she went and worked for him to fill in as his assistant and then she looked for jobs in the BJP, she went to see Dorothy Wilding, but she was treated so badly by her she "fled from her in horror" but really there was very little around.

They were mostly just for printing and very lowly paid, so she got a job in a studio that copied artworks.

And eventually she got to do some printing but it was hell.

All of her ambitions were thwarted and faded and she was out of work.

But the phone rang and it Russ wanted her to come to work for him again, so she went back and worked in his darkroom for over a year and she ended up filling in for him a lot. Using HPS film and flash, huge grainy prints. All the burgeoning pop groups.

So a good grounding plus getting to know a few more people similar to those she met at Tropic magazine.

She began then to do dancehall and wedding photography – all of her other work was subsidised by this! A part of her life that for a long time she denied, it was something she said that serious photographers didn't do, but now she's older she can see the learning from it.

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She talks about when she shot at the BBC at first "There were never any other women there and it always felt strange" photographing the old vanguard but then...

She was interviewing someone for Flamingo, and Michael Aldred came in and it turned out it was a TV programme, called Ready, Steady, Go, every Friday.

She said the atmosphere had changed and there were lots of women charging about which was such a change,

She says that she got work by phoning up press offices of the BBC and asking to photograph the rehearsals. Taking pictures it was great and exciting. Photographing the Rolling Stones drinking cups of tea and so on, in fact she was even a bit older than most of these young new media people running around...

She says she was still living at home at this stage and never really felt the need to leave, her mother was very tolerant and would say to her to bring her friends home with her and she,

“Brought all sorts of people, in fact I was even involved with a few women at the time and I brought them home, I’m not sure how much my mother knew what the situation was but there was no problem, I brought a lot of my black men friends home and there was no problem”

“I don’t know what her friends thought but she was certainly okay!”

She then talks about going to New York in 67 and how much the old and new music would mix a bit more and she became more attracted to the music of her generation.

She says she was getting ‘all kinds of reputations’! But also as a journalist who took pictures.

She says she sometimes felt under pressure to conform and be either a journalist or a photographer and only now doesn’t feel the pressure to have to be pigeonholed now.

(TAPE 4 OF 7 SIDE A F3787 1 OF 7 ORIGINAL ON C459/46/04)

MA: talking about image of self as a photographer and as a journalist

She had articles accepted as melody Maker, what did you do after that?

“More of the same,... at first it wasn’t very often but gradually it grew and there were more.”

“I continued to take photographs and to know about photographs and to look at photographers”

She always thought she was interested in reportage but she didn’t seem to be able to find the work so she almost resented doing portrait and wedding and editorial jobs.

She repeats again how much of a men’s world it was, but it was constant. But she never thought of doing anything else. Her mother and then her first life partner were both very supportive.

She worked with Nigerian journalists for an African agency called Africa Features. All the contacts she made through both Flamingo magazine and through doing Nigerian weddings.

She funded a trip to Ghana by doing construction photography.

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She talks about New York about a fomenting time, Ideas of women's liberation, hanging out in women's bars and she feel she took some of her best pictures in America just preceding this.

She says the music gave just as much to her life as to her photography.

She had the third ever photography show at the V&A, in 1973, the first being a sports show and the second a group show. There were reviews and interviews and the opening was very widely attended.

She talks about how she FINALLY became comfortable with being a photographer now and she called the Times and said she wanted to work with him. She developed a really good friendship with Norman the Picture Editor. He treated her with such respect and consideration, it really meant something to her.

Ian Macintosh was his successor and Keith Smith but eventually she started to turn it down because they paid so little and she felt it was demeaning.

Things like working for the Times were borne out of a need to be treated with respect, and she says "women in those days were treated with disdain".

She worked shifts at the Times over a few years. Which takes us to 1975.

"In 1971 I got more involved in thinking about women's liberation"

I saw Sally Greenhill sitting doing something with prints n the Photographer's Gallery and I'd read that her husband Richard Greenhill had gone to China

(TAPE 5 OF 7 SIDE A F3787 1 OF 7 ORIGINAL ON C459/46/05)

She said Hi and they developed a friendship again which was good because she was feeling isolated and she never really had photographers as peers before.

"The women's movement was becoming a hard part of life for women to ignore now, everyone was becoming fed up with the lives that their mother's had led"

"thinking of new ways of expression and became interested in empowerment"

"I realised that I did [need the women's movement]"

"I was approached by,.. Angela Phillips.. and a photographer called Serena Wadden in the NUJ and she approached a lot of women about whether they wanted to be in a women's group exhibition"

But they told her that she was 'too professional' to be shown in the group show. Very disconcerting and retreated into herself.

Then after her V&A she went back to West Africa to stay for a while, BB King was doing a tour of three African cities.

She was in Africa for 3 months but aside from BB Kings state department tour visit she didn't take any photographs.

"I just lost the desire completely,..."

Then she saw some fisher women one nights therapy back to the place she was staying and her companion Barry said as she lifted up her camera: " oh yes the people here make such beautiful shapes! And it was just such a slap in the face"

So she recoiled, she couldn't photograph them.

When she returned home she then wrote an article for the BJP called "they make such beautiful shapes" about colonialism, inspired by conversations she had in New York about representing other people's culture, about whether we as Europeans have a right to photograph people in the third world - I mean I'd never seen anybody write anything about this and I explained why it was okay to photograph some things and not others."

I was reading that the other day and I was amazed at myself for writing this piece, I. Was amazed at them for publishing it!

This is all before is heard any of this debate, 'what do we have a right to photograph?'

Of course it was tempered, inspired by having lived at Ornetts place I New York and hearing the conversations that went on between black people all the time about these things, the way whites represent us, how they do it, how they abuse our culture I mean there wasn't only black it was other people too but there was no way after that. I mean I went down south to photograph since then but there was a reason for that - but the idea of photographing someone on the street, I just couldn't do it. I mean I have done it but it's never been right and it's never felt right."

When I've seen other people doing it I've wondered how are you doing that?!"

Africa - at Niger she got badly bitten by mosquitoes which stilted the rest of her trip.

I felt very strange coming home after being in West Africa for three months coming back with no pictures.

It's different I suppose if you go to a war torn country like Somalia, you're a war photographer then you have a label, you've got a name!

MAM|: well if you're doing pictures for a reason, there's gotta be a context then it's fine. did you come back to the debate about this thing then? There were those debates in the 70s

" yes but I'd been saying these things for a while before it became a more general debate in the photographic community. And I think my inspiration to do that came from closer contact with the people who were the subjects of a lot of our pictures"

MAM: and had made contact with Sally Richard and Maggie by then?

VW: yeah oh yeah - I don't know if we talked about that much but "we were developing a kind of morality and an ethics around our work and the way we

should treat the people we photographed and what the possibility to them was in terms of... You know would we give them a print... I mean I've paid people to photograph them sometimes... Not before I got my first grant...

In my trip in 1972 I'd met a lot of women I got on really well with in Mississippi and the idea of photographing these great women I knew in the Deep South, struggling against the odds, seemed attractive, that's not the right word but the right thing to do. I felt as if I'd photographed men all the time and round about this time I decided I was too occupied with photographing other lives,

She says she began to think that she should turn the camera on to her own circle of people but she grew tired of it and actually finds she responds to people utterly not like her. She realised we do get stimulated creatively by something other to ourselves.

"To this day i prefer photographing men to women. I know this isn't particularly sort of favoured view among feminists, but that's what I respond to in people, their otherness"

She went back to Mississippi in 1974 and had to deal with a whole new set of people. From attorneys to fieldworkers.

Some pics were used in the three perspectives on photography but she felt she didn't have a right to do any more and that these were really other people's stories.

As a result of the V&A's show in 73 was the women's photography group that had to shows at the half moon photography gallery.

This happened because of Wendy Ewald.

She had decided there should be a women's photo exhibition with Julia Meadows. They came to see me in Balham and I asked them who else they'd approached and I don't think they'd approached anybody else!

She told them about Maggie and Sally and Angela Phillips which is how we came together as a group and for many of us was the start of all the debates about women in photography.

Hackney flashers was subsequent to that.

In 1975 we did another show called 'men'... But we met every week and discussed things. Lots of people, " me Sally Angela Maggie, Tony Walker, Jessie Ann Matthews, Claire Schwab, several other people I can't remember. Angela Williams, then we had the show about men there were a few other people drafted in like Caroline Forbes...

But we used to meet every week in different people's homes and discuss the photographs and it was a wonderful learning process and people who were hostile to the ideas of feminism learnt en route, on the hoof, others who had never considered them before delved into their souls and found themselves coming up with all kinds of ideas and they were wonderful times. Very

triumphant times, you know the beginning of the women's movement, thinking we could change the world!

All we had to do was to be good and to think and be righteous! Everything would fall into place, ho go.

MAM| so this was very different for you to be working in a group - and with women

VW: uh huh, it was yeah but it was necessary from within. When I went to New Orleans in 1971 and photographed the wives. Albeit in the background, they had to be there because women were part of everything, it wasn't just run by men and for too long I had believed it was so and I suppose I believed that I didn't have a right to - but I do have a right to.

But you're so brainwashed, my mother didn't make me wear pink bows in my hair but it doesn't matter if she doesn't tell you. Someone will tell you you know you're supposed to do this and your limitations are that.

MAM: it effects what you see! You perhaps didn't see the wives before

WW: exactly you're asked to photograph Joe blogs you. Photograph joe blogs.mshes out there in the kitchen,...

So it changed for me.

MAM: do you're perspectives on photography began to be hanged as you were involved in this group?

VW: mmm yeah I didn't take photographs for the exhibitions, photographs came from what we had. It was the same for everyone, they were based on what we had already taken. They were good exhibitions.

MAM: so this perhaps was at the time you were working at the TIMEs as well?

VW: yes

MAM: 75 was the exhibition and 76 was when the book came out in the United States. To a fair amount of acclaim I suppose.

VE: well.....

There was so much going on at the time it's a period of my life I find very hard to remember because there was so much going on it seems like every day there was. A new thing. In 77 there was a women's festival at the drill hall which I showed some photographs in.

Talks about making work and agrees with Duke Ellington, when someone asked him what his favourite composition was he said the next one, and She agrees. I mean I'm pleased I did certain things but I want to look at the futures and at what I'm doing now.

One of the things that comes from these oral history interviews is how people arrive at the nature of their art, you know the direction that they take and so on, their experience and I think that although the photography is very much about techniques and the ability to draw with light and so on, it's also about perceptions and attitudes, you pick up on the way. I'm glad I was. Novice when I started photographing musicians, I was a fan, if I hadn't have been I'd have come to them with the burden of technique. The music was my main interest if I'm honest,... It was a way of getting close to the musicians.

I don't want to deify them because some of them were bastards hey really were, but this gave me a chance to get into their world and experience it. Something most people from my background would never have had the chance to do. All this impinges on the way you take photographs. I learnt about life and I learned about myself and of course my relationships with musicians which covered everything from sexual relationships to friendships to battles in some cases. I mean I was involved in all kinds of fracas with people of all tempers.

...

You did start to witness things happening that did cause you to question the status quo...so that was good for me. It pulled my coat so that I began to see the reality of this country.

And the musicians taught me how to see, how to see them - the world of primarily black people in a different way than most of my contemporaries and this affected the way I took pictures and how I photographed jazz musicians. It also affected me as a person and a political animal, which I was, which I was becoming, I mean we all are really let's face it. I became increasingly more so as time went on so attitudes that I imbibe through my associations with black musicians and black culture in general, they affected my view of myself as a woman. Were part of the way I applied myself and sort of how I got involved in the woman's liberation struggle.

So really all I wanted to say about that was that none of this would have happened if I'd have gone to the music as a grown up sophisticated person.

Really I was a kid I was only what sixteen at the start.

People think come back stage, have a drink - take pictures.

She talks about being grateful to the people who trusted her and believed she could take photographs - especially the musicians.

Because a lot of the time her presence as a woman from other people backstage was actually presumed to be because she wanted to have sex with a band member.

She believes that being discriminated against because they were black meant they had some empathy (despite often being sexual predators) with her being undermined as a professional because she wasn't a white man.

This was how she photographed people and understood them as more than just musicians with an instrument.

She understood them as people. The ones she was close to impressed upon her that the way Jazz musicians were portrayed then was due to racism and headlines of drug busts despite being about much more, and despite doctors for example, using drugs as much. So although it was never said she felt a responsibility to portray them as serious artists.

Her early days in a church setting grounded her moral compass into one of equality and humanitarianism. She had the sense of internationalism aroused by the scout movement.

She looked at expel like Eugene Smith as a spiritual guru, she felt she wouldn't be up to that standard.

She only decided to think of herself as an artist when she wanted to sell prints.

She was more interested in being part of the action and using her camera, "whether it involved being backstage with musicians or being involved with women's demonstrations and lesbian demonstrations anti racist demonstrations, the grunwicks action. That was a long saga... That's what I wanted to do I wanted to be a press photographer, I was a press photographer - at the time of the six day war in Israel, we did a story for time out about what Jews and Muslims were doing for the war effort in that country."

MAM: you were also a jobbing photographer then it shifted can't you talk about that change?

1971 saw her think of herself as a photographer, "having the chance to have the V&A exhibition made me think of myself as a photographer"

I studied with david hurn and they were all a bit purist about it (using a Leica)

She thinks it produces a different way of seeing, photography is about concentration

(TAPE 5 OF 7 SIDE B F3787 1 OF 7 ORIGINAL ON C459/46/05)

"Photography is about concentration, nowadays people are seduced by techniques."

She likes Leonard Freid and Dennis Stock as photographers.

When she was at college Margaret Bourke-White was a big hero. Who produced strong images. She was apparently a woman who was against the odds and she had her focusing cloth made to match her skirt and so on.

She loved Eve Arnold's Islamic pics in the Soviet Union.

“In the 70s as time went on, there was so much going on politically and I was involved in a lot of it.”

“Towards the end of the 70s there was a sense of being part of the action”

She did a lot of work for Spare Rib and wrote for them as well, reviewed photography books and exhibitions.

Rosie Parker, who worked for Spare Rib, was one of the first people to work there, her aunt was a legendary Jazz Baroness. (Nike de conissomething) She liked Val's work so she commissioned Val for them to write and to photograph.

We used to have visual group meetings one Sunday a month for Spare Rib and talk about the visual content of the magazine. The idea of not photographing the battered woman or the molested child but you can produce collages instead which represent. Maggie Murray, Angela Phillips, Jo Spence may have been there. Instead of concentrating on the victims. Laura Margoyles and Jill Nichols. Sally greenhill.

All these heterosexual women were involved with men photographers in Report agency. And there was a crossover with that agency , real life men's world of photogaphy. John sturrock and Laurie sparhams partners.

She keeps talking about Report and how they started to “become involved in the men’s world, there was this kind of idea that Fleet Street was a man’s province”

And she feels it’s important to say that men almost kept something apart.

There was also a great socialist politics and the women who were feminists became increasingly socialist, especially in that particular photographic world.

She talks of many nights of late night discussions over wine sorting out the worlds problems rather earnestly,

“the feeling of optimism was extraordinary, I mean there was a feeling that you could overthrow mountains if you just demonstrated enough and believed in yourself and your cause enough.”

MAM: whereas these other women photographers you were talking about, were working within the women's movement they were working as freelancers in this country ,but y continued i that period your music photography?

VW: i did all of it, it was a very busy time! If I didn't do weddings I certainly (still did jobbing photography)

It was 74-76 I did the Mississippi pictures.

(It wasn't finished and she didn't feel it)

If you do any work like that you can't help but be moved unless you haven't got a soul to be moved by the poor people you meet.after all it was only a few years before th national guard had been down there and blood in the streets, but I felt

out of my depth and totally dishonest, I felt this was something that a black woman...

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F3792 ORIGINAL CASSETTE ON C459/46/06

VW: there was no doubt that being involved with the people I met in the South affected me enormously - I didn't feel I could do it.

In terms of self perception as an artists or a photographer, well I just didn't have any - here I was I'd got these two grants from the arts council to pursue this project as they'd call it but it wasn't a project - it was about people's lives. And I couldn't just dig and delve. I mean I took some great shots.

Talks about women's prison photos - portraits for women in for murder - she names a lot that she photographed but she never felt she could do much with the pictures, she felt they were something special.

She talks about wishing she could have given more back, about how she used her grant money to give money to the people she photographed, every single one of them, that it wasn't much but it was something.

She talks about a photographer called Jill Cremenst Who did a beautiful book called Sweet Pea about a little girl in Alabama, and she paid for the girl to go through college.

" I feel that there's a lot of responsibility here and you can't just dig and delve into people's lives, the gap between perceptions of wealth is so extreme,..." "

MAM: do that was in a way a major preoccupation of yours inthe mid 70s?

She then talks about visiting four coal mining communities and putting a book together on the communities in Scotland Wales and England. It was after the winter of discontent. The book was commissioned but never published.

By the time they got round of assembling material a new era had come along and it seemed very dated.

Her backstage experience was pretty useful, the miners canteens still had an element of the same pictures coming up in the from and sheet some fantastic people and expanded her awareness of the history.

Her meeting the people in these communities dashed all of her socialisation that working class people weren't bright and her own education about these things was widened. She was surprised and delighted by the minors libraries and years of learning.

She was aware after that of the class bias in British Society and realised all the misconceptions about class's head led to believe. She is sure Britain is an extremely classist society.

MAM: So you were making a reasonable living from writing and photography?

VW: reasonable... Mm yeah

I'd like to say that as a result of those shows at the half moon, I joined up with the Exit group with other photographers, Chris Steele Perkins, Paul Trevor and Nick Batty, erm Diane Olsen who had been one of the photographers who had been involved with the women's photography group at the half moon, she was an American photographer she was part of exit and she went back to the states, so I joined the others and we had a grant from the quebenkian foundations to document poverty and deprivation in inner city Britain, I went round the country with them on a reccie. We went to Glasgow and Liverpool and Cardiff and somewhere else anyway that's what sticks in my mind. And I began to take pictures in Liverpool and when I came back to England - haha there you go (laughs) back to London I mean, I realised I didn't want to work with them any more I wanted to opt out of it and I had to give my grant money. Back, boo boo, a big cheque but anyway they stayed together and drove each other mad as far as I remember but anyway I grew to be great friends with Chris Steel Perkins.

I'm trying to remember the date because freelance photographers suffer terribly from isolation and female photographers even more so. But one of the things that Chris and talked about was the need to bring photographers closer together and I had been involved in the NUJ right from the beginning, from 1963 or something like that, it was john Hopkins and he made me join. Came round with the form and it was all duly signed and in fact I was thinking about this other day, when flamingo deteriorated some mad American bought it and used my articles and photographs without paying me and I went to the union and I'll always remember this - in those days they would actually take people to court for you so we went to court.

There was somewhere in St martins lane, and my representative was a man from the NUJ a solid straight journalist,

she remembers him being scoffed at, in a very classist way.

I remember being very impressed that they went to court for me and we won't he case and I got my money and I did it again - I was also impressed in a negative way at this registrars attitude to my representative in the witness box who was you know explaining the way things ought to be.

That made me realise how ordinary journalists were treated and it raised my awareness about the need across the spectrum for respect in that field and for me to be involved in the union.

Not just the elite of the profession.

Val then talks about how Chris Steele Perkins and herself organised a big photographers meeting to discuss rates and fees and contracts and so on and put

together proposals as a kind of a UK photographer charter for those things. A few years before BAPLA and so on came to any agreements. She talks about all of these photographers coming out of the woodwork. Maggie and Sally and Richard Greenhill helped and they had their second meeting at the Roebuck on Tottenham Court Road.

She feels very proud that her and Chris were the instigators and co-initiators of that getting the base rates and conditions for freelance photographers agreed.

"Andrew Weard who worked for report (had late got NUJ and BAPLA and AFAP reps together) and claimed responsibility 'this is the first time all these people have got together' (she puts on a pompous voice) "and I thought oh do me a favour, you didn't even come to the Roebuck or the Drill Hall!"

MAM: it's worth noting that at the time that you and Chris did this, the union wasn't dealing very well with freelance photographers. Freelance photographers were increasingly joining the freelance branch of the London NUJ but they were getting very little out of it.

VW: that's right

MAM: so there you were you'd left exit and you're back in London on your own

VW: I should say Chris wasn't part of Exit from the start - he came in at the same time as me, because the people who did exit was Paul Trevor and Nick Batty and Diane Olsen who we called Hank, for Hank the Yank I mean that's how people were on those days and some photographers I can't remember

Originally they did their exhibition called Down in Wapping and exhibited at the Half Moon. They went on through Gulbekian to do the book and exhibition and I mean it took them a good few years and I think they were all quite sick of it near the end. Which is inevitable when you have a grant I feel, I mean I have never applied for a grant since the days of the arts because I think it ties you in a way to things that you're not that keen on.

I managed to skirt around what I was supposed to produce in exchange for being given this money but I'm not a believer in grants and awards and if you have a family to support I suppose they are quite useful but I'd rather make money on a job.

MAM: what you talked about after exit was the nameless photography group that you handed over to the NUJ, and it was the period not long after that when Network was formed wasn't it? There was a feeling amongst photographers that working in isolation wasn't really what they wanted to do and there was a move to get together groups.

VW: well I think I mentioned before that I was very friendly with Angela Phillips, by this time, we didn't start off on the right footing, we got very friendly and Angela is very much very vocal and in terms of organising things and of course she was very involved in the women's movement in a way that I wasn't, I mean I wasn't involved in the women's movement at that time, and I felt I suppose, women who were lesbians or free felt that they were, they often felt excluded and

they often felt you know her was a club that you belonged to who would accept you more than wider society so women who didn't necessarily have a political analysis of things were attracted to the women's movement for obvious reasons, so I sort of jogged along and I met a few people and Angela, who was very friendly with John Sturrock, of course one of the people who started Network and erm at one time I used to go to her place in better sea and I used to try and persuade her and John that we should Stuart an agency together and I was envious of the fact that Maggie Murray used Sally and Richards darkroom and they appeared to have this great friendship and I wanted to our friendship to go into something similar that we would visit each other use somebody's darkroom and I remember Jo Spence and Terry Dennet coming down the and erm they wanted to start up something but I suppose this was the beginning of not camerawork the other thing , it wasn't about photography it was about something else as well, photography socialist group or something...

MAM: Photography/Politics?

VW: yes that's it! And I mean much as I found Jo an inspirational figure, the prose that Terry turned out was turgid and so un... I couldn't understand it, I couldn't related it to anything that was in. My life... Great tracts were produced that appeared to be about photography but had nothing to do with photography as far as was concerned (laughs)because photography, it was about two things to me the technical side and the art and creativity and photo documentary of course, but not analysis in this way . It made reading Kapital like Enid Blyton!

Should I have said that?!

So we had a few meetings but they didn't work out too well because I was interested in getting Angela and John to come on with me on some onwards and upwards business thing really, although it would have a socialist content and feminist content as well, erm but it was more of a business thing and they were interested in theorising everything to death

MAM: this was Jo and Terry

VW: and also they were very interested in power, in a kind of way and power as an oppressiveness, erm, moralising that I didn't ... I'm only able to put it into words now I found that everything around them was very much... I like Jo and I love her work but there was a lot of moralising in a way that I don't care for

MAM: and I presume that your discussions with John and Angela must have ended when Network started, as John was one of the instigators. And Angela originally belonged to network I think.

VW: yes I don't know I think we were all pulling different directions about what we wanted to do, I kept going round the and saying, can we do this why don't we do that but I didn't have to ability to, .. To organise it and Angela was... And you know I mean I don't think Angela would have ever thought of herself as a photographer im sure she would say the same thing too. you know she took photographs but she thought of herself primarily as a writer and that's how it's

turned out and in fact a lot of people maybe will be like that with me eventually you know 'at one time she took some quite good pictures'

Maybe they won't say it about me but You know people do want to label you a lot and drives me mad.

MAM: so how did you deal with that?

VW: I don't know Im trying to remember - the 70s were a riot of things going on erm there was a sort of a group up at Spare Rib, we still met and of course we met informally because we we'd meet and Gills place and Laura's place, Laura Margoyles, and we'd talk about things. When I say things in mean we talked about everything from the representation of women and matters around women to business things and artistic , nuts and bolts stuff about layout, you know technology was changing I'd never seen someone paste a layout before overnight we went from letterpress to litho, from all that clacking noise to just silence - I miss it

Telephones ringing and typewriters banging and now it's an awful electronic hiss everywhere.

Gradually I suppose what happened was that Maggie and I got closer in our friendship developed into something else really and we spoke about what we wanted to do and that's right I was trying to get Sally and Richard and her to come in with Sally and me at one point - it was some kind of idea of mine - I'm not sure if it was after Network was formed. But we decided now was the time to start a women's photography group and everything had been pointing towards it, now was the times to work autonomously and exclude men from our working practices, and so format - under a dreaded name, came to be!

It came out of a result of many discussions between Maggie and me, Maggie at the time had a child, so she couldn't do much running around. Format started with us making a list of all the women photographers that we knew and contacting them in nine cases out of ten I did the contacting because she was tied up with her son and I did the meetings. I didn't rally know what I was doing i just contacted them and said would you be interested in meeting me in a pub to talk about something, very cloak and dagger you know, so I had a series of meetings with women in pubs and eventually it was agreed that we would have a meeting all together and hitherto people who were interested came to the meeting and now I can't remember who the people were who came. There were a lot of people who came like Sue Adler and Sally Fier who weren't and Fay Godwin no she was never interested in women's issues, she came to a few of the Spare Rib meetings and said she couldn't see what was in it for her and she was doing all right thank you very much... And didn't identify with women's need to work together and she sort of pissed off so we didn't invite her!

I'm trying to think who else now I can't remember - there was a woman who used to do pics for socialist worker and she was a friend of Mark and Laurie and all that crowd. I can't remember her name but she was very nice and very interested, Sally Fear was very good I liked her because she was not interested in working with other women in the sense that she went an instinctive feminist but

she's a liberal, I know she won't mind me saying that, but she came to our meetings for quite a while before she reached a conclusion and decided 'I don't want to be part of this' she gave it a lot of thought and I really respected that because people have different ways of doing things, whereas Sue Adler. Came to a couple of meetings, looked at us and thought, 'some of these people are obviously lesbians, I can't stand this, I'm off!' Just split, I mean she could argue till she's blue in the face but I know that's what happened, I know .

Faye of course we didn't bother with and then Sally I think we were very - well particularly Maggie and Me because we'd had such a long relationship with her, but she felt very much that her and Richard were team and because of all of. The years building that up that she didn't want to joining something else because it would have a bad effect on what they built up over the years.

Kim, what was her name, she was film maker as well, so we met Raissa Page, Anita Corbijn, Jenny Matthews, Pam Isherwood who I knew from the women's movement, Pam was a bit of a separatist, a radical feminist, but I thought it out of be good for her to be involved, because it would be good for her photography but also it would be good for us to have someone that was out there fighting the battle in the street rather than working as a professional photographer, Joanne O'Brien, Joanne came in, have i left out anybody. There were eight of us originally and Anita was one of Maggie's students and she was a brilliant brilliant photographer. So we started meeting, it was out tenth anniversary this year so it must be... Erm 83 that we started but we started meeting about a year before that so about 81

We would meet in each other's homes and we would do what women do which is we'd bring food and sit down and talk about everything under the sun except being photographers you know! If men were flies on the wall they'd have said 'told you so' and forget that when they had their meetings they talk about women...

Ours would be very serious and sometimes descend into hostility. Jane Harper, yes Jane was one of the photographers, that's right, who did a lot of theatre photography and the people we got to run it, Amanda Hopkinson who was Tom Hopkinson's daughter and a woman called Monique who was a friend of Raissa's who didn't do us too many favours as I recall, and

MAM: so you got an office in the end?

VW: yeah we did... And one of the things that happened with format was that it was a remarkable achievement although as an achievement it was an idea whose time had come in a sense it was a pioneering venture and I think a lot of, the inflamed that format has had on other women's work, you know it just scant be measured but because it was a collective as such there were problems you know, people used to say to say to me is Format a collective or a cooperative and I used to turn round and say non-cooperative (laughs) which was not politically correct but that was how I had felt. I guess we had all come to it with different perceptions and Maggie and I had discussed it at great length then things had developed and the idea was as well as being a business we would like to provide a forum for other women to work, you know an opportunity for other women to

develop their work as photographers. Well that's all very well. All these fine ideas work very well on paper but they don't work in practice and as far as I was concerned after all of my years scuttling here there and everywhere I wanted us to be like magnum!

You know on those lines, a fully professional business, everybody as turning out out pictures all the time (because that's what a photographers do) and sending out to press so what did we do? We picked two people who don't know how to run a business and one of them who keeps talking about getting whatever grant money is going and keeps talking about there's grants for this there's grants for that and everybody was talking about grants all the time. I for one, I used to go to meetings and get drunk sometimes for my sins, I just couldn't stand it you know. I felt completely alienated from half of it, this was an idea I'd had and we were talking about grants and I hated grants and all they represented... 'What are they talking about?!' You know (laughs) at one point I remember standing outside with one of the others to smoke a joint of course this didn't go down well with the other peple who felt that we were being very negative and people shouldn't behave like that! Someone once brought along brandy because they had period pains and I said well if they're gonna drink brandy then I'm gonna smoke a joint so I was severely rep remanded for that.

I, talking about the negative side of it but it's probably because I still feel a bit passed off about some of the things that happened you know. Of course it was a very positive venture.

One of the things I loathed most about it was the name, we had a meeting and I couldn't even believe it, we had a series of meetings to come up with the name and Format was the least I liked name, it means nothing, it certainly has nothing to do wit women, I wanted to call ourselves matrix because that is the womb the centre but 'no we can't do that because there is another firm called matrix the architects' well I thought we could be matrix photographers and they could be magic architects and just get on with it, people so it all the times and very seldom fog to court over it!

But no no no we had to have this stupid name and when you here it people say 'did they do such and such' as if I'd no part in it, I dropped out of it after a while because.

So I should start at the beginning we used to talk about it being a collective we used to work in the office, one day every two weeks, sometimes I quite liked that and sometimes I didn't but really it meant that there was no continuity and eventually Monique who had contributed nothing and in fact had taken a lot from it, left, and Jane Harper decided that she wasn't all that keen on staying in photography any more so she stayed and took in administration and did a very good job of it. She ran up our stationery and telephone bill but she was very obliging to everybody and put ppl eat their ease and I think that offices need somebody like that you know someone who puts them at ease and people like phoning up and asking for pictures and she also made the photographers very happy.

MAM: yes she was always very kindly to the photographers

VW: yes she was a kind person

MAM: so this woman Monique left, and then Amanda left and Jane took over?

VW: yeah and then we had other people come into work from time to time in other roles and then after a while my mother who had had cancer for sometime, was seriously ill and I found it all got on top of me and i couldn't be involved in format as well as my personal commitments. I just sort of let it all go and I just stopped being part of the agency , i am still part of the agency in terms of all my photographs are on file but now it's purely a business thing you know.

Maggie sells my pictures you know and it's a fifty fifty deal. I suppose I should have been more positive about Gormat but I suppose I regret not being able to,... It didn't turn out to be the women's magnum and also I take responsibility for some of its failures in that sense and I'm glad that things are going quite well now and that things are still going after ten years but I don't really feel a part of it anymore and I, not treated by the others as if I'm part of it and so I've got mixed feelings about it. In one sense I'm proud that I had the idea of it Maggie and I had the idea tot heather to do a women's agency but it was my idea to do something at that time and we would be together and I did all the running around and brought all those people together but in a bother sense I feel rather disconnected from it.

MAM: When did you sever your, when did you ease out of it ? After a couple of years

About 86/87

MAM: what kind of work were you doing at the time, I mean an agency like that takes an awful lot of work, did it have an impact on your photographic work?

VW: oh yes. I did all sorts of things. I mean I guess e of the things that was kind of nice was all the work coming into us. There was a lot of money floating around from the GLC and local councils and so we got a lot of work out of that. We did a nice exhibition for the GLC called Equal Opportunities, unit called opportunity knocks and my picture was the main picture used on the brochure for the exhibition. A picture of a cleaner on the steps of the GLC county hall and then we did another exhibition for Camden women's unit. That was good, it involved a lot of all sorts of people. All sorts of different community situations and running round here and there I liked doing that.

What happened you see because of my work with music and musicians I found that people were loathe to employ me to do anything other than photograph musicians or particularly black people!

I didn't say earlier on - I did quite a lot of work for the observer colour magazine I did started off doing a piece on the blues, I went south going jack to 79/80, went to Georgia, Mississippi and did an article called 'still got the Blues' which what I thought at that time was the last of the country blues. So I did a story on the conjugal visits at Mississippi state penn and I did quite a lot of other stories but always it was this thing you're the person who does black musicians or you're the person that does... And it was very hard to get away from that and so I would try

to get People to come in who wanted to do other work and they were reluctant to do so and so I had to find my own kind of level so I was working for time out and working for city limits when we started city limits and Spare rib and so on and with format I was able to do a lot of the photography I was qualified to do and felt like doing which was to photograph people at work just anywhere just day to day situations I was able to expand my horizons and I just became a photographer really I suppose yeah so that was.

I can't stand being pigeon holed it drives me insane

Mam: have you escaped the niche now?

VW: well people don't jack me to take pictures very much any more so but they still see me as this person who is only interested in black musicians.

As if you know we didn't all have lives to lead and other interests. I do think I'm a funny kind of way if that coal mining book had have been published I would have been able to shake it under a few people's noses and say this is what I do and once they get over their jokes which of course we had to put up with 'oh yes you're doing another kind of black face' you know, that might have been quite good for my sort of credibility and self image in fact, **because when people discriminate against you it affects the way you see yourself.**

It's as strong as anything and affects you. We should get past that and let people expand and real out of the cage as it were.

MAM: what kind of work would you like to do now?

VW; erm I don't really do that much photography any more, I've got interested in writing and research and aspects of black music history in Britain and the history of black musicians and from starting to write one book by myself I'm now engaged in writing three and researching in a way I never anticipated before which is to trace people's backgrounds and history and tracing the chronology of their day to day lives and it seems to be taking up all of my time.

I write a few bits and pieces sell a few hints here and there I mean I sell my old photographs I'm not very interested in taking pictures at the moment. It doesn't mean I'm not taking pictures anymore I've just stopped at the moment!

In fact I want to go back to the states next years I'd do some pictures of the younger musicians in New York, that's one of my ambitions. At the moment.

MAM: what aspects of your work are you particularly proud of?

I like to think that I've kept up and continue to provide a positive image of musicians and through doing so and thorough black society in here all and also not seen so often pictures of women that I've taken that format sells, I like to think that I've provided positive images. I mean it's become a cliched expression but it's still very real to me that that is what we must do we have a social conscience and every now and then you'll get one of someone picking their nose or scratching their behind you know you don't necessarily print that one or let people see it.

I have written to date three books: Jazz people - a collection of interviews, a series of inner city life which is about the music of the sixties and the seventies and I have an autobiography called, mamma said there'd be days like this, which is a song title and which includes a lot of matters which covers photography and other aspects of my life which we haven't managed to discuss at length. I've also published a book of photographs called the Face of Black Music which came out of the show I had at the V&A and it's still in print still available in the U.S. as well. But two of the things that I've done that have given me the greatest satisfaction are, one of them was an exhibition which I did for Lewisham's race equality unit, it came from one of those strange ways these things come about. I called it Sorrow Songs and Soulful Shouts, Sorrow Songs are what Deboise called the spirituals and soulful shout I guess is self explanatory and the idea would be that this exhibition was a kind of illustration of how the music has provided a focus for black people's sense of celebration and a vehicle for carrying the history for the peple in the diaspora.

90% of the photographs were mine and 10% were the work of David Correo who is young photographer, well younger photographer and good friend of mine who lives in New York now, we put this exhibition together for Lewishams and they showed it in their town hall and put it around a load of libraries like Clissold in Stoke Newington and I heard people make rude comments about them about the quotes we had writers do for the images and then I had the opportunity to take them to the states, Michael fellwell who wrote the book the harder they come, written after the film, he teaches up at the university of Massachusetts in Amhurst and I went and met him and got friendly with him and his wife Roberta Fellowel and they organised a black musicians conference up there and on two occasions they asked me to go and talk at the conferences there in different panel discussions and to rad a paper at one and to show my photographs there so I had this ready made show the Sorrow Songs soulful shout and I took it with me and amongst the professors who teach or were teaching there at the time, was Archie Shep a saxophonist I've known for years and max roach from the great be bop days who played with Charlie Parker, and james Baldwin and they all came to the opening of my show and it was a wonderful occasion quite cathartic in a way because max and me had exchanged words about something I'd written he'd misunderstood and there was this wonderful moment where they had a gospel group singing at one point and the lead of the group www the pianist and at the end of the revenue I had to say a few words so I was standing at the mic and the curve of the piano and he said ' now ladies and gentleman we're gonna bring the evening to a close, looking round at all of these pictures what strikes me is the grace that has brought us all through' so I'd like to end the evening by everybody singing amazing grace, and I was still standing by the piano by the microphone and everyone just stopped what they were doing put down their bosses of wine and their potato chips and what have you and they started singing amazing grace Archie Shep and max and james Baldwin, Mike and Roberta , old people young people black and white, students and all so's tttt and my photographs were round the room and to me it was one of the most moving moments of my life I felt really sort of ... Vindicated isn't the work I particularly want to use but I felt I'd been doing right thing, that I had worked through just what I believed in working

towards a show like this it wasn't necessarily seen by a lot of people but I just felt satisfied and it's not every often you get to feel satisfied about what you've done.

Afterwards max said to me, well you know we haven't always seen eye to eye on everything but what you've done here is really great, congratulations, and he invited me and a friend of mine to have dinner with him and James Baldwin afterwards and in fact it was about twelve of us all went off and had dinner in this place. That's another story but it was a great evening but if people stop and ask you what shows you've done and you say Victoria and Albert and Lewishams race equality unit they say whaaaaat!?

But you know i wish they could have seen that.

Another was editing an edition of ten 8 out of Birmingham and I had written quite a few things for ten 8 and I said why don't we do an issue on black American photographers? Not photographs of black Americans but the work of black American photographers and so's they said okay it was supposed to be a collective effort but I was a bit bombastic and decided that as I was going to the states I was going to do the whole thing myself so I did and I called it 'evidence' which is after a tune by Thelonious monk - my hero

Evidence you know, we have been here. And during the course of that i interviews a number of photographers and went round various archives collecting up pictures and got commissioned a couple of people to write articles for it and got them to reprint an essay that Angela Davis had written about black American photographers. And I think that's one of the most successful things I've ever done, my name appears in my new print inside the front cover. Everyone says why didn't you have your name on the front and I now see that as one of my - you know they have that thing in the independent, my greatest mistake! I should have put my name on the cover but I felt it had no place but I put the whole thing together wrote some of the stuff did interview, I should have put my name on the cover but now it's on the recon I put the whole thing together! I also interviewed for subsequent issues, Anthony bamboza who is a black American photographer who does a lot of fashion work who did lots of pictures for Miles Davis and a people like that and also Roy decarava, who is a photographer from Harlem who is one of my particular Heroes. I love Roy's pictures he has an ability to make you look at his. Pictures and. You want to touch the people he photograph and you actually feel that .. You can feel how ye feel, I don't mean what they feel inside their heads but what they feel like physically and I've never found anybody who can present people in that way, whether it is because he photographs musicians a lot or musicians families and the kind of world I don't know but when I look at Herman Leonard's photographs, Herman Leonard is a well known jazz photographer, an innovator, he's also ridden with cliché in as much that all of his photographs are lit in the same way and they all have a cigarette smoke trailing you know and there was the thing where you don't feel you know the people in his photos they're icons, definitely icons, which is fine, but when I look at Roy's pictures I don't know them but I know who they are, I know where they live and I feel like I want to know them and a friend of mine who likes opera and ballet and isn't particularly keen on jazz, I showed her Roy's book, The Sound I Saw, and her, you know there is a picture in there of Billie

Halliday and Hazel Scott at a party if I could afford it I would buy a print from Roy and she looked at the images and there s one shot of a young guy listening to music at the side of the stage he's just leaning into music, and she said to me if o had the money I'd buy that picture she kept on looking at it and I thought well that is a real photographer you know, I would aim towards that kind of photography. And I met a number of photographers on that trip in New York in 1986, who sort of changed my perceptions of hoot graphs and it's worth and value and these were all blacks people. And one of them is Ajar Cowans (?) who is quite well know for his paintings and I never did an interview with him but I always meant to and he said something to me which keeps coming back to me, he said, "look you can talk all you like about politics and content but photograph think of the word, it's drawing with light and that's something that people forget" and I realised that I'd forgotten about it, I'd forgotten about it for so long. Being involved with Format and the women's movement and ideas of - I was going to say political correctness but that's kind of become such a ridiculous word now that's it's lost all meaning even as a joke now, and it's a sneer and also an insult to people who really have tried to do the right thing, they felt that they wanted to, you know they wanted to get the humanitarian view, so derided nowadays by the media, and yes I'd got caught up in all that but I'd forgotten about the art, the actual photograph itself. And I didn't come back and consciously going 'zap zap' and taking pictures which showed this new discovery of mine, hah new discovery in quotes, but I looked back at. My pictures in the past and I started to print them in a different way not radically different but just to take more care with them I taught myself to become a better printer in different stages and this was one of them and I found that by paying more attention to printing I found that I could make the pictures speak in a way that I didn't know that they could. I know this is going to sound ridiculously pretentious but, it was almost as if there were things that lay hidden in them because of my inability to print them well, or print them with feeling and I was able to bring up things from the past that were somehow hidden in the layers of the film. It was in response to what Ajur Cowan said to me, I've been thinking about that ever since where photography is concerned, I am fed up with seeing pictures presented in newspapers on magazines which don't - would not have won an amateur photography competition because they're so shoddy and I'm fed up with dealing with picture editors and picture researchers who don't seem to know the first thing about photography "we can't use this one because it's out of focus"! And I was using differential focus, I was focussing on someone out in the crowd purposely thrown everyone else out of focus through my choice of lens, I was told that we can't use this its out of focus and I looked at them and it was just like speaking to a Martian. Someone else threw some pictures back at me it was just like being an ingenue all over again when someone said to me (gruff voice) 'we can't use this its too black this is what we want', and he shook something at me where every hair and pimple was in focus. (Gruff voice again) 'this is what our readers want to see' eyebrows and moustaches, we don't want to see those black things, he meant shadows, with a bit of light and shade on them. And I had someone do this to me the other day, 'we can't use these they haven't got enough detail in them' what detail, what do you want? I mean the detail of people's lives is in the feeling..

My friend Lindsey looked at that picture of Roy's of the man listening at the Side of the stage - not much detail in that but looking at the music with love and affection, it's a wonderful picture, I'll show it to you in a minute. What can I say

Here's another thing, because i photograph musicians and moved in the circles I've moved in and because I'm a writer as well, do you know that hardly ever has anybody ever written about my photography as photography - it's always reviewed in the music section. I have people come to interview me and it's always "what's a white girl doing.." And at the age of 51 I find that rather tedious actually.

People don't seem to ever look at my pictures and compare the,, I don't care, you can compare them to some other photographer and say that they're a very low grade by comparison but I'd just like some sort of understanding of my pictures as a technician and as a artist, a creative person, a crafts person whatever, one of the things that I particularly like doing and I'm sure I've been influenced in this by Roy, or by Eugene Smyth is to photograph a dark person against a dark background and find a way of making them stand out. Originally this happened because I was making pictures in dark places, in clubs and so on which is inevitable dark, I developed ways of photographing people up against the line of light of the cymbals or something like that, it's not always successful but I enjoy doing that and that's where the concentration comes in you could take , if you know what you're doing you can take a photograph almost in the dark, but if you don't know you'll say there's not enough light and get your flashgun on then you'll destroy what it was that you liked about the thing in the first pace. That's one of the things you need as a photographer is lots of concentration.

I think that's why I, not taking any pictures at the moment because I'm concentrating on something else and I haven't got the resources anymore to drop what I'm doing and take off and be a photographer again, becaus when I was doing those things like with the women in Mississippi with the musicians, with the coal miners in Yorkshire Scotland Wales and Kent I left everything behind, I left my self behind, I don't mean to say we become selfless, but you have to leave your thoughts behind to an extent about your other life and you have to enter into theirs to show how they feel, the feeling of them.

Tape 7 of 7

ORIGINAL ON C459/46/07 SIDE A

Talking about what time she got up with miners, so she laid on the bed with all her clothes on ready to get up with him and how she was ready straightaway when he banged on the door!

She was impressed with the washing and shaving routine before the pit!

"They had so much pride in themselves and in the work to shave before he went down the pit - it seemed strange but I understand it now I KNOW WHY AT ONE time I would have thought oh you don't bother to get washed if you're going down a coal mine but you because you want to go there feeling that you want to feel sharp and smart and on the case so I photographed him getting ready

washing, dressing and having some breakfast and then his wife who also started a shift somewhere early, came down and kissed him goodbye, I believe it wasn't just for the sake of the photographs, but that actually takes an awful lot out of you, and you know all the great photography of the past you know Walker Evans Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and all these they have been done by people who went and lived with the people they photographed and now you find people wontgiveyou the time. Now if you ask to photograph someone they won't give you the time they want it all over in seconds because everybody's got a camera. In the days of the focusing cloth and the ground glass screen nobody would dream of hurrying up the photographer - you were waiting for the photographers pleasure when they'd finish you could relax and do your thing but now you know you have to do it over as quickly as possible. I find that a bit not inhibiting but it I find it off putting frankly and even with well meaning people they're not prepared to spend time to get the pictures. I think Maggie and I often talked about how everyone wants beautiful pictures but-they won't give you the time to take them in. A picture takes a lot longer than the 125th of a second it takes to trip the shutter. So well I don't know what else can I say.