

*Fiction*  
M R Weber

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**The following piece appears in *Fiction*, a book of photography and text produced in collaboration with photographer Tomas Hein. The images reproduced here represent a small sample of those present in *Fiction*. The complete book is available to view online at [issuu.com/tomashein](http://issuu.com/tomashein)**

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Click.

It is impossible to quantify the volume of debate that these images have generated. The innumerable tomes devoted to their interpretation would fill a large room, vary wildly in tone and intent, and are all incorrect. It is not expected that the present work will cause the production of such fallacies to cease. Nevertheless, the facts presented here constitute the first systematic attempt to elucidate the intent of these photographs, explain their provenance, and account for their content. It is also the first to produce a unified version of their narrative.

Some context. The peculiar and signatory grain lent to the images by the dust present in their site of composition indicate that they were all, every single one, taken within the confines of a large city in the Northern Hemisphere. In the blatant homogeneity of these effects, as well as the strangely trapezoid nature of the scattering, we are presented with clear evidence that the site in which they were taken was no more than 1000 metres square. This is a conclusion borne out by the extensive aesthetic analysis that has been undertaken; the brickwork glimpsed in the images, and the period heating ducts which pepper the compositions, places the scenes' location in and around a disused

warehouse. This warehouse is likely to have been used to store dried leaves, and is likely to have been built in 1856. The colonial past of many of Europe's largest cities makes this observation less than useful. However, one site immediately stands out – the now-collapsed building which occupied 78 Lambeth Road, Lambeth, London, England.

This building, because the events which took place in it from March 2009 until its unexplained collapse in March 2010 have remained mysterious. The erratic and unreliable accounts of local residents confirm that in the early months of this period, “strange and continuous” music could be heard to emanate from the former warehouse, and a “group of 30 young men and women”<sup>1</sup> inhabited it, one of whom was Tomas Hein. He is the author of the images found here, but little further is known about him – the scrawled signature found on the reverse of these photographs, and the frustratingly vague image reproduced here represent the entire evidence of his existence. Accounts of the events in 78 Lambeth Road contain but 1 mention of him, stating that he was seen entering the building “at the beginning”. If these accounts are to be believed, all of these people were observed to be in a state of almost-permanent intoxication, though it must be pointed out that the provincial dispositions of many of these witnesses lend this observation a certain unreliability. As the months progressed, these residents became increasingly concerned for the welfare of Hein and his compatriots, who ventured outside less and less. As the year progressed, and as the music grew louder, occasional glimpses of the these occupants revealed them to visibly degrade. Then, at some point in mid-February, a month before the collapse, the now-oppressive music ceased abruptly. The building was rendered silent, and no more was seen of those still, presumably, inside.

The obvious explanation would be a squat, a party, or perhaps the peculiar (but not unusual) combination of the 2 that plague the modern metropolis. However, this interpretation is rendered problematic by

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1 Dr. Raymond Pluhar, *Nonsensical True Histories Under Hypnosis, vol I*, Thornbury Books, 2009.

several unusual facts. The first is that, as already stated, the event which took place in the building lasted for close to a year – it can hardly be supposed that such revelry, even for the most tenacious adherents, could last this long. Further, whatever occurred on the site seems to have been capable of completely undermining the structural integrity of a venerable industrial building, one that had stood for close to 150 years. Finally, though no-one was seen to leave the site, no bodies were found in the rubble. If this was a party, it was gathering singularly intense, destructive and revelatory, and capable of driving at least one of its adherents to compose the disturbing images seen here. Its porpoise remains unknown; it would be presumptuous to assume that the “revellers” gathered in the building were actively seeking the violent revelation they underwent. Yet, the fact remains that the sequencing and content of these images seems to describe a coherent narrative, one in which some eternal object or scene is sought. They build to interstitial points like the scenes in a play, and contain turning points of Shakespearean subtlety.

The sequencing of the images compounds this apparent narrative. It has always been assumed that the photographs were ordered chronologically – that the image presented on page 1 was the first composed, and that presented on page 47 the last. This assumption is forgivable, for it has long been noted that their order implies a certain climactic narrative. Until now this has remained unproven, a critical fiction useful insofar as it provides a basis for reconstruction. However, we are now in a position to confirm that it is, in fact, correct. An analysis of the angle at which sunlight lances into the photographs, when compared with astrological data, indicates that they were captured over a period of exactly 365.25 days of 86,400 SI seconds each. That is, the final photograph was taken precisely 1 astronomical year after the first. Thus, it appears that the narrative implied by the sequencing of the images, that of an increasingly ecstatic struggle for transcendent survival, is just that – a narrative, albeit one that is subtly codified.

On first inspection, the opening scenes of the collection appear as sites of joyous abandon, a certain narcotic-infused madness. Yet, it is

equally clear that this surreality is conscious. Indeed, the images serve as blatant extensions of a carefully studied abandon which infects both subject and scene. Ducts, in their symmetry, become butterflies newly pinned, yet still living – willingly given to a camera that moves in harmony with them. If there is abandon present in these images, it is conscious precisely because it represents a decision to temporarily shift the scene into the realm of aesthetics. The very act of capturing these scenes effects a portion of this – even the most mundane image is transformed by the frame. The remainder is constituted by a playfulness present in their occasional human subjects; the viewer is presented with characters dressing up, living in treehouses, playing the omnipotent infant. If their faces are obscured, it is because of joy – some dance too quick and hot to freeze. Narcotics thread their way through the scenes, leaving no trace of dependent consequence. Religion appears, devoid of sin and given to man, and its revellers are as free as air; drifting through doors left open in trust, they are blown on some ecstatic tide between joyous exterior flight and intense interior pleasure. This freedom of movement, this lack of boundary, may be seen as the trope of these opening scenes. There is no delineation between internal space and external, neither in the revellers' minds nor in their surroundings. They are free to move between the warmed concrete outside and the sweating rooms within, and do so with regularity. This, as will be seen, changed.

But for these opening few months, an achieved ecstasy reigned. Perhaps the most obvious example of this conscious madness is found in the fact that these images are so carefully framed, and composed with overt skill. Their subjects appear to have been chosen for their almost banal regularity, and fill the focus of the images with mechanical accuracy. There are grids, girders, heating ducts. Indeed, some of these images seem so devoid of humanity that, in a different context, some encyclopaedic analysis of the building could be assumed; a scene-setting, a structural enumeration to place the coming tide. Yet it is clear that this is not the case, for even this explanation cannot account for the sheer regularity of these compositions, their subtle manipulation of object and scene. Instead, something far greater is at work, an attempt

at an effect which takes these images' resonance beyond the mere pictorial; a re-creation of an ancient and unknown language, a script written in image.

In 1972, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., saw a selection of slides from William Eggleston's *Guide*. Eggleston, who was then a young photographer, had intended the collection to stand as a frozen script of American life. Barr's comment on these images could well have been viewed as bluntly unhelpful, perhaps downright rude. He is recorded by Szarkowski, who wrote the introduction to the collection, as having "observed - surprisingly but in fact accurately - that the design of most of the pictures seemed to radiate from a central, circular core. In time the observation was relayed to Eggleston, who replied, after a barely perceptible hesitation, that this was true, since the pictures were based compositionally on the Confederate flag - not the asterisk, or the common daisy, or the dove of the Holy Ghost, but the Confederate flag."<sup>2</sup>

It is not clear whether the revellers in 78 Lambeth road were aware of this story. It may be supposed, however, that Hein himself was. Not only because, as a photographer himself, he is likely to have studied Eggleston's book, but also because the images seen here, on a superficial level, owe much to the *Guide*. Yet, this similarity goes beyond such surface concerns. Szarkowski seems content to assume that Eggleston's comment was made in jest, that it is "of interest only as an illustration of the lengths to which artists sometimes go to frustrate rational analysis of their work, as though they fear it might prove an antidote to their magic"<sup>3</sup>. This, despite its imaginative paucity, may well be incorrect – who can say, now as then, what was in Eggleston's mind as he composed those images? Who can say that he did not frame them in reference to the confederate flag? Who can say, ultimately, that his magic lays in quick-witted lies thrown to critics, rather than in its

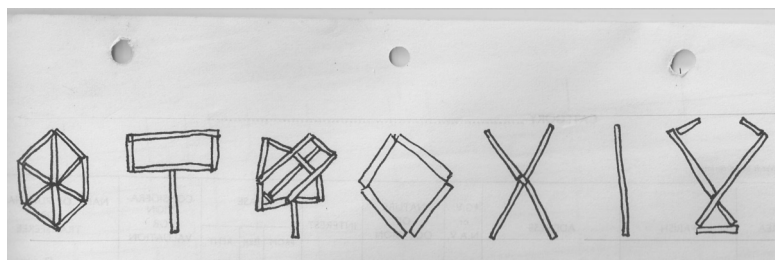
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2 John Szarkowski in William Eggleston's *Guide*, MOMA, 2002 (facsimile).

3 Ibid.

more obvious manifestation – the endowment of photographic art with readable symbolism?

This is Hein's magic, though his is more complex. Not content with the reproduction of a single character, a singularly recognisable glyph, the images here contain 7 recognisably unique characters, arranged in patterns designed to heighten their semantics. And to form, it may be presumed, a coherent narrative, a record of the events of that year codified for the initiated.



**Fig. CCgh - The Dholavira Glyphs**

These symbols themselves are from ancient India. Evidence of their use has been found to date back to 2000 BCE, in the remains of an ancient city now known as Dholavira. The city itself was built by a civilisation that has been given the stunningly dry name “The Indus Valley Civilisation”, and whose citizens were presumably the same people who first carved the “Indus characters”. Well over 400 distinct symbols have been found on seals, small tablets and ceramic pots, with typical inscriptions being no more than 5 characters in length, and exquisitely tiny. The longest on a single surface is less than 1 inch square, and consists of 17 symbols. The only exception to this is the “signboard” found in Dholavira, which, though it only consists of 7 characters, is 70 feet high. It is these symbols (reproduced in fig. CCgh) that form the “language” present in Hein's work. Here, we must be blunt – almost every single photograph in this collection contains, artfully “written” into its composition, at least 1 of these symbols. The

images that appear towards the beginning of the sequence often contain many more. An analysis of how this is achieved would (and probably will) form a thesis in itself, but the concept is hinted at in fig. 45%L.

Now. The study of the Dholavira symbols themselves has not been without controversy, the focus of which is their very status as “language”. Either, the debate goes, they constitute a fully-formed script of a literate society, or their purpose and meaning is non-linguistic. It is a debate that is an important one. Seen in the latter context, they may be compared to mere heraldic signs or base accounting shorthand. But, in the former, they are one of the oldest extant languages known to us, and a system of writing which appears without ancestors or descendent. It is a debate that continues - to quote the foremost academic of our time;

“In a 2009 study by P. N. Rao et al. published in *Science*, computer scientists, comparing the pattern of symbols to various linguistic scripts and non-linguistic systems, including DNA and a computer programming language, found that the Indus script's pattern is closer to that of spoken words, supporting the hypothesis that it codes for an as-yet-unknown language. Farmer, Sproat, and Witzel have disputed this finding, pointing out that Rao et al. did not actually compare the Indus signs with "real-world non-linguistic systems" but rather with "two wholly artificial systems invented by the authors, one consisting of 200,000 randomly ordered signs and another of 200,000 fully ordered signs, that they spuriously claim represent the structures of all real-world non-linguistic sign systems"<sup>4</sup>.

Whether Hein was aware of this, when he composed them, is unclear. However, the question of intent has little importance here. The point is that these symbols possess a controversial status as “language”. The fact that they are overlaid on a medium which has had its own share of the same problems, namely photography, is where the importance of these images lies. If photography is a problematic language purely

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4 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indus\\_Valley\\_Civilization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indus_Valley_Civilization), retrieved 13/04/2010

because it has often been viewed as devoid of “language” itself, what better script to endow it with voice than the Indus Valley glyphs? They are its mirror, its saviour, but also its destroyer – for in their grasp, the “picture” loses its virginal subtlety to the blatant and overpowering demands of the written word. The same effect can be seen in the newspaper caption, the title on the wall of the gallery, and here. Yes, right here.

Whatever the intention, the effect remains, and a larger question presents itself – what do the glyphs actually mean? On this point, unfortunately, the present author must remain silent. Not, let it be stressed, because this extends beyond his remit, but because no-one now living can translate the language. If the debate above can be regarded as typical of the level of knowledge of the purpose of the script, it should come as no surprise that their meaning, a question almost infinitely more complex, remains unsolved. Nevertheless, attempts have been made, not least by the unknown author of the “captions” that accompany the images in the present work. It has been noted that, occasionally, the meanings encompassed within these captions synchronise with the symbols present in the images. Erratically, where 2 captions mention “the sun”, or perhaps “the son”, the same symbol appears in both connected photographs. However, it must be stressed that the eccentricity of such synchronisation is extreme – only in very few places do such coincidences occur, and there are many places where the same glyph appears to have no relevance to the captions. This has raised questions comparable to those above. One school of thought would maintain that the captions are the work of a “translator” in possession of full fluency, the other that this unknown author is merely a weaver of fiction who appears, occasionally, to have accidentally created coincidental synchronicity. Yet the presence of such subtle narrative devices as are present here can hardly be attributed to luck – again and again, we are presented with the peaks and troughs, subsidiary plots and blatant characterisations, and sudden moments of horror.

Consider the 18th photograph (fig. 4\$), which may well represent such a moment. If there is a narrative implied here, this image marks the beginning of the 2nd act, in which a dark turning occurs. The images which follow possess a different quality, a inexorably closing net, a crushing room growing ever smaller. They culminate in a pinhole closing, through which a pinprick of light may be seen. This will engulf the world, but must be ignored for now. The building at 78 Lambeth Road becomes a prison. Reference is made to this, in a way that seems clearly designed to implicate that inmate and guard are one and the same – the adherents of this particular gathering have sentenced themselves. They are kept behind doors they themselves have chosen and constructed, their movements constricted by the unceasing gaze of their fellow captors. Here, the building at 78 Lambeth Road becomes a warped Panopticon, a prison designed around the simple principle of the unseen seer. Cells are arranged in a way that allows their occupants to be seen from a single, central tower, in which stands an unseen guard. The jailed, knowing they are watched but unable to tell the exact moment of their jailer's attention, are forced to assume they are continually observed. Here, it is Hein's camera that stands in for the mute spectator, and the people clustered in the building are caught in its unending gaze. Thus, they are forced to make the hideous choice between continuous aesthetic scrutiny and the space outside the building, where blackened concrete and the cigarette-buffed flowerbeds have become increasingly hostile. Even when Hein himself ventures outside, in the few exterior images of this series, his gaze is sucked into false, cathode visions. Both the electronic eye and the roadside cats stare back, annihilating sections of the images with their glare. They seem to challenge the viewer to follow, to leave their self-imposed prison. For whatever reason, the revellers seem unable to do so, withdrawing into themselves as they withdraw further into the depths of the building.

What affected this change is left frustratingly vague. Or rather, it seems that Hein has assumed that the viewer is aware of whatever event caused the shift. Thus, we are presented with infuriating half-explanations, statements that require a received knowledge that is

lacked. Whatever caused the people present in these images to lock themselves in, be it madness or decision, it is clear that it had further consequences. Violence, explosive spillage and death follow. Trees are uprooted and left to die, flowers for the deceased are piled on makeshift altars. Even those revellers who escape “accident” are defaced, their visages reduced to blurs in thronging crowds. Their body parts, even if they remain attached to their owners in actuality, are amputated by the camera lens, de-contextualised with violent intent. Time ceases to mean anything; faces grow older with every dawn, each of which is heralded by the tabloids.

Faced with such horror, the revellers react in a satisfyingly predictable way – they retreat into ritual. Absurd scenes become more and more common, but are clearly staged as some communal defence against further “accidents”. As is the way with such quasi-religious observances, their original purpose quickly becomes indecipherable – what are we to make of the bubble party? But more practical concerns are also visible, even if they are tinged with surreality. By the closing images of this section, it seems the increasingly distant prospect of the “outside” had led it to gain almost mythical status. We are presented with scenes of a tropical, incense-infused jungle, creepers and shrines imposed upon Lambeth. The imagined tigers that inhabit these roads play on the minds of those inside – when they seem ready to venture outside, they prepare for an expedition. It is unlikely any of them returned, their scrawny figures chased into imaginary bear-traps by invisible natives. Still, it appears that all this was futile. This series of images culminates in overt threats of violence, guns left lying next to justification. Eventually, madness prevails. We are presented with images of willing sensory deprivation, some ultimate withdrawal into ever-smaller cells. At this point, the emergence of dictators, and of their demanded sacrifice, was inevitable.

Hein himself cannot escape. Where he is alone, he is not. He shoots ghosts, chimeras, in images that cry out for a focus, for a subject. We are given none. Whatever Hein sees in these corners, whatever squat goblin fills his viewfinder, disappears as soon as the shutter is pressed.

Thus, it is difficult to determine the effect of his mounting madness on his powers of composition. Not only because these photographs are strange by aesthetic standards, but because the characters written into their compositions are subject to a slow degradation; the form of the Indus characters becomes less and less discernible, and the still-visible strokes are made violently, as though by a shaking hand.

There are two possible interpretations of this, neither more convincing than the other. Some have made the obvious conclusion – that Hein was so affected by the rising tide of insanity that he lost the ability to compose such subtle images. This is certainly possible, for it is unlikely he remained isolated from the effects of the maddened atmosphere of the building, but is unlikely. For a photographer as skilled as Hein, such effects would have become second nature, and therefore would have remained untouched by even the extreme events that were occurring around him. Conversely; some have seen in these images impossibly small traces of another script, an extended font that renders the Indus characters obsolete. This leads us to the second interpretation, which is far more plausible. If Hein was affected by the conditions of 78 Lambeth road, the manifestation of this was not destructive. Instead, it was creative, and culminated in the creation of a new language, an evolved script designed to deal with the scenes witnessed. Given the extreme nature of the conditions inside the building, it is not impossible that the Indus characters were rendered inadequate, obsolete. Hein appears to have taken the logical way out – the invention of a new language, vastly more complex than the one he abandoned, and capable of expressing his new world.

By necessity, it is complex. Each character “appears to be made up of a multitude of strokes”<sup>5</sup> with some of the more ostentatious glyphs containing hundreds of elements. These minuscule lines and dots form grids that resemble a close layering of Cantonese characters, and are all but invisible without magnification. To the naked eye, they appear to be no more than shading, occasional cross-hatchings intended to

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5 *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, New York, 1917.

represent darkened areas of scene. Unfortunately, as with the Indus script, their meaning has resisted even the most zealous analysis; they remain, as does every character here, silent.

The 39th image (fig. ER) is also silent, as are those that follow. But not, let it be stressed, for the same reasons. Instead, this image forms the climax of Hein's narrative, a revelatory point of no return. To be blunt; whatever was found in the deepest interior of the building, in its darkest cellar, in Ella's Room, is inexpressible in words.

The room is festooned with offerings to some unknown desert god. It is a closing – the smallest room, hidden in some dank sewer deep in the core of Lambeth Road. Yet it is also an opening – after its discovery, the scenes open into some nightmare labyrinth. A labyrinth which broods with recently-ceased violence like the silence after a gunshot, but which affords a temporary and dubious freedom. Amid the deprivation, at the darkened eye of this particular storm, although rooms have become animal pens and corridors blades, there exists a grey peace (fig. 6776). Its trope is flight, and so neon birds interpolate themselves into the scenes, their curled wings strobing across the images. Finally, the sickening undertow rests, and the viewer is left in a domestic space. This is home, serenity, and contains a promise that events, though they may not cease to occur, are forever excluded. Finally, a sanctified moment of introspection is reached, and our cardboard shell is reflected back at us.

It is unclear what the nature of this revelation was, though it may be supposed that it was more mental than physical. Whether the throng clustered in Lambeth Road reached some peak in their mass-hysteria, or whether this sudden descent of almost post-coital peace affected Hein alone, this was an internalised event. It may have its closest approximation in post-traumatic catatonia, or in religious fervour, but it clearly changed those who witnessed it forever – the images that follow Ella's Room are wholly, disturbingly different from those that precede them. Yet the images are silent. Even after the most in-depth analysis, the most detailed deconstruction, we have been unable to find any trace

of linear intent to these photographs. Even the minuscule traces of the proposed “evolved” script above have ceased to appear; the images appear to have been the victims of a violent tracheotomy.

It is apparently clear what happened here. If, for a time, Hein's chosen script was able to adeptly code the events of that year, it was quickly rendered obsolete. Attempts were made at adaptation, and the script took on ever-more complex flourishes in an attempt to retain its relevance. In the unknown transcendent event that occurred in Ella's Room, this attempt was rendered futile. Hein, faced with events inexpressible in any language he knew, abandoned his project, and removed any trace of language from his images.

And yet, and yet. There is another interpretation, one that is as laughably obvious as it is fitting to the ambition of Hein. He did not abandon the project – he allowed the script to evolve again, into one impossibly indecipherable, subtle and reactive, one in which singular photons can stand for crude pencil-marks. If we are to assume that he abandoned his project, these closing images are not silent, but express their meaning through image itself, through a photography returned to omnipotence. If he adapted his language, it was to one so complex that it is identical to image itself. The distinction is arbitrary – a language remains in both interpretations, albeit one with an infinite number of characters and innumerable syntaxes. It is a language that comes full-circle, moves backward from representation and allows pictographs to metamorphose back into images; photography.

Whirr.