

Romeo Vendrame
Photography
Staffelstrasse 13
CH - 8045 Zürich
T 0041 (0) 44 201 99 25
M 0041 (0) 79 778 13 35
romeo@romeovendrame.com
www.romeovendrame.com

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THE LIGHTS OF LONDON – ROMEO VENDRAMÉ'S
PHOTOGRAPHIC SERIES CHOREOGRAPHY

by Lena Fritsch

Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory....
And suddenly the memory returns.

(Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, 1922)

London calling to the faraway towns

Now war is declared, and battle come down.

(The Clash, *London Calling*, 1979)

The warm yellows of the street lights and advertising signs in the centre of the photograph vie with the flickering neon sign inviting the public into the Raymond Revuebar. In the narrow alley below the bar there are the darkly blurred silhouettes of individuals succumbing to the seductive appeal of the big city at night. What may be going on behind the small, barred windows is anyone's guess. In another photograph the nearby Taboo Revue strip club gleams palely in the pitch black darkness. And in rain-soaked Wardour Street there is the yellow-orange glow of a famous music venue, the Marquee Club. A car is parked outside it, the door to the club seems to be open – a blues or rock concert could be about to begin.

These atmospheric images, all from Romeo Vendrame's cycle *Choreography* (ongoing since 2014), are based on photographs that he took in London in the 1970s. Besides the sights of Soho at night the series also includes landmark buildings such as Westminster Palace, contemporary architecture that appealed to the photographer, and street scenes in Brixton and around Piccadilly Circus. However, the photographs from the 1970s were only the starting point for a new process of artistic production; inspired by Graham Greene's espionage novel *The Human Factor* (1978), in spring 2014 Vendrame revisited his old slides. He put them into a slide projector in his studio, adding filters and other translucent materials, and took shots (sometimes multiple shots) of the resulting images. He thus recast his images from the 1970s in an entirely new 'choreography'. These photographs contain traces both of the lights of London forty years ago and the flickering light of the slide projector in Vendrame's studio in Zurich over the last three years. And it is the complexity of these 'technological byways that creates the magic' of these photographs.¹

London has a long history as a photographic motif – as in John Thomson's photojournalistic *Street Life*

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in London (1877), for instance, or in works from the 1930s, such as Bill Brandt's book *A Night in London* (1938). In the 1960s and 1970s life in London captured the imagination of photographers from all over the world, including Bruce Davidson, James Barnor, Martine Franck, Karen Knorr and Olivier Richon. Knorr and Richon particularly made a name for themselves with their images of Punks, which they first exhibited in 1978, at the Photographers' Gallery in London. In a similar vein, Vendrame's photographs with their evocative titles, many with allusions to music,² reflect his fascination with the music scene and show business in the metropolis. There is a particularly atmospheric quality to the photographs taken after dark, which convey a sense of the photographer (and musician) Vendrame strolling through Soho and seeking out music venues – photographs such as *Jam at Raymond's*, taken in Walker's Court, *Voodoo*, showing the *Taboo Revue Club*, and *Rainy Night Dream (Still)* with the *Marquee Club*, where Jimi Hendrix appeared. One set of three photographs, *Robbie Opiliones, Busker I*; *Robbie Opiliones, Busker II* and *Robbie Opiliones, Busker III*, depicts the same street musician from different angles and in different colourations. In the second the guitar glows bright yellow, but the musician's hat always conceals his face.

Vendrame's shots are also of interest as documents of that era, as records of a lost London and of the pulsating atmosphere of the 1970s. They vividly evoke the rock and folk music of that time: 'See the dazzling nightlife grow beyond the dawn and burning in the heart of Soho', sang Bert Jansch and John Renbourn in 1966; later on the Punk band, The Clash, had hits such as *London Calling* (1979) and *Guns of Brixton* (1979), which described the pull of the perilously fascinating city of London. The world of entertainment in London has seen countless changes over the last forty years and many of the buildings depicted in Vendrame's *Choreography* series no longer exist or have been radically altered. The *Taboo Revue* strip club with its 'non-stop live show' shut down long ago and even the *Marquee Club*, once the 'Mecca' of the British blues and rock scene, had to close in 2008. The *Raymond Revuebar*, which opened in 1958, was named after Paul Raymond, a notorious entrepreneur who owned the first strip club in the United Kingdom. He acquired numerous properties in Soho and published soft-porn magazines such as *Men Only* and *Mayfair*. The *Revuebar* closed in 2004 and 're-opened' with a different name and under new management in another building. Since 2011 the building in Walker's Court has been home to *The Box*, a cabaret nightclub that presents raunchy, modern shows in a 'fetish burlesque' style.

However, far from being merely documentary, the images in the *Choreography* series also question the very nature of documentary photography. The artistic process devised by Vendrame –photographing slide projections and introducing analogue interventions – alienates the 'original' shots and subjects them to a contemporary reading. The projections of old pictures of London become a symbol of visual memory: certain views and colours come to the fore, details are omitted and new elements are discreetly added – as

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though Vendrame wanted to highlight the suggestible nature of his memories of London. At the same time the blurred motifs and palely warm colours of the photographs create a mysterious aesthetic, which relates to the indeterminate, distant qualities of visual memories that linger in the mind's eye. Recollections often surface randomly and unexpectedly from the dark realms of memory – Marcel Proust found that the sweet taste of a madeleine cake, for instance, suddenly evoked pictures from the past: 'And suddenly the memory returns'.³ The lights that seem to momentarily emerge from the all-enveloping darkness in Vendrame's shots of Soho at night are reminiscent of the ephemeral nature of human recollection and its interconnection with forgetting. Roberta Valtorta, historian and photography critic, has aptly described the interplay of light, colour and memory in *Choreography*: 'The light ... does not illuminate things, it just shimmers, transparently.... Memories only find their way to us through the colours, and even then only sporadically and patchily.'⁴ The phenomenon of visual memory also plays an important part in earlier works by Vendrame, such as his photographic series *Afterglow* (1999–2001) and *I forget who I am, when I'm with you* (2001). It is the red thread running through his photographic oeuvre. Benjamin Marius Schmidt, literary critic and cultural historian, specifically investigated the interaction between the photo-technological eye and internal perception in *Afterglow* and concluded that these photographs 'convey a coherent, tangible sense of the way that the memory leaves tracks and recollections are subject to an ongoing process of sorting and re-organisation'.⁵ This also applies to the photographs in *Choreography*. However, they show London not only in nostalgic, utopian visual memories but also as a city that is still aglow in our own time. London has never stopped calling.

Lena Fritsch

Curator, Modern and Contemporary Art at the Ashmolean Museum (University of Oxford)

Translated by Fiona Elliott

Endnotes

- 1 Nadine Olonetzky, 'Im Sternbild der Grossen Blume', in Romeo Vendrame, *Romeo Vendrame. Fotografie. Bilder aus der Raumkapsel der Fotografie* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag 2006), p. 4.
- 2 The title of the photograph of the Marquee Club, for instance – *Rainy Night Dream (Still)* – alludes to the Jimi Hendrix song *Rainy Day, Dream Away* (1968).
- 3 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, *Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Dover Publications 1922), p. 38.
- 4 Roberta Valtorta, 'Choreography', text to accompany the series on the artist's website: <http://www.romeovendrame.com/valtorta.html?lang=d> (retrieved on 10 December 2016)
- 5 Benjamin Marius Schmidt, 'Engramme – Fotografie und Erinnerungstechnologie', in Romeo Vendrame, *Afterglow* (Zurich: Edition Fink 2001), p. 55.