

Max Pinckers

**Review: Control Order House, Edmund Clark, HERE Press, 2013.**

[www.photobookstore.co.uk](http://www.photobookstore.co.uk)

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I was introduced to Edmund Clark's work at the Bal Books Weekend at Le Bal in Paris where we were both invited to give a talk about our work late last year. From the first glimpse at Clark's most recent book *Control Order House*, I was immediately intrigued by the aesthetic choices and photographic approach. Initially, the work reminded me of the self-published books by Michiel Burger or the thorough documentation of housing by Sam Weerdmeester, but then I realised its political relevance and critical power, not only towards the subject matter but also towards the status of (documentary) photography.

With its red cardboard hard cover and large title in black capital letters, Clark's well designed book appears as an official document or some sort of emergency manual. The architectural illustration immediately sets the tone for the anonymous and somewhat archetypical middle class British house in which the photographs are made. The opening pages show the 'Occupancy Rules' of living in a Home Office provided residence, which is followed by the United Kingdom Prevention of Terrorism Act of 2005, another censored legal document with blacked out segments. Lead by a small personal introduction written in the first person, we find a copy of the official reply Clark received from the Home Office concerning the permission and conditions the photographer was obliged to follow in order to produce this series of photographs.

Clark was granted three days and two nights inside the Control Order House together with CE, the controlled person, who remains anonymous and is therefore also never photographed. A Control Order is a type of house arrest imposed upon people suspected of potential terrorist activity. The evidence on which this suspicion is based remains secret on the premise that it would be incongruent to reveal such evidence in open court and would compromise the Home Office's intelligence services. Therefore the suspected person, in this case CE, and his lawyers had to disprove a suspicion without knowing on what evidence it was based, rendering them defenceless. Interestingly it was CE and his lawyers who, after Clark's request to photograph him, made sure that the necessary applications were obtained to ensure Clark gained permission to take pictures inside the house.

All the images in the book are unedited and shown in the order they were taken. Clark systematically moved through the house, measuring and photographing every detail in a straightforward and methodological approach. About five hundred images are shown, mostly presented in the same manner, with eighteen images to a page, captioned with their original filenames (e.g. \_MG\_3024.jpg), sometimes interrupted by single recurring enlarged images. The measurements were made in an effort to document the spacial forms of control within the house with the intention to potentially re-create various spaces in collaboration with an architect, be it digitally or physically, in the form of an installation when exhibiting the work (which Clark is planning to explore in the future).

The main body of images is followed by a few handwritten pages that make up CE's diary over a period of three days. Confronted by his mundane routine, he decided to stop writing because he thought it was becoming repetitive. This is followed by a floor plan of the house showing the upstairs and downstairs floors, mapped according to Clarks measurements in collaboration with an architect, giving the reader an idea of the spaces described in the diary and photographs. The next four pages are an interesting contribution to the book, which puzzle me yet lead me to the thought of the aesthetic functionality Clark's photographs maintain. We are suddenly introduced to four consecutive close-up photographs of wallpaper textures: images instantly reminiscent of the topographic visuals produced by drones and war machines, yet at the same time very formal and aesthetically conforming in contrast to the straightforward banal images that make up the main body of work.

It's important to state that Clarks' intention was not to create any form of hierarchy between the images so as to maintain the conceptual approach of thumbnails presented as a grid without any form of personal manipulation or subjective input. However, there are a number of pictures from the grid reproduced in a larger format (the file names can be used to reference the thumbnails in the grid), breaking the flow of his systematic documentation, which seem to ask for more attention than the other images. When I asked Clark about this particular choice he emphasises the presence of the cat in the house, the only living thing photographed that has the freedom to come and go at its own will, which becomes an important sub-narrative that is emphasised by enlarging a photograph depicting the cat and other images that are perhaps suggestive of its presence. Clark makes clear that "CE was not allowed to have a cat, and could be

prosecuted on the basis of having the cat in the house”, which indeed makes it a very important element, yet perhaps this choice is also made on the basis of engaging the viewer more into the individual images rather than being subdued by the repetitive grid structure of the thumbnails.

A beautiful balance to the impersonal documentation of the house are the close-ups of four different wallpaper textures (the only photographs made with a large format camera), printed on another paper type. A visual shift from order to chaos. “They are typical and very recognisable British wallpaper patterns yet when looked at closely they contain traces” Clark continues, “these wallpapers show the textures this man lives with all the time affirming a claustrophobic environment”. This is the only moment Clark reveals a personal view on the subject that moves towards a more abstract visual language, yet maintain their banality through the subject matter of plain old wallpaper. Not only referencing to military drone surveillance footage, the images also allude to the mental landscape of the controlled person. The photographs are intelligently placed, following the architectural floor plans that lead the viewer into a topographical way of looking, and preceding a thirty page high court judgement imposing the control order on CE, which concludes the book and is the only material that moves beyond the constricting walls of the house and into the public sphere.

This intelligent and aesthetically intriguing book is a wonderful example of how a photographic approach compliments the subject revealing the mediums’ true nature. A somewhat daring approach criticising the contemporary status of photography by referring back to its essence: trapped between a banal depiction of reality and a symbolically-burdened aesthetic form. This work is as much about the representation of politics as the politics of representation.

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