

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on October 11, 2022,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Christopher David
Killip was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

CHRISTOPHER DAVID KILLIP

BORN: July 11, 1946
DIED: October 13, 2020

Chris Killip was one of the great British documentary photographers of the twentieth century. He was born on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, where, as he liked to say, people you meet start by asking who your grandparents were. His father owned a pub where Chris sometimes worked. He hated school and was pleased to be thrown out at the age of sixteen. Soon after, searching an issue of *Paris Match* for news of the Tour de France, he came upon the celebrated photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson showing a smiling child toting two wine bottles. It haunted him. A month later he told his father he had decided what he wanted to do with his life.

Working as a beach photographer, Chris scraped together enough money to move to London, where he earned a living as a freelance assistant to several accomplished photographers. From them he learned his craft. But it was a visit to New York and the Museum of Modern Art that opened his eyes to what photography could be. Deeply impressed, he returned to the Isle of Man and began work on what was to become a magnificent and ambitious book documenting life there. His first images were made using 35-millimeter equipment; then, on the advice of a respected friend, he switched to a large-format camera. The necessity of setting up a tripod and the effort of loading the camera with one sheet of black-and-white film at a time turned out to be keys to the spare style he evolved and to its power. He photographed in daylight and spent nights working at his father's pub. He periodically traveled to London to print his images. A New York publisher brought out a limited edition of them and a few even found their way onto Isle of Man postage stamps, where they traveled the world.

Once the completed book was published, Chris spent months driving around Britain searching for a new place to live and to photograph. Given his working-class origins, he was attracted to the massive, and declining, industrialization of the Northeast. He moved to Newcastle and spent the next seventeen years creating a monumental photographic record of all he saw there. His most dazzling, profound, and unforgettable images come from this period. He photographed those who live by scrounging the coal that the sea tosses up on the beach. He photographed shipbuilding and miners, whose union employed him to take

pictures for its newspaper. He photographed in the streets and pubs and brought his large camera regularly to the city's punk rock club. Every day he left his house at 8 a.m. and chose a place where he kept a promise to himself to remain and to photograph until dark. He came to understand black-and-white as a medium of abstraction that allowed him to distill and see reality more clearly and to use flash often, even outdoors, as a way of intensifying that reality in its revealing glare.

Chris believed that without earning his subjects' trust he could accomplish nothing. He thought of his photographs as belonging partly to them. With a friend, he opened a photography gallery so that his photographs, and those of kindred photographers, could live in the environment from which they came.

His labors gave birth to numerous exhibitions and books, including the celebrated *In Flagrante*. When he completed his work on it, he offered it only to publishers whose lists did not include books of photographs, hoping that it would be reviewed mainly by writers and poets bringing little baggage to the experience of contemplating his hard-won images. In a rare positive instance of the poetic justice that life occasionally renders, the book won the prestigious Cartier-Bresson prize.

In 1991 Chris, then in the midst of completing a new project, and without ever having given a thought to teaching, was persuaded to accept an offer, tendered out of the blue, to come to Harvard as a Visiting Lecturer. Three years later he was offered tenure.

As a teacher, Chris was exceedingly generous with his time and attention. Yet he was never less than frank in conveying what he did and did not see in his students' work. He may not have been terribly interested in the United States, but he was thrilled by the pools of talent available in a nation of such vast size and diversity. He devised ways to increase the capacity of the photography courses so as to reach more students, while never relinquishing his insistence on the highest standards. Thanks to his active presence in British and Continental photography, he was acquainted with a wide range of photographers and brought them to the department for both single lectures and term-long visiting positions. The effect of his presence was both to elevate the standards of what was done and expected here and to open our doors to the richness and range of world practices, including those that bore little resemblance to his own.

Chris believed that his mission was to document the lived experience that history is powerless to render, and that the route to this goal was to live as a member of the communities he photographed. "The photography that I practice," he once said, "takes place in a specific time and place, depicting real moments in people's lives. In some ways I think of myself as a historian, but not of the word. History is most often written from a distance, and rarely from the viewpoint of those who endured it." The images he left us are eloquent testimony to that conviction.

Respectfully submitted,

Makeda Best

Ross McElwee

Alfred Guzzetti, Chair