

## Photography in Britain in the 1960s : the Photographer John Donat as Critic

### Establishment of a new frame for the evaluation of photography

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#### Intention:

This research project deals with the topic of *architectural representation in Great Britain in the 60's*, with its different forms of exposure, promotion, publication and communication. It especially concentrates on *commercial photography*, where the professional relations and reciprocal effects between photographers, architects, publishers, critics and clients play a crucial role. The position of the critic is particularly interesting because he or she stands as mediator between the other four.

Since its first promotion, around 1840, photography has been a flexible medium - it adapts to each innovation reciprocally in relation to ideology and market forces. The meaning of photography is moulded by the society in which it is used, from the connection of all human actions which take place in the society, so that it changes from time to time and place to place. Photographs receive their meaning by the way the reader understands them. The assignment of meaning happens on two levels - on the organizational level, in which the photographer determines what to place in the current scene, and second on the historical level, where the photograph must be understood in the context of its day. Based on the assumptions of Dagobert Frey, the "*reality character*" of an art object is defined by the *tension between the objective picture and the meaning of represented contents*, between form and meaning. The framework for the analysis is the study of photography and its relationship with society and culture. The viewpoint of Dagobert Freys is to be used throughout the investigation of the critical activity of John Donat, in order to work out the special meaning of photo journalism in architectural photography, where critical activity is meant to be the determination and representation of topics. Donat's work offers a starting point for examining the mutual interrelations between photography and society. Finally, this research project will also be an intensive self examination of the methods of criticism.

*Keywords: criticism, photography, John Donat, 1958-68*

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## I. Photographer John Donat as critic

This research project dealt with the topic of architectural representation in Great Britain in the 1960's, with its different forms of exposure, promotion, publication and communication. Much attention was paid to the professional relations and reciprocal effects between photographers, architects, publishers, critics and clients. The position of the critic was particularly interesting because he or she stands as mediator between the other four roles.

What is criticism? Since that discipline was the subject of the research, it was appropriate to begin with the definition of the term and its implication. Why those who cannot create ('build') take it upon themselves to estimate the value of architectural work? Oscar Wilde says in his essay *'The Critic as Artist'* (1891) that the highest criticism is the one which reveals in the work of art what the artist had not put there - new thoughts and not the repetition of the already existing. The critic sets art in a wider picture and therefore he is creative. Documentary photography does so as it is always a representation of reality, and in its definition did not exist before. Furthermore, the study of the essay confirmed the equal importance of the critical faculty with artistic creation. The artist must be both critic and creator if he is to produce great art, and the art of the critic should be as fine a creative work. What are these requirements for being a good critic? William H. Jordy and Ralph Coe published their point of view about criticism in *"American Architecture and Other Writings"*<sup>1</sup> and their view can be summarized as follows:

1. Whether his aesthetic perspective is relevant for the creative production of the world?
2. Whether his point of view leads to the most creative artist and considers the significant problems in the world?
3. Whether he allows his perspective to be transformed during the critiquing process.

The study of the work and thoughts of John Donat answers the questions positively. Although his intentions were not matching with those of the *International Situationists*<sup>2</sup>, and his work does not mirror the common public opinion, it is able to recreate the past to guide us through a labyrinth of thoughts of the 60s. Questioning what were the possibilities to influence others in the 60's, the most obvious response is that one had to speak very loud, aggressively loud. One has to think about movements like the 'Anti-ugly-action' who were against ugly buildings and forced a debate about architectural quality putting coffins in front of buildings and warning to demolish them. John Donat was not loud, he was more likely a charismatic gentleman (refers to his well tempered style of conversation). With his influence he achieved to have a voice, but not on the influential medias. He

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<sup>1</sup> ed. **W.H. Jordy and R. Coe** (1961). *Montgomery Schuyler*. Harvard University Press, p. 71-72.

<sup>2</sup> Very strong cultural tendency of that time, who had declared as their main scope the abolishment of any form of representation.

worked among the institutions which were to lose their credibility. His film *'Rape of Utopia : Jam Tomorrow'* (1964) for the BBC, where he describes the effort to build a new Britain, and talks to people struggling to plan a better future for the industrial town, became hardly known. Not even his best friends (Su Rogers, Peter Ahrend) can remember it. But it was not a problem of passion or devotedness, Donat was surely very committed to all of his subjects. On backsides of photographs you find annotations like for the Newcastle series: *"The tough character of a city to be rebuilt."* or *"Is the new any better than the old?"*, which nobody was intended to see. However influence matters, although it is not decisive. Central is the conception of critics, as was confirmed by John Donat's choices of working themes: new settlements, housing, city growth, traffic problems, education. Those themes were identified during the analysis of his photographic inventory (client, content, place, time, photographer, quantity of external and internal pictures). His interest on contemporary discussed issues can be read in the titles of his produced DIA series for educational material: *'Man-made world 1 - Environment'*, *'Man-made world 2 - Man and Maschine'*, *'Man-made world 3 - Who cares?'*, *'Man-made world 4 - Change is normal'* in 1968 for RIBA; *'Looking at things'* (V-VII) titled with *'Modern movements'*, followed by *'View points'* and *'Environment'* for the London editor Visual publications.

A proof for his success as critic can be seen in his writing. In telegram to John Donat on July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1964 regarding his exhibition review "The growth of London" was confirmed: *Your piece is the best thing that has happened to the growth of London for years absolutely. Thrilled = Tony +*".

## **II. New interpretive framework**

The value of a work has not to be measured only regarding its success as a single object in the artistic world, but also regarding the production process. The appraisal system is not based more on the object, but to its model of development.

The *Theory of anthropology of the space* (D. Frey, O. F. Bollnow) is concerned with the concept of dialectic in the evaluation process of architecture. The critical examination of Dagobert Frey's *'Kunstwissenschaftliche Grundfragen'*(1943) brought new and fertile keys for reading the work by John Donat. Frey's definition of architecture starts from the significance for the human experience and not from the classification in an abstract fine arts systematic, like it was before established by August Schmarsow (1893).

He yields to accept the *duality of the human nature* present in many art works. For Frey 'Ort' (place) is always in the same moment 'Weg' (path), too. A place is defined through our intention to move toward it or away from it, and otherwise we are not moving if we do not have a goal to go for.

Derived thus a single art work has to be always considered as a sequence of actions and thoughts, and can never only estimated only for their physical presence. A single photograph is a pure sign, which includes in its meaning time and space particles. Looking at one single image alone does not give enough information for a critical judgment. The whole process of his creation, production and post-production has to be observed and evaluated, because the risk of plagiarism or masking is very high. From the other direction, a process alone does not have any value, if it is not finalized in obtaining a new product.

Frey states that the character of a work of art is founded in the tense relation between the objective '*image*' and the significance of the '*represented*' content (between form and meaning). Photography as dialectic element establishes itself between the original subject and surrounding where it is presented. Therefore the limits for an evaluation are extremely flexible. However, this is not a valid reason not to look for them, even though they are challenging to define. As a matter of fact all world is structured by complementary spatial principles, for example under/over or left/right. All those criteria are strongly interwoven with ideology and moral values, as well with cultural history.

Every symbol ('*Zeichensetzung*', Frey) demands a community for who it is defined, where it has its value and where it is recognized. There it has a specific position. In this specific reference system, or community, you find essential *reference points*. However those *anchor points* are constantly changing, for example what in 1922 was a reference - the political system of communism, is not going to be one in 1959, there it might be the TV series Bonanza. It is not our rational ability that allows us to give value to a work of art, instead there are our feelings and emotions, which vary through our daily experiences. Those small *daily moments* influence our judgments as they give our reference system the *points of anchorages*.

Besides studying the main historical events of a time span it is equally important to observe the less-important ones. New media has brought ignorance of local immediate issues and comprehension of only the global-scale patterns of evolution. Often we focus on the 'important' while the events of minor importance can silently acquire the strength to change the world, as it happened through the punk movement in the 70s. In the 'unimportant' issues, like fashion or music, we have the possibility of expression escaping the control of superiors (reference to M. Kundera '*The book of the rice and the oblivion*'<sup>3</sup>, M. Greil '*Lipstick traces*'). In the end they are those who can make a difference.

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<sup>3</sup> „Wir stehen im Bann der erstarrten Auffassung darüber, was wichtig und was bedeutungslos ist und heften unseren Blick ängstlich auf das Wichtige, während das Unwichtige im verborgenen, hinter unserem Rücken seinen Guerillakrieg führt, der die Welt letztlich unbemerkt und uns

An examination of the theory of anthropology has developed a reference system, where 'context' has to be defined further its pure physiological aspects (base of the theory 'Critical Regionalism'). The main new characteristics of the evaluation system are: the concept of 'functional complexity' and the concept of 'artistic topography' (networks of ideas, methods and concepts), which differ from the geographical one. Topologically complex social structures form the foundation for processes of exchange, production, information and knowledge sharing, and validation.

### III. Reference points in the work of John Donat

John Donat was committed to the architectural world and its requirements. On the other hand, he wanted to mediate between the general public and the architects and had therefore to address the architectural layman. He used a media mix, or better a matrix of mediation to convey the information from the architectural profession to the general public. There is a gradient from the profession proper to the general public: *books, magazines, newspaper, radio/TV* - moving towards those that can be described as institutional (academy institutions): *lectures, exhibition, prizes, competitions*. Donat's communication pattern was divided regarding the products.

Every product follows another logic of the production (times, public, costs, distribution etc.) and therefore it refers on various fixed points in the significant reference system. Ideas and events influence every work differently and therefore each form of media has to be observed separately<sup>4</sup>. That observation lead to the organization of the 'functional complexity' of his work. Derived from texts by the *Dagobert Frey*<sup>5</sup>, *Hannah Arendt*<sup>6</sup>, and *Edouard Glissant*<sup>7</sup> the interpretation of the data did not follow the idea of parallelism of the events, where all is described on one timeline. Instead it established a time displacement (graphically) of the single observation fields in respect to the to analyzing product (books, magazines, radio transmissions, documentary film, book, photography). Following are examples of the primary forms of media used by John Donat in his role as a critic.

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*unvorbereitet treffen wird.* " **Milan Kundera** (2000). Das Buch vom Lachen und Vergessen. München : dtv. p.264; © 1978

<sup>4</sup> In the sixties much attention was drawn to new economic observations, where lateral effects of industries became influential on the equation of economic success and failure. Knowledge became considered as a product and therefore its value could be measured. The Austrian economist **Fritz Machlup** ('*The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States*', 1962) divided information in three categories: intellectual, instrumental and pastime knowledge suggest broad range of uses of information other than pure instrumental (practical) one.

<sup>5</sup> **Dagobert Frey** (1883 - 1963) Austrian art critic

<sup>6</sup> **Hannah Arendt** (1906 -1975) German political theorist.

<sup>7</sup> **Edouard Glissant** (1928-) Francophone writer, poet and literary critic

Books have the image of prestige and they carry the aura of timelessness. But they are very slow to appear. Few architectural books are read and one wonders if the effort of writing them is worthwhile. John Donat published four with success, 'World architecture' (1-4). Number 4 was even reviewed in the New York Times on its appearing in 1968, as was his contribution to the book 'Aght'amar : church on the Holy Cross'(1964) by Sirarpi Der Nersessian. The latter one was the 1<sup>st</sup> book in the Harvard Armenien Text and Studies series by the prestigious Harvard University Press.

His book series 'World Architecture' has a very simple structure and it is presented entirely in black and white. In comparison with other books of that time it does not seem very appealing graphically, but you can recognize a very precise complementary relationship among the text, the photographer, the drawings and the layout. It speaks more from commitment and value rather than value-free graphics of aesthetic detachment.

Magazines have a limited reach beyond the realm of students and architects. Only a small number end up in the hands of outsiders of the profession. Their main function is inter-professional communication. If it avoids the trap becoming an architect's public relations tool it could even be a record of the state of the world through the state of architecture. Articles in one magazine can reinforce one another enlivening the exchange of authors and readers. The research examined the two main British architectural magazines, Architectural Design and Architectural Review, in their period from 1958-68, finding out what were the main issues one talked about and their evaluation. The information was drawn out of the sections: 'letters to the editor', 'marginales', 'exhibition reviews'. Beside this the appearance of photographs of John Donat, Sam Lambert, Richard Einzig, and Henk Snoek were recorded and interpreted.

Newspapers require an extremely clarity and are exposed to critical feedback. One address an audience of million readers in which architecture is presented in an urban, social and economic context, but also literature, arts and history. It has a broader platform of public visibility than is provided by academy. John Donat used this medium for the publication of his point of view regarding the current broadcasting strategy of the BBC. His initiative was based on the *Pilkington Report* (1960-62)<sup>8</sup> who criticized the BBC. Since the mid 60s John Donat was working on a

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<sup>8</sup> The BBC offered at that time a range of dramatic programming that bridged the gap between the serious and the commercial. The Pilkington report suggested that it would be better thinking of overlapping majorities and minority tastes instead of tiny fractal cells. But the government ignored the recommendation and introduced a system based on the evaluation of the listening audience numbers. Programs were segmented (introduction of BBC Radio 4 in 1967) and therefore the listeners, too, what fostered the existing situation of mass observation and did not allow new capacities to evolve. "Giving the public what it wants" was a definition of 'mass audience' where they claimed to know what the public wants.

research to carry out an interdisciplinary study of the effects of the new media on architecture, turning inward to study the influence of communication media. It calls attention to this intrinsic effect of communications media. The research was granted and supported by RIBA, the architectural league, and made part of the 'Campaign for Better Broadcasting'. After the publication of '*Crisis in Broadcasting*' in the major daily newspapers in September 1969, Donat received an remarkable amount of publicity and the article received an amazing response by universities, architects and intellectuals, all confirming their support. It was a high point in his professional development, even if there were some similarities to the 1961 in Canada published study "*The decline and fall of Canadian broadcasting*" by Graham Spry.

Radio and architecture seem a hardly to belong together. Architecture without images is difficult to convey. Radio transmission are usually pro and contra exaltations. TV is different, but the programs are pushed to afternoon or late night fringes, where audiences are less significant than those of leading newspapers. In his article '*Crisis in Broadcasting*' he address these issues and proves his very understanding and involvement in media. He had started working for the BBC radio in 1958 and made more than 100 transmissions. Among his memorable ones are '*Masterbuilders: implications of change on architectural ideas*' (1966) or '*Milan Triennale*' (1968).

Lectures are a simple method to communicate. They have an emotional impact derived from the magic of presence. Through their rhetorical power they can become a memorable events to students, architects or the general public as they never reach the level of intellectual sophistication or literary elaboration of a text.

Donat was very successful in holding lectures. With his charismatic voice and style he could take in ban thousand of people. One of his most remarkable '*The camera always lies*' was later made commercially available through Monica Pidgeon Audio Visual titled '*Architecture through the lens*'.

Exhibitions are generally very expensive and cheap ones rarely have any influence. Architectural exhibitions are sparsely visited by a big crowd, but they achieve to offer institutions some mediated exposure.

The RIBA had organized an exhibition on the life work of John Donat in 1989, which did not find his approval. The RIBA is a committed space with a specific audience, where he would have preferred a public space.

#### IV. Reference points - interviews with eyewitness

Given that urban environments facilitate many kinds of interaction, in different places and amongst many kind of people, London was and is as location for interchange was extremely important. What London characterized was its “*get-together, not so much of types, classes, races, as of individual departures from the norm.*” (Sam Lambert, *London Night and Day*, 1961). “*London now recognized as the world centre of art trade.*” (S. Lambert, p.49) and “*Coffee bars are the biggest social change since people started going to laundrettes...*” (S. Lambert, p.53). For architects one might be reminded of the Saturday breakfast meeting under the Smithsons.<sup>9</sup> and the Sunday lunch meeting under guidance of Reyner Banham<sup>10</sup>.

However American culture and imagery governed the artistic world in the postwar time. Abstractionism and POP Art formed the reference points for the cultural production. The preoccupation for the whole world with its old structures (political, social, economic) stood not anymore in center, instead the battle of ‘*expressing oneself*’ were the most challenging issue. The subcultures of the street, with their desire to destroy all structures of society, governed the time. London was the center of the youth culture, exemplified by the Swinging London subculture which made Carnaby Street and its mini skirts a household name of youth fashion around the world. For example John Donat was even commissioned by Charles Eames in 1961 to picture the mini skirts in Carneby Street in order to see what was going on in London.

But in the 1960s things were changing. The British history was shaken by events: from the invasion of Anglo-French forces in Egypt, John Osborne’s theater play “*Look Back in Anger*”, which became a symbolic text for people who wanted a different kind of Britain, and the beginning punk movement. It was the declaration of war upon a rotten society. It was a time of doubt, chaos, anger, confusion and joy. The loudness of the punk mirrored the open, decisive passion to the moment, where the world seems to change. People took responsibility for themselves. But it is a story of unfinished sentences, and to picture that situations seems impossible.

Through interviews with contemporary witnesses the frame for the evaluation of John Donat’s work was continuously reviewed. Principle person was prof. *Kenneth Frampton* (American, architectural critic) who made important connections with other eyewitnesses. About the specific situation in the 60s and the creative circles in London interviews with the British editors *Monica Pidgeon* and *Peter Murray*, with the British architects *Su Rogers* and *Peter Ahrends* were hold in London. In Venice the British architect and photographer *Michael Carapetian* could be

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<sup>9</sup> Alison Smithson (1928-1993) and Peter Smithson (1923-2003), English architects

<sup>10</sup> Reyner Banham (1922-1988) English architectural critic

interviewed. In stay in New York permitted to discuss several times the general issues of representation and the artistic production with *Michael Blackwood* (American film producer). Through Mr Blackwood's work the opportunities were given to interview the Canadian photographer *Jeff Wall* during his exhibition at the MOMA (New York) and the American artist *Vija Celmins* during her exhibition in the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles). *Phyllis Lambert*, a Canadian philanthropist and founder of the Canadian Center of Architecture in Montreal, could be interviewed in Montreal. Following only some interesting notions taken from the interviews.

### *Michael Blackwood*

Michael Blackwood is a very exceptional person and can be seen as one of the great connoisseurs of our time in terms of art, architecture, music and dance. He stood in contact with many personalities, e.g. Andy Warhol or Philip Glass, and shortly with John Donat (film production on Mies van der Rohe). Michael Blackwood work reveals a very clear structure in choosing a subject and then observe it in its most modest terms. The setting is always an interview situations, wherein the viewer can feel to be in a very exclusive situation with the respective artist or architect. Often it is not very exiting but gives you the sensation to hear the true voice. Reality isn't often spectacular as it is presented by the media, but it is neither boring. His films have their strength in the little detail which one has to discover. That kind of details which are significant for humanity with all its imperfections and doubts. Michael Blackwood never interferes in the situations, just let them happen. He has a great respect for life and his films in its dryness do nothing better than show it us in its beauty. One of the great lesson of his films are that we are all the humans with emotions, enthusiasm and failures. artists, architects and subway drivers.

### *Jeff Wall*

Both photographers have the same Londoner background. Jeff Wall is one of the most important and influential photographers working today. His work played a key role in establishing photography as a contemporary art form. He described his work as "near documentary," a plausible account or a report on real or imagined encounters. In confrontation with John Donat, he usually spends weeks painstakingly recreating his encounters and taking many pictures, from which he selects his final image in a critical process. Wherever Jeff Wall is not interested in running around trying to find an event that could made into a picture, Donat preferred to do so sometimes even waiting for days for the right situation. In 'Waiting for the decisive moment' (H.C. Bresson) Donat gives no indication that he was trying to break with the tradition of documentary photography seen generally as hunt for a shoot. The 60s art photography was the one of street photography of Robert Frank, Arbus and Winogrand and Stephen Shore, and their grainy, blurry pictures. Jeff Wall titled that as a kind of photo ghetto. The style of images might have been changed, but you could not escape the Iconophobia of the mid 60s. Photos did not get noticed in this over pictured epoch, what

explain why Donat did not receive any broader public recognition. With his photographs he had followed the traditional tracks by picturing situations in strong black/white contrasts and publishing them in small size formats.

### Vija Celmins

Vija Celmins recalls her beginnings in abstraction. Her approach is almost the complete negation of the temporary world. Even that her repertoire is narrowed to three subjects: the sea, the night sky and the desert, it shows a highly appreciation to values such as modesty, persistence and rigor. Celmins studies the objects of her perception with intense commitment to what is literally seen, removing them completely from the realm of romantic and the codes of the sublime. In deep concentration to single issues she achieves to reveal a truth. Obviously it is difficult to compare an artist with a photographer for the lack of common techniques or presentation modes, but Celmins as well as Donat focus on the close-up of situations or plane surfaces (Donat with the frescos in the Byzantine churches in Crete). The works mirrors the search for the beauty in the existing environment, which is always are very specific one. There are no aspirations for revolution neither changes.

## **V. Search for reference points - study of the artistic context in the 60s**

In her book '*Vita activa*'(1958) Hannah Arendt elaborates the problem of 'truth' in the scientific conception of the modern world. All becomes representative in terms of mathematics to us. We can recognize all what we make, but its understanding has become extremely difficult, unless impossible. So far *photography is a technical product* that intend to show us the real world, but it is always a representation of it. Photography is neither a pure scientific element. However the definition "what is photography" it is second grade. Its importance is revealed in "how much one speaks about photography". It is difficult to find out about what kind of photographs people talked in the sixties as there actually were not such thing as a photography market. People talked about films.

Films influence the way we see and perceive our world, they are our visual dictionary of the reality around us. As a medium they are very closed to photography, too. In looking closer to those films shown in the 1960s and watched by architects, the clients for architectural images, found interesting. Between the contributions that have been engrossed are those of Andy Warhol on mirroring the life of the time, Alain Resnais on the use of the abstraction (for the understanding) and dialectic, Johan van Keuken on truthfulness, Mikhail Kalatozov whom the diversity of the feelings in various contexts emphasizes, and Arthur Harold Lipsett on the dissolution of the documentary value of the image and the sound.

The film *'Night and Fog'* (1959) by Alain Resnais was a typical anti-documentary. You cannot document this particular reality of the concentration camps in Auschwitz with the traditional neutrality of documentaries. Film is the expression of a thought. The only solution is that of reflection and asking questions, to examine the record and then to interrogate our own responses. In the film *'Hiroshima mon amour'* Resnais constructs a non-linear story to deal with the difficult issue of the atomic bomb. What you are going to see is not a pure creation by an author, it is an element of the real world. The actors see their own tragedies rendered insignificant in the shadow of the monumental tragedy of Hiroshima. The film is a sequence of single frames. One should rediscover unity from the fragments of the film.

In Holland there had been developed a new sensibility, which paid more attention to day-to-day lives. The official image of architecture were displaced by an informal one with blurred pictures and erased ones. It was a moving away from a 'realistic' aspect, what provoked the presence of the matter in foreground. In 1958 the young photographer Johan van der Keuken (1938-2001) was published in the magazine *Camera* together with Jean-Louis Sieff and Mario Giacometti. All three escaped the 'pure photography' with its blended techniques and aesthetic appreciations, revealing a 'troubled state'. Disquiet, instability, unsettling reality became acceptable in photography. Johan van der Keuken tried to erase any hinge of over-affirmation ('I see that') from the finished picture. He did this by replacing the single, decisive frame of a photo by a series of attacks on the same theme, none of them pretend to be the absolutely right. The 'right' image does not exist in the face of this multiplicity of all possible approaches. The multiple series of treatments of the same theme dramatizes the act of choice involved in any framing operation.

In the work of Russian director Mikhail Kalatozov, especially in his film *'Soy Cuba'* (1964), the image was more important than the actual content what might be grounded in the inability to tell another nation's way of feeling. Every nation has its own rhythm and way of feeling. Kalatozov used special light effects, the scenes were shot in a continuous flow, and new viewpoints were introduced.

## **VI. Artistic topography - study of writings and notes**

The study of the personal archive, major part held by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in London, points out that John Donat was given a great ability to deal among different disciplines. Unfortunately his personal correspondence does not exist as a holding, but through

interconnections with his clients some letters could be found and read. For example the one with the British architect Sir Denys Lasdun<sup>11</sup> researched in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

29.05.1964 John Donat to Denys Lasdun:

I am sorry to have sat on this for so long – I just managed to find one sunny afternoon with light in the right quarter, the leaves not yet on the trees, and the site looking reasonable clear of contractor's paraphernalia<sup>12</sup>.

The result fulfils most of the requirements we discussed together but really doesn't make much of a picture in my view – hence my hesitation – I don't think our eyes had any idea that what we saw was in fact a very long and narrow horizontal strip which, seen as a single image, is rather loose and dispersed looking. I have indicated on the back of the montage the extent of one shot showing your building – you might think that this on its own would make a better picture.

Let me know what you think,

With best wishes

John

01.06.1964 Denys Lasdun to John Donat:

Dear John,

I am most grateful for the trouble you have taken with the photograph. Considering all the circumstances, I think it is excellent but we shall not use it for publication. It will certainly be invaluable for re-photographing in the autumn. Non of this implies that you should not send in your bill if you want too. I am off on holiday after 20<sup>th</sup> June. Don't know if you will be around Aug-Sep-Oct., but, if you can, please keep a session free for a full exercise on this building inside and outside.

Yours sincerely

From his early childhood on he stood in closed contact with the world of film, theater and their respectively promotion in Europe as well as in America. Nobody else as his father Robert Donat, Oscar winner for his performance in 'Goodbye Mr. Chips' (1940) and considered the most distinctive and beautiful voice of Britain, taught him the way of acting. With 10 years he appeared in his first Hollywood picture by Jean Renoir, the award winning film 'This Land is Mines'. Beside his remarkable seriousness and passion for the fictional world, he never considered the film business as his future. What might be grounded on the fact that his father did not approached it and that through him he already had undergone the heights and depths of the theater and film world, especially if you want to follow your convictions. Nevertheless the life as a son of a famous Hollywood actor brought him in contact with the most aspiring cultural and artistic movements on both side of the ocean. Just to name some Peter Ustinov, Deborah Kerr, Alfred Hitchcock.

The knowledge of rhythm, structure and timing of plays John Donat could use in his later broadcasting activities. Similarities between his theater ken and way of reporting were traced by the comparison of his BBC transmissions with the classical methods of acting by Konstantin

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<sup>11</sup> **Sir Denys Lasdun** (1914–2001) English architect

<sup>12</sup> paraphernalia : personal belongings

Stanislavsky (1863-1938, Russian theater educator)<sup>13</sup> and Michael Chekhov (1891-1955, Russian actor and director)<sup>14</sup>. But more resemblance were borne with *Notes on directing* (2003) by Frank Hauser and Russel Reich in the main points *simplicity, variety and clarity*. To cite an example of analogy - John Donat used to built up his series from the detail towards the bigger picture of the setting. "Realize that the end is in the beginning" (F. Hauser), as the audience will see every element was essential, as every moment from the first to the last contributed. In general architectural publications approach the representation from the opposite direction, what hold the risk to oversight the fineness of architectural details as one believe having them already seen before.

## VII. Study of the visual material

The observation of John Donat's *contact sheets* gives some specific information as they have the advantage that one can see the sequence of the taken pictures. One get to know the picture before and after the chosen one, neither they are manipulated nor cut. Donat took all almost pictures with a small Hasselblad, format 6x6 cm. His work on Crete reveals that he actually captured situations, the passing moment instead of single objects or persons. There is no central fix point in the pictures although people in their daily activities were shoot very closed. One feels looking at something very private, but never too closed. It is a kind of middle distance that intrigues to start a dialogue with the picture and not their artistic performance with perfectly strong contrasts and high definition, or blurred situationalism. Unfortunately the situations were often cut (out) in the printing process in order to focus on a specific architectural detail. In his early photographs one can read the experience what it might have been to be at that place, rejecting to construct pictures regarding the classical terms of beauty – symmetry, picturesque, formal abstraction, pattern making (expressed by Donat in a public lecture in 1967 at RIBA).

## VIII. Concluding observation

Along the research the focus shifted from John Donat's central activity as photographer to John Donat activity as a critic. A photographer is every time a critic regarding the architectural work but the value of the criticism can only be estimated by setting it in a contemporaneous frame (see W. H. Jordy and R. Coe, 1961). Criticism should be relevant for the creative production of the world, but the way John Donat photographed did not seem to have had any influence on the architectural profession. His audience was the general public who did not read architectural magazine. That made it necessary to shift the frame of evaluation and look for reference points outside of

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<sup>13</sup> Stanislavski, Constantin (1936). *An Actor Prepares*. London: Methuen, 1988

<sup>14</sup> Chekhov, Michael (1942). *On the Technique of Acting*. Collins : 1993

photography like art and film. This move was especially challenging through John Donat's family background.

The current state of the research is rather an initial point than a final one. The research constantly took in information, and put it on 'shelves', then compared the new information with the existing and when there are matches, it was put together. However there are still some missing connections.