



ERA OF SOLITUDE

HELEN SEAR

£35.00 Hardback

144 pages, 75 duotone / 19 colour photographs

270mm x 210mm

ISBN: 978-1-911306-81-8

Four thousand square foot of blue-flecked linoleum is decorated with maps of the world... This random patchwork, traversed by thousands of people scuffing its surface, is slowly being worn away, the floor underneath emerging as new oceans eroding the graphic landmass. Fallen sticky price labels and other detritus settle across an ever-evolving cartography formed by human footfall.

Helen Sear reflects on the current ecological crisis and our shared responsibilities across countries and borders. It is a call for human collaboration to avert the permanent loss of other species, in an era that biologist E O Wilson has suggested might be named "The Age of Loneliness".

In 2018 and 2019 Sear spent several weeks in Durham North Carolina inside the vast warehouse premises of The Scrap Exchange, an organisation dedicated to re-diverting surplus materials from landfill and creating environmental awareness and community through reuse. It is a microcosm for something global, namely our human relationships with, and impact on the environment and our immediate surroundings.

Constructing a makeshift studio on the shop floor she invited visitors to have their portraits taken, photographed hands holding chosen objects, sometimes recording brief conversations. Photographing strangers in the formal style of studio portraiture enabled a momentary stillness and connection amid the agitation of peripheral vision overload and the direct eye contact between subject and artist heightens the sense of a moment shared.

Helen Sear's practice focuses on the co-existence of human, animal, and natural environments and is rooted in an interest in Magic Realism, Surrealism and Conceptual Art. She studied Fine Art at Reading University and University College London, Slade School, her practice coming to prominence in the late 1980s, when she worked primarily with mixed-media installation, performance and video. Her photographic works became widely known in the 1991 British Council exhibition, *De-Composition: Constructed Photography in Britain*, Sear was the first woman to represent Wales with a solo exhibition at the 56th Venice Biennale 2015 presenting a suite of new works...*the rest is smoke*. Helen Sear currently lives and works in France.

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An interview with Helen Sear

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