

*Text by William Pym*

Peter Funch's *Last Flight* is a photographic series based around an event. That event is the demolition of a bridge in Atchison, Kansas, an American city with an industrial past and about 11,000 citizens on the Missouri river. Atchison is the birthplace of the mythic American pilot Amelia Earhart, and the bridge was built in 1937–1938, shortly after Earhart disappeared over the Pacific Ocean. It was renamed in her honor in 1997, on the centenary of her birth. The Amelia Earhart Bridge was demolished in 2013 because it was too narrow, with not enough lanes for modern traffic. Funch traveled to Atchison before, during and after the bridge demolition.

*Last Flight* is about scale. It is a very large portfolio of images, for which Funch shot hundreds of pictures. The bridge demolition at the heart of this project was a large-scale event, which Funch documented in 360 degrees with large-scale production and live coordination. The moment was captured with the help of 26 local photojournalism students, who shot the demolition from 13 locations, as well as two helicopter drone cameras.

Beneath that large dramatic event, Funch shot small-scale narrative events in the community around the bridge, in various snapshot documentary styles. Some of it essentially street work, some of it more staged and still, and some of it is conceptual and postmodern, exploring rephotography and more cameraless ideas. He shot a huge variety of this work.

Seen as a whole, the *Last Flight* series takes on anthropological and poetic dimensions, full of questions about America, history, transition and loss. Amelia Earhart embodies the American pioneer spirit at its most utopian and least rapacious. Her disappearance and presumed death represents a dream unfulfilled. Atchison, Kansas, exists in the American heartland, a place pejoratively described as “flyover country” by the people from the cosmopolitan east and west coasts who only see it from airplane windows. Atchison is hung over from the glory of 20th-century American industry and the vitality and morale it brought the community. It is now, like much of the American heartland, in an inbetween state—between prosperity and poverty, between beauty and decay, between happiness and sadness, and between the past and the present. The demolition of the Amelia Earhart Bridge is a profound metaphor for the city. America churns forward, rewriting its past in anticipation of the future, spurred into renewal by explosions of one kind or another. For the kaleidoscopic *Last Flight* series, Funch watched invisible shock waves resonate quietly through the community.

This chapbook is only a fragment of *Last Flight*, with an emphasis on the multi-camera shoot at the bridge. Funch brackets these shots with close crops of

debris in the immediate aftermath of the demolition, and studio portraiture of salvaged remnants of the bridge, shot in tanks of water and abstracted from their original context. The shots of the detonation are a colossal spectacle, a field of black smoke with flecks of blown metal etching the surface like dust on a negative. The shots of the aftermath are immediate and almost journalistic, scrambling down to the riverbed to frame evidence up close. The studio work is elegiac, tweaking tone with natural effects, gently rippling into abstraction. This chapbook is above all formalistic, focusing closely on the primacy of the explosion and what an explosion does, what that looks like. It is a study of transition at a material, atomic level. It is an examination of the spark that represents change. Appropriately, it is the first published work from *Last Flight*.

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Peter Funch's work is both austere and progressive. He is aware that photography has been democratized by the digital age, yet he retains old-fashioned rigor in his work. *Last Flight* was made at a precipice in the evolution of the photographic medium. As image-making transforms and mutates in the hands of Photoshop masters and amateur cellphone photographers making perfect, effortless pictures every day, Funch's work appears academic, almost classical. His work is about humanity and nature, but it is also about faithfulness to the photographic medium. He is a student of 20th Century documentary photography and the photobook, in a line that runs from Henri Cartier-Bresson through Robert Frank, Jacob Holdt and Philip Lorca DiCorcia. At the same time, he remains open to photography's future, and the awesome undertaking that is *Last Flight* exists as a euphoric, expansive testament to everything his medium can do, and everything his medium might do tomorrow.