

*Chalant* opens at Slugtown towards the end of May. For the east of Newcastle, this time of year is special and desperate, the summer dropping before us like a golden bowling ball. Vegetation explodes in wild canopies over Heaton Park and there is anxious euphoria in all the cow parsley in Ouseburn. The bowl of City Stadium fills up with people hanging out, determinedly amongst each other and surprised that winter really is over again. As the summer comes on the street lights begin their shifts later, imploring all the green to dazzle through the night.

On the 3rd February 1879, Mosley Street in Newcastle's city centre became the first in the world to be lit by incandescent light. For one winter night only, inventor Joseph Swan illuminated the street with his newly developed bulb, containing a carbonised filament heated with a voltage to produce a bright orange glow. Tonight, the street is set in LED light that no doubt washes out many more shadows than were reached by Swan's first lamp, licking the Victorian mouldings and sharpening the concrete pavement.

Nocturnal vision in Newcastle is now owned by contractor Enerveo, who began the conversion of the city's streetlights to LEDs in 2019, as the Coronavirus pandemic was beginning its terrible sweep across the world. Light Emitting Diodes cost much less to run than the previous gas discharge lamps, and, according to the city council website, possess a number of other benefits, such as making "colours look more natural" and "provid[ing] better

facial recognition for security and CCTV cameras." The warm sodium hues of years past make way for cool tones bouncing through high definition branches, and highly traceable actions.

It was during Covid lockdowns that we often walked through the night attempting to maintain our delicate connection to the world, or assert control over our anger and grief. Making loops through Heaton, Shieldfield, Byker, Jesmond, we felt affinity butt up against vigilance on encounter with another soul forging their own circuit through the shadows. We burned to make eye contact but more often avoided it. We developed anxieties about being recognised under the streetlamps as they shifted from orange to white, we went to places we could never recall the routes to in daylight. The memories of this time are of purple leaves moving over the stars in the sky and the shiver of the steel park bench in the dark, nowhere in particular. Suddenly, state control over movement was felt acutely by those who'd never known it before, and this led some to spiral into conspiracy theories.

Searching for interaction, we gave ourselves more fully to our screens, where friends and people we didn't know discussed the hobbies they'd picked up. I filmed myself singing 'Go 'Way From My Window' as recorded by John Jacob Niles. I imagined the singer leaning out their window, soliciting a small crowd by telling them to go away, the drama of it, like electricity cajoled into powering the first electric street light for one night only, like

Ailish Treanor's seductive, jewel-like paper wall constructions, like the burning for eye contact with a stranger. We performed to be seen by each other, knowing that our performances would also be received by many eyes - human and machine - that we would never meet.

Sometimes, we stayed up late in our rooms watching live streams on Virtual Railfan, listening to the nervous chattering of Florida teenagers as they walked on the tracks lit up by floodlights. We wondered what they'd do if they could see us at home thousands of miles away, guilty and captivated voyeurs to their summer night freedom. But they moved out of frame along the iron. They were able to turn away from us, into a world out of our grasp.

At the same time, states were reaching for increasingly advanced technology to render those of us within their borders legible to them, to the advantage of tech firms like Palantir and Amazon. As we've returned to our streets we've come across police vans adorned with signs alerting us to their use of live facial recognition technology. Under unforgiving LEDs, we can assume their success.

It's five years after the pandemic began and there are so many of us moving about the city again, with our headphones in and our atomised experiences of the way the new paper-white light looks on the asphalt. We see ourselves defined sharp against the built up backdrop, saturated in soundtrack. The ghostly figures in Jessie Whiteley's paintings pass over and

through each other, without the weight or consequence of contact, but they do so in a haze of colour. In *Cruel Optimism* Lauren Berlant describes a personal soundtrack as something that "holds a place open for an optimistic rereading of the rhythms of living, and confirms everyone as a star." It is simultaneously a salve for our alienation and a balloon expanding the space between our experiences.

Earlier this month, Keir Starmer cynically invoked a sense of alienation in claiming that we "risk becoming an island of strangers" to garner support for more dehumanising and racist anti-immigration policies that will deepen divisions. This includes the implementation of eVisas and "the latest developments in artificial intelligence, facial recognition and age assessment technologies." The White Paper claims this will allow enforcement to discern "when each individual leaves the country and when they have returned; telling us whether they have the right to work, to rent, to claim benefits or use public services." Here is something Starmer can't understand: how glad we would be as strangers to him, but how strong is our desire to be close to one another.

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