



**Factories**

**Photographs  
by John Spinks**

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**James Shaw**  
**Co-founder of Albam**

**John Spinks**  
**Photographer**

**Interview by Jim Campbell**  
**Academic, University**  
**of the West of England**

## A conversation

**This is the first book you've decided to publish and it's a book of documentary photographs, not fashion images.**

**James** We're not a fashion brand, we make clothes. Styles change and we'll go with that, but when we make something, we want to make it really well. This book is about the making process, the people and the places.

**What was the idea behind the book?**

**James** Albam is involved in the whole manufacturing process and the factories are very important to us, so I started taking pictures to show customers how the clothes are made. Then I met **John**, and we decided we wanted to do something more in-depth. **John** Initially, James and I would drive around together. On the first couple of trips I expected everything in the factories to look the same; that I might be fishing in quite a small pool. But, after several return visits, definite differences started to emerge; the workers in Leicester are very different from those in Manchester, who are different from those in Nottingham. The question was how to capture this and place it in a photographic context. Eventually, I decided to give them time to reveal themselves.

'Work' is very hard to photograph. Essentially, I was just identifying things that would tell a story, like a little road movie. I didn't want it to be a book that was just for people who like

photography. Because the Albam shops are in London, the people who might buy the book are probably people who live there. I think presenting them with the people, and places, that made their clothes is really important.

**It sounds like the classic motivation for 1930s documentary photography like Spender’s Worktown.**

**John** Yes, but then there was an agenda for change, and we’re not trying to change anything. What I’m trying to do is present places and people that, I believe, need consideration. We all need to think about where the things we buy come from and who makes them, otherwise our consumption is completely passive — but I don’t want to lecture anybody.

**James** It’s just a good thing to do. If the industry dies it would be such a shame not to have any record of it, and for that it’s worthwhile. When we started Albam, people told us that you couldn’t make anything in England anymore. In fact you can, but the tiny workforce that exists now is all that is left, and if they decide to retire tomorrow, then the industry’s gone.

**John** It feels very much like the factories as they exist now are just a rumour of the industry that was there before. There are no signs on the outside of the buildings, you have to dig around to get to know these places, it’s like a secret world in some ways. They’re invisible.

**James** The factories are like big shells with about five or six people rattling around in them, when they used to have fifty or sixty. They were kicked so hard seven or eight years ago by companies virtually moving production overnight — Friday they were making stuff, Monday the ‘phones had stopped ringing. We started using these small British factories because we wanted to make small numbers of garments, but you can see that they are on the verge of disappearing. They might come back, but right now you can see that everything has gone.

**John** The culture of the next generation following the previous one has gone. People just don’t want to work in factories; they have a different set of expectations.

**James** ‘Factory’ has become a dirty word, but the people who work in these factories are very skilled, and they are actually making something, which, to me, is important. Mostly, people don’t like making things anymore. One of the factory owners told me that people these days would rather stack supermarket shelves because it’s easier. But it’s not better!

The point is that people who make things are happier, because they’re all in it together. It’s more than just a random job. There are little glimmers of hope that are obvious in the book, like the portraits of young people.

**The development of this project seems unusual, in the way that the company has collaborated with the photographer.**

**John** It’s unique. It took two years and James and Alastair were fine with that because they wanted it to be right. It was extraordinary to be completely left alone to produce the images that I found interesting.

**James** I think the fact that nobody else does this is a really good reason to do it. It echoes what we do and allows more people to see the manufacturing process and network in a really good way.

**John** The book is partly a record of the manufacturing process, but it’s also about the feeling of the factories. Some factories are really cold in the winter, the light that you get in there is a certain kind of light. They’re chaotic, human spaces.

**James** Because humans are chaotic. These factories are not the vast de-humanised places that mass-produce by sitting in a line of a thousand.

**John** One of the things I noticed that illustrates how personalized these places are, is how fabric is used to repair banisters, or to tie speakers to girders.

**James** All factories are different, but factories that make clothes have a particular quality.

**John** And that quality is definitely built into the clothes. The stitching isn’t always dead straight; there is a kind of authorship to the clothes. People are making them; they’re not made in a huge factory where everything is perfect. You are aware that these clothes are not made in large numbers, and that’s important.

**James** [In the past] companies got carried away by competition. At one point all the factories were trying to ruin each other by undercutting their rivals, to the point that nobody was making any money, so people were laid off. But if you charge the right price, you can keep everything going. And if you can’t cope with the work, then you can pass it on to the factory down the road.

**You’re clearly concerned about having a solid sustainable business model and treating everybody fairly.**

**James** We’re trying to build a business in which every part is

as good as the clothes. It doesn’t matter what size it grows to, we just want the ball passed perfectly every time.

**John** For me, Albam is all about a familial approach, or a network of connections that runs through to the factories. The end result is a feeling of being ‘in this together’, from making to buying. The process is kept relatively small-scale, and that engenders a certain set of feelings about the clothes. In this regard, the book is not meant to be nostalgic; it’s about carrying something forward that is still relevant. The factories are still making good stuff that people want to buy — it’s an old fashioned idea, but it’s still a good idea.

**You both sound like William Morris, suspicious of what mass production and consumption on a massive scale is doing to us as individuals.**

**John** I’m aware that there is a circular argument here. That we’re arguing for a resurrection of manufacturing when it is the efficiency of that process that, at its peak, is so de-humanising. The question is; how do you preserve a sense of the human within the needs of the market?

**James** Basically, people need to simmer down and not be greedy. As a designer/retailer, for example, it is very important not to over-price. Perfection and efficiency in that sense is overrated because it produces sameness. The things that people love are different, imperfect, and human.

**What do you want the book to say?**

**John** I want to give a good sense of these places. Where your clothes have been, and how they come about.

**Where are the factories?**

**James** The ones in the book are in Stevenage, Rushden, Leicester, Northampton, Nottingham and Manchester. But we use factories all the way up to Scotland. In the past there was an industrial geography of what areas made. Manchester made raincoats because it rains a lot. Northamptonshire make shoes, but they buy bits of the shoes from all over the place, all produced by various little industries. Wipe out the factory and you wipe out all the associated trades.

**Do the images appeal in the same way as the clothes?**

**James** In the sense that they’re well crafted photographs, yes.

## Plates







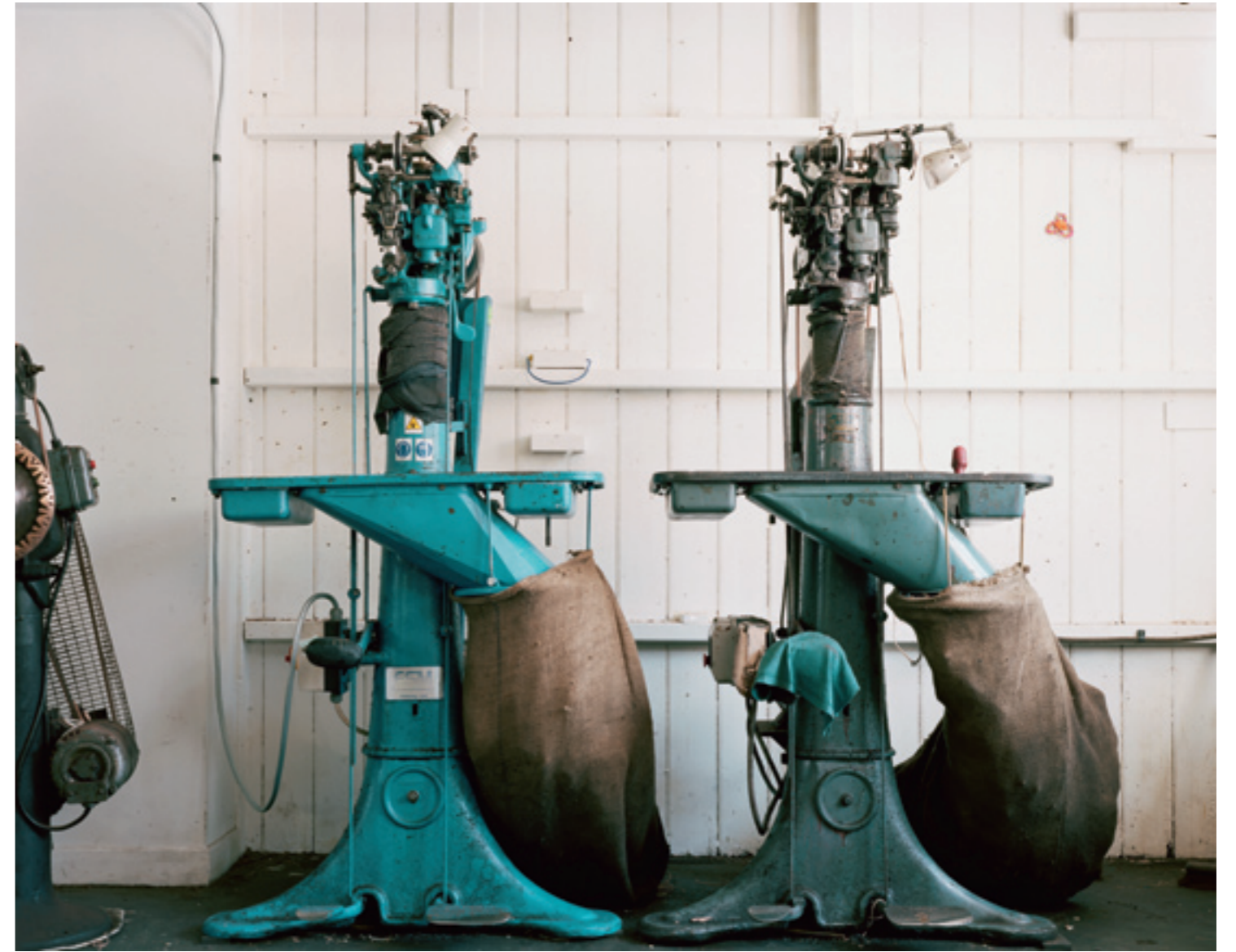












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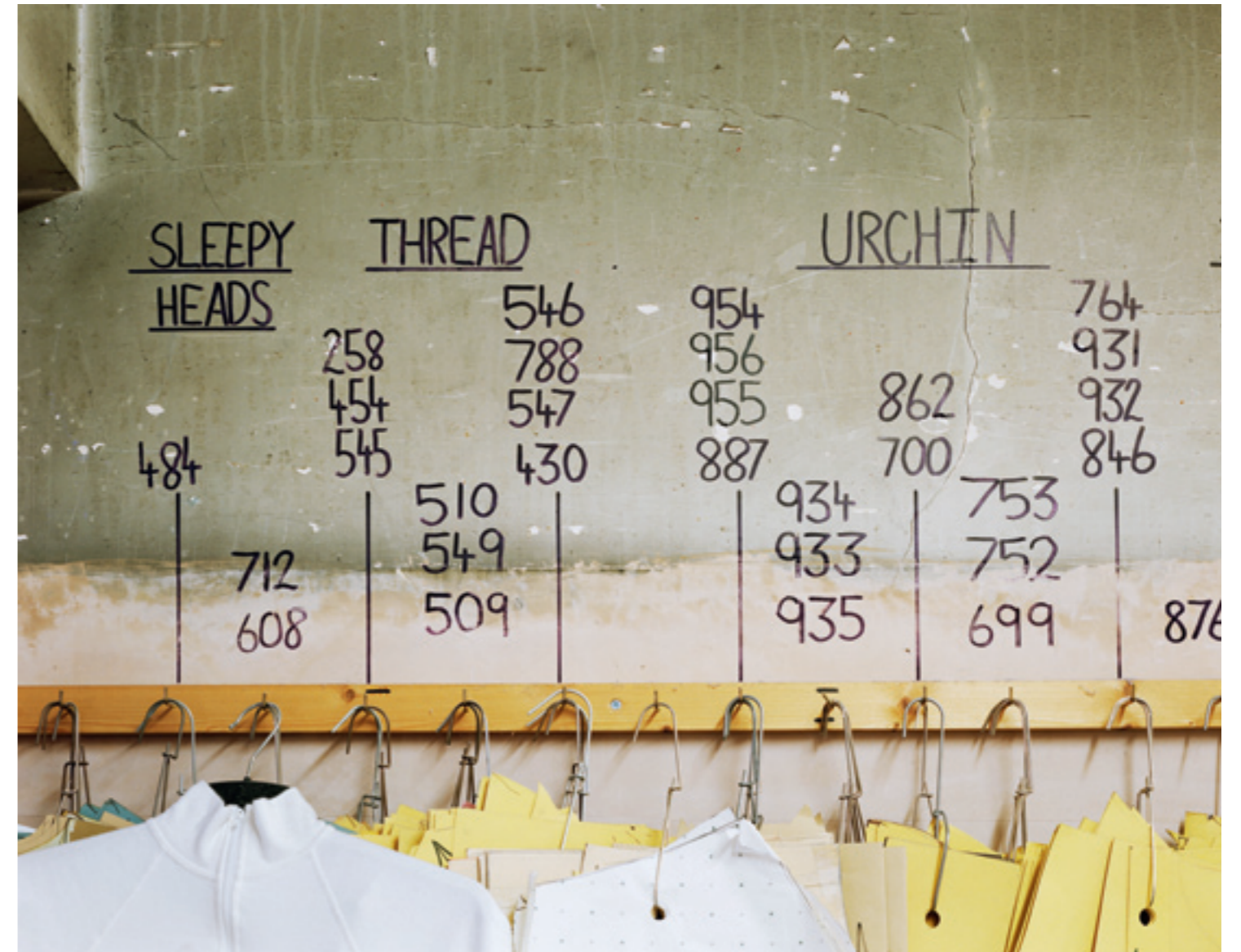












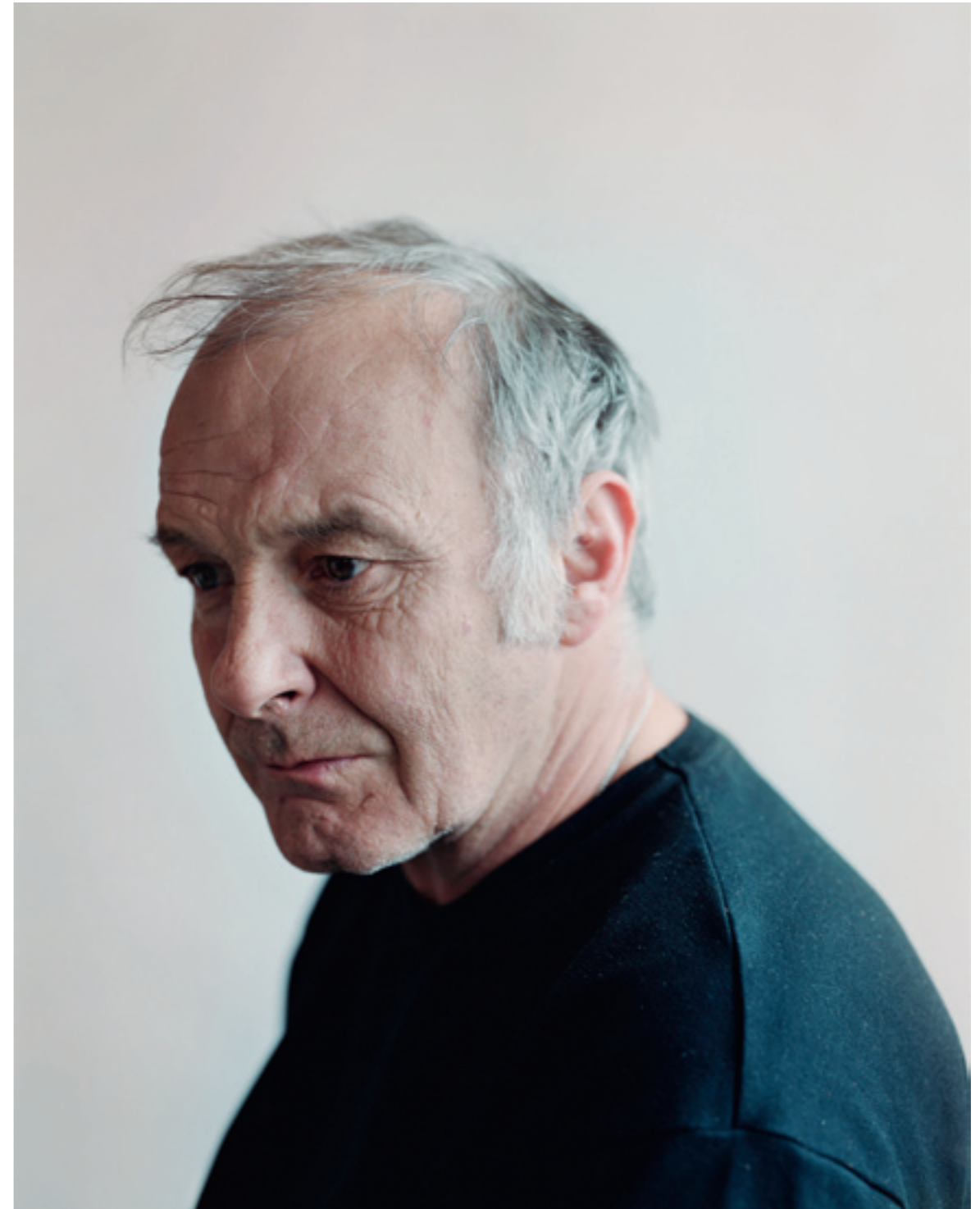




























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