

When the photographer Trevor Key died suddenly shortly before Christmas, it caught his friends and colleagues flat-footed, as premature death will. Quite apart from the personal loss, Key's death at 48 was an abrupt reminder that an unconcern for money – which could look heroic when you knew a superbly crafted result was all that really mattered to him – might translate into something rather less heroic for his dependents.

Avoiding a high profile was fine while he was still around, but now there is a feeling among his many friends, colleagues and admirers that Key's fascinatingly varied and often under-credited body of work should at last be celebrated properly. There is also a hope that it may provide a focus for the Trevor Key Memorial Trust which has been set up to help his partner and young daughter. A small exhibition in the reception area of Visualeyces Ltd is scheduled for early June, and it is intended that this may act as the catalyst for the setting up of a major retrospective.

The man behind all this is Brian Cooke of Visualeyces, a fellow student of Key's at Hull College of Art from 1962 to 1964, and subsequently a professional partner in the early years.

"We were in the Photographic Department at Hull together," Cooke recalls. "The first two years were very technically-based, but in the final year we came under the auspices of the Graphics Department and a guy called Peter Sullivan," he says. "We were all very competent technically and then we had this final year when new horizons opened up and Peter Sullivan stretched us all creatively."

Hull provided the foundation for a 25-year professional career in which Key's prodigious technical concerns and designer's eye would make him a valuable ally to a succession of creative partners including Jamie Reid, Peter Saville and David James. Among the first of these was Brian Cooke, who relates that, as Cooke Key, their work for



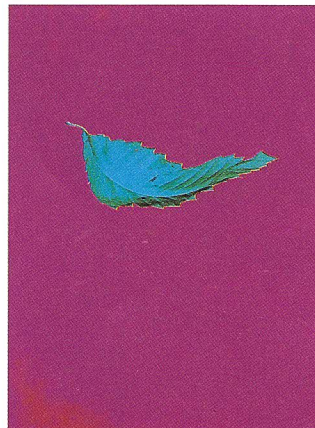
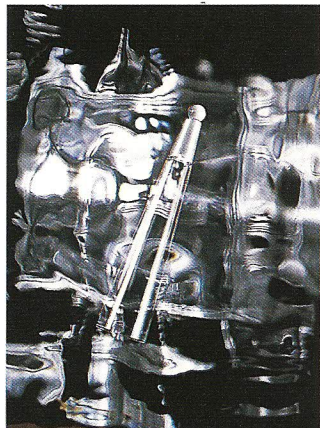
record companies in the late 70s involved few of today's creative services demarcations.

"Originally we did everything," Cooke says. "Record companies would come to us and say 'we want a cover' – usually for complete unknowns, I should add – and we'd do the whole thing. Concept, photography, design, typography, advertising campaign, fly poster, the lot. The music business was becoming very design-orientated. Then the sleeves went graphic. We ended up employing graphic designers because, by the early 80s, there wasn't enough photography involved. In the end we went off separately to find other ways of being photographers."

Key's other way of being a photographer was to combine high levels of technical ingenuity with a designer's eye and, less happily, an art student's financial acumen. The result was a career that embraced Mike Oldfield – (Key created the original iconic Tubular Bells album image and

Key notes

Photographer Trevor Key worked with some of the most famous names in **music** but their taste for the limelight never rubbed off him. Graham Vickers looks back at the work of a modest master



reprinted it more recently), Marie Claire, the Sex Pistols, corporate literature, newspaper food pages, Peter Gabriel, Elle, New Order and occasional stints of advertising. Key never really warmed to advertising, professing surprise when someone at Leo Burnett reminded him that, atypically, he was earning £2500 a day.

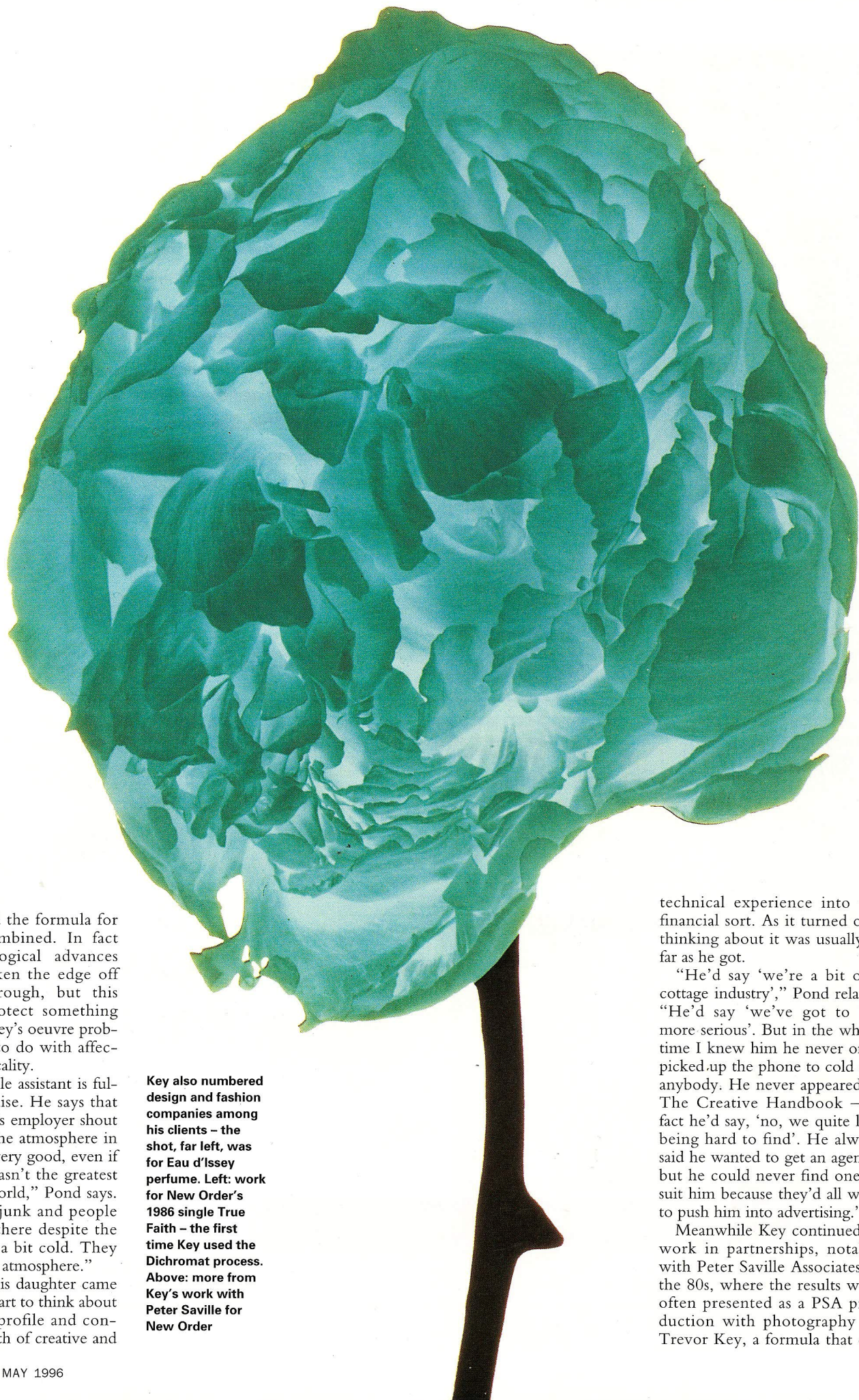
However "a day was never a day with Trevor" Cooke reminds us, and there are many stories about how, after a desultory piece of bargaining, Key would buckle down to the real business

Key's work for the record industry resulted in some seminal imagery including, left, New Order's Substance album and, below, Peter Gabriel's So, Tubular Bells by Mike Oldfield, and, bottom, System 7



in hand, which was usually working twice as long as he had just negotiated to be paid for.

Key also shunned specialisation – his personal “style” resided in the intensely perfectionist way he tackled a variety of problems, not in any recognisable visual trademarks. This too probably contributed to his relatively low profile. Nor did he ever employ assistants until latterly when he worked with Toby Pond, whose admiration for and protectiveness towards Key and the work he left behind is really quite touching. For example, much is made of Dichromat, the technical process which Key invented and used on the sleeve of the 1986 New Order single True Faith, and Pond is still anxious to shroud its technical secrets in mystery as if it were a map reference for the



Holy Grail and the formula for Coca-Cola combined. In fact today technological advances have rather taken the edge off Key's breakthrough, but this concern to protect something tangible from Key's oeuvre probably has more to do with affection than practicality.

Key's erstwhile assistant is fulsome in his praise. He says that he never saw his employer shout at anybody. "The atmosphere in the studio was very good, even if physically, it wasn't the greatest studio in the world," Pond says. "It was full of junk and people loved coming there despite the fact that it was a bit cold. They just enjoyed the atmosphere."

Only when his daughter came along did Key start to think about improving his profile and converting his wealth of creative and

Key also numbered design and fashion companies among his clients – the shot, far left, was for Eau d'Issey perfume. Left: work for New Order's 1986 single True Faith – the first time Key used the Dichromat process. Above: more from Key's work with Peter Saville for New Order

technical experience into the financial sort. As it turned out, thinking about it was usually as far as he got.

"He'd say 'we're a bit of a cottage industry,'" Pond relates. "He'd say 'we've got to get more serious'. But in the whole time I knew him he never once picked up the phone to cold call anybody. He never appeared in *The Creative Handbook* – in fact he'd say, 'no, we quite like being hard to find'. He always said he wanted to get an agent – but he could never find one to suit him because they'd all want to push him into advertising."

Meanwhile Key continued to work in partnerships, notably with Peter Saville Associates in the 80s, where the results were often presented as a PSA production with photography by Trevor Key, a formula that did

not necessarily reflect the balance of input, but which did not seem to trouble Key unduly.

One of his last projects, a brochure done with Williams & Phoa, will come as a surprise only to those who associated Key exclusively with the music industry he loved. In fact he worked on a wide variety of jobs and it is perhaps a symptom of his invisible way of working that only in the high profile world of the record industry did some of the publicity rub off on him. Even then, according to Pond, few people realised that it was Key, not his professional partner of the time Jamie Reid, who was responsible for much of the later Sex Pistols imagery.

Cooke says that Key had many friends. "There were a lot of people who would have liked to get together, but his death happened very quickly and the funeral was over and done with just before Christmas. So our mini-retrospective of some of his work is also a chance to get everybody together. A wake, I suppose."

As a celebration of a highly creative craftsman's life, the *Visualeyes* exhibition will inevitably be touched with sadness. Whilst for his friends and family that sadness will be to do with personal loss, others who never knew Trevor Key might also mourn the passing of an era that allowed his kind of technical accomplishment and passionate creativity to develop and flourish. And if his sole legacy is to be a quarter of a century's worth of wonderful images rather than a well-crafted savings account at the NatWest – well, blame it on the 60s. And anyway, if a major retrospective results, Key's years of perfectionism may yet prove a more profitable investment than he might ever have imagined. It would be an elegant finale. □

An exhibition of Key's work runs from 7 June at the Chapel Gallery, Visualeyes, 24 West Street, London WC2 (0171) 836 3004. A trust has been formed for the benefit of his dependents. Donations may be made payable to The Trevor Key Memorial Trust c/o Brian Cooke, Visualeyes.