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Re-imagining urban margins

This paper looks at urban margins and how they are approached by artists. Here, the urban margin is understood as land that is in a state of excess, surplus, or waste—the incidental spaces of the city, the wastelands, verges, abandoned industrial sites, contaminated ground, and informal commons. Such sites can remain secluded and relatively stable and undisturbed for long periods; equally, they can become mutable and contested sites as processes of development expose social and cultural antagonisms.

Ignasi de Solà-Morales' short essay *Terrain Vague* offers some thoughts regarding the correspondence between margins and creativity. Here, he discusses urban margins and the production of urban imaginaries through the medium of photography and photomontage. Importantly, he asks where an enthusiasm for such spaces might come from. He proposes that a sense of constant strangeness pervades late capitalism, bringing us into an existential sympathy with these spaces: 'transposed to the urban key, the enthusiasm for these vacant, expectant, imprecise, fluctuating spaces is a response to our strangeness before the world, before our city, before ourselves'. This inability to locate oneself and one's identity in relation to a rapidly and ever-changing world aligns material margins with existential margins, creating a nomadic sense of being. It is this link between ambiguous artist-subjects and ambiguous material landscapes that animates this paper.

Since Solà-Morales' essay was published in 1995, urban margins have become increasingly occupied by creative practices and their attendant imaginaries. These spaces, variously referred to as drosscape, friche, edgeland, and wasteland, have also been subject to a great deal of attention from within academia. My own approach considers the urban margin as site where both a distance and a porosity develops between the artist and the urban landscape—a site where both the artist and the landscape simultaneously materialize and dematerialize. At this intersection between the real and the imagined, artists often demonstrate simultaneously essentialist and anti-essentialist understandings of nature, the city, and identity. Here, they ask how, why, and what kind of distinctions and indistinctions exist between selves, the built environment, and nature.

Since the early twentieth century, the relationship between the human subject and the material landscape has been a key area of research in cultural geography. Early work in this area asked how nature (the material environment) and culture (human civilizations) were related to one another, and gave rise to theories that privileged one over the other. This first leaned towards environmental determinism and later, in critical response to this, towards something closer to cultural determinism where 'culture development may be viewed as man's [sic] growing knowledge of, and control over, forces external to himself'. These approaches were often oriented around a field study approach, emphasising the importance of close observation through a deep embodied familiarity with (usually rural) landscapes. These influential early approaches to landscape were critiqued and eclipsed during the latter half of the 20th century, with various Marxist, structural, and post-structural approaches emerging and dominating. Subsequently, there has been a turn towards embodied, performative, and creative geographies, which have further entwined, blurred, erased, and challenged essentialist and



essentialising understandings of broad concepts such as nature and culture, proposing that subjects and landscapes are variously entangled or enfolded. These approaches include hybrid, more-than-human accounts, and what has been termed the re-materialisation of geography, and is further extended by geographies of waste, and the uncanny.

These discourses all offer valuable ways of thinking about the relationship between artists and urban margins. They also reflect not only the eclectic nature of research within landscape studies, but also the very hybridity of the urban margins discussed here. Urban margins are landscapes that are exceptionally difficult to categorise or draw boundaries around—this is reflected in the difficulty in finding a single disciplinary lens through which to explore them or a disciplinary home in which they comfortably sit.

Drawing from these literatures, I have previously used three rubrics to think about the relationship between margin and subject—the uncanny, contamination, and the organism. Each has different emphases that draw out a matrix of correspondences between artists and urban

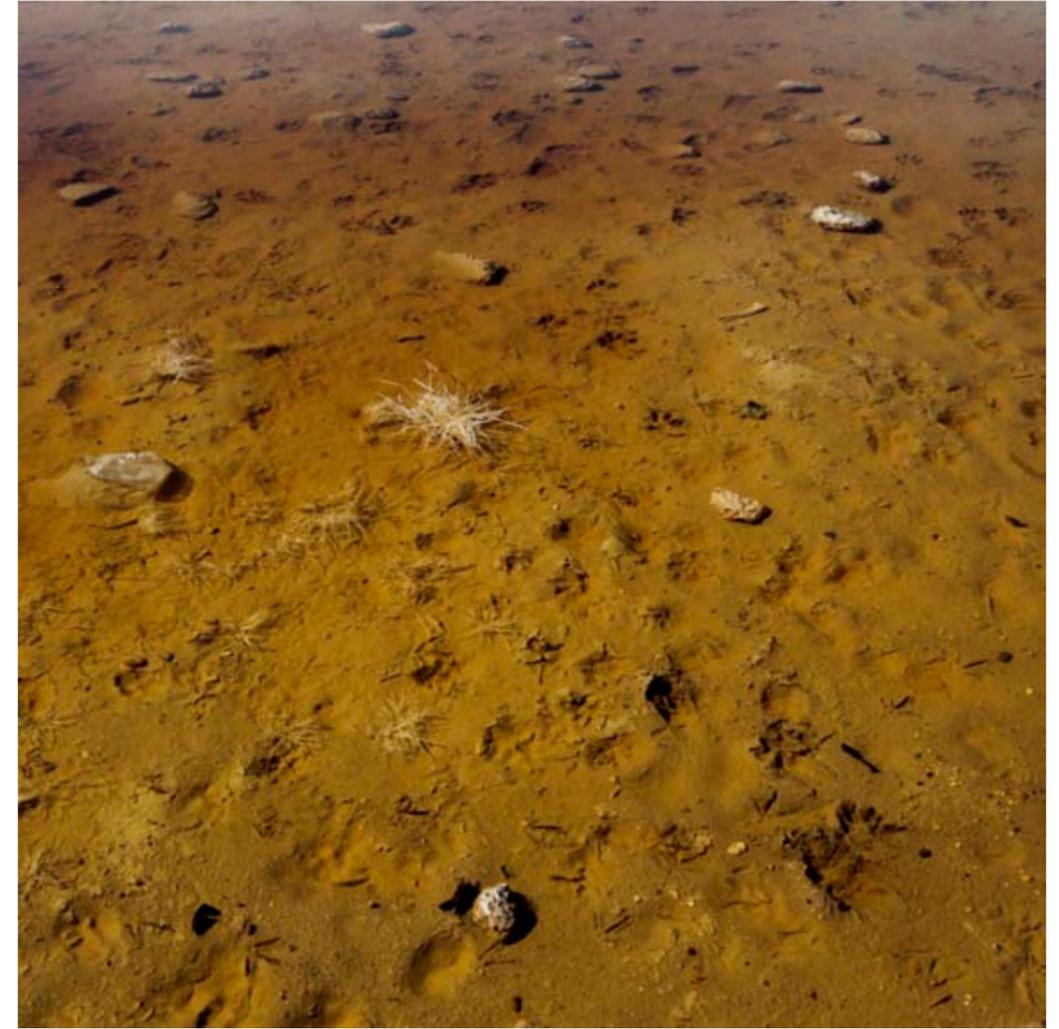


margins. The uncanny facilitates an investigation, from a first-person perspective, of how the artist and the material landscape both create and collapse distinctions between one another. This approach emerged from a photographic study of the Lower Lea Valley and the Thames estuary, undertaken prior to the Olympic Games and the radical transformations associated with it. The photographs in this paper are taken from this study. The focus, however, was not the visual image itself, but the embodied registers of photographic practice and the simultaneous proximity and distance that the practice creates for the photographer. Here, the notion of an urban margin can be considered as a particular type of encounter between the artist and the landscape wherein the narrative flow of experience is constantly challenged and fragmented. This encounter is one of ambiguity and collapse between a real and imaginary experience of both self and landscape. Such ambiguity is discussed in Freud's essay, *The Uncanny*, which itself sits somewhere between document and fiction, an essay that 'is and is not psychoanalytical, is and is not literary criticism, is and is not literary'. The Uncanny is where the capacity to know becomes uncertain, what Royle refers to as 'a crisis of the proper', where



the real and the fictional come to occupy the same experiential register.

Overlapping this is the term *organism*, which is often used to distinguish living from non-living matter. However, it is an ambiguous and contested term—the distinction it refers to quickly becomes meaningless at both molecular scales and behavioural scales. Its ambiguity is also seen in contemporary metabolic and organicist metaphors of the city, with roots in the nineteenth century, which normalise essentialist ways of thinking about cities. Elsewhere, I used the ambiguity of the organismic to approach the work of photographer Stephen Gill, who has described his practice as a collaboration with the urban margins of pre-Olympic Hackney Wick. His practice operates at different spatial and temporal scales, from the molecular interactions of photographic emulsions with soil, water, and pollutants, to the entwinement of industry and infrastructure with nature. Here, on one hand, the term organism can be used to position his work in relation to post-human geographies, in particular new materialism and material vitalist discourses, and hybrid geographies. On the other hand, Gill's relational understanding is countered by a tendency to create archives of both images and objects. Like



the term *organism*, his work has both a tendency to create categories and equally to dismiss these categories as inadequate when faced with the excess of the material world.

Finally, the contaminant also has polarising tendencies, dividing the world into binaries of pure and impure, in place and out of place, and is often used to establish or maintain cultural norms. However, contamination also suggests the porous nature of this division, the co-mingling of a contaminant and the contaminated. For example, the flora of urban wastelands are labelled weeds; some, such as Japanese knotweed, are classified as controlled waste, and regarded as an insidious contaminant. Weeds, however, are also involved in the remediation of contaminated land wherein a succession of hardy species slowly breaks down pollutants and improves soil quality. Early pioneer species are particularly robust, flourishing in areas that other plants cannot grow. In this vein, Julian Stallabrass discusses Michael Landy's etchings of weeds in his *Nourishment* series as metaphors for particular human subjects and subjectivities, migrant and tenacious. In various quiet and mundane ways, the weed's alterity can be seen to 'disconcert this binary geographical imagination and entertain forbidden possibilities





for being otherwise in the world'. Whilst contamination, dirt, and the hardy weed distinguish between purity and impurity, they similarly demonstrate that nature, human society, and the urban landscape are unavoidably hybrid.

Each of these three terms—uncanny, organism, and contaminant—offer differently nuanced ways of approaching a particular kind of correspondence between artists and urban margins. This correspondence is characterised by an oscillation between poles of distinction and porosity. From this perspective, marginal landscapes are not primarily physical territories, the 'wastelands' of urban discourses, and nor are they cultural constructions of landscape presented by artists. The urban margin instead is a negotiation of the excess of the material landscape and the artist–subject, both an untampered expression of surplus and a desire to render it legible.

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