**Non-lieux / Non-scapes:**

**Reflections on an exhibition by Sungsoo Kim**

**Abstract**

White plastic garden furniture stands on the street outside a cheap eatery. The forlorn facades of urban buildings – shopfronts, car showrooms, apartments, grand public offices – suggest sterile functionality, repetition and perhaps recent dereliction. Semiological complexes are formed by a montage of pedestrian crossings and by an entranceway to a multi-storey carpark. There is woodland too but it is eerie and ghostly. Overwhelmingly in washed out, leached out colours – white, beige, charcoal greys – but then an occasional intense scarlet or vivid blue; everything on the cusp of reversal into a photographic negative.

“Non-lieu” entitles not only each of these thirty or so individual canvases by the South Korean artist Sungsoo Kim but also the exhibition itself staged at the felicitously named Gallery Skape in Seoul last year (5th November – 19th December 2014). This paper explores and reflects upon this exhibition in relation not only to Kim’s work but also to the (unmentioned) usual source of the concept of ‘non-lieux’ (non-places), the celebrated French anthropologist Marc Augé. Kim uses the term not so much in Augé’s sense, that is to say, with reference to those banal, simulated sites and setting in the contemporary city that seem bereft of meaning and significance (shopping malls, carparks, airports, etc.), but more with regard to loci where meaning and collective /individual memory is fading and/or dissipating (ruins, sites of dereliction and neglect – counterpoints to the historian Pierre Nora’s notion of lieux de mémoire).

The exhibition catalogue makes much of Kim’s emotional ambivalence towards these non-lieux. My interest though is in another kind of ambiguity / contradiction. In depicting them in artworks, that is to say, in transforming these non-places into sites of acute aesthetic interest and intense contemplation, into ‘scapes’, are these non-places not (re)invested with meaning and significance (aura?) through aestheticisation? In short, are these non-places not reconfigured, one might say redeemed, as *places*? I coin the terms ‘non-scapes’ and ‘scapescapes’in an attempt to capture the paradoxes of the representation of non-lieux.

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The serendipity of the streets! I am visiting South Korea to undertake fieldwork for an experimental/experiential rhythmanalysis of the port city of Busan,[[1]](#endnote-1) an ongoing collaborative project (with Professor Jiseok Ryu, Pukyong National University) interlacing concepts and motifs drawn from the urban writings of the sociologist Henri Lefebvre (rhythms)[[2]](#endnote-2), the Critical Theorist Siegfried Kracauer (metropolitan ‘landscape’ [*Landschaft*])[[3]](#endnote-3) and the social anthropologist Marc Augé (‘non-places’ [*non-lieux*]).[[4]](#endnote-4) And then, on an aimless walk one wintery afternoon in Seoul, just across from the presidential palace, the Blue House, I chance upon this: an exhibition entitled *non-lieu* by the Busan-born artist Sungsoo Kim staged in the felicitously named Gallery Skape.[[5]](#endnote-5)

There I am treated to an exhibition comprising thirteen of some thirty large oil and acrylic paintings each bearing the same title – *non-lieu* – as exemplary instances of a common phenomenon. The images themselves though are diverse. On these canvases one can discern white plastic garden furniture standing on the street outside some kind of cheap eatery, patiently awaiting custom. The forlorn facades of various urban buildings – small shopfronts, a car showroom, apartment complexes, some rather grand public offices – suggest banality, repetition and sterile functionality. There is an air of desertion and recent dereliction. Strange semiological complexes are formed in one instance by a montage of pedestrian crossings and traffic signals, in another by an entranceway to a grim concrete multi-storey carpark. And there is woodland too, but it is eerie and ghostly, the stuff of nightmares, white bark against black skies. There are no human figures to be seen in any of these pictures: not so much empty as emptied, evacuated. Bereft of the living, of life, these spaces call to mind Walter Benjamin’s comments on the Parisian street photography of Eugène Atget[[6]](#endnote-6) and his uncanny conclusion: such “photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. But isn’t every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit?” (1999b: 527). And every viewer a witness if not an accomplice too, perhaps?

Photography is certainly decisive here both for the look and the compositional process of Kim’s paintings. Resembling old calotype photographic negatives or the images obtained by modern night vision cameras, these are spectral, or perhaps better, skeletal images produced by first projecting reworked photographic images onto canvas, and then applying paint – white to capture structures and outline forms, colour to infill the intervening voids. The result: in some, white shafts and struts seemingly melting into each other – or perhaps bones arthritically fused – against simple monochromatic backdrops, usually washed out hues of beige, petrol blue, and grey, occasionally and surprisingly of bright royal blue or vivid scarlet; in others, white, charcoals and blacks monopolise the canvas, never to create a chiaroscuro of fine gradations accentuating features, but rather to blank out, to obliterate detail; often streaks of dripped paint run vertically giving the effect of a blurry greasy grain to the image, like film stills from the earliest days of cinema. These paintings involve the erosion and erasure of specificity and detail, the diminution of the definite and distinctive, the evisceration of the physical and material. These dilapidated and depopulated sites and settings appear as ruinous residues, remainders and rudiments: forms teetering on the brink of formlessness, lines, shapes and colours now slowly but irresistibly recomposing themselves as simple abstractions. Kim presents us with the final instance of recognisability, the ‘appearance of disappearance’ as the accompanying exhibition notes put it, the ‘at last sight’ of architecture as Benjamin would term it,[[7]](#endnote-7) not the last things as such, but the last before the last to borrow a typically tantalising phrase from Kracauer.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The accompanying catalogue notes by Kyuchul Ahn (in Kim 2014) make much of the notion of ‘ambivalence,’ foregrounding the equivocal mood and/ or emotional response of the artist and the spectator. These disquieting depictions of disintegration are imbued with melancholy,[[9]](#endnote-9) the ruefulness and resignation that accompanies the ebbing away of things, their fading into featureless oblivion. An air of mournfulness pervades and persists as these ephemera[[10]](#endnote-10) retreat from remembrance. It is this dialectics of disappearance – materially from the world, mentally from our memoires[[11]](#endnote-11) – to which Kim attends and attests that renders these loci *non-lieux*. They are perhaps, as Louis Aragon poetically put it: “’Places that yesterday were incomprehensible, and that tomorrow will never know’” (cited in Benjamin 1999a: 87).

I prefer the term ‘paradox’ to ‘ambivalence’ and this representation of the appearance of disappearance is just one of them. While Kim’s choice of subject and theme corresponds to the technique employed in the production of the pictures themselves – photoshopping material out of the original images, a form of production by reduction that recalls earlier printing forms like etching (indeed, do not these paintings resemble most of all the scratchings of a stone upon a rock?) – his actual title, *non-lieu*, does not equate with Marc Augé’s (2009 )famous formulation and critical elaboration of this concept. Remarkably, there is no mention of Augé. For Kim, *non-lieu* refers to a site or structure of fading and forgetting, the antithesis perhaps of those formal settings for official commemoration identified by the historian Pierre Nora as *lieux de mémoire*. For Augé, however, *non-lieux* refers to those increasingly frequented loci in which meaningful and memorable experience has been diminished to a minimum of significance, especially those interchangeable interiors (not exteriors, as for Kim) that are stripped of any distinctive vernacular and /or authenticity: the simulated spaces of shopping malls, airport lounges, multi-storey car parks, office atria, the standardised bars and lobbies of international hotel chains, motorway service stations, identikit fast food eateries, super- and hypermarkets. Such non-places inculcate and accommodate boredom, apathy and disinterest. And far from withering away, Augé contends, such non-places are relentlessly proliferating, the time we while away within them only increasing. We are not bidding farewell to such settings; rather they are ever more characteristic, indeed definitive, of our age of supermodernity [*surmodernité*]. Tomorrow, such non-places may be all we ever know.

And this brings us inevitably to the principal paradox in any description or depiction of *non-lieux*. If non-places are indeed loci reduced to a modicum, a minimum, of meaning for those who frequent them, what is it to turn them into objects of aesthetic representation and contemplation? Here the term ‘scapes’ becomes critical. The suffix -scape, and here I am using it in a far more humble everyday sense than Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) capturing of the global flows of peoples, technologies, money, image and ideas,[[12]](#endnote-12) designates the work of situated or perspectival representation: in simple terms, land, sea and city are transformed by the work of art into land*scapes*, sea*scapes* and city*scapes*. In becoming a -scape, the object is subject to a process of aestheticization. Accordingly, the question arises here: how can non-places be objects of representation without the very investment of meaning that would, by Augé’s definition, elevate them to the status of genuine ‘places’? Indeed, one could argue further: does not Augé’s very own identification and designation of non-places render them as intensely fascinating, as acutely meaningful symptomatic sites of the present? Can non-places resist the significance conferred in the act of representation? Can they survive somehow as *non-scapes*? Can they escape the imputation of meaning as *scapescapes*? Or as *skapescapes* in honour of the gallery in Seoul? [[13]](#endnote-13) Perhaps it is because they are skapescapes that Kim has chosen to bypass Augé’s *non-lieux* for his own. And so his paintings adorning the walls of the exhibition are a gesture to another absence: not of the emaciated edifices he has so sensitively depicted, nor of the human figures who have declined to populate them, but of Augé’s *non-lieux*. Not so much then the ‘appearance of disappearance’ as the non-appearance of non-places.

And so on a cold December day I ventured into the Galley Skape in search of *non-lieux* and lo and behold they were not there. At least, not the ones I was expecting – lobbies, laybys, lounges. And how could they be? For even to search for them, to seek them out, would be to make of them an object of interest and investigation. To find *non-lieux* one must not look for them. Perhaps one must rely on the serendipity of the street and chance upon them in the course of an aimless walk.

**Exhibition Catalogues**

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2. See Lefebvre 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Kracauer 1987: 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Augé 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The exhibition *non-lieu* was staged 5th November – 19th December 2014 at the Gallery Skape, 58-4 Samcheongro, Jongnogu, Seoul. See Kim (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Remarkably…,” Benjamin notes, “almost all these pictures are empty. … They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant” (1999b: 519). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See his comments on Charles Baudelaire’s poem *À une passante* for this formulation (in Benjamin 2003: 25). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. A reference to Kracauer’s (1969) posthumously published final work on historiography. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Melancholy* was the title of a 2007 exhibition in Seoul (2009 in Paris) comprising two main groups of figures: individual portraits and single wilted flowers (the title given to some of the latter, *Bad Flower*, again being redolent of Baudelaire’s poetry). See Kim (undated). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Èphémère* was the title of another 2007 exhibition of Kim’s works (at Project Space, SARUBIA, Seoul). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. And, one might add, *visually* from Kim’s paintings. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See in particular Appadurai 1996: 33-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Perhaps the title of another, earlier exhibition by Kim, *-scape* (Mongin Art Center, Seoul, 2007), is an attempt to deal with this conundrum: by offering the suffix alone, we have a representation of an absent subject. Whether -scapes, non-scapes or skapescapes, might these be representations of that which eludes Appadurai’s (1996) five-fold classification of flows?: so many excluded ephemera – the disregarded and despised, the forgotten and forsaken, the trashy treasures of the ragpicker. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)