

STRATEGIC  
GEOGRAPHIES  
—  
CHALLENGE  
OF THEIR  
VISUALIZATION

SASKIA SASSEN

RUT BLEES LUXEMBURG

*Black Sunrise*, 2010, C-print, 120 x 155 cm, framed.  
Courtesy Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, and the artist.



There is an interesting interaction between the two categories I was asked to address: photography and geography. Both signal visualities of all sorts; further, they signal a kind of objectivity with their *graphos*. There is almost a presumption of a one to one with the *x* that is being *graphed*; and this peculiar objectivity holds even when the *x* being graphed is actively constituted by the gaze of the 'grapher'.

I want to experiment with the thesis that notwithstanding all this *graphos*, both geography and photography obscure as much as they make visible. That is to say, I want to problematize these visualities. Each produces a penumbra around what they make visual. In my own research I experience an equivalent tension between the legible and what it obscures precisely because of its capacity to make legibility. Thinking conceptually, this would mean that the more powerful the explanation, the more difficult it is to see/understand what it obscures precisely because of that power; as if this were not enough, it can obscure in ways that make this obscuring invisible. There in lie the power and the danger of powerful categories.

Geographies are an abstraction - topographies might be closer to the actual visual experience of a terrain, a ground. In that geographic abstraction lies something potentially more illuminating than a 1 to 1 description between the geographical account and the reality it seeks to capture. Also photography obscures something, and it does this actively, not casually or accidentally. It does so through the photographic rendering of an image, an operation that inevitably will be a partial capturing of what is the object of the photography. But in so doing it also allows us to see, conceivably, what we cannot see with the naked eye - because the naked eye is burdened by an excess of details, or by an excess of perspectives which can have the effect of blurring, whereas photography can extract, isolate, and make clear.

In short, it seems to me that neither geography nor photography are simply about *graphos*, description. They are also about the non-image - all the other presences that hover in the shadows of the image. The power of the visual becomes also the power of what the visual can obscure.

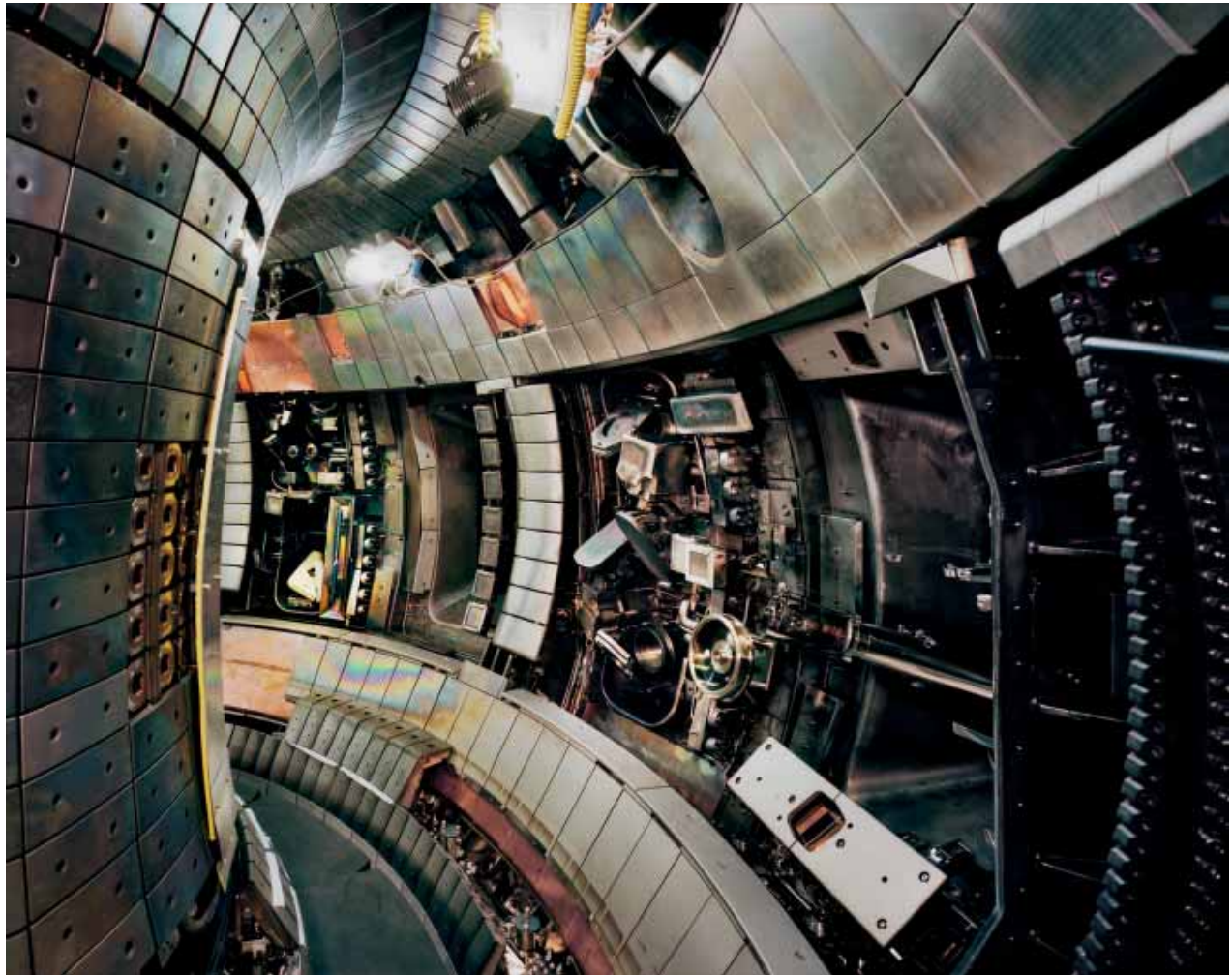
How then does this enter into the relation between photography and geography: more specifically, the types of photography and geography that deal with the realities of our life today in this world at this time. What are some of the geographies of our time, and what does it mean to make them photographically visual. Given my own work, the focus will be on what we might think of as strategic geographies, some of which may not be so familiar because they are emergent.

#### When time and territory seep out of the cages of nation-states

At its most foundational, I think of photography as able to capture worlds that become visible when we break prevalent conceptual and operational cages that house our life, our imaginaries, our spaces. Among these are the cages into which territory and time have been pushed (though never succeeding completely!) over the last few centuries by the project of making nation-states built on voracious corporate capitalisms and contestatory citizenries.

#### Can photography capture this?

There is visuality in this project of nation-states to build standardized, bureaucratized, and nationalized cages for housing time and territory. For centuries, national states and their enactors worked at nationalizing territory, identity, security, power, rights - in brief, all the key elements of social and political existence. When the national state is the dominant format, the overarching dynamic is centripetal: the centre grasps most of what there is to be had. Those nationalizing dynamics assembled the pieces of what we now experience as the national and, too often, the "natural".



THOMAS STRUTH  
*Tokamak Asdex Upgrade Interior 2, Max Planck IPP, Garching, 2009, C-print, 141,6 x 176 cm.*  
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman, Paris/New York.



RUT BLEES LUXEMBURG  
*Narrow stage*, 1998, C-print, 150 x 180 cm framed.  
Courtesy Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, and the artist.

What happens outside the borders of territorial states - whether the impoverished terrains of former empires or the earth's still frozen poles, long written out of History.

Salgado is one photographer that breaks these cages open through a visuality that inserts enormous distance - whether in his Sahel or Genesis project.' In this distance I see theorization. It is a visuality more akin to the Greek notion of *theoria* than to the visual as representation.<sup>2</sup>

Can photography also capture what is not completely recognized.

What we innocently call the global climate crisis is partly what we exported out of these cages into a *putative* no-man's land -that other geography constructed as part of the making of capitalism. But such a no-man's land does not exist, and never did. It is actually the atmosphere, the water, the earth, once seemingly distant, that is now knocking at our door. It was never so distant for the poor in the Global South and the disadvantaged in the rich countries who have been far more exposed to toxicity than the privileged. The glaciers, once remote and immobile, are now increasingly mobile liquids touching "us". And the multitudes of disadvantaged everywhere are becoming actors on a global stage. Neither the glaciers nor these multitudes can be kept in that putative no-man's land upon which powerful shapers of our modernity thought they could rely.

Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* project took him over a long distance to find a territory that was beyond that *putative* no-man's land, a

1 Audrey Singer.  
Interview with Sebastião Salgado. *Contexts*, 2010.  
See also Sebastião Salgado, *Migrations* (New York: Aperture, 2000).

2 Saskia Sassen, "Black and White Photography as Theorizing: Seeing What the Eye Cannot See." *Sociological Forum* 26, no. 2 (2011): 438-443.

3 Audrey Singer.  
Interview with Sebastião Salgado. *Contexts*, 2010.

4 Hilary Koob-Sassen, 2008. "Faith in Infrastructure." *Manifesto*, Serpentine Gallery, London, October 2008. [http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2008/05/park\\_nights\\_manifesto\\_marathon.html](http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2008/05/park_nights_manifesto_marathon.html)

5 Sebastião Salgado, *Genesis*. Retrieved September 20, 2010 at: <http://www.amazonasimag-es.com/grands-travaux?HPHSESSID=2a078b639171f014f597ee841c223fcb>.

territory where we can still find a complex, almost untouched biosphere and a part of our mankind that has not been flattened by oppression and consumerism. In Salgado's words (2010), *Genesis* is an attempt to portray the beauty and the majesty of regions that are still in a pristine condition<sup>3</sup>.

I have little doubt that photography can capture/graph, like no text can, the immediacy of today's catastrophic conditions: the melting of the glaciers, the radicalness of today's poverty, the violence of extreme economic inequality, the genocidal character of more and more wars. My question is can it capture this only as a sort of new occurrence? But they are not new occurrences. On the contrary, they have long been part of that putative no-man's land that absorbed the costs of making nation-states and capitalism. Can photography capture that which was pushed into a space not visible from the "centre" of the world. Can it engage and show us that active making of the minutiae of human and environmental destruction in a putative no-man's land. Can it show us the centuries-old histories that we are only now seeing, and seeing as new.

These conditions have existed for a long time, but today they are crossing new thresholds and, crucially, they become legible as the cages of the national begin to fall apart and reveal the landscapes of devastation on which they were built. Our over-cantilevered bridge cannot cope with the warming waters below<sup>4</sup>."

#### When powerlessness becomes complex

As territory and time seep out of the old nation-state cages they begin to constitute a proliferation of partial, often highly specialized, assemblages of bits of territory, authority, and rights once firmly enconced in national institutional frames. I find these new formations can include oppressive as well as emancipatory moves.

These are the elements, the building blocks for new global geographies. They can be thick, sub-national settings or vast and thin translocal networks. They are not the globalities that run through supranational institutions that take out that thickness and produce thin generalizations across differences. What I am thinking of here, at one extreme, are globalities marked by localisms and by immobilities. I do not see this as a contradiction. Once territory and time seep out of the cages of the national, the immobile can be global actors even if their bodies do not cross the borders of national states; they can be part of global subjectivities and politics even as they are immobile on the newly destabilized ground of old nation-states.

Under these conditions powerlessness can become complex and thereby contain the possibility of a politics, of making the political. I use this notion here to distinguish it from empowerment. Powerlessness can be complex even if there is empowerment.

Photography of thick, localized realities can capture a sort of globality constituted through recurrence rather than through the more common universalizing of meaning. It can show us that the spaces and times of our global modernity can contain thick immobilities. The long period of time that Salgado spent with the subjects of his diverse photographic projects is itself a concrete instance of these thick immobilities: he spent 15 months in Africa's Sahel region to work on the famine, six years documenting the lives and struggles of workers around the world, and eight years on the *Genesis* project<sup>5</sup>.

But can photography capture these novel kinds of nomadisms not predicated on geographic mobility. In my work I find it critical, both theoretically and politically, to dislodge mobility and globality from the entrapment of geographical movement; in today's world such movement is mostly marked as positive: those who are enabled to move geographically are the privileged, the achievers, the new

6 Cf. Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Right: From Medical to Global Assemblages*, Princeton University Press 2006, chapter 8.

7 Andreas Gursky (Los Angeles: Gagosian Gallery, March 4-May 1, 2010).

professionals, the famous artists, the powerful. The insufficiency of this automatic positive valence of mobility is especially clear when the it becomes a logic for domination, as in the camps for displaced people, refugee flows, trafficking of migrant workers.

The challenge for both geography and photography is to capture these new meanings of immobility. How to capture the fact that those unable or unwilling to travel can nonetheless experience themselves as part of larger worlds marked by recurrence of meanings, struggles, imaginaries in multiple thick settings, each with its own specificities, across the world.

#### Geographies of expulsion

We can visualize masses driven out. But a geography of expulsions is much more than that.

With the onset of the global neo-liberal project in the 1980s, there are no more putative no-man lands beyond the nation-state, where we could export all bad things. There is the opposite project: an accelerated appropriation of what once may have been that no-man land. Mining and plantation agriculture have exploded well beyond what they may have been in the old imperial geographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From 2006 to 2010 70 million hectares of land have been bought or leased by foreign governments and firms in Africa, Latin America, Central and East Asia. With such vast appropriation of land comes a sharp growth in the numbers of people who have been expelled - from villages, from smallholder agriculture. Many move to the cities of their regions.

These appropriations and their corresponding expulsions constitute new geographies. Can they be captured by photography? Certainly fragments of these geographies can. Can scale and space of vast dimensions be photographed? Is visibility a curve - up till a certain point we can relate to it as visibility, but beyond a certain scale and expanse, it is no longer a visual experience? For geography it would mean capturing a temporal dimension that functions as a fracture<sup>6</sup>.

In my new research project, I use the concept of logics of expulsion to describe a diversity of conditions: the growing numbers of the abjectly poor, of the displaced in poor countries who are warehoused in formal and informal refugee camps, of the minoritized and persecuted in rich countries who are warehoused in prisons, of workers whose bodies are destroyed on the job and rendered useless at far too young an age, able-bodied surplus populations warehoused in ghettos and slums.

All of this can be conveyed by photography. The challenge is conveying scale and how quantity alters the meaning. Andreas Gursky finds a mode to convey scale through recurrence - row after row of basket weavers<sup>7</sup>. Salgado conveys scale though distance, as in his Sahel and in his Genesis photographs. Are there other modes?

#### Assemblages of presence

There is a kind of photography that gives us assemblages of presence. Presence is a complex condition that goes beyond the material, the visible. It is also ephemeral even when deeply material, because materiality by itself, and the visibility of the material, are not the same as presence. Presence is not a mere function or an attribute of materiality. Presence is made.

I immediately think of a city - which we might think of as a vast amplification of this possibility. Notwithstanding the enormity of its immobile physical structures, what marks the urban is the continuous slides and shifts - of meaning, of perspective, of materiality. Every person, every street, every window is a different vector into it all. The effect is that of a recovery of presence. And for me, this



RUT BLEES LUXEMBURG  
*Vertiginous Exhilaration*, 1995, C-print, 180 x 220 cm, framed.  
Courtesy Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, and the artist.

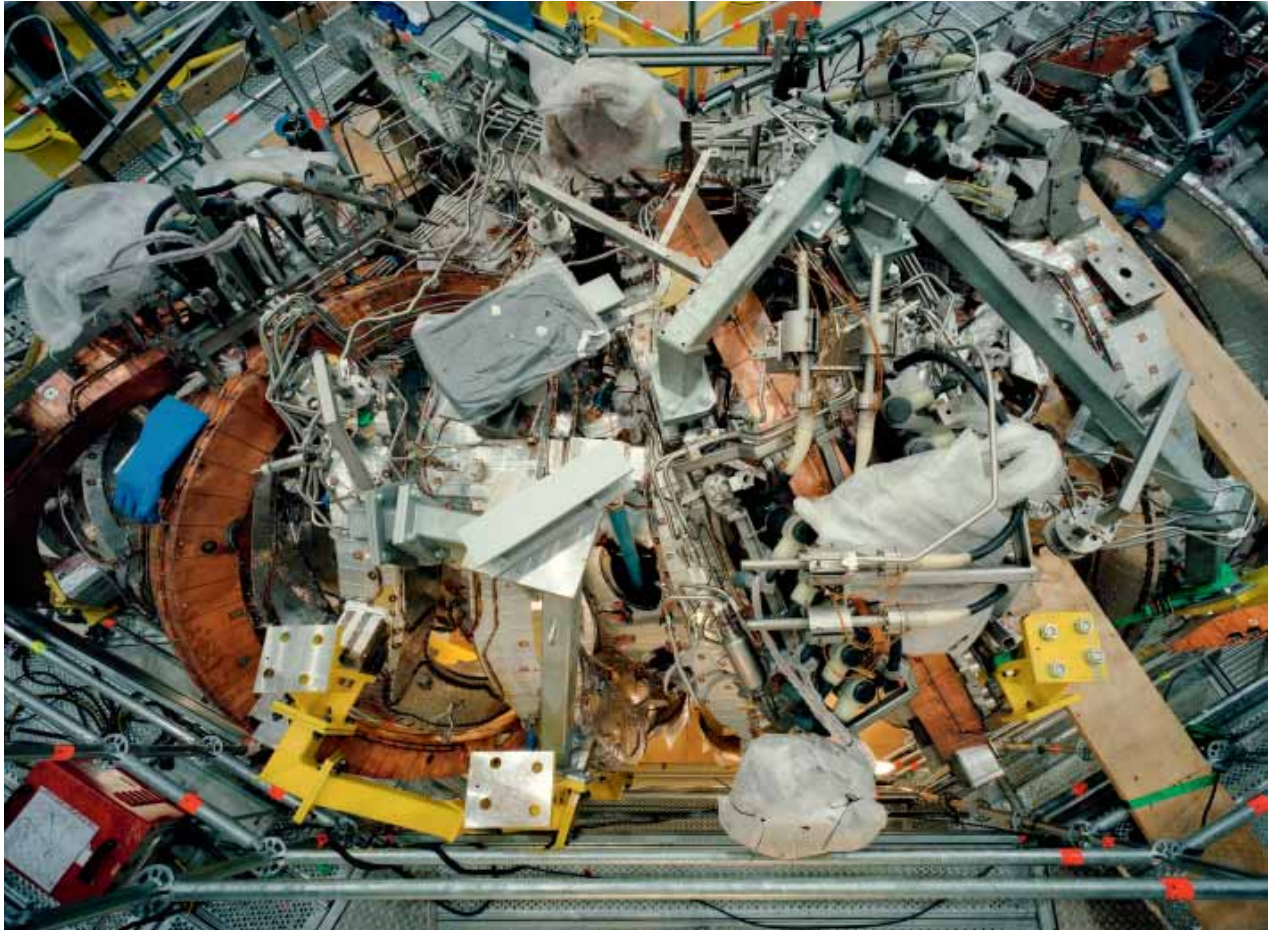




THOMAS STRUTH

*Semi Submersible Rig, DSME Shipyard, Geoje Island, 2007, C-print,  
270 x 340 cm. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman, Paris/New York.*

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*Stellarator Wendelstein 7-X Detail, Max Planck IPP, Greifswald, 2009, C-Print,  
160 x 209,5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman, Paris/New York.*



<sup>8</sup> "The Global Street: Beyond the Piazza and Theatrum Mundi?" (research project filed with author, Columbia University).

<sup>9</sup> Stefen Gronert and Christoph Schreier, *Thomas Struth. Straßen. Fotografie 1976 bis 1995*. (Cologne: Kunstmuseum Bonn 1995); *Thomas Struth* (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, May 5-June 19, 2010); *Thomas Struth: Photographs 1978-2010* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, July-September 2011).

<sup>10</sup> *Commonsensual - the work of Rut Blees Luxemburg* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2009).

experience of recovering presence is at the core of urbanity understood as a more global event than our western European notion of the urbanity of the piazza. It is more the urbanity of the Global Street<sup>8</sup>.

Standing in front of certain photographs, two concepts jump out: making and recurrence, which promptly take me to the question as to whether recurrence is made, and whether this formulation actually unsettles what the artist is after. This is a slippery zone. Meanings begin to slide even as they are only migrating across infinitesimal distances. I see this migration of meaning in Thomas Struth early photographs of buildings in urban space and the recent series on offshore rigs<sup>9</sup>. The multiplication of pieces of materiality in some photographs – Struth's recent photos of vast piles of elements, from tools to materials, on off-shore rigs – gives us an experience of intensity rather than of endless repetition. Also in the city, the active *making* of multiplication ironically unsettles the meaning of endless repetition – there is plenty of repetition in any city. And it is alive, no matter its seemingly inert materialities.

Rut Blees Luxemburg nighttime photography of familiar urban spaces devoid of people, makes these spaces unfamiliar.<sup>10</sup> In so doing the photograph brings to the fore the fact of an assemblage – the familiar elements are all there but their meanings migrate with the shift in light and the emptiness. We see the unfamiliar, a space where we can find the sublime.



## RUT BLEES LUXEMBURG

*Oakwood*, 2006, C-print, 100 x 127cm framed. Courtesy Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, and the artist.

The artefacts of the quotidian we see in New York photographer Marilyn McLaren - glasses lying, not standing, on a table; the metal bars on a window from the Bronx with a view of a far away Manhattan's corporate centre - conjure up an assemblage that is, again, more than the sum of the parts, and more than mere repetition. Something is extracted that was not visible: the objects say more than their facticity, and a space is rescued from the silence of absence.

Immobile images - as in photographs, or in much sculpture - can produce slightly sliding meanings, a sort of nomadism of meanings. They do so through the larger assemblage of presences that constitute them and that are more than the sum of the elements - the whole makes room for multiple vectors of meaning, visibility, and form. It makes room for the work of the crawling eye.

In my own work I have developed notions of "making presence", of rescuing from the silence of absence. I am especially interested in understanding how groups and events at risk of invisibility due to societal prejudices and fears become present to themselves, to others like themselves, and to others unlike themselves. What I seek to capture is a very specific feature. It is the possibility of making presence where there is silence and absence.

One version of this is a particular condition in even the densest city that has the visual character of under-utilized space, and is indeed often seen as such. Yet these spaces are often charged with memories, with presences of the past, rather than by their current meaning as under-utilized space. They are thus charged precisely

<sup>11</sup> See Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, op. cit.

because they are under-utilized. As memories, these spaces become part of the "interiority" of the city, the city's present, even when this interiority is outside the profit-driven utility logics and their spatial framings. They are the *terrains vague* or vacant grounds that enable many residents to connect with their city at a time of rapid changes. This is a making of presence.

#### Analytic Borderlands: Extracting a Space Where There is Meant to be None

For me as a political economist, addressing these issues has meant working in several systems of representation and constructing spaces of intersection". There are analytic moments when two systems of representation intersect. Such analytic moments are easily experienced as spaces of silence, of absence. One challenge is to see what happens in those spaces, what operations (analytic, of power, of meaning) take place there.

The work of capturing this elusive quality that cities can produce and make legible is not easily executed. Utility logics will not do. It calls for artists (e.g. public sculpture) and architects able to navigate multiple forms of knowledge and introduce the possibility of an architectural practice located in spaces – such as intersections of multiple transport and communication networks – where the naked eye or the engineer's imagination sees no shape and no possibility of a form, just pure infrastructure and utility.

What happens if we begin to think of this space as one that bridges two differences: it is a kind of frontier zone, an in-between space that is under-specified, ambiguous, under-narrated. One version of these in-between spaces is what I have called analytic borderlands. They are spaces constituted in terms of discontinuities, and usually conceived of as unrelated or disconnected. In constituting them as *analytic borderlands*, discontinuities are given a terrain rather than reduced to a dividing line. Much of my work on economic globalization and cities has focused on these discontinuities and has sought to reconstitute their articulation analytically as borderlands rather than as dividing lines. I see such analytic borderlands in much photography, including the few cases alluded to here.

There is an urban condition today that lies between the fact of massive structures and the existence of semi-abandoned places that I would so much like to see rendered photographically in ways that pull them out of their familiar and flattening concreteness. It is a condition not unique to today's period – under other arrangements, and with variable particularities, it also existed in the past. I think that this elusive in-between space is essential to the experience of urban living, and that it lends legibility to transitions and the uneasiness of specific spatial configurations. Aside from the huge range of contributions that are typically enumerated, architecture and urbanism can function as critical art practices that allow us to capture something far more elusive than that which is represented by all-present ideas/tropes such as, for example, the "transformation of the urban into a theme park".

The types of space I have in mind are the surfaces that cover recycling plants, tunnels and sewage systems; small awkward unused spaces that have been forgotten or do not fit the needs of utility-driven plans and hence are seen as useless; and other such spaces we do not recognize as spaces. We can also add spaces that require the work of detecting possible architectures where there now is merely a formal silence, a non-existence; for instance, a modest and genuinely undistinguished *terrain vague* – not a grand *terrain vague* that becomes magnificent through the scale of its decay and abandonment, as might be the case with an old unused industrial harbour or steel factory.

It is precisely in these spaces, easily experienced as dead, that there is a possibility: the possibility of inserting architectures and of formalizing them as inhabited infrastructures – the possibility of

## GEOGRAPHY

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an architectural moment in what is seen as mere silences or gaps from the point of view of mainstream architecture. To recover infrastructures that facilitate daily life in the city, many of which deserve recognition, is to recover histories other than the history of building for users, for consumption. To transform the infrastructures for public use into sites for architectural and artistic interventions is not only to celebrate people's histories but also to give presence to everyday life.