

## Do Not Linger On Desolate Ground

“You should not encamp on grounds hard to approach. Unite with your allies on grounds intersected with highways. Do not linger on desolate ground. In enclosed ground, resort to stratagem. In death ground, fight a last-ditch battle ... There are some roads which must not be followed ... some ground which should not be contested”, Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

“If today we already began completely to destroy the bond which ties us to nature, to rush headlong into liberation and to content ourselves exclusively with the combination of pure colour and independent form, we would produce works which would look like geometric ornamentation, which, to put it crudely, would resemble a necktie or a carpet”, Wassily Kandinsky, *Uber Das Gestige in Der Kunst*

At first glance I was in the realm of the abstract. I was in the desolate ground of geometric ornamentation, to conflate the two quotations used as epigraphs to this essay.

Confronting Edgar Martins' *Hidden* series, I was struck by a glacial stasis, by the resolute fixity of the photographic field. Blocks of tonal colour appeared to have assembled themselves into a pictorial plane of sheer solidity. This initial encounter resonated with Clement Greenberg's diagnosis of the flatness of modernist abstraction in which uniformity dominated and picture dissolved “into sheer texture, sheer sensation”. There seemed little opportunity in *Hidden* for an interpretation that relied upon some anchor to reality: where were the fissures of differentiation that could allow me to begin to contrast graphic elements; where was evidence of scale that would enable an identification of the camera's perspective; where, ultimately, was there any information that might jolt me out of the seduction of surface and into a confrontation with depth, with meaning?

With repeated scanning, however, these images begin to divest their secrets. Focusing on repeated irregularities in the lower sections, most pronounced nearest the frame, suggests a dynamic of proximity and distance. Closer inspection insinuates that the irregularities observed are formations of corrugated concrete, a suspicion which, when pursued, connects the azure in uppermost segment of some of the series to the clouded sky that occupies the same position in others. With this vertical axis deciphered, the horizontal seams of colour which bifurcate the pictures become vulnerable to decoding, as barriers or walls. Once alert to these dimensions, the formal neutrality that previously seemed to bind *Hidden* to the realm of abstraction rapidly unravels as details emerge to corroborate this interpretation – visible road markings, lamp-posts with shadows, a glimpse of the sea, an eruption of straggly grass.

The wall and the road constitute two of the most fundamental architectural devices that marked the move out of human pre-history. According to Lewis Mumford in his magisterial work, *The City In History*, in their earliest incarnations, both the wall and the road were as much sacred as strategic, were matters of faith as well as function.

Poring over archaeological discoveries, Mumford determines that “the first use of walls may have been a religious one: to define the scared limits of the *temenos* [the temple courtyard], and to keep at bay evil spirits rather than inimical men ... the exaggerated height and thickness of these walls in the earliest cities – seventy-five feet thick in Khorsabad – is significantly out of all proportion to the military means that existed

for assaulting them. It is only for their gods that men exert themselves so extravagantly". Only very much later does the wall evolve into "a military device and an agent of effective command over the urban population. Aesthetically it made a clean break between the city and countryside; while socially it emphasised the difference between insider and outsider, between the open field, subject to the deprivations of wild animals, nomadic robbers, invading armies and the fully enclosed city, where one could work and sleep with a sense of utter security".

The road, too, was no mere utilitarian transport mechanism. As Mumford argues, the "frequent orientation of the main avenues to the points of the compass perhaps indicates the growing dominance of the sky gods; this layout sometimes flouted more practical considerations, such as the tempering of heat or catching the prevailing winds". From architect Kisho Kurokawa we find confirmation of Mumford's suggestions in Ancient Indian Vedic texts, where it is stated that "the streets are the core of the city. Those streets are the streets of the sun and the streets of the wind". In parallel to the dislocation of the constructed barrier from its relationship to the gods and the spirits, the road underwent a similar detachment from anything that spoke of another world than that of the brutally instrumental.

From today's vantage point, with the accumulation of hostility poured into each brick and wrapped around each coil of wire, it is extremely hard for me to consider the wall or the barrier in anything other than negative terms. Wherever a poetics of the wall does rise to the surface, it is a poetics that responds to environmental negativity rather than to any other, more positive, potential. Here is graffiti writer Voodoo "[r]ight before you hit that wall, you get that rush. And right when you hit that wall, you know that you're breaking the law and that gives that extra adrenaline flow. And that's what really got me going. It's like, it's kind of almost like a drug ... Yeah, it's like being a jewel thief. It's not like your really breaking the law, it's like a jewel thief, it's a real kind of romantic criminal act". Similarly negative poetics of the wall, this time activated by more discernibly political motivations, are evoked in the collective enterprises that turned the Berlin Wall into "the world's biggest screen"; in the Popotla villagers of Mexico's inspirational fight against the wall constructed around *The Titanic* film-set that cut them off from the sea that was their livelihood; in Michal Rovner's haunting film *The Border* from 1997; and in Justin Bennett's *Europa* sound and image explorations of the edges of Europe, amongst many other possible illustrations.

A poetics of positive potential clung to the road for a little longer than it did to the wall. In the twentieth century, individuals as distinct as the "caffeine of Europe" F.T. Marinetti and the "little madman" Jack Kerouac, found in the road a transport to other places, the vector of mechanised speed and the romance of the self, respectively. Yet, despite the persistence of some vestiges of the road as escape route – notably in Gimpo's M25 spin described in Iain Sinclair's *London Orbital* – the road has succumbed to the same fate that befell its structural neighbour, the wall. "The idea of the road stands for the idea of how easy it is to live without dyspeptic supervisors, uninterested bed companions and the flat grey light of fluorescent bulbs and the shadowless winter afternoons. We imagine our lives are more mobile, that we wander the world more readily than before, but in fact it is less possible to extricate oneself than in earlier times. No stranger is trusted who can't verify his history and bed debt clings like flour". It is comes as no surprise that Lewis Mumford foreshadowed the descent of the road. For him, it is not only the spiritual that has been lost but even the basic facility of movement: "Instead of buildings set in a park, we now have buildings set in a parking lot ... Under

the present suburban regime, every urban function follows the example of the motor road: it devours space and time with increasing friction and frustration while, under the plausible pretext of increasing the range of speed and communication, it actually obstructs it and denies the possibilities of easy meetings and encounters by scattering the fragments of a city at random over a whole region”.

Rather than my first appreciation of Edgar Martins’ *Hidden* series as locked into a pure abstraction, perhaps it is better instead to figure these potent images as conceptual conversations with the wall and road as profane systems of confinement and control. However, further investigation into the origin of Martins’ project suggests that this analytical refinement is not yet enough.

Not enough because these images and the roads and walls they depict occupy a location every bit as concrete as the Berlin Wall or the M25 alluded to earlier. The photographs were taken in the Algarve region of Portugal and represent highways which cut through the landscape bounded by barriers designed to deaden the acoustic presence of the traffic that travels along them. With this knowledge, the title *Hidden* now betrays another logic at work, one that connects to tropes that are active in some of the Martins’ other photographic endeavours.

On the one hand, hidden becomes a watchword for the ambiguity of things that open and close, attract and recoil, converge and diverge in front of the lens. The hidden-ness of the world means that the very same images can shift through registers of meaning – from neutral abstraction through abstract meditation and then to something akin to reportage – with such alacrity that the ground beneath the viewer’s feet is rendered slippery and our epistemology eroded.

On the other hand, hidden becomes a statement about ontology. This time, the hidden-ness of the world relates less to a corrosion of the certainties of representation and much more to the way that the contemporary environment itself can be distinguished by operations of disguise and partial disclosure. Is it that the valleys and villages of old Portugal are hidden as possible distractions to the accelerating motorist or is it that the intrusions of the snarling tarmac are what demand hiding from the shimmering coast?

We may be entering a world of borderlines. For many these borderlines can open things up, can become sites of a new hybrid poetics. “For within the borderline are other borderlines. There are as many of them as there are individualities seeking to assert the differences that make them ‘other’ and yet impel most of them to negotiate together some form of common ground, that which constitutes a community or a culture ...What is constructed inside the borderlines is not a catalogue of new monuments to stability for a culture which does not need them, but something much more modest and at the same time more ambitious: the tectonic and spatial elements of a new landscape. As the borderlines themselves already suggest, it is a complex landscape in which fragments retain their identity and yet meld, through negotiation and chance, into a new form of continuity”.

I have written about these borderlines before and the zones that emerge there. I have celebrated these zones as ones that contain the potential for a new openness and a positive negotiation of difference. Having spent time with these Edgar Martins’ images, I now wonder whether such a celebration may have been premature. I wonder whether I

had ignored the perseverance of the wall and the road; whether I had forgotten that which was hidden.

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