

“Nothing disappears completely... In space, what came earlier continues to underpin what follows.”  
– Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

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## *i. P L A C E*

In conversations surrounding urban placemaking, the idea of transformation is often invoked. Other questions also arise: does the community know best? Is money no object? Should naysayers be allowed airtime? Is 'triangulate' defined by how it sounds? The unanswered questions linger, like ghosts from a life previously lived. During attempts to remake spaces in the image of the contemporary mood, revitalisation takes on a more sinister face—like any bid to please a large, cohesive mass, the tyranny of the majority inevitably (for better or for worse) reigns supreme. Unwittingly or not, places are un-made in their making: old, sacred sites are bulldozed to make way for the erection of modern monstrosities; whole communities are uprooted to be moved further afield; new industries enter the fray, changing the face of previously-held structures. Sometimes history is rewritten to make room for more palatable myths at the expense of long-standing legacies. Newfound truths emerge, even as holes are excavated deeper into the ground. As a result, psychogeographies form: a deep, psychic scab crystallised over old wounds—self-inflicted or otherwise—mapped by lines over a well-trodden terrain. This is not to say that placemaking projects are always insidious, but it is difficult to think about the construction of modern narratives without taking into account what came before. How might we re-imagine place while re-considering history? What kinds of meaning does a place create as it morphs, over time?

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## *ii. P S Y C H E*

It's a common theory within environmental psychology that for a sense of place to be fully realised, natural surveillance must occur. As people feel equally more distant and more connected from and to one another through an existence mediated through technology, urban spaces struggle to situate local anchor points that foster physical relationships in real time. In what is considered to be one of the pioneering treatises on urbanism, the 1980 volume *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* refers to a general fascination with street-side social behaviours: “the regularity of chance meetings, the tendency to reciprocal gestures in street conferences, the rhythm of the three-phase goodbye.” Nearly four decades later, one can simulate a sense of place via a social media geo-tag or wave to a friend through the comfort of screen-based communication. However, natural surveillance doesn't falter; instead it is heightened through an unwavering sense of presence, propped up by ghosts that continue to fester.

As such, Roberta Rich's video installation *Specimen 1278086* reflects this pervasive sentiment of surveillance through the lens of race, gender and the body. It's a not-thinly veiled foray into a remaking of the self in

direct opposition to the gazes of others, as the artist herself is being watched, whether at a glance or intently, up close or from afar. As the work loops ominously at the site in question, it hardly matters if someone is intentionally there or merely passing through—surveillance occurs both purposefully and by happenstance. The work is a deliberate attempt at collapsing the boundaries between looking and seeing, especially in the context of marginalised identities, who are already often surveilled whether they like it or not. Juxtaposed against a history of urban placemaking, it becomes a pointed comment on policed identities and deleted pasts. The connection is at once both searing and intrinsic: who decides exactly who gets to be surveilled? Who dictates that some spaces are safer for some and not for others? Taking a quick piss in an alleyway, drinking in public, walking alone at night through a parkland—these are a few examples of acts that carry very different connotations depending on whose bodies they inhabit. Viewed through the site, Rich's work takes on an even more sombre immediacy: previously-drawn demarcations surrounding race, gender and power are immediately brought into question.

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## *iii. P O W E R*

Meanwhile, less benign accounts of placemaking point to more violent acts. In these iterations, the creation of place can also be an euphemism for displacement, civil strife and war. Yet again, peripheral ghosts remain—as a consequence of borders drawn before, locations fragmented by arbitrary forces. Identities are rebuilt, subsumed, extinguished. The popular imagination surrounding placemaking often elide these realities under the guise of development and change, at the expense of those displaced. To that end, the kinds of narratives that end up materialising from these undoings are generally fractured and complex.

Accordingly, Elyas Alavi's video piece *Naan/Bread* seeks to highlight these tensions. Mediated through the eyes of a global interlocutor, its overt cosmopolitanism underscores the fact that displacement is a universal condition. While it can seem like it's a specificity localised to certain areas at times, interlocking world powers are often silently complicit, capital acting as the backbone for states embarking on their own versions of placemaking. When the work is viewed through this premise—especially in repetition across four screens—the site becomes jolted with a fervour. All of a sudden, this pressing demand for an audience's attention acts in tandem with the warfare the art is trying to communicate. The location of the work along a (well-trodden) footpath previously bereft of subjective meaning adds to the dialogue around placemaking, a commentary on histories past. It is not so much an accusation insofar that it is a query, its wordless yet disruptive occupation an effort to stop urban witnesses in their tracks, perhaps urging them to look up from their respective screens onto yet another screen, but this time in a space not of their own making. This is here, this is now; what was then, what came before. If a place carries upon layers and layers of its own making and unmaking through conquest and invasion, do suppressed spatial memories ever truly disappear?