

With Added Context

Xavier Ribas
Belfast Exposed/Place

Habitus was a collaborative exhibition held at Belfast Exposed and Place. The three pieces which made up the show considered the interplay between urban architecture, commerce and history and the impact those relationships have on those of us whose lives they touch.

Habitus (2008) is a series of sixty-seven colour photographs documenting the housing estates built on the outskirts of Barcelona in the sixties and early seventies. As Ribas tells us in his accompanying contextualising statement, these estates have been improved and urbanised through public investment in the post-Franco years.

The work is arranged in a formal 21 x 4 grid, with seventeen gaps, apparently selected randomly, with no discernable pattern or thematic rationale for the omissions. A feeling of discomfort is created by these holes in the geometric logic of the hang.

There is a sense of absence, too, in the images themselves. A number of them contain single individuals, alienated from their surroundings. Reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer*, these people are not, however, romantically connected to their environment, but gaze sadly upon land- and cityscapes with which they struggle to find any real engagement. Thus the habitus of the work's title – isolated individuals attempting to gain relationships with a world which shapes their lives and which was constructed with little contribution from them.

A number of the photographs contain moments of limited social interaction – small groups or pairings engaging with each other at a recreational level – they converse, play games and sports and, in one image, kiss. These are pictures of collective, day-to-day survival, but at no point of collective organisation. From out of this community emerges the pathos and isolation engendered by its negative socialisation.

In his statement for *Nomads* (2008), Ribas names the date of the event recorded in this series of photographs, giving it the status of a significant historical moment. The piece shows evidence of an act of corporate violence, on Sunday 22 February 2004, against around sixty gypsy families from a disused industrial site. The concrete floor was smashed with drills, reducing it to slabs of rubble.

The thirty-three black and white photographs are again hung in a grid – 12 x 3 – and again with omissions, the last two of the bottom row and the fifth in the top row. The three rows generally, but not strictly, refer to the foreground-middleground-background tradition of landscape composition, with the camera moving from a downward direction to the horizontal, the top row showing buildings and hills in the distance. The work thus acts as a montage, making an approximation of the entire area. This is both countered and confirmed by the gap at the top, where the background image appears to have slipped into the middleground, like a movable segment in a child's grid-puzzle.

While the chequer-board of the installation contains and orders the shambles of the crazy-paved images, the latter contain within them straight painted lines on the broken concrete. Ribas has used these lines, in one corner arranging three photographs to form these lines into a zig-zag pattern. This is the most clearly evident example of the artist's use of discrete elements as compositional devices – readymade brush marks collaged to make a largely non-figurative composite image.

The artist's statement, in case we find ourselves lost in the formalism of the piece, is positioned next to it. This reminds us that this is an image of the oppression of an already dispossessed sector of society, explaining how the property developers Nesco took advantage of 'the economic value of violence and destruction in order to control space'.

In addition, he has a framed print of the Google Maps satellite image of the area and its surroundings. Another collage, of nine printouts arranged 3 x 3, the street layout forms a grid-

within-a-grid, along with other organically/historically developed roads, echoing the structure of the piece to which it refers. Using this image, I was able to find the area on Google Maps, zoom in and look over the hastily-built wall surrounding this vast waste ground, perfectly suited, before its corporate vandals got to it, to the needs of the evicted travellers.

MMDCCLXI AVC (the year 2008 in the Roman calendar) was commissioned for a group photography show held last year in the city of Tarragona, a coastal city west of Barcelona. The aim of the exhibition, at the Fundació Caixa de Tarragona, was to explore the history of the town.

Ribas chose to document a quite extraordinary little museum, sited inside a multi-storey car park underneath a shopping centre. During construction, the remains of a Roman necropolis and villa were found. After building was completed in 1997, these were relocated in the car park's lowest level. Ribas points out that the lowering of the objects to this level signifies thousands of additional years. The building of this very modern temple, then, has distorted its location's history. And the carbon monoxide that fills the remains' new surroundings is destroying the evidence of that history.

The first of the three photographs shows that the car park is like any other, with the addition of a lighted sign, indicating the commercial centre to the right and the archaeological site to the left. The second is of a stone at the entrance to the museum area, with an explanatory Latin inscription carved into a pseudo-ancient stone – another historical distortion. The third shows the artefacts themselves, scattered beneath the standard concrete car-park ceiling and competing with the window at the back, with its jazzy signage.

The three works, *Habitus* and *Nomads* in Belfast Exposed and *MMDCCLXI AVC* in Place, differ significantly in visual and strategic terms, but they are united in their observation of human activity according to its historical and societal context.

Colin Darke