

**Xavier Ribas**

**Concrete Geographies [Nomads]**

Xavier Ribas's *Nomads* (2008) is a body of work and a subsequent publication (Bside Books, 2012) that does more than narrativise a story. The work consists of elements of an installation that includes a photographic diptych of brooding clouds, a Google Earth composite image, a text, geographical coordinates, and a grid presentation of thirty-five photographs taken of a former industrial plot on the Eastern outskirts of Barcelona. With these elements, *Nomads* provides a number of possible navigations, introducing ideas of how architecture serves as a mode of control and division, used by those in power against communities that are deemed unwelcome in the order of their schemes.

From the text element we learn that over a period of several days in February 2004, a team of workmen with heavy machinery entered the site; their machinery put to work on the foundations, shattering and uprooting the concrete surface, until the task was complete in transforming it into an inhospitable wasteland.

This was an act of premeditated violence that effectively caused the eviction of sixty families of gypsies that were then inhabiting the site. This was a violence of forced displacement. A deliberate act of architectural ruination and destruction that made it impossible for those families to remain there, leaving them with little choice, we can only guess, but to search out other redundant spaces elsewhere in the city. This act – inflicted upon architecture in *effect*, but upon people in *practice* – was not part of a plan of constructive rejuvenation, or the first step of a property development scheme that would typically, for better or worse, bring about new duplex apartments and glass-fronted businesses. No justifications were necessary back then, or have been called for since. In the nine years that have passed to this day, – visible from the windows of the commuter train that heads to the seaside town of Blanes – the site remains in its abandoned chewed-up state.

In the 35 vertically-orientated black and white photographs, there are clusters of nails and upturned covers of unidentifiable books, but there is relatively little that we can align, in a classic photojournalistic sense, toward a narrative of land contestation, mechanized power, and displaced peoples. There are no shattered caravans or children's toys left behind in the calamity. The pneumatic drills and diggers, long since disappeared. In these photographs, Ribas's camera settles on details of the broken foundations of the site; its cracks and fractures, the interruption of weeds, and the disjointed patterning of lines painted onto the surfaces that may have been bay markings or directional lines of some kind of another; a language of industrious order that is now lost and reduced to crumbs. There are materials of natural and man-made varieties that stack on top of each other and settle new boundaries. In many of these photographs, the entire frame is filled with these closely observed material dislocations and disturbances. Fragments, rather than the larger un-representable whole. It is these fragments that remain the only evidences of aggressive action taken against a widely stigmatized nomadic community.

What is it that photography can do here, in a place like this, in the serene calm after the storm? How can photography tell a story of struggle in this inactive and barren landscape, where the only movement is the

stubborn, slow growth of plant-life in the rubble?

*Nomads* is a work that seems to ask these questions of itself. Better still, it enacts these questions with all their implicit uncertainty and doubt, against the grain of documentary traditions. It is an embodied vision as much as a revelatory one. Beside a vision of the site itself, what we also see in *Nomads* is the site's impositions upon the camera-connected-body, and upon the very liberties of possible perspective.

In Xavier Ribas's photographs, the ground seems to sear up like a wall. And as viewers, we are kept tightly and inescapably bound to it, drawn to its limits. Within these confines, it's as though the camera searches for something, some clue, some definitive remnant, or any such 'thing' that might invite a notion of history (that 'spark of contingency' that Walter Benjamin once wrote of). Nothing comes. Nothing, that is, apart from the weeds and the material fractures in disturbed foundations of the site. It's the particular kind of nothing that has a disorientating, almost suffocating effect.

In those few photographs that pan upward to a broader view, we find ourselves confronted with the blank and faceless windows of overlooking industrial units. Every space that promises a breathing space is a space occupied and pre-seen. The graffiti tags on the surrounding walls make their authoritative claims upon the site in altogether different sense. The sky appears in small, inorganic slivers, as grey and as dead as the concrete on the ground. All life, apart from the weeds, seems to be in a state of evasion. Viewing this work, we become acutely aware of how architecture can act against us, upon our own bodies as spectators, but also implicitly upon the bodies that have suffered this environment at first hand.

The presentation of these photographs in a grid format offers some reconstitution. A comparative and formal containment of discreet fragments, the grid format also provides the hope of awakening the muted voices of recent history and the enclaves of community. The grid structure, of course, refers to the well-known organisational strategy that exists at both ends of the speculative divide, between the urban plan and the archeological search.

The satellite navigation co-ordinates and Google Earth composite images provide some specificity and exteriority to these interior planes of vision of the grid. The Google-Earth images show a rectangular shape that is the subject of these photographs; a space that is scarred in different shades of grey, looking like some kind of ancient relic against the uniform structure of rooftops and road and rail networks that define the surrounding urban fabric. This is a space that, in effect, seems to belong to another order of time, layered with our own.

The day is bright, as we can see on some images. And on a day like this there are surely numerous people less than a kilometer from here, pointing their cameras to the horizon, cutting their photographic frames in neat rectangles of sea and sky, before getting on with their day. How long has it been now? Three or more years since the foundations of this site were shaken, there weeds are taking over. The clouds brooding overhead are a signal that it's going to rain, and soon the bright concrete blotches with water drops.

A photograph of the sky, taken at the end of the day, now in color, stands as a counter-vision of all that looks down upon the site with calculating eyes. As Hannah Arendt once wrote of being an emigrant: "*We leave the earth and all its uncertainties behind and we cast our eyes up to the sky*"

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