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Peripheral Zones

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At the periphery, the city illuminates itself, negatively. Every image seized there, at the precipice where the urban compulsively extinguishes itself, is a story so concertinaed by sensation or absence that it fixes the eye profoundly into that image. Human life has been swept away, with magisterial cruelty or nonchalance, but the emanation projected by the empty zones of streets, highways, buildings, pivots on a kind of neural inkling within the membranes of the eye, an intimation of vision, that something may be resuscitated or restituted from the detritus that forms that void. Such an inkling, in its flux and in its desire for revelation, propels the eye on from image to image.

No void subsists at the city's edge, for any longer than the instant in which it is registered; the debris tracing that void reconfigures itself like a set of magnetized iron filings, in an endless sequence of invisible, irresistible transformations. From image to image, the periphery convulses. It is in danger of eluding the eye, but it is constellated with flowers: the traces of death attached to the desiccated earth or crash-barriers along the now-stilled highway; or it is constellated with semen and its discarded surfaces, the traces of evanesced bodies: flowers and semen, with the corporeal long burned out.

Detritus itself speaks in the image, conjuring those scorched and exposed traces, via a vocal tract scarred by memory. If the urban periphery possesses a memory, that memory adheres itself to such instantaneous manifestations, weighs itself down with the random manoeuvres of stones around that terrain, vanishes in the vapour of human fluids sucked into the sky above the periphery, and coalesces again across the window-indented facades of low-grade concrete apartment buildings. The eye that circuits or penetrates the urban periphery generates marks of memory that form precarious explorations: they bleed over for an instant into oblivion, oscillate for a moment into their own annulment, then vertiginously overbalance backwards, to cohere into images.

In Europe, from Marseilles, to Berlin, to Rome, to London, the cities are engulfed: rendered into negligible corporate outposts, all images relentlessly pitted-out - except on their resistant peripheries. Europe survives as a caustic residue on those peripheries, its visual components meshed and contaminated, vital in their damage, occluded and randomly expelled, but offering themselves up to the eye that can locate them and restore to them their dirty glory.

And with Europe always comes the scar of the human body: even in its most abysmal desertion, at the height of its human emptiness, the urban periphery is still instilled by a seminal touch of transmuted flesh, in the forms of vectors or incisions: a blur of laundry zigzagged across the facade of a tenement, arbitrary apertures inflicted in walls, pathways -

random at first sight - that intersect, begin and end as though created to mark an act of negation: every story of a human act collapses into itself at its point of origin, leaving a configuration of debris that only the image can seize.

There exists an intractable ambiguity between the city and the image, and the process that explores that space (not an area, not an interface, and not even space) involves an intricate excoriation choreographed by the eye against and into that mystery, whose elements are exacerbated and intensified on the urban periphery. One moment, those elements can be formed of brilliant light, another moment, from the most discarded human traces. That ambiguity remains obstinately intact even when the human and social forms around it have transformed themselves wholesale, instantly, as in the leisure parks of the former East Berlin, constellated with concrete table-tennis constructions, built to last for centuries, then permanently disused and subtracted from the city, but still able to emanate their mysterious tenacity, as improvised grave-markers for vanished time, or as coagulations of disappeared human gestures, along the pathways interconnecting newly-appeared hypermarkets. That mystery exerts its presence too among the concrete towers on the peripheries of Marseilles, where the erased zones around the high-rise apparitions are studded with the barely-surviving foundations of Phocaean or Roman buildings, and where obsolescence moves so rapidly, erratically, that the hypermarkets appear already negated, standing steel-shuttered, the redundancy of their exclamatory insignias underpinned by the matching graffiti inscriptions that wryly replicate them.

The vital conjunction undertaken between the periphery and the image creates an aberrant mutation in urban space, a kind of seismic centering of the periphery, against the grain (otherwise, the periphery would be left to its own oblivion): an overruling by the image that also unleashes a sensory jolt in its viewer. In sequences of images, those impacts are carried through more deeply, and the essential configurations of human absence, and of human density, reveal themselves: the abraded facades of tenements, each identical in its arrangement of windows overburdened by drying clothes, or simply vacant; the carbonized highway-edges, where fire unearthed unforeseen layers of debris or damage for assembly by the eye. In those sequences, the periphery is exposed so intensively that an anatomy of dead time is taking place in the image.

Where the outlying city enters the image, every narrative of the human body has already been derailed, and whatever still remains of a corporeal trace, its form condensed or skewed, irresistibly attracts the eye. Those elusive traces have been abruptly sieved away from the city, which has acted with the velocity of a centrifuge to scatter them across the periphery, in an arrangement (traces of fire, traces of semen, and endlessly variable movements in the zone) that requires a sustained work of the eye to pin down; those human traces have been ground to the point of surfacelessness, often raw to the eye, and demand a careful moment of envelopment and ease in which to incorporate themselves – within a sanctuary – before the next zonal mutation. Equally, there can be no threshold of return to the edifices of power or ecstasy in the heart of the city; the periphery's boundaries are implacable and inescapable.

Traversing the urban peripheries, in search of that delicate, barely-existent space where the city meets the image (a space always ready imminently to deliquesce, and able to coagulate into the image only as the result of an exhaustive

exploration and of an interrogatory patience), is open corporeal work, mediated through the eye – only ocular journeys ever take on substance, in those peripheries; that is the work of Xavier Ribas. Such an evanescent coagulation, swept out of its danger of extinguishment, in the gap between two moments of annulment, and sited alongside other such images, in a sequence of fragments torn from time, also forms a perfection.

That perfection is an already striated one, intimately in complicity with its shadows, that fall or flail across the image even in the most dazzling light, and double the absences of human life. Those pivotal shadows indicate where something has come unstuck; simultaneously, they form the source for ocular excavations. Under the surface of the city, and especially at its sensitized boundaries, the layers of surpassed moments roar downwards, with ever greater speed, carrying every precious image ever created along with them, words too, together with all evidence of human immediacy or ecstasy, all the way to the terminal point of the city's origin.

The marks of memory resurge obliquely, finally exposed to light, and they, too, are ultimately precarious: vivid for an instant, then consigned to a blackout fall, then to oblivion, until they arise again, as memories of the periphery. From such extinguishments in memory, images seep back suddenly, into space and its discarded or dislocated objects. In movements through that space, off the beaten track (or on tracks themselves beaten to insensibility by scars of memory), the markers into such memories are dispersed, unforeseen, liable to transport the eye into death, via the skeletons of flowers, or into historical or sexual voids, where an urban pressure has exploded, or has been lifted, leaving only an abyss; a deeper movement pinpoints the marks of resuscitation or liberation or illumination that survive only in such peripheries, but to seize such images requires an intake of breath held almost to vertigo, before its exhalation. The virtual or obsessive expirations that form the essential substance of the periphery demand special enticements to manifest themselves, and the work of an almost neural or instinctive scanning, born out of the compulsions of the city's detritus.