

Forensic Intimacy: A Digital Exploration of ‘Non-Place’

Jim Brogden

School of Design, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

Email: jim@jimbrogden.com

The intention here is to further promote the trans-disciplinary debate surrounding the urban ‘non-place’, through several signposted arguments, each of which seeks to reveal the contestable nature of ‘non-place’, by discussing its relationship to the following key themes: identification, childhood, cultural valorisation, ‘new landscape’, anthropological space, the palimpsest, and digital re-presentation. This study is supported by a selection of my most recent digital photographs, which investigate a specific urban ‘non-place’ in the centre of Leeds, in the UK.

Introduction: Defining the ‘Non-place’

Firstly, how do we define a ‘non-place’? One might consider these places as *liminal* spaces (Figure 1). According to Martin Heidegger, the liminal experience could be described



Figure 1 Depot 2006

as a space between two worlds; a potent middle ground that holds joins and separates two worlds at the same time. Interestingly, the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner advanced the theory that from time to time people inhabit states of marginality, inbetweenness or ‘liminality’. For Turner the value of liminal experiences lay in their ability to expose ‘new realms of possibility’, and more importantly (in the context of our discussion here), could provide

opportunities to subvert or challenge cultural givens or conventions.

I suggest here, that non-place is familiar territory, yet paradoxically, it could be seen as an anonymous part of culture: locations that are recognised in relation to their iconography of the abandoned. Places which most people usually avoid, ruptured spaces, in the Nora [1] sense, ‘exiled’ urban zones, where one inhabits a contemporary no-man’s land, often situated amongst redundant post-industrial sites, isolated by modern infrastructure developments, forgotten sites on the verge of recovery, regeneration or cultural erasure (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Car park 2006

Such interstitial places (not surprisingly) are found near prohibited sites within the urban milieu, where access and ownership is often ambiguous, or in dispute. There is the sense when walking through these non-places, that these are fugitive locations that have been created through a vicarious process of urban renewal. I would argue that these non-places act as potential palimpsests for an increasingly displaced and alienated urban community, commemorating in some new form its passage, and to a certain extent provides 'forensic' evidence of the perceived inequities of late-capitalism. (Although similar 'non-places' exist in some form within the emerging cities outside the West, most notably the Indian *maidan*, such parallels are beyond the scope of this study.)



Figure 3 Cottage 2006

The *status* of the non-place, I would argue, is in marked contrast to the more embedded cultural notions associated with the park and countryside. One could claim here, that most of the population disregards non-places. They are more often viewed as neutral zones – areas that have to be tolerated during the journey to the 'real' destination, unless of course, you are destitute, then such places may offer some form of temporary shelter (Figure 3).

To provide a more spontaneous definition of the non-place, one would not expect to find recreational activities taking place there. And, to make a more popular allusion to the golf course scene in the Michael Douglas film *Falling Down* [2], there are no families having picnics here either. On the contrary, one is more often confronted by the anthropological evidence of a more feral and disenchanted human agency (Figure 4), where one recognises that the contemporary *imbroglio*¹ of non-place is not without its social problems associated with drug use, increased fly tipping, car theft disposal, itinerant habitation, and other site-specific problems.



Figure 4 Checkout 2006

To anticipate certain doubts as to the value of encountering non-place in the first place, I would argue that in the West (especially in the UK) the non-place could be regarded as an emerging cultural and biodiverse asset. For beyond its more utilitarian potential as a dormant brown field site for redevelopment, there is the possibility to engage the urban inhabitant in perhaps a more unconventional landscape experience, an experience that potentially subverts the expectations of the public garden and park (Figure 5). This absence of a municipal landscape design 'aesthetic' within the existing non-place could provide for a desire in people (especially some children) to have the opportunity to make sense of a less prescriptive urban space – through a more empowering interrogation of non-place (Figure 6).

¹ A confused mass, a tangle (Italian).



Figure 5 (left) Hedgerow 2006



Figure 6 (right) Departed 2006

Childhood and 'Non-place'

It is useful at this juncture, to briefly highlight the case for children and their relationship with the non-place.

When I have shown the photographs of non-places to a range of audiences, their first impulse is to declare that the places depicted reminded them of where they played as children. The photographs seemed to elicit an immediate childhood reverie – of unique adventures in the zones which we are referring to here as non-places. Those members in the audience (UK) who spoke vividly of such places would have been children (5–16) during the period 1960–80. This is by no means an analytical study to support the value of non-place as a public amenity; nevertheless, this anecdotal evidence does perhaps strengthen the case for a change in attitudes in response to non-places, as these areas did affect those adults in the audience; they valued the perceived chaos of these random parcels of land, which, in the broader context



Figure 7 Refinery 2006

of my argument, I would refer to as the shrapnel of late capitalism [3], where the incongruity of industrial remnants were absorbed into the fabric of natural recolonisation and 'rewilding' (Figure 7).

One could argue, that these childhood incursions into these places, made a valuable contribution to childhood development – the introduction to risk-taking creative play, which in most cases was liberated from parental supervision. More

importantly, I would suggest, these places provided the opportunity to interact imaginatively with a range of discarded materials: to create idiosyncratic games released from the imposition of municipal signposting [4] found outside the non-place.

The Cultural Valorisation of 'Non-place'

One might consider this shift in the public debate regarding children and their spatial engagement, in the context of so much of our landscape experiences - in which our reading of landscape is often decoded for us, not only through navigational devices, but through what I would call 'aesthetic prompts', whose function serves to confirm and legitimises the value system of the dominant ideology.

In relationship to the UK, some might argue that many of our landscape encounters are deeply affected by the pervasive lens of the heritage industry, working concomitantly with numerous literary associations, for example: Brontë Country in West Yorkshire, Hardy Country in Dorset. This process of both explicit and implicit privileging of one place over another is most evident in the designation of the National Park; a landscape construction (in the cultural sense) completed with the obligatory visitor centre, and further articulated through the interactive tourist information screen.

It is here that we witness the visitor as pilgrim to the venerated site, suggesting a degree of complicity in an agreed valorisation of nature and landscape. Furthermore, let us consider what I would term 'the plaque effect', where value is bestowed upon landscape through a form of spatial branding: a designer label for place perhaps? In this context, we may wish to hypothesise (for demonstration purposes only) how the authority of the plaque might transform the reification of the non-place: say for example on an anonymous arboreal embankment along the M1? Would we then perceive that place differently? I suggest that we would.

The 'New Landscape'

It is appropriate at this stage to contextualise the cultural potential of non-place. In an age when the main agenda is focused on global environmental issues, such as climate change, the potential of those indeterminate non-places to make a positive contribution to the broader debate, has perhaps been over shadowed by their seemingly mundane locations, and their relative small scale. Nevertheless, if these fragmented non-places (in which I include motorway embankments and roundabout, etc.) were gathered into one specific area, then I would estimate that the size of that area would rival a UK national park, and furthermore, this non-place 'park' might even display, paradoxically, a greater biodiversity.

My contention here, is that these disparate non-places are emerging as the 'new landscape', a 'new landscape' that requires sensitive stewardship, to retain its essentially idiosyncratic qualities (Figure 8).

This sentiment could be seen to resonate throughout John Vidal's *Guardian* newspaper article, in which he challenges the assumption that late-capitalist non-places are worthless wastelands [5]:

Being hailed as England's rainforest... the former Occidental site on Canvey Island is an oasis in a landscape of oil refineries, new housing, massive roundabouts and drive-through McDonald's. Laid out with concrete roads and street lighting, it has been untouched for 30 years... it has already been found to be home to at least 1,300 species, including 30 on the UK red list...



Figure 8 Business park 2006

What seems to connect these disparate non-places? Is a shared public ‘amnesia’, a perceived absence of cultural definition, compounded, or even exoticised, by ambiguous public access? Iain Sinclair alludes to this process of exoticisation through restrictive access during his recent account of a modern pilgrimage around the London M25 [6]:

Land, which it is forbidden, is also preserved: ... that which is unviewed becomes the ultimate view.

There are parallels to be drawn here between the problematic accesses to certain non-places, and the difficult access to land owned by the Ministry of Defence in the UK, where again, paradoxically, there is evidence of a flourishing wildlife habitat. We are also reminded of the former industrialised zones of East Germany, the no-man’s land associated with the Berlin Wall, and of course the revealed green corridor tracing the former route of the Iron Curtain, where unsurprisingly, nature has benefited from a restricted programme of industrialisation.

In view of the previous claims made for a more positive acknowledgement of non-place, do we then concede that culture is predisposed to privileging certain landscapes for veneration and commemoration? It may be difficult to refute that established natural icons such as forests, mountains, and rivers have embedded various cultures, providing a cultural stability through associated rituals, symbolism, a profound sense of place and belonging. (A landscape symbolism, which I suggest is often resurrected to bolster the notion of national identity for various reasons.) One could argue, that this innate need to belong to a particular landscape still exists amongst our displaced, and constantly evolving, urban communities, as they endeavour to adapt to flexible working conditions, and the more general massification associated with late Fordism and late capitalism; what Marc Augé would define as ‘supermodernity’ [7].

The Anthropology of ‘Non-place’

The term ‘late capitalism’ in relation to non-place is applied throughout this paper to denote the rapid socioeconomic changes associated with globalisation, the increased fluidity of technology, transport, and communications; and furthermore, according to Marc Augé, these effects are embroiled in the recent notions of ‘accelerated history’ and ‘history without meaning’, where the pace of time and information precludes any meaningful reflection upon the recent past [7]:

For it is our need to understand the whole of the present that makes it difficult for us to give meaning to the recent past.

This feeling of disassociation from the recent past through the complex negotiation with the present and compounded by an uncertain future, may find physical form in the non-place. I would suggest here that most non-places provide the interested visitor with 'forensic' evidence of a dispossessed human agency, in which we are invited to deconstruct the encoded casualties of late capitalism: the marginal place frequented by the marginal (Figure 9). This is non-place as contemporary repository for the detritus, so often ascribed as symptomatic of Western consumerism.



Figure 9 Boundary 2006

Although one could argue that capitalism created urban non-places in the nineteenth century through dynamic industrial expansion (and housing provision for its workforce etc.), I would argue that during the 1960s (specifically in the UK) a unique rupture of the urban landscape took place, through the adoption of the new aesthetic of high-rise urbanism, supported by a robust road development strategy. Although this urban renewal included provision for palliative green open spaces, since the early 1980s these same urban zones have continued to change through the construction of the ubiquitous business park, its associated ribbon development, and the more recent appearance of the gated community.

These new structures, which are seen to promote a return to city living, are often ironically contiguous to the remnants of an industrial past that relied upon workers living within walking distance, and the sound of the factory siren. Many of these workers (many of whom are now retired) now find themselves displaced to the new estates located throughout the metropolitan zone.

The topography of late capitalism (in comparison to the nineteenth century in particular) reflects the struggle over space. Who controls it? For what reasons? And to what ends? If we consider nineteenth century capitalism to represent the desire for faster production, then the late capitalist (twenty-first century equivalent) seems more concerned with the economic advantages of out-sourcing, utilising smart technology, and, in certain circumstances, is content to sit on assets, especially land. My point here is that speculative investment in land (and certain properties of course) could be a determining factor in the production and fragmentation of non-places throughout Western cities?

As a result of this complex zoning of the modern city into various active and dormant sectors, we witness the inexorable inscription made by big business (and the state) on our sense of the city as place (with meaning).

'Non-place' as Redemptive Palimpsest

What then are the effects of this rapid transformation of the remembered urban milieu into non-place (Figure 10)? Perhaps a consequence of this late capitalist urban configuration is that the notional link between a sense of place and a sense of collective belonging becomes increasingly untenable (or at least under threat), where a general feeling of alienation persists. Therefore, have we underestimated the power of place to unite communities, to withstand the fracture of collective memory, as Nora lamented so presciently [1]?

Furthermore, Barry Sandwell alludes to this feeling of physical and emotional detachment from place [8]:

...the 'crisis' is not purely intellectual or 'spiritual'. In essence it reaches into the personal, social, and political fabric of modern societies [and] the 'loss of truth'... now inscribed in the central institutions and technological media of modern life.

Can the modern self find some form of consolation from this crisis of identity [9] by finding new urban encounters: new routes in those non-places previously overlooked? Could this potential re-engagement with non-place (however individual and seldom such encounters may be) form some tenuous sense of collective belonging with place, as a gesture of resistance to the ineluctable homogenisation and mediatisation of the local, regional, and national landscape? In this context of inexorable urban change, how can we recover what has already been lost from the urban landscape in the recent past? And what exactly is it that we wish to recover?

One might suggest that the non-place functions as a fractured 'archive' for a form of collapsed collective memory? The non-place acts as a potential palimpsest², commemorating the displacement of the urban community's sense of place, each one unique, depending on the neighbourhood and city.

In the wake of post-1960s late capitalism, one might consider that the non-place presents an opportunity to step off the accelerated future alluded to by Augé, to enable a more reflective engagement with the recent past? Although the clues to this past may not be easily exhumed from the detritus of the ever present, the memory trace (to borrow Freud's term [10]) once found, could trigger some form of memorial association, a redemptive reverie, or, in relation to the cultural legitimacy of non-place itself, could serve to stimulate further discussion? For as the debate broadens in relation to the potential *value* of non-place, the more likely the erosion of the 'non' in non-place may occur, with the potential to be retranscribed as 'place' perhaps (Figure 11)?



Figure 10 Exit 2007

² A manuscript in which old writing has been erased for a new inscription.

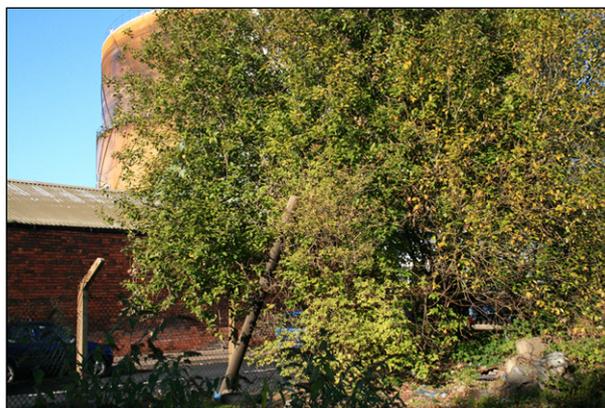


Figure 11 Copse 2007

Although I understand that my claim for the non-place to be perceived as an emerging memorial place could be viewed as hyperbolic or simply absurd (in the context of their largely ignored status), I would like to suggest here that the memories of these non-places (especially those associated with our formative years, referred to earlier) have the potential to contribute to the 'DNA of the self', and in the broader sense to the accretive collective memory of a community.

One could argue that it is common practice for people to make sense of their social identity in reference to their environment, for example, to 'place someone', to 'know one's place'. Interestingly, one person's 'place' (with meaning) could be another person's 'non-place' (without meaning), a selection process as unpredictable and complex as the formation of memory itself. According to Peter Jackson, 'this language of social existence is unmistakably geographic', as he calls for a decoding of landscape imagery, a reading of the environment through 'maps of meaning' [11], which reveal, reproduce and sometimes resist social order.

To continue this navigational metaphor, we might wish to consider non-places as random folds within a much used map, a narrative glue, which, however fragile that adhesion may be, could be seen to make an important contribution to the accretion of collective memory. Antze and Lambek examine the significance of this narrative process within the architecture of memory [12]:

In forging links of continuity between past and present, between who we are and who we think we are, memory operates most frequently by means of the threads of narrative.

And, as Paul Ricoeur also reminds us [13]:

It is through the narrative function that memory is incorporated into the formation of identity: [with] memory as the temporal component of identity, in conjunction with the evaluation of the present and the projection of the future.

It is also worth considering here that the regeneration, or the overly enthusiastic preservation, of these non-place palimpsests could sever these dormant social and economic narratives from future exploration, thereby precluding an alternative direction in negotiating the modern self.

The Digital Representation of 'Non-place'

I would suggest that one of the functions of the contemporary photographer is to document the underbelly (or the blind spot) of late capitalism. Here we witness the investigative photographer as privileged witness [14] to the dismantling and erasure of a particular urban collective memory. It would seem appropriate in this age of rapid digital mediatisation of global culture to choose the medium of digital photography to reveal the complex and multi-layered iconography of the non-place in full colour. The intention here is that the colour images should resonate and form a dialogue with a host of contemporary media, which includes cinema, digital television, broadband internet, advertising billboards.

In an effort to explain my use of full colour photography here, there has been a deliberate attempt to reject the cultural valorisation of the black and white photograph, the perceived obsession with its print quality, and the exclusivity of the limited edition, in favour of the more ubiquitous digital image. Furthermore, the photographs reproduced here present a series of non-places that include visual references that could be seen to allude to an industrial heritage (Figure 12). But importantly, in my view, through their absence of black and white, they are liberated perhaps, from the 'accusations' of sentimentality and nostalgia.

The audience is encouraged to scan the photographs contrapuntally, without the reassuring unification offered by the black and white photograph, as the holistic encounter has been deliberately disturbed by pockets of enhanced saturated hues.



Figure 12 Garden 2006



Figure 13 Passage 2006

'flatness' of the composition devices (Figure 13) allude to the pictorial canon of Western art history.)

The viewer is invited to engage with the an hyper-real re-presentation of the non-place

Through a high level of depth of field sharpness, a limitation of linear perspective and increased saturation and contrast of the RAW images, the contemporaneous nature of these redundant sites is emphasised. Moreover, the deliberate use of high contrast saturated colour intervenes in a comfortable crossing of the image, thereby replicating (to a certain extent of course) the experiential zone of vision. (Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning, that the balanced landscape format

as a fecund palimpsest, where we confront the photographer as a hunter of the indexical³, attempting to track the meaning of a new territory, to document the socioeconomic narrative for an audience already experiencing what I would describe as image fatigue [15].

In the manner of an antiphon [16], to borrow Roland Barthe's description of the photograph as 'alternate chanting', the photographs record a specific example of an emerging non-place within a late-capitalist context: each digital photograph attempts to elicit a dialogic encounter with the complex indexicality of the urban non-place. The use of the term indexicality here describes the ability of the photograph to fix in focus a remarkable 'index' of disparate visual elements in great detail, enabling the viewer to scan the surface at leisure - to form connections and new meanings through a deconstruction of the semiotic surface.

Discussing photography, Lefebvre (perhaps anticipating some of our earlier discussion) declares that the role of photography is to locate 'implicit and unstated oppositions' [17], where we experience 'a political economy of space' [18], in which the processes of centralisation and monopolisation that underwrite capitalist competition, produce direct and indirect spatial effects which transform lives at micro and macro levels [19]. Through the visual exploration of these non-places as a pedestrian photographer, one has to physically experience the inextricable link between the motor car and the late-capitalist urban landscape, in which the non-place could be seen to be the direct progeny of this symbiosis.

The revelatory potential of this peripatetic activity is discussed by Michael de Certeau in his essay 'Walking in the city' [20]:

Pedestrian movement can be seen to open up individual experience to new and different ways of perceiving and designing the world.

In my view, the photographs here document a particular encounter with the perverse celebration of chance juxtaposition, evidence of quixotic intervention and departure: 'prayer



Figure 14 Plastic 2007

flags' of various plastic bags ensnared in hawthorn, images of absence (Figure 14) that may present an elegiac substitute for human presence. The intention is to re-present the abject in epic simplicity, where we are invited to encounter a contemporary simulacrum⁴ in the form of the distorted plastic bag, the rampant winter buddleia, a relocated shopping trolley.

Interestingly, there is evidence amongst certain sections of the contemporary arts of a renewed interest in places that do not conform

to the more conventional template of landscape beauty and spectacularity. What seems to connect these more recent representations is perhaps a common interest in the revelatory potential of place and memory in relation to the search for identity. This search for landscapes

³ Relating to the 'index' from Charles Peirce's trichotomy of signs: icon, index and symbol in 'Division of Signs' in *Collected Papers*, 1932 (1897).

⁴ Used in the Baudrillard sense, of an object symbolic or characteristic of a specific stage in history.

that reveal (what one might term) socio-political truth is epitomised in the UK by the prescient chroniclers of the emerging non-place hinterland, the novelist J G Ballard and the psychogeographer Iain Sinclair.

Whilst in North America several prominent photographers have engaged with the non-place landscape. One of the most memorable of these projects was created during 2000 by the photographer Joel Sternfield, whose seasonal recording of the redundant 14 mile long suspended New York commercial railway the High Line, questions notions of beauty and (more importantly for our debate) function in relation to the legacy of industrial obsolescence.

In the supporting gallery catalogue, Adam Gopnik describes the natural restoration that has taken place within the seven acre Manhattan site [21]:

For the moment, the High Line has gone not to wrack and ruin but to seed: weeds and grasses and even small trees sprout from the track bed. There are irises and lamb's ears and thistle-tufted onion grass...

As a postscript to Sternfield's project, efforts have been made by the Friends of the High Line to preserve this sinuous 'park' from development, to promote it as an elevated 'green' walkway.

Conclusion

To agitate the debate further, I would argue that those organisations that already purchase and act as the guardians of 'areas of outstanding natural beauty' (most notably in the UK the organisations English Nature and the National Trust) might wish to reconsider their criteria when acquiring future sites? The acquisition of a non-place within their landscape portfolio would surely elicit a broader debate as to the existing notions relating to heritage, and to that most difficult of words, beauty? Indeed, how ironic it would be if such valorisation led to an increase in access to the non-place, thereby placing those innate qualities previously discussed at risk.

Through an encounter with non-place, we are presented with an opportunity to consider the urban dislocation ascribed to late capitalism, its subsequent impact upon our sense of place and collective memory?

There is also the possibility that society may come to view the non-place as a potential palimpsest to trigger both personal and collective memory, whilst offering some form of urban pastoral consolation to those previously disempowered urban inhabitants who made way during the post 1960s urban reconfiguration.

As the photographs here suggest, the non-place may be engaged with as an emerging 'new landscape', without apparent design, yet a place that is becoming increasingly valuable in relation to its paradoxical biodiversity through recolonisation (Figure 15).



Figure 15 Wash room 2007



Figure 16 Residence 2007

And finally, perhaps such places have the potential to provide us with a unique aperture through which we might see beyond the increasing homogenisation of the urban landscape towards a more heterogeneous place (Figure 16).

References and Endnotes

1. P Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire* (Realms of Memory), Vol. 2: La Nation (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).
2. *Falling down*, dir. Joel Schumacher (1993).
3. K M Fitzpatrick and M LaGory, *Unhealthy places: The ecology of risk in the urban landscape*, (London: Routledge, 2000) 66.
4. In the UK in particular, one is reminded of the recent media debate (e.g. the *Daily Telegraph*) regarding the issue of children and the proposed benefits of more 'risk-taking' outdoor play, free from over protective parental supervision.
5. J Vidal, 'It doesn't look much, but this bleak corner of Essex is being hailed as England's rainforest', *Guardian* (London: May 2003).
6. I Sinclair, *London orbital: A walk around the M25* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 241.
7. M Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).
8. B Sandywell, *Reflexivity and the crisis of Western reason* (London: Routledge, 1996).
9. I use the term 'identity' here from a specifically contemporary Western perspective (whilst acknowledging that this contested term in its relationship to the sovereign self is open to much debate, especially within the discipline of post-colonialism. My use of 'identity' and to a lesser extent 'self' is couched within the definition suggested by Richard Meyer in *Critical terms for art history*: '...the term was often used to designate a problem – an "identity crisis" or a "search for identity" – stemming from the individual's alienation in the face of an increasingly anonymous society.'
10. S Freud, A Note upon the 'Mystic writing pad' (1925) *General Psychological Theory* (New York: First Touch Stone Edition 1997) 207.
11. P Jackson, *Maps of meaning: An introduction to cultural geography* (London: Routledge, 1995).
12. P Antze and M Lambek, *Tense past: Cultural essays in trauma and memory*, Ed. P Antze and M Lambek (London: Routledge, 1996) 17.
13. P Ricoeur, 'The exercise of memory' in *Memory, history, forgetting*, trans. K Blamey and D Pellauer, (Chicago: University Press, 2004) 81.
14. It is worth noting here the problematic position of the photographer (or any commentator within a critical debate perhaps) as 'privileged witness', and the related issues of power, exclusivity, and access to the resources of communication and audience etc. Such ever-present concerns are beyond the scope of this particular paper.
15. I use the term 'image fatigue' here to describe the problem of disinterest in an audience already subjected to thousands of sophisticated visual messages every day. There is a correlation here with the term 'death of effect'.
16. J M Rabate, *Writing the image after Roland Barthes*, Ed. J-M Rabate (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 35.
17. H Lefebvre, *The Production of space*, trans. D Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 65.
18. H Lefebvre, *The Production of space*, trans. D Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 104.
19. H Lefebvre, *The Production of space*, trans. D Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 75.
20. M Certeau, 'Walking in the city' in *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 40.
21. A Gopnik, *Joel Sternfeld walking the high line*, Exhibition at the Pace/MacGill Gallery (Göttingen: Steidl, 2001) 47.