Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces

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Who Do Cities Belong To?

Plywood Publics: Thin Politics in Carrie Mae Weems's Painting the Town.

Documenting and Staging Alternative Urban Living: Miyamoto Ryūji's Cardboard Houses and its Materiality.

Félix Solaguren-Beascoa del Corral

The intersections between photography and art as modes of social expression and as critical instruments are profoundly suggestive. It is within this intersection that Carrie Mae West's work during the popular demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in Portland is situated, a project that opens up a broad field of inquiry and reflection on the contemporary city.

The city, conceived as a space of life and coexistence, becomes a site of disenchantment when a specific event exposes a much deeper social imbalance. Photography assumes the role of a notarial record of this condition, while a fundamental doubt emerges in the collective consciousness, an ancient, almost timeless question: who do cities belong to?[1]

This question is not new.

1968: Paris, May: Sous les pavés, la plage. Multiple issues converged simultaneously–Vietnam, unrestrained capitalism, institutional authoritarianism–yet the core of that uprising lay in the aspiration to abolish class-based society. Workers and students occupied the streets, transforming urban space into an open manifesto: il est interdit d'interdire![2]

Cities were altered by that effervescence, and with them, so were we. People –peoples– took to the streets to claim what they understood as just; social expression became a critical tool against both unfolding events and established structures.

Graffiti emerged whose scale and significance were unprecedented. A relentless and indiscriminate wave of collective fervour took hold. Alarms were triggered, and the actors, astonished by the magnitude of their actions, found themselves converted into victims of a process that, in retrospect, seemed inevitable: rebellion had taken root.

1980: Bonjour Tristesse[3], the title of Françoise Sagan's 1954 novel, reappears decades later on a corner, high on a building designed by Álvaro Siza in Berlin. The phrase articulates the city's

1 Harvey, David .2012. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution.* Verso Book Editorial. London-New York.

2 Besançon, Julien. 1968. *Les murs ont la parole.* Tschou editeur. Paris, France.

3 Sagan, Françoise .1954. *Bonjour Tristesse*, Editions Julliard, Paris, France.

social despair, a persistent echo of a malaise that transcends time and geography. It was said that the inscription was executed by the architect himself.

For some time now, forms of peaceful rebellion have also manifested in Barcelona: crowds of tourists traverse La Rambla in an incessant flow. The scene repeats itself daily, prompting once again the same persistent question: who do cities belong to?

Cities are –and must remain– a continuous site of social and symbolic claims. From their bustle, an abrasive cry occasionally emerges: Tourists go home! Graffiti proliferates across walls, façades, doors, and both public and private buildings, accompanied by improvised posters and banners hanging from windows and balconies. These marks constitute the voices of those who inhabit the city—a rebellious response that disrupts and reconfigures the urban landscape.

Who, then, do cities truly belong to?

2013: Black Lives Matter. Once again, the urban panorama is anew unsettled; protest re-emerges. The cry –the recurring rebellion– shakes the foundations of collective life.

2020: the city, astonished, bears witness to the scale of events. Graffiti, banners, and peaceful demonstrations are no fully satisfactory. Looting, destruction, and bonfires return. Enough. Cities are fortified. So-called defensive architectures emerge: vast wooden panels shield offices, shops, and storefronts. In their anonymity, they often go unnoticed; it is tacitly understood that they function as barriers against the vandalism associated with protest.

Yet within this act of protection, a new possibility arises. These banal, repetitive surfaces are transformed into large-scale canvases, unexpected supports through which rebellion adopts alternative signs.

The process is clear: new visual expressions appear on the panels, evoking events that citizens refuse to forget. These collective visual laments resonate with a long iconographic tradition of pain and accusation: echoes of Picasso's engravings –Guernica[4], Korea[5]– the iconic image of Goya's The Third of May 1808[6], with its raised hands that arrest the viewer's breath, or Eduardo Chillida's lithographs, where the scream and despair are conveyed with restrained intensity.

Justin Fowler situates his analysis within this context in Painting the Town, his examination of Carrie Mae West's extensive body of work. Developed over many years, this work is sustained

4 Pablo Ruiz Picasso. 1937. *Guernica. R*esponse to the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Museo Nacional Reina Sofía. Madrid, Spain.

5 Pablo Ruiz Picasso. 1951. *Massacre in Korea.* Picasso Museum. Paris, France.

6 Francisco de Goya. 1814. *The Third of May 1808*, Depicting the dramatic execution of Spanish patriots by Napoleonic troops following the uprising of May 2, 1808. Prado Museum. Madrid, Spain.

by ideals and by questions articulated through photographic practice. West listens to and records the voices of citizens expressed through hidden and ephemeral graffiti, frequently erased by rollers of black paint or covered beneath neutral tones applied to plywood panels intended to protect shops and offices. It is Portland in a state of collective outcry.

Thus, parapets erected against violence are transformed into an artistic position in response to social demand.

This is an act of rebellion.

Writing once again exposes shame and demands justice. The roller of black paint that obliterates images evokes both Leonardo's ATreatise on Painting[7] and Malevich: figuration tied to a specific site is abstracted into a dark stain, as if an attempt were being made to deny the articulated claim, to expel the graffiti through erasure.

Yet rebellion does not disappear. Even when concealed, it remains latent. The very brushstrokes intended to erase it draw upon what lies beneath and ultimately determine the final composition of these surfaces, much as ancient cities are constructed upon ruins and successive historical layers.

Carrie Mae West operates as a visual notary. She repeatedly presents the civic clamour of a deliberately veiled insurrection. This is not an isolated phenomenon.

Fowler invites us to attend carefully to these photographs in order to uncover a deeper narrative: a dispositif that amplifies questions citizens should never cease to ask. As with the paintings from Goya's now-lost Quinta del Sordo[8], West's images function analogously, translating Portland's contemporary graffiti into photographic tableaux that preserve the memory of the causes behind those cries.

Cities, ultimately, are composed of layers that endlessly accumulate, relinquishing certain elements to acquire others. They are recycled, transformed, and continually rebuilt upon what they once were.

Once the storm subsides, Portland's panels will be dismantled, the murals removed, and everyday life will reclaim its space, restoring the normality desired by its inhabitants. What, then, will become of these paintings? Will they share the fate of the frescoes from Goya's estate and become museum objects that shape collective memory and sensibility?

7 Leonardo da Vinci. 1956. *A Tratise on Painting*. Princeton University Press.
8 *La Quinta del Sordo* was the home of Francisco de Goya in Madrid between 1819 and 1824.

Perhaps they will; perhaps they will not. The originals –the wooden panels– may end up in a landfill or be consumed in a final, anonymous combustion. Yet the chrysalis will have already transformed into a work of art. The process is inexorable, like time itself.

For this reason, reflection on Mae West's work ultimately revolves around a fundamental value: the notarial value of the gaze, a frontal, contemporary gaze, devoid of veils.

Through the magic of the camera's viewfinder, coarse brushstrokes are transfigured into works of art that expose injustice and imbalance, becoming testimony to a collective suffering that –as Goya and Picasso once demonstrated– remains unresolved. This suffering, underscored by Fowler, permeates these images, which compel us not to forget, once again, who cities truly belong to, even as we contemplate the aesthetic power of West's work.

But the question does not end here. Professor Mengfei Pan introduces us to the work of the Japanese photographer Ryūji Miyamoto in his series Cardboard Houses.

It is a different context, yet the question remains just as valid: who do cities belong to? Do they really belong to their inhabitants?

The city is not a continuous fabric. It has fissures and produces waste. It is precisely within these margins that new realities emerge, realities that may perhaps alleviate the despair of those who are left outside the established urban order. Because, ultimately, the question persists: do cities belong to those who inhabit them, or to those who are able to remain in them?

Within these fissures, in this terrain vague[9], an alternative way of inhabiting appears, marginal and fragile, amid a rapidly transforming landscape. Discarded materials offer the possibility of a poor shelter for those whom the city itself expels through its habitual, cruel inertia. The city is anonymous and, therefore, there are no culprits.

Improvisation governs these ephemeral constructions, built from whatever can be found, in the same way that graffiti appears on the wooden barriers in Portland. Here it is a different kind of wood. There is no aesthetic intention: the goal is survival.

The scream is replaced by the cardboard man, the box-man, who looks outward through the gaps in his protective shell and who, at the same time, seems to disappear in Miyamoto's images. As suggested by these images, the box becomes a symbol of urban isolation and the desire to remain visible[10].

9 The concept of *terrain vague* was used in the 1970's to refer to spaces disconnected from the capitalism and the functional logic of the city.

10 Mori Art Museum, *Cardboard Houses – Tokyo 1996*, by Miyamoto Ryūji, 1996, gelatin silver print, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.mori.art.museum/en/collection/2441/index.html.

All these shelters are alike and, yet, all are different. They share a common purpose, but the final result depends only on what can be found. Aesthetic value is renounced because the objective is another one.

This same logic of displacement and attention toward the marginal is also transferred to the way the photographs are shown to the public.

Miyamoto's work, presented by Mengfei Pan, refers us to a collection of 67 black-and-white photographs, carefully published and framed.

His unconventional display compels the viewer to bow repeatedly—perhaps in homage to the images themselves, or perhaps to those marginalized, fringe figures who, in a quiet gesture of rebellion, remind us, once again, who cities truly belong to.

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