

'You are now waiting', Published in Desired Landscapes issue 04

As I sit at my computer I am also able to gaze out of a window that lies just behind it. The window overlooks a park. Trees, grass and bushes, a rarity for a studio in central London. I am in that park, at least it is where my mind is, simultaneously there but also sitting in front of a glossy screen. I have a conference call in fifteen minutes. I collate my thoughts and arrange the papers on my desk.

"We've let people in the meeting know you're waiting."

I was always fond of waiting rooms, the sterility, placeless voids waiting to be inhabited. Gleaming white floors, spaces for transit. Mark Augé spoke at length about these sterile globalized spaces. He describes a world "where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral."¹ I used to travel constantly for work, movement was part of my life, part of my identity, genetic make-up. I did not belong to a particular city, but a network of connected spaces. I loved the feeling of getting into an airport and, on the contrary to Augé's morose description, revelled in the solitary vast spaces. This waiting room I am currently in I am less enamoured with; a blank grey screen, another void, yet without texture, depth or curiosity.

I see Dan's face appear on the screen, a blue sky and lush trees are swaying in the background. He is wearing a T-shirt and his face looks flushed.

"How are you today? Where are you?"

"Northern California," he replies gleefully. "It's hot today!"

"Show me around," I quickly ask before others join the call.

He lifts his laptop out of the window, the sun is cresting in the sky. I can almost feel the heat through the screen. In that instant the world contracted, space collapsed, I am in California, he in London, yet separated by thousands of miles of land and ocean.

Space and technology have always been symbiotic. Early humans who roamed the plains had just such a relationship with their body and the ground beneath their feet. This must have defined their understanding of space. A day's walk. Perhaps this is something that we have lost, the relationship to space, movement, thinking and being. A holistic world. I was told once that Darwin walked in order to think. Walking without destination, the mind can breathe; and without destination, the unexpected can happen. Our minds and bodies are connected, unified as one. His thoughts flowing aided by physical space as he moved.

¹ M. Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 78.

Recently, I have been daydreaming about galloping across arid landscapes on a great stallion. A primordial connection between humankind and beast. Sustainable travel. I think of old Westerns that transport me to a place of freedom. Simplicity. Slowness. I travelled to Arizona not long ago, it presented itself to me as an old distant friend, known through the moving image. Yet on closer inspection, alien. Our understanding of the world is warped by the image. Implied space, captured. A relationship between imagination and reality forged. Small triggers. Still beautiful.



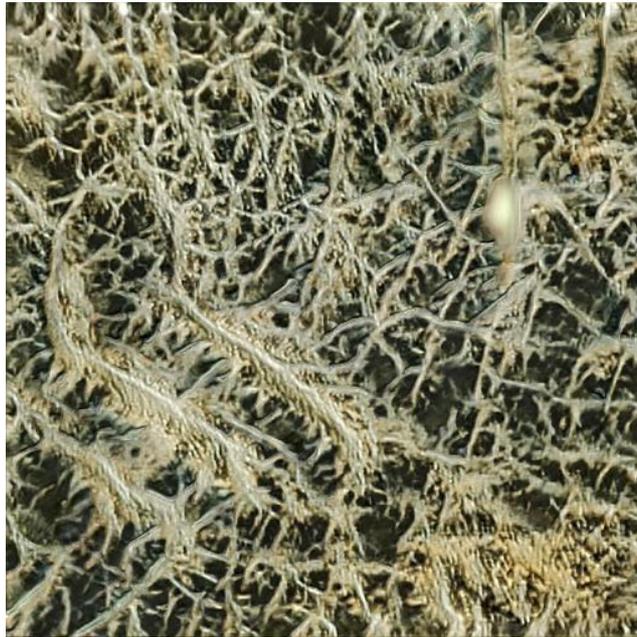
Ben Cullen Williams, *Generated landscape 01*, 2019

The image has a relationship with space and time, sitting as a fragment, a document alongside the evolution of space. The image has the freedom to be a presentation of a fantasy. Susan Sontag explains that after “the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed.”² However, I find the relationship between the photograph and the lived world to be a strange one, a tension exists between the two, interrupting the way that we understand space and time. A captured moment that sits within the world, yet, simultaneously apart. The postcard has a curious relationship to distance, time and space. It is a fragment of a past moment, intended to travel and bring a real-time live event of joy. Upon arrival the distance covered can be physically felt, embedded are markings and grain that it has picked up on route. Space understood. Texture.

Sitting still in my chair, grounded yet globally connected, I think of the images of the solitary individuals on my call. Small boxes containing faces on my flat computer screen. Partial glimpses into other worlds. Fragments of other lives. Real-time postcards, yet with distance compressed, no markings, no grain. Perhaps the only hint of physical space are the words “poor connection.” These two words, more pertinent

² S. Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 10.

than they might first seem. Our connection is poor. No smell, no touch, no atmosphere. An ocular centric domain. Flat image.



Ben Cullen Williams, Generated landscape 02, 2019

The invention of the automobile changed our understanding of space and, with it, our physical and mental geographies. As distances shrank in time, they expanded in length. I remember when I bought my first car, the world opened up. The only thing separating me from wilderness: a stretch of continuous tarmac. I was fully enmeshed into the “non-places of supermodernity – the ones we inhabit when we are driving down the motorway, wandering through the supermarket or sitting in an airport lounge.”³ Britain is a small island, drive for long enough and you will hit the coast. Four hours is considered a long drive. I lived in the USA for a time. A four-hour drive there is a drop in the ocean, a quick hop to the next town. An eight-hour drive is acceptable. Emboldened by the romantic idea of the “road trip” on the “open road.” American freedom, the home of the motorcar. Yet long drives are not enough for our transatlantic cousins. In the true American spirit of maximalism, working between New York and Los Angeles is a common occurrence. Constant “red-eye” flights between the two, walking into a meeting, bleary and dazed having just arrived from the airport. A life in transit. I had a taste of this when I used to travel frequently between London and New York. I saw the two places as the same space. I led two lives that ran alongside each other simultaneously, sometimes forgetting which friends were in which city. The distance between was almost non-existent. The flight was routine. I haven’t been there for sometime now and it has become inexplicably far away, the space between the two cities has grown, the ocean now vast. Perhaps familiarity was a veil that made the world seem smaller than it actually is. And when lifting this veil that our minds create, the “stage scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is. It withdraws at a distance from us,” Camus suggests.⁴ We are able to see again and witness alternate visions of our singular existence.

³ M. Augé, *ibid.*, 96

⁴ A. Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus* (Penguin, 2005), 13.

I must confess I have always felt guilty about the amount of long-haul flights I took. I would offset this in my mind by being an avid recycler, a vegan and being conscious about plastic. But recently I have been stationary. Agonizingly still. Marooned on a small island floating in the North Atlantic Ocean. In the motion picture *Cast Away*, actor Tom Hanks found and personified a volleyball with a graphic red hand print for a face. He would cry out “Wilson!” – the name he had assigned to the ball after its manufacturer; Wilson Sporting Goods. I think of the journey over tempestuous waters that the ball needed to make in order to wash up on those golden sands. Hanks and the ball, two American exports dislocated on foreign soil. Globalization. Shipping. Both products of mass-consumption. Distance to Hank’s character would have appeared vast, inconceivable, an ocean between him and his homeland with no means of travel or communication. Completely isolated. His own awareness of space reduced to the confines of a small desert island in the Pacific. World shrunk.



Ben Cullen Williams, Generated landscape 03, 2019

Due to my constant insistence that I should be roaming the earth, probably still fuelled by outdated imperialistic tendencies, that as a British subject I must explore, I overlooked the island I am in fact marooned on. The concept of the paradox of choice suggests that with too much choice one can become paralyzed, with an inability to choose. In regards to travel, the opposite for me had been true. Stimulated by a heady mix of cheap flights and international work commitments, to me more was more. A luxury that previous generations were not given, flights were expensive and booking was a laborious process over the phone. A luxury that perhaps will again be seen as just that, a luxury. Perhaps, increased attention to our climate and resources, space continues to expand digitally and contract physically.

Google tells me I have arrived, it took me the fastest route. I turn off my phone. My eyes drift over the horizon. A desolate wasteland of pebbles and fragments of rusting boats. Wild and truly beautiful. Just a few hours from my home, but a world away. I try to make out France across the channel. At the far end of

the beach I spot an assemblage of ruined buildings, I set off. I am greeted by the imprecise and unbounded. A *terrain vague*. I can breath. In Solà-Morales Rubió's discussion of the term *terrain vague*, he highlights the "fundamental relationship between the absence of use, of activity and the sense of freedom, of expectancy."⁵ Something severely lacking in the digital. I am connected for the first time in weeks, orientated and located within the lived world away from an illusory existence of imagined space. Christian Norberg-Schulz suggests that "Man dwells when he can orientate himself within and identify himself with an environment, or, in short, when he experiences the environment as meaningful."⁶ The ability to "dwell" is perhaps what is at stake in our developing realities. We need a rapid new reordering of our ontological framework in order for us to locate ourselves within the spatial hybrid of the physical and digital. The development of virtual reality headsets will allow us to have digital avatars that have a bodily presence that occupy space, while the development of AI could generate new landscapes and environments for us to inhabit that are specifically tailored to our own wants and needs. Yet, will we be able to orientate and locate ourselves? Will these environments be meaningful? A new digital reality running alongside the physical, constantly moving but sedentary. When I first saw the Matrix I was stunned, a feat of contemporary cinema underpinned by questions of reality. Perhaps this science fiction isn't as fictional as we might imagine. When sitting at my laptop flying through the world on Google street view, looking at hotel locations in the hope of booking a holiday, it seems as though it could be just around the corner. A future where I slowly lose the use of my body as it is just my mind that travels. Even driverless cars become too physical. Perhaps, it is this imaginary dystopia which has led me to this wasteland of pebbles that I now stand on. A need to experience the unfamiliar. Connecting through disconnection, seeing again.

Augé suggested that "In the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, places and non-places intertwine and tangle together. The possibility of non-place is never absent from any place. Place becomes a refuge to the habitue of non-places."⁷ The new spaces and non-places of technology bring another thread into the yarn; the digital waiting rooms, the virtual reality galleries, video conferences and the frozen world of street view. How will we locate ourselves within these new landscapes once our world starts to thaw and the waiting room walls crumble? How will we embed meaning into the hybrid spaces of the future? What is in fact at stake is our appreciation of living, awareness of place and our ability to "dwell"? I can't imagine finding answers in the near future. So, in the meantime I will look forward to my solitude in the empty void of that airport lounge, a welcome change to that blank grey screen.

"You have left the meeting."

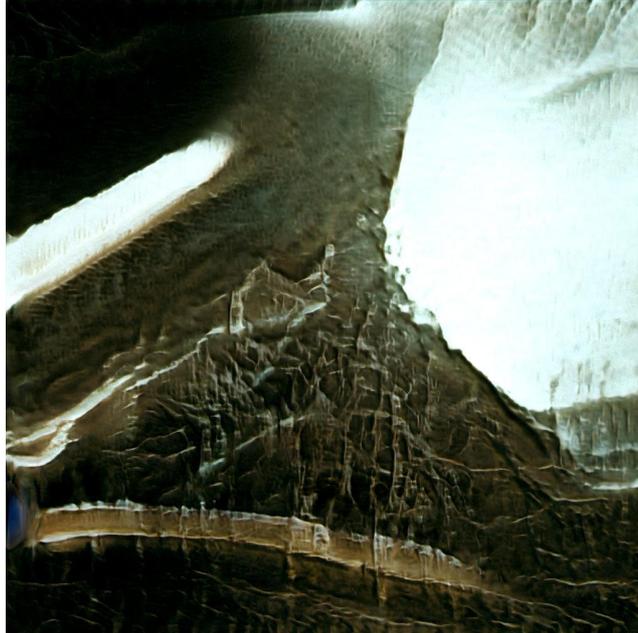
⁵ I. De Solà-Morales Rubió, "Terrain Vague," in C. C. Davidson (ed.), *Anyplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 120.

⁶ C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1980), 5.

⁷ M. Augé, *ibid.*, 107.



Ben Cullen Williams, Generated landscape 04, 2019



Ben Cullen Williams, Generated landscape 05, 2019