

I TRACE THE FOLD

Fluidity and Flux in the Terrain Vague

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Fluidity and Flux in the Terrain Vague

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Textiles in the Department of Textiles of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

by

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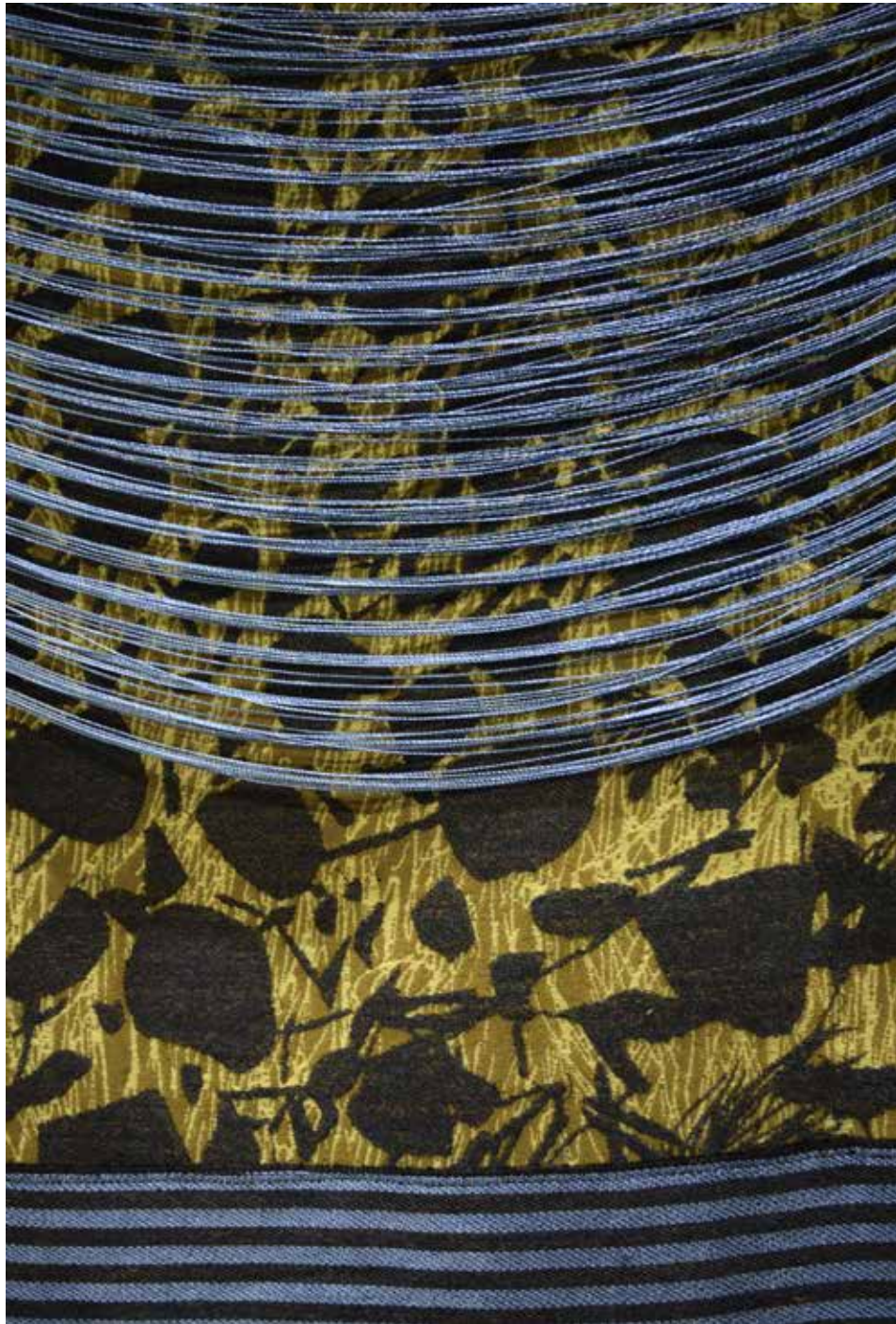
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To Terry and Elizabeth



“In Ersilia, to establish the relationships that sustain the city’s life, the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses, white or black or gray or black-and-white according to whether they mark a relationship of blood, of trade, authority, agency. When the strings become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave: the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain.

From a mountainside, camping with their household goods, Ersilia’s refugees look at the labyrinth of taut strings and poles that rise in the plain. That is the city of Ersilia still, and they are nothing.

They rebuild Ersilia elsewhere. They weave a similar pattern of strings which they would like to be more complex and at the same time more regular than the other. Then they abandon it and take themselves and their houses still farther away.

Thus, when travelling in the territory of Ersilia, you come upon the ruins of the abandoned cities, without the walls which do not last, without the bones of the dead which the wind rolls away: spider-webs of intricate relationships seeking a form.”

- Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

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ABSTRACT

The *terrain vague* is the interstitial fabric of city life. It is the space between and around the inhabited city – abandoned urban space that constantly shifts in form and function. The *terrain vague* is found in empty buildings, former factories, parking lots, along the train tracks, and in unclaimed alleyways. In these still and quiet places, a fragmented narrative emerges from the pattern of urban color, texture, and light.

I record these patterns in the structure of the textile. Warp and weft interweave in layers of experience. The curtain captures both the substance of our collective memory and the immediacy of light in space. It is a fluid threshold which contains these competing forces along a single surface. These curtains are a meditation on fluidity and flux within the *terrain vague*. They posit a flexible and democratic space.

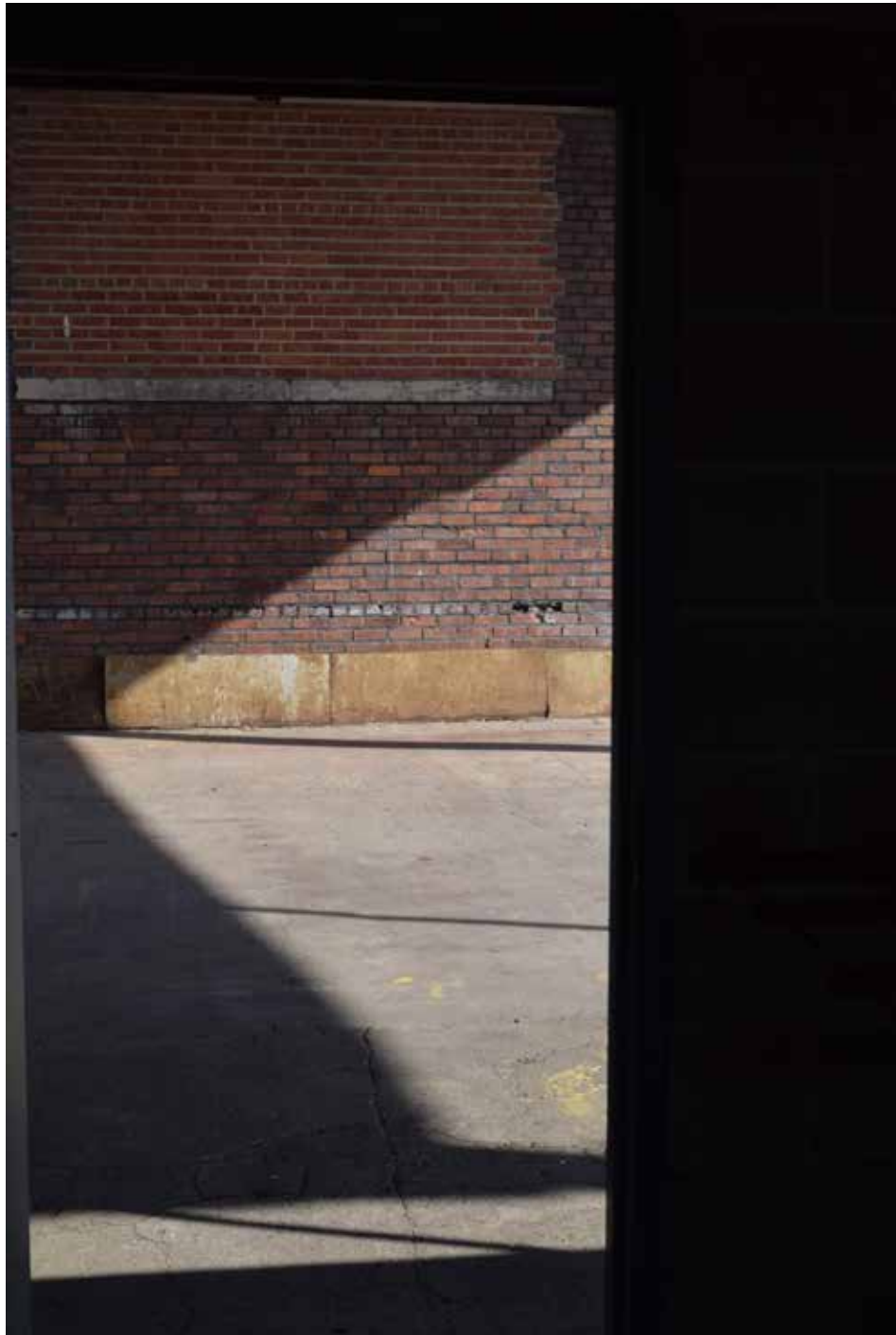


INTRODUCTION

I grew up in Durham, NC, a town built around the American tobacco industry. I can still remember the smell that enveloped downtown on the days when they processed the tobacco. The old brick warehouses were built at the turn of the last century, their facades decorated with functional geometries. The old bricks are small, thin and oblong. In the southern light, they glow a bright rose. The walls are still painted with old advertisements; the price of a hot dog in 1935 was 5 cents. The sun, when it reflects off the old windows, showers the street with a grid of bright light. Puddles of rainwater collect on uneven concrete, reflecting the empty architecture above and a slice of bright blue sky.

Abandoned, urban spaces are defined by solitude and the immediacy of perception. In the quiet, the light is brighter, the patterns are clearer, and the reflections are more revealing. It is a different kind of seeing when I am alone there.

These days, when I'm feeling contemplative, I drive to Central Falls. The town sits just north of Pawtucket, a single square mile of densely populated three-story clapboard houses and large expanses of empty warehouses and forgotten land. I keep returning to the town in search of small moments of pattern and light, which connect me both here and there. I find resonances between the abandoned spaces in Central Falls and those I've explored before. They exist in a web, simultaneously hung with memory and marked by an immediate present.



My thesis takes the moment of convergence between past and present as its point of departure. Through layers of pattern, surface, light, and space, my textile work reenacts the bodily experience of the terrain vague. It searches for the relationship between substantive surface and immaterial light. This written work parallels my material explorations; it catalogues my wanderings through the terrain vague in multiple forms. The fragmented narrative which emerges from my research is a reminder that our experience of place is shaped by many forms of knowing and many kinds of seeing. My work asks us to consider the terrain vague anew and to identify the potential in the flexible space it offers the city.

I TRACE THE FOLD



IT IS WRITTEN

I imagine that the city's history lies just below the surface in organized, stratified layers waiting to be excavated. It is written amongst the dusty detritus and treasure, deflated toys, ticket stubs, crystal doorknobs, antiquated stereos, broken tiles, old postcards, cardboard boxes, flat tires, antique gilded lettering, stolen grocery carts, cat bowls, ancient bricks, and McDonald's wrappers. Under chipping paint, below the sidewalk, and behind corrugated metal, the pages extend just beyond our line of sight.



IN THIS PLACE THAT IS NOT PLACE

On my first visit to Central Falls, I stop at an overlook along the river. There is space for two cars to pull off the road on the way from the highway to the city, though the view is altogether unremarkable. The river is slow here, the reflections somehow dulled in the shade of the trees. Across the street, a store called Animal Planet advertises its fish for sale and some kind of tax business looks closed. In the distance, mill buildings rise in large, substantial blocks against the grey, winter light.

The overlook makes use of a small triangular plot of land sandwiched between the road and the river. The park is lined with informational plaques which proclaim “Chocolateville!” in intricate lettering. It was here, in 1777, that Charles Keene constructed a dam along the Blackstone river. Central Fall’s first big industry was chocolate, though it boasted a trip hammer and blacksmith shop and a small steel mill as well. Wheat’s Chocolate Mill developed the infrastructure - including water power and engineering expertise - to support later industrial expansion. I learn that the mill was sold in 1784 to a leather manufacturer, and, in 1807, the building was damaged in a flood. By 1834, the mill building had been completely demolished, but this was no great loss for the community because, in the intervening years, Central Falls had rapidly grown into a successful industrial center.¹

¹ http://www.chocolatemilloverlook.com/chocolate_manufacturing_central_falls_photos.htm

I am already aware that Rhode Island gave birth to the American Textile Industry. Slater Mill, built in 1793 a few miles to the south, was the first textile mill to manufacture cotton yarn in the United States.² In an elaborate act of industrial espionage, Samuel Slater, the mill's founder, stole blueprints for the Arkwright system from English manufacturers. This method of carding, drawing and spinning cotton fiber produced a yarn that could withstand industrial production. No longer dependent on English mills to process their cotton, this technological development cemented the economic power of the American cotton industry and encouraged the growth of slavery in the southern states.³ The two systems were bound up in a network of supply and demand as America's economy became increasingly industrialized.

Later, I will discover the names of the early mills: Thurber, Horton & Wood, Stafford Manufacturing Company and Pawtucket Hair-Cloth Company. Between 1830 and 1880, industry continued to expand with the establishment of the United States Flax Manufacturing Company, the Paper-Box Manufactory, the Central Falls Woolen Mill, and the American Curled-Hair Company. In need of workers for their mills, owners developed a labor system⁴ which brought entire families to work in the factory, providing them not only employment, but also room and board, church services, and occasionally education.

2 <http://www.slatermill.org/>

3 Rivoli, 9-24.

4 This labor model was originally referred to as the Rhode Island System and later renamed the Waltham-Lowell system.

5 <http://www.centralfallsri.us/history>



The work and hours were grueling. The housing was crowded and dirty. The mills often employed immigrant and child labor, exploiting the most vulnerable within 19th century society. The town became so packed with workers that Central Falls was known as the most densely populated city in America.⁵

The plaques describe the place yet they are not the place. I climb down the bank of the river to stare at the old pilings, traces of an ancient infrastructure that has been replaced by the solid concrete bridge before me. Dark water flows around the old stone, their whispered exchange unintelligible to me. The city does not give up its history so easily.



OF EXTRANEOUS INDUSTRIAL MATERIAL

A single car is parked in the shadows. Across the street stands a modest apartment complex. Children play in the yard as their parents unload groceries from the car. They are too busy to notice my curious wanderings in the abandoned lot across the street, tucked between vacated old warehouses.

Against one wall, I find a strange oasis of extraneous industrial material. The rubble has been carefully contained between three crumbling walls; the lot is otherwise quite clean. The concrete blocks of the enclosure interlock with the original brick structure. Six metal poles stand in a row; whatever purpose they once served having been erased when the lot was repurposed and the building remade. The sage green and indigo paint on the surface of the poles has chipped and rusted away to reveal the deep mahogany of old steel. A cobalt rubber ball rests incongruously at the base of a pole.



Inside the oasis, rubble disintegrates into dirt. Leaves, small stones, moss and concrete powder melt together into an indistinguishable decay out of which new growth emerges. A tendril of an invasive weed crawls up a metal cable which hangs down from a defunct outlet on the back wall of the warehouse. The wall is patched with layers of brick, plywood, and paint. A window is boarded with old pine slats. Beyond the wood I see layered surfaces: a fine metal grate, shattered panes of glass and, blocking my view of the interior, a solid plywood board. The industrial strata wink at a hidden past but offer a beautiful, urban pattern as an apology for their reticence.

I discover a soccer ball on display atop a pillar of concrete blocks. It rests there in the shadow of the building, shining despite its torn and shredded surface. When was it lost to the oasis? Why did its owner not retrieve it, as I do now, a memento of my urban exploration?



UNINHABITED, UNSAFE, UNPRODUCTIVE

As I began my thesis work, I was often at a loss to describe the spaces I was exploring. They were not ruins in the traditional sense. They were neither fully derelict nor economically productive. The spaces were mostly industrial but had often been reclaimed, at least partially, by urban vegetation. I called them ‘abandoned urban spaces’ but they never felt empty to me. They were inhabited both by the strong, material presence of history and an equally palpable politics of the present. I was drawn to their dual nature.

I found clarity in the work of architect and historian Ignasi de Solà-Morales. In a 1995 article published in ANY magazine, he coined the phrase *terrain vague* to refer to interstitial spaces within the city. Solà-Morales is careful to deconstruct the complexity of the term. *Terrain* refers to land or space within the city. *Vague* encompasses three distinct associations including wave (as in oscillation or fluctuation), vacant (as in empty or unoccupied), and vague (as in indeterminate, blurred or uncertain.)⁶ The layering of these etymological roots mirrors the complex layering of experience within these spaces. The definition, though specific, can give meaning to a large number of sites within the city: empty lots, abandoned buildings, former industrial sites, the banks of the highway, the space between two fences, a road median, etc. They exist between, around, and beside the inhabited city.

6 Solà-Morales, 26

These various *terrains vagues* all share several distinct qualities. First, the *terrain vague* is land that has fallen into disuse but did not begin that way. In their layered surfaces, the weathered patinas, and discarded debris, the *terrain vague* contains traces of its history. Under close examination, the space may reveal itself or, alternatively, it may merely reveal our own efforts to resurrect it. In his anthology on the subject, Patrick Barron writes, “As counter-spaces⁷, *terrains vagues* are also containers of a fragmented shared history, illuminating the imperfect process of memory that constantly attempts to recall and reconstruct the past.”⁸ As such, we may read the *terrain vague* as a site to contemplate and construct our collective memory.

Secondly, the *terrain vague*, continually repurposed and renewed, exists in a state of flux. These sites pass in and out of use, between the built world and nature, in a cycle of transformation. The unused tracts and vacant buildings of Central Falls, for example, mark both the end of industry and the potential for innovative reuse or environmental rehabilitation. Barron takes this further, stating: “Many *terrains vagues* contain problematic series of eviction and erasure that, although difficult to trace, are critical to understanding how terrain vague is both a condition and a process.”⁹ Characterized by fluidity and flux, the



7 Foucault uses the term counter-spaces in *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. In this work, he discusses spaces which “are capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.” Counter-spaces or heterotopias allow multiple (and sometimes contradictory) experiences to exist simultaneously, subverting standard dichotomies and provoking new exchanges. The terrain vague would certainly be considered a counter-space.

8 Barron, 1.

9 Barron, 2.



terrain vague collapses past, present and future within a single space. To experience these sites is to experience temporal slippage. Within the context of this heightened temporality, the *terrain vague* invites us to envision future iterations of the site and the city.

Finally, the *terrain vague* provides space for otherness within the city structure. Resistant to commodification, it operates outside the city's functioning economy as a site of radical excess.¹⁰ The *terrain vague* serves no economic function and

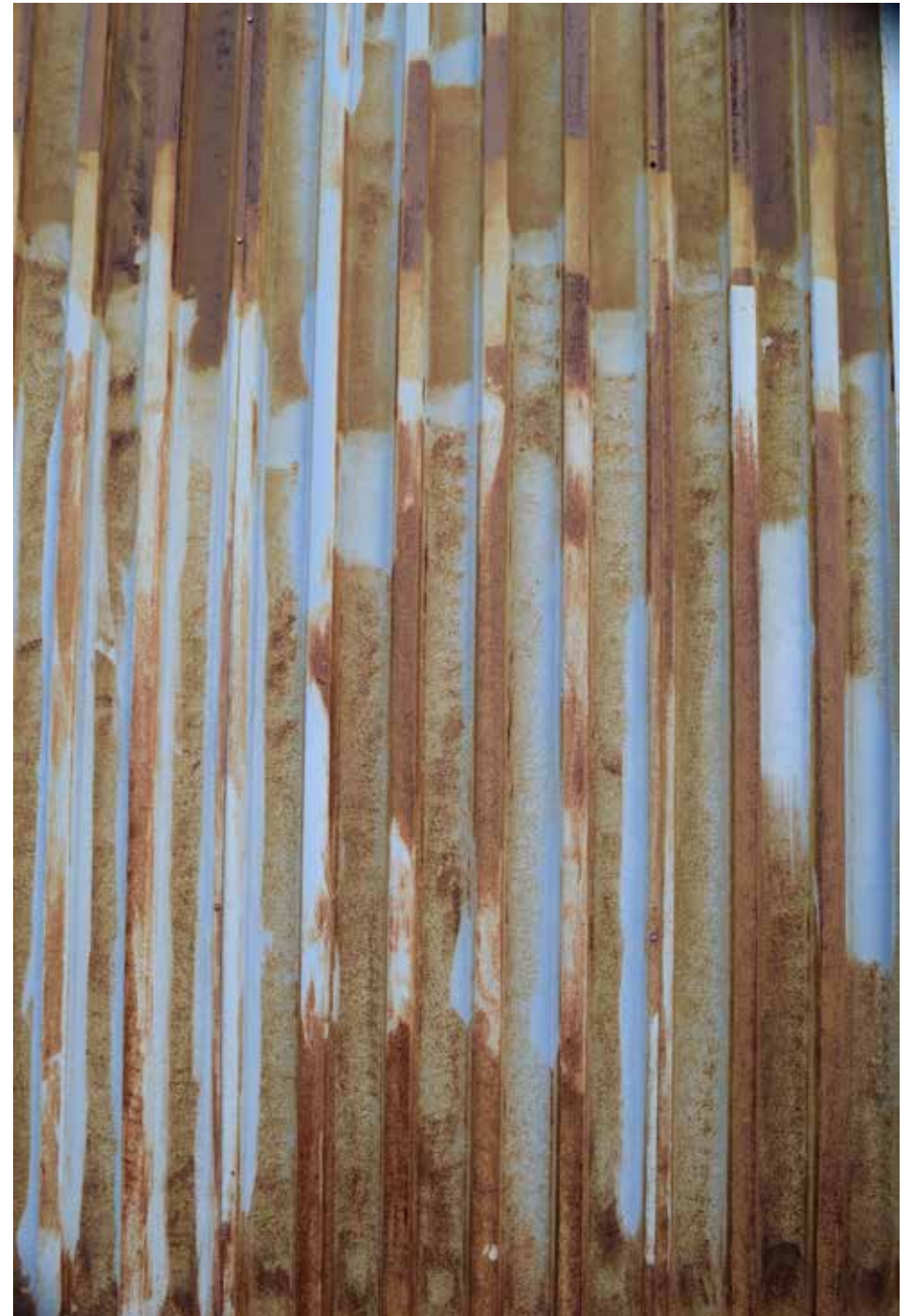
it is not supported by the city's infrastructure. Solà-Morales explains the role of the *terrain vague* in this way: "Unincorporated margins, interior islands void of activity, oversights, these areas are simply un-inhabited, un-safe, un-productive. In short, they are foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much a critique as a possible alternative."¹¹ It is precisely the exteriority of the *terrain vague*, excluded from both the city and from nature, which enables it to function as a space of otherness. It satisfies needs that are not met by the city structure. The *terrain vague* is unstructured space where we walk, children play, the homeless take shelter, and artists of all sorts stage their work. The *terrain vague* makes room for alternative narratives, experiences, and production in the urban environment.

In my thesis research, I explore the *terrain vague* of Central Falls. I returned to the city regularly, mapping the locations of the terrains vagues. I studied the richness of surface and the particularities of form within these spaces. Through my work, I have come to believe that the the specific materiality of the *terrain vague* carries traces of the past and hints at our future. Recorded histories, city plans, and personal narratives may reveal details of place but they cannot contain the whole. I seek to identify the remainder in the material presence of my textiles that I might transmit what our senses know but words can not capture.

10 Spivak, 210.

11 Solà-Morales, 26.

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FRAYING AT THE EDGES

I stand in front of an old factory that has been still and silent for many years. I walk down a sidewalk just outside the fence. Occasionally, a car passes but mostly I am alone with the complex structure. It is a cacophony of geometries. Buildings, rooms, and passageways are stacked on top of each other, bound together only by proximity. Hard rectangular boxes are interrupted by railings, stairs and windows. Angled roofs outline triangles in unexpected places. Perspective and scale combine with the structure to create shapes within shapes and patterns out of functionality.

Yellow traffic lines bisect the road ahead and behind me. Ladders and pipes move vertically, pulling my gaze upwards. Far above my head, a metal bridge connects two buildings on opposite sides of the street. I am now halfway down the block, surrounded on all sides by the complex. Haphazard repairs create a collage of surfaces: brick, stone, metal and rust. Scratches across a wooden beam mirror stripes along a distant wall. Bolts decorate the folds of corrugated metal with their octagonal shape. Industrial yellow frays at the edges. White paint becomes more or less defined by the brick behind it before melting into silky flatness. New colors emerge with time.

A crescent floats in the grey sky ahead of a round black window. If I moved a few feet to my right, one would hug the other. But I can go no further today. Even if I found an opening in the fence, the old entrances have all been filled with concrete blocks.



DOUBLE EXPOSURE

Ruins have often functioned in the Western art tradition as metaphors for the frailty of civilization and the individual. While the ruin often maintains these associations, it is by nature more complex. The ruin's open spaces invite the viewer to complete its image with their own imaginings of past, present and future. Andreas Huyssen, a professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia whose work explores collective memory and urban culture, has written extensively on the ruin's contemporary associations. He argues that the ruin offers authenticity in a contemporary age marked by mass production and reproduction: "Romantic ruins seem to guarantee origins. They promise authenticity, immediacy and authority. However, there is a paradox. In the case of ruins, what is allegedly present and transparent whenever authenticity is claimed is present only as an absence. It is the imagined present of a past that can now be grasped only in its decay. Any ruin posits the problem of a double exposure to the past and the present."¹² Huyssen's concept of double exposure defines the ruin in relationship to time. Within this construct, the ruin flattens history within one's experience of the present moment. The *terrain vague*, a type of ruin which emerges specifically out of post-industrial urban space, is distinctive because it retains an active presence within the city while preserving the double exposure that defines the ruin.

12 Huyssen, 53.



It would be difficult to write about these spaces without citing the influence of Robert Smithson. *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, a short piece of narrative non-fiction published in ArtForum in 1967, provides an exhaustive description of a city in the process of construction. Smithson's writing translates the phenomenological experience of place onto the page. The piece is structured around the act of looking, with his camera acting as translator. He writes, "The sun became a monstrous light bulb that projected a detached series of 'stills' through my Instamatic into my eye."¹³ In this passage, the camera is an instrument of fragmentation, disrupting not just the continuity of Smithson's view but also his experience of time. The photograph functions as a future marker of his present experience. It collapses past, present and future within a single image. The piece addresses the theme of double exposure more explicitly as Smithson explores Passaic's construction sites: "The zero panorama seemed to contain *ruins in reverse*, that is - all the new construction that would eventually be built."¹⁴ The evolving contour of Smithson's ruins traces the past and future in its present form. He writes, "I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past."¹⁵ In these moments of double exposure, time collapses on itself.

13 Smithson, 47.

14 Smithson, 49.

15 Smithson, 50.

16 De Solà-Morales, 28.



The fluidity of the textile is uniquely able to address the temporal slippage that we experience in the *terrain vague*. The textile simultaneously marks past, present, and future iterations as it shifts through time and space. Time is flattened across the surface of the textile to remind us that fluidity and flux are a necessary part of the urban experience. Ignasi Solà-Morales believes that we are drawn to the material, temporal, and phenomenological complexity of the *terrain vague* because in it, we recognize our contemporary condition. He writes: "The enthusiasm for these vacant spaces - expectant, imprecise, fluctuating - transposed to the urban key, reflects our strangeness in front of the world, in front of our city, before ourselves."¹⁶



1.2 SQUARE MILES

I first visit Central Falls to have lunch with an old friend. Rob and I went to highschool together and I've known his wife, Claire, since we were twelve. Now, he works as Parks Director for Central Falls. The city will remind me of our hometown, he tells me. He suggests that we meet for tacos at El Gallo Oro.

I already see the collapse of industry as I park my car outside the restaurant. Across the street stands a large complex - an old light bulb factory I later learn - now shuttered, silent, and dark. Many of the city's old manufacturing spaces, abandoned in the wake of deindustrialization, now stand empty and underused. Remarkably, these spaces are surrounded by a densely populated urban landscape with over 19,000 people living in a city area of only 1.2 square miles. Rob suspects that with the number of undocumented residents the population is actually closer to 25,000 people.¹⁷

Rob lists off statistics easily the way one does when facts become lived experience. 26% of families live below the poverty line and 96% of students in the public schools receive free and reduced lunch. The median income of the city is only \$22,628 per household of 2.75 people. In 2010, the city declared Chapter 9 bankruptcy, due in part to criminal mismanagement.¹⁸ Though the city has since signed a debt-adjustment

¹⁷ For more information, see the full transcript of our later interview in the appendix.

¹⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/07/us/central-falls-ri-to-emerge-from-bankruptcy.html>



plan, the community remains underserved by a local government struggling with limited tax revenues and a cash-strapped state government. Despite these challenges, Central Falls is proud of its diversity, boasting residents from over 100 countries. It is currently the only majority minority city within the state of Rhode Island.

Later, I walk through the city alone. The activity along Broad Street echoes off the walls of abandoned buildings. Stores, restaurants, and gas stations sit alongside industrial plants and crumbling midcentury architecture. The experience of the place - its mere 1.2 miles - is a potent mix of past and present, presence and erasure, inhabited and abandoned space.



I RECORD TRAPEZOIDS

The sign is the only moment of legibility within the large industrial site. A small building stands at the entrance of the gate, neat, tidy, and renovated. It is an old building yet well cared for. Behind it, solid blocks of warehouses cluster together haphazardly around a parking lot. The bright afternoon paints sharp shadows along the facade, abstracting space into a canvas of temporal geometries, dependent upon the sun, the weather, and the tilt of the earth. I record trapezoids beneath the roof, a right triangle in one corner, and a strange concave polyhedron below a bright, flat sky. If I were to come back tomorrow would the shadows be the same?

I don't return the next day. Two months later, I drive past at dusk. The shadows have disappeared from the façade of the building but a yellow light illuminates the interior of the warehouse. I can see inside now; large industrial machines sit in rows. From where I stand, I cannot make out whether the machines are running. No sound reaches me, no movement, only a faint glow as light is diffused across the steel surface of the equipment. A man passes in front of the light, working slowly and methodically amongst the machines. His movements reflect the confidence of many years of work. I raise my camera to capture the scene but the resulting image is dark and blurry. It captures only the stark lines of the fluorescent bulbs and a round reflection off the man's bald head.





INCIDENTAL LIGHT SOURCES

Urban light is seldom experienced across large expanses, constantly reflected, deflected, absorbed, refracted, and diffused by the built landscape. Robert Irwin noticed this effect when he first exhibited his work in New York; the urban environment there created what he called “cluttered light” quite different from the clarity of light and landscape in California. Not only did the light affect the form of his work, it impacted the way it was received. As much as they were seduced by the uncanny calm of the room, some viewers of *Scrim Veil – Black Rectangle – Natural Light* nevertheless found the space disorienting. The light stretched uninterrupted across the length of the room in a manner totally foreign to New York. Irwin’s story demonstrates the extent to which light communicates the specificity of place. Whether in New York, Los Angeles, or Central Falls, the pattern of urban light is formed by the shape and identity of the city.

In Central Falls, the cool northern light is fractured by buildings, infrastructure, power lines, and trees. I collect these pieces as I move through the city. Light bounces from one material to another creating a canvas of illuminations across the city’s surfaces. Through fractured form and color, I find a language of light and shadow specific to the *terrain vague*. This



light creates zones of legibility within a space otherwise defined by shadow, invisibility, and meaninglessness. Shadows demarcate no man zones, places of ambiguous security, and cultural neglect. If dark spaces mark disenfranchisement in the city, light symbolizes inclusion.

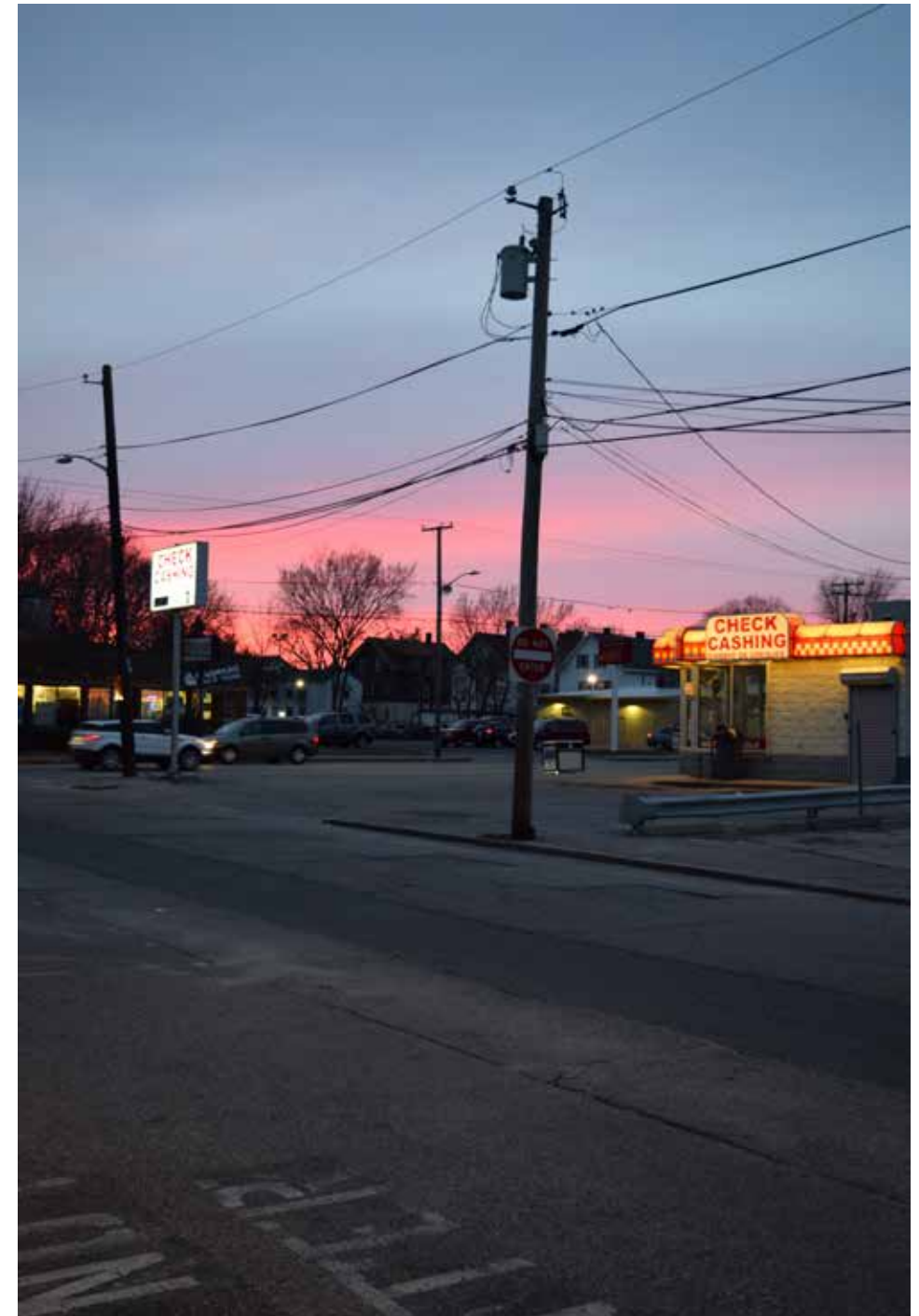
Synthetic light sources further complicate the experience of light in the city. Street lights illuminate roads and sidewalks. Floodlights highlight the facades of statuesque buildings. Fluorescent signs advertise restaurants and stores within the commercial center. These lights are a central element of city infrastructure designed to shape our view of the city and our movement through the urban environment. But there are other sources of synthetic light – the headlights of passing vehicles, lit windows, even Christmas displays – which are unplanned. These incidental light sources mark inhabited space and trace human activity

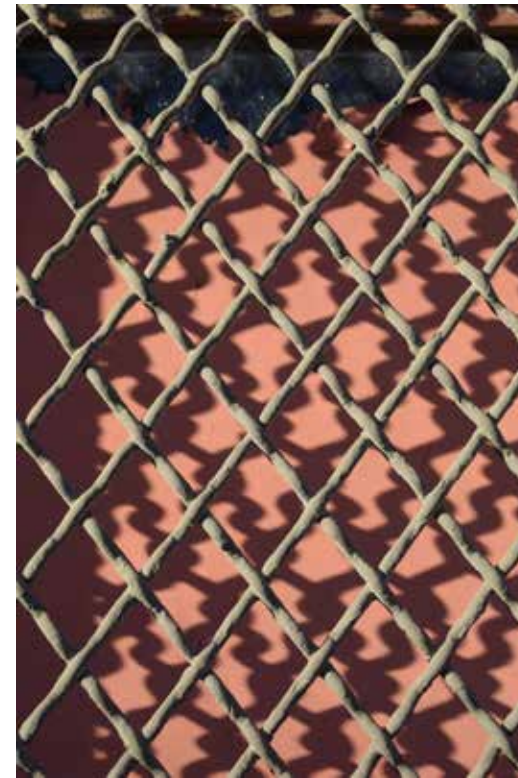
in the city. In the preface of their anthology *City of Light: Two Centuries of Urban Illumination*, the editors conclude that “Lighting, however much it is rooted in technology and infrastructure, is deeply social.”¹⁹ Light demarcates the boundaries of society. The *terrain vague*, by contrast, is often situated outside the city’s lighting infrastructure. Its darkness is both caused by and cause for its exclusion from the inhabited city.

These boundaries shift with movement and through time, destabilizing our experience of the *terrain vague*. Robert Smithson describes this instability in his *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*: “That monumental parking lot divided the city in half, turning it into a mirror and a reflection - but the mirror kept changing places with the reflection. One never knew what side of the mirror one was on. There was nothing interesting or even strange about that flat monument, yet it echoed a kind of cliché idea of infinity; perhaps the ‘secrets of the universe’ are just as pedestrian not to say dreary.”²⁰ As Smithson demonstrates, meaning within the city shifts with the light, the season and with human activity. Meaning is as mutable as the space itself, making both fluidity and fragmentation central to the experience of the *terrain vague*.

19 Isenstadt, Petty, and Neumann, 7.

20 Smithson, 50.





SYSTEMS ARE BENT

Morning sunshine from the window makes oblique shadows across my desk. Hard edges frame a dynamic center that fades as it moves towards me. No longer bound to the material, the line becomes hazy. Darks and lights travel across the desk's surface. What was solid and grey becomes shiny, reflective, blinding. Rays of light converge at an hourglass' center. A star shines at its furthest edge. New shapes dance towards me with probing accuracy in time with my movements. Lines which had denoted measurements are refracted so that their new form no longer reflects their old regularity. Systems are bent and twisted to measure material truth rather than fact. Color hides in the shadows hinting at secrets beyond our line of sight.

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A WARM LIGHT IS OFFSET

What does it mean to take notice of the shape of light in the city? I have turned to the work and writing of Robert Irwin for guidance, for he, as much as any other contemporary artist, has explored the connection between light, time, and perception. After he started working with light in the 1970's, Irwin's installations grew into meditations on the nature of the art experience and the primacy of perception. In 1977, the Whitney Museum of American Art staged a retrospective of his work and Irwin took the opportunity to install a site-specific piece within one room of the exhibition space. *Scrim Veil – Black Rectangle – Natural Light* filled a long, rectangular room on the fourth floor of the museum. The piece revolved around a few simple gestures which heightened the experience of the space. The artist first emptied the room so that the floor, walls, and ceiling melted into large continuous surfaces. A piece of scrim hung from the ceiling to eye level, cutting the room in two from the window on its back wall all the way to its front entrance. The scrim caught the light that streamed through the window during the day, enhancing the quiet stillness of the room, and amplifying its material presence. Irwin further exaggerated this effect by hanging fluorescent lights of alternating cool and warm tones out of the viewer's line of sight. He activated the space with a thick black line which ran along the bottom of the scrim around the circumference of the room. This installation is a commonly cited example of Irwin's work because through minimal moves, he made light tangible.²¹ *Scrim Veil – Black Rectangle – Natural Light* is not about the room but the phenomenological experience of light within it. Irwin creates a space so empty that the only thing left to observe is light itself.

Irwin hoped that by building a space of pure perception within the museum, the viewer would become more attuned to light and space in the wider world as well. The exhibition catalogue for the show features a series of aerial photographs of New York City. Overlaid onto the regular grid of Manhattan's streets and avenues are complex compositions of light and shadow. Buildings paint self-portraits across Fifth Avenue. Bright concrete structures cut dramatically into dark blocks of velvet shadow. The photographs within the catalogue intentionally blur the line between the experience of the city and the work of art, urging the viewer to engage perceptually with the world around them.

Irwin's work makes us aware of the complex process by which we make sense of what we see. He writes: "The triangulation of our consciousness - the particular circumstances within which and for which I find myself at every moment - is the dynamic of our being phenomenally in the world as an active participant in its becoming real for us. This is the nexus of modern thought. That we make and remake (choose) our own reality (at least in part) may well be the only truly creative action."²² Irwin's work locates us in the present moment of being with the world, asking us to revel in our ability to construct a meaningful – and beautiful – reality. But he accomplishes this by by creating a homogenous space - one which negates the very surface that gives light its shape.

21 Weschler.

22 Irwin, 21.



My own work looks for the richness that emerges when light shapes surface and surface shapes light. Light catches in the crack between two bricks. Sunlight flashes across windows, before it is dulled by layers of dust. Small pieces of glass shine in the dirt. A warm light is offset by diagonal blue shadows as it passes through a metal railing. In the *terrain vague*, light and surface transform one another until it is no longer possible to separate one from the other.

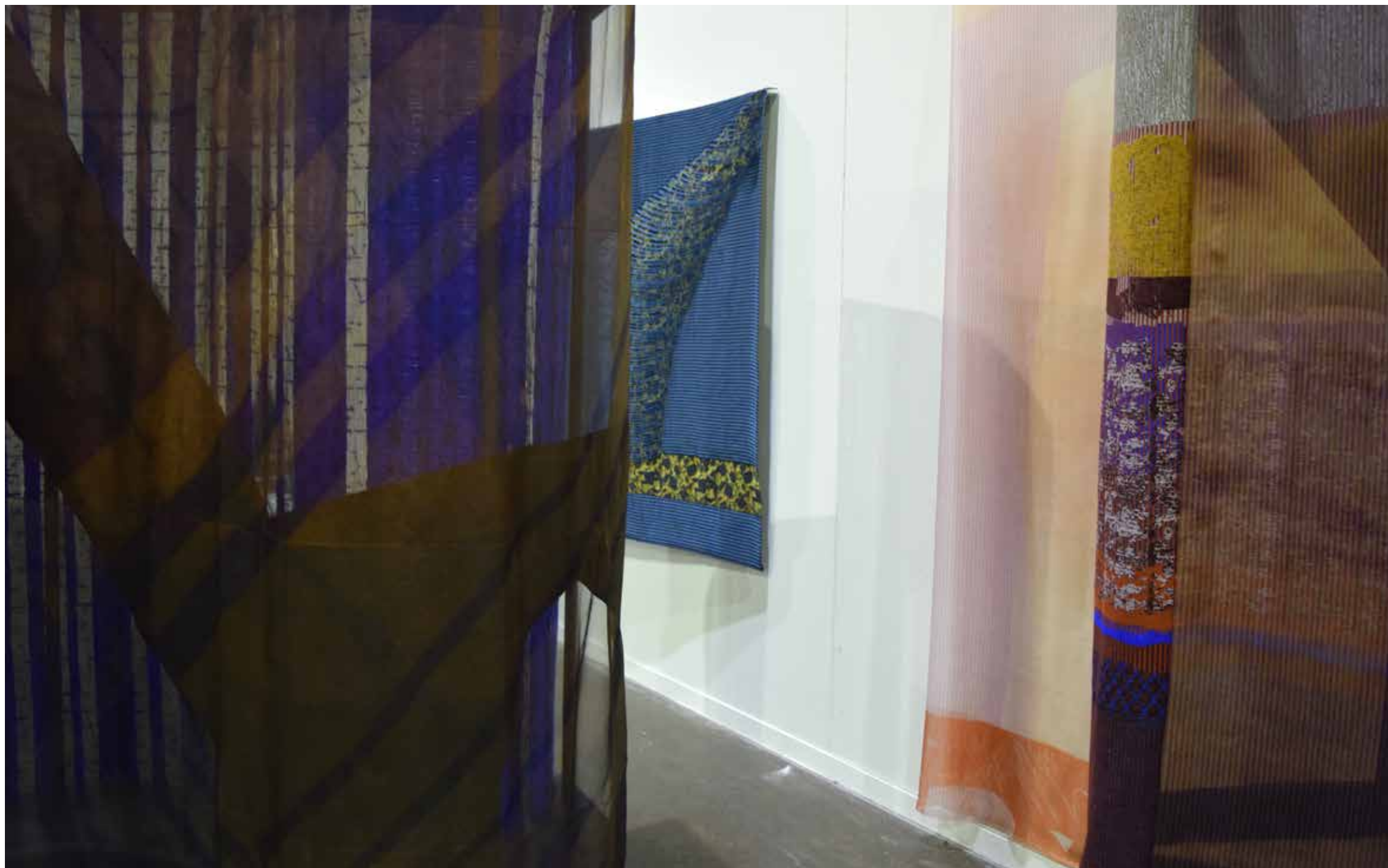






THE SPACE CUT BY LIGHT

The crowd is dense with movement. I experience flashes of recognition as we move in, out and through the light. Faces come into focus before receding again. Is that girl on roller skates? Have I seen him on the subway before? The light is so inconstant that I am never quite sure of what I am seeing. The stairwell behind me casts fluorescent light into the space as a sharp reminder of the world outside. The stage lights at the far end of the building beckon us forward into the crowd. There is glitter falling now and the light bounces from one piece to another in rhythm with the performance. A cell phone glows coolly next to the hot orange burning at the end of someone's cigarette. We dance into the space cut by light.





A MOMENT OF CONTACT

The curtain opens. The curtain closes. It exists simultaneously as object and as space. In its fluidity, I discover parallels between the curtain and the *terrain vague*. The curtain is a vehicle for the mutability of the *terrain vague* just as the *terrain vague* provides context for the curtain. One reflects and refracts the experience of the other.

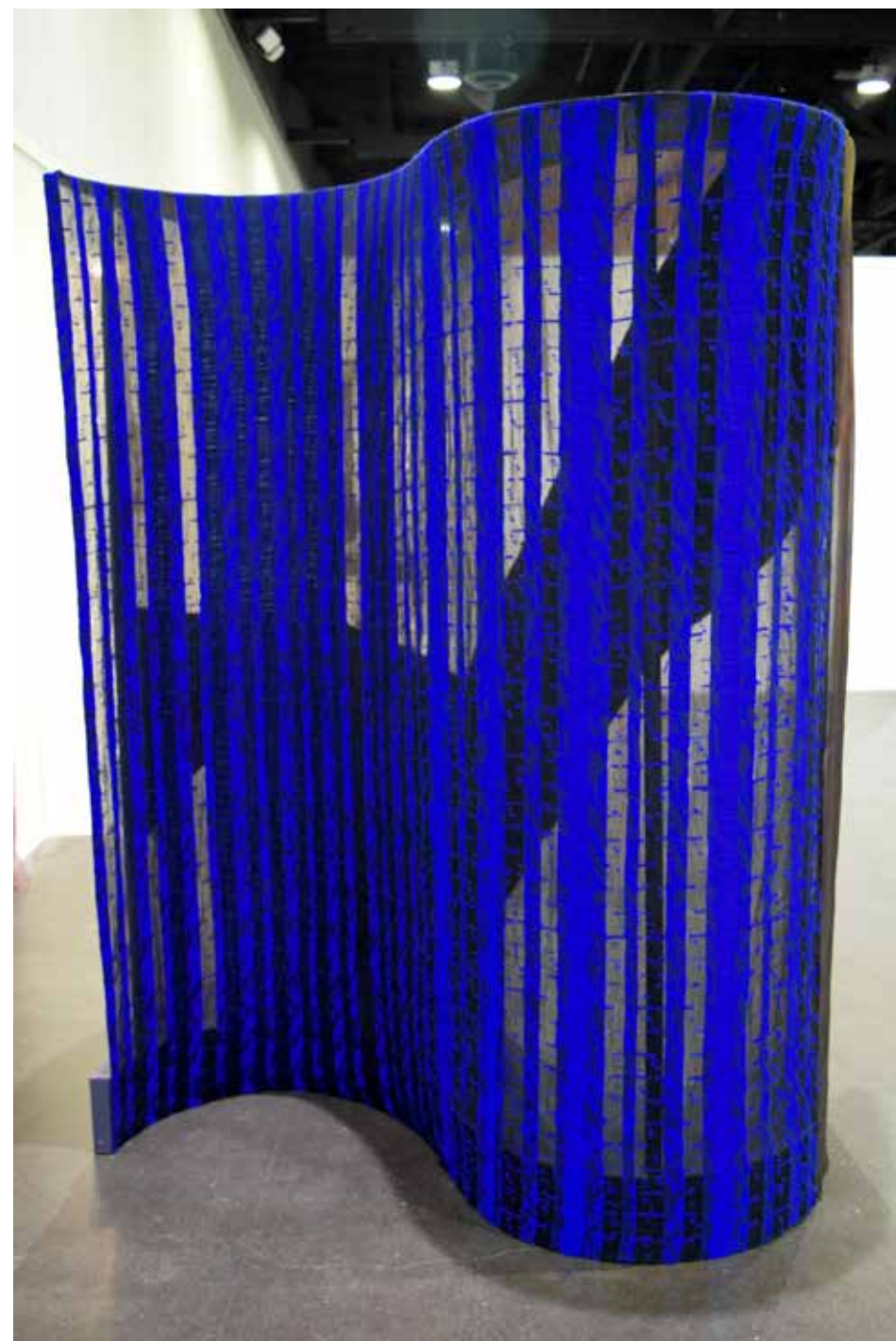
As object, the curtain manipulates light and shapes visibility. It moderates our perception of space through transparency, translucency, and opacity. Textile designer Petra Blaisse has exploited the full potential of the curtain as architectural intervention in her large scale interior work. In collaboration with such contemporary architecture firms as OMA and SANAA, Blaisse designs curtains which “transform space and touch the emotions.”²³ Her pieces often employ multiple materials to engage the viewer in a shifting canvas of color, reflectivity, depth, movement, light and shade. These shifts occur at the scale of the architecture as opposed to human scale. As such, Blaisse’s curtains shape the perceptual experience of space in a way that curtains rarely do in domestic spaces. Tim Ronalds, an architect who has worked with Petra Blaisse, describes the effect of her curtains in large, modern spaces: “Curtains bring sensuality to these hard-surfaced spaces. They make gravity

23 Ronalds, 102.

24 Ronalds, 102.

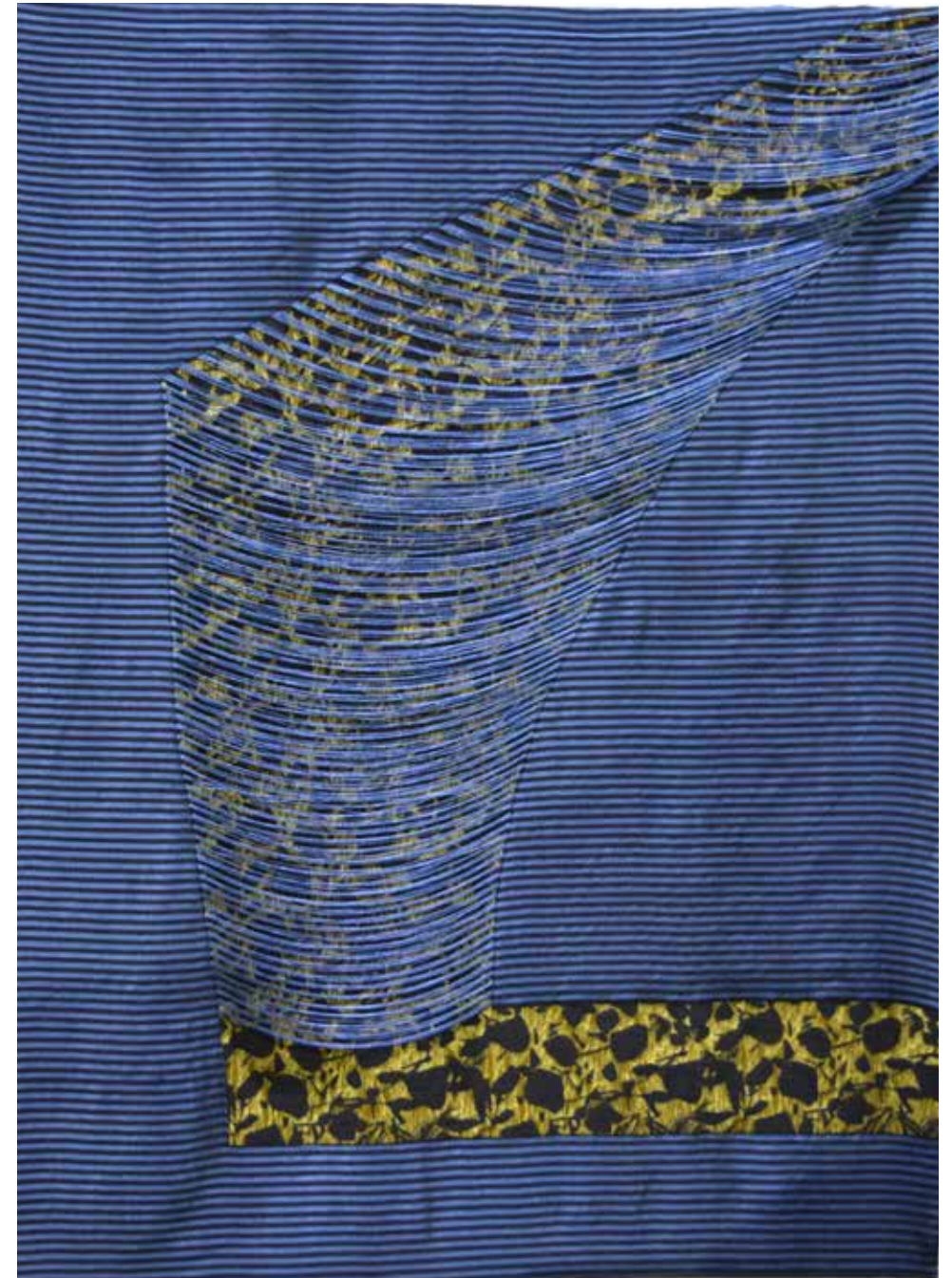
25 Balmond, 407.

26 Balmond, 407.





visible, light apparent, they curve and move and are full of association. The curtains make a primal connection between space and people: the stuff that wraps our bodies and touches our skin becomes an element of architecture."²⁴ In this context, we can understand the textile as a material bridge between the body and the built environment, shaping both our vision within space and our haptic response to our surroundings. If we accept that the curtain forms and focuses our perception of space, then the curtain becomes a frame. It creates focal points – a multiplicity of moments through time and space – that demand our attention. The curtain as frame opens new possibilities for site-specific textile work in which curtain and context act on one another to create a constellation of meaning.



Even as the curtain functions as object (frame), it simultaneously exists as a space of physical and temporal fluidity. The textile's flexible structure responds to environmental changes within otherwise static architecture. The curtain performs multiple functions over time, sometimes addressing concerns about light and other times altering the shape of the space. In discussing Blaisse's work, architect and critic Cecil Balmond writes, "The fold of the fabric, the way it hangs, the way it catches light- all work together to give a complete spatial effect. The curtains are structural open cells that carry light and transparency, floating with gravity, compared to the more solid direct concession a concrete wall would make. The cellular nature of the curtain structure allows a cascade effect."²⁵ In the analogy between curtain and cell, Balmond defines the curtain as an adaptable space in dynamic exchange with its environment. Unlike a solid wall, the curtain does not create boundaries; it marks a threshold. The curtain is an interstitial space between one room and another, between architecture and nature, between illumination and shadow. In her recent lecture at RISD, Petra Blaisse discussed the threshold as a mental space as well as a physical one. She argued the sensitive placement of openings and transparencies influences "the seeings and happenings"²⁶ within architectural space. In other words, the curtain introduces psychological and emotional flexibility into our relationship with our surroundings. When asked to reflect on the role of the curtain more broadly, Blaisse smiled and said simply: "The curtain is an embrace."

27 Rancière, Jacques.

28 Deleuze, Gilles.





I find this metaphor quite compelling, not just for its poetry, but also because it defines the curtain as a moment of contact. As threshold, the curtain is a space of encounter between binary conditions: light/dark, inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion. In the flexible folds of the curtain, contradictory experiences meet and meld. The curtain physicalizes the moment of encounter. The dialectic clash²⁷ of opposites is suspended in equilibrium along its surface and enveloped in its folds. Indeed, Gilles Deleuze famously uses the image of the fold to discuss the conceptual space of “soft logic,” a philosophy of thought that rejects the binary in favor of flexible, mutable and interwoven concepts.²⁸ Within the fold, boundaries break down entirely into a web of interconnectedness. During my explorations of Central Falls, I have been captivated by the encounter between past and present within the *terrain vague*. The folds of the curtain may not capture the entirety of the experience, but their form allows us, occasionally, to glimpse the momentary convergence of light on surface.

FAMILIAR AND FOREIGN

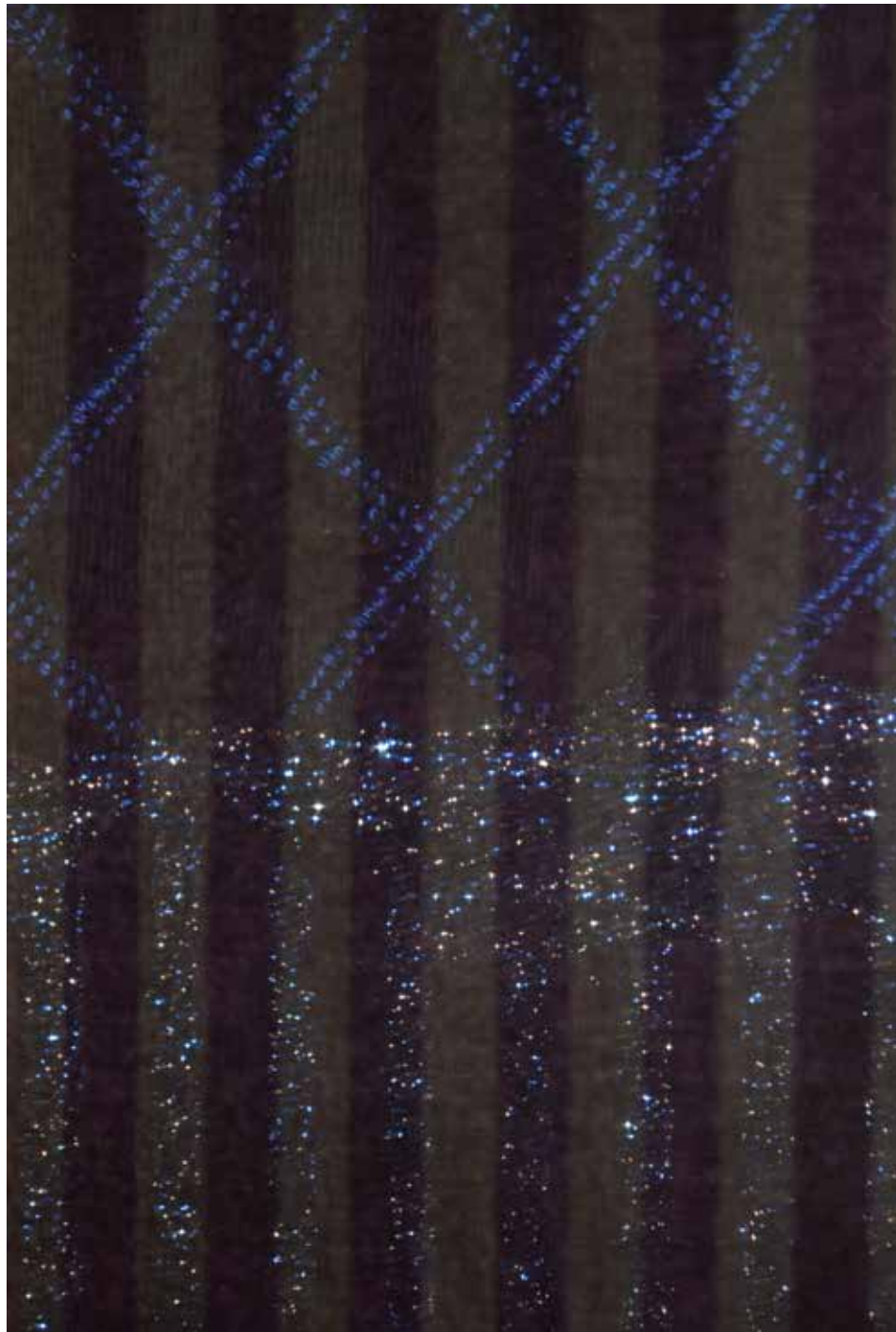
The painting is square and, I imagine, quite large. The image is anchored by vertical black and white stripes which continue across most of the canvas. The stripes are interrupted by a large and indefinable form with straight and curved edges. It is monumental and solid, but not heavy. The form contrasts with the underlying geometry of the stripe in its rendering of space; where the ground is a flat pattern space (the surface of the painting) the form depicts a space with depth. Lacking color, the painting plays mainly with value. The black and white stripes in the background create a constantly shifting exchange with the form in the foreground. In places, the form recedes behind the stripes while in others, it moves to the front. Its drawn gestures - both organic and mechanic - combine with this shifting space to create a perceptual experience that seems to me familiar and foreign. The painting behaves much like the curtain; it creates a heterotopic space²⁹ in which disparate elements collide, affecting and informing one another.

Shirley Kaneda: Seeing is a kind of beleaguered now. There's been a lot of theory that establishes a point of view that is antivision, or antiseeing. It threatens what is valuable about art.

Charline Van Heyl: Yeah, I think that's right. There is definitely this fear of being visually manipulated, which by its nature is also antipainting. A lot of people in the art world are actually unlearning to see. What would I want my paintings to do is to break that barrier, to impose themselves and insist on being seen despite that fear. But that is almost impossible.³⁰

29 See counter-spaces, note 7.

30 <http://bombmagazine.org/article/3655/charline-von-heyhl>



AT THE EDGES OF THE CITY

Penn Station is uglier at night than it is during the day. It is hard, in the fluorescent lights, not to focus on the stains and the trash and the smells. I walk to the very front of the platform to escape some particularly raucous hockey fans leaving Madison Square Garden. My thoughts are fuzzy as I gaze distantly down the tunnel, waiting for my southbound train. I hope vaguely that the train will come quickly and that there will be no delays. I must be home by midnight.

Some movement in the dark tunnel pulls my attention away from these thoughts and my eyes focus suddenly on a gold man. He emerges from the dark and dirty void painted head to toe in metallic paint, moving confidently down the tracks towards the ladder. I am struck with fear for a moment at the sight of him down there unprotected. But he climbs easily onto the platform as if he has done it many times before. I wonder if he lives down in the tunnel.

I knew that he was a street performer. I had seen them many times, those living statues who stand militantly frozen until some tourist (inexplicably) leaves a tip. The performer rewards them with one small movement - sly proof that he is a living, breathing man - despite the fact that he operates at the edges of the city. And though I often passed these performers dispassionately on the street, the sight of the gold man in the tunnel collapsed those familiar urban boundaries.



There was no performance that night. The man called out to his friends down the platform, disappearing behind the crowds and around the bend.



INTERVIEW (EXCERPT)

Alicia: So I guess my central question is what changes the way people see these abandoned spaces. What interventions make people reconceptualize places that they've been around for a long time?

Rob: I think cleanliness and repair go a long way. I mean, it's really obvious but it's important.

Alicia: What causes a shift in perspective? For me it's about visual intervention, but I imagine for you it's about using space in a different way. It's important for something new to happen in that space.

Rob: Yes, I think that's right. And we have parks that don't get any use so we're trying to provide activities there. Garfield Street Park is becoming a community garden that we'll keep open and active from dawn till dusk. We have another park in name if not particularly in function that we are just about to finish up as a fitness park with new fitness equipment, a walking path and brand new playground, and a big grassy space for pick-up games. I think we'll start adding programming there, scheduling Zumba classes or yoga classes that start to bring people to the park who might not ordinarily use the space. Previously it was just a cut through between streets. Adding that programming and attractive features will make people appreciate the space. Maybe they'll stop dumping their trash there like they've done in the past.

Alicia: Wait, litter or literal trash?

Rob: Oh no, literal bags of trash. Or mattresses or TV's. A refrigerator once. Which then of course the city has to pay to remove.

Alicia: That's funny because I've tried to build this whole theoretical argument around the idea of flexible space. I'm suggesting that when they don't have some kind of programming imposed on them by the government, it allows community to use the space in unique ways, in ways that respond to their needs. But what I'm hearing from you is that it's not actually happening in these places.

Rob: Not in our city [...] The city is providing a lot of suggestions but we'd also be happy to adjust to the needs of the community in public spaces. What we can really do is provide a good canvas for activity in the city and for artistic production.



CONCLUSION

Though I see potential in these spaces, they currently sit empty, underused, and unappreciated. I discovered through my conversations with Rob that, in Central Falls, the *terrain vague* often functions merely as a dump - irregardless of the theoretical significance that I, an outsider, might attach to it. Whatever aspirations I began with, the work must acknowledge its position within the larger cultural context. How might the project evolve if - instead of considering the *terrain vague* as a blueprint for the the curtain - the curtain modelled the future of the *terrain vague*? What sort of intervention might that work entail? What might prompt others to reconsider this space? How might the fluidity of the *terrain vague* inspire new dynamics within the city?

I see my future work moving into the *terrain vague* itself. I envision site specific pieces that trace new futures and imagine potential activity within the *terrain vague*. The fluid surface of the textile gives shape to these imaginings. At the edges of the city, I trace the fold.

APPENDIX:

An Interview with Rob Sayre-McCord, Director of Parks and Recreation for the city of Central Falls

Alicia: What's the government's relationship with abandoned, unused spaces in Central Falls?

Rob: We own some of them. We're in the process of taking others mostly through eminent domain or through nuisance complaint procedures. Some are still privately owned and looking to sell. We're looking to buy.

Alicia: Is there a lot of money to do that?

Rob: No. Which is why we take a lot through eminent domain. A lot of people still retain properties as tax write offs or don't put any care whatsoever into them and they're unwilling to do basic upkeep/maintenance. I think you have a basic responsibility to keep your places from being a hazard.

Alicia: Do you fix them up?

Rob: Some of them we fix up. Others we tear down to turn into other things. Many of the ones that could still be functional, we prefer they sell it to someone who will actually use the property. If that won't happen, then we try to acquire it and we'll try to offload it to someone who will use it. But hopefully it will generate new businesses in the city or housing. As ridiculous as it is for a small city, we still need a lot of housing.

Alicia: Yes, that was surprising to me. Many areas with comparably high population density have a lot of high-rise housing. You don't have a lot of [tall] buildings in Central Falls.

Rob: Yes, its impressive. Aside from two retirement communities in the city, there aren't many, or possibly any buildings higher than three stories.

Alicia: So do a lot of people are live together in apartment?

Rob: Yeah, a lot of people in one apartment. Many of our immigrant families often live in one apartment with large extended families. Our population numbers are around 19,000, but that data is from the 2010 census. 2020 is definitely going to be a lot higher. Several organizations have estimated that there are probably around 6000 undocumented folks living in the city. Kids Count Rhode Island is one of those organizations. That's where I'm getting those numbers.

Alicia: Are there times or ways in which the city's population overflows into these flexible spaces?

Rob: Yeah there's a lot of squatting - folks living in unused spaces. Usually not in a permanent fashion. We've had issues with transient camps popping up in our parks especially in our campgrounds. It becomes a problem for public use.

Alicia: Are there a large number of homeless people living in Central Falls?

Rob: Not really. We don't have very many resources for them, given the size of the city. Many tend to live in Providence because there's more help there. So it's not a large population that lives in Central Falls. We don't have a whole lot of folks living in abandoned industrial spaces because they're not as comfortable. We have a lot of unused houses in the city so people tend to gravitate towards them instead. Or when the weather is nicer in the summer, into outside spaces.

Alicia: Does the city hold events in areas that aren't specifically park spaces? Do you ever use these abandoned spaces?

Rob: Not for events. There was a very large and formerly attractive house across from the high school. The city purchased it. RIC [Rhode Island College] is renovating it and turning it into a tutoring center for live-in tutors. It will be student housing for RIC students who will receive housing in exchange for tutoring after school.

Alicia: Cool! That's a great program.

Rob: There were also a couple of nuisance properties adjacent to one of our parks. We purchased both of the houses, tore the more dilapidated one down, and are using that space for a community garden. This park was designed by a RISD class but the professor abandoned the project halfway through. It's a disaster of a park. It has a swing set and a small playground and then everything else is torn up. There's a half-finished path.

Alicia: You would think – if it's a space designed for kids - that they'd be worried about causing injury.

Rob: Oh I am! I immediately took out all the dangerous things that were just sitting there. But we are converting that space and the vacant lot where the house used to sit into Central Fall's first community garden. We're going to use the other house as office space and as headquarters for our urban agriculture operations.

Alicia: That's awesome. There must be a big difference between a city like Central Falls where there's a lot of space that you can repurpose in comparison to other cities that are really built out.

Rob: We have to be efficient because we only have a square mile of space. We have too many people and not enough space. We can't afford to have wasted space in the city. The Ossram Sylvania plant is a huge issue for us also because it used to be the primary employer in the city. When it closed, it was a major factor in what pushed Central Falls off the financial cliff.

Alicia: I'm interested in the psychological effect of these spaces. We spoke about it a bit when you were giving me the tour. What kind of affect do these abandoned spaces and dilapidated buildings have on the psychology of the community?

Rob: It definitely reinforces the idea that the community doesn't deserve to have nice things. That's the biggest problem. If there's not trust in the community or respect for the commu-

nity coming from the local government, then they will believe that of themselves. It creates a barrier between the two. That's not how the government should operate. The other factor is a transient community of immigrants. A lot of people also use Central Falls as a transitional stop. They come for three or six months. For many of them, this is the first place they come in the US. Many of them move onto Boston or New York or occasionally elsewhere. There's not much of an investment in the community. It artificially keeps things depressed because not enough care. People don't have a reason to care. If we don't give folks nice things, there's no reason for them to stick around to live in the community or to invest in the community, start a business in the community. A lack of community pride is also an issue but it grows out of these other problems. I identify with because the way that people talk about Central Falls sounds a lot like the way people spoke about Durham. A lot of this conversation is racially charged. The man who held the pro-Trump rally a few weekends ago, part of his speech was "we should put a fence around Central Falls." You get that kind of prejudice coming from other communities in Rhode Island.

Alicia: That's awful.

Rob: Yeah. We have trouble because businesses don't want to move to Central Falls. They think it's dangerous or dirty, or too poor to make money because no one buys anything. One of the nice things about the city is that a lot of the people who work for the government have grown up there. They care about the community. That is really nice.

Alicia: What is the role of public art in shaping the community's relationship to the city?

Rob: I think that public art is good for civic pride and beautification. The city definitely needs a lot of beautification. There are ways to do that through programs or grants or by simply giving people in the community the opportunity to express themselves. That's how I'd like to see things develop. Everything from murals to creatively designed parks to tree planting. Maybe some people wouldn't consider tree planting art.

Alicia: It's bio art.

Rob: Exactly. If you asked a tree warden he would absolutely say that it is. It's an interesting perspective shift. And in the design of spaces which used to be industrial... to be able to see the inner beauty of these things. There's a great mill space with a series of canted roofs. We've talked about using that space as a sort of natural skate park. We don't have anywhere for bikers or skaters to go in the city. I think that would be a great place for them.

Alicia: Ok so why do you think beautification increase civil pride?

Rob: Well, somebody has to start to shift the way the community sees itself. That somebody should be the city [government] and is probably most effective if it is the city [government]. Also, if someone looks out their window and sees a broken-down park, they won't feel valued and they won't value it. But if

they look outside and see something beautifully planted, and engaging and inviting, they are more apt to think 'this is mine. I'm going to take care of it.' Making sure that you have buy-in from the immediate community is important because you want to demonstrate that the space belongs to them. And they are more likely to take care of it. The parks department in New York City recently shifted from chaining everything [tables and chairs] down and locking up their parks at night to leaving it unfettered. They actually have a lot fewer problems now because it demonstrated trust in the community. It's amazing the shift that can happen when the government establishes trust with the community.

Alicia: It wouldn't even occur to me that you would need to lock things up until I saw the chains.

Rob: We've only ever had a planter be knocked over and a few benches be destroyed. I think it's poor policy to start from a place of distrust. That results in a city that feels like a prison.

Alicia: Yeah and you already have a prison in town.

Rob: Exactly and it makes a poor impression as you enter the city. That's one of the biggest thing for the administration is moving the high school athletic field away from the prison. Right now, the prison is the face of the city. The Wyatt has been a good community partner but they have become the face of Central Falls and that's not great for anyone.

Alicia: Yes, it's one of the first things you see as you drive in from the highway.

Rob: Yeah and the tower is lit up at night. It's unfortunate. It's one of the only buildings that's over three stories. I forgot it when mentioning tall buildings earlier.

Alicia: So I guess my central question is what changes the way people see these abandoned spaces. What interventions make people reconceptualize places that they've been around for a long time?

Rob: I think cleanliness and repair go a long way. I mean, it's really obvious but it's important.

Alicia: What causes a shift in perspective? For me it's about visual intervention, but I imagine for you it's about using space in a different way. It's important for something new to happen in that space.

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Rob: Not in our city. But I'm not sure that's the case everywhere. So River Island Park does have a walking path, it's got our urban campgrounds, it was supposed to be a nature engagement park with a small amount of green space, but our soccer association discovered that the green space is just large enough to work as a soccer field. Because our community needs more space for sport recreation, they got creative with that space. That's a really basic level. We don't really have that much to work with. Central Falls is only 3% green space which is far and away the worst in Rhode Island. But we are bounded on two sides by a river and we own land and we're trying to clear out the area

next to the river for a river walk. The city is providing a lot of suggestions but we'd also be happy to adjust to the needs of the community in public spaces. What we can really do is provide a good canvas for activity in the city and for artistic production. For our community, much of the use is based around sports.

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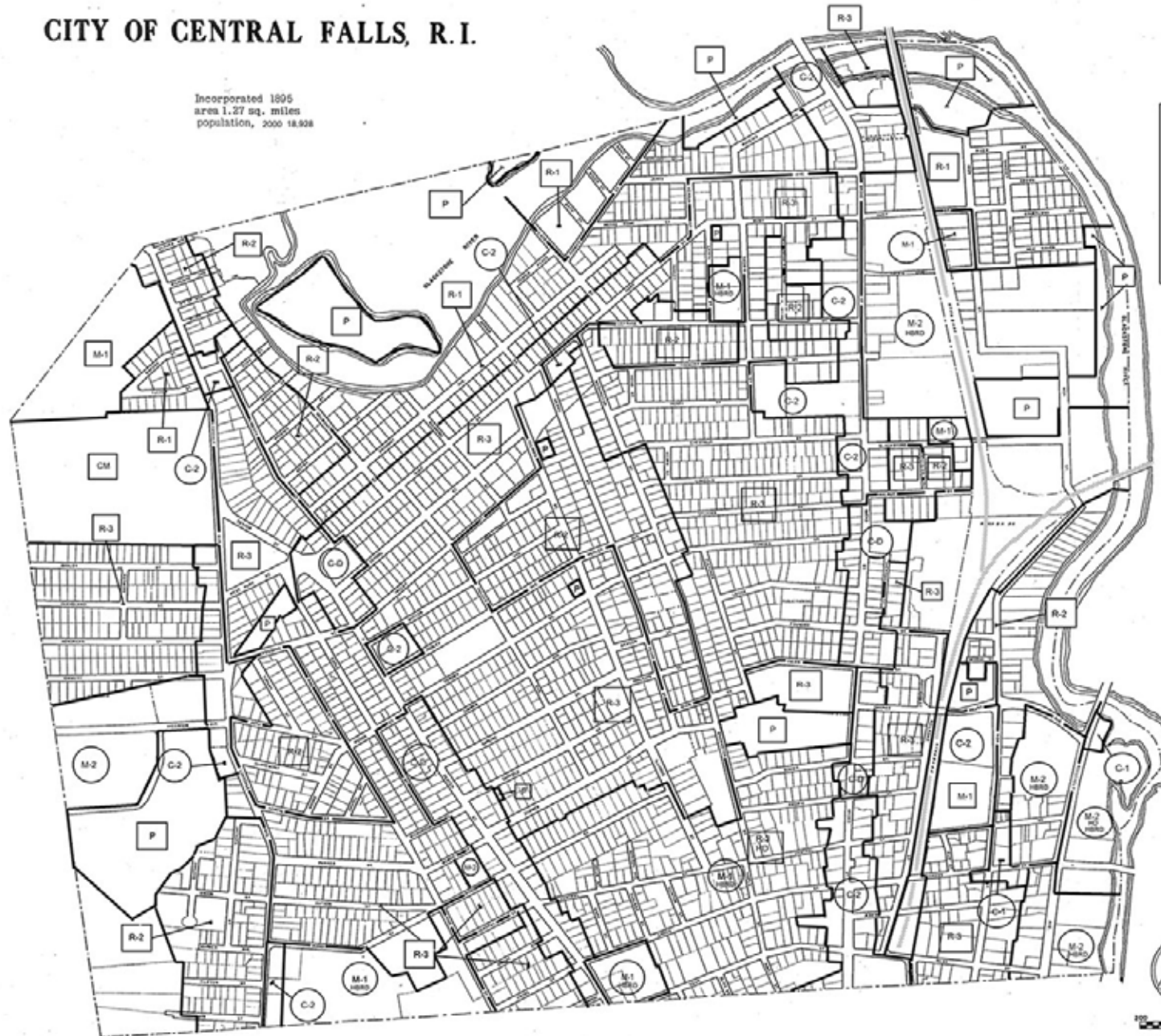
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CITY OF CENTRAL FALLS, R.I.

Incorporated 1895
area 1.27 sq. miles
population, 2000 18,928



- ZONING DISTRICTS**
- R-1 ONE HOUSEHOLD DISTRICT
 - R-2 TWO HOUSEHOLD DISTRICT
 - R-3 MULTI-HOUSEHOLD DISTRICT
 - C-1 LIMITED COMMERCIAL DISTRICT
 - C-2 GENERAL COMMERCIAL DISTRICT
 - C-3 GENERAL COMMERCIAL DISTRICT
 - C-O COMMERCIAL DOWNTOWN DISTRICT
 - CM CEMETERY DISTRICT
 - P PARK DISTRICT
- OVERLAY DISTRICTS**
- HD HISTORIC DISTRICT
 - MSRD MILL BUILDING RE-USE DEV. DISTRICT