

Notes on a periphery.

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Notes on a Periphery

Anne Campbell
Lottie Davies

Sapphire Goss
Eugene Schlumberger

A photograph of a street scene. In the foreground, a black signpost holds a white directional sign with black text and arrows. The sign indicates directions for 'OAKERSIDE DRIVE' and 'SUNNY BLUNTS'. Behind the sign is a long, low wall with a yellow and white horizontal stripe pattern. A grey utility pole stands to the right of the sign, with the number '8401' visible on it. In the background, there are bare trees under a grey sky.

← OAKERSIDE DRIVE ↗
→ SUNNY BLUNTS ↘

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Notes on a Periphery

Peripheral Thinking

"Anyone who has spent a childhood mooching around the fringes of English towns and cities, where urban and rural negotiate and renegotiate their borders, might have come up with the word [edgelands]. If you know those places where overspill housing estates break into scrubland, wasteland; if you know these underdeveloped, underwatched territories, you know they have "edge".

(Paul Farley and Michael Symmonds Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys to the Edge of England's Wilderness*, pp. 4-5)

Periphery is a notoriously slippery term cutting across multiple discourses in cultural history, art, literature, geography and sociology. It is a term connoting banality, edgelands, marginalia, suburbia, non-places. It is a haunting of the ordinary with a sense of the uncanny, produced by repeated looking.

Periphery also has many pejorative connotations. Peripheries are places that one wants to leave, if one cares about being seen, and being seen to succeed. To be peripheral is to be second rate; to be overlooked, out of the loop, provincial; to receive a patronising smile and pat on the shoulder by someone powerful who we'll never meet again.

However, let's leave behind the negative perceptions in these pages, and think again. If it's true that in the contemporary UK we are living in a museum, perpetually re-enacting a caricatured past in order to avoid facing up to the difficulties of the present, those caricatures are played out in metropolitan centres, as a means of maximising tourist income. Seen through this lens, peripheries are places where an imagination can thrive much more unfettered by urban anxieties. In such places, anonymity can be a great strength.

They are places in which a few over-familiar landmarks encountered on a daily basis are made personal and significant in response to the vagaries of individual biography. Peripheral places are those where it's possible to be anonymous or court an instant notoriety; to live in the hinterland between everyday mundanity and the imaginary life on the other side of our daily rituals, oscillating between an enjoyment of the mundane and a desire to escape it. It's perhaps this combination of factors that Farley and Symmonds Roberts mention above as the difficult to define "edge" of their edgelands.

If peripherality has contributed deliberate ambiguities across differing academic discourses then there are many lively intersections of the notion across contemporary art practices. Focusing on photography and video, we can think of examples such as Martin Parr's controversial *The Last Resort* (1985), an unashamed warts and all portrayal of the working class on holiday at New Brighton, across the Mersey from Liverpool; Richard Billingham's *Ray's a Laugh* (1995-96) portrayed the fissuring of that class in the decade after the end of industry, subject to shrinking horizons and expanding addictions.

Meanwhile, Black British artists such as Elsa James in her *Forgotten Black Essex* project (2018-present), seek to challenge lazily familiar local histories through uncovering the forgotten stories of members of the black community who came to Essex long before the Windrush generation, and inhabiting them in a performative and biographically nuanced way. Jade Montserrat, whose research into images of blackness in the context of Northern Britain is reflected in a performative practice focusing on images of diaspora, belonging, and the relationship between body, history and the land; directly connects Gilroy's discourses of the Black Atlantic with her own North Yorkshire edgelands. Both these practices overlay stereotypes of a white periphery with a much more layered and subtle set of narratives, relating to processes of assimilation and belonging.

It was noticeable in the EU referendum of 2016 that many "peripheries", particularly in the formerly industrial North of England, across Wales, in fishing and farming communities in Cornwall, voted heavily in favour of Brexit. Hartlepool in County Durham, Barnsley in the former South Yorkshire coalfields, and Stoke on Trent in Staffordshire voted nearly seventy percent leave; Scunthorpe, whose long slow decline as a steel-making town is one of the last de-industrialising narratives, voted two to one in favour.

Although we in Scotland voted by a large majority to remain (Aberdeen voted 61-39 to stay in the EU), that was an overall view not shared universally; Banff and Buchan, dominated by the two large fishing ports of Fraserburgh and Peterhead, voted 54-46 in favour of Leave. As an urban, middle-class commentariat scrambled for the reasons behind such numbers, one reason that remained under-discussed is a cumulative feeling of anger at being ignored culturally and sidelined politically for decades in such towns; a sudden return with a vote of real significance to the decision making process, and a decisive use of that vote to undermine the “no alternative” neoliberal world view that had promised post-industrial recovery but delivered little more than stagnation, under-employment and economic migration from the early 1990s onwards.

A wide range of literary interventions on the subject of Brexit and the periphery have been made since the middle of our decade. Richard Millward’s *Ten Story Love Song* (2009), predates the Brexit vote by some years but focuses in a visionary way on the conditions that created the pressure for that vote; the struggles of a gifted young artist, in Middlesbrough, to survive and build a creative practice amidst the breakdown of the social compact at the end of the 2000s, and its replacement by an end-of-days set of surreal characters.

Anthony Cartwright’s *Iron Towns* (2016) uses the metaphor of a fading international footballer, at the end of his career, trying to make sense of a life back in his home town, still defined by the void left by the retreat of heavy industry and the social tensions left as residue. Glenn James Brown’s *Ironopolis* (2018) links the dissolute lives of six characters and runs the Teesside myth of “Peg Powler” as a living, frightening thread through them all; Peg Powler is a mythical character living in the drains, used by exasperated parents into frightening their children to behave.

Alongside these recent fictional efforts in piecing together the awkward layerings of peripheral identity, have been the work of journalists such as James Meek in *Dreams of Leaving and Remaining* (2019) and the on-going travels of Guardian journalist John Harris. His memorable series of six short videos from Stoke-on Trent in 2016, is one of the most dogged attempts to understand a peripheral location undertaken by any journalist since George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937).

There’s a marked sense too, in the last twenty years, of “peripheral” towns viewing culture as a means of increasing cultural capital and visitor footfall and revenue. This was a process that arguably began in Glasgow and Liverpool in the late 1980s, and has subsequently manifested itself around the map of the UK from the Lottery funded years of the 1990s and early 2000s (DCA, Dundee; MIMA, Middlesbrough; Tate St. Ives) to a present where art events such as the Folkestone Triennial, and the re-locating of the Turner Prize to venues as diverse as Derry/Londonderry and Margate, seem absolutely unremarkable. The old hegemony of art being made in peripheries and discussed and sold in centres, has fractured; art workers and consumers in peripheral locations have a feeling of direct engagement in reclaiming some kind of cultural commons in their locale, just as the geographic commons is stealthily being privatised and broken apart.

Such are the broad contours of the overlapping debates on peripherality in contemporary culture. In what follows, let’s turn to the specifics of a particular periphery, and also talk though the artists who have responded to notions of the periphery in this exhibition.

Uppies and Downies

Every Easter weekend, in the old port and steel town of Workington in North West Cumbria, there’s a three-day game of football. The heavy ball is of dun leather and inscribed in an old Victorian font. Only victory is defined, the manner of victory is not; should the Uppie men of the east side of town hail the ball three times at the capstan in Workington harbour; or the downies, from the west side, perform that feat at the gates of Curwen Hall Parklands, a goal is scored, and the game is over.

It’s a great marauding scrum predating an industrial past that’s now largely been forgotten. The game often involves up to five hundred participants a side and there are no rules at all. Police warn visitors to the town centre that they may be caught up and hurt in the fast-moving brawl.

The game swept even Tesco away; a planning application for one of their new twenty-four hour non-places, on a critical stretch of land, was rejected after a long and bitter arm-wrestle with locals.

Their new store, in a key battleground between generations of Uppies and Downies, would have brought the whole ritual to an end, and councillors daren't have signed that off. It was one of the few goals scored by local "downies" against the "uppies" of global capital. Their goal stands, for now.

Surveillance Geographies

These days, the UK resembles a giant game of Uppies and Downies; a territorial war of all against all, with no rules, no goals, not even a ball. The veneer of the old is becoming thinner by the week and barely masking the emergence of something new, which no one can yet define.

We are living in a state of permanent upheaval in late capitalism; as the system begins to destroy the very supporting structures that maintained it. Pessimists are already reading our time as an actually existing dystopia, but we haven't seen anything yet.

George Soros speaks of a coming era of "radical disequilibrium"; the inadvertent undermining of old democratic structures by new technology, the gaming of an analogue system by digital natives, for profit and influence. Leading American investor, Warren Buffett, has stated that "There's class warfare alright, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making the war, and we're winning."

The neoliberal subject- self-focused, defined by geographies of consumption, myopically mobile- remains indifferent. The maintenance of surveillance capitalism depends on individuals collectively choosing indifference to the other.

The mushrooming of cameras, data mining, our inability to set aside convenience and speed, our embrace of Alexa and Google Home, our collective shoulder-shrugging when confronted with the consequences of surveillance capitalism, to those who have to get dirty making its instruments, in nappy-wearing zero-hours gulags in peripheries from Dunfermline to Longhua; being marshalled down the never ending mirrored corridors of identity politics and single issue hashtag campaigns; the claws of surveillance capitalism have torn deeply old charts of empathy and solidarity. In peripheral locations, these charts were particularly badly scored, as precarious, unskilled labour shrunk old worlds underpinned by the lost certainties of industry and modernity.

Notes on a Periphery Artists

Anne Campbell's longstanding work in Helmsdale and in the Flow Country made her an obvious selection for this exhibition. Alone of the four artists, Anne's works focus not on suburbia or edgelands, but on wilderness. The Flow Country, 4,000 square kilometres of wetlands between Caithness and Sutherland, is a remarkable wetland habitat home to rare species of birds and also to sphagnum moss, one of the critical building blocks in the production of peat. Anne's photographs focus on the bleakness and emptiness of the landscape, and call to mind sensations of remoteness and the lonely sublime that are difficult to access in the UK beyond the Flow Country; perhaps remoter areas of the Lake District and in North West Wales between Trawsfynydd and Tal-y-Bont, is it possible to experience similar feelings of solitude. Wilderness in this case is not only a condition relating to the landscape but also to the emptying of the mind and introspection associated with a landscape ancient and still largely empty of human intervention in contemporary times. As such, it acts as a valuable counterpoint to the suburban-based work of the other artists in the show.

Lottie Davies is a self-taught photographer who has been active for over twenty-five years. Whilst she is perhaps best known for her Fine Art photographic portraiture, and for hallucinogenic mis-en-scene series such as Memories and Nightmares (2008-9), the work shown here deals directly with suburban edgelands and with everyday photography taken whilst travelling around England on various projects. The series Ten Miles 1976-1986 deals with a specific bus journey on the Surrey-Hampshire borders that sees edgeland locations evoke

particular childhood memories, from a decade at school, and the very beginnings of the artist's involvement with photography. *Observations* (2016), meanwhile, marks a return to first principles, during a difficult period in her career. These everyday images are shot with an analogue camera around various locations in England, a chance moment in an interior marking the steps back to some kind of professional equilibrium through a series of journeys in peripheral territories; the sense of the uncanny filtering through a sunlit post box, and the flap of a net curtain in an open window.

Sapphire Goss' work is an intense scoping of the Poet's Estate in Newport Pagnell, in the borough of Milton Keynes, where the artist grew up. Part psychogeography, part deep mapping, based on teenage memories and repeated walking, Goss' film sees the new forms of the anonymous housing estate overlaid with the much more established contours of local plant life; the shattering of the mirrors of history into a thousand personalised fragments, with deeply personal significance in a particular location sitting alongside moment of history from a millennium ago. There is an implicit duality between the artifice of late modernity and the creation of a "new" place, overwriting rural significances from a time past. As the artist herself says, "the mundane can be deeply strange when you pay attention".

Such a sentence could also apply to the street photography of Eugene Schlumberger. Based in Middlesbrough, Schlumberger is also self-taught, using digital photography as an outlet for a creative expression that chance events had long suppressed. Interested in ideas of hauntology, and deeply immersed in British musical culture from the post-punk era until the early 1990s, the artist has spent the last five years looking intently at the changing landscape of his home city and surrounding town- Billingham, Hartlepool, Peterlee, Stockton-on-Tees.

Basing his careful compositions around colour, Schlumberger's photographs, through their intense engagement with seemingly mundane, everyday, sights, invite wonder and engagement with these particular contexts and the stories and events that may have taken him there. This is a practice based on the intersections between walking, memory and deep local knowledge, a capturing of the fragments of modernity as that era fades at the fork in the road between entropy and redevelopment.

Workington Rails

"Workington Rails hold the world together".

If you use the train a lot, it's very likely that your carriage will be screeching along rails made in Workington. In the industrial age, it was the one product the town was famous for. Hard blue ore from Ennerdale Water, and around West Cumbria, found their way into the Bessemer Furnaces. The specification saw these rails snake all over the world, the iron filaments of commerce, made in a town few had heard of, let alone could find on a map. Even although the steelworks was demolished a dozen years ago, Workington rails continue to be made today, albeit in Scunthorpe.

In late capitalism towns such as these have been forgotten, even sneered at, in metropolitan centres. Our ignorance of the peripheries and their discontents have resulted in some of the political convulsions of the last decade. In the future, as the metropolitan centres become ever more unaffordable, as actions become ever more watched over and we self-censor without realising it, it is in the peripheries where we will find the most potential to re-engage on a human level and re-imagine what creativity could and should be, in response to the needs and thoughts of those around us. The artists in this show, through the work exhibited, are playing important individual roles in these broader cultural debates.

Jon Blackwood

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Anne Campbell, Power Lines, 2019

Anne Campbell

One of Europe's last wild places, the Flow Country, a vast expanse of blanket bog sits at the northern edge of the United Kingdom. The land is a mosaic of peat and small pools that are home to a myriad of wildlife including sphagnum moss and migrating birds. A vital defence against the effects of climate change, this fragile environment often lies covered in a blanket of snow during winter, making it impossibly treacherous for humans to cross. Yet somehow the deer still manage to pick their way through.

This work forms part of an on-going photographic exploration of Scotland's Highlands and Islands. Process is an integral part of Campbell's practice as she moves between analogue and digital, shooting on film and digitising the results: bleaching, layering, inking and pushing the chemistry to extremes. In this way, the periphery of land is mirrored by the periphery of the medium.

www.annecampbell.photography



Anne Campbell, Lines of Communication, 2019



Anne Campbell, Flow Country, 2019

Lottie Davies

Ten Miles 1976-1986
2012

One of the first photographs I ever took was made with a 110 camera, a narrow plastic box with a tiny fixed lens, and I would make one roll of film last over a year. The only image I now remember from that camera is a portrait I took of my family in our garden. It must have been sometime in the late 70s. My parents are sitting on a curved stone bench, my mother's pink shrub roses in puffy pale bloom behind them, my youngest brother is sitting on my mother's lap, and my other brother (the middle one) is crouching on the lawn a little closer to me. It was sunny, and everyone is smiling except for Rupert (the middle one). I lost the print in 1990, in India during my year-out travelling, and who knows where the teeny-tiny negative got to.

I mention it because the walk which made this project began a few yards from that garden. For ten years, between 1976 and 1986, I took a blue and white striped double-decker bus to school from Rowledge in Surrey to Alton, in Hampshire. The bus was unmistakable, and Mr Vane-Hunt, the bus driver, was a big, white-haired fellow who inspired respect from all of his young passengers by being generally inscrutable. I sat in the same seat every year, a window seat on the bottom deck, three rows from the front, on the left. There was a sign behind Mr Vane-Hunt, which said, confusingly, 'Do Not Distract The Driver. Do Not Stand Forward of This Notice'. Confusingly, because I didn't understand the phrase 'stand forward of'. I was a precociously well-read child, and I had a reasonably sophisticated vocabulary, so I worked out that it must be an archaic phrase meaning 'Do Not Disobey This Notice'. This idle confusion over the internal tautology of the notices stayed with me for years.

I walked from my bus-stop in Chapel Road, within view of the house I grew up in, through semi-rural villagescape to the train station in Farnham, following the bus-route, noting changes and sameness along the way. The bus journey continued all the way to Alton of course, but I stopped at the station because the further section is mostly dual-carriageway now. Every location and picture has some kind of memory attached to it.

www.lottiedavies.com

Observations
2016

This project was prompted by a feeling of dislocation, both from a sense of purpose and from my creative work. To address this drifting purposelessness, I went back to my original way of working - simply taking an analogue camera around with me as I travelled to different parts of the country, walking in woodlands and through towns, on my way to somewhere, or to nowhere in particular. I set myself two rules - I could only use two exposures for any one subject, and each image would be reproduced full-frame.

And so, these images are of somewhere and nowhere. They are specific, as all photographs are, but they are also generic - in many ways, things are the same everywhere. Banality is all around us, and yet there is beauty to be found in each flapping curtain, each doorway, each section of worn paint. As I progressed through this work, looking for the moments when I would see an image and think "ah, there it is", I found myself becoming more aware of the grace in the world, which flickers in glimpses all around us.





Lottie Davies, from the Observations series, 2016



Lottie Davies, from the Ten Miles 1976-1986 series, 2012



Lottie Davies, from the Observations series, 2016



Lottie Davies, from the Observations series, 2016

Sapphire Goss

Artist-filmmaker Sapphire Goss makes experimental video landscapes for commissions, installations, exhibitions and live events around the UK and internationally. She creates chimerical documentations of overlooked or overfamiliar spaces. Elements from mismatched times, places, scales and materials are sutured together in the same frame - Sometimes the seams are stylistic, sometimes the stitches are imperceptible. Her work has a choral/symphonic layered feel of many voices, sources and materials to subvert the idea of a singular fixed viewpoint. Using obsolete technological methods and material techniques, footage is looped and processed until colours and shapes shift and become hyperreal and distorted. This is an 'analogue uncanny': scratchy, grainy and shimmering.

Goss has received awards including AHRC funding and an ACE award for the large-scale multimedia project Eternity City (2018). Last year she was commissioned to make Are We Data (AWED), at Tate Exchange (2018). She was part of the arts accelerator Fish Island Labs culminating in a showcase exhibition at the Barbican and at Culture:TECH festival in Northern Ireland (2014-16). She was selected for Live Cinema UK's National Talent Pool (2018). She is part of the collective Diamond Lens – developing projects that explore new ways of approaching the nature documentary as a collaborative practice, soon to exhibit at Margate Film Festival and to undertake a residency in Örö, Finland.

www.sapphiregoss.com

**Poet's Estate. Film // Sapphire Goss, Sound // William Doyle
Part of the wider Your Wilderness Revisited project.**

These places, they are everywhere and could be anywhere.

In the nondescript edgelands of Britain there are hundreds of estates like this - overlooked spaces of identikit homes. On this estate in Newport Pagnell the cul-de-sacs are named after poets –Wordsworth Avenue, Keats Close, Flora Thompson Drive.

Here I was on the cusp of becoming a person, soaking up secondhand life experience, while marking nondescript places with personal milestones. During endless, dull days waiting, life is so theoretical yet so vivid – vague and abstract and exotic. Pasts and futures are telescoped – from personal memories at the turn of the millennium to a hidden 1000-year-old Saxon church. Long before England existed, this area was at the bottom of a primeval sea.

The chapters are named after mysterious lost landmarks from old maps made before the estate was built – Hoo wood, Burnt Covert, Lakelane Spinney, their imprints perceptible in the bricks, in the soil, sometimes a leftover school or street name, but largely replaced by the generic – Welcome Lodge Services, Red House. The film cycles between perspectives, spaces and times to create a new mythology from the personal, the commonplace and the eternal. The mundane can be deeply strange when you pay attention.



Sapphire Goss, Still from the Film Poet's Estate, 2019



Sapphire Goss, Still from the Film Poet's Estate, 2019



Sapphire Goss, Still from the Film Poet's Estate, 2019



Sapphire Goss, Still from the Film Poet's Estate, 2019



Eugene Schlumberger

What I really want to write here is a long list of songs, buildings, films and books that are inextricably connected to 'the city' and simply state that my work is a response to them: that I want to make pictures that show how these things make me feel. Because that's all I'm doing when I'm out with my camera: thinking about being mugged in the colossal concrete enclosures of the Hulme Crescents in Manchester; thinking about the view from the back seat of my dad's car as we drove between back-street garages in Middlesbrough, looking for spare parts; of Joy Division and the very first recordings of New Order, to me the most articulate expressions possible of post-industrial northern England; of the gravy-like atmosphere of the hotel described by Nik Cohn in his book, Market; of looking at a smudged concrete city through the condensation on a bus window. I want the photographs to show how I carry these things with me at all times and how they inform my interactions with the streets I walk through carrying my camera.

Asked by my art teacher to abandon any thought of studying art at GCSE due to my shoddy drawing skills, I spent 25 years feeling a frustrating need to create something but unable to do so. During this time, I looked at things and I listened to things and internalised them. Around five years ago, I picked up a camera and everything I had absorbed seemed to pour back out of me.

www.eugenschlumberger.com



Eugene Schlumberger, The Future is Now the Past no. 14, 2019



Eugene Schlumberger, Union Jack, 2017



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