

***Terrain Vague*, by Ignasi de Sola-Morales**

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TERRAIN VAGUE, For a renewed cartography of urban space

“We have become used to judging the work in light of its appropriateness in relation to the apparatus; maybe it is time to start judging the apparatus in the light of its appropriateness to the work” George Brecht, 1930

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TERRAIN, extension of soil of indeterminate limits, of an urban nature and strange to the productive efficiency of the city.

VAGUE, a form of absence, but simultaneously a power for the future, expectant and available, where invisible questions of identity hold a range of disclosure.

It is mainly about the work of some photographers, who in the 1970's turn to urban spaces that are abandoned, obsolete, deactivated and forgotten in course of the urban expansion in post-World War II, on which the essay of Sola-Morales (1995) builds a new cartography of urban space. The fascination with these “new” spaces is highly illustrated in the description of TERRAIN VAGUE, and in which contains multiple meanings and ambiguities. It indicates a double condition: strange spaces which are placed outside the generic domain of a recognizable occupation and therefore reassuring and comforting; a sense of freedom and criticism within the “mind” of the city, an alternative space of escape and impunity to build other identities.

Sola-Morales mentions several authors in his work that allow him to strengthen the description of the urban subject facing this plot of land defined by indeterminacy. In a time of estrangement before the world (Marquand cited by Sola-Morales) the photographic images of this TERRAIN VAGUE have the power to become indexes, as

“indexes more than icons” (Kraus 1985), that make ethical and aesthetic problems in contemporary social life.

Focusing the problem in dealing with these imprecise spaces, Sola-Morales also calls upon a fresh look on the city consolidated from the spaces that were left out of a certain idea of urbanity.

The position taken in this essay with almost 20 years opens a new and complex sensitivity which leads to question hegemonic values (which Sola-Morales associates to the modern illuminist legacy), which have revealed to be inadequate in many interventions in the interstices and residual areas in the city.

In contrast to how architecture has been making general standardisation criteria, tied to models that are essentially based on building the “emptiness”, artists and filmmakers have shown interest in these spaces of negative connotations, providing notions of belonging through preservation and recording memory.

The marginal spaces, in a transitional state, that withstand strategies of power and imposition of identities, carry in its fragile condition the characteristics that allow connecting links and continuity of the several transformations of the city. They also hold the possibility of finding for architecture a performance that is not exclusively about forms, optical and figurative.

In conclusion, Sola-Morales emphasizes this idea of seeking forces instead of forms, for the incorporated instead of the distant, the rhizomatic instead of the figurative.

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Since its first publication¹ in 1995, the Terrain Vague of the cities gained more visibility and led to several reflections. Returning to previous experiences, such as, “Derive” (Debord, 1956) (that sets up through the everyday (quotidian) and the banality an urban intervention, as an alternative way of dwelling) and more recent proposals, such as, “Areas of impunity” (Ábalos e Herreros, 2002), the current environment provides a rereading of these principles of action, as a second type of activation: the construction of more plural appropriations with changing programs and uses, for the permanent recreation of urban space. Building the built space.

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¹ The first presentation of the essay of the Catalan architect Ignasi de Sola-Morales was held in an academic seminar at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, in Montreal, Canada, in 1994. Incorporated in a series of conferences entitled ANYONE, as ANY conferences were held in the last decade of the twentieth century, once a year, on themes that were based on the 10 descriptions of the word ANY in the English dictionary. ANYPLACE was the fourth conference, in 1994, and the work came to be published in 1995. In 2002 a collection of texts were published on the theme TERRITORIES by the publisher Gustavo Gili. It is the first volume of a set of 5 books that gather the most relevant texts by Ignasi de Sola-Morales, published in sequence between 2002 and 2006.