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Winter growing fields:
landscape and estrangement
Andrew Langford



‘Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed: they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten.’

Augé (1995, p79)

Winter Growing Fields: Landscape and Estrangement by Andrew Langford

As consumers we now have a developed expectation of buying fresh unseasonal greengrocery products all year round in our supermarkets. Almeria in southern Spain has established itself as a principle region for growing and exporting these products throughout Europe. When choosing Spanish produce at the point of sale we might carry a romantized picture of the local farmer tending his fields against the sunlit backcloth of the Andalusian mountains. The reality is that rapid industrialisation and new growing methods have radically altered the physical landscape and the cultural and economic composition of the region of Almeria. The city of Almeria is at the heart of a horticultural revolution of highly managed plastic greenhouses – calculated in 2001 to total twenty five thousand hectares built since 1970 and still expanding. The region [‘affectionately’ known as the Costa Plastica] is now clearly visible from satellite as the greenhouses converge and expand further over the rural landscape. The desert of Almeria is bordered by Granada, Murcia and the Mediterranean Sea. It is a harsh, dry environment resisting real sustained habitation and, until recently, it had remained relatively impoverished and to some extent neglected. The filmmaker Sergio Leone brought the desert environment to public awareness in the so-called ‘Spaghetti (or Paella) Westerns’: A Fistful of Dollars, For a Few Dollars More and The Good, The Bad and The Ugly portray a frontier land or badland visually associated with the American wild west. It is Morricone’s evocative score to the films that subconsciously persists for many tourists, ironically overwriting

the rich history of the indigenous Flamenco of Andalusia. Near the small village of Albaricoques in the east of the region stand the remains of El Cortijo del Fraile. Inspired by his stay in the 1930s and stories associated with the house, Federico Garcia Lorca used it as the setting for his dark drama ‘Blood Wedding’. Lorca’s play passionately evokes love, honour and revenge within a context of strong characters bound by the struggle of life and death. These works in film and theatre augment the mythology of Almeria in very different ways, yet both draw intense physical, moral and emotional associations with the landscape.

The province is now fully conscious of the rich profits possible from eco-holidays and mass tourism, pan-European property speculation and the second home phenomenon and is, therefore, awake to issues of the environment and ecology. The landscape has a very distinctive story to tell in terms of its geology, climate, light and its physical and biological make up. It has a rich history of occupation by different civilizations – each leaving vestiges of their time with the land – most notably the Moors who governed in the south for around 700 years. As well as evidence of earlier forms of agriculture in the region there are sites of former mineral extraction that have reshaped and left distinctive marks on large tracts of the environment. In opposition to the spread of horticulture, natural parks have been established. The parks attract large numbers of visitors for their spectacular mountains, coastal walks, geology, mining, archaeology and indigenous sea and land based plants and animals. They appear to come under constant threat along their borders and land (real estate) is now highly contested.

European funding opportunities, new horticultural technologies and entrepreneurship around consumer demand have rapidly transformed much of the semi-desert landscape. On one hand the region attracts visitors for its exotic and experiential value – climate, natural landscape, history and heritage, local culture and lifestyle. On the other hand the region signals an adoption of architectural standardisation and the application of sanitised processes around monocultures – equivalent to the ubiquitous gargantuan logistics sheds fringing UK cities. Individual greenhouses coalesce forming a total utilitarian environment. In this new prohibited territory public access to the land is impossible, all traces of the natural and sense of geological time is removed and any spiritual relationship with the landscape that might have existed before has gone forever. Greenhouses directly adjoin the roads and the bewildering matrix of tracks between the greenhouses are clearly not intended for anyone but workers. The greenhouses abut holiday beaches, golf courses and natural parklands. The structures are intensively subsumed into village and town spaces and tightly pack the fringe of the main city. Shoard’s (2002, p120) study on the edge lands of cities has particular resonance for Almeria as it is in these types of city interfacial rims where change is clearly manifested: ‘We may not notice it, but it is here that much of our current environmental change, and in particular the development of large scale retail, business and industrial premises, is taking place. In the United States there is growing awareness of the development of what has been termed ‘edge city’ and the effect this is having on







the geography and economic and social profile of entire regions". Superficially, the Almerian countryside and its conurbations are assumed to share a simplified point of boundary and demarcation. A more conscious consideration reveals a heterogeneous complexity of unplanned physical interactions between areas of low-level living, commerce, industry and leisure. In the case of Almeria much of what one sees is directly affiliated with the dominant agri-business industries. Almeria's 'edgelands' extend to such a degree that most villages and towns physically connect through the labyrinth of greenhouses and associated services. This interfacial space conforms to Shoard's (2002) model – it is chaotic and raw with little consideration of aesthetics, planning, design or thought about the surrounding landscape. In these spaces the detritus of urban dwelling and factory growing compete with the more natural forces and the creep of nature. The overwhelming impression is one of a wholesale commitment to converting land for pure function at cost to the longer-term guardianship of the landscape and its resources. The preference of farm landowners is to [re]construct for greatest efficiency of land use and productivity. Concern for human welfare and well-being appears to have been deprioritised. The extreme working conditions of the greenhouses can mainly only be tolerated by workforces of North African economic migrants – the signs of their ad-hoc refuges and low-level lodgings scattered throughout the greenhouses signal a space of abjection and poverty. This new industrialised space conveys a strong sense of unwelcome: there are

few navigation systems, access is clearly discouraged, structural uniformity bewilders and disorients and any normal visual experience of farming and growing is closed off – clearly a place only to pass through. In an impact study of the greenhouses Gomez Orea (2003) summarized the effect of a catalogue of unchecked and poorly managed horticultural developments in the region concluding, "All of this has created a characteristic landscape of poor quality, giving an image of intensity, exhaustion and silting of the land and its resources as well as of an unsustainable form of agriculture."

In the east, fresh countryside is earmarked for future mass development including the areas near El Cortijo del Fraile and the settings for the Leone films. Although some lessons are being learnt, the policy of wholesale transformation of the landscape persists. Of course, this policy is not without challenge, but the economic benefits from meeting the demands of supermarkets throughout the year dominate. In the rush for monetary and lifestyle gain, all signs of earlier occupation and culture are bulldozed away creating a sense of the non-place. Augé (1995) describes his theories of 'non-place' as distinct from 'anthropological place'. He argues: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis being advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places meaning places which, unlike Baudelairian modernity, do not integrate the earlier places; instead

these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory' and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position." Augé identifies individual identities, complicities of language, local references and unformulated rules of living know-how as elements which build anthropological place, and says that non-place creates only a shared identity of detachment of the customer or passenger. Supermarkets – as the destination of the product supply chain – are integrated within his concept of non-place. Augé argues that the appearances and proliferation of non-places "...subject the individual consciousness to entirely new experiences and ordeals of solitude." further adding, "As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality."

At the points of greatest density the greenhouses are disorienting through their repetition, uniformity and labyrinth-like [dis]organisation. This new environment suggests not simply a shift in farming practice, but a fundamental change to a level where people may no longer sense they belong or have a stable identity based on the past and the familiar. For some the land, when rapidly reconfigured in this new way, becomes place-less – an environment of human displacement and detachment. Brittan (2003), drawing on Ellin (1996), defines placelessness as: a diminished importance of place; an accelerated global flow of people, ideas and products; spaces that are less legible; anxieties about homogenization or 'loss of place'. He writes, "Theorists have argued that the key condition of placelessness or post-landscape is the dissolution of fixed categories and

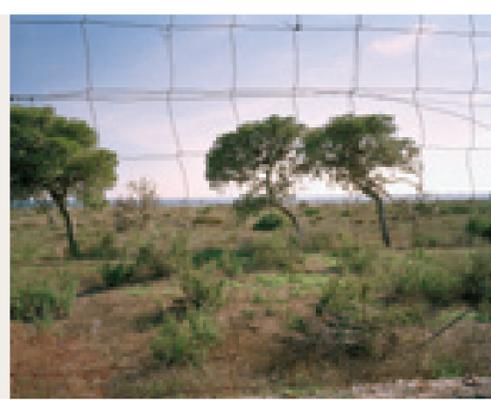
boundaries in the environment and its culture generally. This causes anxiety and an irrational yearning for the immutable and stable that encourages different forms of escapism, such as nostalgia and the romanticism of the pre-Modern." As more and more of the land is given over to synthetic agri-business structures, so less and less of the landscape – which contributes to people's sense of place and relationship with the natural world – remains. Nostalgia is experienced as a longing for stable interactions and relationships with the past and a sense of place or home. What is gained from adoption of the greenhouse strategy for horticulture in the short term is obvious and measurable to those who stand to profit. What is given up or lost permanently may be for the moment peripheral and the understanding of its full value will not be appreciated or missed for some considerable time.

The work in this publication and associated exhibition is not the product of an intent to politicise the environmental impact of this rural setting or to cast judgement on land strategies. Rather, it recognises the example of Almeria as one of many attempts over history and across the globe to maximise the capability of natural resources and land for profit and living improvement. The project does not seek to criticise change or its impact and its primary focus is not to counterpoint the romantic and the utilitarian. The work offers personal images as a way of inviting reflection on our relationship to the natural world and its value to our emotional and physical well-being. Detheridge (2003 p17) argues, "In the



last two centuries the acceleration of our detachment from the natural world, brought about by modernity, industrialisation, the ability to channel and exploit natural resources, have contributed to improve human beings' living conditions but the rhythms forced on us by machines and their destructive potential have also lead at every stage to much anguished debate and many guilty consciences. Below the surface we harbour repressed desires, fears and frustrations that are unfailingly expressed in many ways, not least of all art." Through the specifics of one place and one set of perceived circumstances this work aims to explore the conceptual territories beyond any single site of radical change in land use. It seeks to encourage consideration of the perpetual narrative of landscape and the many subtle and unsubtle ways that humans relate to it. The collection of images attempts to sit at an inter-textual point between the geographical, the political, the economic, the social and the technological.

The research responds to the world of nature through the lens, which in certain contexts might be described as an objective tool for image making in areas such as science or forensics, but which is also used subjectively by the artist. It is aligned to the concept that in a relatively short period of time, western societies have manifested what could be described as an unnatural way of looking at and thinking about nature. The work in part explores the potential of the pseudo-topographical image and also through a range of manipulative techniques and image groupings invites consideration of the objectivity-evidence-photograph



association. "What does the myth of the photograph's objectivity add to the world, when and where, how and how much, what interests does it serve.", (Lomax 1996). In the digital or post-photographic era photographic images can be endlessly altered which, as Mitchell (1994) advocated, compels us to further reconsider the truth-image fallacy and to ultimately reconfigure our eyes and thoughts to different ways of looking at photographs and deriving meaning. Unlike the approach of photographers like Richard Misrach, whose *Desert Cantos* images carried captions giving exact times/dates of exposure and geographical location, these images do not. This was intended to encourage more transferable thoughts. The images aim to avoid sentimentality and overt expressiveness through medium in favour of what is made to appear to be a more detached gaze. Ambiguity has been created between the apparently directly observed and the simulacra – constructed realities without source – so the viewer cannot know if, or in what ways, images have changed from that which was caught by the camera.

Initially, the physical environment offered a set of opportunities through which traditional binary oppositions could be examined. These included: inside outside; old new; space enclosure; public private; natural synthetic; utopia dystopia. At the point of practice through observation, interest grew in how such critical dialectics played out on the ground and how this convention within argument and analysis might be questioned. Bachelard's (1964) argument, rooted in the philosophy of phenomenology, and Lomax's (1996) argument, developed around myths of images,

reality, postmodernism and representation, advocate in different ways a more subtle consideration of this dualistic critique. It is in such a conceptual space that some of the work in the catalogue is developed and will be ongoing as a work-in-progress. A subtext of this research has been the challenge of how ideas which are essentially invisible can be given form through engagement with the visible and how both natural and man-made environments act as points of stimulation for a more personalised interior intimacy. In these novel liminal spaces of the plastic greenhouses the experience is one of being held in a state of transition and indeterminacy – aware of the outside by memory alone and unfamiliar with what this new territory signifies. Instinctive notions of growth dependent on the seasons and natural elements compete with an alternative artificiality. The inside (wherever that might begin and end) is a space of contradiction – simultaneously open and yet closed. Thoughts abound about what is being separated by a line in the ground, a thin membrane of polythene or a turn of a corner. The environment is rich in sites of symbiosis across the manmade and the elements – sunlight, heat, rain, wind – and the slow creep and return of nature.

In those greenhouses which are fully managed, only that which the grower requires is allowed to enter the space and anything which is detrimental to efficient growing is excluded. What is discernable on the outside and the inside is tacitly understood. In contrast, in abandoned structures a conflict ensues across biological types in the fine line between the internal and the external space. Those that best suit the

conditions ultimately dominate the overall look of the co-joined eco-environment. Even though the structure itself may have no remaining surface, there are noticeable differences between the micro-environment of one area of ground over another. In these environments survival of the fittest and chaos theory – where small changes in the conditions of any system can drastically change the long-term behaviour of that system – is played out.

The skeletal greenhouse structures comprise mainly tensioned wire covered with different sheet plastics to modify light, heat and ventilation. In terms of what has been eradicated to enable building, this new place mirrors Augé's non-anthropological model. The greenhouses themselves vary in style and construction from newer glass and steel to low tech, mainly vernacular in nature. Individually, some greenhouses carry visual associations with nomadic temporary shelter. Wind and intense sunlight corrode the outer plastics. This attempt to resist natural elements seems futile as the sunlight and the strong Poniente and Levante winds break up the surfaces and disperse the material across the open land. The material quickly acquires the hue of the dust and soil as it secures itself in the spines of the indigenous plants and cacti and the rough terrain of the desert. In these hybrid environments different pattern types challenge the eye. Patterns, which might be termed organic or randomised, intermingle with those thought of as geometrically organised or predictably systematised. When amongst the greenhouses one is more often than not looking into structures, or out from structures, through a grid of

fine wire or structural framing. The view beyond can only be seen through the filter or boundary of the man-made, providing a sense of Euclidian ordered space and perspective, evoking associations with artists' perspectival systems and measuring devices. "The way we think about space, consciously and unconsciously, is profoundly associated at the deepest structural level with the way space has come to be represented in Western art from the Renaissance." (Kemp, 2006 p.13) Thus overlaps ensue between landscape as direct experience and landscape as depicted within the history of western European visual arts.

The research underpinning the series of images was concerned with a range of questions which grew out of a developing understanding of the political and cultural context of the location and associated critical theory. The strategy aimed to suggest associations across the full spectrum of building, decaying and renewing to encourage thought around the cyclic pattern of land use and human benefit over time. In its raw state the landscape of the region ranges from remote wilderness to land littered with the remnants of earlier civilisations and cultures and their attempts at shelter, farming, small industry and mineral extraction. It could be argued that it is also those extreme physical manifestations of human exploitation of the land that now characterise it for the visitor. It might also be that given enough time (geological time) the plastic greenhouses too will be seen as the distant technological past and changes that they have enforced on the land and its people may also be subsumed into a more romanticised interpretation.







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- 2000 Project Award, East Midlands Arts
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- 2004 *Pleasure Garden*
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- 2005 *Common Ground: Landscape and Contemporary Art*,
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- 2006 *Invernaderos*
solo show within Format06,
Derby Photography Festival

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