

The condition of things



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Douglas Scholes

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tcot.ca

Orbital

Text by Daniel Canty



This book is part of the project *The condition of things* developed by Douglas Scholes during his Canada Council for the Arts International Residency at SPACE Studios in Hackney, London, UK (March to August 2012) and is an accompaniment to the project's website at [tcot.ca](http://tcot.ca).

The bas-relief amphora was cast in beeswax in multiple editions and attached to the catalogue by Douglas Scholes. As beeswax is malleable yet delicate, the perpetuity of the amphora will rely on the careful handling and storing of this book.

This work is entirely recyclable.

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Orbital



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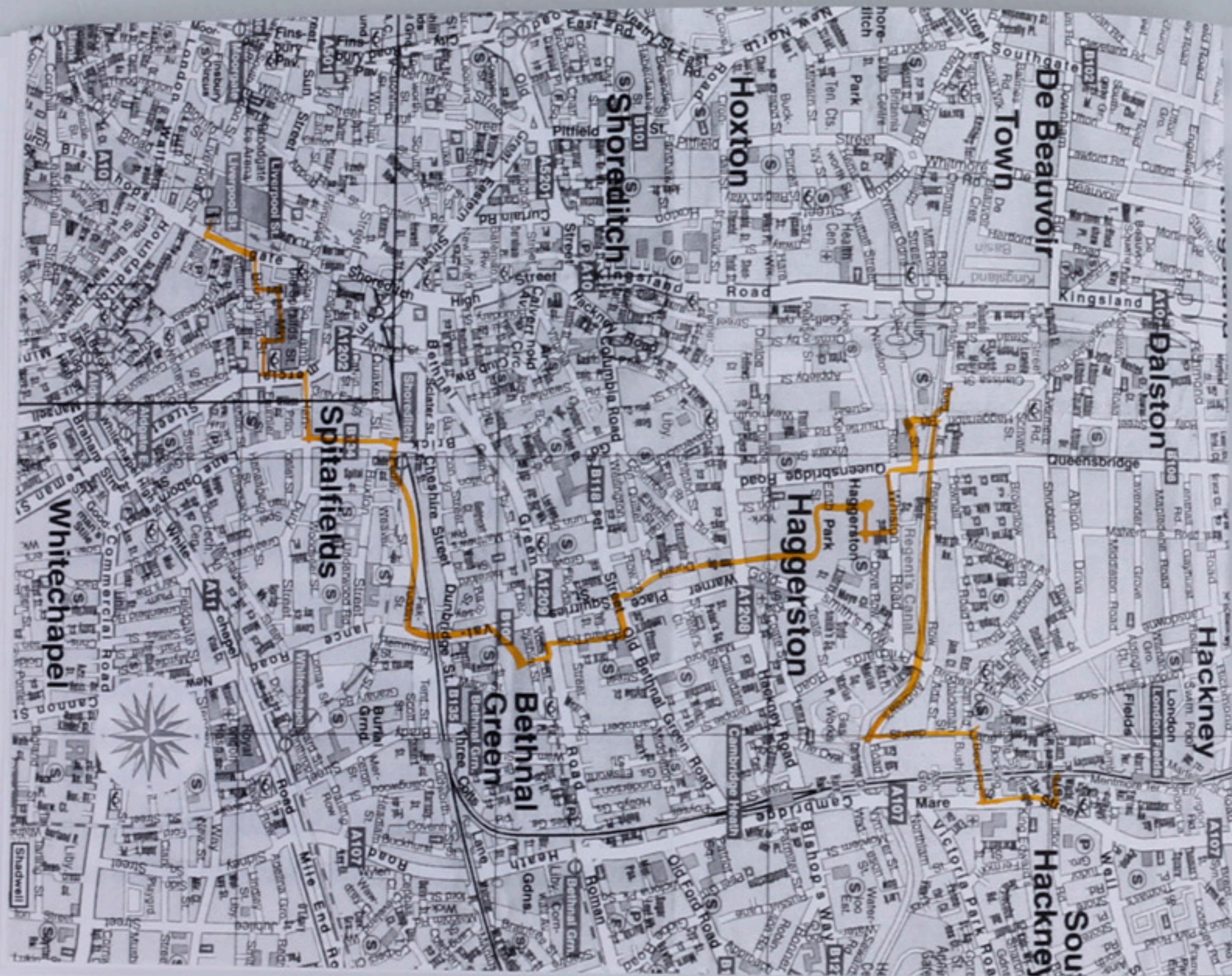


## 1 The inertia of images

I first came to London by way of the sky on a nine hour night flight from the west coast of Canada, coursing along the ballistic curve where Russian and American warheads would have met head-on, had the final war that fuelled my youthful fears come to pass. Looking out of the port side window, I could detect no signs of the polar expanse and radar arrays of the Distant Early Warning line. I should have been sound asleep as the plane, trailing the lower circumference of the polar

circle, flew over an invisible winter landscape under the crystalline dome of stars. The 20th century would soon come to a close, its skies unbroken by the hard light of extinction. I was still sleepless when Iceland floated through my half-closed eyes out of the Atlantic void. The plane would soon veer off its nuclear flight path towards the shores of England. In my memory, the North, studded with towns softly glowing like nightlights, appeared to be as sound asleep as I should have been. Yet as we reached the southern half of the island, it seemed aglow with the diffuse light of a fallen constellation. In childhood lore, I heard that London was a





foggy sprawl of streets so numerous that some of their names escape all memory. The inertia of images is such, that since then, I have always thought of the city, with its rippling, luminous pelt, as a milky beast of light, stranded at the foot of the sky. Travelling to London now, I land in an Unreal City hazy with signs and portents, ready to reconnect the dots.



## 2 A sideways glance

In order to see the figures that the ancient astronomers distinguished in the night sky, one must learn to look at the stars sideways. The animals, deities and commonplace things that hide within the constellations only reveal themselves to those who look out of the corners of their eyes. No need to wait for night time though. The art of the sideways glance can be practised in full daylight. The earth's cities, after all, are replete with images that only emerge in peripheral vision. While the multitudes might





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Portrait of a Rubbish Picker – Regent's Canal



have grown wary of eye contact, so much remains to be learned from the wandering glance. Millions of strangers mill about London's maze of ten thousand quaintly named streets, conducting unknown business. If they have one, that is. And if they don't, they can just invent it. None will be the wiser for it. The island is known to be a host of eccentricities and not just because of the derby hats. This busy bee, slipping on his work gloves, donning his cap and cane and loading a crate of twelve wax amphorae on his back, is here to remind us that the city's business is everybody's business. He knows that just because a thing seems invisible





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The city's business is everybody's business – Haggerston Park



that does not mean it isn't there. So if the Rubbish Picker's orbit intersects your path don't hesitate to look up and tip your hat in salute. *Top of the day, mate*. Drifting in the currents of the everyday, tossed in the flotsam and jetsam of common things, he assembles shapes on the periphery and disappears back into the crowd, looking for what was put aside and left out, for what everybody else seems to have forgotten. He could be from anywhere, even Ancient Rome. His work is yours. When he does it, he is at one with the people and the things that surround him. Now you see *him*, now you don't. Now you see *it*, now you don't. We turn around





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Picking up the wayward thread of time – Samuel House



and, at the drop of the hat, we see  
*something* and are *somewhere* again.  
A humble labourer, the Rubbish Picker  
helps us pick up the wayward thread  
of time, hands back to us the lost and  
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The unseen or those who won't see – Liverpool Street Station

















Bagging the invisible is no guarantee (during, after, later)  
– Liverpool Street Station









The precursor to the contemporary trophy was  
a disposable object – *Bishopsgate Street*



Grocery bags, carried off by wind, assemble in a plastic sargassum off the Pacific edge. Out there, whale song and dolphin calls choke on consumer waste. Paper (*Don't print this email!*) and microprocessors (*Don't throw away this computer!*) make up the bulk of the world's landfills. In the south-western deserts of the USA, whose substrata is already studded with incomprehensible minerals forged in the aftershock of atomic testing, the American government has decided to bury its nuclear waste





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Orbital decay



under a mountain as ominous as the dollar bill's all-seeing pyramid. The real question is this: will the Futurians be able to decipher our DANGER signs or will they end up in a variation of *Planet of the Apes*, crying out against the buried evidence of man's folly? Even the skies have become unsafe. A ribbon of broken matter now girdles the earth. Paint flakes and miniature metal motes, accelerated to lacerating speeds, threaten to lock us in. The city dweller need not fix their gaze two planets away to be reminded in the Asteroid Belt of the original cost of decreation. They have only to stare at the tip of their shoes to see that the





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Deciphering our DANGER signs now



scrap heap of history has grown to orbital proportions and that the sky might as well be falling, for all the debris at their feet.





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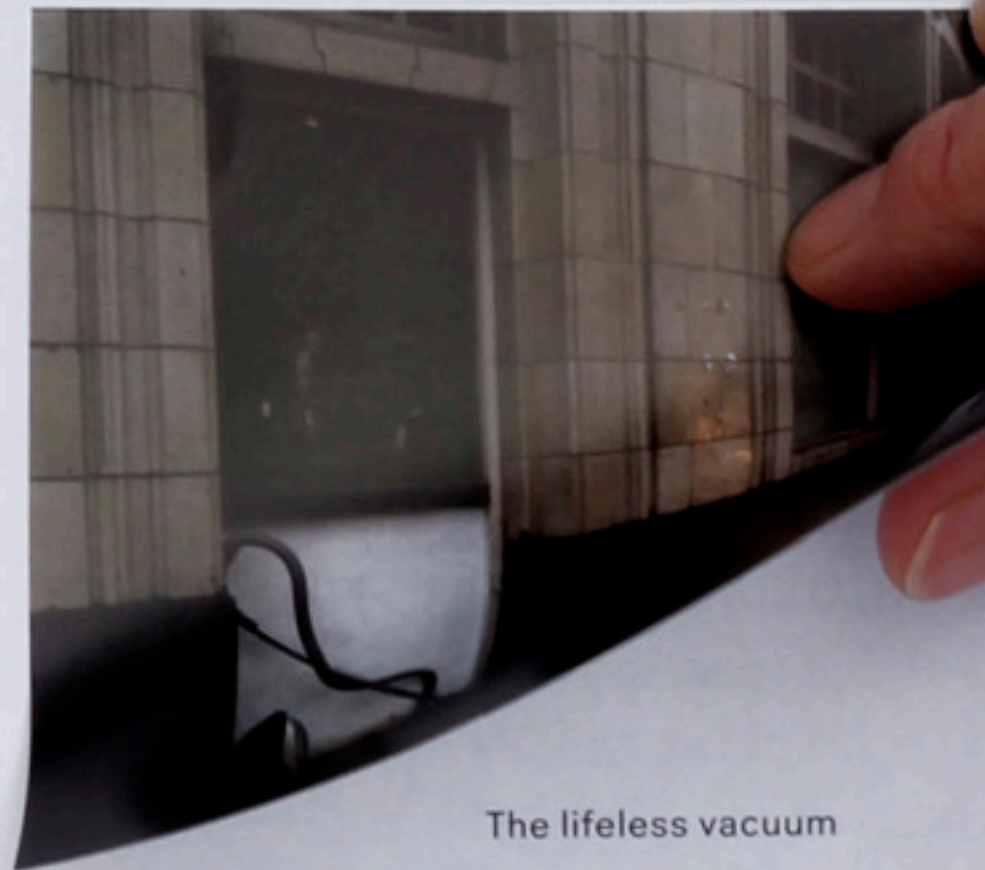


A passageway to another dimension









The lifeless vacuum



#### 4 Heedless mountain

Things fall unexpectedly into place. When young, my cousin Denis, who was very gifted at sports, landed a high-paying summer job at the local Coca Cola plant, summoning his best pitch to throw used glass bottles into metal containers, in order to break them into recyclable pieces. *Nice work if you can get it.* The plant was located in that hinterland of suburbs, where one only ventures out of obligation and where the machinery of our daily living hides in plain sight. There, our goods are made and there, their





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A constellation of discarded vessels underfoot



overflow is processed. That being said, I wonder how much the constant din of breaking glass contributed to him giving up his athletic career to work in sports journalism? I cannot help but think of this image from my ancient summers when I consider the mountain of clay shards that rises in Rome, near the banks of the Tiber River, overtaken by centuries' worth of weeds: 600 000 m<sup>3</sup> at 54 m above sea level. Back in the imperial heyday, the amphora was the basic unit of maritime transport. Aligned and piled in neat rows in the hull of boats, awaiting redistribution through the businesses of the capital, amphorae were as common, and as disposable,





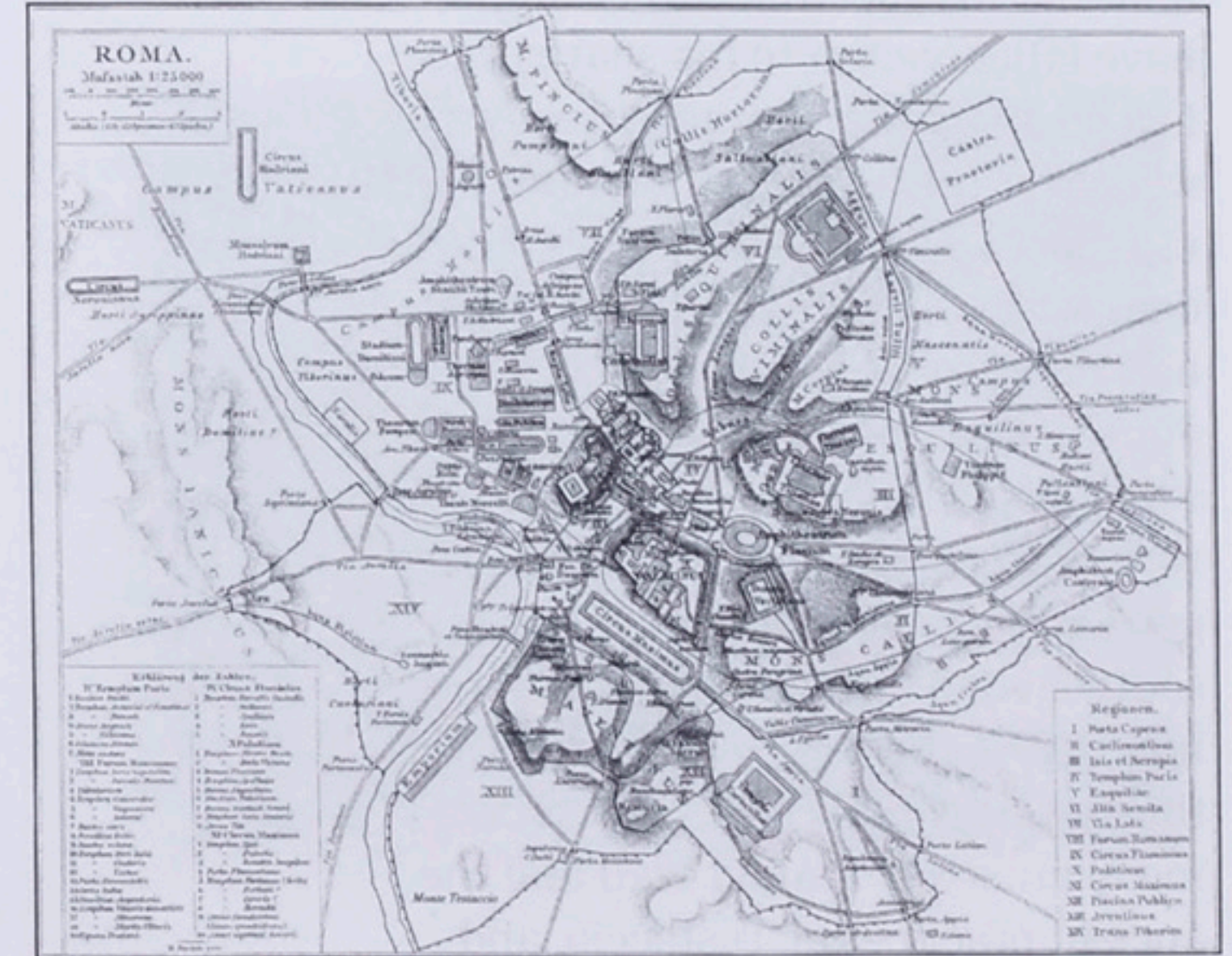
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A missed bid for reentry

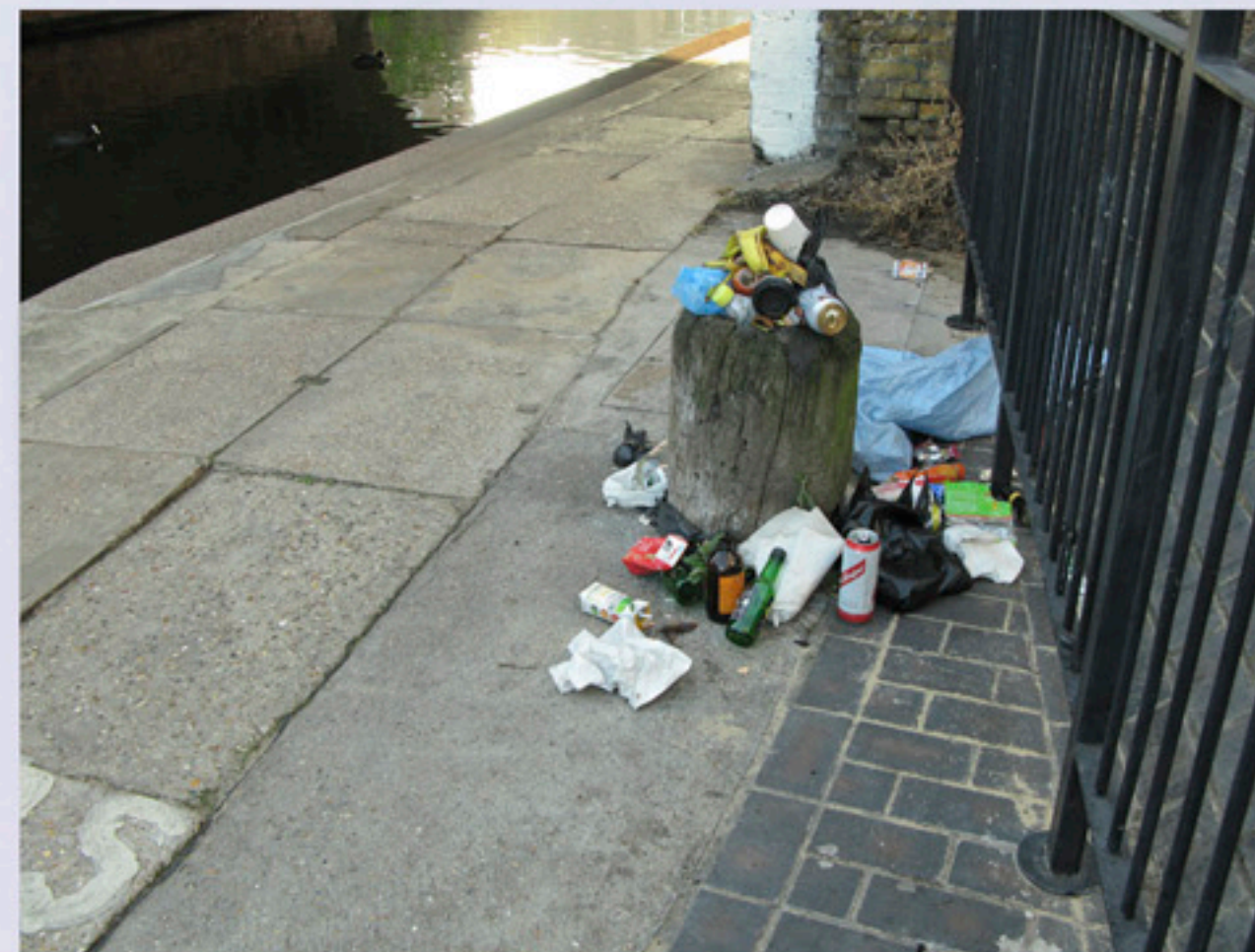


as packing crates, or as today's plastic bottles filled with tap water by the same mythical soft drink purveyors of our youth. Every amphora in the port, once void of olive oil, was destined to be broken into pieces and added to the ever growing mass of Monte Testaccio, *The Mountain of Shards*, or *Mons Testaceus*, in Latin. I like that *Testaceus* shares its root with the argotic *testae*, or *head*, and that the amphora's shape is reminiscent of the sports trophies I coveted in youth. My cousin's job was like all thoughtless jobs where you get to daydream a lot. When I look back on his situation, I realize that his athletic advantages paved the way





for his intellectual development, and that his sporting career might have fallen victim to his spare time. I wonder if the labourers at Testaccio were as precise and sportsmanlike as my cousin and what they would have done with their lives had their society been more leisurely? Would they have gone the way of the Rubbish Picker who spends his spare time doing what no one asked for and sometimes getting noticed for it? Once I have some time to think, I would like to investigate the correlation between the trajectory of a Coke bottle smashing against a container wall and the ancient practices at Testaccio, and perhaps commendably christen that





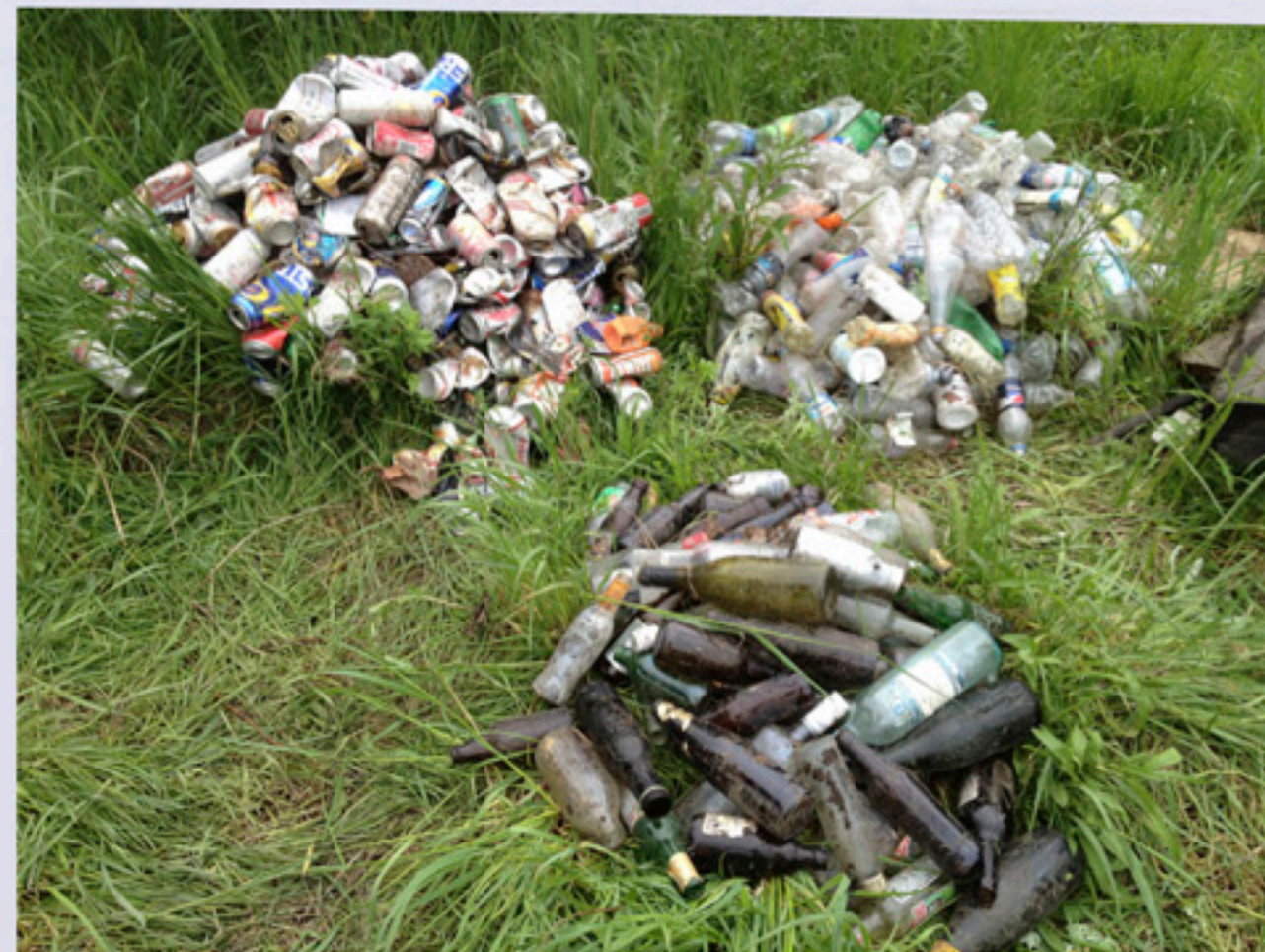
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Overflowing canal ad hoc dustbin



heathen monument, in an unrepentant case of translator's treason, *The Headless Mountain*. In the geography of spare time, it lies just one vowel away from *Heedless*.





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The Rubbish Picker's collection



## 5 Constellation of the amphora

*The Mountain of Shards* and the port at Testaccio lie far away from London, but the Rubbish Picker's enterprise remains an uphill battle. He wages it to keep himself busy against the rising tide of time. For the most determined (some would say desperate) amongst us, *there is nothing but things*. Our gestures are measured out against a world of material indifference. Entropy finds one of its metaphorical meanings in the denial of human endeavours. The view from above





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A heedless mound

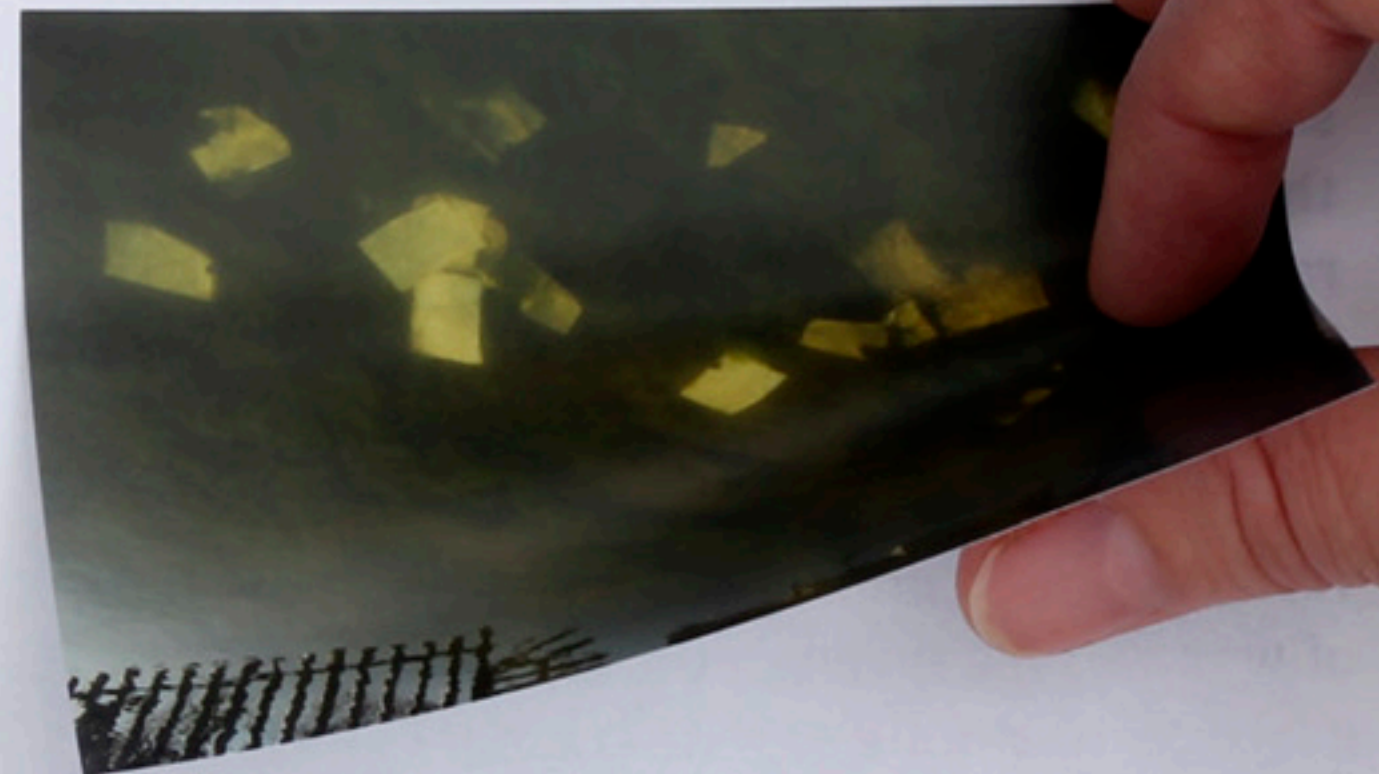


has been obscured by our own deeds  
and our old astronomy has vanished  
behind a cloud of broken matter. The  
old gods have gone away and, these  
days, it's hard to tell what any of us  
weaves into the skein of the world.  
The sky has fallen all around us and  
we are drowning in its fallout. As the  
Rubbish Picker travels from derelict  
station to derelict station, dropping  
his amphorae at anchor, he connects  
the dots of an uncertain constellation.  
It can only be seen from here on earth,  
where time waits, like water, to sink  
us in itself. Even words written on  
water were *written*. Signs, indifferent  
to our understanding, adrift in the  
currents of duration, gather in every





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Written on water

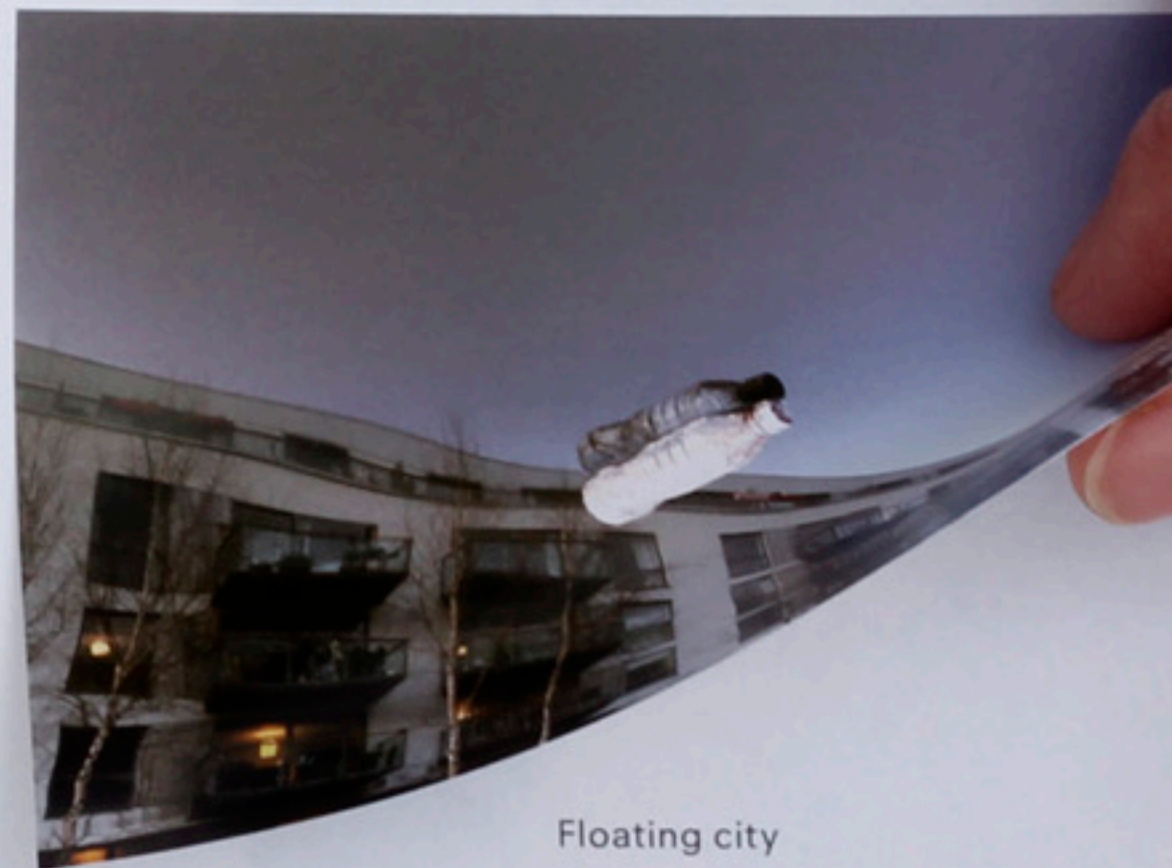


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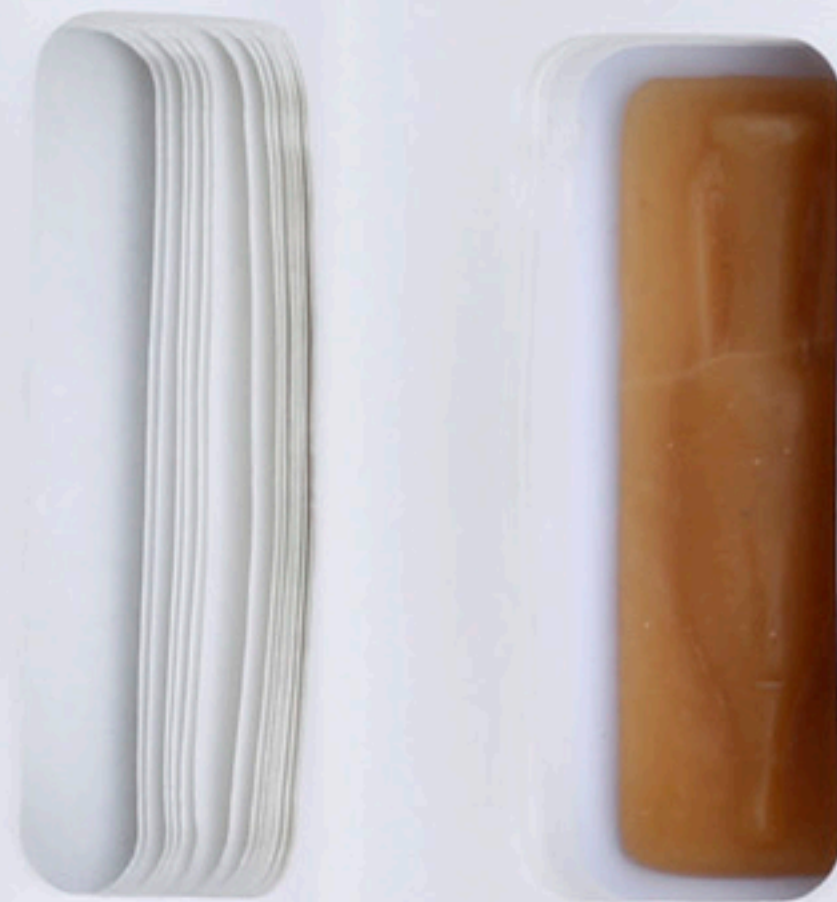


Floating city



here, stranded at the foot of the sky,  
where there is nothing but time, there  
is one thing our heroics can always  
amount to: saving time from its own  
waste. *Because there are no things  
but time.*

Daniel Canty





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Hollow amphora



## The condition of things





I explore *the pragmatic aesthetic\** within the urban landscape by maintaining—collecting, sorting, organizing and repairing—the unwanted, used and discarded things that amass in eddies in the urban landscape. These eddies are peripheral sites, overlooked and undervalued yet existing in plain sight. They typically feature layers of neglect, evident in the overgrown accumulation of leftovers from our contemporary packaged existence.

I search out these eddies and peel through the layers of accumulated leftovers to reveal the condition of things, which can be seen in two ways. One is accepting the condition



as natural: neglect exists and has an aesthetic value, deriving its state from natural forces, an entropic neutralization of energy. This is where little to nothing is done and things are left to become what they will. The other is acknowledging the condition as artificial: neglect is controllable and the aesthetic value is altered, even improved, by expending energy, sustaining a perceived order to things.

In a city too busy to notice, there is an uneasy appealing quality to working in a forgotten parcel of land nestled in plain sight. I feel as invisible and anonymous as the debris that has collected. This anonymous relationship to the condition of things



is identified and made public through the work done within the chosen sites.

Once the sites have been maintained and much of the unsightly (not unseen) material removed, a further contribution is offered in the form of a hollow amphora cast in beeswax. The amphora, precursor to the contemporary trophy, was originally a disposable object. Once its purpose was fulfilled, it was broken into pieces and discarded in dumps that eventually became huge mounds of fired clay fragments, like Monte Testaccio in Rome. The contemporary parallel to the ubiquitous plastic water bottle and landfills is evident. In this instance, the amphora



represents the material removed from the site and the trophy offered in recognition for the actions performed: a temporary, ephemeral, almost unseen gift that will disappear, likely to be replaced by rubbish.

Douglas Scholes

→ [tcot.ca](http://tcot.ca)

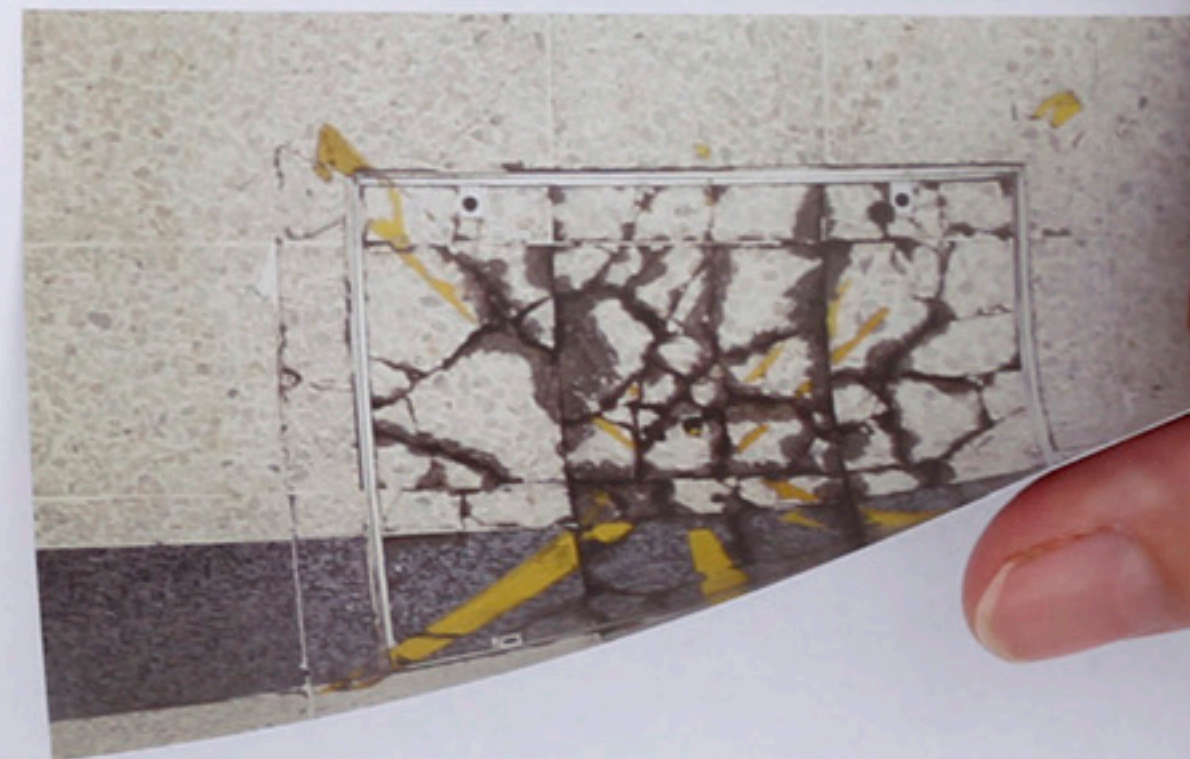


\* The *pragmatic aesthetic* refers to the intrinsic and evolving appearance of things, objects, places and structures found in our environments, appearances that are inherently dynamic due to use and the passage of time.





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Fractured terrazzo continuum



## [ space ]

SPACE has hosted the Canada Council for the Arts International Residency programme in London since 2003. The programme allows two Canadian artists per year full use of a SPACE studio and a place to live for the duration of the six-month period. Alongside SPACE, the artist plans a programme of activities, talks, visits and social events offering valuable opportunities to meet London-based artists and gallerists, helping to promote and distribute their work internationally.

Founded in 1968, SPACE produces dynamic environments where individuals and communities can engage in creative processes. SPACE supports artistic production by developing and managing studio space, widening participation in visual arts & media, and fostering the creative potential of individuals and communities.

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Mattress rack – restful bliss awaits



Douglas Scholes moves through the urban landscape pragmatically responding to the condition of things.

→ [dougsholes.ca](http://dougsholes.ca)



Daniel Canty is an author and director who lives and walks in Montreal.

→ [danielcanty.com](http://danielcanty.com)



*there are no things but time*



