

ON EDGE

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I take photographs of the landscape on the edge of Melbourne. That is why I am driving slowly, late one afternoon, on a dirt road just outside the northern boundary of Melbourne. I'm intrigued by the number of farmhouses that look to be in a state of disrepair. They're built of both weatherboard and stone, boarded up or falling over, and layers of coloured peeling paint reveal years of careful maintenance. Farm equipment lies rusting in paddocks marked by stone fencing and remnants of European trees and gardens lie dead and covered with lichen.

The liminal zones of a city fascinate me. When I drive out of Melbourne I am always looking for the 'edge', the moment of change from urban to country: what does it look like? Because of the expansion of the urban growth boundary, centuries of history are about to be disturbed and possibly changed forever. These farms sit on the Victorian Volcanic Plain, a region in which significant urban growth and development is planned over the coming years.



Large gum trees and indigenous grasses hug the sides of creeks - the last sign of remnant landscapes before European settlement. Creeks from north of the city cut through these boundaries, sometimes their banks are lined with concrete as they make their way through suburbs to the city and the Yarra River, and then the ocean. I am looking for a particular creek, Darebin. I am lucky, I see it winding through a farm paddock. At the same time an enormous kangaroo bounds out of the fading light, towards me, and I think how amazing that such animals are still living twenty-five kilometres from the centre of Melbourne.

I turn right into a road that is definitely on the edge. The northern side of the road is marked by a billboard with a *sold* sticker: 'huge Victorian land subdivision—one of the last land subdivisional opportunities in this fast growing northern corridor'. The abandoned houses and farm buildings I've been driving past are ruins waiting to be pulled down. The buildings have passed their use-by date even though some look less than fifty years old. They lie in wait, boarded up, ready for the bulldozers to arrive. I am reminded of



the eighteenth-century Italian artist of ruins Piranesi, who said that 'ruins are a sign of life and not death'.¹ There is no nostalgia, they are an image of the future, not of the past.

Further along the road more billboards appear. Promises of opportunity line the street, promoting a new life in the form of new housing, shopping and lifestyle. It's a Sunday and about twenty earthmoving machines lie as if resting before they begin their heavy work again on Monday. A bright yellow bulldozer has the brand name Casabene printed along its shovelling arm. Stone fences are piled into mounds. Fluorescent plastic flags and markers map out an area of land that is to be razed to the ground. All the bright colours feel incongruous as I wander around the site and try to imagine the long-gone farms, the indigenous grasslands and the people who once lived here.

Roads and infrastructure move northward each day, ripping out trees, crushing huge basalt boulders and levelling off the ground. A new suburb is emerging. Rehashed neo-Georgian houses are lined in tight rows. Remnants of grassland and stone fencing sit tucked in next to newly installed parks and public sculpture.



I'm an inner-city dweller, Spending time in these outer suburbs takes me out of my comfort zone. As I walk along creeks, bike paths and freeways looking for the 'edge' I come across odd events. I see a man digging in the ground alongside a freeway, I realise that he has been following me, he disappears into the bushes when I notice him. I quickly call my partner to let him know where I am then continue to set up my tripod to take pictures of some grasslands beside a freeway and a park. While I'm doing this two young men do a series of burnout wheelies in a Torana in front of me and I'm not sure whether to smile, clap or look busy. Two other cars drive up alongside each other in the park: words are exchanged then the cars drive out of the park at high speed. A drug deal, perhaps? These things happen in the inner city too but on the edge, where new and old suburbs collide, it seems more confronting. Everything, it seems, is new here, and codes of behaviour as well as a new suburb are being mapped out.



NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Marco Belpoliti, 'Memory of Oblivion//2006', in Simon Morley (ed.), *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, MIT Press, Whitechapel Gallery, London 2010, p. 181.

