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In his book *Warped Space*, the architectural theorist Anthony Vidler speaks of the "paranoiac space of modernism," a space which is "mutated into a realm of panic, where all limits and boundaries become blurred..." These words come to mind when considering the urban aerial images of Los Angeles and its periphery shown here, excerpted from my photographic project called "Oblivion."

Certain spatial fears seem endemic to the modern metropolis, and Los Angeles defines this term in ways that no other American city can approximate. This amorphous skein of strip malls and gated developments, highway entrance and exit ramps, lies unfurled over the landscape like a sheet over a recalcitrant cadaver.

Surely the earth is dead beneath the sheer weight and breadth of this built form?

As we cast a critical eye upon the megalopolis of Southern California, it is necessary to remind ourselves that there is still a heart beating within it. Indeed, 15 million hearts, with all the souls and dreams of the bodies powered by those hearts: the city as living, breathing organism, constantly breaking down and constantly replicating.

In its frenzy to expand, the city creates topographies of alienation, fear, and despair. Indeed, Los Angeles is emblematic of an idea of modern space that is linked to an increasing sense of collective societal anxiety. The invention of radical concepts of urban space was a theme central to the early twentieth century avant-garde, who called for modernity to escape from the constraints of history. We now know, in ways once thought unimaginable, that we cannot escape history. These aerial images describe a potentially desecrated urban fabric, even as they transcribe the commonplace. Indeed, in the post-9/11 age we now occupy, chaos and catastrophe seem implicit in the urban aerial view. To surveil and record the city from the air seems nearly to approach an act of civil disobedience. The images cannot help but serve as portent or prophecy of some future conflagration.

Is this the reason for the unease, the hint of claustrophobia and synesthetic terror that these pictures elicit? Or is it the endlessness of the expanse, the multiplying nothingness that fills frame after frame, the city metastasizing ceaselessly, which causes a sense of rising dread?

Our perceptions are contingent on the positions our bodies occupy in space. The architecturally-trained sculptor Gordon Matta-Clark split open the domestic structure of the home, peeled it apart and let us occupy the void he created. For those making their homes within the urban galaxy of Los Angeles, an entity with neither limit nor center, is there any space remaining that can serve as psychological refuge or sanctuary? From above, in these aerial views, we see encrypted within the city's code the elements of our own vulnerability: an oblivion that is at once stately, magnificent, and potentially lethal. How do the city's inhabitants adapt to these aspects of the modern metropolis? As Mike Davis writes in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*: "social anxiety...is just the maladjustment to change. But who has anticipated, or adjusted to, the scale of change in Southern California in the last fifteen years?" Likewise, who among us has adapted to the more recent sea-change wrought in urban living by the demise of the Twin Towers of New York, and the lives that fell along with them?

The urban dweller of Southern California now exists in what Davis terms the fastest growing metropolis in the Western world, "with a built-up surface area nearly the size of Ireland, and a GNP bigger than India's." Left to navigate this terrain of anxiety and estrangement, with a pattern of urbanization the critic Peter Plagens calls "the ecology of evil," the citizen of this alien landscape may begin to ponder some of the elemental design questions of our time...Where is home? Where is our safe haven? How can we move towards such a place? Perhaps by forming such questions, we can begin to imagine the process of creating their answers. In the interim, these images imply an incessant search for sanctuary that never ends.



























