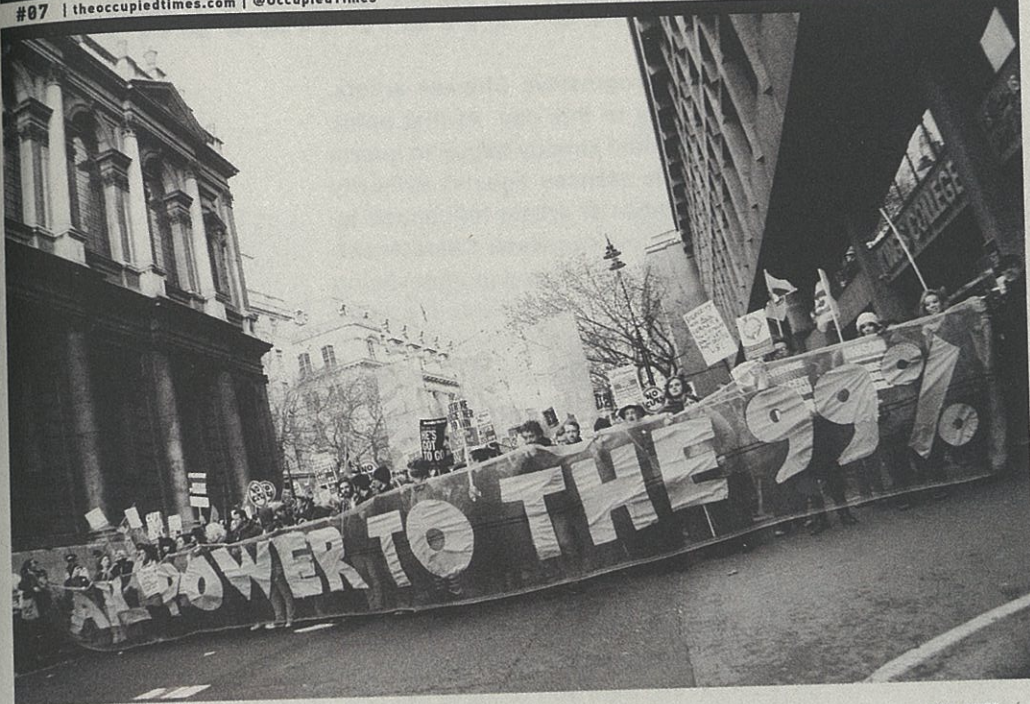


The Occupied Times

~ OF LONDON ~

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MARK KAURI

OCCUPY EVERYWHERE: GOING VIVAL

This week, coinciding with the two-month anniversary of the emergence of Occupy London, calls have been made for a national day of creative, non-violent action to highlight economic and social injustice. Occupy Everywhere (December 15th) is an invitation for concerned citizens and communities across the UK to engage with the global dialogue on the changes and re-imaginings our society desperately requires.

The invitation comes on the heels of concerns of further instability in the markets and the continuing drive by the government to proceed with extensive cuts to public services, the perpetuation of neoliberal economic

policies and corporate rule, and a blind eye-turned attitude towards the ecological devastation entailed by this agenda. In short: the same formula to have run amok in the build-up and consequent come-down of the recent global financial crisis is being re-bottled, re-branded - and sold at a higher price (rolling out at coffee shops this festive season: the Neoliberal latte!). Occupy Everywhere may represent the latest batch of antidote attempting to remedy this poison, but this action - together with the wider initiative of the Occupy movement - is also representative of an historic and intertwined domino chain of social reform.

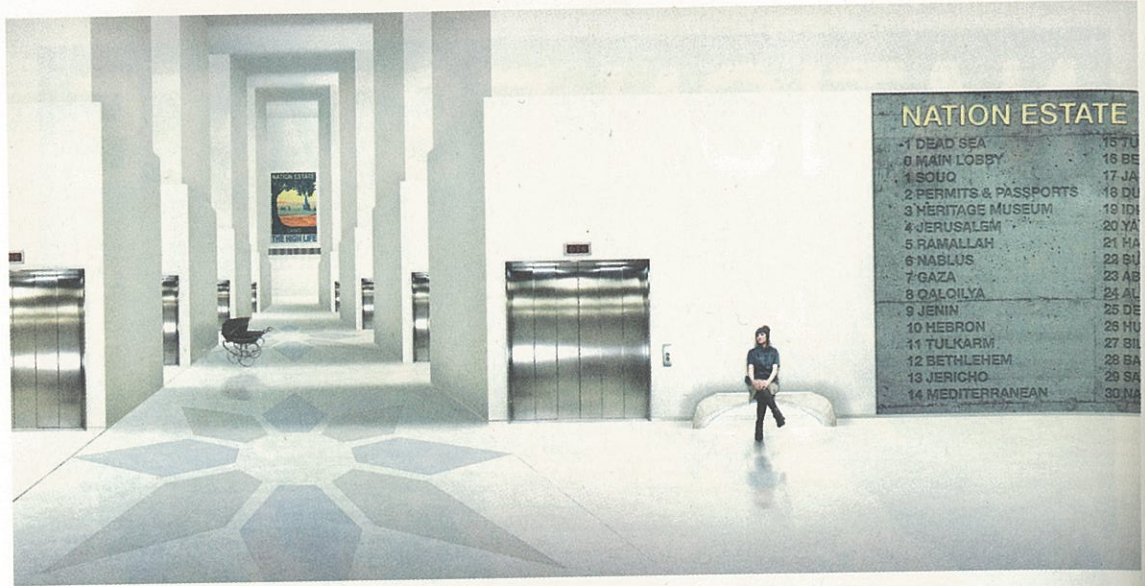
In the seventeenth century, it took a dissolved parliament more than a decade to reform and stand up to the tyrannical reign of King Charles I - and longer still for the ensuing civil war to see the autocratic rule of monarchs ousted from the British Isles altogether. This period of turmoil gave rise to the actions of dissenting groups, including the Levellers and the Diggers, who occupied themselves with efforts towards economic equality.

A century later, against the backdrop of the industrial revolution that would propel our society into the late modern age, the trade union movement saw those outside of the aristocracy take social reform into

their own hands. Workers formed unions to stand in solidarity against injustices and exploitation. It was from this front that 'occupy' as terminology can find its origin - with workers' industrial action having included moves to occupy factories to prevent lock-outs by their employers.

With the kindling of reform set down for future generations, the 20th century saw the fire of change stoked like never before: with direct action from feminists leading to the civil right to vote, the post-world war years giving rise to the welfare state and a national health service and the 1960s playing host to a plethora of social reforms, civil rights movements and revolutionary general strikes >>





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PALESTINE AND ISRAEL: FICTIONALIZING THE FUTURE, RELIVING



JR: MAGNIFYING THE WORLD

The artist JR often produces work that requires engagement with ordinary people – the invisibles, the everyday, the unnoticed. After photographing them or requesting portraits, he enlarges the images to monumental size, pasting the magnified pictures throughout the environment. The visual effect is astounding. Whether in the favelas of Rio or the streets of Los Angeles, buildings start to speak, gigantic eyes blink in different directions and huge smiles pop out of the dark. It's as if a whole layer of humanity, hidden in the depths of cities and slums, has suddenly surfaced to see the light – and finds it dazzling.

Engagement is key to JR's work. He has travelled the world, sometimes placing himself in difficult situations. By initiating straightforward discussion with those involved, he gains their trust and – through photography, enlarging and pasting – tells their story. He began to work in this way after the 2004 riots in the Paris suburbs, or *banlieues*, taking close-up shots (using a 28-millimetre lens) of young residents pulling faces and pasting them on the walls of the historic Marais district, giving the residents of the *banlieues* a human face. The next stage in what he now called his *28 Millimètres* project was *Face2Face* (2007) in Israel and the West Bank, where a mixture of Israelis and Palestinians were photographed close-up, and the photos pasted throughout Israel, the West Bank and on both sides of the Separation Wall (see page 157).⁴⁵

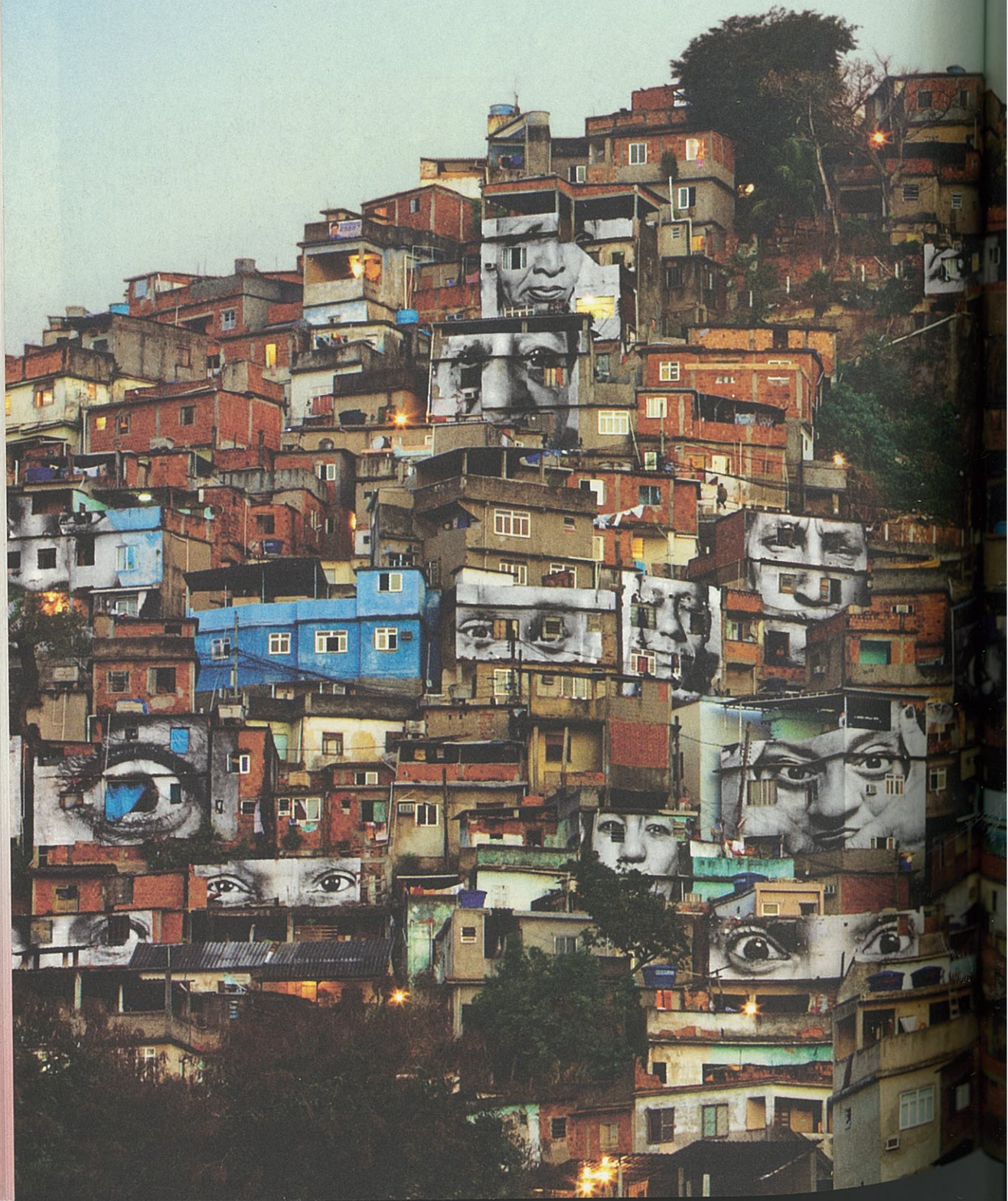
Then in 2008, came *Women Are Heroes* (the third stage of *28 Millimètres*) examining the role women play in holding families and communities together around the world, despite tragedy and conflict. JR's first stop was the slums of Kibera in Kenya, where 2000 square metres (21,500 square feet) of rooftops were covered with his photographs of resident women's faces (the photographs were also printed on vinyl providing the added benefit of making the rooftops waterproof). A further stop that year was a visit to Morro da Providência, one of Rio de Janeiro's most dangerous favelas, after hearing a news report of the killing of three innocent young men caught up in the existing drug wars. The women he met there told a story, not of grief and despair, but of courage and dignity – and the desire for identity, as the infamous favela was literally being 'disappeared' off the map, despite its location near the centre of the city. This time, their story was told through photographs of their eyes, proud and immovable, which they helped JR to paste on the sides of their houses: all looking directly towards the centre of Rio – an emotive reminder of their existence.⁴⁶

1. *28 Millimètres: Women Are Heroes*, project by the French artist JR. The photograph shows an overview of an 'action' in a Kibera slum. Kenya 2009.

2. *Inside Out Project: The Time Is Now, Yalla!*, photographic 'pasting' in Naplouse, Palestine. In 2011 JR and his team set up giant photoboosts in Israel and Palestine; both communities visited the booths and received large-format photos that they could paste anywhere, on their own or in groups. The project title states that it is now time for the two-state solution, bringing peace and prosperity: 'Yalla' means 'let's go!'.

3 (overleaf). *28 Millimètres: Women Are Heroes*, project by the French artist JR. The photograph shows an action in the favela Morro da Providência in Rio de Janeiro. Brazil 2008.

JR won the TED Prize in 2011, and launched a new global participatory project entitled *Inside Out*, through which he encouraged people to send him their own portraits and a statement concerning a cause that they felt strongly about. The Inside Out Project would then help them to find a vehicle for communicating their statement or cause. The group project *The Time is Now, Yalla!* (2011) is represented on page 189 by a photo 'pasting' in Naplouse, Palestine, involving both Israelis and Palestinians. The project title calls for the two state solution, bringing peace and prosperity: 'Yalla' means 'let's go!'.⁴⁷



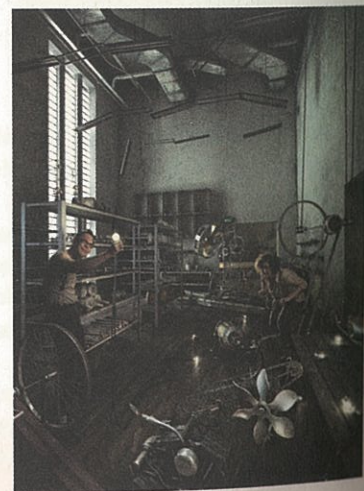
AFTER THE FLOOD

Creative agency Squint/Opera exhibited five images entitled *Flooded London* in the 2008 *London Festival of Architecture*. They tell a story set in the year 2090 and it's clear a catastrophe happened a while in the past. London has been overtaken by rising sea levels, and there are very few people around. The survivors seem settled into a way of life that is inventive and low-tech, and the pace is calm. The hysteria of business-driven city life (symbolized, for example, by the City of London) is either submerged or a wreck; two women are fishing off an open-office level of a Canary Wharf high-rise.²³

Other people are in a former London gallery or museum, engaged in making new things from pre-flood materials, and show satisfaction at having built a low-tech machine that will power a light bulb. The spirit of invention stretches to the suburbs: in a street of terraced houses, the road has become overgrown by plants, long since free from cars, as well as most of the houses. One house appears loved and inhabited, its garden bordered with topiary hedges. A man works on a homemade submarine and the end of the street has become a slipway, from which to launch it. This is no horrible, dystopian future, but a tribute to survival, invention and the human ability to 'carry on' and make the best of things. (If viewed satirically, some might even say the bankers, city-types and lovers of the rat race got what they deserved.)²⁴



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1-4. *Flooded London*, five images that foresee the future, produced by creative agency Squint/Opera for an exhibition at the 2008 *London Festival of Architecture*. UK 2008.



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THE GREAT ESCAPE: GO VIRTUAL

Chinese artist Cao Fei grew up in the Pearl River Delta; a region of heavy industrialization driven by globalization. She was therefore surrounded by clashes between urban and rural lifestyles and values in an area of dense population and rapidly growing factories. Little wonder then, that her creative work often explores the fantasies and desires of people wanting to break out of their mundane lives.²⁵

Her fascination with fantasy and role-play, as well as cultural contradictions, took her into interactive-media projects, especially the online role-playing game, *Second Life*, for which she constructed her avatar, China Tracy. In 2008 she planned and developed the island city named *RMB City* within *Second Life*; the city's title is derived from the Chinese currency *renminbi*.²⁶ *RMB City* itself is an inchoate mass of stereotypes and symbols of China's past and present – a panda floats in midair, a statue of Mao is half-submerged in the harbour, the rusty wreckage of the National Stadium (the 'Bird's Nest') surrounds the People's Park. It's a virtual universe where participants live through personalized avatars and is financed by real-world collectors and art institutions. It has also become a platform for the creation of new projects and artworks by other artists. Cao Fei produced further extensions in film, such as *Live in RMB City* (2009), in which China Tracy and her baby son explore the buildings and meet different characters in *RMB City*, while she tells her son about virtual and real life and death. And her *RMB City Opera* (2009) uses both *Second Life* avatars and spaces, alongside real-world actors in a live stage performance. It is a series of episodes between a young man and woman. On stage they log on to *RMB City*, switch avatars frequently (at times becoming superheroes), dance and sing, while the projection of the avatars coincides with real performers on stage.²⁷

Cao Fei's interest is in living in parallel worlds – the real and the virtual – and informing connections between the two. After all, a virtual world of freedom offers interesting possibilities for escape, especially to those living in a real-world country where government and social restrictions can be limiting and environmental destruction is increasing.

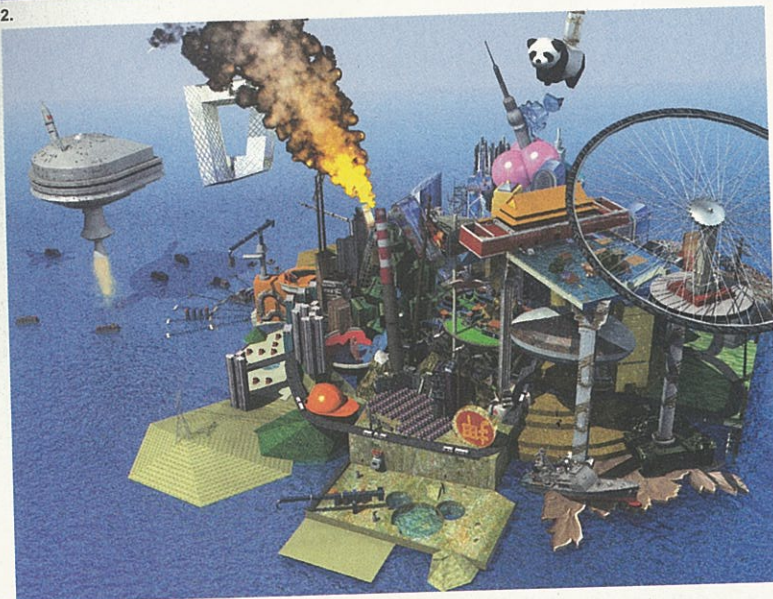


1. Detail of a video still from *Live in RMB City*, showing China Tracy (Cao Fei's avatar) with her baby son. China 2009.

2-4. Different views of *RMB City*, an online virtual world where users socialize using self-styled avatars. Planned and developed in the role-playing game *Second Life* by artist Cao Fei. China 2008.



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WARNINGS OF THE FUTURE

Canadian artist Kelly Richardson's installation *Leviathan* (2011) is an immersive experience that uses three enormous screens to draw the viewer into a dark swamp of trees that look deeply foreboding, while a very slight breeze makes an occasional branch flicker, suggesting the briefest sign of life. The trees sit in a vast mass of liquid that shifts and rolls with a slow, flowing movement; there is an eerie, threatening light from beneath, perhaps radiation or some strange life form or disease is brewing. The sound emanating from this scene is a low, monotonous hum: is it the product of a malevolent poisoning? Or a mythical evil come to haunt the present, or a post-apocalyptic future?²⁸

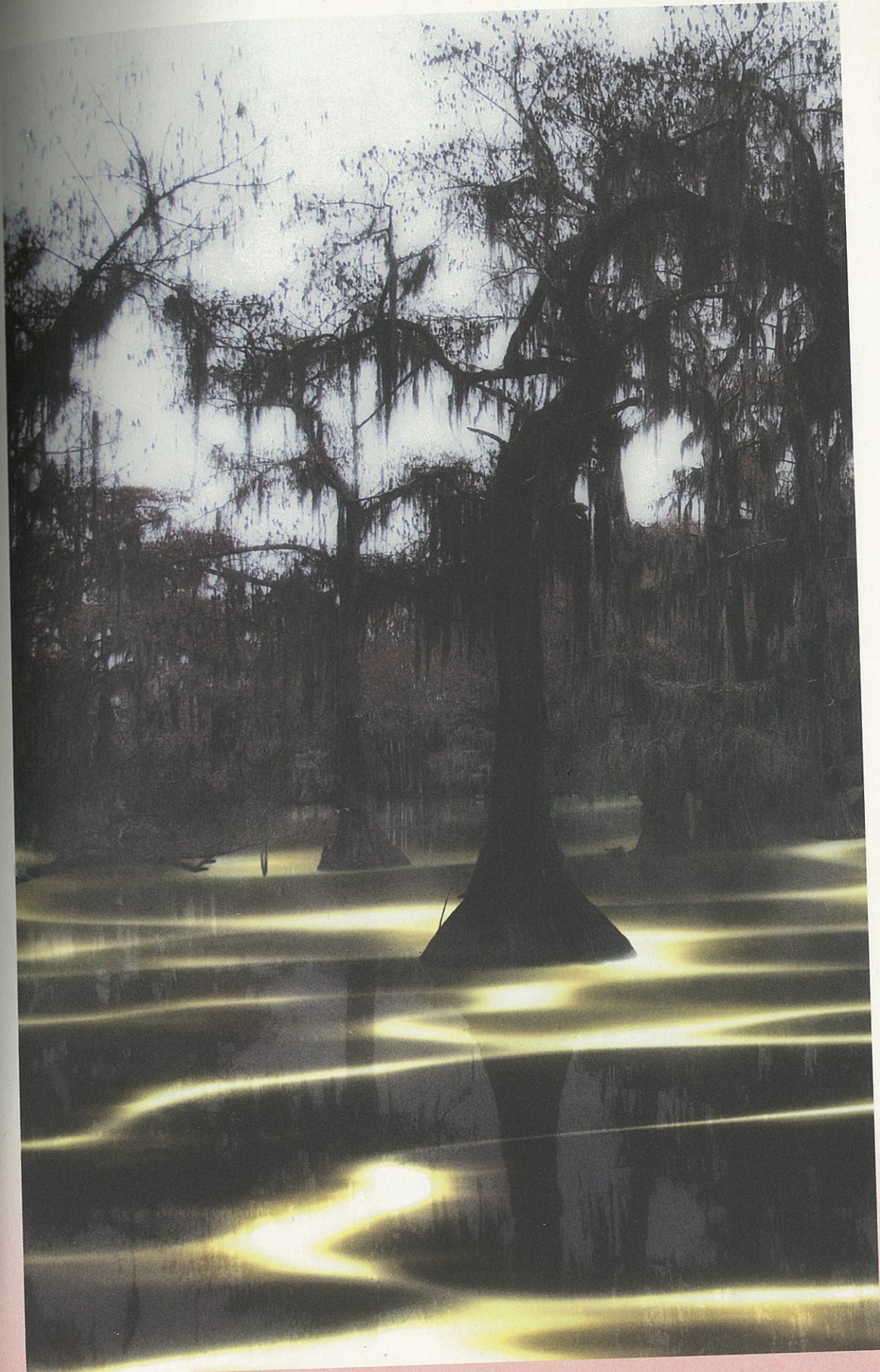
Leviathan is actually not a fictional landscape. It originated from documentary film footage shot by Richardson on Caddo Lake, outside the town of Uncertain, Texas, where oil was first drilled underwater. The bald cypress trees are not really dead, but adaptable – their root structure is underwater and they grow without leaves. But rather than deal in blatant narratives about oil or pollution, Richardson constructs ambiguities – which can be far more frightening – and allows viewers to create their own readings.²⁹

Her installation *The Erudition* (2010), created on the same monumental scale, is even more chilling. A visualization reminiscent of science fiction, it presents a landscape – whether earthly or alien is unknown – that seems barren (yet natural), but for the interference of ghostly images of trees. They flicker and dodge erratically, in and out of sight, to the sound of strange electrical clicking or fizzing noises; and they never seem to appear in the same place twice. The sky is vast, the colours are cold and the trees appear to be phantoms. Is this a post-apocalyptic landscape on earth? Or another planet in the distant future, where trees only exist virtually and are suffering a malfunction?³⁰

Both installations treat Richardson's ongoing concern about the effects of industrialization on the environment. And because this concern is delivered through dark imaginings, ambiguities and associations, it becomes difficult for the viewer to just walk away. The immersive experience has a mesmeric effect and viewers can conjure their own powerful vision about what the future may hold.

1. *Leviathan*, three-screen, high definition video installation with stereo sound, 14.5 x 2.7 metres (48 x 9 feet). By artist Kelly Richardson. Canada 2011.

2 (overleaf). *The Erudition*, three-screen, high definition video installation with stereo sound, 14.5 x 2.7 metres (48 x 9 feet). By artist Kelly Richardson. Canada 2010.



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