

Postcards from the Unconscious: the shifting spaces of Kivland's Rome

Steve Pile

Now, let us make the fantastic assumption that Rome is not a place where people live, but a psychical entity with a similarly long, rich past, in which nothing that ever took shape has passed away, and in which all previous phases of development exist beside the most recent.¹

Freud uses Rome as analogy for memory. Rome is like memory because it contains its pasts. More than this, Rome's present and Rome's past exist side-by-side. It is, consequently, important for Freud that Rome is known as the 'Eternal City': a city that lasts forever (both as an idea and as a physical presence), like he is arguing memory. Freud makes it clear, however, that psychical memory is even better than Rome at preserving its pasts. Memory preserves intact. Freud continues:

For Rome this would mean that [...] where the Coliseo now stands we could admire the vanished Domus Aurea of Nero; on the Piazza of the Pantheon we should find not only the Pantheon, bequeathed by Hadrian, but the original structure of M. Agrippa; indeed, occupying the same ground would be the church of Maria sopra Minerva and the ancient temple over which it is built. And the observer would perhaps need only to shift his gaze or his position in order to see the one or the other.²

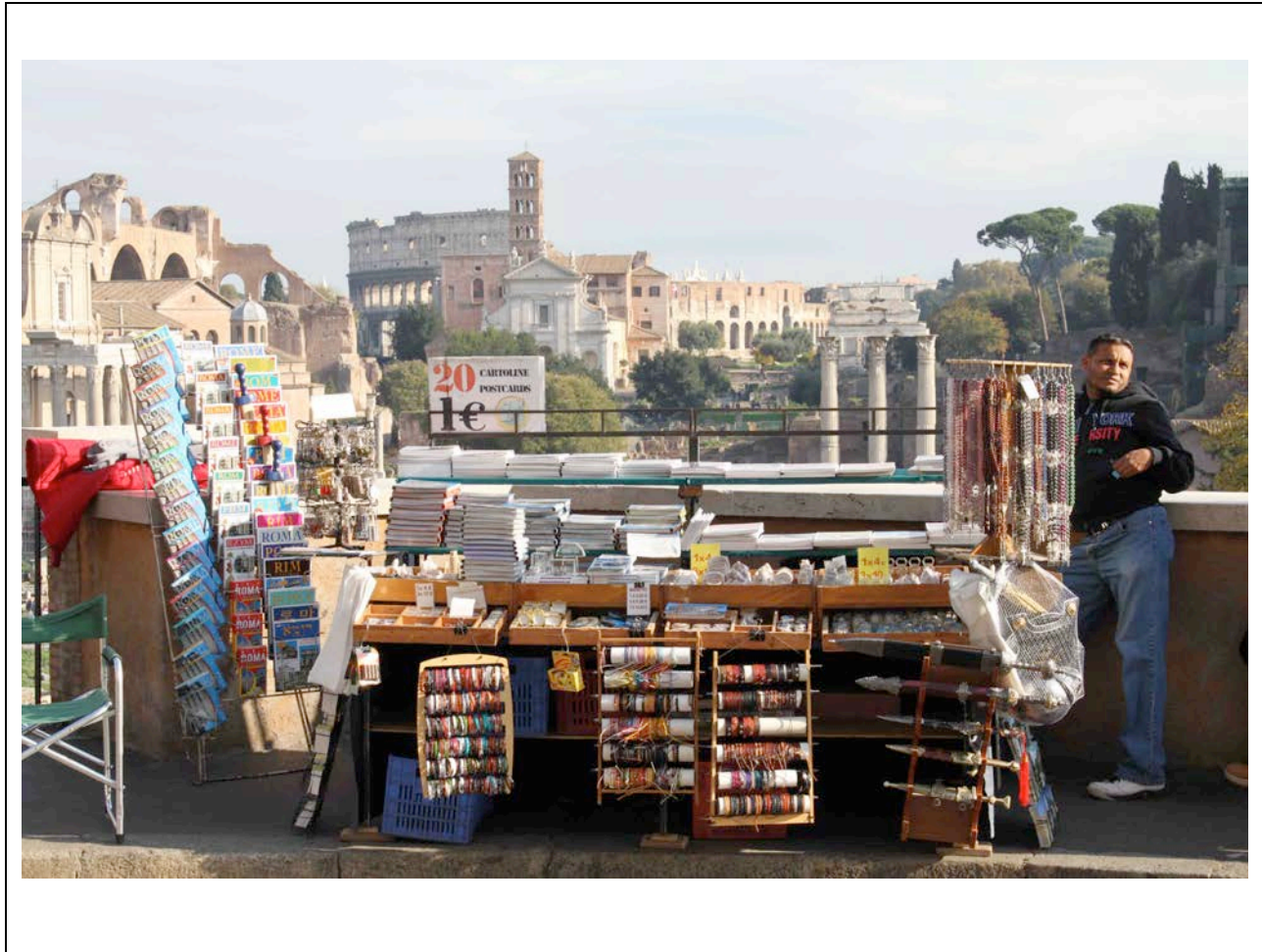
Ultimately, Freud says, the analogy cannot be taken further. The result of his fantasy is absurd: surely, it is ridiculous to think that the Domus Aurea of Nero can exist in the same space as the Coliseo.

If we wish to represent a historical sequence in spatial terms, we can only do so by juxtaposition in space, for the same space cannot accommodate two different things [...] Even the most peaceful urban development entails the demolition and replacement of

buildings, and so for this reason no city can properly be compared with a psychical organism.³

Despite Freud's misgivings, this does not quite finish off the analogy. To see this, we need only look at Sharon Kivland's *The unconscious is a city* series. This set of images resonates strongly with other projects. For example, in *Freud on Holiday, Volume III, The Forgetting of a Proper Name* (2011), Kivland follows Freud around Europe and presents us with a series of postcards that Freud might have sent. Significantly, one point she is making, in this work, is that places can be remembered and forgotten in different ways (see also the other two volumes in the *Freud on Holiday* series). Postcards connect memory and place, yet also paradoxically create separations: the image on the front is on the opposite side of the idea (the message) and the address – something Kivland highlights in another work *Messages de lointain* (2012), the bonus thirteenth book added to a series of twelve.

The postcards in *The unconscious is a city* have a dual function: they are both of Rome and the city – and deliberately so: Kivland is following Freud. For me, her Rome postcards not only extend and elaborate the analogy between the city and memory/forgetting, they also demonstrate how wrong Freud was to suggest that the same space cannot accommodate two different contents. Rather, I would like to argue, Freud should have stuck to his observation that the observer can see different contents in the same space by shifts in gaze or position. Indeed, 'shifting' itself becomes a useful metaphor for thinking about not only unconscious processes but also the enfolding and unfolding spaces of the observer.



The process for creating the postcards is deceptively simple. Sharon Kivland used 1950s postcards of Rome, which she has been collecting over several years, as a canvas to paint on. It is a technique she has used in other works, such *Mes Mouches* (2012), where she added a "beauty" spot to the faces of models taken from fashion magazines. For the Rome postcards, she reversed the highlights and shadows in the postcards by painting over the darker areas in white and the lighter areas in black paint. Out of simplicity, however, a wide range of effects can be discerned. These effects evoke unconscious processes, provoke shifts in perspective and invoke changes in form, both of the psyche and the city.

The first way of seeing Kivland's postcards is as what they present to us. On the surface, the images look like paintings. The brushstrokes are clear and bold, with a sharp contrast between light and dark; the effect is to produce a chiaroscuro cityscape. Yet, as we linger on the images,

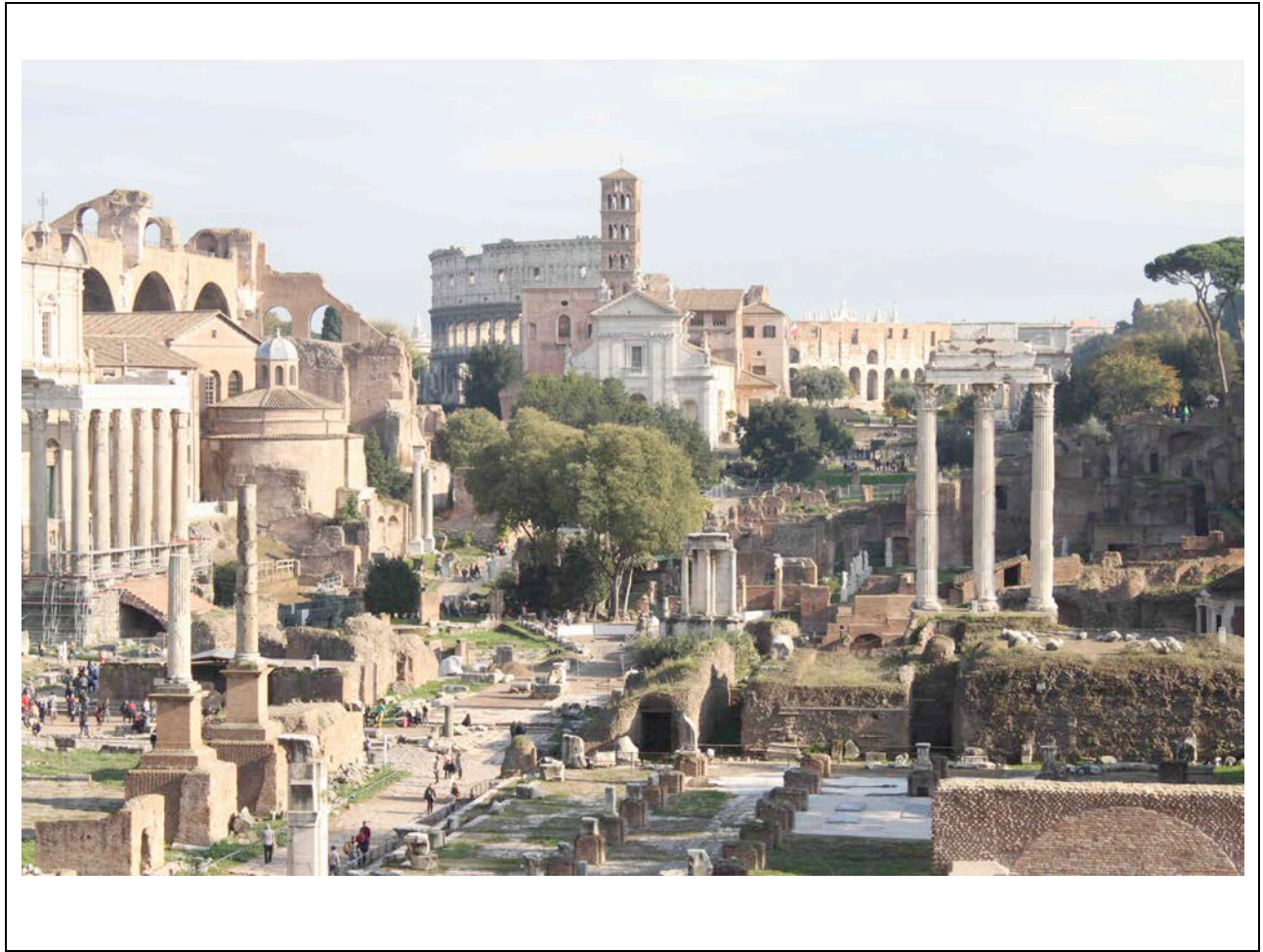
a background begins to emerge from behind the chiaroscuro of the scene. A sepia image seeps through, suggesting another scene. Patches of white and black, rather than a chiaroscuro, now appear to be mask behind which further details of the scene are hidden. Perhaps some of these can be made out. Buildings, landscape features, people exist like a mirage in the scene; not there, and yet also there.

We have, in these images, then, not two, but three scenes. First, we have Kivland's painting, which reverses light and dark into their opposites; second, underneath, we have the underlying original postcard; and, third, we have an indeterminate interaction between these 'layers', as we shift perspective between the whole and its parts. To 'see' these scenes does not, of course, require the observer to shift physical position, but to shift their attention between the visible, barely invisible, and imaged scenes in the postcards. As Freud would have it, shifting our attention changes both the scene and its meaning, whether this scene is 'original' or a 're-presentation' of some kind. Indeed, these shifts in perspective do not have to be conscious; realising something new about a scene follows an intuition that all is not quite what it seems.

There is more. In fact, what Kivland has done is ruined the original postcard. It is irretrievable. It cannot be recovered or restored. The original is gone. Indeed, on a recent trip to Rome, I tried various antique shops to see if it was possible to buy old 50s postcards. I found none. Curiously, I could not find much in the way of contemporary versions of the 50s postcards either. Sure, postcards of the Coliseo and the Pantheon are still common, but you will struggle to find a postcard of the Villa Pamphili, the Piazza del Popolo, or even the Fontana del Mosè. Perhaps today's travellers are preoccupied with fewer locations than those of the 1950s. Or perhaps Rome wants to divert the attention of postcard buyers. Or perhaps the idea of Rome is itself receding. For whatever reason, so much of the 'postcard world' of 1950s Rome has passed from view. This is not the only kind of disappearance Kivland's postcards evoke.

Since the 1950s, Rome has and has not changed. Visiting the locations where these pictures were taken enables us to see something else in the postcards. On the one hand, there is a kind of persistence and resilience of place. For some of the postcards, it is possible to stand where the photographer stood, all those years ago, and reproduce, almost exactly, the exact image. Little, if anything, seems to have changed. For other postcards, what is difficult to recreate is the exact perspective: the original photographers had access to vantage points that can no longer be accessed easily, or at all. For a few postcards, the scene no longer exists as such. This is for two reasons: first, trees and shrubs have grown in ways that obscure the scene; second, less commonly, features in the postcard have vanished. Rome may be the Eternal City, but this does not mean it is not changing in its physical and social forms, and it does not mean that it is not itself shifting perspective.

In the exhibition, we see a scene of the Foro Romano. The photographer has a high vantage point, looking over the Tempio di Castore e Polluce (the three columns in the foreground) towards the Il Vittoriano monument (in the top left of the image). Kivland's rendering of the postcard gives the scene the kind of chaotic jumble that we might think evokes nicely the chaos and jumble of the psyche. Yet, if we think a little bit more conceptually about the unconscious, we can begin to see that Kivland's postcards are evocative of many of Freud's key observations about unconscious processes. Thus, for example, we can see: the reversal into opposites; the ways the postcards contain opposites without contradiction; how one layer of 'memory' can stand in front of another, displacing it and even repressing it; how a hidden layer can still find ways to reveal itself, albeit in disguised form; and, there is a kind of timelessness to the postcards – Rome is Eternal: it lives in its ruins, just like psychoanalysis. This does not mean, however, that Rome and psychoanalysis have somehow stopped in time, in an eternal state of 'arrested decay'. These are shifting spaces, too; spaces, moreover, with way more than one content.



The Foro Romano is, today, often seen from a vantage point on the Capitoline Hill. The Capitoline Hill now has very little evidence of its ancient past, as it is now almost entirely covered by medieval and renaissance palaces, with a piazza significantly designed by Michelangelo. As Kivland does in her *Freud on Holiday* series, it is easy to image Freud strolling around, admiring Michelangelo's vision, puffing on his cigar, and pondering perhaps the meaning of the wolf that feeds Romulus and Remus. Yet, perhaps Freud also wondered what happened to the city beneath, puzzled about what was under his feet, beyond his touch and comprehension: forever out of reach, forever unknown.

From this perspective, the unconscious of the city has more than one content and, importantly, more than one kind of unconscious process. There are evidently the ruins of

temples: columns stand for a certain timelessness of desires and fears. There are also other kinds of buildings, especially of course, the Coliseo, the circus of life and death. Yet the Foro Romano is also an ordinary place, with markets and cramped streets. It was (and remains) cosmopolitan, with many different ‘things’ bumping along together. And it remains, somehow, ordinary; convertible into postcards and miniatures. If the Foro Romano stands for the unconscious, then this is not a fixed and pre-given unconscious, nor an Ideal of mythic proportions, but one that emerges out of its ordinary social life. What rattles around the unconscious, from this perspective, is less a structure or an idea than a psychical and emotional response to all the ruins of desires and fears that are presented to us.

Kivland's postcards, then, evoke not only the shifting spaces of the city, but also the shifting perspectives of the observer – in my case, the shifting perspectives of the urban geographer. Not only do her images evoke the very ways in which the same space – the postcard, the city – can have more than one content, we can also glimpse how the psyche and psychical processes are more than one thing, even when we consider such seemingly singular entities as ‘the unconscious’. The problem, as Freud rightly observed, is not how to see space as a container of a single content, but how to grasp the ever-changing forms – as well as the ruins of previous forms – within which we all live.

Professor Steve Pile (December 2012)

The Open University, Social Sciences faculty, Department of Geography. Steve Pile is Professor of Human Geography at The Open University. His main research centres around the relationship between places and power. This essay was written to accompany Sharon Kivland’s solo exhibition ‘Reproductions ii’ at domobaal in January 2013, in London.

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud [1930], ‘Civilization and its Discontents’ in *Civilization and its Discontents* (2002, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 8.
2. Freud, ‘Civilization and its Discontents’, pp. 8–9.
3. Freud, ‘Civilization and its Discontents’, p. 9.