

# Jason Larkin and Corinne Silva: Spaces of Global Capital: On the Photography of Jason Larkin and Corinne Silva

## Text by T. J. Demos

The space of global capital—to which *Uneven Development*, one of the exhibitions comprising the 2012 Brighton Photo Biennial including the photography of Jason Larkin and Corinne Silva, makes reference—is a deeply contradictory one. It is filled with tension and conflict at once political and socio-economic, architectural and geographic. On the one hand, globalisation is defined, particularly in the post-Soviet era after 1989, by the ‘waning’ of national sovereignty with the growing dominance of transnational organisations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the rise of multinational corporations and an increasingly wealthy class of people—a structural shift that is cause and consequence of the mounting flow of money, resources and people across national borders. On the other hand, the space of global capital is marked by the construction of barriers and walls within and between nations, cities, communities and neighbourhoods, built ostensibly to stop the passage of criminal and terrorist threats, illegal immigration, biological infections, and weapons and drugs.

Those barriers create and enforce geographies of inequality and bear the mark of the ‘uneven developments’ of neoliberalism, keeping the accumulation of wealth—what the geographer David Harvey calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’, insofar as private wealth inevitably depletes public resources—from the growing masses of the impoverished.<sup>1</sup>

That paradoxical condition of globalisation’s selectively open and bordered world is, of course, not new—it’s been developing especially since the late 1970s, with the ascendancy of neoliberalism, according to Harvey<sup>2</sup>—but the extent of its progress is strikingly registered in the photographic works of Jason Larkin and Corinne Silva. Their works focus on the construction of barriers and the creation of spaces of inequality—what we can call, after Wendy Brown, the contemporary regime of ‘walling’—in two regions: Southern Europe and the Middle East. Take Larkin’s *Cairo Divided*, a cycle of images from 2011 that centres on the architectural developments in peripheral Cairo, an emergent urbanism of gated communities where built space comes

up against the natural desertscape. Piles of red brick and rebar, mounds of dirt and rock, wooden scaffolding, cranes, ladders and pipes snaking into desert sands appear amidst new road construction and the building of numerous architectural structures, including mosques, vast apartment blocks and, of course, concrete walls and ornate iron gates. Larkin shows workers in the building sites and security guards protecting the newly created installations, positioned near the freshly watered glistening grass of desert golf courses. He also depicts the drab reality of these installations, next to the sleek billboards advertising the developers’ mirage of a happy and secure new community set away from the slums of the capital (though numerous developers have been jailed for corruption since Egypt’s recent revolution). The geography is thus clearly divided between the haves and the have-nots. As Larkin’s collaborator journalist Jack Shenker writes about this context in Egypt, as visualised in Larkin’s photo essay, with some degree of sarcasm:<sup>3</sup>

It’s a process that began long before this year’s revolution and is continuing well beyond it, ripping apart old social and political fabrics and giving birth to a web of contradictions where the advance of private capital is marshalled by an aggressively retreating state, gated compounds for the elites are reimagined as inclusive national projects, isolation gets marketed as community and plush green golf courses can rise miraculously from some of the most arid land on earth.

This new age of walling signals the failure of the modern liberal democratic state, with its erstwhile commitment to the social welfare of its citizenry. It is with that commitment in mind that the foundations of national commonality, inclusivity and equality once were built (as initiated by the French Revolution’s claims for popular sovereignty, continuing the development of the post-Westphalian nation-state system). Walling also announces the breakdown of the post-national claims





Jason Larkin, *Untitled #22*, from *Cairo Divided*, 2011. © Jason Larkin



Jason Larkin, *Untitled #24*, from *Cairo Divided*, 2011. © Jason Larkin



Jason Larkin, *Untitled #12*, from *Cairo Divided*, 2011. © Jason Larkin



Jason Larkin, *Untitled #10*, from *Cairo Divided*, 2011. © Jason Larkin

that we have entered a post-historical and borderless 'new world order' of globalisation, where national boundaries fall and an emergent era of participation, proximity and openness reigns (glimpsed, at least rhetorically, in the jubilation surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall and the formation of the borderless EU, as well as in the celebrations of the end of the apartheid in South Africa at the same time).<sup>4</sup> The emergent 'new world order'—one of walled states and elite enclosures of wealth, betraying a new post-communitarian era of paranoia and xenophobia—is glimpsed in the work of Larkin and Silva.

The growth of 'walled states', argues Wendy Brown, answers anxieties of 'waning sovereignty', as spaces of enclosure and security offer a compensatory image of protection and security when hitherto unimagined forms of social, political and economic inequality struggle to find legitimation within contemporary governmental discourse, media representations, legal structures and ethical codes. Indeed, one sees these developments and geographical conflicts worldwide, between Israel and Palestine, the US and Mexico, China and North Korea, India and Pakistan, as well as within nations and their various economic and social partitions. As Brown writes:<sup>5</sup>

Rather than iterations of nation-state sovereignty, the new nation-state walls [are part of an ad hoc global landscape of flows and barriers both inside nation-states and in the surrounding postnational constellations, flows and barriers that divide richer from poorer parts of the globe.

She continues:

this [walled] landscape signifies the ungovernability by [national] law and politics of many powers unleashed by globalization and late modern colonialization, and a resort to policing



Corinne Silva, *Resort town of Al Hoceima placed in former industrial zone, Cartagena*, from *Imported Landscapes*, 2010. © Corinne Silva

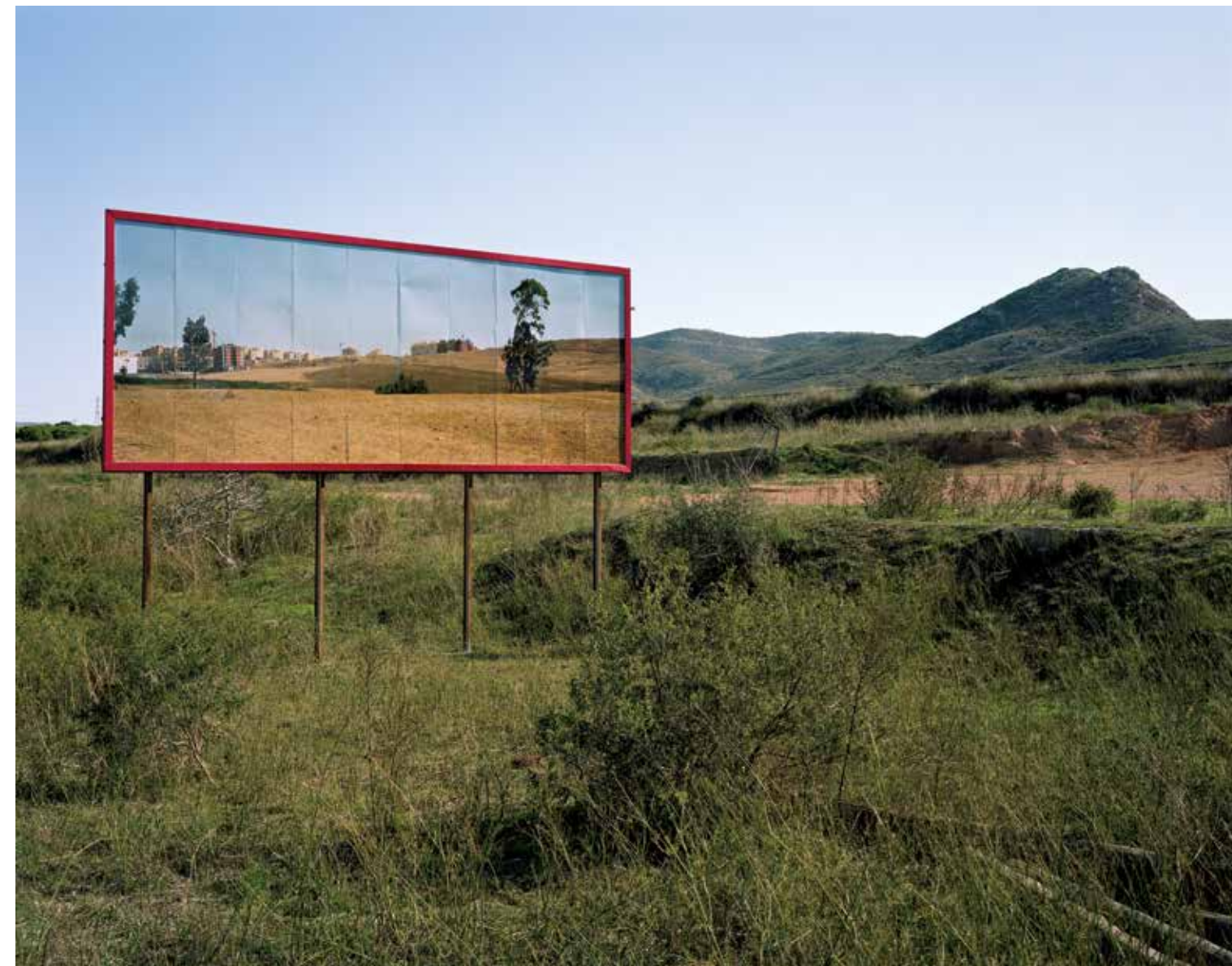
and blockading in the face of this ungovernability.

That breakdown and ungovernability is clear in Silva's *Badlands* (2011), which pictures the developing frontier territory of Almeria in south-east Spain. The post-Bechers-type photo-archive comprises, on the one hand, frontal images of resort housing (featuring concrete structures, walled-in McMansions, observed from the position of being outside and thus excluded from these islands of affluence); and, on the other, plastic and wood shanties built by illegal migrants desperately seeking opportunity in Europe. Silva's images stage a confrontation between the two orders, opposing architectural economies and forms of life. The one, a post-natural fantasy-based manipulation of the landscape-become-simulacrum (most apparent in the fibreglass 'rocks' built for aesthetic enhancement of the environment, and the creation of pools and golf courses to make an inhospitable desert ecosystem serve the leisure class); the other, an informal architecture of survival, based on an ecology of found and recycled materials and a by-any-means-necessary way of living. The first exists within the law of consumption, legal identity and private property; the second, an occupation of public property existing outside the law, in spaces of exception.<sup>6</sup> Of course, we've seen images of migrants' shanties before (e.g. those of Bruno Serralongue in Western France, David Goldblatt in South Africa, Sebastião Salgado in Brazil); but Silva's series is notable for its juxtaposition that brings into view the crisis of economic inequality separated by walled states. 'This borderland, where Europe and Africa overlap,' she writes, 'is a microcosm of a rapidly unravelling neoliberal fantasy.'<sup>7</sup>

The paradox of waning sovereignty and walled states—where the latter acts as a hyperbolic defence against the former—also finds parallel contradiction within the visual conditions of globalisation. On one hand, recent claims for the universality of photographic visibility—whether of artists or photojournalists—promise newfound possibilities for citizenship beyond national borders, as photographic imagery cannot be controlled or its meaning circumscribed, and is always open to novel interpretations and creative uses by unofficial viewers, oppositional social movements and counter-public spheres.<sup>8</sup> In addition, photography participates in the proposed 'redistribution of the sensible' in the name of equality, contesting the order of appearance that divides those who have a part from those who are

relegated to the status of noise and invisibility, or working towards the freedom of information via the newfound possibilities of digital sharing regardless of frontiers (consider the mission of Wikileaks).<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, visual culture, as another space of global capital, clearly continues to be ordered and controlled by powerful media organisations and government elites so that the well-resourced have greater access than others to appearance, reproduction and dissemination (a fact often overlooked or underplayed by the proponents of photographic democratisation). As well, images, despite new technologies of global distribution like the internet and social media that facilitate the free sharing of information, are increasingly subjected to a regime of property claims and copyright protections, where the commodity value of visual forms is strictly enforced by legal and governmental agencies, and marketed by profiting institutions (from galleries to multinational corporations such as Bill Gates's Corbis Images, which charge large sums for the reproduction of the images whose rights they 'own').

The photography of Silva and Larkin challenges both the socio-economic and political divisions that manifest in the contemporary world of walling, and the unequal distribution of visibility that accompanies it. They do so by insistently juxtaposing the signs of wealth and poverty via the architectural and geographical conditions of citizens and migrants, the elite and the disempowered. The effect is to prompt critical questioning of these separations and to challenge their division, offering viewers the visual experience of injustice. As well, they both make their imagery widely available, both on the internet, and experiment with distribution in the public sphere—in Larkin's case, in self-produced freely available newspapers with images, critical essays and descriptions translated into Arabic on Cairo's real-estate developments; in Silva's, in the placement of images taken in Morocco on billboards in Spain, as in her series *Imported Landscapes*. As such, they make an effort at opposing the proprietary claims of image-ownership beyond the gallery (where they also show their images). As such, their work participates in the reformulation of the culture of the commons, in opposition to the dystopian future defined by the logic of privatisation and walling, which their images also lay bare. ■



#### Notes

1 David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Toward a Theory of Uneven Development* (London: Verso, 2006).

2 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

3 Jack Shenker, 'Cairo Divided: a megacity turns itself inside out,' in the self-published newspaper by Jason Larkin of the same name. He also writes: 'It is perhaps unsurprising that, in a country which has seen 90% of its citizens become poorer in real terms since it signed up to an IMF-led structural adjustment program in 1991, the neoliberal transfer of public assets—not just in terms of land, but also of the other environmental resources like the water needed to keep the desert green—should be met with such enthusiasm by those at the apex of finance and government alike.'

4 Indeed, as Harvey observes in *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 'the neo-liberal state is hostile to (and in some instances overtly repressive of) all forms of social

solidarity (such as the trade unions or other social movements that acquired considerable power in the social democratic state) that put restraints on capital accumulation' (25–26). Such was witnessed in the police and military repression of the Occupy movement during 2011, and of the anti-globalisation movement generally since 1999.

5 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), p. 24.

6 The 'state of exception' designates a spatio-political regime that divides sovereignty and bare life (life stripped of its political identity), a division increasingly organised according to practices of walling. See: Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

7 See Silva's website: [www.corinnesilva.com/badlands](http://www.corinnesilva.com/badlands).

8 See the recent arguments of Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone, 2008),

and Sharon Sliwinsky, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

9 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004). On Wikileaks, see the conversation between Julian Assange and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *e-flux* 25 (May 2011) at [www.e-flux.com](http://www.e-flux.com).

Corinne Silva, *New suburb of Tangier placed in former mining region La Unión, Murcia*, from *Imported Landscapes*, 2010. © Corinne Silva



above Corinne Silva, *Plastic Mountain I*, plastic recycling plant, from *Badlands*, 2008 - 2011. © Corinne Silva  
below Corinne Silva, *Plastic Mountain II*, plastic recycling plant, from *Badlands*, 2008 - 2011. © Corinne Silva

above Corinne Silva, *Shaded Settlement I*, from *Badlands*, 2008 - 2011. © Corinne Silva  
below Corinne Silva, *Shaded Settlement III*, from *Badlands*, 2008 - 2011. © Corinne Silva



Corinne Silva, *Castle II*, from *Badlands*, 2008 - 2011. © Corinne Silva



Corinne Silva, *Castle VIII*, *Badlands*, from 2008 - 2011. © Corinne Silva