

Bass, Slate

and Spray Paint:

On the Edge of,

and within,

Trespass

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This piece discusses trespass and its liminality, through exploring the urban/rural juxtaposition of street art and graffiti made at sites of free parties and illegal raves. Sites of specific interest are those in North Wales where the jagged urban manifestations of street art and graffiti straddle the mountains, leading the way for revellers to and from their dwellings in towns,

villages, to the city through the suburbs. Images are taken from 'The Bomb Depot', Llanberis, Gwynedd. Of interest is how these artworks allow access to a philosophy of trespass that can illuminate, and subvert, the very legal frameworks that have made certain forms of sound and visuality, combined, illegal.

I always knew there was rhythm in this land. The beats seem to echo the mood of the granite, ricocheting across the moss of the valley floor, and into the bones of its local reverents.

I always felt a twinning of slate and bass, as if both offering deeper caverns to human existence, the frailty of being on life's edge, not least with a full eye of stimulants to encourage the oneness, the fealty to the wilds, upended through chasmic electronic sounds.

Wild and free they were, being careful not to kneel on someone's scratched together line.

It's this point of extremity – on a verge between the rustic and the civic, the rural and the urban – that this series of images depicts, with a specific relevance to North Walian free party street art and graffiti. In some contexts this might be considered the 'peri-urban', where the city meets its bounds, the suburbs languish into the hedgerows, and the wilderness begins.

And yet within the fluorescence of the art and graffiti that are within this story, there is less an edgework but an integrality, the urban has been placed directly within the landscape, where spray meets slate, and bass.

I grew up in North Wales, and returned in 2022 after spending all of my adult life in Southern England or travelling to other parts of the world. This return took me back to my youth, where upon driving through the Ogwen Valley in Snowdonia I could feel the reverberations of parties past as I sidwound its steep slopes. 4x4 met Four to the Floor, music loud and windows down, removed once more to electronic beeps and squelches that for many of my peers and I were just as much part of the Welsh vista as the heather or the mountain goats. Within a euphoric recall, I am standing sleepless in a cold cloud-huddled valley of a Sunday morning, vibration dripping through my veins, insurrection in my heart.

In 2024 we will see the thirty year anniversary of the passing of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (CJA 1994) under English and Welsh law. In one of many symbolic junctures that saw private accumulation take over less orderly, less conventional, and less quintessentially middle England ways of life, the act brought in a legislative damning of nomadic and alternative cultures of Irish and New Age travellers and Romani Gypsy communities (ss. 60–62), the rave generation (ss. 63–66), street artists and graffiti writers (s. 62), and squatters (ss. 72–76).

Known for its now infamous passage under section 63(i)(b), CJA 1994 made the unlicensed emission of a 'series of repetitive beats' to a crowd of revellers outdoors, a criminal offence. In resistance to the law, 20,000 people danced for many days and nights at Castlemorton Common, Gloucestershire in South West England, the second May bank holiday weekend of 1992. From there on in, conservative legislative architectures were imposed to illegalise what was not just a way of life, but a regular (and age old) form of political and aesthetic expression.

Of course, free parties still continued, much less affected by the law in fact, when hidden away in a bleak grey forested valley in Gwynedd than it might be in the midst of the Home Counties surrounding London. A lot of sound systems and their followers then went indoors, into the cities, bolstering the warehouse and squat party scene, with the law following to illegalise unlicensed raves *within* venues and not just outside in the countryside, with the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 (s.53).

And the law has not stopped curtailing and enclosing. In a draconian move following a series of seminal protest movements and actions by Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter (and those more local to the UK as a result of the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer), the current UK government brought in the Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, further banning unlawful encampments (ss. 83–85). Those who live more nomadic lifestyles are directly affected, the traveller community as well as sound systems that may be organising free gatherings. As is becoming evident in case law, there has been an increased use of injunctions against 'persons unknown' in order to remove travellers and party-goers (*Vastint Leeds BV v. Persons Unknown* [2018] EWHC 2456), which is a poignant indicator of a mechanism in law being used against a crowd, or against a party, as such.

In response, and with a renewed and refreshing vigour, trespassing as a form of activism, has become reignited by Nick Hayes and Guy Shrubsole with their Right to Roam campaign in the UK. During the recent Covid-19 lockdowns it became clear that relatively few people benefitted from access to green and open spaces in urban areas, which were much less accessible for those of certain socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Equally, the countryside is seen predominantly as a white space; one of dominion, the Englishman's castle, the aristocratic estate, despite a rich history of African, Moor and Asian presences on the land during and pre-Roman times.

And so the rave, to trespass, with its irreverence and its denial of individual property and any boundaries – whether they be literal fenced off property, or those of acculturated structures, e.g. class, race, gender, disability, or any other background – is a breath of fresh air, in this stuffy and turgid history of the rural.

Following from the 'Radical Landscapes' exhibition at Tate Liverpool in 2022, Darren Pih and Laura Bruni highlight the power of trespass, which '[...] demonstrates how the countryside has been a focal point for both artistic production and arguments around civil freedoms in the long shadow of colonialism' (Pih & Bruni, 2022: 9). Artist Jeremy Deller has been another important voice on the freedom and the reconfiguration of a section of the urban population in relation to the rural, through rave, 'it [redr]awing the map for a lot of people and their relationship to the countryside' (Deller, 2022: 145).

My time attending parties back in Blaenau Ffestiniog in the heart of Snowdonia, or Cloceanog Forest and the Llandegla Moors in Denbighshire, was 1996–1999, a few years after such parties had been outlawed, and yet were still continuing to pull punters from all over the North West. I remember the Dosse Posse, and various other sound systems including one or two pulled together by friends of an off night. I can recall getting lost trying to find the places, gallivanting the lanes to find the far off thud of the Bassbins and the reassuring purr of the generator. And then once arrived, got lost again.

So I am back in the present day, returned to Eryri (the official name for Snowdonia), and recent ramblings and explorations led me to an old Second World War ammunition depot tucked away in Llanberis, hidden amongst the slopes leading away from Llyn Padarn. Known locally as 'The Bomb Depot', the store is a remnant of the past in the now. Originally the Glynrhonwy Isaf Quarry, it was acquired by the Air Ministry in 1939 to store up to 18,000 explosives of different sorts, a significant volume of the UK's munitions during wartime (McCarmley, 2000). Unfortunately, part of the store collapsed not long after the site was requisitioned for its new role, taking many years of bomb removal to make it safe(-ish) again.

As any good detective may assume, walking up (or scrambling more like) to the store, there are tags and stickers adorning traffic signs and gate posts, the bright colours immediately indicating signs of non-human presence; a pitch and hue of bright greens and pinks that denote an urban techno-esque tribe, and one less acquainted with more socially acceptable forms of rambling to be connoted with the countryside. Peering over the slate gradient that leads down to an access point, spray painted lines and scripts on walls jolt and screech across the side of the cavernous space, the sharp lettering just like the spiked rock formations on which they are written. Higher up from the wall structure, tags are precariously hung on vertical granite cliffs, where their authors have used their climbing prowess to etch their presence into the Snowdonia landscape. The presence of murals, stencils, stylised images, and intricate graffiti; fun characters, huge wall-sized decks, and even the local postcode etched within the black interior of the depot with no or little light, as well as all over its outside perimeter. It is conspicuous and yet not at the same time. It is as if it should always be there, borne of and within the land. This is not liminality but a unicity of a kind that may bring any division between urban and rural to the ground.

And so to the cacophonous meld of the sound systems that you might imagine competing with one another inside the depot's many tunnels, the former rail tracks where the bombs were to be transported around the country; where today party-goers might sit, succumbed and making sense of their night as the dawn stars appear.

It has fascinated me since moving back to the area, the extent to which the mountains and the hillsides are literally altered by human intervention, how the slag heaps of slate create new forms and shapes that pierce the skyline with their strangely human character. Analogous to an understanding of land art as that which moved from bucolic Constable representations of pleased landowners and national treasures – in the chiselling of the land through quarrying and art found within the store – this country scene has been worked with, like a sculptor's clay, and not just fetishised and depicted.

'Outdoors' as they were called when I knew them, provided their own set of rules and etiquettes, not unlike that of street art and graffiti. The most obvious being the invisibility, the hidden and covert nature of them. Perhaps with a phone number or finding the rig is being run by a friend of a friend, there is an expectation of anonymity, the necessary refusal in order to maintain the undergroundness.

With The Bomb Depot there is a visual archive of the sonic happenstance, nevertheless. The production of auditory space at the same time reverberating with and through the urban floridity painted within and outside the store. Not least too, the remnants of the nights before strewn eclectically as if momentos of hedonistic insurrection. The sub-bass vibrations expressed on the walls stretch further, tentacular-like with the tags that took kudos to create, crawling up and beyond the edge of the walls and into the scrub.

The surface is the sound itself, reified on the confines of the former quarry, and its internal infrastructure. Within a stratum of the sonic and the ocular, trespass is crystallised in an urban-rural time-capsule.

There is really very little discussion of the important role traveller communities have played within not just rave cultures, let alone those of street art and graffiti. Who knows who has made the pieces within the Bomb Depot, and given the impact of legislation over the years, the presence of New Age Traveller is much diminished, and marginalised into insensibility, although no more so than those of Irish and Romany Gypsy descent. This outlawing of a way of life is a reminder of the recently repealed Vagrancy Act 1527 which sought to remove and hide those who have emigrated to the cities from their rural agricultural backgrounds all those centuries at the beginning of enclosure; the elixir of today's neoliberal symptomatic.

Who knows if the artwork was even created by those of the free party scene, but I imagine it to be so. One thing for sure is that the striking presence of the graffiti adorned depot within the scabrous bleak of the North Wales mountains cites an opportunity for innovated rupture, a newly arrived exterior of slate and juncture of tangibility and expression, for bass-come-spray paint, and the *nomos* of trespass.



The Bomb Depot, Llanberis,
North Wales, UK, November
2022. Artists Unknown.
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References

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LUCY FINCHETT-MADDOCK is an artist and Associate Professor of Law at Bangor University, North Wales, UK. Her research is broadly concerned with critical legal and contemporary philosophical understandings of law in relation to its material and conceptual formulations of aesthetics, property, entropy, and resistance. Since 2015 Finchett-Maddock has been involved in developing an 'Art/Law Network', a meeting space between artists, activists, lawyers, practitioners, and other such agitators. Out of this has been borne an interest in the role of law in outsider art, the scope of the impact of institutionalisation on the creative process, and law's role in the formulation of the genre in itself. Part of Finchett-Maddock's work is practice-based, including working with sound, video, sculpture, and data sets. The practice-based element of her work is inspired by her artistic practice that seeks to capture ontological questions around artificial and formal divides – between human and machine, subject and object, art and law. Finchett-Maddock is currently writing the monograph, *Art* (Routledge New Trajectories in Law Series).