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Walking, mental travelling, and writing London's territories. An interview with Iain Sinclair

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Walking, mental travelling, and writing London's territories

An interview with Iain Sinclair

Abstract

This interview with the writer and filmmaker Iain Sinclair took place in June 2025 at Sinclair's home in Haggerston, in the London Borough of Hackney. Lasting more than three hours, it covered a wide range of topics related to Sinclair's explorations of London. This abridged version, kindly edited by *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa*, focuses in particular on the relationship between place-writing and ethnography, as briefly explained in the introductory note.

Keywords: urban ethnography, literature, place-writing, territoriology, psychogeography, London

1. Introductory note

Iain Sinclair (born 1943) is a writer in a long-term intimate relationship with London – a city he regards as the ultimate, uncrackable enigma. Sinclair's vast production includes poetry, fiction, reportage, and film, and he often blends these genres through a highly distinctive style. For nearly fifty years, Sinclair has unravelled the intricacies of walking and writing, pondering the ephemeral and the eternal. A great storyteller of places, people, and mishaps, he guides readers into immersive experiences of environments that are spatial and literary at the same time. Sinclair belongs to an exquisite English tradition of visionaries and ramblers, in which London's territories are revealed as a vast, richly layered poetic geography.

During the 1990s, Sinclair honed a method for his metropolitan forays, most evident in works such as *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997) and *London Orbital* (2002). The former is a collection of perambulations through a number of boroughs chiefly in east and south London where the author encounters

an extraordinary cast of characters, poets, artists and dropouts; the latter, released simultaneously as a book and a film co-directed with Chris Petit, recounts Sinclair's heroic trek around the M25 orbital motorway in the company of a small band of fellow strollers, «shadows on the road», whose motto may well be: «Only those who attempt the impossible will achieve the absurd».

Such a seemingly aberrant act of encircling and embracing the whole city with one's body (and mind) fruitfully yields an extraordinary excavation of British political and cultural history, stretching from the late nineteenth century, when the pastoral landscape began to be dotted with madhouses, through the Thatcher era, when the motorway was built, to the Blair years, when real estate and logistics became the dominant forces in place. In this way, looking at the extreme periphery of the metropolis provides precious insights into some of its defining urban trends, including hypergentrification and the corporate takeover not only of vast swathes of urban land but also of the social imaginary itself.

An omnivorous reader, an archival researcher, a student of cartography, and a tireless peruser of London A-Zs, Sinclair is deeply immersed in the literary and cultural life of the capital, having met practically everyone who is on the map – or, better still, *having drawn the map himself*. As a culmination of a particular method of knowing cities, *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire* (2009) is a tribute to the borough where Sinclair has lived since 1968: «it was time to start thinking about the territory where my life had formed and unravelled», as he put it. Unsurprisingly, the book had been long in the making – around thirty years. Unsurprisingly, I say, because everything about the life of territories must be slow, often unassuming, and circular, so that jotting down the famous «first sentence» may seem «impossible». Yet, once started, it also seems impossible to stop – to the point that *Hackney* also extends into Sinclair's next book, *The Last London* (2017), where the focus becomes the 2012 Olympics and the 2016 Brexit referendum, and where a phenomenal walk leads Sinclair's motley crew from St Leonard's Church in Shoreditch to St Leonards-on-Sea, near the site of the Battle of Hastings of 1066.

As a social scientist with an interest in spatial phenomena, I have always been intrigued by Sinclair's gift for probing territories. In a kind of Conan Doyle lineage, the writer first steps into action as a detective, always on the hunt for revealing connections. Salvaging from oblivion scraps of forgotten history, eccentric characters tucked away in the folds of the city, and mundane, discarded documents of every kind, Sinclair infuses his discoveries with a register that shifts between dry social commentary, poetic transport, humour, and absurdism. I find the peculiar mix of unpredictability, endurance, and serendipity in his approach quite congenial to conjuring up a veritable art of encountering territories. In this vein, my decision to travel to London to interview Sinclair was my personal way of handing him a symbolic honorary doctorate in territorialology.

Territorialology was initially developed in the 1950s by ethologists interested in the territorial behaviour of animals. More recently, there have been some attempts to reprise, revise and develop the discipline into a form of

knowledge applicable to social science research. As part of this revival, I have played an instrumental role in rekindling the conversation around this

approach (Brighenti, Kärholm, 2020). The affinity with ethnographic practice is not accidental. Like ethnography, territoriology calls for attending to realities *ex vivo* through what Lévy-Bruhl once called *mêthexis* – a participationist ontology. Whether science or pseudo-science, territoriology seems to find a natural domain of application in urban, quintessentially public realities (Brighenti, Kärholm, 2023). The suggestion, I guess, is that anyone trying to develop urban ethnography today may benefit from looking beyond the established map of disciplines. And while ethnography is certainly not fiction (Brighenti, 2023), exchange with literary authors remains of the essence. We have much to learn.

The interview presented here is, of necessity, an abridged and edited version of a longer transcript, available on my personal website, www.capacitedaffect.net (visited 20/07/2026). The text also includes a few brief explanatory footnotes on figures who may not be familiar to all readers. In addition, a map has been included to indicate the location of some of the key places in and around London to help readers gain an initial sense of the geography under discussion.



FIG. 1. Map of places in and around London mentioned during the interview (designed by Nick Dines).

Key 1. Bethnal Green; 2. Blackheath; 3. Brixton; 4. Camden; 5. Chingford; 6. Chiswick; 7. Covent Garden; 8. Deptford; 9. Docklands/Canary Wharf; 10. Eltham; 11. Euston; 12. Greenwich; 13. Hackney; 14. Isle of Dogs; 15. Isleworth; 16. Lea Valley; 17. Liverpool Street; 18. London Fields; 19. Peckham; 20. Petersham; 21. Purfleet; 22. Richmond; 23. Shepperton; 24. Shepherd's Bush; 25. Shoreditch; 26. St George's Hill; 27. Stratford; 28. Thamesmead; 29. Tower Hamlets Cemetery; 30. Turnham Green; 31. Whitechapel.

AMB: *By my count, there are two moments in which our lives intersected in London. These encounters exist perhaps only in the imagination but I'll tell you about them, as I learnt about them through your books. Maybe they can offer us an excuse for talking about certain places. The first dates back to 1995. At the time, I was spending some time in South London. One day, I remember I walked from Peckham through the Greenwich Foot Tunnel, across the Isle of Dogs, and up to Bethnal Green and Hackney. As you write in *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), you were making the same journey in October 1995, but from north to south, on your way to a lecture that Richard Makin was supposed to give at the University of Greenwich. And for an instant I imagined that our paths might have crossed there, right down in the Greenwich Foot Tunnel...*

IS: That's totally a Blake journey¹. Blake sees his angels on Peckham Rye. The journey is described in *Jerusalem*. He comes down from Highgate, through Hackney, Stratford, to the narrows of the rivers, and to the Isle of Dogs, down to Greenwich. That is a great line in London.

AMB: *Yesterday, I walked through the same places, and I was shocked, or stunned, by the amount of change, by the magnitude of what's happened in terms of urban development.*

IS: If you stand on the top of Greenwich Hill and look across, you can't believe the city that's grown up there.

AMB: *I don't even remember a human component to the Isle of Dogs in the 1990s. There was nobody there. While yesterday: super-yachts and crowds, and the number of new towers, I was just stunned.*

IS: It has changed London completely. Because, from that point, previously you could look back to the old city of London, which is relatively flat, and you could see all the alignments. You could see how the city laid itself out. This new thing just blocks the view entirely. The new Isle of Dogs is not London, it may as well be Hong Kong, or Dubai, or just wherever. You could change it tomorrow. You have *The Last London*. But what I called then «last London» was actually the last of a *particular kind* of London. What we have now, is a post-Covid, post-digital, entirely different London. In any case, you never get to the end of a territory, as we were saying. You do a walk, and ten years later you do it again, but it's not the same city.

AMB: *The second moment when we sort of crossed by, was on a particular date, at the time you were doing *London Orbital* (2002). It was June 18, 1999. You took a cab to get back into the city, and the traffic was stuck because of a protest. And I was in that protest! Specifically, I was involved with the Association of Autonomous Astronauts, and their performative critique of Lockheed Martin's*

¹ The reference here is to the English Romantic poet and artist William Blake (1757-1827).

thoroughly unimaginative space exploration programme. It was also probably the last moment in history when the protesters felt they were more powerful than the police.

IS: That has changed, hasn't it?

AMB: *Definitely.*

IS: The repression has become so violent. People are going to be sent to jail just for protesting climate change or whatever.

AMB: *And they'll lock protesters up for five years. Aggressive sentencing.*

IS: That's horrific.

AMB: *There have been quite extensive changes. I'm thinking here particularly of your «confidential report» on Hackney, that Rose-Red Empire, which is a monumental book about the area where you live. Where we are now.*

IS: This was a working community when I first came. Now, to give you an example, they are renewing the house next door. It's a million-pound house being ripped out and rebuilt completely. The family who previously lived in it had been here since 1870. The last person just died and I was standing outside of the funeral talking to one of them, the daughter. And she said, «Do you know that our family has been here since 1870 and now we're gone». The place is going to be bought by some digital whiz kid in his 20s, on an expensive bicycle and three or four dogs, who has no clue. We're in the middle of a process where at the same time there are estates on the edge of survival, mixed up with the multimillionaires who are moving in.

AMB: *Funerals are very important in your work. You went to Ronnie Kray's².*

IS: What a funeral that was, yeah. I remember that. Going up to Chingford.

AMB: *And you write about Margaret Thatcher's, too.*

IS: I didn't go to the funeral. On the day of her funeral, I went out into all the places in Essex that supposedly supported her. To see what the reaction would be. She was forgotten. It was on TV, but nobody was looking. It was interesting to see.

² Ronald Kray (1933-1995), together with his identical twin brother Reginald, was a leading figure in East London's organized crime from the late 1950s until their joint arrest in 1968. Their story is recounted in Sinclair's *Lights Out for the Territory*.

AMB: For London Orbital you decided to walk – and this was a word I learnt from you – widdershins...

IS: Counter clockwise, against the passage of the sun. It implies the magical belief that things can be undone if you go that way round. I don't know, it was quite accidental when we hit the M25 and I decided. I could have gone right, I could have gone left, but my whole instinct was to go west. It was a really wonderful experience, where you see the strange connections of these extreme west and extreme east of London. Particularly the points where you cross the Thames were really significant. The one in the east is such a disputed landscape. And the fact that it was right by where Bram Stoker had Dracula's Abbey in Purfleet. Today you have huge car deposits for shipping them out to West Africa. And on the other side, you come over Heathrow. There is this weird building, the Siebel building. No-one has any idea which purpose it serves, nor what goes on there. Even when you are inside it, you don't understand. A sort of invisible capitalist enigma invented by Ballard³. Everybody is smiley, everybody helps each other – but what is it? What are you doing? I still don't know what they did there.

AMB: During London Orbital you also paid visit to Ballard.

IS: I did. I went to see him in his little kind of suburban villa in Shepperton. I got to see him quite a bit after that period. He was very much in control of his life, hugely. Every Wednesday, he came in to Shepherd's Bush where his girlfriend, as he called her, lived. And if you have to go to see him on that day, then he goes back to Shepperton and she stays there. And he works from there. Everything is set in compartments. Always nice to see him. He wouldn't talk about his own books very much; he was always interested in new ideas. He had this English colonial accent, typical of his social background, prison camp in Shanghai, public school and university in Cambridge, like an old RAF officer. Nicolas Roeg, the filmmaker, had the same voice⁴. They knew each other. They were an interesting pair. They looked like they were going into the club somewhere, gin and tonic. And yet what Ballard was saying was completely subversive.

AMB: How did you first get in touch with him?

IS: At the time when those Docklands Towers were coming, in the 1980s, the BBC Late Show made a little film. Mary Harron, who then became a well-known director, was making the film, and got Ballard in it. He was all in favour of it: «This is exciting, this is weird, this is the world of High-Rise», et cetera. And I was in it saying the opposite: «This is apocalypse, this is horrendous». That was the first time I came across him. We were on opposite sides. But in the end,

³ The reference here is to the science fiction writer J. G. Ballard (1930-2009).

⁴ Nicolas Roeg (1928-2018) was an English filmmaker whose best-known films include *Don't Look Now* (1973) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976).

we actually found quite a lot in common. He also wrote an M25 book, *Kingdom Come*. It was set on the M25, with big supermarkets being turned into messianic religious cults... usual Ballard. He was a mental traveller; he wouldn't have walked a hundred yards. Somewhere I wrote the world divides into the two categories: *Pods*, people who are living in the pod – the car, the static traveller. Send them out in the car, or let them locked in a house. They don't need to move anywhere. And *peds*, the pedestrians, who are always having to tramp and trudge. Bunyan, de Quincey, Defoe⁵. I'm currently writing about Van Gogh, a phenomenal walker, a Rambler in London.

AMB: *You yourself belong in the tradition of the walkers.*

IS: I like to move. I feel kind of stupid until I'm moving. You need to get into a collaboration with the territory. You're inventing a territory, but the territory is also speaking through you. Through walking, you come to a poetic that is not otherwise available.

AMB: *You have a wonderful expression somewhere, where you speak of «the immortality of the unnoticed». It's an absolutely wonderful way of putting it. In many cases, you have to walk in places that look so trivial, so dumb. You need to endure the mundane, in a sense...*

IS: The mundane is significant because the architects, the controllers, the grand designers, think only in terms of their own construction and nothing about what it takes to get from where you are to where they are. So, the landscape around doesn't matter to them. To me, it's all that kind of dross you have to pass through to get to wherever you're going that confirms the identity of the place that you finish up with. If you go to the Docklands walking from Peckham, you have a very different sense of the place than if you get onto the Docklands Light Railway and just emerge in the middle of Canary Wharf. You don't know where you are. You don't know what's involved, what's been sold, what's been lost to get you there. To know the territory, you have to pay the price. If I want to understand Buckingham Palace, then I'll walk there from here, and learn what this thing represents in terms of my transit across London.

AMB: *In your books, your fellow tramps often get foot ache and a lot of pain as a result.*

IS: On one level, it's comedy. Don Quixote picaresque comedy about what is involved in doing these journeys. But, on another level, I really love reading

⁵ The authors mentioned are, in order: the seventeenth-century Nonconformist Protestant preacher John Bunyan (1628-1688), author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678); Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859), writer and literary critic best known for *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821); and Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), writer, merchant, spy, and the author of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).

accounts of people who have done strange solitary walks for reasons they can't even explain. They have taken off as if to find themselves by losing themselves.

AMB: Like W.G. Sebald, a.k.a. Max Sebald⁶? Who you approach through the poet Stephen Watts...

IS: Stephen Watts was a big friend of Max's⁷. Once I got to meet Stephen at Liverpool Street Station, and he led me on the walks that he used to take Max Sebald on, which became part of *Austerlitz*. Sebald reinvents the territory, making changes to reality. Interestingly, when I walked with Stephen around Whitechapel, he couldn't remember whether he had actually shown him these things or whether he had just read about them in the book. The hinterland between fiction and document was completely erased. It was beautiful to see this, because Stephen was very moved by something he was describing to me, and then realised that that was just how it had been presented in Sebald's book.

AMB: This is very Proust-like – reality trying to become like art...

IS: When Sebald was coming into London on the train from Norwich, the train always stalled before going into Liverpool Street at a certain point. He looked out of the train, getting a static view into this strange area of streets, which he didn't know at all. Afterwards, he would ask Stephen to lead him on foot from the station back to the places he had seen from the train's window. This way, he went through the whole trajectory, from being a static witness in a privileged high point to actually ploughing all his way through Whitechapel's narrow streets, while Stephen was telling him stories about places, the Jewish burial ground and so on. Finally, they arrive at Tower Hamlets Cemetery, and next to it they see this hideous hospital, the asylum. In the book, Sebald has the main character ill in the hospital, looking down into the cemetery, then wandering through the cemetery and finding a particular grave, which you can still do. It's literally there. You can find this stone angel. It's there really, although, clearly, it's also in another dimension.

What was really intriguing to me, is that I used to go to that place every day, many years before these facts, in 1974, when I was working as a gardener. I used to go on my bicycle and have my picnic lunch in the cemetery. It was beautiful, like an overgrown country park. It's a very rich green, overgrown tangle of London. When I first read Sebald's book, it was quite a surprise to learn how mysterious and magical this territory was becoming when I looked at it through Sebald's gaze. Also, I knew people who had actually been sectioned to that hospital. The poet Lee Harwood, who used to work as a monumental

⁶ W.G. Sebald (1944-2001) – informally, Max Sebald – was a German academic and writer who worked at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. His work spans fiction and non-fiction, including *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999), and *Austerlitz* (2001).

⁷ Stephen Watts (1952) is an English poet of Italian descent. Watts has devoted much of his literary production to celebrating Whitechapel in the East End.

mason, was a heroin addict for a time, and was sent into that hospital – which was horrible, as he described to me⁸. At the same time as the film with Ballard, they did a film on three London cemeteries, and I was allowed to choose three where I would walk the viewers. One of them was Tower Hamlets. It was filmed with a Steadicam, and the cameraman could follow me through the cemetery. It turns out it's exactly the same route Sebald would write about and publish later on! That was quite uncanny. One good thing about being both static – because I am in the same house I have been in since 1968, and we haven't moved – and going out in every direction of the compass, is that you can get the best of both worlds. From whatever is found out there, from having been out walking, sketching, grabbing, photographing, I bring back home a sort of static condition – mental travelling!

AMB: As for the mental part of the travel, it seems you do a lot of research in history, in the archives...

IS: Being a book dealer, a lot of the very eccentric books came into my house. And I am always grabbing books, they're feeding into writing all the time.

AMB: One can walk through libraries as though through the city's territory. And a library is itself a territory. And maps, too.

IS: Maps, yes. But I don't do any digital mapping, no Google Maps or whatever.

AMB: I remember that back in the day I also purchased my edition of the London A-Z. It was the 1995 edition, I guess. Does it still exist, the A-Z?

IS: It does. I still use it.

AMB: Do they update it?

IS: They update it, yes, but they can't keep up with changes. Because if you'd buy it today, it's already old. Due to the pace of changes, there are streets that are not even in there. And there are other ones that have vanished. I was noticing this recently in Paris, too. *London Orbital* has been published in a nice French edition, and I was there to present it. The streets that were there at, say, the time of Van Gogh were actually not the same streets. Obviously, the names have changed. You're looking at a map, but actually it doesn't really help because all the names are gone. And also, the Haussmann period has obliterated much of the physical layout. It was quite fascinating noticing the same process in another city. A good part of the theoretical and inspirational side of my approach originally emerged in Paris with the Situationists, and then came to London. So, to send it back from London in a different form was an intriguing experiment.

⁸ Lee Harwood (1939-2015) was an English poet associated with the British Poetry Revival.

AMB: Somewhere you have become very critical of psychogeography, though. You write it has «long outlived its utility».

IS: I thought it was great as an active thing around the 1960s. Even when it came to be exploited, I suppose in the 1980s, it still produced interesting results. But then it just became such a meaningless phrase. It became journalistic and didn't apply to anything useful anymore.

AMB: It's probably something you now find in The Lonely Planet.

IS: But what does it mean now? I'm getting next to nothing from it. The Situationists launched the idea, although in practical terms they weren't particularly great walkers.

AMB: They were great drinkers, for sure... Seriously, some of them, like Attila Kotányi, had an interest in urbanism⁹. But in fact, their psychogeographical exercises were limited. They went around Les Halles. In fact, psychogeography only features in the first few issues of the International Situationist journal, and then disappears. But the idea of a connection between the mood, the state of mind, and the place was there. Interestingly, there was an English chapter of The London Psychogeographical Association, which was originally Ralph Rumney. But he was kicked out of the International even before issue number one of the journal! The people who rekindled psychogeography in London were The London Psychogeographical Association. And they had a tagline that said «thirty-five-years of non-existence» – because there was a thirty-five-year gap since when Ralph Rumney was kicked out of the SI, and when they relaunched the project in the early 1990s¹⁰.

IS: I remember when Stewart Home used to put the LPA newspapers through your door¹¹. They were just distributed free. All really nutty ideas were being pushed out there, and it was very active and interesting. And then it got taken into the mainstream and became diminished.

AMB: It's the logic of recuperation – something coming from the margin gets caught in the mainstream, and the creative people have to scout for new things.

IS: The Xerox principle, I call it. Some mad visionary in an attic conjures something up. A chemical equation is cooked up. Then somebody else takes it and makes it, not respectable, nor even understandable. But it's a little bit more visible. And then a kind of cultish thing comes around that. And then somebody

⁹ Attila Kotányi (1924-2003) was a Hungarian-Belgian poet and architect. He was a member of the Situationist International movement.

¹⁰ An English artist, Ralph Rumney (1934-2002) was an early member of the Situationist International, from which, however, he was expelled in 1957 (the same year SI was founded).

¹¹ Stewart Home (born 1962) is an English underground writer and pamphleteer, associated with punk, the avant-garde, pranksterism, and political activism.

else... eventually, it becomes a Hollywood movie. It's three jumps and it's there. It needs the work being done. And, at each stage it becomes a little bit more visible and a little bit more smoothed out. But the original thing somehow survives to now.

AMB: That's why the unadjusted figures, the unadjusted characters, are important. The big question is: What gives value to what we do? Who decides what is to count as valuable? For instance, as academics, we are increasingly asked to «perform». To perform according to metrics invented by someone else, though.

IS: Managerial classes.

AMB: Just before the French Revolution, they resumed the Estates General. I think we should do something similar today. The Estates General: bring together all the people, all the castes, all walks of life, and figure out the question of value. The problem today is that everything is very much compartmentalised. All these different worlds – the arts, academia, etc. – have become so self-referential. If you think about it, the university was founded around the idea of, literally, universal knowledge. But this ideal is being destroyed by fragmentation.

IS: It's been completely destroyed. Unless there is a monetary value in what you do, you're not going to be funded, and you are going to disappear from the map. Entire departments. In addition, there has been Brexit here. The stupidity of the whole Brexit thing was so painful. Even the small exchanges that were going on before have been made much more difficult. Small publishers can't afford to send books to Belgium. All of that, and the mindset that went with it, has been pitiful for England. Instead of things reaching out and connecting more and more, there has been expropriation. The rich landed aristocracy still own their whole lot, and for the rest, it has gone out to an international class of wealthy Chinese, Saudi Arabians...

AMB: It's brutal. And this, of course, is the country where industrial capitalism has been invented – so, in a sense, you are used to this brutality of private property.

IS: There was a period when the Council owned a whole lot of property around here, and people moved into these empty spaces. They were left empty and people just moved in. In the late 1980s, early 1990s, that was very much the case. And then suddenly, these became multi-million-pound houses; so, if anyone squats there...

AMB: You've got these two traditions: on the one hand, capital; but, on the other hand, the commons – this is also a very English notion, is it not?

IS: Originally, a common is a common ground around a village. The enclosures of such grounds was a big moment in England that happened around the Napoleonic War era. The common, and the idea that everybody in the village has a free access to, is gone.

AMB: *During your London Orbital trip, at some point you end up in a place that evokes the Levellers and the Diggers and the Ramblers.*

IS: Yes, in Surrey. Because the Levellers and the Diggers were in St. George's Hill, in Surrey, which is now a huge private estate with private security. We were stopped about ten times by completely private cars coming up and saying, «What are you doing here»?

AMB: *You were the last Ramblers.*

IS: This is where John Lennon had his house. And now it's mostly Russians. These villages are entirely catering to oligarchs. And that's the land where the Levellers and the Diggers, Gerrard Winstanley and his people were trying to establish some idea of commons¹²! So, the ghosts are there in the landscape. That's why the ghosts are very important. But also, General Pinochet on the golf course, all that stuff – ghosts. And how do you access that without some mad pilgrimage like a walk round the M25? A lot of the land there is not even on the map. There are government installations where they are experimenting, weapon factories, the military, pharmaceutical things. They are not even on the Ordnance Survey. If you are walking there, you come up against it all the time. So, I think those journeys are very important. It's such a big tradition in England. Like William Cobbett's *Rural Rides*: though he was a sort of conservative with a small C, he got on horseback and rode all over the country, reporting on what was going on, quite savagely¹³. He was satirical of what the landowners were doing. Or, Daniel Defoe doing a whole tour of Britain. It's a tradition of seeking out... And more recently Patrick Keiller's films¹⁴. But the problem now is that the money to do that kind of films has disappeared. A whole area of possibilities for making important contributions that have an influence is gone, even from the public service. The 1990s was still a good period, there was a sudden flush of activity: it was the last one before the huge global digital entities closed it all down.

¹² Gerrard Winstanley (1609-1676), a Protestant reformer, was the leader of the Diggers, a movement that fought against the enclosure of common lands.

¹³ William Cobbett (1763-1835), was an English pamphleteer, politician, and farmer, who spent time in France and the United States. He praised traditional rural living, and also opposed the enclosures.

¹⁴ Patrick Keiller (born 1950) is an English filmmaker, essayist and lecturer, known for his Robinson trilogy, which includes *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997), and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010).

AMB: *You argue that the historical shift towards the digital has eventually created more poverty for the people. But going back to the idea that these walks are also pilgrimages, there is another one you do in The Last London (2017), from Waltham Abbey to St Leonards-on-Sea. To the Harold and Edith statue.*

IS: Yes, that fantastic statue of King Harold and Edith Swan-neck¹⁵. The walk took place at the Brexit moment, and some places we passed through were really aggressive. They had big signs «Vote Brexit» and would see us as a rabble of musicians and artsy people marching through the countryside. They didn't like it at all. Even though we were marching from London towards the coast, they associated us with the immigrants coming in, as if we had somehow smuggled ourselves across the Channel! It was a really interesting aspect of that walk, which I wasn't expecting. The vote had not yet been taken, but during the course of the travel I became quite sure that actually Brexit would win, because I could feel the country. Even in the South, even in these wealthy parts. Of course, London was different; but once you were out into Kent and Sussex, they were all... They didn't know what Brexit meant; they were fooled by the politicians. Towards the end of text, if you remember, the two characters walk on, going from Dover to Canterbury. But actually, I didn't do that walk back then. I wrote it before I did it. And now I'm writing about really doing it. Because I did this other walk, eventually. So, I am in real Dover and seeing the dinghies and the RIBS, the rubber rafts confiscated from the smugglers. As far as the eye can see, they have just stashed them in a car park and they're rotting away. Like a ghost thing.

This connects significantly to the project I am doing around Van Gogh. When Van Gogh came first, he went to Paris, where he met up with his uncle, and they took the train to Dieppe, and then by boat they landed in Newhaven, and continued to Brighton. At that time, there were no passports or visa or papers required at all. Subsequently, the next thing I was writing about, is Jack Kerouac. When he arrived in Newhaven, he came off the boat alongside a black guy, and the British police completely surrounded them both. They were arrested. Kerouac has a backpack and fifteen shillings in his pocket. They are not going to let him in. So, he's ringing his British publisher, but it's the weekend and no-one can be reached. Eventually, the police find a book in his rucksack with his name on it, linking him with Henry Miller, perhaps an endorsement, or a foreword. And they go: «Oh yeah, we arrested him too». So, this little horror story helps understanding what happened between the period of Van Gogh arriving and being waived through as a fully respectable person who had a job and was nicely dressed, and the subsequent arrival of a writer like Kerouac who looks run down and has been on the road for a while. And all that happened long before what we have now, which is even worse.

¹⁵ Harold Godwinson (c.1022-1066) was the last Anglo-Saxon king of England. He was defeated by William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings. Edith Swan-neck, also known as Edith the Fair (c.1025-c.1086), was his first wife. The statue mentioned was erected in 1875 on the seafront at St Leonards-on-Sea, a few miles from the site of the battle.

AMB: In a sense, the epitome of this is really the poet, this very light human being with no belongings and no credentials. Often, poets end locked up in jail, or in an asylum. At the same time, if you look at city monuments, you realize everything important must have the name of a poet on it...

IS: In Dover, I entered one of the only pubs open and a man came out, in a big hat, dressed like a business man. He introduced himself to me and gave me a business card. It said on it: «I am the Beat Laureate, my name is Chris Vannoy». And he went like: «I'm fully booked in, I'm going to be in Dover tonight, tomorrow I'm in Ramsgate. If you've got some money, I can do a poem now». Complete business style: «Here's my website, I have no problem in coming in, I'm always booked in...» So, even the figure of the poet, who would have been the one person I would expect to be challenging this mentality, and writing about it – not at all, he's become a performance, a Xerox of the people he's pretending to be as a beat poet. In fact, this Vannoy was just a business man, his poems are all made up of brand names, it was nothing, it wasn't a poem at all. All he was is a professional actor, dressed to look into the part – the stereotype of the poet. I thought this is terrible – but anyway, it would make for an interesting chapter, if I just finish it.

AMB: There's another element in your pilgrimage to the Harold statue, which is in St-Leonards-on-Sea. My son's name is Leonardo, so that's a special name for me. And there are a lot of churches associated with this saint, Leonard of Noblac. There is one in Shoreditch, if I'm correct, which you describe in The Last London. Originally Saint Leonard was a French hermit from the upper Middle Ages. He had prisoners released, and he is associated with this gesture of breaking the chains: he is the patron saint of political prisoners...

IS: Saint Leonard Church, yes. They are scattered around the south coast. In *The Last London* book, during this walk across from Euston, I found this image of the act of breaking the chains in a building, and there's the same image on the stained-glass windows of Saint Leonard's church. It's a great symbol in terms of pilgrimage, the moment of liberation. Anyway, I'm going to St Leonards tomorrow, on the coast. The town of St Leonards is part of Hastings, but it's now become Hackney-on-sea, complete with cafe society, art galleries, all of that spirit of Hackney, combined with an underbelly of addiction and poverty and people living in the streets, and all the artists who can't afford to live in London anymore.

AMB: I would love to go there. You described this huge building on the sea, where you once had a flat.

IS: It is strange enough. Really weird, fantasy building. It looks like the Queen Mary, but it's made out of concrete. It was built in the 1930s, initially with the idea that it would become a sort of community, a bit like Le Corbusier's *Unités d'habitation* in Marseille. It never did, because the war came and people couldn't

live there. The army took it over, but then it was too visible and an easy target. By the end of the war it was very run down, but it's still an amazing building: it embodies the utopian idea of big community, with the view of the sea. You can look at the sea as well as at the town. It used to have tunnels underneath the road that took you straight out to the beach. It's incredible that it survived at all. It's not really economically viable to keep it, but it's still a nice idea.

AMB: This idea of plotting long walking distances makes me think about the notion of scale. At some point, it's as if with your body you can start measuring a whole city, a whole country...

IS: The physical stride is a measurement. There's a lot of literature on how important a yard is, a stretch of one's leg as against an imposed metrical system. The actual thing of your foot on the ground, the stride length, is a natural form of measurement in the time that's available. The world becomes discernible by the measurement of your body against the earth. The important thing in a walk is when you've gone through the whole period of the day from first light to last light. I haven't done that so many times, but when I was going around the M25 there were days when I was actually up at sunrise and walking into the sunset. The length of the day changed immensely across the seasons. So, in the winter this is quite a short day and the whole feel of what you've done and where you've gone is different to coming through Surrey in the summer, when the days are very, very long and you're walking hours and hours into the night. You cover much more ground, and see more. I don't know whether you have absorbed more, though. In fact, in the winter the walk was intense, and the experience was different because we were going through the places where all these asylums were. This reminded me of the «mad travellers», the people who just took off their fugue walking and got lost. But also, the utopianism of the hospitals. Originally, they had gardens and fields and a lot of green space around them. People used to go there to recover from the city. But the insane were also being expelled from the city: they were seen like a diseased element in the city – «Send them out! ». Later, those same buildings have been turned into private apartments for the rich, which is how we found them during *London Orbital*.

AMB: Van Gogh also has the famous painting, La ronde des prisonniers...

IS: The walking around the prison yard, which he took from Doré's *London Pilgrimage*. And he was in Saint-Rémy himself, perpetually walking around the prison yard. In a different context, Albert Speer, Hitler's architect, was walking the same circles around the prison yard, projecting it into a mental geography as if travelling to America. He mentally walked across Europe and kept a journal every day of the walk as if going through Russia, then crossing the Bering Straits, and walking down the West Coast into Mexico. By the time he got to Mexico, they let him out of prison. Speer was a very dubious person, but the whole notion of his mental travel was interesting, a bit like a Beckett play, I think. He picked up stones or whatever in his pocket that counted the circuits he'd

done, and measured the corresponding distance into the world atlas. But also, he described what he could see out there, without actually going anywhere. It's better than being hanged, I guess – which must have been a close thing for him. In this sense, I think it's quite an important story.

AMB: *In your new book, there's going to be Van Gogh and there's going to be The Prisoners' Round...*

IS: It's called *Walking Shadows*. As I said, I started with just Van Gogh's journeys in England, and I've done all the walks he did. In themselves, they were so intriguing, because he was dissatisfied with his job as an art dealer working for his uncle's company in Covent Garden, and was walking all the time from South London where he was living in Brixton, Hackford Road. He walked over Westminster Bridge every morning, along the way into Covent Garden, relatively a modest walk. But then at the weekend he could walk from Brixton to Brighton. The main one was after he failed as a dealer. He'd gone back home to his father's parsonage. But he was looking for jobs in the English papers, as he still wanted to be in England. So, he got this job as a school teacher in a terrible school in Ramsgate. And he walked from Ramsgate to Canterbury, Canterbury to London, down in South London to Blackheath. Then he got up at four in the morning and walked to Welwyn, north of London, right out on the Great North Road, and on again in one hit, from Welwyn to Isleworth, which is down in West London on the Thames, where he was going to work for the school that he'd moved to. And while he was at that school, he walked all the time from there right into Whitechapel. There were parents who had not paid their school fees for the school, so he was going around Whitechapel at night to collect the fees. This is an enormous walk, and obviously in his letters he describes the basics of the walk, he doesn't give many details.

So, in repeating these walks you get a sense of how immense these journeys were. But, also, you begin to get into the idea of his compulsive behaviour, his determination in looking at the pictures he was looking at. They were always focused on pilgrimage, John Bunyan's idea of the pilgrim's progress, and his determination to become a preacher. On a Sunday, for instance, he visited three separate churches: small, very small churches. In fact, if you walk across Queensbridge Road just outside here, and you walk down Shrubland Road, right opposite, there is a tin church, a tin tabernacle. These were self-assembly churches. Around the middle of the 19th century, you could just order one of these churches. If you were a small community of working people and you wanted your own assembly point, you could buy one of these churches very cheap and it just came, and you could put it together. London filled up with these tin churches. The Van Gogh ones were in West London, but they are all gone, because those areas later became wealthier, more middle class. Then I realised that there is one actually just across the road in my neighbourhood. It has survived because it was taken up by a Black fundamentalist congregation. Now they're trying to sell it for two million pounds... Anyway, on one Sunday, Van Gogh started in Chiswick, he went to one tin church, where he did a Sunday

school with the kids; then he walked to Richmond, where he preached a sermon about spiritual advancement; and then he walked to Petersham. All in one day! Three sermons, all on the theme of walking and pilgrimage, following Bunyan: you do this life like a pilgrimage.

At the same time, I am not just doing a Van Gogh biography. I'm more interested in what is revealed when you go across those places now, using Van Gogh as a thread, and the whole idea of the various mappings of London that different people evolved. For Van Gogh, each walk had to be walked, even when they said to him he could get a train. He didn't want to do it. Many of his walks are what I call «grief walks». When the person where he was lodging died, he just threw himself out of the house and walked until he ended up right down in Streatham where he did a drawing, now lost, of the Common. He didn't know where he was going, he just had to go. There were several grief walks – one was to Blackheath, when his friend's daughter was thrown off a horse and killed. He walked into the city where the shop owned by the family was, but obviously nobody was there because they were at the funeral. So, he walked on to Blackheath and arrived in the house just as they were coming back, but the walk is gigantic. Later on, in Holland, he did this big walk, eighty miles to Pas-de-Calais, to a small village where Jules Breton lived, a painter he admired, who did peasant paintings. He wanted to talk to him, but didn't have the nerve to knock on the door when he got there, so he just walked back home. A very incredible period was when he was living with the coal miners. I spent a few days there to see the coal mine where he went down. And then Paris, and Arles, Auvers, and Saint-Rémy...

AMB: These very original, unadjusted personalities are somehow linked to resistance but also, more mysteriously, to commonality...

IS: That is why you want to resume the Three Estates. But today all the big conferences seeking to address enormous themes like climate change are perversely attended by the kind of people who are almost exploiting the fact that they are attending the event. They are turning up in their jet planes to show off how great and good they are. They attend not to actually address the problems, but to present themselves as the problem-solvers. It's very hard to have the General Estates today, but in some way, they did exist in the past. In a sense, I was part of it, back in 1967, when the old railway sheds in Camden, the Roundhouse, had this Dialectics of Liberation conference. It was started by the anti-psychiatrists R. D. Laing and David Cooper, and went on for two weeks. Stokely Carmichael, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Goodman, Gregory Bateson, Herbert Marcuse, were there. I was there filming it almost by accident. Apart from anything else, it was the space itself: they took over the whole building, which became a lived-in area. It wasn't like going to the Albert Hall and having a ticket to get in. People were living and sleeping there. The discussions went on apart from the main speeches, the event splintered into a whole lot of little events where many, many contacts were made. It really changed London, also from a geographical point of view. The whole Camden idea emerged on the back of this. Compendium Bookshop and things that became big centres afterwards,

they all came out of the Dialectics of Liberation conference. Laing was pursuing his agenda of breaking up the hierarchy in psychiatry, the asylum institution, the drug regimes, and all that. Some of the consequences were, in fact, nutty, but it was visionary and poetic.

I was dispatched there to make a film about the conference, commissioned by West German TV. Then I got this idea of turning the filmed interviews into a book. Particularly, it was conversations with Ginsberg over several days. It was very important for me, and it was exactly an idea of a certain kind of commonality of people who were drawn in from many disciplines. There was a lot of argument, too. For instance, I remember a quite violent debate between Ginsberg and Stokely Carmichael around the period of the Black House, funded by John Lennon, on Holloway Road. Carmichael was saying, «No possibility of exchange between me and you, you don't get what's happening», and Ginsberg trying to reply, «Look, there are other ways, peaceful means», «No, there can't be». There were really big rallies and discussions. But on the other hand, at the end of it, when the dust settled, something had been achieved. I haven't seen anything quite like that, the invention of something that is missing.

AMB: The first thing you have to realise is precisely that something is missing. Most people don't even suspect that they are missing something...

IS: It kickstarted an approach in popular culture, in terms of music for instance, the idea that you can have a free festival in Hyde Park with thousands of people saying «Cannabis should be legalized». They were all there just doing this thing, Mick Jagger or whoever it was. For a moment, it seemed like you could literally change society, you could change the whole structure of things, and people started to work towards that aim. Many, many small communities popped up between Notting Hill, which is where this energy came from, and Hackney, where it was beginning to spread. It necessarily spread east, because nobody could afford to live in the places where the conference took place. So, they drifted into the East End, which was cheaper, and a squatting scene ensued. The whole thing rolled on into the next ten years, the 1970s, which were really tough in England because the industry was breaking down. But the resisting energy was working pretty well for that period of time, until Margaret Thatcher arrived at the end of the decade, and everything that we've got now started then – the breakdown of the liberation idea. She made it her business to destroy all of that, which she succeeded in doing by pulling away any kind of funding and breaking down the social infrastructure, crushing the miners, and making everything subject to the market. The Big Bang to the world financial markets happened at that moment; the Greater London Council, was not coincidentally closed down at the same time. So, I think events like the Dialectics of Liberation conference were crucial to achieve the sort of state of general readiness to engage with things it would otherwise be extremely difficult to contest. But I'm interested in what you think that we could do.

AMB: *Toni Negri has this notion of «constituent power», as opposed to instituted power. For my part, I like the idea of «constituent», but rather than power – I'm always sceptical of it – I say «constituent magic». Actually, what we need today seems impossible to achieve, and that is why you need a magical operator, but not just any sort of magic – you need the constituent one.*

IS: In my mind, all I did with the M25 etc, they were magical acts, in a sense. They were intended to enact something that could bring about a slight change, and the best you can hope for is that some of the ideas are picked up by people, and maybe become interesting in a way. Otherwise, we wouldn't be talking.

AMB: *I do believe in writing, like you, otherwise I wouldn't spend my time this way. It's interesting, though, that ideas have not only their present manifestation, but also unpredictable afterlives. That's the «Nachleben» notion, from Aby Warburg... so you've got ideas that, after they seem to have been lost and vanished, survive and reappear where you don't expect them. The ghost is, in this sense, an important kind of reality, to the extent that the revenant is someone or something that refuses to die forever...*

IS: I'm very convinced that this revenant is Van Gogh, or Rimbaud, walking through London, exploring the Docks and being excited by the possibilities of modernist London. The landscape of trains and tunnels and docks creates a phenomenal poetic, which Rimbaud was pursuing – he was such a young guy, using up this phenomenal urban energy. It can be done, it's not magical – but then he gets horribly tangled up in colonialism, sickness, return to France and death. They are lingering presences: the things Van Gogh and Rimbaud did are very much part of the living fabric of the contemporary city, and without that I don't know what there is. I think there is spirit, there are great reservoirs of spirit left by various people, even by people who are not celebrated, who led ordinary lives. But they are there, their traces are there, and you can feel such spirit in buildings or places. They are still there to be got out... That is why this mindset of just wiping out, this idea of the computer-generated image of a perfect future, is a lie. Yet it goes up, and they convince you that it's real. And people buy in, they buy into something that doesn't exist. Not one brick has been laid and it's already sold. There are people moving into blocks on London Fields with a swimming pool on the roof, but in fact there's nothing there.
[...]

AMB: *A good thing about territoriology is that it enables us, if we practice it in a certain way, to find the secret passages in a city. London is very conducive to this type of exercise...*

IS: At one time I had the idea of trying to navigate across London just by way of those secret passages. It's hard to do. But there are a lot of little cracks between buildings, hidden walkways, and I wanted to link them up. I had a plan of mapping the old arteries. The problem was that, as soon as you start

mapping, half of them will have gone. They work best when nobody notices. Start anywhere, and there are still traces of an old London.

AMB: The in-between is interesting, it preserves possibilities. Because we live among the huge ruins of modernity, as you described them. The new developments and luxury condos are already decaying just a few years after they're completed, or they even start to decay while they are still building them...

IS: They are not intended to last. Huge investments are being made into something with a short sell-by date. It's more or less the equivalent of having a phone or a computer designed to be completely unusable after four or five years. Same with the buildings, they come with an expiry date. All of us have an expiry date, but now late humans, willing consumers, outlast the buildings that house them.

AMB: I'm walking around Deptford these days, where I've seen some of these things. Developments that already look like destroyed before being completed... you can see the cracks in them.

IS: You know the Elizabeth line? If you go to the end of the line, Abbey Wood, you emerge into a surprising landscape, down towards Thamesmead. There is nothing substantial there, but it's stacked to the eyeballs with promises, future perfect. The fact of having a station predicts increased house prices, real-estate investment. They say they are trying to set up a community, but it's weird beyond belief. Thamesmead was the location for Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. Initially, the development included a rash of tower blocks with a nice lake. But living in it was deadly: there were no services, no connections to anywhere. People felt abandoned. It was a nightmare. Understandably, it is one of the epicentres of British fascism, extreme right-wing clusters, with racist attacks on the black people who have been reluctantly relocated. It goes over to the Eltham territory where Stephen Lawrence was killed¹⁶. It's about four miles away. The boy was set on by a gang with local criminal connections, a comfortable relationship with the police. If you want to explore that territory, you'll see it's full of promotional boasts by the architects. But the reality is grim. It's a new grim. [...] To sell one of these new buildings they say, «Look, you can see the City from your window». You pick your new flat by what is visible on the horizon: aspiration by way of a long-focus lens. «You are five minutes away, so this is must be exactly what you want». Value derives from how far you are away from somewhere else. [...]

¹⁶ Stephen Lawrence was an eighteen-year-old Black British student who was murdered at a bus stop in Eltham, south-east London, in 1993 by a group of white youths. The case became a landmark in British criminal justice and race relations, particularly because of its mishandling by the Metropolitan Police, which led to a major public inquiry into institutional racism.

AMB: *Can I go back to the idea of the secret passages? I am intrigued by the fact that territories always have secrets, but to even start suspecting they exist you need to find someone who sneaks you in somehow, a guide to the backside story. The French word would be *pasqueur* – it's the smuggler. You need a smuggler.*

IS: Yes, absolutely. That's very important, the art of finding those *passeurs*. On the right day, sometimes you just bump into them. Sometimes you search them out. But they are always there. When you really need somebody, one of these characters emerges from a wood and puts you onto the right track.

AMB: *Right, it's also your need of them that materialises them.*

IS: You've got to be sufficiently aware to recognise them and not dismiss them. Don't brush them off, they're important. I'm always on the lookout for them. And as I said, they are always there: as a person or very often a building that talks to you in some way. You go into a place that's never open, but today it **IS:** someone is doing a paint job and he lets you through the door. You need to develop a special kind of alertness. Like the tin church I mentioned. I've seen that church for years and always thought it was worth a look, but I never connected it to a grander narrative. One day a friend of mine, Renchi Bicknell, with whom I walked around the M25, came to London. We were talking about the Van Gogh project and I was struck by new relevance of the tin church. I said: «The drawings that Van Gogh made of the church in Turnham Green, this is just like it». And it turns out this is about the oldest surviving example in the country. You find the story you need on your doorstep, ultimately. All the stories of the world are in Hackney if you know where to look. Go down Shrubland Road, walk across London Fields in a straight line. On the far side of London Fields, you'll come to Martello Street, alongside the railway. On this side of the railway, you pass a former industrial building, once known as «The Death Factory». It was where musicians such as Throbbing Gristle played. Genesis P-Orridge was working there and William Burroughs came there to visit him; they made recordings in the basement¹⁷. Well, if you go just beyond that, to the end house, you will find a big mural on the wall: it's Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows*, one of the last paintings he did.

When I started my Van Gogh book, I was taking a photograph of the wall and a man came out and said, «Good thing you're recording this because we may have to take it down: the person who did it committed a murder and buried a body under the floor». I won't tell the whole story now, but what he revealed was the existence of an extraordinary character from the squatting nexus of the period. He brought someone in to live in the squatted house with him. They had a row and he killed him, then buried the body in the basement. After that he got the rest of the squatting community to come and lay concrete. They didn't know that a body was under there. He said to them, «I'm going to make a recording studio and you can record here if you help me to lay the floor».

¹⁷ Genesis P-Orridge (1950-2020) was an English poet, performance artist and lead vocalist for the industrial band Throbbing Gristle.

They poured the concrete and made a recording studio. Then the killer left for Australia, Melbourne and Sydney, and got away with the crime. His work was actually doing gigantic murals on the side of buildings. This is the only one he did that was a representation someone else's artwork, the Van Gogh painting. Everything else featured Black culture heroes, Steve Biko and Martin Luther King. Successful street art. He joined a religious community, the Twelve Tribes. He confessed the story to them, and they said, «You have to go back to England and report to the police or you can't be with us». The killer came back to London Fields in a police car. They dug up the body. He went to jail for twelve years. When he came out, he rejoined the Twelve Tribes in Vancouver. The thing is, I met somebody who poured concrete over the body, without knowing what he was doing. He gave me the whole story. If you go under the railway bridge to the other side there's Ellingford Road, leading to Mare Street. It was squatted all the way. And the house this photographer lived in was the end house. Because he was part of the resistance movement, the Council knocked his house down. The rest of the street is still there, but this is where the character was operating. This story fits into the Van Gogh book I'm doing – actually, it is the opening section.

The reason why I was telling the story is that my getting hold of it was an accident. I'm looking at this mural because it's the key to something local that takes me into the Van Gogh project. Someone comes out and starts to tell me a tale of murder, but that only takes me so far. I can forget about it, as I think I'm not going to find out anything more. And then I'm doing a walk with Tom Hunter, the photographer¹⁸. And we stop. And I'm telling this story while we're standing looking at the wall. And he says, «Oh my God, I was involved in this. I was in the group who poured the concrete». So, finally I get the whole thing. That's how it works. But you know, I was already alert. Because I picked up the first story and teased it out, I got the second story, which was the real one. It's like putting disconnected pieces together... it takes years. I have seen two recent things published where someone is doing a detailed walk that comes right past the mural, and they never mention it. They don't see it. And when I told them about it, they said, «Never noticed that». There it is. I had noticed it. These things, you have to map them in your head, and be open for the next move.

AMB: Thank you so much.

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¹⁸ Tom Hunter (born 1965) is a London-based artist and photographer whose work has focused in particular on the Hackney area.

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