



# **Body Pictographs and the Disappeared; Ghosting (through) City Spaces. A Short Essay with Photographs**

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## **Abstract**

This essay and accompanying photographs forms a contemplation of pictographs of the human form which are routinely painted onto city surfaces to demark walkways, cycleways and pedestrian zones. Whole series of initially identical pictographs can take on individual appearance as they fade and distort. Over time their original purpose wanes and other (possible) associations can form. I suggest that such images of the body can never be neutral or innocent, as they will always carry some political and ethical 'charge'. And when these images do become distorted and/ or faded, they become suggestive of the political body and the body damaged by industry and other forms of political violence. They begin to whisper of other graphic images sometimes painted onto, or even burnt into city surfaces. Some of these 'other' images are pictographs of resistance which have represented the bodies of the Disappeared in a range of harsh political regimes. The information pictographs can thus become, and speak of, 'spectral traces' - ghostly presences in the city. They can link everyday city spaces to other places and other times through the geographic-empathetic imagination, and through the flow of texts and images through physical and virtual space-time.



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## Introduction

"The possibility that he is alive estranges him from me"

(Hisham Matar on the Disappearance of his father, Jaballa Matar, under the Gadaffi led Libyan regime.) (in Kellaway, 2010: web page)

As public spaces, and movements through them, have become more martialled and organised in some modern cities and spaces therein (for example through car parks, campuses, parks) pictographs of bodies have proliferated on road surfaces, pavements and signs. My experience is of UK cities and some in Europe and the US, but I suspect all 'modern' cities will be thus marked. Series of images of 'the walking man' or the 'riding man' are routinely painted to demark pedestrian route-ways and cycle-ways by various authorities (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A Pictograph denoting a pedestrian route way, Bristol, UK. Source: All images Owain Jones unless otherwise stated.

These pictographs are, in one sense, as common and straightforward as those which indicate the intended gender of users of male and female public toilets. But bodies, and images of the body, carry such charge that they can never be simple, or

neutral, or free of political, ethical and other associations. Most obviously, nearly all pictographs have gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and age associations, and related implications in terms of power, identify and justice. They do not simply inform the city; they begin to write it. One obvious example is that most of the pictographs I have recorded in UK cities (I now have many examples) are implicitly, or even explicitly, male. Thus they speak of the city as a male space of movement, recreation and labour. Furthermore, such images can be appropriated, casually, artistically and/or politically by artists and activists or new ‘unofficial versions’ can be deployed (figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Appropriation of existing pictographs. Source: Daniel Villar Onrubia.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/danielvillar/470515505/in/set-72157602573678986>

Most importantly for me, and for this paper, initially ‘routine’ (if they ever can be) pictographs can transmogrify over time through wear, becoming faded and/or dirty, and can distort as the substrate they are painted onto breaks up. In doing so they can begin to whisper of what happens to actual bodies in the city over time, and they can speak to, and of ‘other’, images of the body drawn onto



Figure 3. Artist reworking of street pictographs. “Walking Men Worldwide”. Source: Maya Barkai. (New York, USA).

<http://weburbanist.com/2010/04/26/walk-this-way-99-diverse-men-walking-in-manhattan/?ref=search>

city streets as an act of resistance, and in other macabre flashes of violence (see later figures). They can become what Till (2010) calls ‘spectral traces’ (figure 4), and in doing can represent other ghosts, and images of the Disappeared. Having said they do this ‘for me’, I am certainly not the only person to take note of, and record, such pictographs in all their variation. See for example the photographs of Phil Smith (online 2012 at <http://www.mythogeography.com/2009/12/a6.html>).

### **On the Body and Ghosts**

The body is the foundational political unit. Harvey (1998: 402), in discussing ‘the return to “the body” as “the measure of all things”’, points to ‘the whole apparatus of symbolism, iconography, and representation that gives the body so much of its meaning’. Even the simplest “stick-drawing” of the human figure will resonate with all manner of ontological and political vibrations if attended to closely in relation to its exact form and setting. And, as the body is the foundational political unit, it often pays a heavy price in terms of power (state and other), labour and gender, ethnic and age politics. The body endures in a number of senses. It continues through time and through regimes, and in various narrative trajectories. It can turn from flesh to dust, flesh to shadow, flesh to image, and flesh to memory. But the body can be disappeared by violent means and violent agencies of some kind or another. This is ultimate violence. One of the great terrors of the body Disappeared (for those left behind) is the uncertainty of narrative, and thus the unending of narrative (the lack of closure).



Figure 4. An example of a faded pictograph. A spectral trace? Plymouth. UK.

The body, it almost goes without saying, becomes very obvious in cases of enforced disappearance – obvious as an absence. This is the disappearing of individuals from their communities, their families, from cultural, political and economic networks, through processes of extreme state (and non-state) violence. The body possibly: - killed, incarcerated, tortured, incinerated, buried, obliterated, broken. The body perhaps alive somewhere else (for decades). The body not known-where-what-why- how-by that (exactly), for those left behind. It is obvious as a lack, as an absence, as a physical narrative that has been violently arrested and

yet left unclosed. The lack of closure due to acts of disappearance is seen as a specific “tactic of terror” and a crime against humanity (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights UNHCHR 2006).

In the face of disappearance, tactics of representing the lost body in public space have been developed. Traces of the disappeared body can also reappear through chance, and through imaginative seepage which allows ghosts to appear in the city. Till (2005: 6) discusses violence, memory, and ghosts in the city in the context of Berlin when she argues that ‘the spectres of the past are felt in the contemporary city when groups or individuals intentionally or unexpectedly evoke ghosts’.

Till’s spectral traces involves coming into ‘contact with past lives through objects, natures, and remnants that haunt the contemporary landscape’ (Till 2010: 2). The city, as others have also pointed out, is always populated by ‘ghosts’- lost souls - the ones who-were-once-there. These ghosts might simply be those from the past, long gone, but somehow recorded in old photos, stories, legers, marks and objects. King (2000: 12) draws upon Bollas (1995) to say ‘the passing of time itself is traumatic, involving as it does the ‘loss of the self, its continuous destruction through consignment to oblivion’. But more poignant still are the ghosts of those who suffered violence and injustice, those who became ghosts too early or in bad ways. This includes, of course, the Disappeared. Till (2010) is interested in how spectral traces can emerge when the ‘ground’ (be it physical, symbolic, political, historical) of the city is disturbed, and calls for an ethical-political response to them when they do. A form of justice which speaks not only from present to past, but within the present and for the future. Here I suggest other types of spectral traces can emerge through the fading or changing of ordinary signs.

Pile (2005: 15) also sees the city as teeming with ghosts who are bound up with movement and space - ‘the city was full of movement, of criss-crossing times and spaces, a serial procession of dreams and ghosts’. Kneale (2011: 10) suggest that ‘ghosts “...” are strangers in the city, demanding a response from the living’. But ghosts are not, or should not, be bound in congruent space, they can travel through from one place to another, from one city’s past to another’s present, through acts of protest and resistance, acts of remembering, or simply through chance promptings of the imagination by marks and events. The street becomes a universal space of (in) justice – every-street.

Ghosts are nearly always about bodies and bodies somehow re-appeared. No trace = no ghost, so questions arise about the ghosts of ghosts and the un-ghosts who wait underneath the surface of the city, waiting to be conjured into ghosts by some disturbance, some gesture, some mark, some event. The fading and changing pictographs are on a slow journey from clear visibility to vanishing (unless they are restored). In this migration they speak of the interplay of presence and absence which has been the focus of landscape studies recently (Wylie, 2007, 2009) and

perhaps of Derrida's concerns (1974) of "Différance" and "Trace" and the play of absence and presence.

### **Marks of Resistance, Protest and Lament**

For some time I have been struck by the representations of bodies that have been deployed in protests about, resistance to, and remembrance of episodes of Disappearance. Notably the protest drawings of 'The Disappeared' in South America (Fig 5). These are representations of loss, longing, searching, and resistance placed / performed in public space — a form of art / graffiti as grief,



Figure 5. Remembering the Disappeared under the military dictatorship in Argentina. Source: Image reproduced from Druliolle, 2009, 78, image by Druliolle, original drawing anonymous.

resistance, and longing - attempts to represent and re-signify the lost body in(to) political, ethical and memorial form. These remain a potent symbol in post-authoritarian Argentina and elsewhere as expressed by Druliolle:

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the disappeared had returned to Argentine society, no longer as invisible traces haunting daily life, but as acknowledged absences. They have found a place and a role as the guardians of memory and as a source of the ethical commitment to the defence of human rights in post-authoritarian Argentina. It is not

surprising that the disappeared returned to ESMA<sup>2</sup> through this artistic medium. Such human-sized silhouettes have been used by the human rights movement and the organizations of the relatives of the disappeared since the last days of the authoritarian period, when they invaded the streets of Buenos Aires, an important event known as the *Siluetazo*. Nevertheless, most references to the *Siluetazo* in the academic literature are very brief (Druliolle, 2009: 77-78)

Bosco (2006, 2004, and 2001) has shown that these kinds of strategies of resistance against enforced disappearance have ‘mobilized intensely spatialized, largely public responses from collective, civil society movements’ (see also Thrift 2007 on the geographies of violence).

Other images of lost bodies also crowd into the mind such the supposed shadows of people incinerated onto walls in the nuclear attack on Hiroshima (Fig 6) and subsequent remembrance performances of Hiroshima (Figs 7 & 8)



Figure 6. Hiroshima Shadow. Source: <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Hiroshima%20Poetry%20Pr%20ose%20and%20Art.htm>

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<sup>2</sup>EMSA stands for Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (Navy School of Mechanics,) in Buenos Aires, ‘one of the most infamous torture centers of the last military dictatorship’ (Druliolle, 2009:, 77).



Figure 7. Remembering Hiroshima. Source:  
<http://www.thehypertexts.com/Hiroshima%20Poetry%20Prose%20and%20Art.htm>



Figure 8. Remembering Hiroshima. The  
GammaBlaBlog. Source:  
[http://www.nowpublic.com/shadow\\_chalking\\_hiroshima\\_memorial\\_nyc3](http://www.nowpublic.com/shadow_chalking_hiroshima_memorial_nyc3).  
Licence: Creative Commons: Attribution-NoDerivs

Representations of the body in it all its graphic and ontological essence can become political/ ethical ‘wormholes’ between one image and another, one city space and another, one person and another, which can tug at the imagination as one passes by – or over them. The outline of the human body is also a marker of the crime scene, of the stricken body, the disappeared in terms of terminated life, body outlined in the pattern where its energy disappeared. Hicks (2009) considers the rise of body outline drawings in her neighbourhood of Newtown, Sidney, Australia in her following quote:

On the other hand, those first body outlines I had seen in Newtown many years previously were commemorating a different kind of wartime event – the bombing of Hiroshima on 6th August 1945. Every year peace activists around the world observe Hiroshima Day by holding rallies, and sometimes they draw bodies on their local pavements. These are supposed to simulate the marks left when people were vapourised by the bomb’s heat blast. Judging from the few photographs taken in Hiroshima that day, the real body shadows were blurred and formless, and yet it is the clichéd homicide silhouette that activists have chosen to use in their peace demonstrations. [...] The outlines make the street look like a crime scene, and for anti-war protesters that is the point. (Hicks, 2009: 125)

The cliché of the drawn body also speaks to the political essence of the body. The transformation of ideogrammatic images of bodies on the street shows how contingent and residual processes can create new signs and create ghostly geographies. As already set out some artworks deliberately ‘play’ with the notion of street signage, setting up connections and (re)interpretations of differing urban spaces. But it is possible to simply rework, re-imagine, and re-present images and marks put into the city for one geographic purpose, to begin to make them do other geographic work which can feed into a spatialisation of politics, and a counter-narrative of remembrance through representational space (Cresswell 1996). Figure 9 is just a sample of some of the pedestrian pictographs I have collected (all UK).

Some have strangeness even at the outset! All would have started out white, fresh, sharp and clean. But almost inevitably over time they fade, become broken, partial, distorted, especially if the plans and the regimes they spoke of and for, have been replaced, or they have simply fallen out of hard-pressed maintenance budgets. So, in time, they become bearers of parasites and stigma and seem to express emanations. Even the accidental layering of paint on rough ground can become expressive (Figure 10) and akin to painted depiction of grief and anger.

Also, series of once identical body images spaced out along, say, a pedestrian route-way, will fade, wear and be dirtied into individual forms as city grime, footfall, and the breaking up of surfaces take their toll. The broken, ghostly images become something different to their freshly painted progenitors purely in

visual terms, but these speak to me, and perhaps others of other forms of body pictograms in the city and bodies themselves.

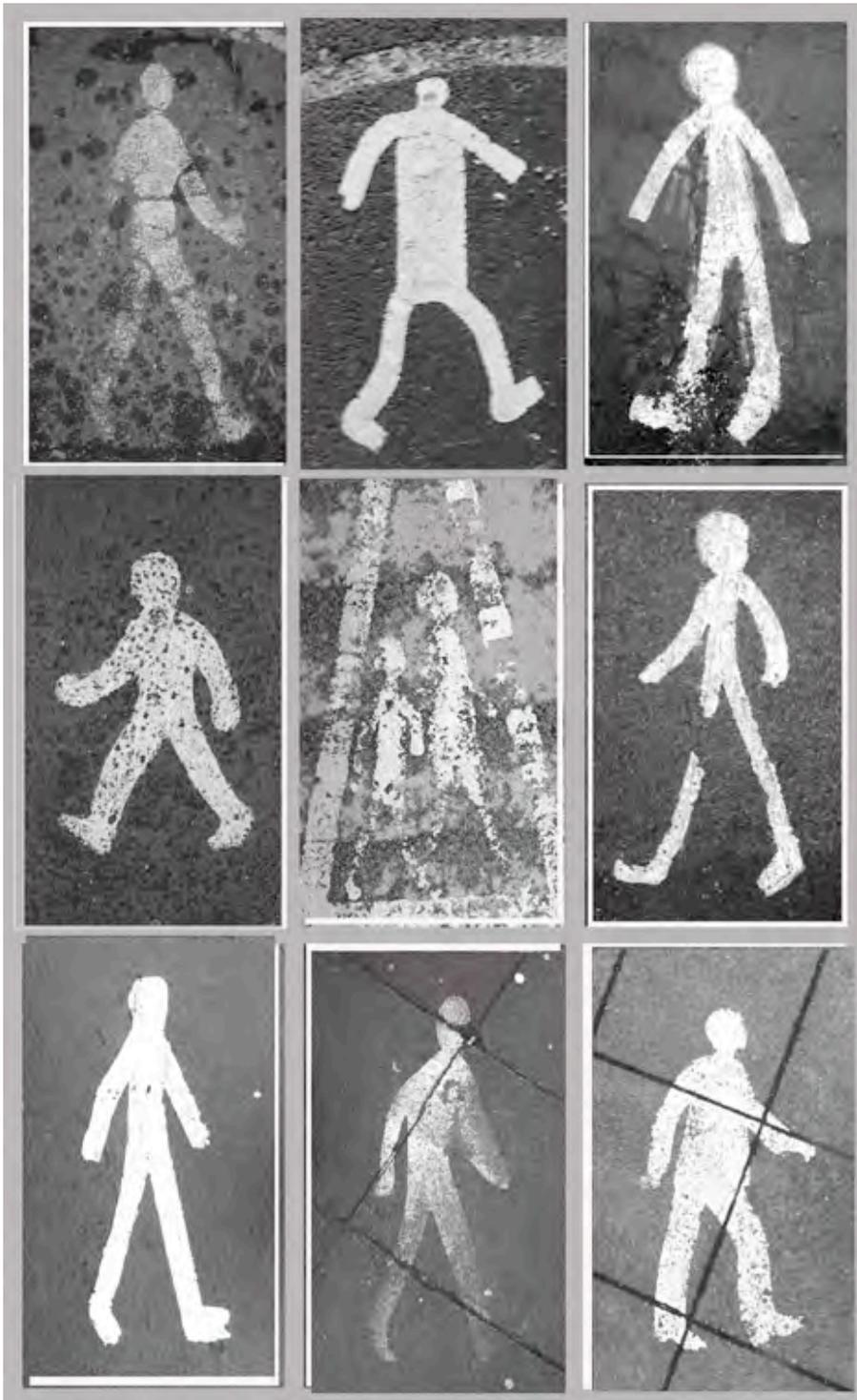


Figure 9. Series # 1. Variations of 'human' pictograms (all UK)

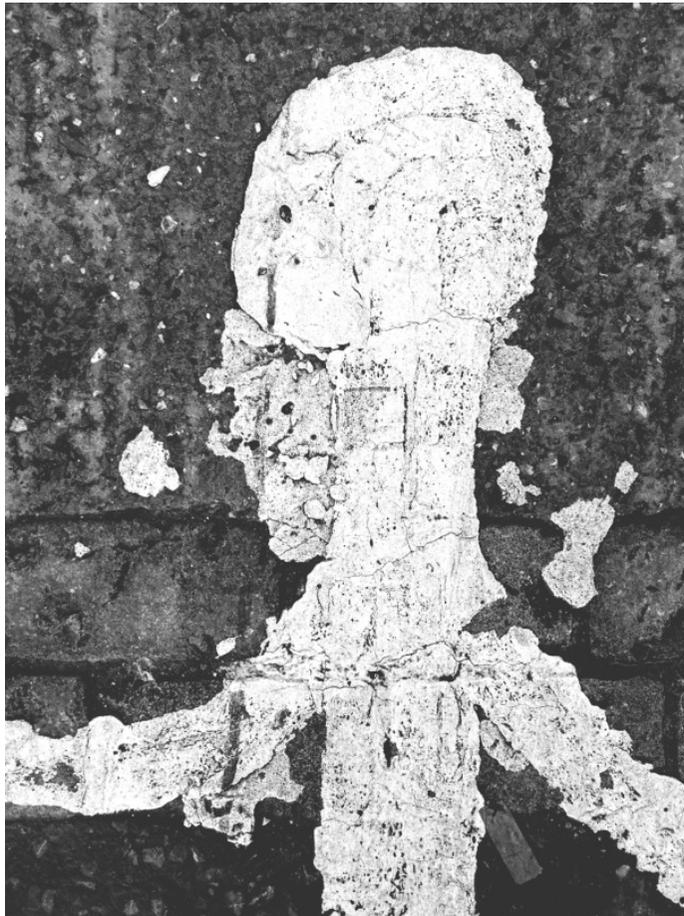


Figure 10. Head of 'man'. Bristol. UK.

Hardly serving as information as originally intended, the more faded and transformed become a type of city ghost which speak to/off other city ghosts. I suggest these are examples of the 'apparitions' that Thrift (2000: 405) reckons can appear in the city and which 'are the unintended consequences of the complexity of modern cities, cities in which multiple time-spaces are being produced, which overlap, interact, and interfere'. These apparitions, which paradoxically emerge through fading, can seep meaning from one type of urban space to another through, perhaps, barely sensed memories, symbolisms and associations.

In the many versions of the figures now drawn in the hope of moving the body safely and efficiently around the capitalist city, is there also some sense of the disciplining and then the breaking (up) of the working body? Link missing here? The body "broken on the wheel" of industrial and post-industrial capitalism labour conditions as famously depicted by Charlie Chaplin in the film *Modern Times*. (See also The Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights

<http://www.globallabourrights.org/about>). Similarly, Callard (1998: 396, citing Marx 1976) talks of

[the] excitement and anxiety that accompany bodily deformation and re-ordering [...]

[Manufacture] converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity ... the individual himself is divided up, and transformed into the automatic motor of a detail operation, thus realising the absurd fable of *Menenius Agrippa*<sup>3</sup>, which presents the man as a mere fragment of his own body (pages 481-482 (Marx)).

Lifting such common-place images off the street imaginatively and photographically begins to make them travel and work in ways which speak to private suffering (re)presented and remembered in public space. An important task, surely, for critical geography and a task that can be done, or which can spring upon one even during a quiet stroll through a peaceful city pedestrian routeway.

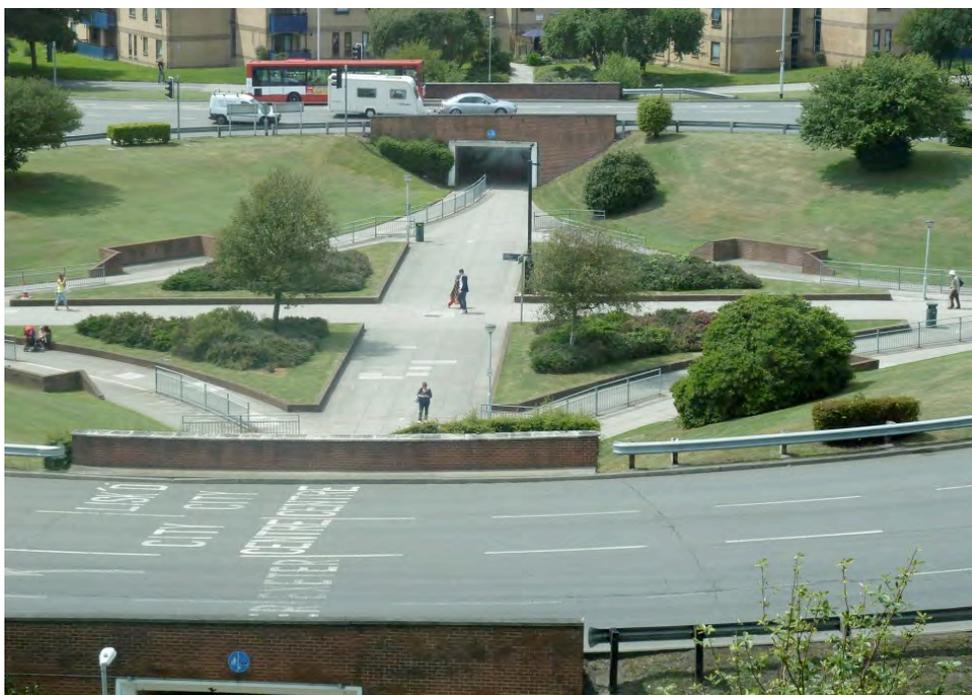


Figure 11. The Setting for Series #2. Pedestrian Routeway, Plymouth, UK

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<sup>3</sup> The fable of Menenius Agrippa tells of a man whose body organs argue and refuse to work together, thus bringing about his, and their, destruction.

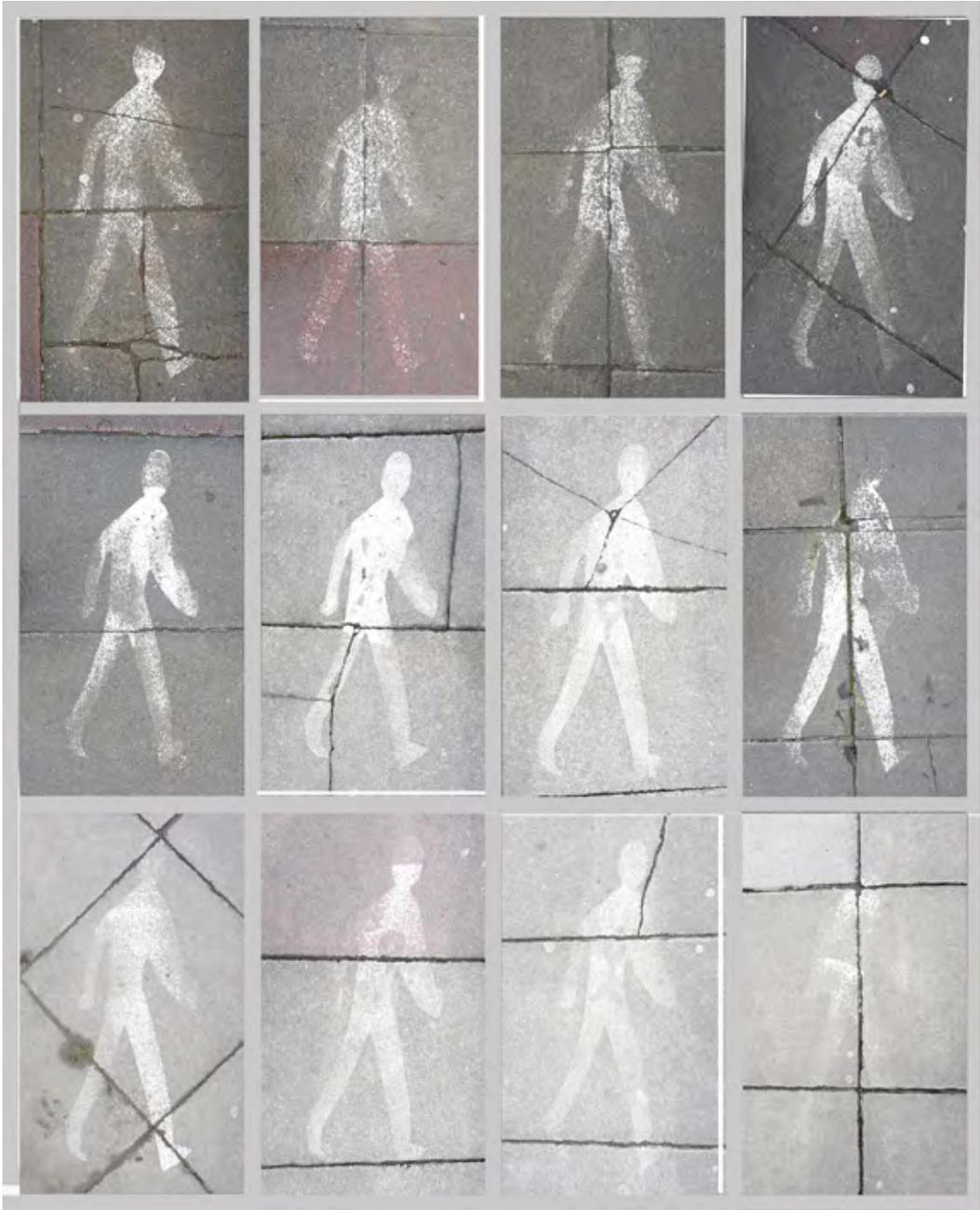


Figure 12. Series #2. The same repeated figure, variously worn and stained, marked by cracks in the substrate, almost faded to nothing. Plymouth, UK.



Figure 13. The setting for Series #3. Cheltenham, UK

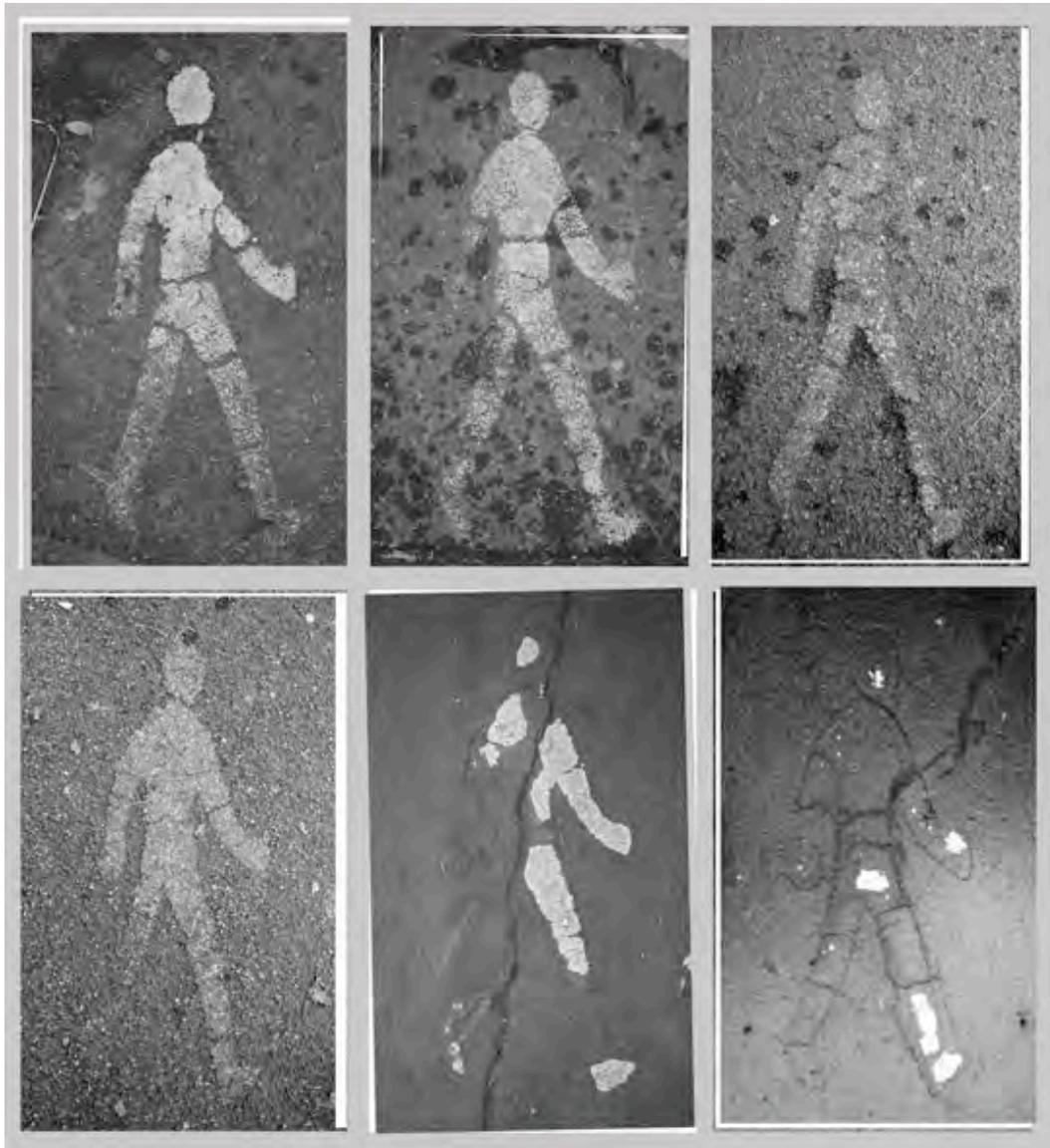


Figure 14. Series #3. Cheltenham, UK.

### **Concluding Thoughts (for now)**

I think we are all (in the end) the Disappeared. We will all fade bodily, in the memories of others, in traces of virtual space. But some Disappear, and more importantly, are Disappeared, much more tragically, violently, prematurely and unjustly than others. The multiple endurences of the body are not concurrent or co-terminus. Perhaps I have an over-fertile, or somehow pathological, geographic imagination, but I have long been struck by pictographs, and taken photographs of them. I am particularly drawn to those faded or transformed by the agencies of footfall, dirt, shifting substrates, and neglect. The movement from brightness and

newness to decay, fragmentation and disappearance, seem to me to have a great poignancy relating to real bodies in the city, and also to all the protest pictographs I have discussed. In addition the way that series of originally identical pictographs, say, a series making a long pedestrian routeway, slowly change into individual forms through time, also speak somehow of others in the city. For me the transformations, distortions and fading turn what were functional (but never totally innocent) signs of information into ghostly reminders of the Disappeared and the Disappearing and of those lost in other spaces and times.

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