

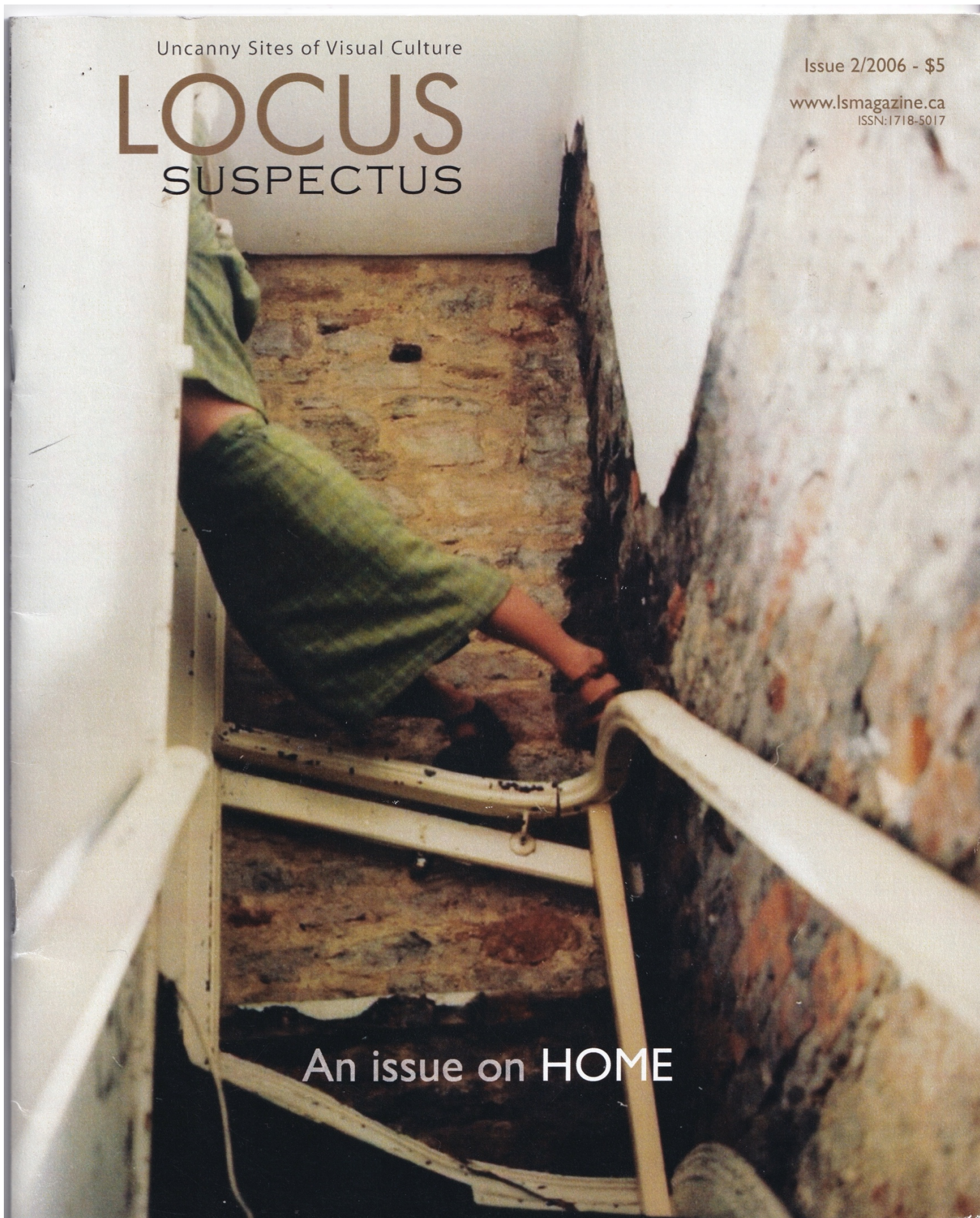
Uncanny Sites of Visual Culture

LOCUS SUSPECTUS

Issue 2/2006 - \$5

www.lsmagazine.ca
ISSN: 1718-5017

An issue on HOME



Home?

by Ilga Leimanis

My grandparents fled their homes to save their lives. Infants under one arm, a suitcase in the other, they left in the middle of the night. They endured hardship for what, at the time, they thought would be only a few weeks, maybe a few months, until the end of the war. They never returned, but only to visit - twice. The tragic circumstances of the occupation of my grandparents' homeland and issues surrounding home and belonging have, until quite recently, been a central focus in my life. My grandparents' experiences were passed down, and I internalised their culture and felt their trauma and dislocation as though it were my own. Growing up, I collected correspondence from friends as a means of suturing this scattered sense of belonging. There is a containment in the practice of collecting, a form of practical memory closely related to autobiographical writing (Walter Benjamin, 1999). It is through this process that I have come to realise that 'home' is more about people - friends and community - than about place.

Born into my grandparents' exile and raised in Canada, my childhood centred on my family and my cultural community. On Saturdays, I attended classes, where I learned about the country my grandparents fled; a country I had never seen. These classes taught me the history, geography, and language of this country, and the cultural traditions, song, and dance that were an important part of my grandparents' lives. Summers were spent at camp, where I lived with others who shared my cultural background. We spoke the language of our heritage and practiced our cultural identity. In short, we led a double life, engaging superficially with the local country in which we had lived our entire lives.

Introduced to new perspectives and ideas in university, I discovered I was not alone with my inherited feelings of loss, but realised that I was one of many millions of participants affected either directly or indirectly by an unprecedented phenomenon in human history: a massive displacement of people who

abandoned their homelands for different personal, political and socioeconomic reasons. A backdrop of exile and longing provides a powerful factor in the process of identity formation. I was raised with a deep sense of duty towards my cultural identity and was taught to stand tall as a positive representative, reminding others of the history endured by so many. I don't know why I felt it so deeply, so seriously. Ron Eyerman discusses cultural trauma as a "dramatic loss of identity and meaning" that passes down through generations. Later generations need not have experienced the original event, but continue to identify themselves through it (2001).

Political change abroad coincided perfectly with my

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entry into adulthood, making it possible to leave Canada to live and study in this the mythical "homeland"; the land of the stories I heard in my grandmothers' kitchens. However, the place I arrived in bore little resemblance to the country of my grandparents' memories, the country I viewed as my own. My

language and accent marked me as an outsider. As a young woman, I was naïve, believing I was returning 'home'. My identity was at a cross-roads in this foreign land.

Much has changed in the fifteen years following this experience. My cultural identity is more mobile and I now feel comfortable both here (where ever that might be) and there (in my grandparents' homeland). Language, culture, and passports have enriched my life ex-

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perience: privilege and access – the ability to float between and pass as one or the other. I now live in London, a multicultural metropolis, where again, I am a foreigner. My accent defines me, but I am no longer preoccupied with these feelings. I have connected with my cultural community here, but it differs from both the one I knew growing up in Canada and the one I found while living in my grandparent's homeland. Border relations with the homeland are different than they used to be. Cheap flights, phone calls, and Internet access make living or working in a few places possible. As James Clifford notes "dispersed peoples, once separated from homelands by vast oceans and political barriers, increasingly find themselves in border relations with the old country, thanks to a to-and-fro made possible by modern

technologies of transport, communication and labour migration" (1997). Here, different generations of the dispersed, meet each other in the same place.

Upon reflection, those strong old emotions seem silly now. History has changed: political obstacles no longer prevent émigrés from returning 'home'; the choice exists. I regret the space these emotions and feelings have occupied. They now seem like useless clutter, for there are so many other more interesting matters to pursue. What do we pass on to the next generation? What values and expectations do we communicate? Remembering a past is always an effort and sometimes it might be easier to forget altogether – to shrug off the weight, the burden.

The concept of home is a universally constructed signifier of place and belonging. Foreignness and exile stand in opposition to this. Once you have left home, you can never really go back, even if you visit regularly. Hamid Naficy (Naficy, 1999) writes that "it is possible to be able to return and choose not to do so [...] it is also possible to transit back and forth, be in and out, go here and there – to be a nomad and yet be in exile everywhere." There is no guarantee that the home one hoped for is any longer the structure that memory built.

When I last visited my grandparents' homeland, a friend brought me to visit her new country prop-

erty: a beautiful old house with a pond, hills and fields in a traditional rural setting undisturbed by the passage of time. We were raking leaves and her young daughter was showing me around. The air was crisp, the light was northern and autumnal and I was suddenly overcome with nostalgia; the overwhelming desire to belong to this land. Despite the fullness and happiness of my life, I still envy people who know where they belong, who know who they are and raise their children with a clear and singular focus that was missing in my childhood. I have only ever felt those powerful feeling of nostalgia in my grandparents' homeland, despite having just lived there for three years during my studies. No other place can evoke such emotion. It represents a simplicity, a history that was severed when my grandparents fled, forever changing the trajectory of our lives.

It is through the lens of comparison offered by my own experience of my grandparents' homeland that I recognised the quaintness and tradition of my childhood. I grew up

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in the gap created by a severed history, separate from the mainstream and frozen in time, where long-distance friendships were sustained through letters collected and neatly classified. Today, I feel an

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range of health problems" (2001). Living without permanent shelter, inadequate nourishment, and protection from the elements leaves one vulnerable to infections and disease, thus homeless people "are admitted to hospitals up to five times more than the general population and stay in hospital longer than other low income patients". Hwang argues that more research needs to be done in order to identify proactive ways of providing care for this segment of the population.

The steady increase of homeless people in the Edmonton area makes it clear that more needs to be done to address this serious issue. It is not enough to write a cheque and hope for the best. On August 2, 2006, *The Edmonton Sun* published a statement by New Democrat MLA Ray Martin, proposing that Alberta Premier Ralph Klein create a task force that would "explore the root causes of homelessness and find solutions" in Alberta. Martin, along with other supporters of the proposed task force, believes that this would not only help prevent an increase in Alberta's homeless population, but it would also draw public attention to the issue. Jim Gurnett of the Centre for Newcomers described the city housing situation as desperate. "Something has to happen. The problem is getting worse and we are not seeing any real action from the governments that can do something about it".

Klein, on the other hand, is not at all convinced by the NDP's argument for a homeless task force. The

Premier is confident that the \$171 million that was allocated for housing programs and shelters across the province is "sufficient". Klein made it clear to *The Edmonton Sun* that he was not open to any new suggestions addressing the issue of homelessness in Alberta. More specifically, he was not interested in any idea that came from the New Democrats. "We have good thinking people—a lot more intelligent than (NDP leader) Brian Mason or Ray Martin—who are looking at this particular problem (and) have been for years". Whether Ralph Klein genuinely believes the task force is an unnecessary venture, or he simply refuses to accept advice from an opposing party remains unclear.

Homelessness is a pressing concern in Edmonton. As housing costs continue to rise so, too, will the number of people living on the streets. Like many other Canadian cities, homelessness is concentrated in the poorer inner-city districts of Edmonton. In a city that is dominated by suburbia and commuters, the homeless population is all but invisible to many Edmontonians: this is an issue that needs to be on the city's radar. Big changes need to occur, and given that Edmonton is situated in Canada's wealthiest province, we should not only expect, but also demand that this homeless crisis be put on the right track.

SOURCES

Hwang, Stephen P. "Homelessness and Health" in *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, January, 2001 v. 164. pp. 229–233.

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allegiance to the country I discovered first hand and the life I have created, rather than to the little world made up of passed-down traditions I called home and grew up in. The myth of the fairy-tale land was just that; a story that did not fully correspond to reality, but a rich story bearing many gifts, and one I am not prepared to completely let go of in this digitally-mediated, dispersed existence where I am at home.

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