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[Communities](#) **Lost treasure**

Hackney Wick, once home to a massive market, is being revamped for the Olympics. Stephen Gill photographed its dying days with a 50p camera he bought there. Report by Iain Sinclair

Stephen Gill is a member of that recent urban tribe, the yellow-jacketed Hackney centaurs: part-man, part-bicycle. He roams the canal system, the backwaters of the River Lea, breathing hard, in the reverie of a doomed landscape. Travelling-shot visions of blight and sturdy nature - bindweed, teasel, mutating buddleia - keep him afloat; until he sees the site that will become his next project. Bike padlocked, he walks and watches. Centaur becomes Cyclops: camera-eye panning, waiting for revelation or epiphany. The shock of recognition. The camera is just an excuse, a disguise. When the situation is right, the set located, the viewer is absorbed into the view. He vanishes.

January 2003: for 50p Gill bought a magical instrument, a plastic camera willing to interpret chaos. The photographer enters into a collaboration with place, by the mediation of a found object. "I was overwhelmed," he says, "by the number of people." He had stumbled on one of the great secrets of the city, the old Hackney Wick Stadium - which, before the authorities noticed it, was a monumental car boot sale. It's an illusion that these provisional zones with their pylon forests are bereft of human presence. Dogs howl behind melancholy fences on which ribbons of dusty polythene flutter. Sinister cars cruise, right behind you as you walk. CCTV nests twitch at your intrusion. Then suddenly, out of nothing, there is Hackney Wick market. Gill finds his camera and lets it lead him through a forgotten island, trapped between road and rail and canal, between development scams: begging somebody to contrive an obituary. Whatever he might think, Gill's

work is elegiac. He documents a poetry of loss. When the cycling conceptualist arrives, the game is over.

I remember another market project, Markéta Luskacová's *Photographs Of Spitalfields*. Vagrants warming themselves in the snow. Street musicians. Dogs under coats. That was 1991 and the end of something. Publication proved that a modest part of London was being noticed and branded. Celebration is also dissolution. Luskacová's monochrome gives way to Gill's smudged colour. Technical "shortcomings" are part of his charm. That slackening of focus, the cheap camera's cataract eye, humanises the theft of spirit. Gill is dressed like one of those borderland mercenaries, the sad and soulful security operatives who guard newly privatised roads and business parks created, overnight, from Balkan rubble. A fluorescent jacket aligns him with the brotherhood of solitary watchers at gates.

In Hackney Wick, Gill finds his theme in a decommissioned dog track, a memorial to the London of novelists such as Alexander Baron, Gerald Kersh and Robert Westerby: *The Lowlife*, *Fowlers End*, *Wide Boys Never Work*. But urban stadiums have a darker resonance: Allende's Chile, wartime Paris. Convenient amphitheatres for rounding up political prisoners. Gill's scavengers are electively third world, trading in things with no value, curating trash. Making surrealist inventories from the most spurned and distressed material. The Wick is a museum of disappearance. An open-air gallery liberated from irony.

But irony, like the long shadows of a computer-generated future, does fall across the scene. Alongside convolvulus tendrils weaving through the boundary fences are laminated notices, placed there by the London Development Agency. Announcements of the compulsory purchase of 838 acres of the Lower Lea Valley: travellers' sites, lock-keepers' cottages, even the New Spitalfields Market.

Gill is not a polemicist. He is present, as Robert Frank is present in his American wanderings, to let reality imprint itself with the smallest degree of intervention or commentary. Human weeds. Articulate plants. Guard dogs waiting for their bellies to be tickled. The story of London is the story of its markets. Hackney Wick disappears into a pre-Olympic limbo of exaggerated promises and present suspension of liberties. But in another part of the borough, Broadway Market, jellied-eel mythology gives way to a pastiche Islington. No 50p tat here: discriminations of olive oil, fancy breads and a stall selling lush volumes by notable photographers. This is where, for a price, I pick up my copy of Gill's Hackney Wick. An interesting journey, and one I am pleased to share with the centaur of the marshes.

· Next week: Stephen Gill's Hackney flowers. Stephen Gill's book of photographs, Hackney Wick, is available for £28 from stephengill.co.uk, and from the Photographers' Gallery, London.