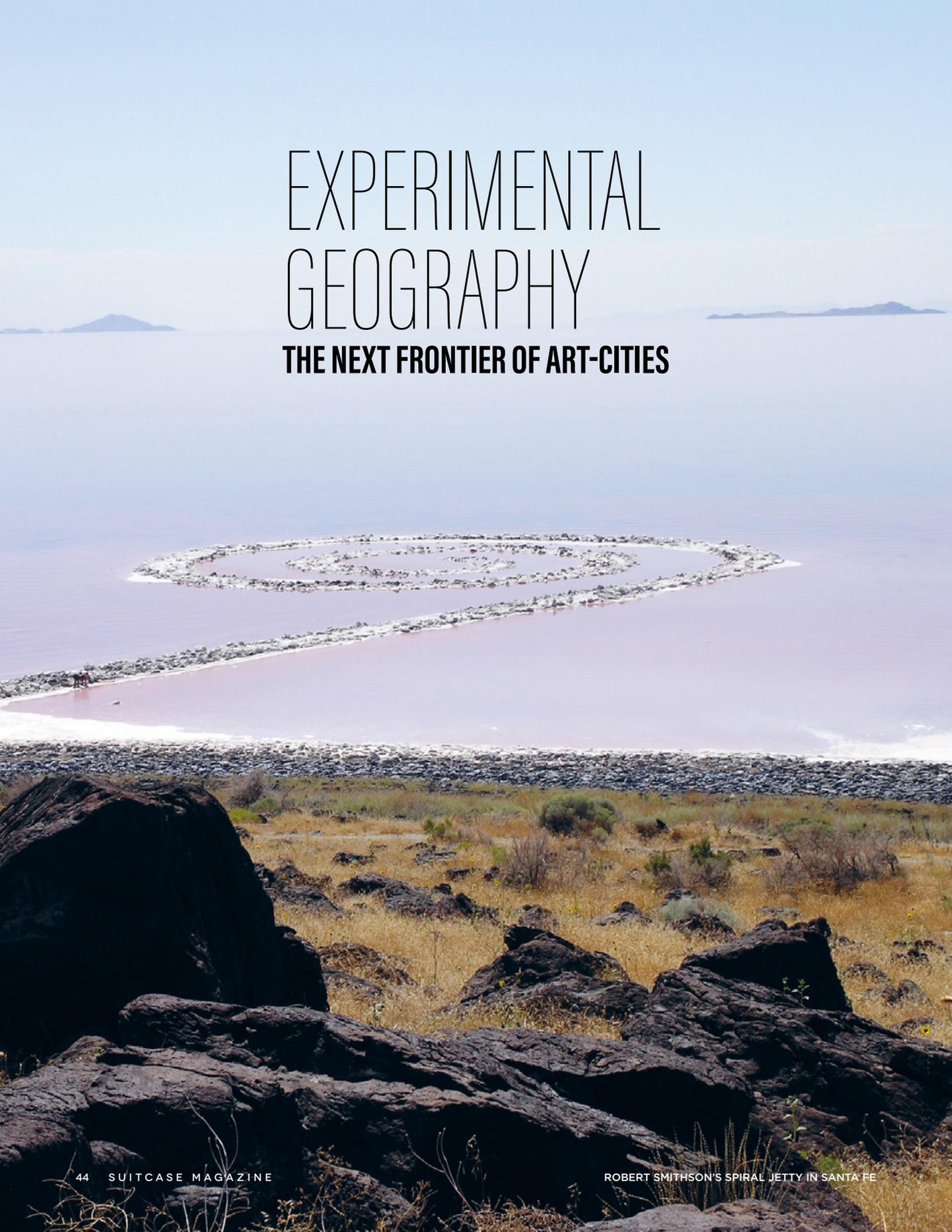


# EXPERIMENTAL GEOGRAPHY

## THE NEXT FRONTIER OF ART-CITIES



Words by  
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A sentiment often expressed in New York's creative circles is that the city is the best place to be inspired – and one of the worst places to be productive. This may sound like an excuse, but there is something to be said for its logic.

Like New York, many of the world's most art-focused cities are not particularly artist-friendly. As creative hubs like London, Paris, Berlin and Los Angeles attract more people, the special balance of conditions that once made them favourable for artists – access to affordable space, diversity, inclusiveness, liveability and interconnectivity – can end up being impaired. And as the artistic population in any one area approaches critical mass,

opportunities for funding, exposure and resources become even more competitive.

In fact, creative productivity can often be more successfully achieved in what an economist might term a 'beta' city – where small or burgeoning art scenes are accessible, galleries more approachable and local infrastructure simpler and more supportive. As we increasingly shed the idea that being an artist is synonymous with living in one of only a few cities – or even being urban – dynamic and engaged artistic communities are flourishing in less expected and less exhausted communities around the globe.

### **ATHENS** GREECE

"It is never too late for a little happiness, even in the shadow of death," wrote Glenway Wescott in his novel *Apartment in Athens* back in 1945. And that sentiment still rings true in the city today.

Despite, and also partially owing to Greece's current economic turmoil, creativity and conviviality have proliferated in the country's edgy cosmopolitan capital. Either in defiance of, or simply regardless of austerity measures, Athens' social and cultural life has not been as affected by the downturn as you might think. In the vacuum created by the closure of commercial galleries, collectives of self-organised artists' groups have emerged to convert struggling hotels, restaurants and shops into exhibition spaces, studios and pop-up shows. Meanwhile formerly peripheral areas, like Gazi, are turning into industrial artistic neighbourhoods as well as buzzing nightlife districts.

As the imprint of Athens' emergent art scene extends beyond its borders, an increasing number of touring exhibitions, symposiums and performances are visiting the 3,400-year-old metropolis. In addition, several artists' residency programmes have been conceived with the intention of opening up a dialogue with the international community (notably Pantheon, Kappatos and Snehta). A sign of the times: in 2017, Documenta, widely regarded as the most important recurring exhibition for contemporary art in the world, will be split between Athens and its regular home in Kassel, Germany.

### **SHANGHAI** CHINA

China's stunning transformation into the world's second-largest art market helped fuel an explosion of fine art sales after the turn of the century. But just as in other burgeoning art powerhouses in the Asia-Pacific region – including Mumbai, Hong Kong and Singapore – the conditions that give rise to lucrative marketplaces can often be the same circumstances that can end up seeing creative communities struggle for support.

In China, censorship practices, as well as a climate of artistic risk-aversion, have limited the country's appeal as a base for international artists. Domestically, however, art production has boomed. At the intersection of art and commerce is Shanghai, which by some measures is poised to displace Beijing as China's art capital. In 2004, the Shanghai Creative Industry Centre was established with the ambitious goal to develop Shanghai into the most influential art city in Asia.

Now on the other side of a decade's fervent development, Shanghai is endowed with 80 creative industrial clusters comprising 6,000 different groups, as well as a Biennale with international traction and China's first state-owned contemporary art museum, The Power Station of Art.



LA FRICHE - PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MANGE

## MARSEILLE FRANCE

You'll find the city of Marseille in between the lavender fields, vineyards and medieval hamlets of Provence. Until fairly recently, the place was largely seen as a seedy Mediterranean metro. But since it was designated European Capital of Culture in 2013, the world's eighth-largest port has reinvented itself as a culinary and artistic focal point.

The Musée d'Art Contemporain de Marseille frequently produces major, narrative-challenging retrospectives of significant artists. And a recent €23million renovation to La Friche (The Wasteland) – a converted tobacco factory full of galleries and studio space – has enlarged the presence of experimental and emerging art in the region.

Outside Paris, the city now houses the largest community of artists in France thanks to the municipal government's efforts to catalyse investment, diversity and affordability in a burgeoning creative economy. TGV trains link Paris to Marseille in the space of only three hours, facilitating an easy transmission of people and ideas between the country's first and second cities. Further encouraging decentralisation of the nation's creative and intellectual energy from Paris, France is currently planning to reduce its number of administrative regions, which should ultimately affect how the country's state-supported arts funding is both prioritised and distributed.

## LEIPZIG GERMANY

The factors that transformed Berlin into a wildly fertile home for artists following the fall of the Wall are complex. Today the city is still hard to beat for its relaxed cultural richness. But economic transitions and the steady crush of tourism have created an atmosphere of transitivity, speculation and cynicism, especially among residents of Berlin.

It is easy to understand why artists – in particular German artists – are searching for another city to provide the charm, sophistication and commercial latency of Berlin in the 90s and early 2000s. Only 160km to the south, Leipzig has already unofficially awarded itself this title. In a wry attempt to promote the city as Berlin's successor, the municipal government rebranded it 'Likezig' in the summer of 2014. The move was perhaps premature, judging by the meme that followed: Hypezig.

However in the last few years a sizable community of artists and musicians have relocated to the city, which already possessed a dynamic club scene, the prestigious Leipzig Art Academy and an abundance of abandoned factories. Slowly these destitute spaces have been turned into cultural complexes. The hip neighbourhood of Plagwitz is full of flea markets as well as buzzing bars. And for those not lured by the city's modernist aesthetic or its industrial charm, it is also a great place to simply relax and do nothing.



BOGOTÁ

## BOGOTÁ COLOMBIA

With the national economy surging and peace talks with the country's Left-wing guerrilla group calming down, a conflict that has dominated Colombia for decades looks as though it is finally coming to an end. Meanwhile, the capital is emerging as a world-class city (admittedly one with some third-world problems.)

In the 90s, Bogotá undertook a series of projects (including parks, libraries and bike paths) that helped transform the city's urban profile from one of endemic crime to civic functionality. Notwithstanding fluctuating levels of security since then, the city has been vitalised by great restaurants, cutting-edge galleries and bohemian neighbourhoods like La Macarena. In 2013, Colombia decriminalised graffiti, turning the capital into a hotbed of global street art talent. In Bogotá's old city, La Candelaria, adventurous designs and powerful social commentary have been credited with radically transforming some of the city's interior spaces.

FLORA ars+natura is a gallery/laboratory established by José Roca, the former Curator of Latin American Art at the Tate. Since the space first opened its doors in Barrio San Felipe, other galleries have arrived, turning the neighbourhood into Bogotá's first art district. In a half-demolished theatre downtown, Espacio Odeón produces a solid program of visual and performing arts as well as an alternative art fair (Feria Odeón) which runs parallel to Bogotá's main (and flourishing) art fair, ArtBO.

## SANTA FE + THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST USA

Santa Fe's art scene might seem a little skewed toward Western landscapes and jewellery made out of utensils. But beyond the kitschy exterior, this creative hotspot, with its 70,000 residents, is a designated Unesco Creative City exploring the intersection between science and art.

Site Santa Fe is bringing experimental curatorial approaches to the Southwest, with shows by the likes of Dana Schutz. Meanwhile the Santa Fe Institute, a theoretical research foundation, is earnestly searching for "order in the complexity of evolving worlds". And the Santa Fe Art Institute's art residency has been mentioned at the Paris International Climate Conference and received a Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Award.

There is also something to be said for the ineffable allure of the geographic Southwest. In 1929, Georgia O'Keeffe abandoned New York for the high desert of New Mexico, as did Agnes Martin in 1967. "It's like a blank canvas in a way... there's something cleansing about the geometry of place," remarked pop artist Ed Ruscha when he built his Mojave Desert hideaway. The Land Artists of the 70s understood this. And while art and Las Vegas are not often discussed in the same breath, America's most bizarre urban construct is actually an important marker on the art map, linking Land Art sites such as Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty to Michael Heizer's Double Negative.