

U for underground

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Underground

Luke Bennett



Figure U.0 Nina Mathijsen, *Collage U*, 2021. © takeadetour.eu. Courtesy of the artist.

Whether in the form of commodious basements, impervious subterranean shelters or vast waste repositories, the underground offers up a promise of voluminous service to our storage, shelter and disposal needs. But the underground is a trickster, as likely to spit out as to swallow the matter and life injected into it.

Letting go of most unwanted things on Earth will – by action of gravity alone – see them fall to the ground. Here they will lie, either

decaying into the ground or helping – through their stubborn refusal to break down – to form part of a new sedimented layer, by which the ground slowly rises beneath our feet, turning successive layers of former surface into *underground*. This seeming ability of the ground to swallow waste matter into itself, and to carry it down into an out-of-sight and out-of-mind underground, has long been exploited for waste disposal. Following the Industrial Revolution, and the burgeoning volumes and varieties of intractable wastes to be got rid of, via the rise first of coal power (ashes) and then of petrochemicals (plastics), the ‘pushing’ of waste into the underground became the dominant form of waste disposal. This accelerated, intentional, human-authored deposition and undergrounding of our discarded useless matter is one hallmark of the Anthropocene. In the United Kingdom, an abundance of worked-out mining and quarry voids provided ample (and cheap) opportunity for an accelerated undergrounding of layers of municipal and industrial wastes, and until prohibited by the EU’s Landfill Directive, enacted in



Figure U.1 Nicole Clouston, *Microbial growth in mud from Lake Ontario Portrait*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

1999, the UK's landfills were designed on the principle of 'dilute and disperse'.¹ These were not to be secure containment cells, but rather accelerated *insertions* into the ground: matter emplaced there with the explicit aim that it would quickly meld with its surroundings, and continue that onward, gravity-assisted journey away from human sight and attention, into the underground.

But just as (for 'depth' psychologists like Freud or Jung)² the burial of unwanted feelings or experiences runs the risk of a sudden, and unexpected, traumatic reverberation, so the undergrounding of wastes can see painful, unwanted, revenant effects. Thus, methane gas and leachate emanating from waste's decay can break out from their underground confinement, visiting their poisonous effects upon the surface. Meanwhile, seemingly stable 'made ground' can, over time, slump or fissure, as its underlying extractive voids (now filled in) settle, in turn unsettling both the ground above and our convenient imaginings of the underground as an accepting, passive, sponge-like receptacle. This troublesome quality is also to be found in our other appropriation of the underground, as a promise of shelter for our precious possessions (think of underground vaults, crypts, tombs and buried treasure) and even for shelter of our vulnerable living, fleshy bodies in times of crisis (think of improvised underground air-raid shelters, fortified subterranean bunkers).³ But this sheltering is contingent, because the underground is ultimately not a safe place for either our possessions or our bodies. Just as the underground can push back against waste injected into it, so the atmospheric conditions of the underground corrode, compress and entrap, and the distinction between a shelter and a tomb lies only in the question of a viable route of escape back to the surface. Whether through the lens of revenant waste or in glimpsing the smothering, life-stifling peril of underground dwelling, we come to see that the underground is never fully under our control.

Notes

- 1 Alistair Allen, 'Containment landfills: The myth of sustainability', *Engineering Geology* 60 (2001), pp. 3–19 (p. 12).
- 2 Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents* (Penguin Books, 2004 [1930]); Carl Jung, 'Mind and Earth', in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 10: Civilization in Transition*, ed. by Herbert Read et al. (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964 [1927]), pp. 45–69.
- 3 Luke Bennett, 'The Bunker: Metaphor, materiality and management', *Culture & Organization* 17 (2011), 155–73.