

a conversation with Frank Rodick

GET HIGH AND HURT IN THE PROCESS

THE following conversation is taken from several e-mail exchanges I had with Frank Rodick while working on his “Of Liquid Cities and Celestial Abattoirs”. Sequencing his booklet was like solving a puzzle. We had to learn a whole new visual language.

“Of Liquid Cities and Celestial Abattoirs” is based upon three bodies of work: *Liquid cities*, *Arena* and *Faithless Grottoes*. It was especially important to keep in mind the big picture of the whole *corpus* and the direction of Frank’s work. Frank and I kept writing each other, sharing thoughts about taboos, death, love, redemption and its absence , the city as a state of mind, literature and everything else: I think part of our discussion is worth sharing with readers to better understand Frank’s work and personality.

Enter the strange world of Frank Rodick.



Portrait of Frances Rodick – Each Day is Cold

Frank: I traveled a lot when I was making *Liquid City* but what I'd do is stay in one city as long as I could. The more I did that the more the cities just melted into each other, like they were devolving into some psychological swamp populated by these isolated bodies in motion, all the boundaries dissolving away: figure into foreground into background, the whole thing a silent grainy fog....

Alex: While Valentina and I were working on the sequence for our work about London, *Fallen Empire*, she once said: “every city is just the same”. We laughed but this thought got stuck somehow. Then I recognized that very

same place in your Liquid City .. a place shared by all cities, an *Interzone*, : no landmarks, no map, quick transit rush hour for work or fun or desperation. We just were at a different depth, stranger creatures dwell at the bottom: you almost reached it, we barely scratched the surface. *Faithless Grottoes* seems to go in an opposite and complementary direction, exploring the inside/outside private/public dimension.

With *Arena* you grabbed and recoded the messages to the private sphere: starting with hundreds of hours of tapes, recordings of your life and random TV, programming the VHS to record at a set time during the night, then re-recording it on film and finally to printing in the darkroom, it's like you turned into an antenna for this subliminal ocean -it reminds me of Cronenberg's *Videodrome*.



Reveries dusk (taken from “Arena”)

I like how your treatment and recontextualization change completely the nature of the raw material taken from the recordings. You decoded subliminal messages and amplified the signal.

To me, our book “Of liquid cities and celestial abattoir” is like a hard boiled investigation of two different spheres at the same time: a scanner darkly of the outside world and a ladder to the unconscious mind.



Liquid city

Frank: it's almost uncanny how similar your language is to what I've used when I've been asked to talk about my work.... Stuff like your "inside/outside private/public dimension"; the *Arena* title had a lot to do with that, as in the idea of an intensely private experience spotlighted in public. To public/private I'd add "secret",

that last layer where the wildest and most hidden things roam, the stuff that for each of us to find we have to dig to into our own ground until brain and fingers start to bleed.



Masquerade

Alex: Public/private/ secret ... sounds quite similar to the ES theory where Eros and Thanathos rule the unconscious mind. I'm not an expert but I wonder if you've ever had a psychoanalytical criticism of your work.

In the same way all cities share the same swamp at a deep level (I like the term you used), we could consider that people share a common sea-bottom, the secret/unconscious layer you're talking about.



Arena – Celestial Abbatoirs

Frank: My day gig for a long time was as a counsellor and psychotherapist (not sure if I mentioned this) so I've done some formal study of psychoanalysis. As far as I know there's been no psychoanalytical criticism done of my work, although I think I'd find it very interesting. (I remember reading quite a detailed psychoanalytic study of the film *Mildred Pierce* – another one of my favourites – and thought it was a ton of fun.) No doubt, given my current work using my mother's image, psychoanalysts would have the proverbial field day. Anyway by the time I left the day-to-day grind of the therapy business I was more burned out than I realized. The most grinding stuff involved violence: rape, horrific assaults... the two cases that most

shocked me (I think I went for nearly 20 years without being shocked; nauseated and horrified at times, but never shocked) were a case in my first month on the job and one in my last. Grenades for the mind.



3AM engram

I like the term swamp because I've sometimes characterized my process as "dredging"

I look for stuff that's stuck in the deep muck where it's dark and dirty – and where most people don't want to go.

I had a colleague once who had one of these summer jobs from hell as a student: he went into blocked sewers to clean them up. I was fascinated by the stuff he told me he found down there. (He also managed to catch hepatitis, poor bastard). To me it's analogous to the human condition; we have this whole set of subconscious waterways that are more important to our actual being and behaviour than all our elegant concepts and intellectual creations, but we're too vain and – probably more important – too timid to

really engage them. (Milan Kundera once wrote beautifully about contemporary cities as surface areas covering a vast underground maze of tentacles whose purpose it was to move infinite amounts of shit from place to place. Same analogy really.

I think a big part of making a art that works is just trying to stand still enough to look — really look — at what's standing in front of you. That is, look at it without all those buzzing thoughts and preconceptions and labels and wishes getting in the way. But that's a difficult thing to do. You're bound to see stuff that isn't necessarily appealing. It's hard not to turn away or retreat into the security of what your protective mind comes up with.



Revisitation – The Bathers

Alex: This kind of investigation reminds me of what Roger Ballen is doing, digging a little bit more in every work, deeper and deeper, it's the same path to abstraction (in this case introspection) of Cezanne and Mondrian, in a different maybe opposite direction (finding the essence of things in an outward direction, Ballen's path goes inward) ... in your case you found a whole new set of question and the ultimate ground for an artist's battle, Death, the short-change trick doesn't work with it. From what I saw you're

doing well and I respect what you did with 97532, the portrait of your mother's face just after she died, it carries the contradictions of different stages of acceptance in one image; the sickness, grief process and artistic process walk side-by-side.



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Frank: With 97532 I kind of started at the end, with the fact of my mother's death ("97532" is a reference to her death certificate number; it may also be a semi conscious reference to the Final Solution, the tattoo numbers, it's one of those "who knows?" things). Now I'm dredging backwards as it were, going through her shit (My parents kept everything and there are tons of photos

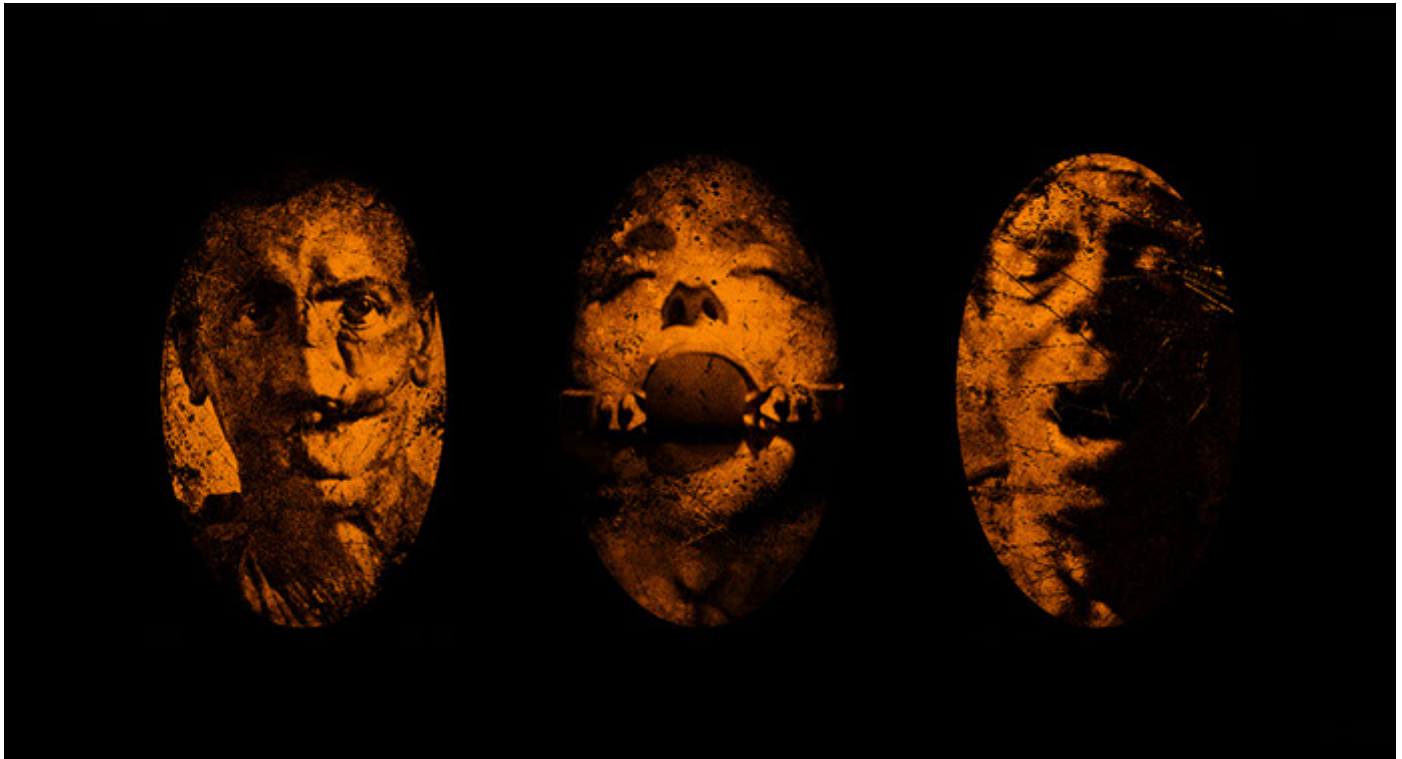
and papers and knick knacks). And of course one can say that it's all about the tragedy inherent in time, which in turn is about that Last Great Thing, which is death.

Alzheimer's Disease, which is what my mother had – and for a criminally long time – is like death in slow motion, dying as stop frame action. It gave me time to take in every gory phase. It was like listening to a piece of music for a long time, like Philip Glass non-stop for a decade.

Of course I love Philip Glass' work: what I'm trying to say is that to begin to get underneath something,. You can't just engage it in a cursory way or assume anything, you have to sit with it a long time. I mean, after a while, I started to get it, although I'm not sure what *It* was or is. But it started to become less hidden although still impossible to label.

Also Alzheimer's is like a petri dish for studying how memory isn't just a fundamental part of the human condition; in many ways it is the human condition. To watch memories being destroyed inside a living person is to watch somebody die a living death. It's a slo-mo bright daylight nightmare. Add to that all the other stuff Alzheimer's does and it's one hell of a show.

By the way in case it means anything, the third image in my *Three Studies for a Mouth* piece is my father, from 2004, about 90 minutes after he died.



Revisitations – Three studies for a mouth – 2004

And death is still the biggest bugaboo for most people, sex is easy compared to death. I think that's at the bottom of what sometimes pisses some people off about my work, not just the recent stuff but also the *Arena* and *Liquid City* work too. When they're resistant — which is quite often — my guess is it's often about the death thing and some of its corollaries, maybe my apparent rejection of redemption, which many people use as their current substitute for heaven that is really a death antidote (along with romantic love, another thing I guess my work isn't too imbued with either). I used to think we've made a little progress on this, but sometimes I feel that the embrace of artists like Francis Bacon and Joel Peter Witkin (great artists) has more, on a current popular basis (not for those early adopters who had the courage to really look and feel and think) to do with the fame (and hence the popular stamp of approval) that arrived with for their later audiences.



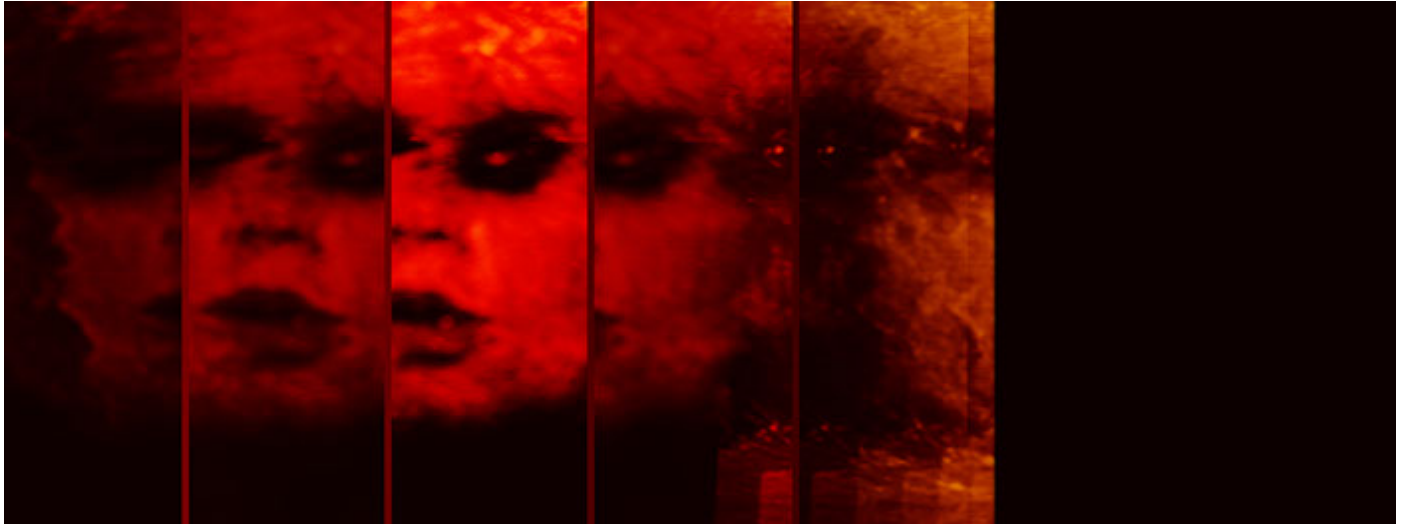
Revisitations – When I dream I dream of you

Alex: I think it could be what you call the stamp of approval, a mainstream product is more reassuring for the viewer: you may be in a creepy forest but you're not alone. About the rejection of redemption I can understand why people got pissed, many still think that art should be cathartic; they think it's OK if the artist leads me into a creepy jungle as long as he can point to a way out. The refusal of redemption means the viewer must find his way out somehow, make sense of the surroundings and put on stake his own ideas.

I think it's far more rewarding when you manage to get out the Minotaur's labyrinth just following a thread instead of blinking signs for tourists. Since the territories you are exploring are still uncharted, people can find it easier to get there via somebody who already got the stamp of approval and an "Hallucination, Sex and Death on a shoestring" guide by Lovely Planet.

Another thing about your work is the very personal approach. You're not talking about death, but about "your" deaths. Your experience is the point of departure. There is something voyeuristic for the viewer here, in the sense it's a very private space (the ultimate private space?). You're inviting people in, rejecting the security distance gives a completely different point of view while

on the other hand leaving your flesh open.



Love (Faithless Grottoes)- 2007

Frank: Your point hits at the issue of specificity, which I think has been badly twisted especially in photo art. You know how Lisette Model famously told Arbus (so the legend goes anyway) that the specific is more powerful than the general? Well, of course, she was right. But I think a lot of people took that to mean that the subjects within the photographic image should be specific, i.e., identifiable as individuals. But I think the real meaning of this observation is in line with what you said. If the artist can communicate a sense of his or her own personal experience, that's the crucial requisite specificity, not the simple form of the subjects in the work. It's the art working as a whole to convey that specific personal experience.

Look, I really know nothing about Death, capital D as some kind of universal concept, but I might be able to dredge up something about my own experience of what people call death. I have flesh and blood material there, I have stuff I can rummage around in, I have access as long as I'm willing to get dirty with with it, see what it tastes like. The other thing — capital D Death — is a philosophy paper.

And yes, you do have to risk looking utterly weak, undignified, ugly, childish, hopeless, pretentious, stupid, whatever. I'm not saying that's what happens and it's certainly what you're looking to make happen. It's okay to be afraid, but you can't be cautious and hope to come up with anything interesting.

Alex: The refusal of redemption as a universal antidote also means the viewer must find another way out, putting at stake his own ideas.

You were writing before about how romantic love is not part of your work, is it a deliberate choice or did you just not find the raw material for it?

I wonder what is your position about love and sex since you mostly portray sex as something cold, unpleasant and dangerous, almost "inhuman" (at least this is one way to read it) like out of a page from William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. Is there a connection with death?



Of liquid cities and celestial abattoirs – Frank Rodick for Akina 2013

Frank:

Redemption is just something I can't feel as real, especially in the way it's portrayed now, nattered on about *ad nauseam*. It's become too cheap, too rationalizing, too much a part of that secular positive thinking that's infected North America. It's become a low rent substitute for religious feeling, like shitty crack for high grade heroin.

But maybe that gets at something else — it's hard to put into words (I guess that's why I make pictures, maybe) — that I just damn well resent the concept, that it feels like a way out of being who you are. That a person should just have to live with himself as he is in the present. At least some of the time anyway.

Interesting, your comment about how I portray sex. And that I have less of an answer for that interpretation. Some possibilities, in no particular order... I think there might be some materialist reasons. Being a therapist for many years I came into contact with lot of people who were sexually abused so these stories had an impact on me. Nor were they my first contact with human cruelty, I got that early on. But sexual violence is an especially pernicious form of violence because it's so secretive; the victim sometimes goes so far as to keep it secret from herself. And this whole sense of violent secrets was something I grew up with closely so perhaps I related somehow to that. In my case it also had a lot to do with my family's Holocaust history and how that was handed down to me. It includes but goes further than shame; it's a deep dis-ease that's bone painful.

Does it have something to do with death? certainly, although I can't seem to find words for it right now. It might have something to do with isolation, and sex as a frenzied attempt to break that isolation perhaps. And I'm pretty sure

it has to do with the complexities inherent in sex, complexities rarely acknowledges sufficiently, the issues of complex emotions and motivations and vulnerabilities. For sure I think people oversimplify sex onto one side or the other: the purely physical or the romantic. But there's a whole twilight zone in between and that's where most of it is played out.

As for romantic love, I just think it's been sold to people as some holy grail. The reality of that undefinable quality called love is so much harder to pin down. I think too many people in this culture have been taught to look for end points — to achieve, for example, romantic love. But the love thing, that's a process, and between two people (or more than that) it's a dynamic process, not an end point. It's something you observe and engage and feel, not a definable target that's "out there". The idea of a definable end-point, a target,, an achievement is another contemporary myth.



Portrait of Frances Rodick

Alex: I find interesting the experiment you made blurring the line between different media and mixing them. You managed to get thousands of hours of tape on a VHS recorder and then reel them on screen, take pictures and bring them with you in the darkroom for a silver print. What kind of sources do you currently use? Where does photography finish?

Frank: I use all kinds of stuff: video, snaps, whatever I can get my hands on.

And now old photographs, documents, notes, postcards, stuff I keep finding and putting together.

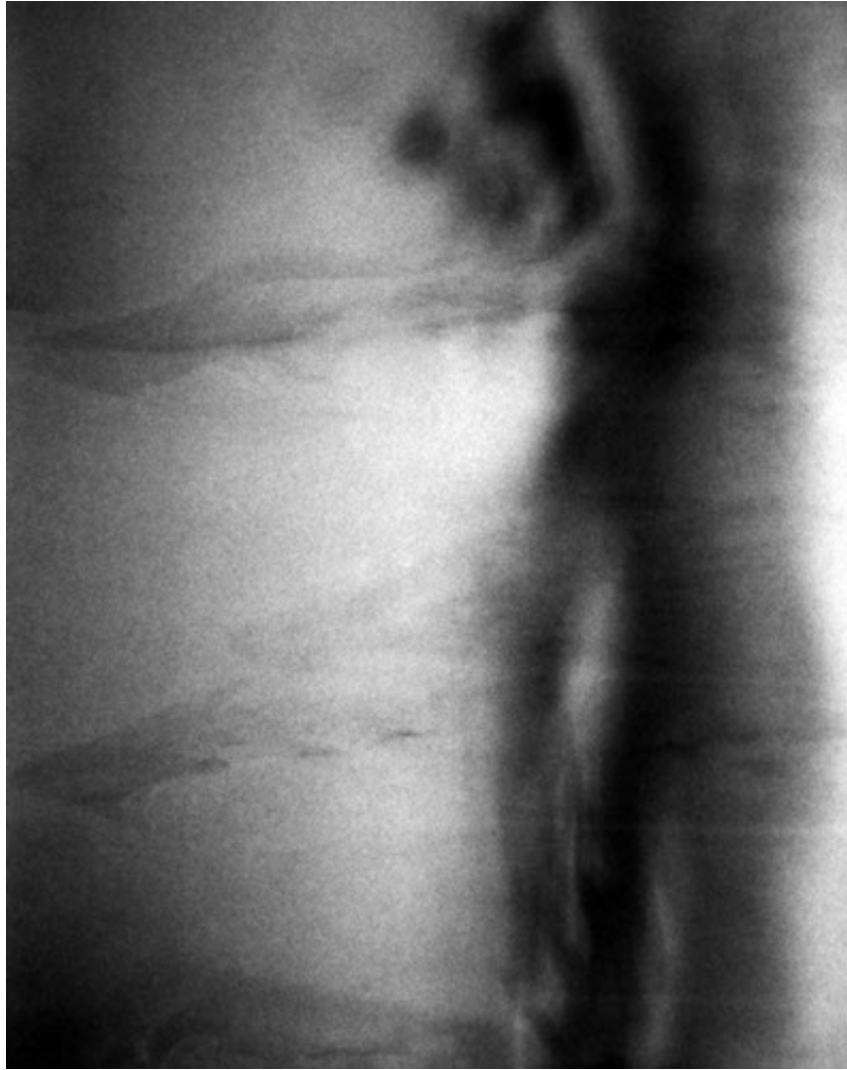
And then it's me sifting through it — but most importantly experiencing it — and looping back over that experience, dodging, weaving, culling, tripping over it, the occasional thing blowing my mind, but most importantly taking me places I didn't know were there. I think you know what I mean.... The work has to lead you, not the other way around.

Besides that way it's fun and exciting and scary and wrenching, but not boring and ultimately puerile like it is when your brain leads. David Foster Wallace said that the head is a lousy master and that's never truer than in making art. Your head can be a good servant but not a good master.

The darkroom was great for that because it slowed the process down, laid it all under that great red safe light glow. Listening to hours of Philip Glass and Portishead and Arvo Paart didn't hurt either.

I still start by looking at my “raw material” images, the stuff I start with, and say some silent incantation like “Now you're going to tell me your secrets” and that's the exciting part because I don't know what they're going to be. The secrets won't come from me: they're going to be revealed to me.

I'm going to have to work to find them, interrogate not only the suspect but myself too – it turns out the division is chimerical – get high and hurt in the process....



Subrosa

I feel like a bit of an outsider in the photo world, although I suppose that's neither here nor there. There are photo artists I like, but not many that rock my world. I tend to bend the medium against itself; it's really a conscious decision but that's how it's worked out.

I love the written word. I was brought up in that atmosphere, the only child of parents who were booksellers. Books, books, books, thousands of books, hundreds of thousands of books everywhere, at home, in my parents' store. Books and pictures too, because my father was into photography. Literature was a natural habitat for me. Written words are physical for me. And, of

course, poetry and literature are much older art forms than photography so there's more to choose from.

I'm indebted to people like Kafka and Céline and Beckett... They showed what you can do if you keep that flame under the paper very still, and for long enough. Céline was the real deal, completely merciless and merciless with himself above all, he was a literary assassin with the gun to his own head, spinning that chamber round and round.

The other thing about literature is that, as a visual artist, I'm free to inject my own visual interpretations/representations onto the text. But most of all, when the stuff is good, it just injects me with a certain fuel, a spirit, energy that's not pre-packaged with images. My imagination gets very free reign. It takes me places I didn't know were there.



There's stuff in photography that I really like — some Robert Frank, Arbus (a lot), Witkin (especially the early stuff), some Woodman, and also some of the contemporaries — to name a few. But there are books and maybe even a film or two (Tarkovsky's Andrei Rublev maybe) that have changed my life — and I don't think any photographic work, with the possible exception of Arbus, has done that.

I guess that's the kind of rush I'm ultimately looking for in art. I don't want to be amused or entertained; I want an artist to look me in the eye, reach into my chest and rip my heart out. In an age of irony, that's pretty old fashioned isn't it? I guess I'm weather beaten enough not to care one way or the other.

I follow that Beckett tenet: I owe my audience nothing and they owe me nothing. I mean, I try to communicate, yes, of course. But I don't owe them any good feelings, any lessons, blueprints, brilliant ideas for a better future. If hope's not on my plate why should I be shoving it onto theirs?

No, what I owe them, if anything, is what I owe myself: emotional honesty and an attention to craft. Shitty craft leads to shitty communication. And emotional dishonesty and vacuousness leads to puerile content.

To Frank Rodick, fellow traveller, and Valentina who can translate in a sequence what I can only think in words.

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Alex Bocchetto & Frank Rodick

Frank Rodick's website: <http://www.frankrodick.com/>

“Of liquid cities and celestial abattoirs” is on sale in our bookshop

