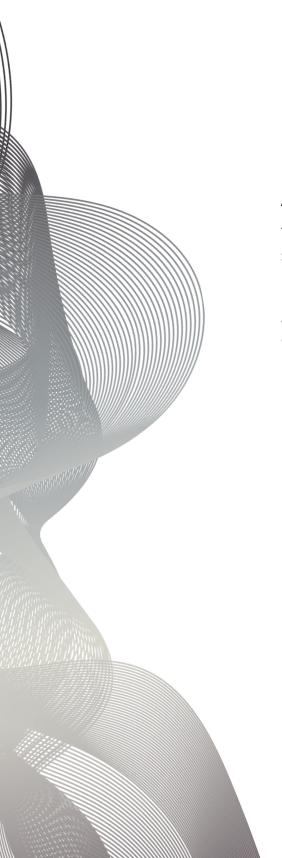
THO TOOLL PASS

Urban interactions, artistic interventions and new visions in public space.





Abstract

The sudden health crisis left cities empty. Interactions, surrounding awareness, connections and the space for future unfoldings reduced drastically and the urban public spaces underwent a deep reorganisation. In the process of rethinking and reinhabiting cities again public art has become the catalyser, facilitating meetings, inspiring innovations and imagining beyond.

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Our Time, Our Space

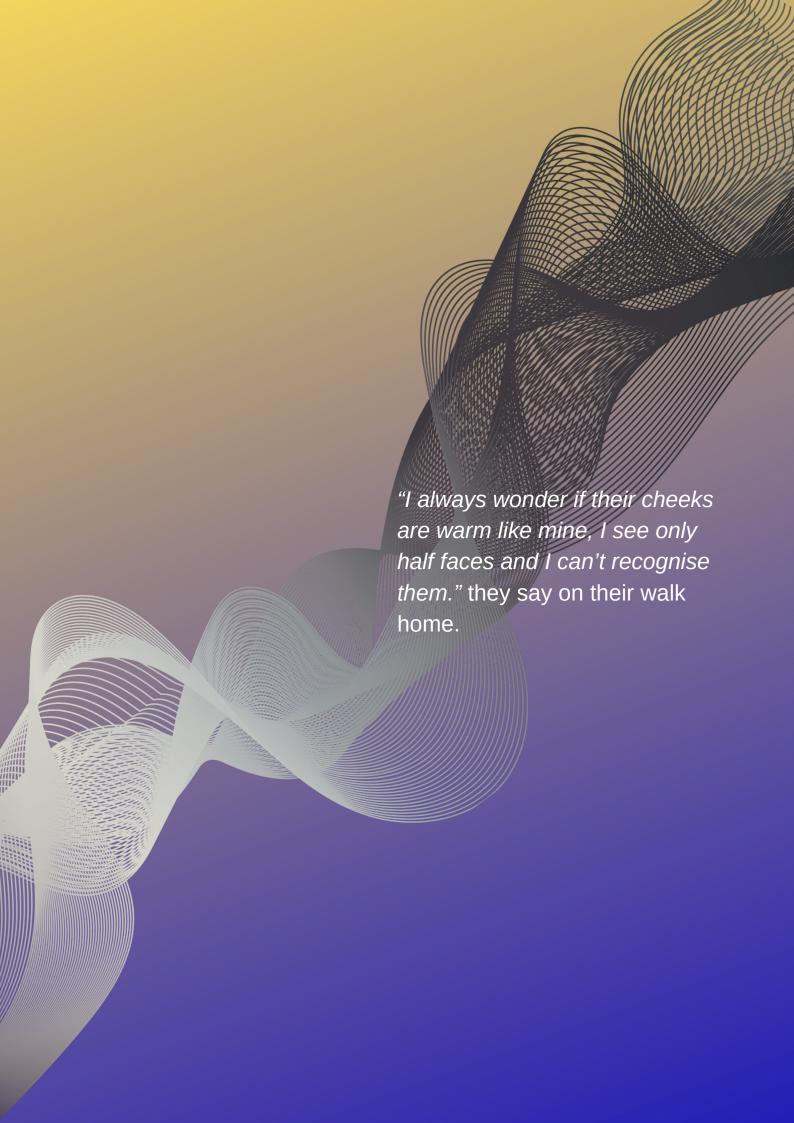
The unusual events depicted in this chronicle occurred worldwide between 2020 and moving forward to 2021. The word "pandemic" has been uttered again for the first time in years, due to the emergence of a new strand of coronavirus, COVID-19. Lockdown, social distancing and home quarantine became popular terms, as the fast pace, invisible threat forced a need for conventional practices across the globe to be rethought.

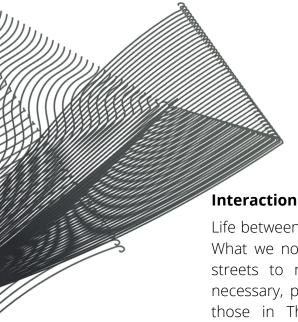
Government action was put in place to prevent deaths within their nation. In The Netherlands, a lockdown was introduced in early March 2020. People were asked to stay inside as much as possible, avoid social gatherings and maintain distance in public. Months went by and allowed, during the summer, for some of the harsher measures to be lifted.

However, once new variants of the virus started to mutate and increase their infective power, a curfew was introduced and people were forced to stay inside during night time. Testing centres were set up and working full-force through all the pandemic, leading to rapid changes in the infection curve. Towards the end of the year, things were not looking very cheerful as wearing masks became required in closed environments. For the first month of 2021, the introduction of the vaccination campaign led to a softening of preventive measures, although, sadly, the opportunities for meeting inside and outside remained very limited.

Guided by the brief thoughts of an ordinary individual, this essay explores and rediscovers the joy of living in public space through COVID-19-based artistic interventions. Four distinct artworks are considered in which the constraints of the global pandemic have been utilised to both shed light on current society as well as to allow for a new interplay between the public and art. Whilst policy makers and scientists are combatting the challenges of physical safety, artists are able to use their practice to provide emotional closeness, allowing for new visions and critical reflections to prosper.

Here, the selected pieces are proposed as crossing three interconnecting yet distinct themes of *interaction, awareness* and *connections* while exploring and rethinking creative participation within communities.





Lofland, 1998, p.54

Gehl, 2001

Lofland, 1998

Oldenburg, 1999

Tilley, 1994

Life between the walls of the city has always adapted through the times. What we now understand as public space has changed from bustling streets to more barren sites where people prefer to do what is necessary, passing through on their way to the shops or to work. For those in The Netherlands, this means a reduction in hearing a neighbourly *Hoi!* on your walk and instead, seeing masked individuals. Faces, with hidden smiles on people who are safely separated.

Social interactions are an essential part of our lives. Our city itself is the result of *fleeting relationships* with strangers we encounter on our way. Seeing others in public, observing them, having small moments of eye contact are the passive interactions that we need to understand others and feed our social hunger. Of course, when conditions of public space are desirable, people may engage more with one another. Think how a child may learn from a peer as they play in the park on a warm day, the spaces provide areas to chat and to have rich interactions for all. While in public, we are not enclosed in a private area, and not constrained to a working environment. We are free to walk, to observe and to meet.

Strolling around, we wonder about the life story of those solitary sitters, the ones that quietly claim their place in the public space, never participating but comforted by the feeling of being surrounded by the hum of other people's chitchats. Or perhaps, we like to be distracted by the atmosphere of the city and lock our eyes on every moving urban particle. A stream of water, the funny duck floating peacefully, the wheel of a bike, a parent and a child or a teenager eating a sandwich. We are always on the lookout for people.

Cities, by their nature, presuppose socialisation. Some spaces favour conviviality more than others. These are called *thirds*, one step below the ones where we go to work every day, and topped by the intimacy of our own homes. Third places define the public space. Here, people engage in social activities, playful chats, frivolities, fuelling their fantasies. As the public space is the place of encounters, exchanges and entertainment.

Different people interacting in the urban public space make first-hand experience of cultural diversity possible. Multiculturality enriches the public space that becomes open and accessible, enhancing the feeling of belonging to a global community.

Allport et al., 1954

Terzi & Tonnelat, 2017 Hybrid architectures and mismatched personalities that roam in the urban realm contribute to our experience as citizens, generating a positive attitude by means of meeting with the *cultural others*. Being able to physically and culturally make use of a determined place is, in fact, what grants its status as public and accepting. Thus, participation and sociability are key in defining and reclaiming the openness of a location.

However, in times when participation cannot be granted anymore the notion of *public* must change accordingly. During corona times, the occasions to meet and assemble have been drastically reduced. Sunday gatherings in the park with friends were made impossible. City centre walks with partners became a distant memory.

In a nutshell, this is the true deal of Daan Roosegaarde Studio's piece *Urban Sun* (March 2021). In a period in which one-to-one interactions fall short and group meetings are almost impossible due to preventive measures, he succeeded in reclaiming bits of the public realm and making them safe again. Started as a one-piece pilot production in Rotterdam (fig. 1), with the special use of a carefully calibrated suspended UV light (fig. 2) the artist addresses how artistic innovation can improve the confidence of people re-entering public space, reconquering small conversation areas in the urban space.

This work represents the union of design, artistic symbolism, scientific research and technological innovation. An interesting hybrid that combines aesthetic intervention and scientific claims. The studies published in the renowned journal, *Nature*, support *Urban Sun* and show that although traditional 254 nm UV rays are harmful, if their wavelength frequency is lowered to 222 nm (far-UVC) they can drastically reduce the presence of viruses including strains of coronavirus, in a way that is both safe for humans and animals. Further, this was confirmed by the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP).

People can safely enter in a purified circle defined by a beam of light. A cleansed bubble within the public space in which the current barriers to socialisation can fall. Artistically intervening in the urban fabric, aware and not against regulations in force, one could think that since bacteria and viruses are neutralised by the light waves, in those areas people could lower their masks.

Familiarising with faces again and talking to each other without fear of spreading diseases. A poetic oasis of comfort and social closeness, as a symbol of hope and curiosity for a better future.

The Studio holds a vision of possibilities for use of Urban Sun across other cities, however, with the intensive research and customised manufacturing to calibrate the lamp correctly, this would be a costly endeavour. Nevertheless, they strongly call all governments to action to make this artistic-technological innovation implemented in projects of community (re)building, hoping for its adoption in strategic public spaces, such as large venues, outdoor events, schoolyards and cultural festivals.

In fact, although the project could not and is not planned to actively treat individuals who tested positive for COVID-19, by creating a safe space Roosegaarde encourages people to imagine a space of possibility in this abnormal reality. Allowing people to interact directly in a controlled environment, this innovation is combating the negative impacts of social isolation. By aiming to improve social and cultural gatherings in an increasingly desolate urban environment, *Urban Sun* creates an architecture of proximity and intimacy in this new normality.



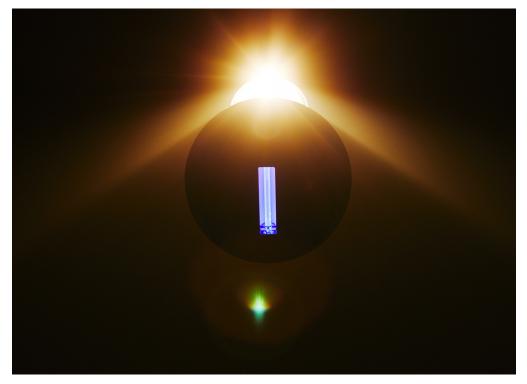
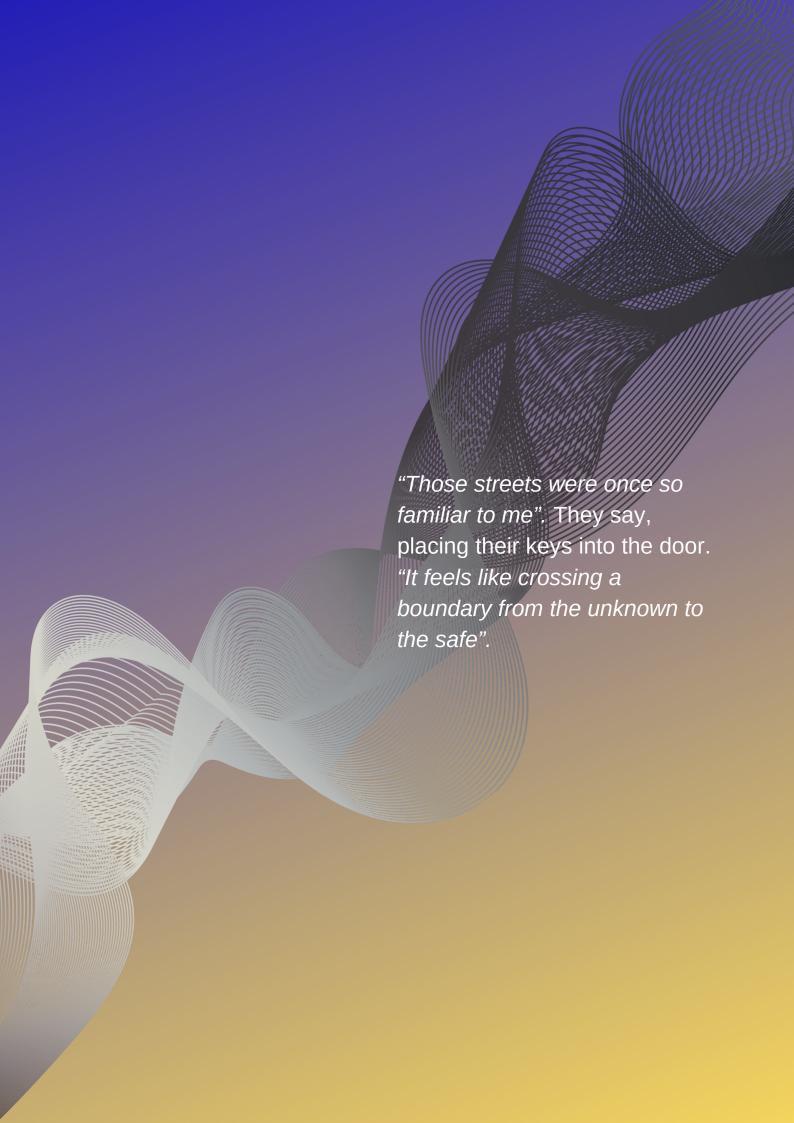
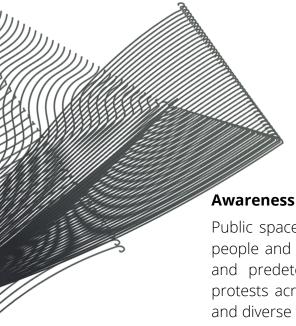


Figure 2



Figure 3





Public space has become emptier. We are constrained to see minimal people and with the introduction of the curfew, time outside was finite and predetermined. Some Dutch residents were in opposition, as protests across many major cities reminded us of the complex politics and diverse views that are held across the nation. However, this yearning for autonomy in outside space that many felt was also coupled with the opposite notion of wanting to stay at home in fear of leaving. As many of us may have found ourselves siding with a desire to leave or stay in our homes, we must recognise the influence of fear.

Particularly, this fear that compels us to stay inside, in an environment where we have full control of the surroundings. We know who comes in or out, we place trinkets and utilities around to our liking and we can sanitise anything that has entered from the outside. Here, we have our own world where we are the regulators. What is outside, on the other hand, is constantly changing and strangers whom we may have previously interacted with now could place a possible threat to our lives.

There is so much that is unknown. The open, symmetrical streets of The Hague now contain constant reminders of the danger of COVID-19. Signage, in turn, does help us make sense of the city space. Think about all the arrows pointing around streets, both in The Netherlands and beyond. These are recognisable symbols that, even if you chose not to follow, still define your experience with public space as, for example, you may actively walk in opposition to them or start to become more conscious of others around you.

Especially in the times of corona, following rules and signs has become a common defence to slow the spread of the virus. Closed shop fronts, masks and warning tape decorate the city as individuals adapt and shrink their social bubbles. They provide a constant visual cue that we are living through a pandemic.

Despite the fact that the virus is invisible to the naked eye, the effects it has had on the workings of streets, cities and even our own homes is most definitely one that is observable.

It can be hard to experience familiar places that feel so alien especially when we are inside for so long. Of course, in this age, many of us turn to technology to interact with others, pass the time and develop a new working routine.

Low & Smart, 2020 pp.2-3

Low & Smart, 2020 pp.4-5

However, this adaptation can leave us feeling separated from the outside world.

Responding to the changing cityscape, the artist Sandra Uittenbogaart has been producing a photography series highlighting how COVID-19 has led to various aspects of public space changing within the Hague (February 2021- present). The series includes collections of images such as benches, warning signs and stairs. By posting these works on Instagram (fig. 4), people can connect to space digitally as their phone screen acts as a window to the outside world.

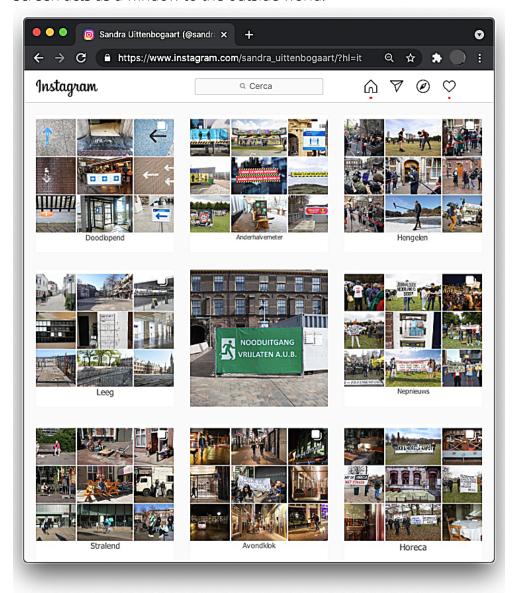


Figure 4 Screenshot from Sandra Uittenbogaart's Instagram page

Importantly, people can use the images as a basis to interact with others via comment sections or by sharing the artworks. With this, Uittenbogaart provides a space for virtual connection while physical connection is constrained. In documenting the evolution of The Hague during the pandemic, those at home can see how their surroundings are evolving. She provides a safe visual bond to public space that can help people become aware of the environment around them. Utilising the artistic platform in this way demonstrates the beauty in which artists can find aesthetic elements in everyday life and draw attention to various goings-on in society. Her work can therefore make people more comfortable and informed about the space around them to help blur the somewhat eerie boundary many of us feel from inside to outside.

Particularly, in this piece, *Doodlopend* (or *Dead-end* for English speakers), Uittenbogaart has documented various arrows dictating new one-way walking systems around The Hague (fig. 5). The piece is particularly powerful as it adds emphasis to a new component of public space; demonstrating that now more than ever, physically navigating space is moulded by regulations. In this case, the arrows form a new pattern on familiar grounds to persuade us to walk consciously. This means that interaction with others changes.



Figure 5

Now, we often walk behind people who cannot see us and observe others as they walk away. As a result, the one-way systems add structure to the uneasiness of being outside, but at the same time, freedom to explore and wonder is constrained. In documenting this, Uittenbogaart creates familiarity in an unfamiliar time. She allows us to be conscious of the changing space around us and more mindful of the somewhat unnerving ingredients of our current lives.

In another of her works, *Op slot (Locked)*, Uittenbogaart regards the closed-off nature of space (fig. 6). Here we see empty walkways and warning tape that dress many of the settings as the images pose a stark reminder that so much of our lives have changed. The absence of bustling life makes the spaces feel even larger. When looking, you become more conscious of the elements that make up public space and how empty they sit without human interaction. Two of the images, of course, contain pedestrians. However, as they are far from the lens of Uittenbogaart's camera, they allow us to become aware of her role as a photographer. By being distanced from these people, she reminds us that her human presence is restricted in space in order to keep a safe social distance.

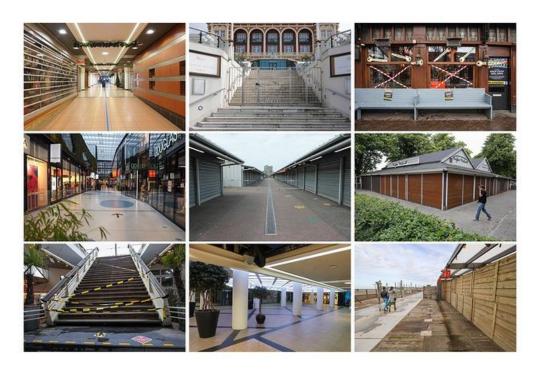


Figure 6

Learn more about Sandra's collaboration with Stroom Den Haag: https://stroom.nl/activiteiten/tent oonstelling.php?t id=9219999

This feeling of being apart from others is one that we have all experienced throughout this time and is much in line with the anxieties that now come with getting close to strangers in public space. In doing so, the pieces conjure a sense of unity. Although looking at man-made spaces without *man* seems odd, knowing that this feeling is shared can be quite comforting. Through documentation, Uittenbogaart highlights that these spaces do feel bizarre and feeling uncomfortable or anxious is expected. She, therefore, uses her virtual platform to help create an emotional unity while many of us remain physically alone.



Figure 7 - Close up from the series Doodlopend



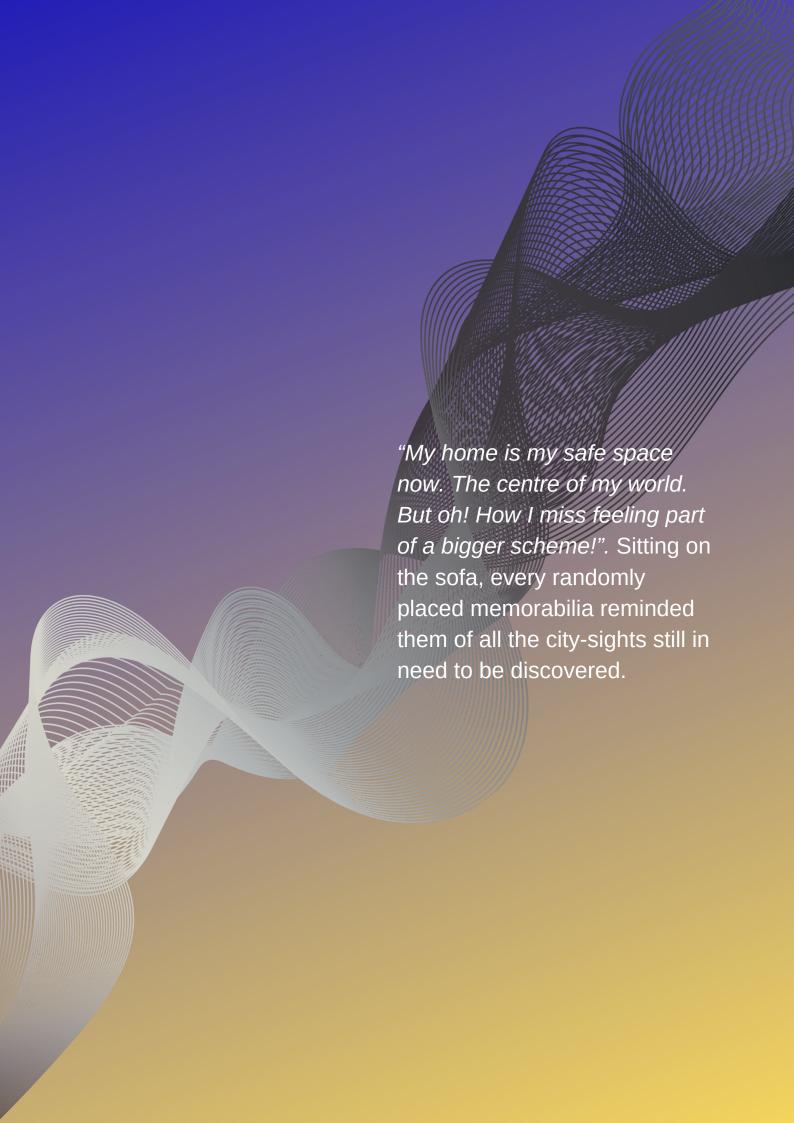
Figure 8 - Close up from the series Op slot

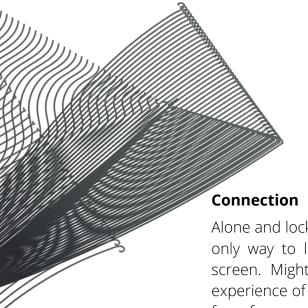


Figure 9 - Close up from the series Doodlopend



Figure 10 / Close up from the series Doodlopend





Alone and locked inside the safe space of our domestic environment, the only way to live in the world seems to be experiencing it through a screen. Might that be a smartphone or a window, the unmediated experience of reality — and we have become well equipped with devices, from face masks to technological gears — imposed and stood alongside the tangible sphere.

Looking outside and imagining beyond our sight are ways to feel physically present and part of a community. Lacking first-hand interactions, people turned to social media, eager to share how they repurposed all those outdoor public activities in the privacy of their homes. Because when you can only see your front yard from your home window, creativity and imagination can help you regain a global vision.

This is the lesson we have learnt *in times of corona*. Johan Nieuwenhuize's eponymous work (March - July 2020) is a complex and ambitious installation that aims to map how the intimacy of the home has become the new centre of symbolic meaning-making during the pandemic. Combining art, photography, design and new technologies, the artist wanted to investigate how people were living and coping with social isolation, but at the same time how public space in The Hague had been transformed by the pandemic. Through a series of original images, the artist aimed to show the new practices of living and the creative methods people used to deal with the psychological pressure of a lack of social interaction.



Figure 11

Learn more about Johan's collaboration with Stroom Den Haag: https://stroom.nl/activiteiten/tent oonstelling.php?t id=9219999

The latter, placed in random visual juxtapositions by an artificial intelligence algorithm, which drew worldwide images posted on social networks under the hashtag #corona.

Visions of masked individuals close to pictures of jigsaw puzzles or yoga training. Bathtubs transformed into art installations close to mirror selfies. A skyscraper view accompanied by emptied out public squares, German firefighters and Parisian tourists (fig.12). In times of corona proposes a broader reflection on the centrality of interactions between people on a domestic and urban scale but also globally. Picking pictures from all over the world, the artist used new technologies to highlight the possibilities in the creation of a public space beyond its physical geographical barriers, re-accustoming people to see new ways of experiencing the world. Again, offering an opportunity to look outside further than your own window, creating a glimpse of a variegated world that for a moment in time is going through the same situation unanimously.

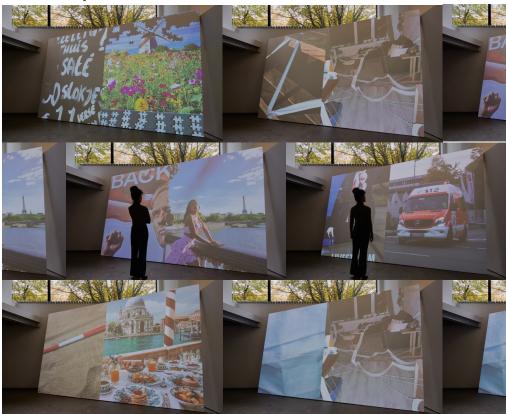


Figure 12 Stills from the video of the installation

Windows to the outside world — whether digital or physical — have therefore taken on a profound symbolic value. *Looking outside* has become the central way of feeling part of a multi-ethnic public space that we have taken for granted and that has emptied out right before our eyes. Indeed, part of the charm of cities lies in the interweaving of the cultures that animate them. However, when this togetherness feeling fails, cities' mechanisms begin to squeak.

In The Netherlands, the proper functioning of the social machine is closely linked to how different citizens experience public space.





Figure 13

Figure 14

The streets are teeming with natives and non-natives, walking side-byside and contributing to the creation of the relational melting pot of Dutch cities.

The great attention to inclusivity and the central role people have in open public space can be seen in the special care with which cities are planned. Houses are never towering, facades are never overhanging, and windows are always large and unobstructed. Being able to be in the city and expressing oneself is, in fact, mirrored in the treatment and respect of the common spaces in the city. This cosmopolitan spirit moved citizens to intervene in the public space by making it pleasant to the eyes of the passers-by. With a quasi-artistic flair, residents themselves have used their facades to intervene in the public space, to comment on what public space is and how they imagine it, becoming representative of their lifestyles and ideals. Front gardens started to bloom and the large windows began to be inhabited by all sorts of knick-knacks, highlighting again that the question of what kind of city we want to live in is not separated from what kind of people we want to be.

Karssenberg & Laven, 2017

During corona, this creative bottom-up intervention established as a common practice of interacting without words with the public space. People started to embellish and put visible attention to the outside appearance of their houses even more than before as a way to cherish the few essential people still walking outside. An example of this tendency is the collective project *stay sane stay safe* (March 2020-ongoing).







Figure 15 Some of the posters on the website

Learn more about the Studio's collaboration with Stroom Den Haag: http://lennartsendebruijn.co m/projects/stay-sane-stay-safe

Organised by the Studio Lennarts & de Bruijn, based in The Hague, a series of over 1700 posters were designed. These were created to inhabit walls and windows all over The Netherlands and the world, with the intention to spread uplifting messages of solidarity to people directly in the public space (fig. 15, 16). People were encouraged to go on their website and choose their favourite messages among creations from over 82 countries and then print them to display and make people feel part of a bigger community that needs to stay safe and sane, showing support for essential workers and home-stayers.

Especially in The Netherlands, taking up most of the space facing the street, windows are — with some exceptions — rarely covered by curtains or blinds. A construction element that clearly underlines the social need for interactions and exchange. Windows and window-sills act as a stage to being in contact with the world and in claiming their space in the city, putting the personalities of the residents up-front. With the addition of happy notes disseminated through the cities, these became symbolic of hopes and aspirations of individuals, fighting together against the virus and therefore communicating the centrality of any type of interaction in the public space.

Crucially, with the Dutch nation, the boundary between the public and private can be persevered as more permeable than their European counterparts. The line is blurred as indoors and outdoors are more closely connected and communication is possible between the two, leaving us with the possibility to ponder the lives of others and feel connected in a sentiment of openness.

STAVELOSE BUTPLEASE DON'TOUGH

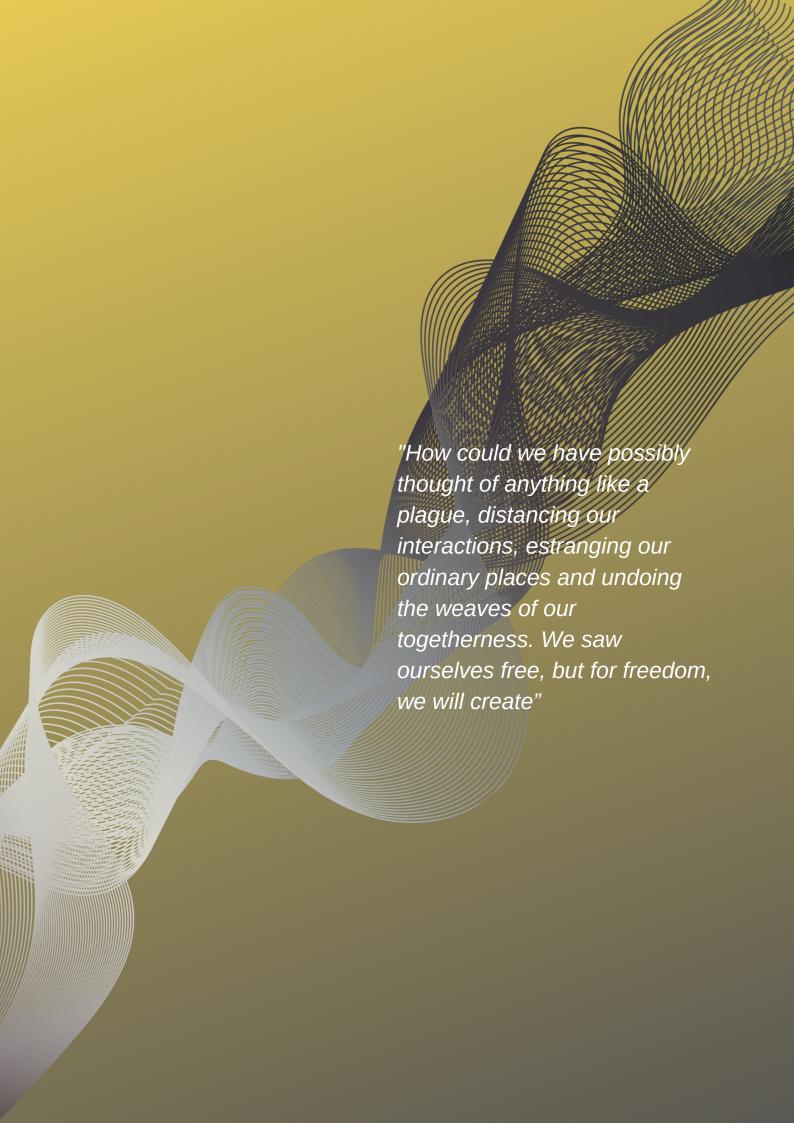


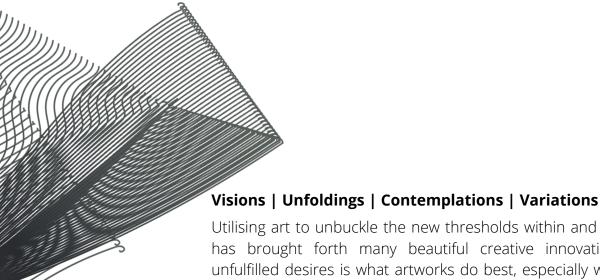


Lawson, 2007

Van Der Horst & Messing, 2006







Utilising art to unbuckle the new thresholds within and between spaces has brought forth many beautiful creative innovations. Expressing unfulfilled desires is what artworks do best, especially when people can only imagine what the next day will look like. Art, therefore, can mend buzzing spirits, providing a space of reflection and foreseeing in the public space. The creative practice stands differently in society than other interventions, such as governmental or scientific, as art is made to

be seen and to hold salience with the purpose of connection and expression. Often, various elements within public space may go unnoticed but art has a distinct role in holding an enlightening, or

sometimes critical, commentary on experience.

The way that both artists and citizens have influenced the public space to regain connections has confirmed the true value that art holds in imagining and living in open spaces. The need for these spaces, whether it be a park, a market or a café is essential, both now and looking towards the future. Seeing others, seeing our surroundings and interacting with space is needed for us to connect with our humanity and feel grounded in our environment. As the pandemic has limited our freedom, adaptations are necessary to regain a sense of reality and provide safety in interactions. When remaining at a safe distance, webbased artworks utilise a virtual space so that people can feel comfortable, ergo encouraging new forms of connection amongst one another.

The very nature of the artworks produced during the pandemic crisis, in fact, not only shows the importance of putting creative inputs in the public space but also highlights the broader trend of societal digitalisation. On social media, it is common for people to post images or videos of their visits to their followers and friends coupled with a tag of the given location. This has created a dynamic within public space where the relationship between people and the environment is partly constructed online. The virtual experience of urban space keeps the magic of these places alive and adds a sense of desirability and imagination.

As with the example of Nieuwenhuize's work, the exposure to visual cues of urban spaces scattered around the world rekindles the flame and the hope of being able to visit them again.

Showing that despite the current situation being unstable, the public space is out there waiting to be re-inhabited once it will be safe. This was only possible thanks to digital media, which allowed new bonding and relating strategies to establish. Due to this, it is expected that interacting with public space virtually would be a step that people would take to continue interactions from a safe distance. Crucially, these artworks remind us that physical distance between one another does not have to mean a social distance.

Low & Smart, 2020 p.3

As many of us struggle with constraints on our social lives, finding ways to connect is vital. Roosegaarde's piece, therefore, is a prime example of using technology and scientific insights to allow for a closer connection. It is a glimmer of hope that as we move through the pandemic we can keep interacting with each other, showing that research can be used in innovative ways to allow us to maintain social contact. Creative interventions in public space can pave the way for a more connected future, indicating that even if we may have to stay at a distance to protect our physical safety, we still have the possibility to maintain social connections that are vital for better wellbeing.

Zukin, 2009, p.27

Moreover, as face-to-face interactions are fundamental in our public life experience, understanding the contribution of web-based media in the current situation offers a spotlight on the way digital interactions allow and facilitate the creation of new urban imaginaries. Fantasising, making use and engaging with the public space keeps it alive. If people are not encouraged to interact with public space, then there will be less incentive to provide new spaces. Hence why, in these interesting times, it is important to look at social media as a tool to maintain the flourishing of public space and to allow for the possibility of new spaces and visions to prosper. As each artwork explored here demonstrates a differing ingredient in the ways that we can safely engage with space and bring life and wonder into interactions again, Sandra Uittenbogaart's work offers us an awareness. Her meticulous project of documenting the current state of affairs keeps the souls of people in their homes curious and informed of the outside world. Memories can be unlocked that link to suburban streets and the city environment. The virtual setting helps people imagine new ways of using public space and provides an acknowledgment of its evolving state.

Open streets or tight alleyways are spaces of possible encounters. They are portrayed as empty canvases on which to build new plots, weaves of dialogues or silent glances between one another. At the moment, perhaps these encounters may only be conceived, but the images allow a stage for these thoughts and a setting for a time where physical interactions can be richer.

Notably, this journey through new visions of public space has underlined how in the tension between the virtual and the tangible, there is currently no force that overpowers the other. They act by completion, one making up for the shortcomings of the other and vice versa. However, the question is still open. In an increasingly digitised future, what is the role of the physical public space? In light of the questions that citizens and artists have been asking themselves during the last few pandemic months, the answer seems clear. The tangible public space undeniably remains the arena of encounter, the ultimate space where aspirations and fantasies take their concrete form. The space in which the possible becomes real. Whilst, the digital space becomes the new space for creative exchange, dialogue without physical barriers and imagination.

However, even if online platforms offer new ways of experiencing and understanding public space, they are not devoid of risks for the urban future. The action of sharing and documenting every aspect of one's public life on a social networking site with global resonance presents the major threat of losing not only the relational but also the aesthetic authenticity of urban public space. The authenticity of a city represents its historical character, shaped by the personalities who live in it and its history. Authenticity is *that something* which differentiates a space and makes it unique, attractive to its visitors and a source of pride for its citizens. The social media turn of urban spaces may in the long run cause the homologation of public space on a global sphere, so that the charm of the city will no longer be linked to the peculiarity of the place but to an aesthetic canon defined through digital interactions. Although the hope is that public space will become vibrant again, its existence is closely linked to the logics that nonetheless reign in the tangible world.

Consequently, its revival must be responsible, driven by the desire to be able to see itself again in a way that is safe but does not neglect the magic of urban living.

Image credits

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