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At Arm's Length

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Understanding Distance Management

a cura di / dossier coordonné par / edited by
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EDITORIAL

The global pandemic scenario of the 2020s has among other things brought back into the spotlight the topic of interpersonal distances and social distance management. These issues are not wholly new – indeed, urban density, excessive proximity and overall environmental livability represented chief preoccupations in the behavioural sciences through the 1960s and 1970s.

In this light, today's requirements for the implementation of social distancing protocols and related mitigation practices (masks, tracking apps, vaccine passports, etc.) seem to have induced a renewed awareness of the role distances play in social life. The latter may thus be understood in a wide sense, as they encompass different psycho-social, affective and material sets-up. To mention just some of its most trivial manifestations, since 2020 an array of new visual props to demarcate standing locations, queuing positions, and so on, has popped up in public space – notably in retail, service and leisure spaces.

Certainly, in most cases, social distancing regulations have proven patchy on the ground: fuzzy, hard to implement, often whimsical, if not straightforwardly contradictory. On the one hand, this fact points towards the power of social interaction to shape the meaning and the very perception of physical distances; on the other hand, larger cultural motifs concerning the body in public need to be taken into account as well.

Various technologies can be imaginatively and practically deployed in order to make distances visible and workable across a multitude of contingent, specific and significant situations. However, because distance is intimately tied up with trust, how trust is built and maintained remains the crucial variable to understand how distance-work is concretely performed. For instance, considering the ideological and political polarizations following the vaccination mandates in many countries, vaccines have themselves turned into a new type of 'distantiation', namely 'distancing' between pros and cons.

Since the pandemic began, new geometries of connection and mediated connectivity – such as typically, although not exclusively, remote working – have also conjured up new social environments endowed with peculiar distance etiquettes, where the formal and informal registers appear transformed in ways that may eventually persist beyond the pandemic itself.

In the long run, it may well be that social distancing regulations will reveal themselves as an ephemeral sanitary policy; even in that case, though, long-lasting consequences in contemporary spatial organisation are likely. Cities have, for instance, seized distancing mandates as an opportunity to redesign transport and dwelling spaces ('build cleaner and greener'), while the private real estate market has swiftly absorbed new use-value spatial priorities and desiderata in its logic of valorisation. It is not the first time in history that shocking events ignite long-term spatial transformations in urban space, and it is not the first time that health emergencies are involved (with nineteenth-century cholera epidemics and the construction of sewers serving as a classic case).

In this issue, we host contributions inquiring into the meaning of distances and distance-management in social life, both in local settings and with an eye towards the larger urban and political trends for post-pandemic scenarios. The anthropologist Nick Harney argues in the opening piece that social distancing can be regarded as a mode of governance that inherently 'clarifies' the nature of public space, revealing, in particular, its inherent 'unruliness', or instability. At a time when 'the pandemic has forced people to read their body and other bodies in more threatening and indeterminate ways,' suggests

Harney, the parcelling of public space into 'biosecure, manageable units' has materialised a social formation similar to an 'anti-mass'. With reference to Canetti's theorization of crowds, Harney thus considers the outcomes of a distanced social life in terms of a weakening of collective feelings: 'Relations happen in public, but civility or social grace behind the masking is more contested and uncertain.'

In the following contribution, the urban planner Tali Hatuka similarly puzzles about the transformations of the meaning of distance that has intervened in recent years, and precisely, in the direction of an increased significance of the notion: 'Prior to the pandemic – she writes – distance was seemingly a way to measure the time needed to reach a destination. Yet, we now suddenly acknowledge the deep, multiple meanings of the concept.' Accordingly, Hatuka invites us to realise how distances occupy a key site in ethical and political coexistence – for they are 'representations of order, which can be manipulated easily'.

A vivid ethnographic illustration of the consequences of social distancing on lifestyles is offered by Alice Brombin, in a piece that reports on a study of the university student population in an Italian city. Paradoxically, Brombin has found, the stringent regulations of public spaces of socialization seem to have increased, not the level of security, but that of fear and stress. In reaction, university students seem to have discovered new socialization spaces in sites less controlled by the official agencies. In these liminal or interstitial locations, a phenomenon Brombin calls 'bubbles of social contact' can be seen unfolding – a curious form of trust mostly based on a much-needed temporary obliviousness of the context.

The critical theorist R.L. Bince remarks that the pandemic has enhanced the digital mediation of social life, with consequences that might be ominous for the networks of sociality: 'Mobile and web applications position themselves between us and our other contacts, trying to look friendly and helpful while they set the terms of our social and economic engagements, listening all the while.' Due to their architecture and algorithmic sieving, these technologies have made avoidance and social homophilia all the more likely, as for instance in the case of 'no-contact deliveries'. 'Social interaction – Bince contends – has become more challenging for many after these last two years, and digital technologies stand to materially benefit from keeping all of us afraid of having direct, unmediated encounters with each other.' As a remedy, Bince invites us to regain confidence and trust in social interaction, while at the same time imagining new types of digital mediation that defuse generalised surveillance.

To do so, we believe, new ways of analysing the technologies surrounding us might be helpful. In an unconventional and funny contribution, Salvatore Poier brings us precisely into the fabulous world of the so-called 'non-humans', thanks to an exclusive interview released to him by Mr Tiler, a professional Skype tile. Tiler, we learn, has been having a hard time since the pandemic broke out: he once used to work occasionally, mostly for weekend long-distance family talks, and has been abruptly shoved into a scenario of intensive usage for the most disparate tasks, ranging from work to schooling, from civil society meetings to intimate relations. Digital tiles have their distancing problems, too.

In the final piece, Simona Bordone introduces us to the guest artist featured in this issue, the Wurmkos collective. The series we feature in this issue is titled 'Shaping Distances' and was produced during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020.

CB, AC, AMB

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The anti-mass and unruly urban sociability

Social distancing as a clarification of publicness

Nicholas DeMaria Harney

In 1900 the Irish anthropologist and linguist George Abraham Grierson described the Pulayar of Travancore and the relationship between Braham and Sudra in South India, which was based on 'silent trade' between these two unequal parties: "If he wishes to make a purchase, he places his money on a stone, and retires to the appointed distance. The merchant or seller comes, takes up the money, and lays down whatever quantity of goods he chooses to give for the sum received" (Grierson 1903: 64).

Reading Grierson today, one cannot but help think of the enforced social and physical distancing that occurs in our urban spaces and commercial transactions during the COVID-19 pandemic for the sake of public health – distance, gloves, masks, hand sanitizer, number – mark the threat posed by interaction with a stranger. Social etiquette is unsettled and reconfigured, hospitality implodes, and individuation reigns both through techno-biosecurity green pass QR codes and readers and the (mis) tracking of each person as a conduit for disease. The uncertainty and fear of the stranger manifests most starkly in the distancing of social interaction in gathering places – public, private, liminal and contested.

Edward T. Hall's (1960) work on every day spatial etiquette in our social encounters, or bodily proxemics, also emphasized the relational challenges of physical and thus social distance. In terms of proxemics behaviour, the current imposition by states and localities of social and physical distancing not only serves as a public health response to limit the spread of a pathogen, but also as a restraint on how we can socialise. The dramatic reduction of certain intimate, face-to-face, or 'in-person' encounters attenuates our very sense of the intimacy required of ethnography and undermines naturalized assumptions about sociality, sociability, mutuality, and relations.[1] The dramatic and drastic demands imposed by governing authorities and emergent social practices on physical proximity can reflect attendant social hostility and fear, or reveal more subtle, social care and acknowledgment of mutuality of concern through awkward smiles and glances as the distance is maintained.

The pandemic has forced people to read their body and other bodies in more threatening and indeterminate ways, to interpret emergent social cues in encounters at a distance and with masking; but, of course, it is not as simple as the interpersonal relations in social dyad. Disruptions and re-readings of social etiquette cross social groupings of many sizes that coalesce in the new regulatory regime of pandemic urban governing. The state and local authorities regulate bodies, space and promixity by pointing to evolving scientific data, fetishized measurements of space and numerical

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1 This article does not address WhatsApp groups, Instagram parties, zoom meetings, etc., to create virtual communities or to organize communities and conversations across balconies, to reinforce the need for social relations.

limits on socialising bodies packaged as authoritative medical knowledge.

In the process, urban space is imagined as parcelled into biosecure, manageable units – sidewalks, public parks marked off into safe grids of (hoped for) scientific certainty: from tape to plastic foot images telling us where to queue to how the public space of sidewalks, bike lanes and city roads have been claimed for private outdoor dining patios in cities across the world to rejuvenate streetscapes and stimulate a hospitality sector – liberating consumption and labour for some, but also limiting the desperate need for more open and varied spaces of publicness in city space.

In urban life, everyday interaction is often characterized by surface relations to make the stranger predictable within the rational and ordered structure of modern cities. Simmel (1950: 413) suggested that the modern city at the turn of the 19th century was a novel rational order that was also relational, and always also informed by 'irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses'. Today, the segmented or contractual quality of these relations in the time of forced isolation appear more pronounced. Social and physical separation revive the 'silent trade' that early ethnographers marveled over as seemingly exotic, yet universal, relations. Relations happen in public, but civility or social grace behind the masking is more contested and uncertain. Degrees of separation vary across 'ethnographic sites', yet shopping for the necessities of life becomes a life hazard for working-class grocery clerks who encounter masked customer-strangers intent on silent trade from a carefully choreographed safe public-health distance.

The 'shelter at home' or *#iorestoacasa* declarations left people in starkly differentiated physical households – a sovereign space of putative safety or security from strangers, but also a reminder that the home could be a place in which the doubling-down on the physical intimacy of social distance could reveal destructive relations – *parenti serpenti, fratelli coltelli* – marked by increased domestic abuse, strife and mental anguish.[2] To escape the home into the anonymity of a masked if more intensely regulated urban labyrinth becomes even more imperative. It also creates other socialising dilemmas. The limits on social gatherings in homes disrupts the foundational social practice and cultural idiom to deal with strangers and set parameters on social relationships – hospitality.

If one cannot easily 'host' someone in the home during pandemic times (because either the state and the virus in their different ways put limits on visiting, or, if one hosts a guest, one incurs the threat of an unending visit because of the indeterminacy of the pathogen's presence, duration and effect), then where can one host in an urban space that is further delimited by all the pandemic rules? The hosts desire to control a space of welcome and the duration of an encounter requires most nuance in the green-passed controlled bars, cafés and restaurants with limited seating and can put up more visible barriers to sociality than the tacitly conceits of encounter within the 'sovereign' space of home. Hospitality then has to be rethought: it has become more attenuated, and some instances more treasured because of its rarity.

Simmel, Park, Goffman, Sennett, and others have described city life coping with both being social and being anonymous with strangers in constrained and rationalized space. Bauman (1993) has summarised the insights of classical urban scholars into a tripartite model of friend-enemy-stranger in urban, mobile, encounters. But the COVID-19 anxieties also show the limits of clear-cut classifications, underscoring the indeterminacy of these three categories. Encounters rehearse a kind of 'mismeeting' or disattention, 'a realm of non-engagement, of emotional void, inhospitable to either sympathy or hostility' (Bauman 1993: 154). In the pre-vaccine pandemic, the purchase of food became a 'transaction of virality' with life and death consequences for those who sustain everyone staying at home – *Do I need a glove? Did she use a glove? Is his mask on correctly?*. . . The other appears less as a carrier of moral subjectivity and being-ness, and more as a transactional entity to

2 I wish to thank Arlo Versini for providing me with the Italian phrase.

support our survival: instead of sociality and mutuality, we engage in exclusion or indifference. In short, these spaces are public but lack civility or sociability.

In the post-vaccine pandemic, public dining and drinking is limited to a public that can show proof of vaccination. To maintain social order, Goffman's rituals of 'civil inattention' addressed the need for minimum security in encounters with strangers. We do this by recognizing another's presence through eye contact and then an averted gaze to suggest we are not a threat: *I will not invade your physical space; I will not attack you*. Yet COVID-19, as a virus that spreads by those who may be asymptomatic, turns this ritual into a far more serious dynamic: in fact, the pandemic has transformed or, one might say, clarified our understanding of the public and publicness. The meaning of the public and processes of place-making are further revealed as always contested representations of the social structural inequality that inheres to society. Police presence and communal sanctions seek to turn urban space into ordered and controlled space, despite the unruly, socialising desire of collectives to free the body from such biopolitical restrictions.

What emerged in the overdetermining demand for social distance in the pre-vaccine pandemic is what might be call an impulse towards the 'anti-mass' – a disaggregating of the crowd by attempts to control the biothreat through the limits imposed by physical distance and its collateral effect on proximity and intimacy

In this context, Simmel's 'blasé attitude' is no longer a studied privilege of the bourgeoisie coping with the overstimulation of city life, a statement of detachment from the world. Its emphasis on anonymity, autonomy, and sovereignty as ways for the individual to cope within the intensity of signals and stimuli in the city, takes on new meaning now that the individual wears a mask and is ordered, advised or 'encouraged' to maintain a physical distance from others and thus attenuate the possibility for social relations ('each person is a potential threat'). The mask in turn enhances the possibility of anonymity. Anonymous but highly visible others traverse urban space – and, how does one conceal a cough, a sniff, a threat to pollution in public space?

Since the beginning of research on cities, scholars have been concerned with the aggregation of populations – crowds and masses – and their generative potential for social transformation. If one dominant history of crowds is one of fear of the masses and a challenge to the orderliness and rationality of modern, urban life, the pandemic threat reinforces the fear of (literally) the 'fever' and irrationality of what was a 19th century obsession with the irrationality working-class masses to all gatherings (for fear of the spread of an *asymptomatic virus*). Social sanctions and reproval accompany photos and videos of those who still dare to gather in groups and crowds.

Elias Canetti's more hopeful analysis of crowds and their sub-forms of pacts and crystals now take on a more sinister and biologically destructive meaning in the context of pandemics: 'As soon as it exists, [the crowd] wants to be composed of more people: the desire to grow is the main and the most eminent attribute of the crowd. It seeks to capture everything within its reach; everything that has the shape of a human being can join it. The natural crowd is the open crowd; there is no limit to its growth; neither houses, nor doors, nor locks' (Canetti 1962: 16).

This threat of increasing numbers of people encourages states to impose an even starker control over gathering sizes. What emerged in the overdetermining demand for social distance in the pre-vaccine pandemic is, thus, what might be call an impulse towards the 'anti-mass' – a disaggregating of the crowd by attempts to control the biothreat through the limits imposed by physical distance and its collateral effect on proximity and intimacy.

Yet, the need for social intimacy and the crowds desire to grow is too unruly for the controls gov-

erning authorities seek to impose or the virus effects by its deadly consequences. This was signaled in the summer of 2020 with the massive (and global) mobilisation of people as crowds to protest anti-black racism following George Floyd's murder, but it has manifested itself in different political frames (including anti-vaccination protests) as well as mundane needs for physical intimacy and the reduction of social distance in music concerts, urban festivals, sports stadia and public transit – a space not fully capable of maintaining physical distance logistically. Ultimately, the 'anti-mass' of this pandemic cannot contain the unruly crowds of urban social intimacy.

Acknowledgement. The phrase 'anti-mass' comes from Giovanni Da Col, personal communication.

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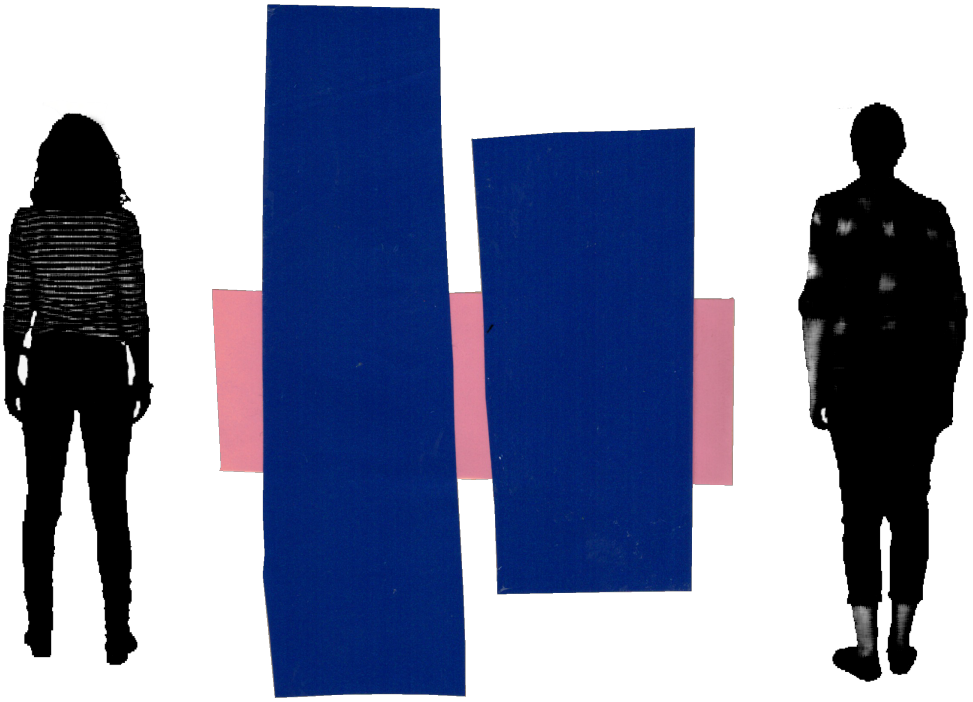

DARE FORMA ALLA DISTANZA


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The multiple role of distance

Tali Hatuka

Keep your distance! Occupancy by more than two people is dangerous and unlawful! Warns the sign (Pictures 1 & 2). The word 'distance' is emphasized in large, shiny letters. Everywhere. The concept 'distance', and the word, received much attention during with the Covid-19 pandemic, but it is deep rooted, with a long history in varied disciplines. Deep rooted, but at the same time not very popular. What is distance in our globalized hyper-connected world? Most of us think about ourselves in terms of proximity. We are close to our families and constantly text one another, we even communicate with forgotten friends from high school via social media. What then, is distance? Most of us think that the idea will be forgotten with the pandemic. Will it? Prior to the pandemic, distance was seemingly a way to measure the time needed to reach a destination. Yet, we now suddenly acknowledge the deep, multiple meanings of the concept. What will remain from this acknowledgment? What do we understand? Why should we care?

Tali Hatuka, an architect and urban planner, is a Professor of Urban Planning and the head of the Laboratory of Contemporary Urban Design, at Tel Aviv University (lcud.tau.ac.il). Her work is focused primarily on two fields: urban society, and city design and development. Her latest books are *The Design of Protest* (University of Texas press, 2018) and (co-authored with Eran Ben-Joseph) *New Industrial Urbanism. Designing Places for Production* (Routledge, 2022).

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Distance etc.

Socially, the term 'distance' refers to the increased 'social space' between different individuals, which facilitates greater disembedding of social interactions and, in turn, more freedom.[1] According to George Simmel, social distance is based on social norms that differentiate individuals and groups based on race, ethnicity, age, sex, social, class, religion, and nationality. The greater the social distance between individuals and groups, the less they influence each other. From a Marxist perspective, the process of distanciation in modern society has dramatically changed economic thinking toward a logic that is blind to qualitative differences, and cares only about quantitative dimensions (i.e., profits). The effect is a weakening of social bonds and increased individuality. This conceptualization of social distance was further expanded by Davis, who suggested that the idea of distance is also important in understanding political distance and, more specifically, citizens' distance from the state.[2] Davis further proposed that the distance between citizens and the state (as manifested in practices, procedures and policies) should be seen in the context of geography, institutions, culture and class, which have a major effect on the overall patterns, practices, and strategies of collective mobilization.

However, the concept of distance affects not only how we communicate with and approach others or those in power, but also how we think about an event, place or idea, and influences whether we view it in abstract or concrete terms. According to Liberman, distant places, events or relationships are

1 Giddens, Anthony and Christopher Pierson. Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p. 98; Henning, Christoph. "Distanciation and Disembedding." *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Edited by George Ritzer, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, pp. 1188-9.

2 Davis, Diane E. "The Power of Distance: Re-Theorizing Social Movements in Latin America." *Theory and Society* 28, no. 4 (1999): 585-638.

perceived in abstract terms, which capture the overall essence of situations or objects.[3] If a person is in closer proximity to people, places or events, he or she will likely think more concretely, focusing on the present in greater detail. Furthermore, distance has an enormous impact on how social power is manifested in space. The powerful tend to use social distance to emphasize the differences between themselves and others, both those who have more power than themselves and those who have less. Research has demonstrated that people who are aware of the concept of power tend to construe events in a more abstract manner; others, who consider themselves less powerful (or who want to present themselves as such), tend to construct events more informally and concretely. Abstract and concrete perceptions of distance are crucial for better understanding how protesters challenge agreed-upon social distance and, in turn, power in physical spaces. Planners and architects play a key role in demarcating distance by defining the geometry of space, a geometry that is not only a signature of lifestyle and capital needs but also a signature of power. The built environment frames everyday life by offering certain spaces for programmed action while closing off other possibilities.

Our entire reality is based on social distances, political distances, physical distances, and cognitive distances

Thus, our entire reality is based on social distances, political distances, physical distances, and cognitive distances. Different epochs in history tell different stories about distances. Prior the industrial revolution the whole idea of distance, families, and movement was totally different. Today, distance seems like an anachronistic term. Yet extreme events have dramatic influence; they tend to impose new forms of distance by regulation, and coding for behaviour/dressing. The events of Sept 11 left us with a new approach to the dynamic at airports and created new performances of checks, routing, and queues based on social distances such as race and ethnicity. What will remain from the Covid-19 pandemic?

This is a question to which we might be able to respond by addressing how distances were manifested during the pandemic. A few new forms have emerged: distances are imposed *ad hoc*, often by officials posting signs. There are new rituals based on distance, such as the'elbow hug'; new spatial orders are based on distance, such as how chairs are organized for public events, or marking circles on the floor to ensure that distance is maintained. These examples relate to three key issues in our daily life: regulation, rituals and physical order. This dynamic is not episodic, the length of the pandemic made it habitual. Is it here to stay? Or is it a moment soon to be forgotten? Do we hope that distances will be forgotten? (Pictures 3, 4 & 5)

Distances, elasticity and change

Distances, whether legal, social or cultural, are extremely elastic and always normative. They can be imposed or culturally evolve but they are always changing. In that case, why should we pay attention to them? Simply because they are representations of order, which can be manipulated easily. On one hand, they help maintain the boundaries between private and public, between the person standing ahead of us in the queue and ourselves. They are often physically beautiful, as we have seen in many of the arrays of public spaces that were adjusted during the pandemic. On the other hand, we also have to remember that the anesthetization of distance is political and often contributes to isolation and alienation between people and groups; most rivalries between social groups are based on social distances.

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3 Liberman, Nira and Yaacov Trope. "Construal-level Theory of Psychological Distance," *Psychological Review* 117, no. 2 (2010): 440-463.

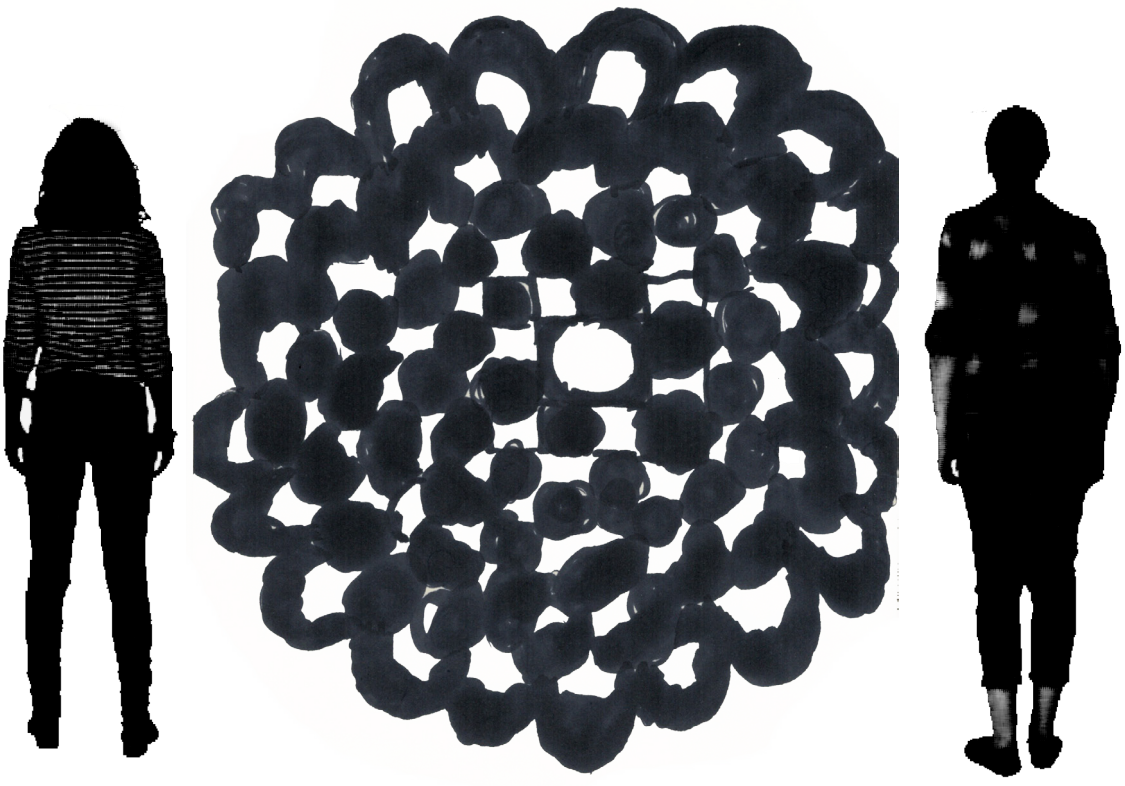
For the citizen in the secular modern age, science, modern medicine, and the state are all perceived as powerful institutions that can solve all miseries. However, as the recent crisis has shown, this is not the case. What are the means by which people can challenge social and political distances? Imagination and the public spaces.

Human imagination is a tool by which people consider themselves part of a larger whole, and refuse to retreat into the isolation of the private sphere. To counteract discrepancies, imagination may be the only tool at their disposal. Public spaces are the social platform that challenges bounded politics by using imagination and space to create new possibilities. In essence, this platform, which advances discursive change, is based on a flexible strategy that tolerates various forms of action and conflicted positioning, allowing activists to modify its character based on what is actually happening on the ground.

To be sure, distances will never disappear. They have always been with us. Every day when you walk outside the house, walk to an underground station, pass foreign people on the street, sit next to a stranger in the metro, bus or train, watch an unhoused person collect coins from the floor on your way to work, and talk to a friend or your parents in the phone but conceal your real feelings, you experience distances. We live in an age when we tend not to notice them. Communication and social media help maintain the illusion that we are not alone, that distances do not exist.

If the pandemic was helpful in any way, it was in highlighting this forgotten category. Yet, the time has come to probe it beyond its literal meaning. Only by seeing distances, can we notice them, think about them and decide whether or not we wish to challenge them. (Picture 6).

Photo Credits. 1. Photo by Nick Fewings; 2. Photo by visuals; 3. Photo by Jon Tyson; 4. Photo by Maxime; 5.Photo by Mika Baumeister; 6. Photo by Jessica Yap. All available from unsplash.com



WURMKOS DARE FORMA ALLA DISTANZA

Bolle di contatto e uso dello spazio pubblico

Sguardo sulle dinamiche interazionali degli studenti universitari nella città di Padova

Alice Brombin

Quali sono le conseguenze delle misure di distanziamento sociale nel contesto pandemico per le fasce di popolazione più giovane?

Al momento sto conducendo una ricerca etnografica tra gli studenti dell'Università di Padova, ateneo che conta oltre 60.000 iscritti, e vorrei qui presentare alcune riflessioni iniziali. Da ottobre 2021 mi sono concentrata sulle zone dell'università più facilmente accessibili, in particolare il polo umanistico dislocato negli spazi limitrofi alle tre principali piazze del centro città, che geograficamente comprende l'area tra la sede di Palazzo Maldura in via Beato Pellegrino, il dipartimento di studi storici dietro al Duomo e le sedi di sociologia e scienze politiche in prossimità della chiesa del Santo. Un secondo nucleo di osservazione è il Portello dove si trovano la segreteria studenti, la sede di psicologia e il polo scientifico la cui dislocazione segue l'andamento del Piovego il canale emissario del Bacchiglione fiume che attraversa l'area urbana della città. Gli studenti si muovono spesso lungo questo asse che in quindici minuti a piedi porta dal Portello alle piazze. Pur connotandosi in maniera diversa, come vedremo, queste due zone rappresentano sia il centro delle attività universitarie che della vita extra-accademica degli studenti.

Le piazze dei mercati e degli apertivi, con i palazzi storici, i bar eleganti, i negozi che si aprono uno dopo l'altro sotto i portici, rappresentano per così dire la quinta teatrale che accoglie non solo gli studenti, ma anche turisti e pendolari. Da questo snodo, che è anche un punto geografico di orientamento per gli studenti, ci si muove verso le altre aree della città e le varie sedi universitarie. Qui l'accresciuto controllo del comportamento e delle dinamiche sociali imposti delle norme di contenimento e distanziamento è molto percepibile: camminare senza mascherina mette a disagio, così come affollarsi nei bar o sedersi nei ristoranti aspettando che qualcuno arrivi a controllare il green pass. La pandemia ha di fatto accentuato la specializzazione monofunzionale degli spazi pubblici, la cui natura di luoghi di interesse collettivo viene meno. Una nuova razionalità nella scelta e nelle modalità di muoversi si è imposta, per cui prima di entrare in un locale si controlla quanta gente ci sia dentro e si fa un calcolo sommario dell'ampiezza, del numero delle persone, dei tempi approssimativi della coda. La pandemia ha quindi contribuito fortemente all'erosione degli spazi pubblici, sia come naturale conseguenza delle norme di distanziamento, sia per l'irrompere nella vita quotidiana della dimensione biologica, che rende i corpi possibili veicoli di contagio, spingendo a rifugiarsi nella sfera privata a discapito di quella pubblica. Una delle conseguenze più visibili, tanto entro le mura universitarie quanto all'esterno, è la tendenza generale ad evitare interazioni, attività e mobilità non necessarie nello spazio pubblico.

Parallelamente a questo è osservabile anche un altro tipo di atteggiamento: seguendo gli studenti nei loro momenti di incontro e ripercorrendone i movimenti all'interno della città, ci si accorge di come

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vengano messe in atto strategie di riappropriazione dello spazio pubblico che divengono occasione per tralasciare le ansie connesse alla pandemia e per rimettere in gioco i corpi al di fuori da una logica di allarmismo. Il Portello sembra essere una delle zone della città dove ciò è possibile. Si tratta di uno dei luoghi d'acqua più caratteristici di Padova ma è anche una delle aree del centro meno frequentate, spazio considerato in un certo senso marginale, soggetto a degrado, microcriminalità e spaccio, nonostante recenti attività di riqualificazione urbanistica. È soprattutto sulle scalinate di pietra che si immergono nell'acqua, il cosiddetto Burchiello, che gli studenti amano riunirsi e sostare, tanto in estate che in inverno. Il fatto di essere fuori dalla zona dove si concentrano la maggior parte delle attività commerciali e le rotte turistiche, e di essere vicino all'acqua, rende il Portello una sorta di confine simbolico, una soglia tra quella che viene percepita come un'area di degrado e la parte benestante della città (Stavrides 2010).

Uno degli esiti di questa modalità di intendere lo spazio è la perdita della capacità di vivere la città come un tutto organico e di orientarsi nello spazio cittadino, rivelando una certa difficoltà a riconoscere la continuità tra un luogo e un altro

Il Portello è un paesaggio che si potrebbe definire residuale o addirittura di scarto rispetto ai luoghi rappresentativi della città e della sua identità: uno spazio pubblico liminale, espressione di una territorialità interstiziale (Brighenti 2013:XVII), dove lo sguardo invisibile delle norme sociali si fluidifica o sembra aver meno peso nell'immaginario condiviso dagli studenti che ne fanno un luogo privilegiato di incontro e socializzazione. La natura fluida e porosa del Portello si è accentuata con la pandemia e il proliferare delle norme di distanziamento. Ciò sembra confermare la letteratura sulla funzione creativa e di riappropriazione dello spazio pubblico che nel contesto pandemico hanno avuto gli spazi pubblici aperti, come parchi e aree verdi (Hatuka 2021; Krzysztof e Drozda 2021). I paesaggi frequentati dagli studenti universitari assolvono a questa funzione, divenendo "bolle relazionali" (Danon et al. 2021) in cui è possibile l'esistenza di gruppi di contatto sociale che si muovono nello spazio con modalità aggregative e temporalità proprie:

> Come gruppo di amici noi giriamo molto, passiamo soprattutto tanto tempo all'aperto, però non per andare in bar, ma più per stare proprio in piazza, o stare al Portello, stare in luoghi pubblici aperti, magari ci portiamo il nostro da bere, la nostra cassa bluetooth e stiamo lì anche delle ore [. . .] il Portello questa primavera, cioè da marzo quando sono riprese le lezioni del secondo semestre, è diventato il posto in cui noi ci siamo trovati, perché i bar chiudevano alle 22.00 o alle 23.00, non ricordo, e quindi noi andavamo lì, ed era un po' il luogo di ritrovo, sui gradini, si stava lì con altre persone che facevano la stessa cosa e si stava lì molte ore a socializzare. Poi dopo un po' con l'avvicinarsi dell'estate c'era davvero tantissima gente che ha iniziato a fare questa cosa, noi siamo stati un po' i precursori, però poi davvero tanta gente si è ritrovata lì, ogni sera potenzialmente conoscevi persone diverse, era tutto molto bello. Lì la pandemia era come non esistesse, era proprio una zona franca, era proprio uno spazio di normalità, di pre-covid ecco, arrivavi lì e non avevi più bisogno della mascherina, parlavi con le persone, ci ballavi insieme, che magari era una cosa preclusa nel periodo però, sì ci sentivamo liberi. (Studente, secondo anno di triennale, unipd)

La testimonianza evidenzia come alcuni spazi della città si prestino meglio di altri alla ricerca di una dimensione di oblio, luoghi in cui è possibile dimenticarsi che il corpo è anche un qualcosa di pubblico e in certa misura fuori dal nostro controllo, spazi in cui la paura interiorizzata della prossimità si dissolve. Questo modo di concepire e concepirsi nello spazio implica la tendenza a una territorializzazione più fluida: contesti come il Portello, diventano luoghi di rifugio, spazi sociali protetti, bolle interazionali in cui la sensazione di pericolo o angoscia legati alla contagio si stempera, così come la sensazione di esposizione permanente allo sguardo di controllori invisibili. Per chi frequenta queste zone interstiziali la possibilità di dimenticare momentaneamente la pandemia consente di riconquistare una dimensione di benessere individuale e un rinnovato senso di comunità o di socialità condivisa. Queste spazialità residuali sembrano in certa misura arginare gli esiti del distanziamento

sociale, configurandosi come spazi alternativi che influenzano la qualità di vita in contesto urbano.

La ricollocazione della socialità in aree della città liminali va di pari passo ad una logica di de-commercializzazione dello spazio pubblico, questo è visibile in zone come il Portello già di per sé fuori delle principali vie commerciali, ma anche in aree dove maggiormente si concentrano le attività cittadine. In particolare, l'uso economico dello spazio sembra divenire secondario rispetto all'uso sociale (Hatuka 2021:395), restituendo agli utenti un ruolo attivo al di fuori di una logica commerciale: scegliere di non sedersi al bar diventa una pratica di resilienza che si oppone al controllo dei corpi e alla logica di consumo che una certa visione dell'uso dello spazio pubblico comporta, e che in parte la pandemia ha favorito, consentendo un ampliamento delle attività commerciali nelle piazze, nei parchi e nelle aree verdi:

> Mi sono molto stancata di andare in posti che una volta (prima della pandemia) frequentavo regolarmente, mi sono stancata soprattutto nel periodo in cui abbiamo ricominciato ad uscire post lockdown, che al bar bisognava stare seduti e non si poteva bere in piedi, che quindi c'era da fare la prenotazione al tavolino. . . le cose non funzionavano bene, anzi a volte magari arrivavi in sei e decidevano arbitrariamente che sei persone erano troppe e ti dicevano vai là, aspetta là, e ti mandavano in un angolo ad aspettare, gente che frequenta quel posto da dieci anni! (Studentessa, secondo anno dottorato, unipd)

Nel corso degli incontri e dei colloqui con gli studenti si è fatto riferimento in diverse occasioni al fatto che con il distanziamento sociale si è accresciuto il bisogno di potersi muovere liberamente nello spazio, o meglio, di avere una spazialità residuale che circonda il proprio corpo e che in qualche modo non deve essere invasa o violata dalla presenza dell'altro. Inoltre, a seguito delle nuove norme, sembra essersi generata una frattura nel patto morale implicito nelle micro-interazioni sociali che avvengono in uno spazio urbano relativamente piccolo come il centro della città di Padova, dove si sviluppa una sorta di familiarità con i luoghi e con le persone in virtù dell'abitudine. La testimonianza sopra citata ne è un esempio e illustra il meccanismo per cui un individuo affezionato a un luogo o a uno spazio di interazione considerato parte del proprio paesaggio di vita quotidiana percepisce il venir meno di un orizzonte di familiarità e fiducia condiviso, o quanto meno dato per scontato, nel momento in cui viene applicato in maniera standardizzata un protocollo che riduce la possibilità di improvvisare in maniera creativa le modalità di socializzazione in quello spazio, mettendo in crisi anche le consuetudini interazionali acquisite in qualità di utilizzatori abituali.

In alcuni casi, la necessità di ridefinire le modalità di muoversi e di stare assieme nello spazio pubblico in conformità alle norme di distanziamento ha comportato l'irrompere sul palcoscenico dell'interazione di aspetti legati alla natura funzionale degli spazi che normalmente si tende a tenere dietro le quinte o a non voler esplicitare, come ad esempio la razionalità prettamente economica e la logica di profitto che governa la relazione tra esercenti e fruitori in contesti di consumo come i bar. Anche a questo aspetto forse è possibile legare l'apparente disaffezione che alcuni studenti manifestano nei confronti di luoghi pubblici che, nel corso della pandemia, hanno progressivamente perso o ridotto il loro valore aggregativo, avvalorando l'ipotesi di una trasformazione nel rapporto di forze tra gli usi commerciali e quelli non-commerciali dello spazio pubblico.

La parte di ricerca che ho condotto sinora mi sembra insomma evidenziare almeno due tendenze nella modalità di gestione del distanziamento da parte degli studenti universitari, connesse al ritiro da un certa modalità di uso dello spazio pubblico: la prima, più immediatamente percepibile, è la propensione a ricollocare l'interazione e i momenti di socialità nello spazio privato o domestico (tipicamente a casa di amici come luogo di ritrovo in piccoli gruppi sia per attività di studio che extra-accademiche); la seconda è invece relativa alla proliferazione di bolle di aggregazione nello spazio pubblico, micro-contesti relazionali che risultano però sconnessi dal più ampio tessuto sociale e urbano circostante.

Uno degli esiti di questa modalità di intendere lo spazio, che da una prima fase di osservazione pare

ricorrente soprattutto tra gli studenti ai primi anni di università, è la perdita della capacità di vivere la città come un tutto organico e di orientarsi nello spazio cittadino, rivelando una certa difficoltà a riconoscere la continuità tra un luogo e un altro. Se la modalità di relazionalità "a bolla" restituisce una forma di abitare, e quindi di vivere la città che può contribuire a comprendere cosa significhi essere studenti a Padova in epoca di pandemia, rimangono da esplorare le implicazioni tanto simboliche quanto sociali delle riconfigurazioni degli spazi pubblici (Goddard, Vallance 2012; Monteduro, 2020), tra cui l'università, insieme alla necessità di ripensare complessivamente gli spazi in cui ci muoviamo.

Bubbles of social contact and the use of public space. Interactional dynamics among university students in the city of Padua

What are the consequences of social distancing measures for the young population in the context of Covid19 pandemic?

This article is based on an ongoing ethnographic research I am conducting among the university population of the city of Padua that counts over 60,000 students. Since October 2021, I have been observing two main areas of the university district: the first one is the humanities division located in the historical city center close to the three main squares, which geographically includes Palazzo Maldura in Via Beato Pellegrino, the historical studies department behind the Duomo, and the premises of sociology and political science near Saint Anthony Chapel. The second observational site, Portello, is in a different area of the city, where the scientific division, the psychology department and the students' office are located. These university sites follow the course of Piovego, the emissary channel of the Bacchiglione river that crosses the urban area of the city. Students move along this axis, which leads from Portello to the main downtown squares in a fifteen-minute walk. Despite their differences, these two areas are the center of students' university activities and extra-academic life as well.

The marketplaces and the routes of aperitifs are part of the scene of a city made of historic buildings, tidy bars and stores placed closely alongside the arcades. Students, tourists and commuters mingle there. From this center, which is also a geographical point of orientation for students, one can then reach other areas of the city and the university sites. Here, the increased control of public behavior and the impact of containment measures such as social distancing is tangible: if you are without a face mask, you feel uncomfortable standing along with people crowding the bars, or sitting in a restaurant waiting for someone to check your green pass. Due to the pandemic, public spaces have lost their multifunctional nature, and their collective relevance seems to have receded before an increasing monofunctional specialization. A new rationality in the way of moving through the city

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is taking hold: before entering a premise, one makes a quick calculation of the number of people inside, the expected queuing time, and so on. The pandemic has strongly contributed to the erosion of public spaces in daily life, as a natural consequence of physical distancing, and as a result of the new biological concern: the fact that our bodies can be vehicles of contagion in spite of our will. The effect, visible both inside and outside the university, is the tendency to avoid unnecessary interactions and inessential activities in public spaces, as well as the withdrawal into the individual private sphere.

At the same time, though, a different attitude can also be observed: following the students in their moments of leisure and retracing their movements through the city, it is possible to detect their strategies of re-appropriation of public space. The seek and create opportunities to avoid the anxieties connected to the pandemic and to regain possession of their own bodies. An area of the city where this seems to be possible is, precisely, Portello, one of the most characteristic waterfronts in Padua. From spring time through the summer, students meet and sit on the stone staircase known as "Burchiello". Despite recent urban regeneration actions, this is one of the less frequented sites of the center, a sort of marginal space, subject to decay, 'micro-criminality' and drug dealing. By being severed from the most commercial sites of the city, from the tourist routes, and by being close to the water, Portello embodies a sort of symbolic border, a threshold space between a run down area and the wealthy side of the town (Stavrides 2010).

Compared to the more representative places of the city, Portello could be defined as a residual landscape, as a liminal public space, or an urban interstice (Brighenti 2013: XVII). Students feel that here the invisible gaze of social norms can be smoothed, its pressure relieved. During the pandemic, distancing regulations have, in fact, but enhanced the fluid and porous nature of Portello. Its specific features make it a privileged site for youth meeting and socializing. This seems to confirm the literature that acknowledges the importance of public space during the Covid19 pandemic and the increase of creative appropriation and use of open spaces such as parks and green areas (Hatuka 2021; Krzysztof and Drozda 2021). The landscapes sought by the students perform this function, turning into "relational bubbles" (Danon et al. 2021) in which different groups of social contact move through space, adopting specific socializing and temporal codes:

As a group of friends we go out a lot, we spend a lot of time outdoors, not to go to bars, but to hang out in the main squares or in Portello, just to stay in open public places, we bring with us our own drinks, our bluetooth speaker and we stay there for hours [...] During the past spring, since March when the classes of the second semester started, Portello had become the place where we used to meet, because the bars closed at 10.00 or 11.00 pm, I don't remember. Thus, we were used to sit there on the staircase, it was our meeting place, we were chilling there with other people doing the same thing for hours, just to socialize. After a while, when summer time came there were a ton of people doing this, maybe we broke new ground but then, that place was crowded every night, it was very cool. The pandemic did not exist there, it was some kind of free zone, it was a space of normality, of pre-Covid: you got there and you no longer needed a mask, you talked to people, danced with them, which was probably forbidden during that time however, we felt free. (Bachelor student at U. of Padua)

The interview excerpt shows that some spaces of the city lend themselves to the search for obliviousness – places where you feel you are allowed to forget that your own body is also a public matter of concern and, to a certain extent, something beyond your control. In these spaces, the embodied fear of proximity dissolves. This way of conceiving space and of being conceived in space implies a more fluid territorialization. Contexts such as Portello become places of refuge, protected social spaces, interactional bubbles in which the feeling of being at risk and the anxieties due to the pandemic disappear. The possibility of temporarily ignoring the pandemic allows people who are used to come in these interstitial zones to regain their individual well-being and achieve a renewed sense of community and shared sociality. These residual spatialities fulfil an important function containing the anxieties caused by social distancing. Such alternative spaces can influence the overall quality of life in urban contexts.

The reorganization of sociality in liminal areas

of the city is also related to the emergence of a logic of de-commercialization of public space. This is visible not just in places such as Portello, far from the main commercial venues, but also in business areas. In particular, we notice how the economic usage of space becomes secondary to social use (Hatuka 2021: 395). Away from a commercial logic, users regain an active role. Choosing not to sit at the bar becomes a practice of resilience against the control over the body and the logic of consumption that a certain approach to the use of public space entails, such as the expansion of commercial businesses into parks, squares and green areas that has followed the pandemic:

I got tired of places where I used to go. I got tired especially after the lockdown when we started to go out again. Because you were supposed to sit, and you could not drink standing, plus you were forced to reserve a table ... things didn't work out well. Sometimes we went there, six of us, and they arbitrarily decided that six people were too many and they would send you to a corner to wait! I mean, I am talking about people who have been used to hang out in that place for at least ten years! (PhD student, U of Padua)

While I was interviewing students, they pointed out on several occasions that because of social distancing mandates, the need of moving freely has increased and also the need of maintaining a sort of residual spatiality surrounding their own body, a personal space that should not be invaded or violated by the presence of the other. Furthermore, as a result of the new rules, a fracture has been generated in the moral pact implied in the micro-interactions that take place in small urban spaces such as the city center of Padua, where the daily routine makes you familiar with people and places. The extract above shows that people attached to a place, considered as a landscape of everyday life, believe that the interactions in that space should be based on mutual trust and care: they assume it as something taken for granted. But, when a standardized protocol of interaction is applied that assumption does not work anymore, and the impossibility of creatively improvising interactions in familiar spaces undermines customs and habits people believed were entitled to as 'regular users'.

The need to redefine the ways of moving and being together in public spaces in compliance with distancing rules, leads to the emergence of aspects related to the functional use of space that are frequently kept in the background of social interaction, invisible. Among these, the economic rationality and the logic of profit that rule over the relations between retailers and users in consumer places such as cafés etc. During the pandemic the socializing value of such spaces has progressively declined, producing a sort of disaffection towards places commonly frequented by students. This tendency supports the hypothesis of a shift in the balance of power between commercial and non-commercial use of public space.

On the basis of my ongoing ethnographic research, two trends in the management of social distancing measures related to the students' withdrawal from public space are pointed out. The first one, more easily recognizable, is the tendency to relocate social interactions in the private or domestic space (i.e., meeting in small groups at friend's places for study and extra-academic activities); the second is the creation of bubbles of social contact within the public space, micro-interactional contexts that seem to be disconnected from the surrounding social and urban fabric.

The reduced ability of experiencing the city as an organic whole, and orienting oneself in urban space, represents one of the implications of this way of living and perceiving public space, which from my observations seems to be recurrent, especially among undergraduate students. The idea of "bubble of social contact" presented in this article may contribute to a better understanding of the interactional dynamics among university students during the pandemic. However, the significance of the symbolic and social reconfiguration of public spaces, including the university (Goddard, Vallance 2012; Monteduro2020), as well as the urgency of rethinking the use of the space in which we live and move calls for further investigation.

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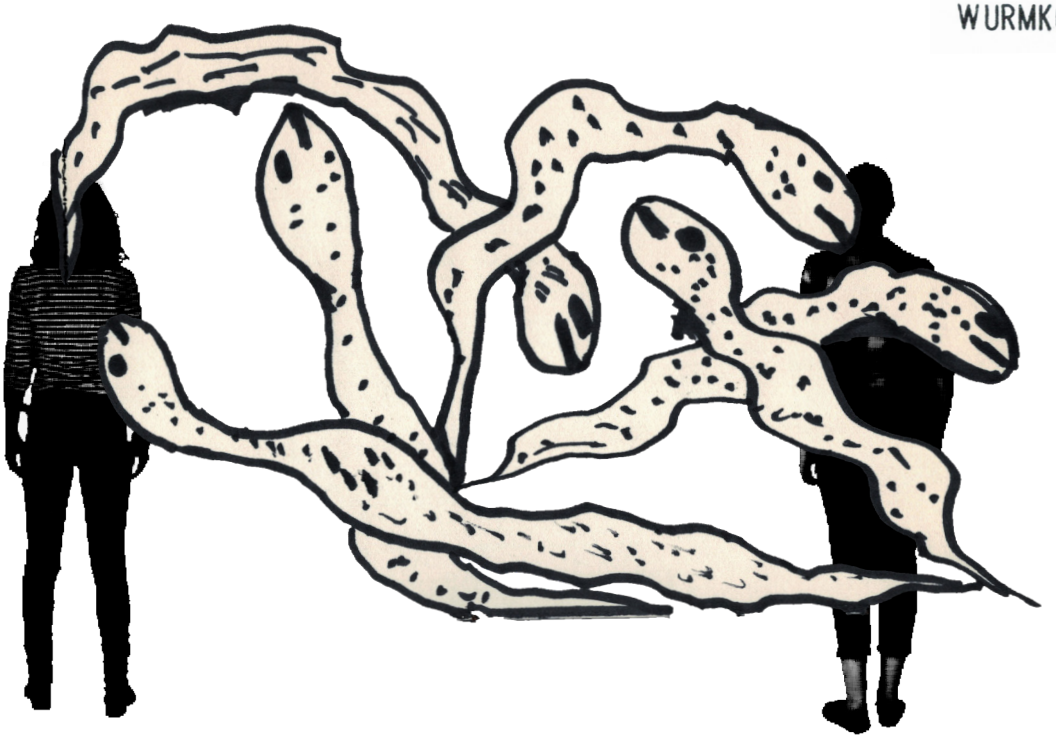

dare forma alla distanza

Contagion is commonplace

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Of all the changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has provoked, the dramatically accelerating transition of social and economic relations onto digitally mediated networks seems among the shifts most likely to stay for the long term. Emiliana Armano, Tatiana Mazali, and Maurizio Teli previously described the rhetorical processes that have rendered digital technologies the best way to protect our lives from contagion.[1] Those rhetorical processes, however, are not unique to the pandemic; they are commonplace. Rhetorics of contagion guide our efforts to strategically manage our networks – digital and otherwise – such that we avoid or seek exposure to particular viral phenomena.

Contagion is not only biological but also social; virality is a characteristic of bacteria inasmuch as it is a property of consciousness, discourse, information, and behavior. Network analysis research has verified that behavioral habits like smoking, eating, and exercise tend to appear in clusters and spread through proximity from one tie to another.[2] Popular terms like "echo chamber," which refers to clusters of people sharing similar discourses, reflect the common sense truth that people tend to be connected to others with similar ways of thinking about the world and likewise spread their perspectives to others in their network through communication.[3] Countless adages encourage listeners to surround themselves with kind, happy, beautiful, wealthy, or successful people and to push away the others as if they might infect us with social abjection. When it comes to rhetorical appeals that would tell us how to structure our social networks, contagion is commonplace.

The social logics of contagion call on us first to identify traits and sort them by desirability. They call on us to ask ourselves, *Who do I want to be?*, and immerse ourselves in ecologies of people, objects, media, discourses, and aesthetics that manifest our desired traits. Contagious logics further provoke us to avoid the undesirable and abject by cutting our ties to them, or by distancing ourselves by placing mediating parties between us. Identifying the contagions that we gravitate toward or repel from is a method for discovering individual strategies for distance management.

The structural practice of distance management in social relationships is called networking. As

1 Emiliana Armano, Tatiana Mazali, and Maurizio Teli, "The 'Pandemic City': Ipotesi Interpretative per Un'inchiesta Sulla Dualità Dello Spazio Urbano," *Io Squaderno* 57 (November 2020): 49.

2 D. Brockmann and D. Helbing, "The Hidden Geometry of Complex, Network-Driven Contagion Phenomena," *Science* 342, no. 6164 (December 13, 2013): 1337–42; Kieron J. Barclay, Christofer Edling, and Jens Rydgren, "Peer Clustering of Exercise and Eating Behaviours among Young Adults in Sweden: A Cross-Sectional Study of Egocentric Network Data," *BMC Public Health* 13, no. 1 (2013): 784; Cynthia M Lakon et al., "Simulating Dynamic Network Models and Adolescent Smoking: The Impact of Varying Peer Influence and Peer Selection," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 12 (December 2015): 2438–48.

3 Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, and Lada A. Adamic, "Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook," *Science* 348, no. 6239 (2015): 1130–32.

an abstract representation – a drawing of links and nodes – the network replaces one notion of distance with another: the networked conception of distance emphasizes degrees of closeness. (*How many nodes must be traversed in a journey from one of us to the other? Are we enjoying immediate co-presence? Or is there some mediating agent which separates us?*) Networks deprioritize and mystify the materiality of geographic distance. Developers of digitally networked technologies leverage that mystification by claiming to bring people together. At the same time, though, their technologies insistently offer to stand between us and our friends, families, and neighbors, but especially between us and workers in production, retail, or service.

Consider the phenomenon of "no contact delivery," wherein a person who delivers takeout no longer hands goods to you, but instead leaves a bag on your porch and disappears before you quietly open the door

Mobile and web applications position themselves between us and our other contacts, trying to look friendly and helpful while they set the terms of our social and economic engagements, listening all the while. Armano, Mazali, & Teli illustrate how the pandemic occasioned a redrawing of the geometries of connection to digitally divide, on one side, those whose provisions of labor and subsistence could be arranged through connective technologies and, on the other, a bio-precariat whose sacrificial labor is essential to ensure the former group's wellbeing.[4]

To be sure, those workers' labor *is* essential. Half of all human beings live in urban cities and are therefore separated from subsistence resources such as food and water by at least a few degrees. As a result, the essential work of supplying those resources to urban populations must be done, and a division must be made to decide who will risk exposure to COVID-19 and who will be protected. Predictably, that decision was left to the market. The COVID-19 pandemic, as a result, transformed the already-existing precariat into a sacrificial bio-precariat largely comprised of people on the wrong end of class structures, racial hierarchies, and eligibilities for state social support. What, then, can we expect to be the long-term consequences of these technologies which assert themselves as a necessary mediating party between the protected workers of the digital and information economy from the bio-precariat?

Consider the phenomenon of "no-contact delivery," wherein a person who delivers takeout no longer hands goods to you, but instead leaves a bag on your porch and disappears before you quietly open the door. The exchange is more alienating than ever before. The moment of recognition which once accompanied every awkward salutation between the consumer and deliverer, as they exchange goods for signatures and perhaps cash gratuities, is fading into history. These encounters provide grounds for recognizing one another's mutual human dignity. Digital technologies that mediate relations between workers and consumers not only foreclose on the possibility of heterotopic contact, but they also render human labor invisible. No-contact delivery beckons the consumer to experience the service as a digital technology rather than a service performed by a living, breathing human.

The breath of other humans is, after all, what no-contact delivery and other mediating technologies are meant to help us avoid. On the part of modern industry, however, it is increasingly unclear whether the ubiquitous "self-service" terminals where we pay for groceries, place orders at restaurants, and conduct all kinds of other transactions is about COVID-19 rather than cost cutting by replacing wage

4 Armano, Mazali, and Teli, "The 'Pandemic City'"; Michael Crang, Tracey Crosbie, and Stephen Graham, "Variable Geometries of Connection: Urban Digital Divides and the Uses of Information Technology," *Urban Studies* 43, no. 13 (December 2006): 2551–70; John H. Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells, eds., *Dual City: Restructuring New York* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992).

laborers with computers. On the part of young and technologically adept consumers, the degree to which social distancing is about COVID-19 rather than social anxiety and mistrust toward other people seems increasingly unclear. This mistrust engenders a profound loss in the eyes of those who retain a faith in the city as a space of radical togetherness and destabilizing possibilities.

Radical theorists of urbanization have repeatedly turned to the prospect of urban density as a source of revolutionary creativity. Urban density is a politically volatile term which refers to the threats and promises of closeness in the urban environment. It threatens contagious illness, poverty, conflict, exploitation, and alienation while also promising cultural development, economic opportunity, and infrastructural advantages.[5] Murray Bookchin contests that density and urbanity are necessarily intertwined. In so doing he aligns the negative social qualities of urbanity with alienation in modernity:

> [Both city and country] are being subverted by urbanization, a process that threatens to destroy their identities and their vast wealth of tradition and variety . . . City space with its human propinquity, distinctive neighborhoods, and humanly scaled politics – like rural space, with its closeness to nature, its high sense of mutual aid, and its strong family relationships – is being absorbed by urbanization, with its smothering traits of anonymity, homogenization, and institutional gigantism.[6]

Bookchin makes the case that urbanization alienates people from one another and from nature, encouraging relations of individual competition and domination instead of communal mutuality and friendship. Anonymization is a key trait of urbanity that breeds mistrust and dispels compassion. In Bookchin's city, one has the sense that fellow citizens are not strangers but acquaintances bound together by mutual interest in the common good – friends, in the sense that Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[7] In Bookchin's urbanity, interactions with anonymous others are uncomfortable, mistrustful, inconvenient, or merely utilitarian. The city brings us together, but urbanization isolates us from one another.

The radical togetherness and mutuality of the city creates opportunities for what Henri Lefebvre called *heterotopias* – liminal moments where the city can be imagined otherwise, even within the urbanization processes of capitalism.[8] Lefebvre held heterotopia in tension with *isotopy*, or the process by which capitalist hegemony breaks up that same togetherness, delineating people from one another and from nature by building modern competitive individualism into the urban landscape. These two topologies work against one another: heterotopic moments assert themselves in the isotopic landscape, only to be broken up and reclaimed again.[9]

Today, the threat of contagion pushes heterotopia into retreat. The COVID-19 pandemic has opened an opportunity for technologies that stand between people in complex ways that are at once connective and isolating. These technologies also advance the accumulation of both profit and surveillance data which strengthen the institutional advantages of ruling class hegemony. The landscape looks deeply isotopic, but there is also great promise for heterotopic resurgence both in dense cities and in the digital environment.

Armano, Mazali, & Teli emphasize that technologies do not determine the structure or content of social life.[10] We have the agency to decide how and whether to use them. With respect to *how* to use them, it is important and noteworthy that alternative technologies for connecting with people in disparate lifeworlds are being fervently developed by parties interested in building counterhege-

5 Colin McFarlane, "The Geographies of Urban Density: Topology, Politics and the City," *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 5 (October 1, 2016): 629–48; Colin McFarlane, "De/Re-Densification," *City* 24, no. 1–2 (March 3, 2020): 314–24.

6 Murray Bookchin, *From Urbanization to Cities: Toward a New Politics of Citizenship* (New York: Cassell, 1995).

7 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. D.A. Rees (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951).

8 Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

9 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), xvii–xviii.

10 Armano, Mazali, and Teli, "The 'Pandemic City'" 51–52.

mony. Encrypted and anonymous messaging services allow us to communicate through mediators that do not seek to accumulate our information for profit. New mediating technologies enable us to rehumanize digital communication by incorporating voice, animations, images, and emoticons. Collaborative organizing and information management technologies empower radical organizations to occasion heterotopic experience. Decentralizing technologies are advancing efforts to democratize the web using collectively owned, transparent, open source programs. To be sure, many digital technologies pose a threat to the development of radical alternative ways of life. That does not suggest that all network technologies must pose such a threat. As for the ones that do, there may soon come a day where socially viable alternatives will enable us to simply not use them.

In the meantime, we must continue to create opportunities for mutual recognition and heterotopic experience. How can we dispel the fear and suspicion stoked by urbanization and the threat of biological contagion? The answer is that we must rediscover a basis of trust upon which we can relate to others. If we are to contest the mistrust and anxiety that comes with urbanity as Bookchin describes it, we will have to take risks at the end of this pandemic. We will have to *decide* to interact with strangers rather than hide behind closed doors until they walk away. We will have to leave our homes to shop for basic goods rather than relying on e-commerce. Social interaction has become more challenging for many after these last two years, and digital technologies stand to materially benefit from keeping all of us afraid of having direct, unmediated encounters with each other. To rebuild the trust which is necessary for heterotopic city life, we will have to choose to recognize the dignity in others and trust that they will see the same in us. This will involve provocative experiences such as laughing in the same air, willingly and openly exchanging niceties and, when it is finally safe, reveling in the opportunity to appreciate the beauty in every human face. Such a transformation at any notable scale will require a great deal of vulnerability, courage, and laughter. Luckily, however, laughter is contagious.

Far away is no longer what it used to be

An interview with Mr Tiler, the Skype tile

Salvatore Poier

Q: Can you introduce yourself?

A: Yes. My name is Tiler. I'm a Skype meeting tile.

Q: What is a tile?

A: Oh, well. When you lunch your Skype app for participating to a remote meeting, I'm the box in which your picture is shown."

Q: I see. What is your life like, Mr Tiler?

A: Well, these days I'm quite exhausted. I used to be used occasionally. My favorite moments were when my users were introducing their babies to their grandparents living far away. Oh, those were fun dates, and they happened now and then. But in the past two years, boy, it has been meeting after meeting after meeting.

At first it was fun. Finally, I was used more often than once a month! The first time I was waken up from my suspended status – you know, we live in the background of your computer – I was all excited to see how much the babies had grown. Instead of the usual grandparents in the tile next to me – his name is Slab – a dude in a suit was showing a graph and talking about possible production hiccups for supply chain disruptions. So boring!

Finished that meeting I was ready to go to sleep again, instead I was fired up right away. Right away! Can you believe it? Now a young lady was pointing at letters saying "A as in Apple; B as in Boy; C as in Car" etc. Going on and on all the way to Z as in Zebra. Instructive, but also strange. What is this now? Why are these people doing this here?

And, by the way, as soon as *that* was done, yet again I was summoned to a guy talking about zoning projects, and how the lot around the corner was planned to become a supermarket, and what people from the neighborhood think about that. Jeez, that was a crowded one: it must have been thirty of us crammed into the same window.

Q: Did you like this sudden popularity?

A: Well, I like to do my job well, but I don't like when I'm reduced to a very small size. It is diminishing to my ego, to be a small tile. And another thing I hate, I've to say, it's when the camera is off. You know, I live to show the world my users. I do a great job at depicting their nice smiles, and their expressions that change so rapidly, so often. But when the camera is off, it brings me to dark spaces. You know, I feel like I've nothing to really represent my users by. I am just a tile like any other tile. I'm not Tiler anymore: I'm a place holder. It's sad, and very depressing. I've to talk myself up and keep going, telling myself that I'm doing my job well even if I'm showing nothing for it.

Bio: Salvatore Poier, Ph.D., is a Visiting Lecturer in Urban Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. He enjoys thinking about ghosts, pirates, and all those traces of the unknowable and the improbable.

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Q: So, you would recommend everybody to leave their camera on?

A: Of course! We tiles have a personality too! Let it shine through the wide gamut of colors and shades we can represent! We live for the moment we can truthfully represent our users, and just shutting us off is denying us the opportunity to show who we are, and what we can do to serve best our users. I can't understand why people don't let us do our jobs. I mean, I understand that you people don't want to be seen all the time, but what about us? What about us? We could absolutely be seen as slakers; as a monochromatic square who refuses to work. I want to work! I want to do a good job at what I do, and you people do not let me do my best.

But in the past two years, boy, it has been meeting after meeting after meeting.

Q: Do you ever listen to all the conversations going on during these meetings?

A: I have to, especially because I need to make sure that what I am representing is attuned with the feelings and facial expression of my users. If someone says something funny, I need to interpret that so that the laughter or smile in the face of my user is getting through. That's also why a camera off status is tough for me: I get bored easily. And then if my users turn on the camera all the sudden, I get into a panic frenzy, in which I don't know if I am truly representing them correctly because I got bored and I didn't follow the conversation. It is such a difficult job to follow a conversation without having cues about what my users think, and then all the sudden having to represent their true them.

Q: What was your most embarrassing moment?

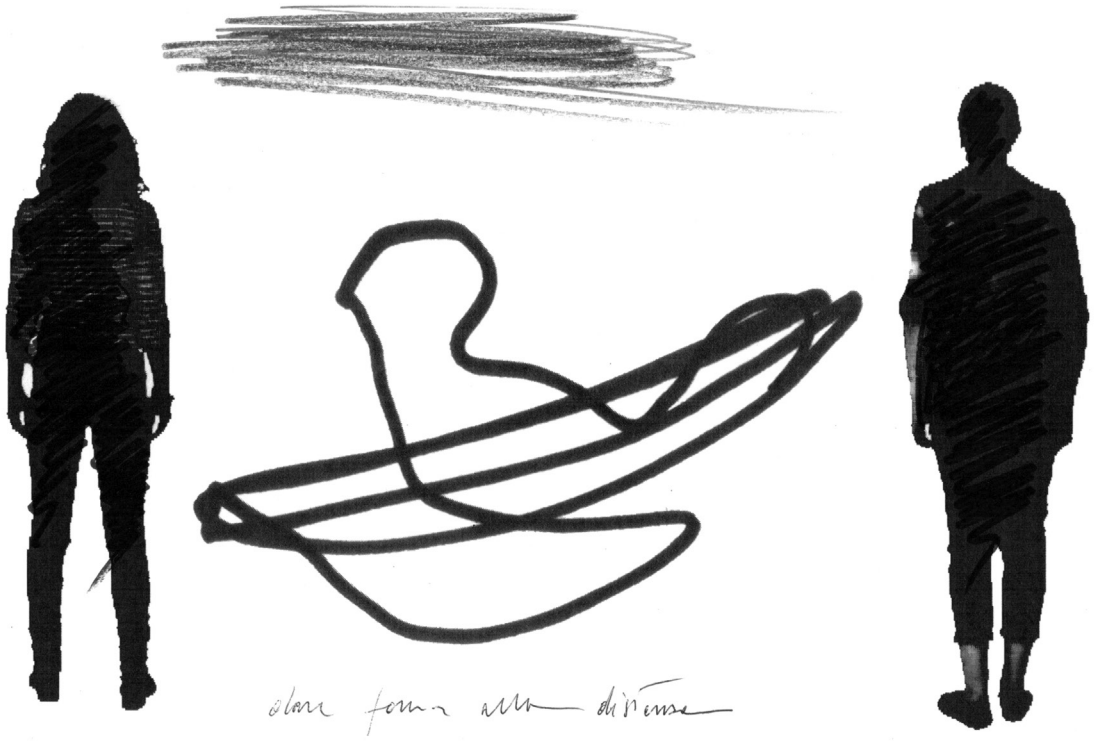
A: Oh gosh, the other day I was in this meeting, and the tile next to me was showing this dude naked. I swear, he was completely naked taking a shower. I don't know if that tile – his name is similar to mine: Tyler with a y – was pissed at his user so that he decided to represent him in that way, but it was embarrassing to be right there, next to it, and having to see nudity so up close. Ouch. I still have nightmares.

Q: What are your plans for the future?

A: Well, you know, we tiles never know what the future is going to look like. An update can really get rid of us entirely, for example. Or reshape us. Rumors give that Meta is now playing around with getting rid of tiles entirely in favor of avatars, which if you ask me is such bullshit: who wants not to be represented truthfully in favor of a digital image that interprets you. It's like giving yourself to an interpretative dancer. Come on. Cute once, but definitely not a good experience every day, all day. Anyway. You know, I'd love to go on a vacation soon. I'm just very tired of representing always these four walls. The lighting too is tough: it's bright, and the window is constantly showing moving trees, and dogs, and people walking. It's exhausting to pay attention to all these small details, *and* having to represent my users truthfully.
Yes, a nice vacation: somewhere peaceful, like the Away status. I remember when Away status was the default status. We were all sleeping peacefully all day, most of the days. Now it is just work-work-work, 24/7. I wish I could retire to the Away status island soon.

Q: Well, I hope you can get a long vacation soon too, Tiler. Thanks for talking with us.

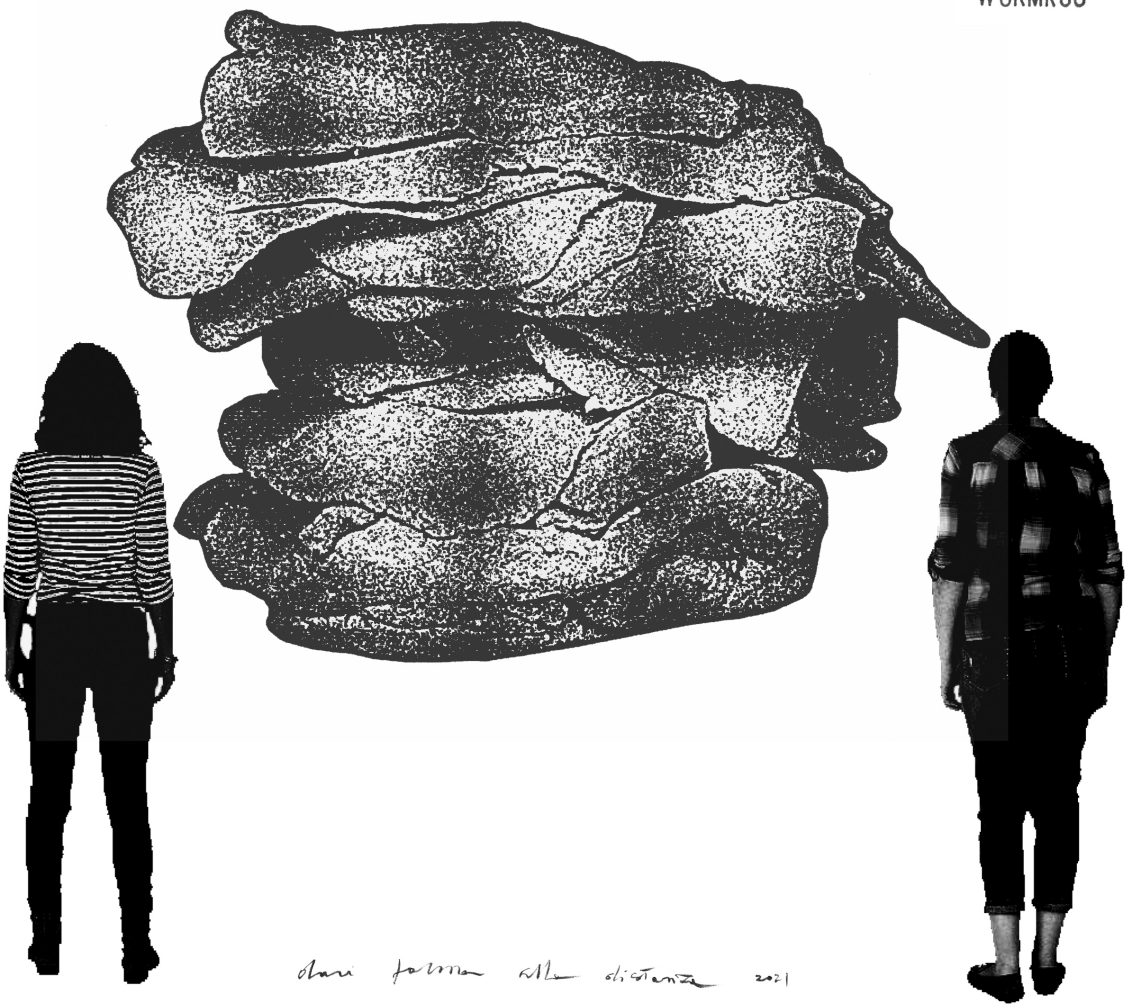
A: Thank you! Oh, here they summon me again. Another meeting. More work. All right, here I go. Bye!



distanza 2021

WURMKOS

WURMKOS



Wurmkos abita sempre

Wurmkos è un laboratorio di arti visive creato nel 1987 da Pasquale Campanella e dalle persone con disagio psichico utenti della Cooperativa Lotta contro l'Emarginazione di Sesto S. Giovanni (Milano). È un luogo aperto, inteso come esperienza che mette in relazione arte e disagio psichico senza porsi obiettivi di "salvezza", nel quale entrano sui diversi progetti, artisti, disagiati e non, critici, persone che collaborano alla realizzazione di opere e testi. Nel corso del tempo si è consolidato un piccolo gruppo che costituisce il nucleo permanente cui si sono aggiunte, sui diversi progetti, oltre un centinaio d'altre persone.

Il laboratorio, inteso come luogo fisico, è lo spazio nel quale vengono ideate le opere di Wurmkos e si attuano le relazioni necessarie alla loro concezione. Nel 2011 si è costituita la Fondazione Wurmkos onlus che ha sede legale a Milano, dove si trova anche l'archivio.

Con spirito "basagliano", da sempre il lavoro di Wurmkos è stato inserito nel circuito dell'arte contemporanea, evitando quello dell'outsider art. Il gruppo ha partecipato, nel corso di oltre trent'anni, a numerose mostre personali e collettive sia in Italia che all'estero. Altre attività del gruppo includono la progettazione e conduzione di laboratori didattici, l'elaborazione teorica, le pubblicazioni e il supporto a tesi di laurea (ne sono state scritte, ad oggi, oltre una ventina).

Questa la nostra presentazione sintetica che da anni viene affinata ma resta sostanzialmente la stessa perché è questo che Wurmkos è, ma il tempo passa e le cose cambiano, lentamente, impercettibilmente, inesorabilmente, volontariamente. Così del gruppo originario restano oggi soltanto due persone: Pasquale Campanella e Susanna Abate. Cooperativa Lotta contro l'Emarginazione è diventata un'impresa sociale che opera sul territorio della Lombardia (e oltre) e da cui Wurmkos si è staccato, sotto il profilo dell'identità giuridica, nel 2011.

Allora ecco che la distanza temporale dagli inizi è un primo indizio su cosa e come la distanza sia stata e sia oggi abitata anche da altre persone.

La prima distanza da colmare è quella, naturale, tra le persone, a maggior ragione se le persone sono diverse fra loro oltre l'abituale. Alcune sono persone con malattie mentali (la cui natura non è necessario conoscere perché Wurmkos è un gruppo di artisti e non di operatori sociali o persone preposte alla cura), altre hanno in aggiunta handicap fisici o cognitivi, altre sono aspiranti artisti con le idee poco chiare, oppure invece artisti molto determinati che si mettono in gioco.

Un pezzo della autodefinizione di cui sopra: "Il laboratorio, inteso come luogo fisico, è lo spazio nel quale vengono ideate le opere di Wurmkos e si attuano le relazioni necessarie alla loro concezione" è la chiave di lettura dell'ultratrentennale percorso del gruppo.

Simona Bordone (1959), ha attraversato diversi mondi professionali: la scrittura, la curatela di mostre, l'insegnamento. Dal 2008 al 2017 è responsabile dei contenuti del sito domusweb.it; dal 2018 si occupa di progetti speciali sempre per *Domus*. Nel 1991 fonda la galleria bordone, che dirige fino al 2001. Ha pubblicato, dal 1998, articoli e testi in cataloghi d'arte, riviste, siti web. Dal 2004 è docente di Storia del design presso IED Milano. Dal 2011 è presidente di Fondazione Wurmkos onlus; con Wurmkos, gruppo di artisti con e senza disagio psichico, lavora dal 1993. La trovate sui principali social network, anche se da quando non se ne occupa più professionalmente le sembrano un po' noiosi.

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https://wurmkos.blogspot.com/

È l'attuarsi delle relazioni nello spazio dato del laboratorio che colma le distanze. Se si lavora gli uni vicino agli altri si rompono innanzitutto le distanze di sicurezza che la prossemica ci insegna a misurare. I corpi si sfiorano, gli strumenti passano di mano in mano, molto spesso anche i lavori. Gli uni intervengono sui lavori degli altri, per entrare in sintonia, appianare distonie, affermare punti di vista. Per poi, magari, ricominciare da capo.

Lo spazio fisico del laboratorio è cambiato nel tempo, prima molto grande, luminoso e appartato, oggi più piccolo e con affaccio su strada. Un'altra distanza da colmare: quella con il quartiere alla periferia di Sesto San Giovanni, a sua volta periferia di Milano. Diventare buoni vicini di casa, lasciare la porta aperta, permettere al fuori di guardare dentro è stato un altro passaggio importante. Affermare il diritto a essere un laboratorio di arti visive che si misura con il dibattito in corso nell'arte contemporanea e farlo con persone molto diverse fra loro è un atto politico.

Se si lavora gli uni vicino agli altri si rompono innanzitutto le distanze di sicurezza che la prossemica ci insegna a misurare

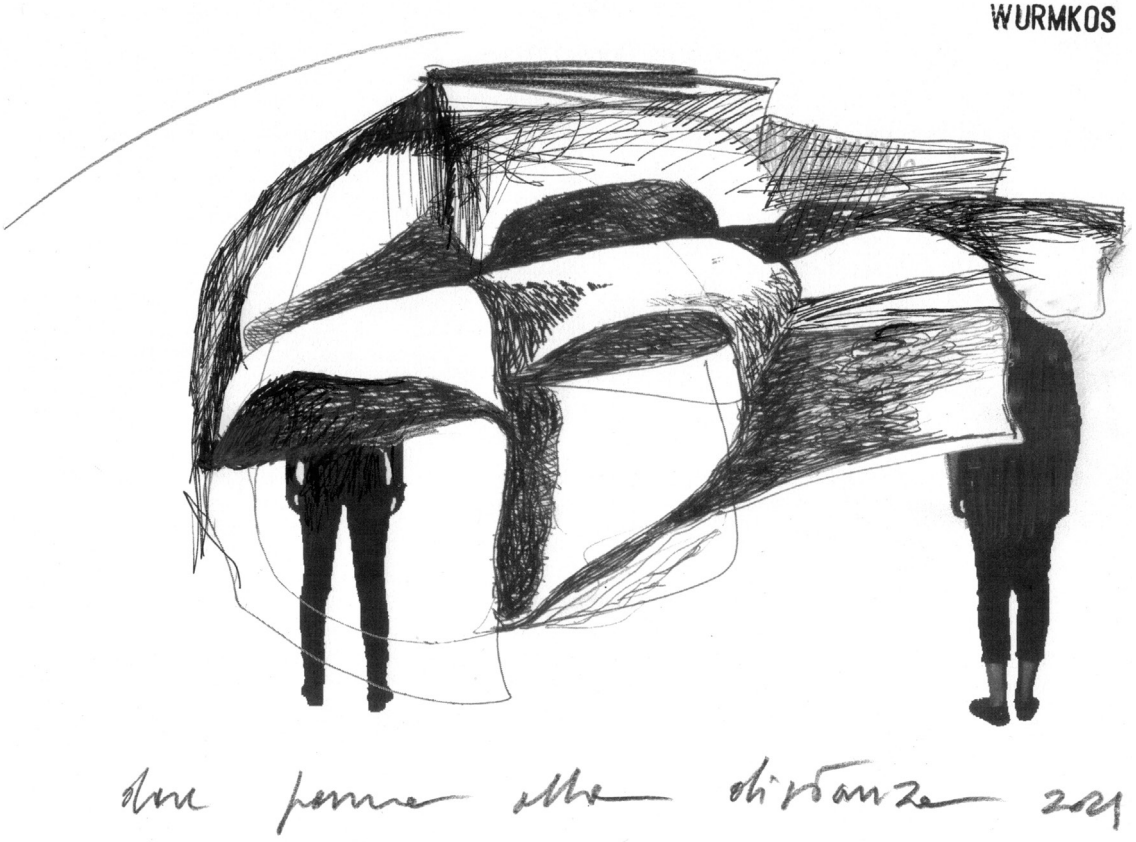
Farmacia Wurmkos, il laboratorio, è stato spazio espositivo con una regola: ciascuna mostra ha convissuto con il laboratorio – quando, a volte, non è stata direttamente in relazione con esso. Altra ulteriore modalità di abitare la distanza.

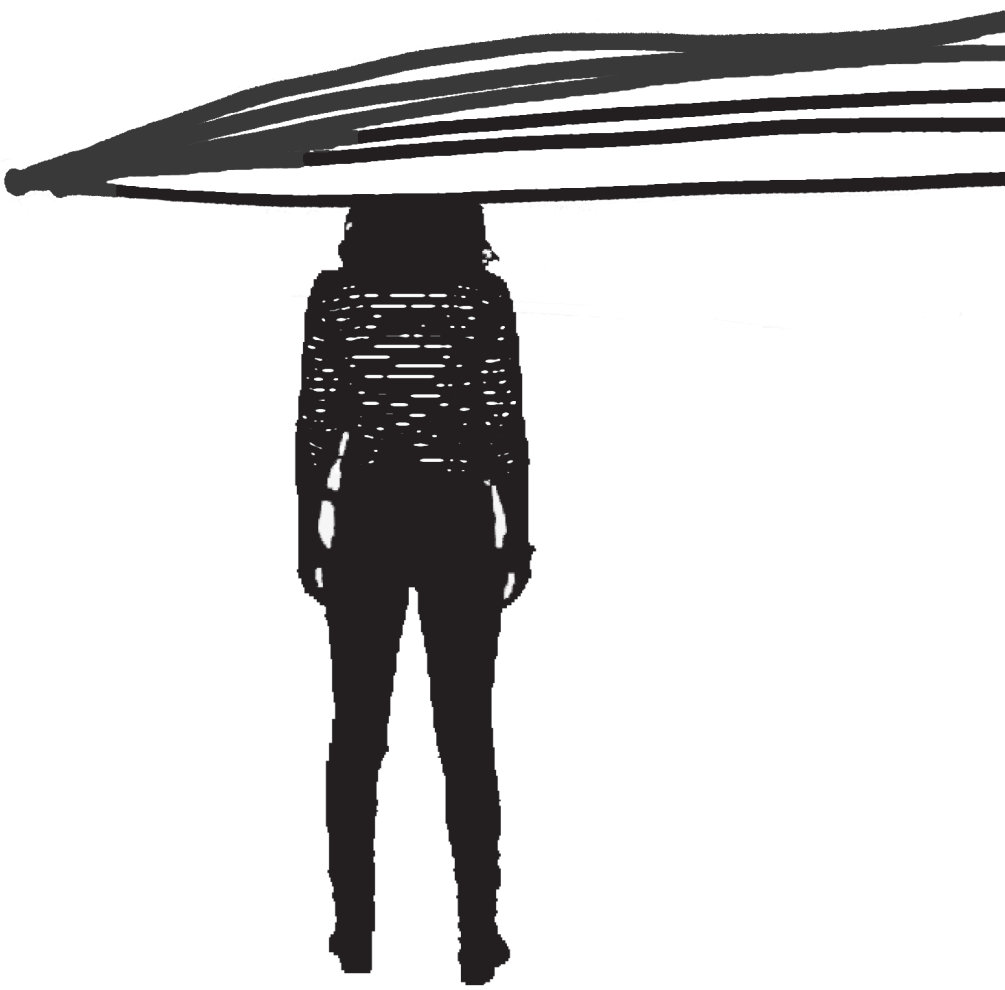
Diversi progetti, nel corso del tempo hanno affrontato temi connessi all'abitare (*Wurmkos Abitare* 2004, *tana* 2000-2006, *Wurmkoskammer* 2007, *Wurmkosbau* 2008, *Belli dentro* 2016, *Coabitare l'isola* 2018-2022) al corpo (*Vestimi* 2014-2015, *Mi Abito* 2018-19), tutti progetti che – realizzati insieme a diversi e variegati gruppi di persone – hanno dato la risposta del gruppo a ciò che significa distanza, sostanzialmente abolendola. Sia chiaro che come in qualsiasi relazione si fa un pezzo di strada insieme e poi ci si lascia ma la strada fatta insieme lascia un segno che è sia opera sia vissuto di ciascuno. Questo segno è una forma aperta alla visione di altri, per questo è oggetto di interpretazione e in molti progetti di partecipazione dello spettatore. Un'altra forma questa di messa in discussione della distanza tra opera e spettatore, non esclusiva di Wurmkos, ma dal gruppo praticata con determinazione creando le condizioni perché questo avvenga.

Tutto questo fino alla pandemia, che ha fatto esplodere le relazioni, quelle di tutti. Con l'aggravante che il sommarsi di disposizioni ministeriali alle paure di chi gestisce le comunità ha prorogato oltre il necessario la privazione di relazioni, svelando ancora una volta la tendenza a farsi istituzione totale delle comunità chiuse.

Gli incontri telematici messi in campo da Wurmkos sono serviti a tenere in piedi le relazioni umane con tutti i limiti dello strumento e del fatto che si sono svolti con le persone chiuse nelle comunità, corpi reclusi.

Oggi si torna molto lentamente alla centralità del laboratorio dove si tessono nuovamente le relazioni nello spazio fisico. Qualcosa è cambiato, per tutti noi, e questo si riverbera nella ricerca di nuove forme di relazione e di progetti. Certo è che il laboratorio ha assunto una centralità che tende a farsi opera, riprendendo un lavoro del 1997, *Wurmkos Fa*, quando il laboratorio si trasferì per un mese nella galleria bordone: era l'opera in mostra. Fu quello un primo tentativo di dimostrarne la centralità.


WURMKOS



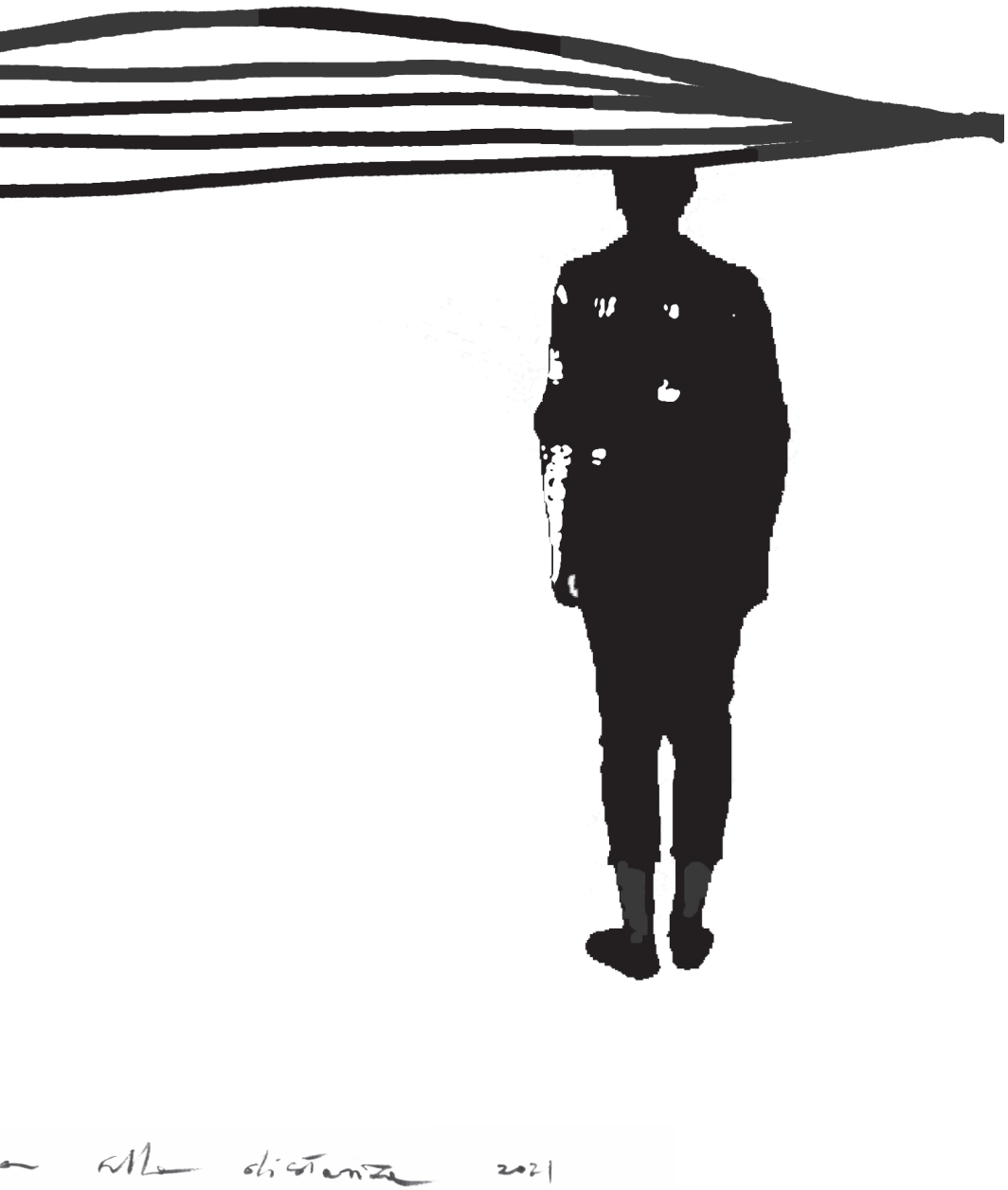
WURMKOS

lo Squaderno 61

At Arm's Length

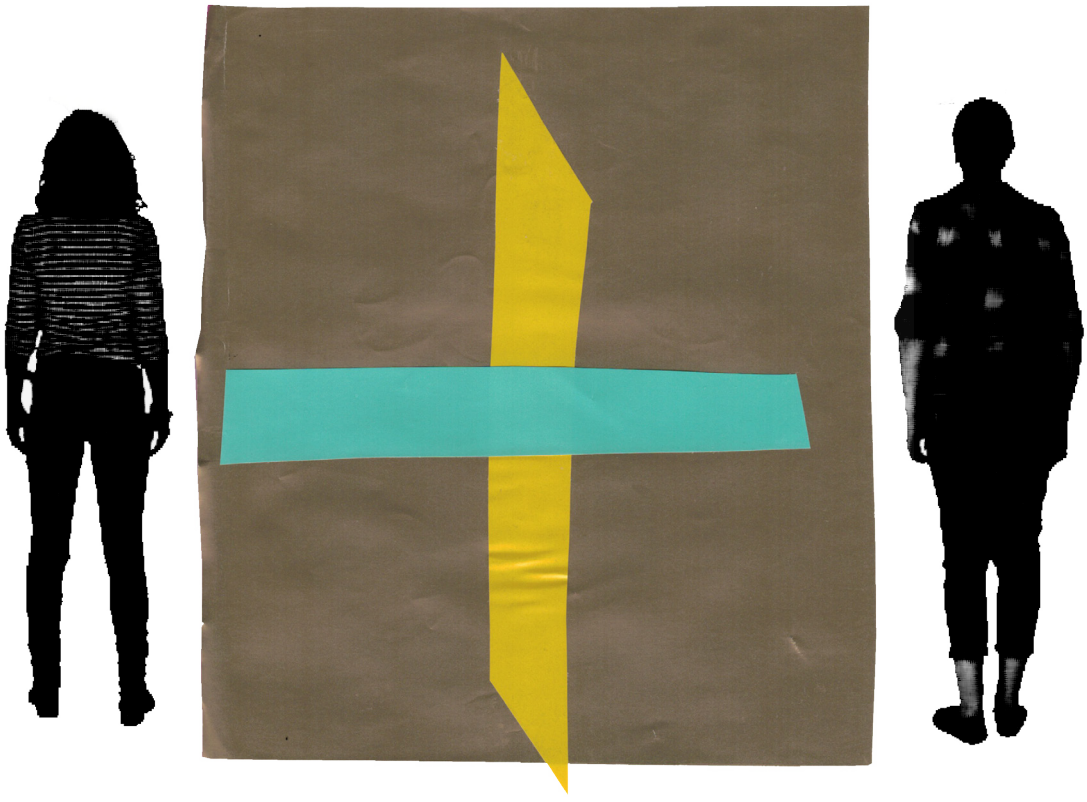
edited by // Chiara Bassetti, Andrea Cossu & amb

Guest Artist // Wurmkos



lo Squaderno is a project by Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Cristina Mattiucci & Andrea Pavoni.

More Info | http://www.losquaderno.net/?page_id=2
Contact | losquaderno@gmail.com



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