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Urban Squares

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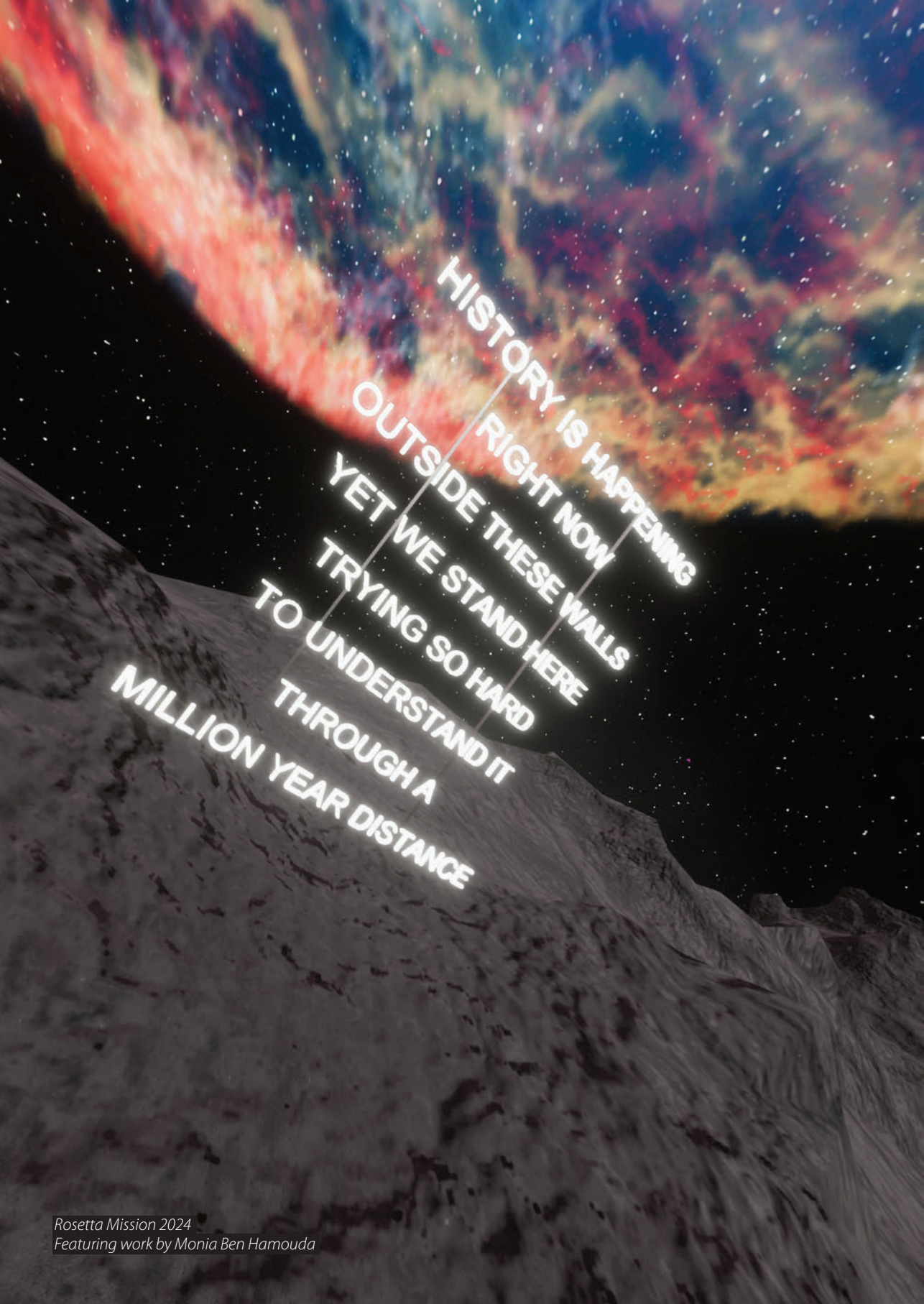

Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring work by Monia Ben Hamouda

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(Cover) Dark Collection for Eternal Peace 2025
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Screenshot from VR game engine

EDITORIAL

For a long time, urban life has flourished around squares: the place where the community meets, the site of daily or weekly markets, the stage of commemorations, celebrations or cultural events, the locus of assemblies, parades, speeches, demonstrations and other political forms of expression. Carefully designed, decorated and monumentalised, or, contrarily, amorphous clearings standing out from the density of the built environment; pedestrianised areas where to stroll, sit down and socialise relaxedly, or, in stark contrast, congested roundabouts circled by continuous traffic – squares can take multiple forms, varying significantly across history and geography.

In many cases, contemporary urbanisation has reshaped urban squares into something quite different from their original role, meaning and function. On the one hand, relentless gentrification and touristification have in many cities displaced traditional activities as well as inhabitants from their historic squares. While often restructured and beautified, central squares have essentially turned into exotic attractions, with monumental spaces dotted by expensive bars, department stores and souvenir shops that hardly appeal to any local inhabitant, catering for tourists only. The securitisation of squares via surveillance technologies, policing, and quality-of-life regulations has further shrunk their long-standing capacity to host a wider array of informal interactions, performances and transactions.

A precise moral imaginary has, after all, accompanied urban squares since the emergence of urban modernity. Already in the late nineteenth century, inspired by medieval and Renaissance urban design, the Austrian urban theorist Camillo Sitte recommended binding design criteria: squares should be spaces of familiar warmth [*Gemüt*], providing both protection and aesthetic attractiveness. Contemporary squares have often been inspired, implicitly or explicitly, by similar moral(istic) aspirations, to be implemented through design, but also through law and the police, with the unsurprising consequence of having disproportionately negative effects on those people perceived as 'unfamiliar' because of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on. Indeed, the formalisation of this vision can be found, at its artificial extreme, in the hyper-controlled and sterilised atmospheres of oxymoronic 'privately-owned public spaces', such as the typical shopping mall's plazas.

On the other hand, however, many squares continue to be loci of informal activities and social improvisations of all kinds, places of excitement and confusion, meeting points for either romantic or shady exchanges. Even apparently empty stretches of land are, in fact, traversed by countless everyday trajectories. Squares are turned into open air gyms for exercising or dancing collectively, dark night-time spaces of respite or fear and, last but not least, key sites when it comes to 'take the streets' – as testified by the resonance conveyed by names such as Tiananmen, Tahrir, Taksim, or Maidan. Invested by vastly different, often contested spatial, temporal and socio-political meanings, squares naturally lend themselves to interdisciplinary readings and explorations – from the analysis of plannning and the investigation of historical trajectories, to the observation of rhythms and atmospheres, including the hidden stories, daily routines, invisible ruins and unapparent conflicts they harbour.

In this issue of *lo Squaderno*, we seek to address the multifaceted, socio-material complexity of urban squares across various historical periods and geographies. We open with two theoretical statements, respectively by Daniele Nicolosi and Niccolò Cuppini, concening the contemporary square. Daniele argues that, in the face of the increasing repression of political demonstrations and, even, the repression of the sheer existence of minorities in public space, it is necessary to

devise new relationships of visibility. Specifically, he suggests that people could profitably learn from strategies of concealment and mimicry deployed in the natural domain, rehearsing capacities of camouflage and semiotic cunning. On his turn, Niccolò is also keen on pointing out the insufficiency of the traditional categories of political mobilization. His dissatisfaction is, in particular, with the implicit reference to the local urban square that can be heard in many discourses. He contends that, at a time of planetary urbanization, we need to consider the 'planetary square' as the proper domain of political action: the planetary square is 'no longer centered, bounded, or stable, but distributed, mobile, and intermittent', and it is within the latter coordinates that its political potentials must now be devised.

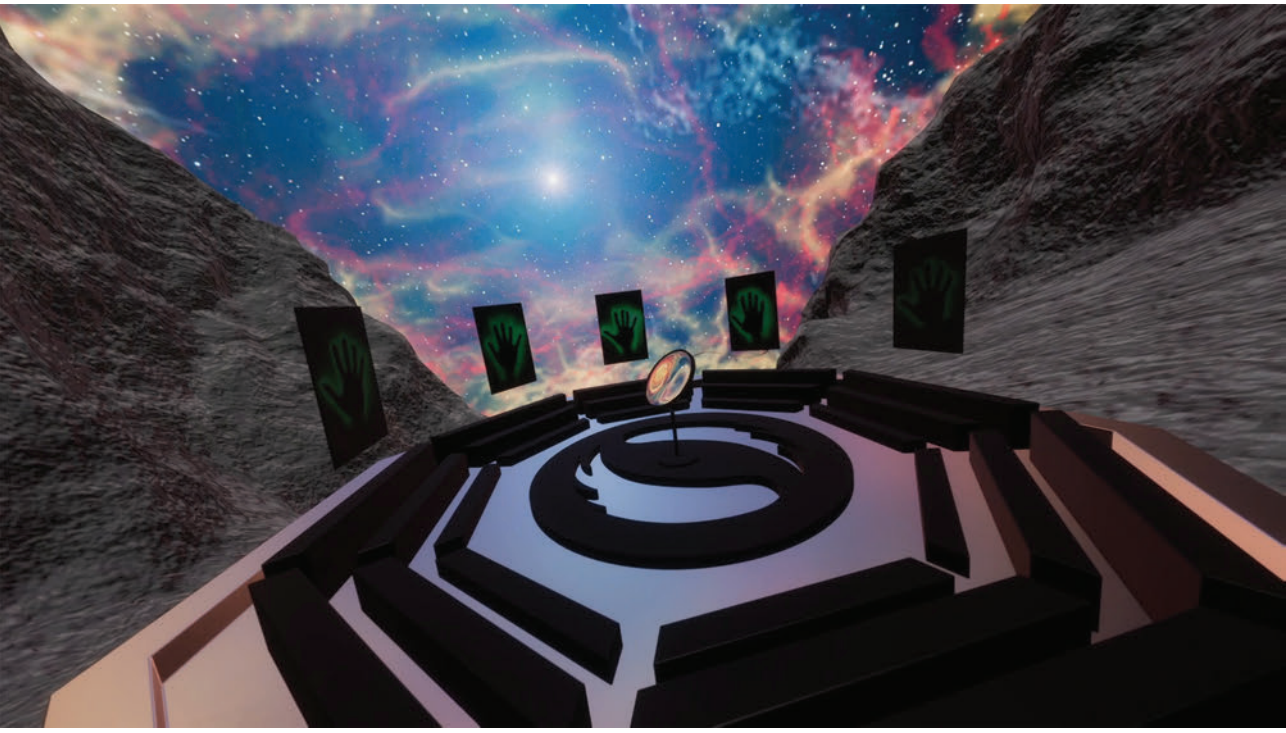
In the following piece, Andrea Pavoni advances a more speculative-narrative take on squares, looking at the case of Luanda's *Largo do Kinaxixi*, a centrally located square in the Angolan capital. Here, the legacy of colonialism compounds, along with the new capitalistic-extractivist ambitions, a thick urban reality that, in Andrea's opinion, calls for something more than historical-materialist analysis. That is why – following up on our previous explorations of ghosts in sq62 and sq64 – he delivers an exercise in *catoptromancy*, i.e. the art of divination by means of mirrors, as a way to tackle the more evanescent, atmospheric, but also underground as well as shadowy realities of Largo do Kinaxixi.

In his contribution, Mattias Kärrholm, who has conducted many longitudinal studied into the changing patterns of use of urban squares over decades (see, for instance, his contribution to sq32), points out how, both in Sweden and beyond, public squares have been increasingly subjected to a number of heavy demands and requirements that imperil their normal public reusability. These trends include densification and colonization, as well as specialization and planned expansion through specified programs. The infusion of retail and other private interests into public squares (outdoors terraces, etc.), often led by calls for securitization, appears, in hindsight, as a mixed blessing at best, given that the expected 'pacifying' effects have, in many cases, come at the expense of variety, inclusion and equality.

The two case-studies that follow highlight the political controversies that are investing public squares in some major Southern European cities, such as Athens and Barcelona. Anna Giulia Della Puppa reports on how the large infrastructure projects of metro extension has, in the case of Athens's Exarchia square, been deployed to pursue an urban development agenda straight from the neoliberal playbook. In response, the local community has rallied around a number of symbols of attachment and memory. Moving to Barcelona, Gülce Özdemir remarks the complexity deriving from the conflicting intersection of celebration in public spaces, with – on the one hand – overtourism and – on the other – localistic forms of control that border with nationalist revanchism.

Everyday life in urban squares also requires an understanding of urban codes. In this respect, Johan Wirdelöv tells us the story of the yellow benches, a special type of street furniture meant to encourage occasional strangers to talk to each other and socialise. This reminds us how much the willingness, even the longing to meet others are still – through a constellation of humble everyday forms – the salt of the public square. In addition to being such complex historical-cultural realities, urban squares can also be used as veritable teaching devices. This much Rosa Salzberg suggests through her own experience as a modern-history professor. Bringing her university students onto the square changes and challenges the traditional lecturing formats. Beyond learning facts from textbooks, Rosa argues, what matters the most is the capacity to train one's attention to details in context.

Luca Pozzi, this issue's guest artist, has been working extensively on the interplay between materiality and mediality. In the project selected for this issue, Luca expands, even explodes, the urban square, not simply at the planetary level, but into an outright extraterrestrial dimension. The series of snapshots, taken from his augmented-reality installations, turn the square into a symbol of human knowledge, but also into the site of a potentially endless exploration that challenges official narratives and gestures beyond violence.



Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring works Arkanian Mirror & LQG Cave Archive

Il rapporto dissimulato
Nuovi strumenti per la coesistenza nello spazio pubblico

Daniele Nicolosi

Parecchie voci del vocabolario andrebbero redatte sulla base dell'espressione che il lemma assume, invece che sulla base di un riferimento ideale prestabilito. Ad esempio, nella sua definizione architettonica e urbanistica, la piazza è uno spazio più o meno ampio, libero da edifici, che può divenire punto nevralgico nella morfologia cittadina: combinando funzioni di scorrimento e di sosta, serve da luogo di ritrovo e riunione dei cittadini e costituisce il fulcro della vita economica e politica del comune, come mostra il fatto che viene usata anche per organizzare pubbliche manifestazioni o dimostrazioni collettive. Spesso i toponimi delle piazze indicano funzioni (Mercato) o celebrazioni (Duomo), azioni o cose che assumono piena valenza nella conservazione di strutture e funzioni sociali. Oltre a permettere lo scambio di merci e del "segno di pace", la piazza assolve funzioni più sofisticate quando viene frequentata dalle persone come ambito in cui ritrovarsi a scambiare notizie, pensieri personali ed emozioni. Pubbliche consuetudini locali quotidiane s'intrecciano qui con altre storie che vengono da più lontano, con cadenza occasionale, come spettacoli teatrali, feste, o semplicemente il ricevimento di un ospite d'onore. Escludendo l'ultimo insieme di rituali popolari eterogenei (non presenti nella definizione dell'UTET ma aggiunti dal sottoscritto) ne resta che il significato del termine piazza illustra soprattutto un carattere metastorico, fenomeno immanente che prescinde dal fluire degli episodi della Storia – come se paradossalmente la definizione della parola ne estromettesse i contenuti.

Daniele Nicolosi (1981) è artista delle arti plastiche e studioso, le cui opere si trovano in collezioni pubbliche e private. Riconosciuto per il suo lavoro *context-specific* in Europa, nelle Americhe e in Russia, e accolto da istituzionali nazionali quali PAC, MacRo, Mart. Diplomato in Arti Visive a Brera e specializzato AFAM in Visual Culture e Pratiche Curatoriali, ha firmato collaborazioni per progetti ministeriali (Expo, Farnesina) ed editoriali (RCS, Gedi, Skira, Silvana).

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La piazza ripensata

L'inesorabile dematerializzazione sociale è un altro buon motivo per utilizzare significati che trascendono i dati effettivi. All'alba del nuovo millennio, Tomás Maldonado compilò un prontuario analitico dei processi attuati nei secoli per lo sviluppo dei sistemi di rappresentazione.[1] Affidandoci al dogma evolutivo di procedimenti che hanno il loro prologo nella Firenze del XV secolo, focolaio artistico-culturale in cui si rinnova l'interesse per il *katàgraphon* (proiezione sul piano), l'accademico argentino ci mette a parte dei principali sistemi produttivi d'immagini "più vere del reale" – risultati designati per venir esperiti globalmente. Dalla prospettiva (parola latina che vale a dire "vista attraverso qualcosa"), primo sistema di costruzione metodicamente esatto di una rappresentazione proporzionale che assunse il portato epocale di strumento principe impiegato nel Rinascimento italiano, permettendo a chi ne fece uso di accentuare con risolutezza e fermezza il compito dell'arte come imitazione della verità,[2] si giunge così alla fotografia, che fa assumere atteggiamenti di posa, stimolando chi è investito dall'obbiettivo alla fabbricazione istantanea di un altro corpo, trasformato a priori in immagine.[3]

1 T. Maldonado, *Reale e virtuale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1992, pp.17-20.
2 E. Panofsky, *Idea. Contributo alla storia dell'estetica*, La Nuova Italia editrice, Firenze 1975[1924], p. 33.
3 R. Barthes, *La chambre claire*, Seuil, Paris, 1980.

Nella lista di Maldonado sono presenti anche i *tableaux vivants*, che nel Tardo Medioevo vennero usati in pittura e scultura per descrivere strutture narrative di ambito religioso o profano, come miracoli, misteri, passioni, feste di corte o tornei: si può parlare di "democratizzazione del festivo"; teatro come causa ed effetto della città, dove tutti sono spettatori e attori, fautori della scena. Il fenomeno del resto era descritto già da Sant'Agostino al tempo dei suoi svaghi a Cartagine, "insana passione".[4]

Su questo argomento, Guy Debord sottolinea a ragione come il parossismo della spettacolarizzazione non sia somma delle immagini ma rapporto sociale mediato da esse. Il reale esperito come una concreta occlusione del contemplato da parte dello spettacolo; in cui l'oggettività della verità è obversa:[5] la realtà sorge nello spettacolo, e lo spettacolo diviene realtà. Affermazione dell'apparenza, lo spettacolo è la dichiarazione di ogni vita dell'uomo, cioè della società, dunque più vera dell'apparenza. Una volta incentrato sullo spettacolo, consuetudine totalizzante di una forma economica-sociale, il mondo perde la sua afferrabilità per lasciare tutto lo spazio alla forma speculativa, illusionistica, d'apparenza feticista. «È il sole che non tramonta mai sull'impero della passività moderna. Esso ricopre tutta la superficie del mondo ed è immerso per l'eternità nella propria gloria».[6]

È degno di nota constatare che i beni degli anni Sessanta, come l'automobile e la televisione, definiti dal situazionista "armi" per fortificare la struttura solitaria della massa, mezzo secolo dopo, evoluti nei *personal device* e usati come strumenti per la creazione del più spettacolare *alter ego* in termini spaziotemporali, nei luoghi che furono delle ex-colonie degli imperi d'Europa, hanno assunto valore opposto quale "dispositivi di libertà". Le manifestazioni di massa di piazza Tahrir del 2011 hanno mutato le linee di demarcazione delle sedicenti democrazie. Elaborando nuovi modi di resistenza per produrre uno spazio di apparizione, teatralità e spettacolarizzazione della lotta all'indigenza del popolo, gli egiziani si sono appropriati di spazi già istituiti e permeati dal potere, rompendo le relazioni tra lo spazio pubblico, la libera piazza, e il regime vigente. Ciò che la filosofa Judith Butler, al pari di un'inviata sul campo di battaglia, ha così descritto: «la storia materiale di quelle strutture si è messa al servizio dei manifestanti, diventando parte dell'azione stessa, ricostruendo un'altra storia in mezzo ai suoi più concreti e sedimentari artifici».[7] Tentativo riuscito di uno spazio estorto al potere istituzionale, facendo irruzione nella sua organizzazione di ordine stabilito, autocostruendo narrazioni e azioni performative al contempo corporee e virtuali.

L'apparizione, intesa come emersione anche ai sensi degli altri, o meglio, soprattutto verso l'altro, è in quel caso divenuto documento strumentale per "mettere in piazza" e rendere visibili e udibili istanze urgenti generalmente occultate dal potere. Le maglie della rete, create per permettere la connessione e la capillare trasmissione di contenuti commerciali, vennero occupate per sciorinare, letteralmente all'altro mondo, in tempo reale, migliaia di immagini di corpi misconosciuti che gridano libertà e chiedono un legame a chi inopinatamente si rivolgono. Grazie alla trasferibilità dei media, il roboante

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4 "Mi attiravano gli spettacoli teatrali, colmi di raffigurazioni delle mie miserie e di esche del mio fuoco. Come avviene che a teatro l'uomo cerca la sofferenza contemplando vicende luttuose e tragiche? e che, se pure non vorrebbe per conto suo patirle, quale spettatore cerca di patirne tutto il dolore, e proprio il dolore costituisce il suo piacere? Strana follia, non altro, è questa. A quei casi si commuove infatti di più chi è meno immune dalle passioni che agitano; eppure, mentre di solito si definisce miseria la propria sofferenza, le sofferenze per gli altri si definiscono misericordia. Ma infine, dov'è la misericordia nella finzione delle scene? Là non si è sollecitati a soccorrere, ma soltanto eccitati a soffrire, e si apprezza tanto più l'attore di quelle figurazioni, quanto più si soffre, e se la rappresentazione di sventure remote nel tempo oppure immaginarie non lo fa soffrire, lo spettatore si allontana disgustato e imprecando; se invece soffre, rimane attento e godendo piange" (Agostino, *Confessioni*, III,2).

5 Nella proposizione positiva universale e in quella negativa universale il soggetto e il predicato sono ugualmente sostituibili dalle loro controparti negative. Sul concetto e sulle sue applicazioni, si veda il magnifico rapporto tra media e disidentità contenuto in M.Senaldi, *Obversione*, Postmediabooks, Milano 2023.

6 G. Debord, *La società dello spettacolo*, Stampa Alternativa Editrice, Elmo (GR) 1974, p.17.

7 J. Butler, L'*alleanza dei corpi*, nottetempo, Milano 2017, p.138.

e lo spettacoloso corteo dei manifestanti in piazza al Cairo ha fatto irruzione nella vita ordinaria dell'utente accidentale e lo ha sottratto alla spensieratezza del previsto. Una sorta di *transfert* capace di mettere in relazione due mondi antitetici.

Nello stesso senso, *mutatis mutandis*, è ciò che accade anche in *They Live* (1988), film fantascientifico di John Carpenter in cui l'attore e *wrestler* canadese Roddy Piper, nel ruolo del protagonista, venendo in possesso di magici occhiali scopre che molti esseri umani sono in realtà degli extraterrestri intenti a condizionare l'umanità con messaggi subliminali. Guardare la realtà attraverso un vetro (schermo, lente) che abilita una nuova posizione prospettica, ossia di via di fuga dall'oggetto di analisi, ci mostra una verità ulteriore – purtroppo spesso peggiore di quanto credevamo possibile.

"Tutto" osta

A più di un decennio di distanza dalla *Primavera araba*, la piazza, idiomaticamente, storicamente e costituzionalmente infrastruttura su cui basare la disputa politica tra società e potere istituzionale, si è trasformata in una trappola per topi. Mentre lavoro a questa stesura, sono le autorità iraniane ad aver tagliato le linee di comunicazione per bloccare il diffondersi delle proteste.[8] In un articolo del *Time*, due alti funzionari del Ministero della Salute dell'Iran dichiarano che soltanto l'8 e il 9 gennaio sono state uccise dai servizi di sicurezza del Paese fino a 30.000 persone. Il numero di persone crivellate è stato così elevato da superare la capacità dello Stato di smaltire i cadaveri. Le ambulanze sono state sostituite da semirimorchi a diciotto ruote. Un massacro di tale portata, nell'arco di 48 ore, ha spinto gli esperti di stragi a cercare paragoni: l'unico raffronto si è verificato durante l'Olocausto. Intanto Trump ordinava massicci rastrellamenti a Minneapolis. La città è stata assediata da migliaia di militari per gestire la deportazione. Squadre armate e incappucciate che si sono spinte a sequestrare bambini e uccidere manifestanti. Due diversi casi di annientamento, con l'ineluttabile effetto di far considerare la piazza come luogo che è, nel migliore dei casi, coercitivo – nel peggiore, un campo santo.

Il popolo del Minnesota, con una sorte migliore di quello iraniano, ha potuto riconsiderare il suo rapporto con lo spazio pubblico, con la piazza, evitandola. Marina Catucci, in un articolo per *il Manifesto*, fa sapere che a Minneapolis i residenti si sono uniti contro l'occupazione delle squadre governative dell'ICE.[9] Disertando strade e lavoro, la popolazione immigrata a rischio d'espulsione si sta avvalendo della solidarietà dei cittadini per disporre beni di sostentamento, ricevendo la spesa a domicilio. Con le saracinesche abbassate, gli esercizi sono stati riorganizzati in presidi di resistenza e difesa, attraverso metodi di contro-sorveglianza come i fischietti o lastre di ghiaccio sulle strade volte a complicare le operazioni militari e farsi beffa degli agenti governativi.

Una reazione ai reggimenti del governo equivalente a ciò che avviene all'interno di un'istituto totalitario. Erving Goffman in *Asylums* (1961) ha appurato che la comunità reclusa si riorganizza per eludere le regole della casa circondariale. Superato il "processo d'ammissione" che fa perdere all'internato una quantità di ruoli costituivi del sé (privazione dell'aspetto abituale, umiliazione e profanazione del corpo, rottura dell'autonomia di azione, mangiare cibo ripugnante, ecc.), sovente il detenuto attua "adattamenti secondari". Lo sviluppo di un codice speciale, con l'aggiunta di maniere di autogestione sociale ufficiose, come il "processo di fraternizzazione" e il rifiuto dello staff: il carcerato scopre che i compagni sono suoi simili e con essi instaura un rapporto di "mutuo appoggio". Solidarietà che porta ad attuare, in modo anonimo e collettivo, piccoli gesti sabotatori atti alla presa in giro e al tormento dei secondini (versi, cori, rifiuto in massa del cibo, ecc.).

Il recluso può giungere fino allo stadio di «regressione», un'apparente massiccia riduzione del proprio coinvolgimento alle attività istituzionali. Tale passività può sfociare in quella che viene definita «linea

8 K. Armin Serjoie, R. Saberi e F. Jamalpour, *Iran Protest Death Toll – Could Top 30,000, According to Local Health Officials*, «TIME» (online), 25 gennaio 2026.

9 M. Catucci, *Minneapolis, lotta e solidarietà. Una città unita contro l'occupazione*, «il manifesto», 20 gennaio 2026, pp. 2-3.

intransigente», rifiutando di cooperare *in toto* con il personale. Il carcerato combina opportunisticamente queste tattiche per uscire incolume, fisicamente e psicologicamente, dalle pressioni condizionate dagli abusi di potere della prigionia.[10] Da questa rapida comparazione tra l'atteggiamento adattivo della popolazione del Minnesota assediata dagli agenti dell'ICE e quella tipica delle carceri, possiamo essere certi di non esagerare a dichiarare la città di Minneapolis, con le sue strade e le sue piazze, un caso di reclusorio a cielo aperto.

Diventare luogo

Per *stare in piazza* si renderà necessario non essere colti dal sentenziale *sguardo altrui*, non essere evidenti, somigliare: agire nella similitudine. Sarà tempestivo appartenere alla città nel modo più dermico, in profondità, per non dischiudersi al visibile, ovvero non vivere subordinatamente mediante i sensi meno (pre)vedibili, cercando l'autonomia nelle impressioni degli stimoli più intimi.

In risposta all'inedita occupazione del contesto da parte di agenti estranei ad esso, varrà la regola alternativa e contraria alla celebre frase di Didi-Huberman nel suo Il *paradosso del fasmide*: «Soltanto ciò che all'inizio fu capace di dissimularsi può apparire».[11] Prendendo in prestito la personale esperienza della *mimesis* vissuta dallo storico dell'arte francese,[12] la piazza assume la forma di *vivarium*, scenografia scrutata e metafora di vetrina, con le sue frontiere invisibili; in siffatto ambito, l'alternativa del "recluso" – al pari di una salamandra – può essere agita nell'evitare di assumere una forma propria, inequivocabile. Si tratterà di peregrinare da uno stato fisico all'altro per sfuggire allo sguardo del "predatore", per esistere sotto enigmatiche spoglie agli occhi di chi coordina l'arte venatoria. Restare nel mito che ognuno è, in prima istanza, quando non appare. In altre parole, vivere in un mondo parallelo per non-essere in quello in cui si è assoggettati a sguardi indiscreti e funzionalizzati allo scopo di scovare il diverso – colui il quale rifiuta l'omologazione – per estinguerlo. Lontano dall'occhio a scapito di chi appare; di chi, dalla parte dell'omologante, si distingue dalla massa, quello che nella sua unicità assurge sugli altri. Il mimetismo metazoico indica alcuni metodi che anche noi umani, con le peculiari modifiche da compiere in rapporto al nostro contesto, adattamenti per antonomasia alla portata, dovremmo sagacemente adottare quando, in un determinato terreno, quello della piazza odierna per esempio, la *vita activa* rischia di condurci alla dipartita.

Le caratteristiche pseudo-somatiche, morfologiche e mimetiche del regno animale non umano servono a indurre un'idea ingannevole e influenzare il comportamento del predatore. Roger Caillois non è un biologo, ma nel suo *Méduse et C.ie* (1960) è stato capace di rilevare le dimensioni principali dell'attività mimetica animale (travestimento, camuffamento, intimidazione) in rapporto ai miti dell'uomo.[13] Mimetismo inteso come l'assimilazione all'ambiente, divenire-invisibile: il boa che con i suoi colori disruptivi fa perdere di vista l'insieme del suo corpo nella foresta; la forma del pesce-foglia d'Amazzonia in grado di dare l'impressione di una fronda morta sul letto di un fiume; le coccinelle a sette punte di Ostenda che, raccogliendosi in gruppi di decine di esemplari, non vengono distinte dal frutto giallo arancio dell'olivello che fa loro da base: sono solo alcuni degli sterminati processi di adattamento animale all'ambiente.[14] Proteggersi, fuggendo dallo sguardo nefasto anche grazie a una simulata minaccia: le ali di farfalle con superfici ornate dagli ocelli, disposti in modo da assumere uno sproporzionato aspetto terrorizzante, incantano e mettono in fuga i volatili loro predatori.

È la maschera dunque l'elemento che accomuna il mimetismo, dispositivo per dissimulare e spaventare insieme. Espediente ancestrale che mette in comune tutti gli animali, seppur con finalità

10 E. Goffman, *Asylums*, Einaudi 1968, Torino, pp. 82-93.
11 G. Didi-Huberman, *La conoscenza accidentale*, Bollati Boringhieri Editore 2011, Torino, p.19.
12 Dirimpetto al vivaio del Jardin des Plantes di Parigi.
13 R. Caillois, *L'occhio di Medusa*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 1998, pp. 60-61.
14 *Ibidem*, pp. 77-85.

diverse. L'uomo la usò come accessorio rituale e, tra le civiltà, fu più diffusa dell'arpione e dell'arco. Tuttavia ora che la sua presenza nello spazio pubblico è minacciata, egli dovrebbe ricorrere al suo uso in qualità di dispositivo di rappresentazione del sé: "arma" enigmatica e indecifrabile per tentare di non essere placcato ed espulso dal territorio; come le ali delle farfalle che – secondo gli entomologi – plausibilmente hanno un significato arbitrario – chissà; di certo, per chi le guarda, esse restano lisergiche, obliteranti, incantevoli. In tal caso, la resistenza alle brutture contemporanee passerebbe per l'uso strumentale della bellezza multiforme, organica e simultanea. Perché essa – Venere, con le parole di Panofsky:

> nacque miracolosamente quando i genitali di Urano, dio del cielo, furono gettati in mare. *Venus coelestis* non ha quindi madre, il che significa, in vista della [. . .] relazione tra le parole *mater* e *materia*, che *Venus coelestis* appartiene alla sfera della Mente, assai remota a quella della Materia. L'amore da lei generato permette alla nostra facoltà contemplativa d'impadronirsi della bellezza divina con un atto di pura conoscenza.[15]

15 E. Panofsky, *Rinascimento e rinascenze*, Feltrinelli 1971, p. 230.

The dissimulated relationship. New tools for coexistence in public space

Several entries in the dictionary would benefit from being rewritten focusing on pragmatic usage rather than pre-established ideal reference. For example, in its architectural and urbanistic definition, a square is usually defined as a space free of buildings and key to urban morphology: combining functions of flow and rest, the square serves as a meeting place for citizens and constitutes the hub of the economic and political life of the municipality, as reveal by the fact that it is also used to organize public events or collective demonstrations. The names given to squares often indicate economic functions (such as the market) or religious institutions (such as the cathedral), or more generally actions that play a key role in preserving social structures and functions.

Rethinking squares

Towards the end of the last millennium, Tomás Maldonado compiled an analytical handbook of the tools implemented over the centuries to handle representation systems.[1] The pursuit of images that be "more real than reality", Maldonado pointed out, resulted in globally experienced forms, at least since 15th-century Florence, where an interest in the *katàgraphon* (projection onto a plane) was renewed. From *perspective* (a Latin word meaning 'view through something'), the first methodically accurate system for constructing a proportional representation which became dominant in the Italian Renaissance,[2] that story stretched up to photography, which makes people strike poses as if the image of one's body becomes more important than the body itself.[3]

Maldonado's list also includes the late-Middle Age *tableaux vivants*, which were used, in painting as well as sculpture, to convey religious or secular narratives – including, for instance, miracles, mysteries, passions, court festivities and tournaments. One might speak, in this respect, of a "democratization of the festive", since the theater is both the cause and the effect of the city, a space where everyone is simultaneously spectator and actor. The same phenomenon was already characterized by St. Augustine during his leisurly times in Carthage as an 'insane passion'.[4]

On this topic, Guy Debord rightly pointed out that spectacularization does not consist of images, but of social relationships mediated by images. In the world of spectacle, reality comes to be experienced as something that hampers the spectacle: the new reality is bound to arise from the spectacle, so that the spectacle effectively substitutes reality through 'obversion'.[5] The world loses its graspability to leave all space to the speculative, illusionistic, fetishistic form of appearance: "It is, Debord writes, the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and is immersed for eternity in its own glory."[6]

The goods of the 1960s, such as cars and televisions, which the Situationists regarded as weapons to isolate the masses, have, half a century later, evolved into the digital personal devices we mostly regard as "devices of freedom." During the mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square in 2011, for instance, new forms of resistance were enacted through personal media to create a space for the spectacularization of the struggle against poverty and oppression. On that occasion, the Egyptians effectively reclaimed for themselves the official spaces. Judith Butler noted: "the material history of those structures also work on [the bodies on the street], and become part of their very action, remaking a history in the midst of its most concrete and sedimented artifices."[7] It was a successful attempt to steal space from institutional power, breaking into its established order, and self-constructing new narratives and new actions, both corporeal and virtual.

The internet could be used to broadcast to the world, in real time, thousands of images of people calling for freedom. The spectacular processions of demonstrators in the streets of Cairo burst into the ordinary life of people all over the world. In a sense, with all due differences, this is also what happens in John Carpenter's sci-fi movie *They Live* (1988), where the protagonist, wearing special glasses, discovers that

1 T. Maldonado, *Reale e virtuale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1992, pp.17-20.
2 E. Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, 1924.
3 R. Barthes, *La chambre claire*, Seuil, Paris, 1980.
4 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, III,2.
5 See the beautiful analysis of the relation between media and non-identity by M.Senaldi, *Obversione*, Postmediabooks, Milano 2023.
6 G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967.
7 J. Butler, *Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street*, 2011.

malign extraterrestrials have infiltrated humanity and are brainwashing it. Looking at reality through a glass (screen, lens) enables the protagonsit to gain a new perspective, i.e., an escape route, showing the truth that, unfortunately, reality is often worse than what we thought possible.

All stands against

More than a decade after the Arab Spring, the public square, i.e. the idiomatical, historical and constitutional infrastructure for playing out the political disputes between society and institutional power, has been transformed into a mousetrap. As I write these lines, the Iranian authorities have cut the internet to block the spread of protests. As reported in a *Time* article, two senior officials from Iran's Ministry of Health have admitted that on January 8-9 alone, up to 30,000 people have been killed by the country's security services.[8] The number of people shot dead was so high that it exceeded the state's capacity to dispose of the bodies. Ambulances were replaced by 18-wheel semi-trucks. A massacre of this magnitude, in the space of 48 hours, prompted experts to seek comparisons: the only possible one was with the Holocaust. Meanwhile, Trump was ordering massive roundups in Minneapolis. The city got besieged by thousands of soldiers to enforce the president's deportation agenda. Armed and hooded teams went so far as to abduct children and kill bystanders. These two different cases of annihilation of the living make the public square look like a place that is, at best, coercive and, at worst, turns into a graveyard.

Interestingly, Minnesotans have reconsidered their relationship with public space by mostly avoiding them. Marina Catucci has reported on how the residents have rallied against ICE agents.[9] By deserting the streets, the immigrant population at risk of deportation has been helped by solidary networks, receiving groceries and help at home and. With their shutters down, local businesses have been reorganized into centers of resistance, using counter-surveillance methods such as whistles and ice sheets thrown on the streets so to complicate the military operations, mocking the government agents. A similar reaction recalls not by chance what happens in totalitarian institutions. Erving Goffman first explained how the prison community reorganizes itself to circumvent the rules of the prison.[10] The admission process to a total institution involves a series of assaults on the inmate that are as many assaults on the self (deprivation of the usual appearance, humiliation and desecration of the body, loss of autonomy, being forced into repulsive situations, etc.). To survive, inmates implement a series of "secondary adaptations." They develop new communications codes and unofficial forms of self-management, such as typically the "fraternization process" and the rejection of the staff: the prisoner discovers that his companions are his peers, and seeks to establish various forms of "mutual support" with them. This solidarity leads to the anonymous and collective implementation of small acts of sabotage aimed at mocking and tormenting the guards (chants, songs, mass refusal of food, etc.). This way, the inmate may even reach a stage of "regression," a passivity that can lead to the "intransigent policy," i.e., the total refusal to cooperate with the staff. The prisoner opportunistically combines these tactics to shield, physically and psychologically, from the pressures created by the abuse of power. Even a sketchy comparison such as the one just outlined supports the idea that the city of Minneapolis, with all its streets and and its squares, has been at present turned into an open-air prison.

Becoming place

From now on, to remain in the square it will be necessary not to be imprisoned by the judgmental gaze of the authorities. It is, in other words, a matter of avoiding conspicuousness by acting in similarity. Belonging to the city must become a visceral act that avoids being revealed in the visible. In response to the unprecedented occupation of public space by agents foreign to it, we need to turn to Didi-Huberman's dictum (*Phasmid Thinking)*: "Only what was initially capable of dissimulating can appear."[11] Borrowing from Didi-Huberman's personal 'mimetic' experience at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, square experience now takes the form of a *vivarium*, a scrutinized setting and metaphor for glass-boxed showcasing. In such a context, the what the inmate – such as a salamander, for example – can do is to avoid taking up an unambiguous form. It is a matter of wandering from one physical state to another so as to escape from the predator's gaze. One has to exist in the hunter's eyes only in enigmatic guises. Once

8 K. Armin Serjoie, R. Saberi & F. Jamalpour, Iran Protest Death Toll – Could Top 30,000, According to Local Health Officials, *Time*, Jan 25, 2026.

9 M. Catucci, Minneapolis, lotta e solidarietà. Una città unita contro l'occupazione, *il manifesto*, Jan 20, 2026.

10 E. Goffman, *Asylums*, 1961.

11 G. Didi-Huberman, *Phasmes. Essais sur l'apparition*, Minuit 1998.

outside appearances, one's existence is assured as *mythical*. One must learn to live in a parallel world so as to subtract onself from the world were, on thwe contrary, one is subject to the indiscreet gaze that looks for *those who are different* – those who reject homologation – in order to annihilate them. One must keep away from eyesight, avoiding standing out from the crowd and taking on the features of uniqueness. Metazoic mimicry can teach us certain methods that we humans, too, can lear, with the necessary modifications to suit our context. Such adaptations par excellence we should wisely adopt each time active life in public square brings mortal risks with it.

The pseudo-somatic, morphological, and mimetic characteristics of the animal kingdom are meant to mislead the predator and misguide its moves. Roger Caillois, a writeer who was much influence by the natural sciences, highlighted in his *Méduse et C.ie* (1960) identified the dimensions of animal mimetism as disguise, camouflage, and intimidation. The same functions, he remarked, can be found in human mythologies. Camouflage entails the assimilation to the environment, becoming-invisible: the boa, whose disruptive colors break the visual unity of the body in the forest; the shape of the Amazonian leaf fish, which gives the impression of a dead leaf lying on the riverbed; the Ostenda seven-pointed ladybug, which, gathering in groups of dozens, cannot be distinguished from the orange-yellow fruit of the sea buckthorn that serves as their base – these are just a few of the endless processes of animal adaptation to the environment. Protection from the harmful gaze, can also be enacted through simulated threat: butterfly wings are adorned with ocelli, arranged in such a way as to take on a disproportionately terrifying appearance that enthralls and scares away predator birds.

The mask is, thus, the element that unfyies mimicry as a device for both concealing and frightening off. It is an ancestral device that all animals have in common, albeit with different purposes. Humans have used it as a ritual accessory, and in some civilizations it has been more widespread than the harpoon or the bow. Now that the human presence in public space is threatened, humans should resort to mimicry as a device for self-representation: an enigmatic and indecipherable 'weapon' to avoid being expelled from the territory. According to entomologists, butterfly wings have an arbitrary signifier; certainly, they remain lysergic, obliterating, enchanting. Resistance to contemporary ugliness may perhaps comes through the instrumental use of multifaceted, organic, simultaneous beauty. In Panofsky's words:

> Amor divinus is the son of the celestial Venus (Venus coelestis) who had miraculously come into being when the genitals of Uranus, the god of heaven, were cast into the sea. She has, therefore, no mother-which means, in view of the supposed connection between the words *mater* and *materia*, that she dwells in the sphere of Mind, utterly remote from that of Matter. The love engendered by her enables our contemplative powers to possess themselves of divine beauty in an act of pure cognition . . .[12]

12 E. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, 1965.

Rosetta Mission 2024
Screenshot from VR game engine

Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring work Arkanian Leonardo

Planetary Square

Conflict, Circulation, and the Fate of the Square in the Planetary Metropolis

Niccolò Cuppini

The square has long been one of the privileged figures through which political thought has articulated the relationship between space, conflict, and collective life. From the agora of the Greek polis to the medieval piazza, from revolutionary Paris to the iconic images of Tahrir or Puerta del Sol, the square has condensed a double function: it has been both a concrete urban space and a metaphor for political appearance, encounter, and confrontation. Yet this figure, which appears so central in the history of political urbanism, is today increasingly unstable. In the context of planetary urbanization, digital infrastructures, logistical capitalism, and permanent crisis, the square seems at once to disappear and to proliferate, to be evacuated and endlessly reactivated in unexpected places.

This article proposes the concept of the *planetary square* as a way to think through this transformation. The planetary square is not the global extension of the traditional piazza, nor its nostalgic survival in a world that has outgrown the city. Rather, it names a political-spatial function that emerges within the planetary metropolis (Cuppini 2023): a form of spatialization of conflict that is no longer centered, bounded, or stable, but distributed, mobile, and intermittent. To speak of a planetary square is to insist that the political has not vanished from urban space, but that it has been radically reconfigured by the same processes that have dissolved the city as a coherent form (Angelo 2017).

Recent attempts to narrate the history of urbanization at a planetary scale have emphasized long-term shifts in the infrastructures that support human settlement and circulation. Carl H. Nightingale (2022), for instance, has proposed a "biography of our urban planet" structured around successive epochs: the age of river cities, the age of oceanic cities, the age of hydrocarbon cities, and the new emerging era in which physical and digital infrastructures organize human action at a planetary level. Such accounts are valuable for their historical breadth and for their attention to circulation as a driver of urbanization (Adams 2018), yet they remain, in many respects, tied to the conceptual framework of the city as a bounded space. In fact, what they describe as the culmination of urban history increasingly exceeds the city form itself.

The contemporary condition is better grasped through the concept of the metropolis, understood not as a large city (*Grosstadt*) but as a social relation, a spatio-temporal projection of society onto territory in Lefebrian terms (Lefebvre 1996). In this sense, the metropolis does not arise as the harmonious realization of an urban ideal, but as the result of a rupture: the breaking of the polis through class struggle (Cacciari 1973), the overflow of social forces that exceed and destabilize the bounded city. From the nineteenth century onward, the metropolis emerges through a constant tension between attempts to impose form – through state power, urban planning, and market rationality – and the persistent *débordement* produced by social conflict, everyday practices, and insurgent movements.

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This tension does not disappear with the globalization of urbanization; it intensifies. The planetary metropolis is not the city scaled up to globe size, but the integration and the dialectical overcoming of cities, territories, infrastructures, and populations into a single, uneven, conflictual field defined by the world market in Marxian terms (Sacchetto & Tomba 2008). It is a space in which highways, ports, data centers, logistics corridors, informal settlements, financial districts, and digital platforms are woven together into a planetary infrastructure of circulation and control. Within this space, the political no longer unfolds primarily in monumental centers or symbolic civic spaces. Instead, it emerges wherever the flows of value, people, and information are interrupted, redirected, or contested.

It is precisely here that the figure of the square must be rethought. In the classical city, the square was a space of escalation of the conflict, but also of mediation: a place where conflict could be staged, negotiated, and potentially resolved. The square presupposed a political collectivity capable of recognizing itself in a shared space. In the planetary metropolis, by contrast, conflict is no longer oriented toward reconciliation. It remains open, proliferates, and mutates. The square, in this context, cannot function as a stable center. It becomes a threshold, a temporary condensation of forces, a spatial effect of stasis (Loraux 2006) rather than its resolution.

The cycle of global insurrections that began in 2011 (Bevins 2023) makes this transformation visible with particular clarity. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, followed by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, triggered a wave of revolts that rapidly exceeded national and regional boundaries. Squares such as Tahrir became powerful symbols, yet their significance did not lie solely in their physical occupation. What mattered was the contagion effect: the way in which struggles resonated across different contexts through the infrastructures of the metropolis planetary. From Occupy Wall Street to the Spanish acampadas, from Gezi Park to the Brazilian protests of 2013, from the Hong Kong uprisings to the emergence of Black Lives Matter, a heterogeneous constellation of movements took shape, linked less by a common program than by shared spatial and temporal dynamics.

A second counter-circuit, between 2018 and 2020, confirmed and deepened this pattern. Revolts erupted in Paris, Santiago, Quito, Beirut, Baghdad, Tehran, Barcelona, and so on, often triggered by issues related to mobility, transport costs, and everyday reproduction (Liu et al. 2022). Most recently (2024-2025), the so called "Gen Z insurrections" from Nepal and Bangladesh to Thailand, Indonesia, Madagascar, Morocco and Italy, somehow relaunch that trend.

What united these struggles was not the centrality of iconic squares, but the strategic occupation and disruption of nodes of circulation: roundabouts, metro stations, highways, airports, ports. As several observers have noted, the battlefield of contemporary protest has shifted from the square to the infrastructure. The road, long theorized as a site of proletarian power, re-emerges as a key terrain of struggle in a world organized around logistics and just-in-time circulation (Clover 2016).

These movements reveal the planetary square as a distributed spatial phenomenon. It does not coincide with a single location, but unfolds across a network of sites connected by flows of people, goods, and information. The square becomes a function rather than a form: wherever bodies gather to interrupt circulation, wherever infrastructures are repurposed for collective presence, a planetary square momentarily comes into being. This is why protests today can move fluidly from physical spaces to digital platforms and back again, shifting from specific, situated grievances to forms of solidarity that extend across distant contexts and social fields.

At the same time, the multiplication of planetary squares exposes deep inequalities and asymmetries within the planetary metropolis. The subjects who populate these spaces are situated in radically different contexts: from the urban-rural margins of Tunisia to the banlieues of French, from deindustrialized regions to hyper-dense global hubs. The planetary square does not erase these differences; it brings them into relation. It reveals the tension between the apparent homogeneity of global

urbanization and the heterogeneity of lived conditions, struggles, and forms of life.

This tension is also visible in the transformation – or erosion – of the square within contemporary urban projects. The proliferation of smart cities, new capitals, and hyper-controlled urban environments can be read as an attempt to neutralize the political potential of public space. Projects such as NEOM in Saudi Arabia or the New Administrative Capital in Egypt are designed to displace politically sensitive spaces, to fragment and monitor public life, and to prevent the formation of large, uncontrollable gatherings. These cities are built in the shadow of past revolts, haunted by the memory of squares that became sites of regime crisis.

Yet this attempt at neutralization is never fully successful. The planetary metropolis produces its own counter-logics. Wherever space is over-determined by control, new forms of informal, insurgent, or ephemeral spatialization emerge. The planetary square appears not despite the metropolis, but because of it. It is a constitutive bug, a recurring malfunction in the smooth operation of logistical and digital systems.

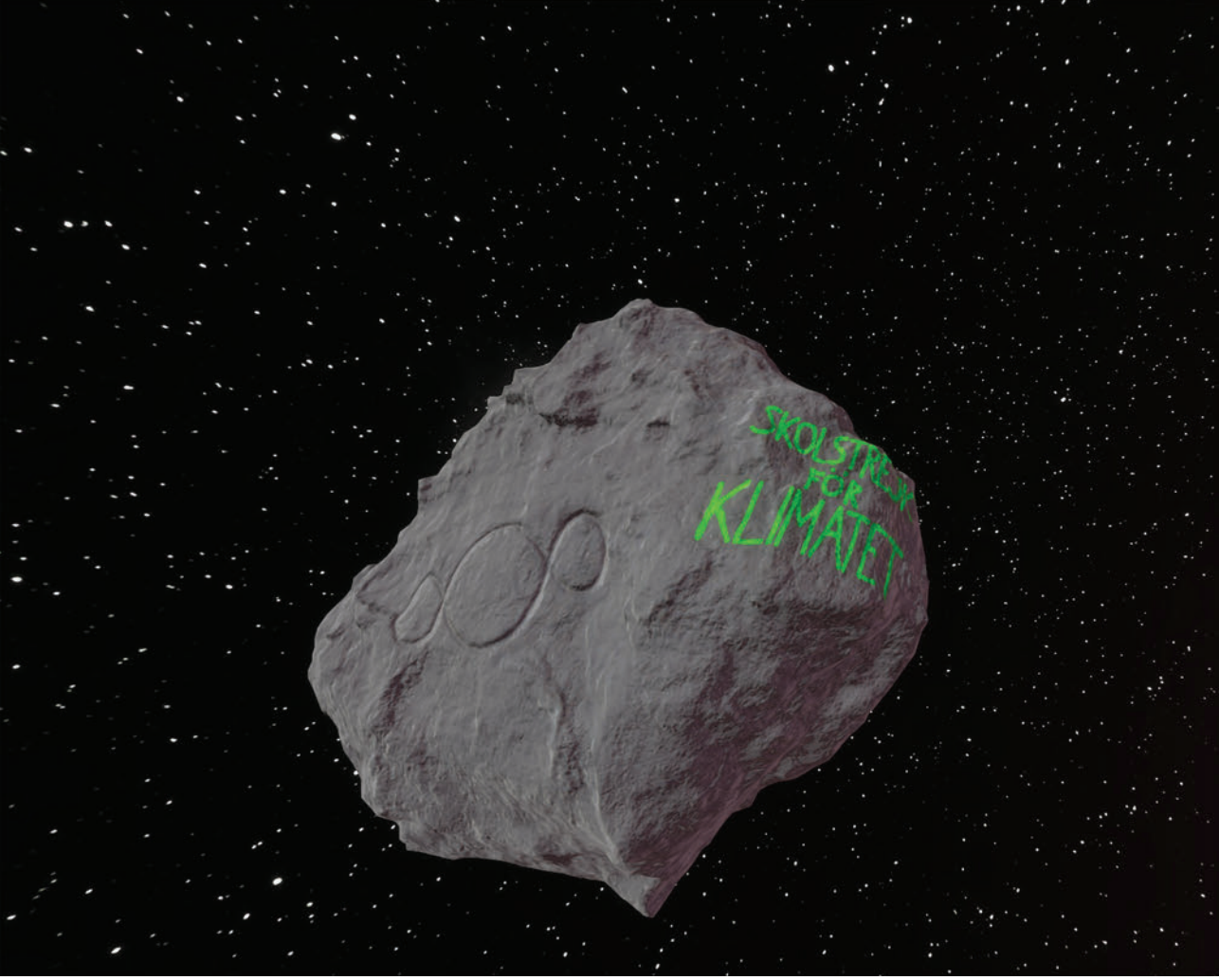
Seen from this perspective, the planetary square also forces a rethinking of political subjectivity. The subjects of contemporary revolt do not coalesce into a single collective actor, nor do they follow a linear temporal trajectory. They are fragmented, mobile, often temporary. Their unity, when it exists, is produced through action rather than identity. The planetary square is the space in which this precarious composition becomes visible: a space where differences are not resolved but held together in tension.

This has important implications for theory. Much of critical urban thought remains trapped between two unsatisfactory positions: on the one hand, a nostalgic attachment to the city as a space of lost political community; on the other, a purely descriptive account of urbanization as a monolithic process of capitalist expansion. The concept of the planetary square points toward a different approach. It insists on the ambivalence of the planetary metropolis, on its simultaneous production of domination and openings, control and conflict. It calls for a theory capable of grasping both the molar structures of global power and the molecular practices of everyday resistance and *débordement*.

In this sense, the planetary square is not a solution, nor a new ideal type of public space. It is a problem-space, a way of naming the unstable terrain on which political struggles unfold today. It shows that the planetary metropolis is not a city, and that its conflicts cannot be contained within the traditional forms of urban politics. The square no longer guarantees visibility, representation, or reconciliation. It offers, instead, a temporary intensification of political life, a moment in which the contradictions of planetary urbanization are made palpable.

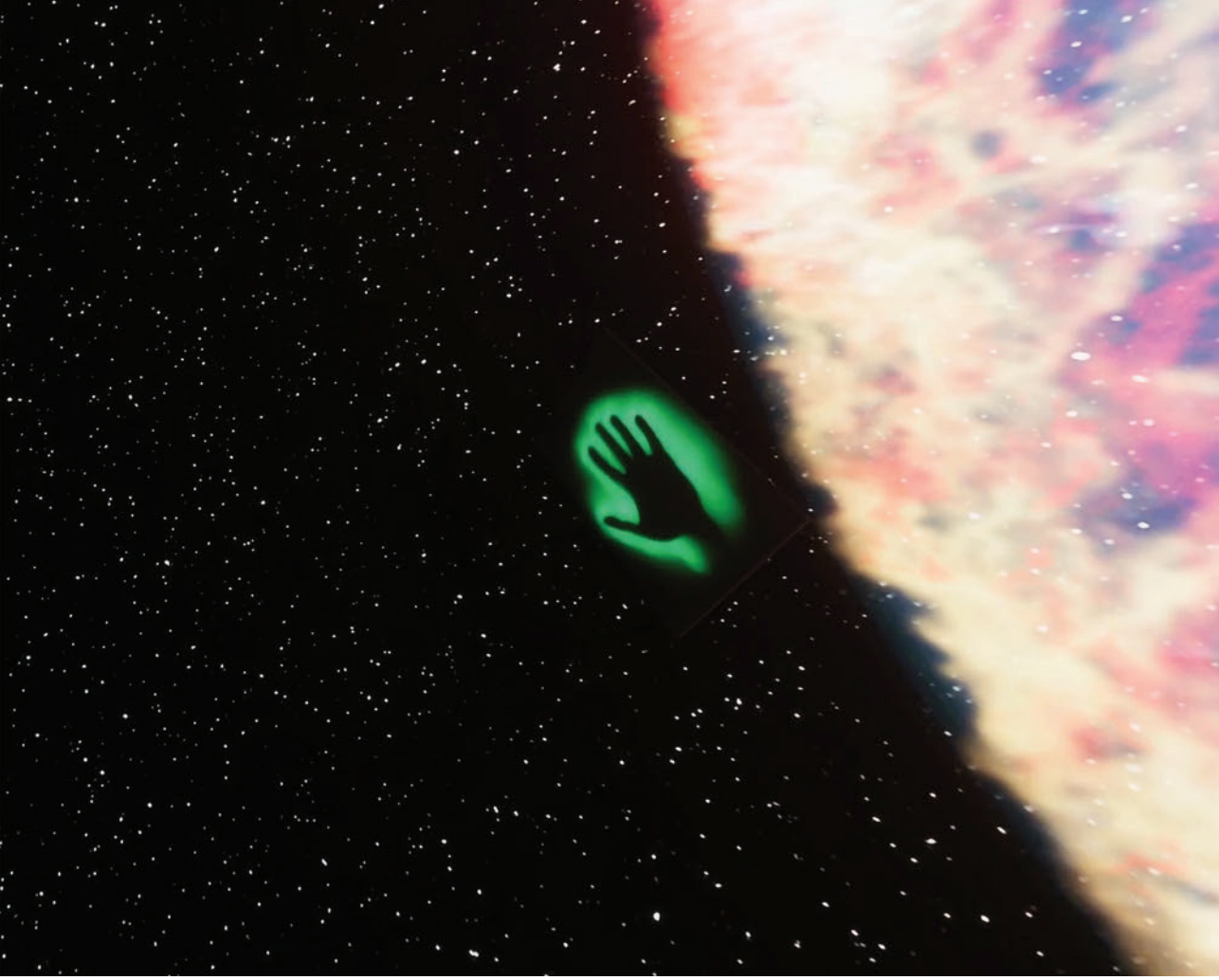
To think through the planetary square, then, is to abandon the search for a single center of politics and to engage with a landscape of shifting thresholds. It is to recognize that contemporary struggles do not simply occupy space, but actively produce it, deform it, and re-temporalize it. The planetary metropolis appears, in this light, as a permanent battleground: a space formed through stasis, where the political is not an exception but a continuous possibility.

The square, far from disappearing, survives as a spectral and mobile figure. It reappears wherever the smooth surfaces of planetary circulation are cracked open, wherever collective presence interrupts the algorithms of governance and value. In this sense, the planetary square is not behind us, as a relic of a bygone urban age, but ahead of us, as a fragile and conflictual form through which new political imaginaries may yet emerge.



(Left) Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring works by Greta Thunberg and Michelangelo Pistoletto

(Right) Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring work LQG Cave Archive



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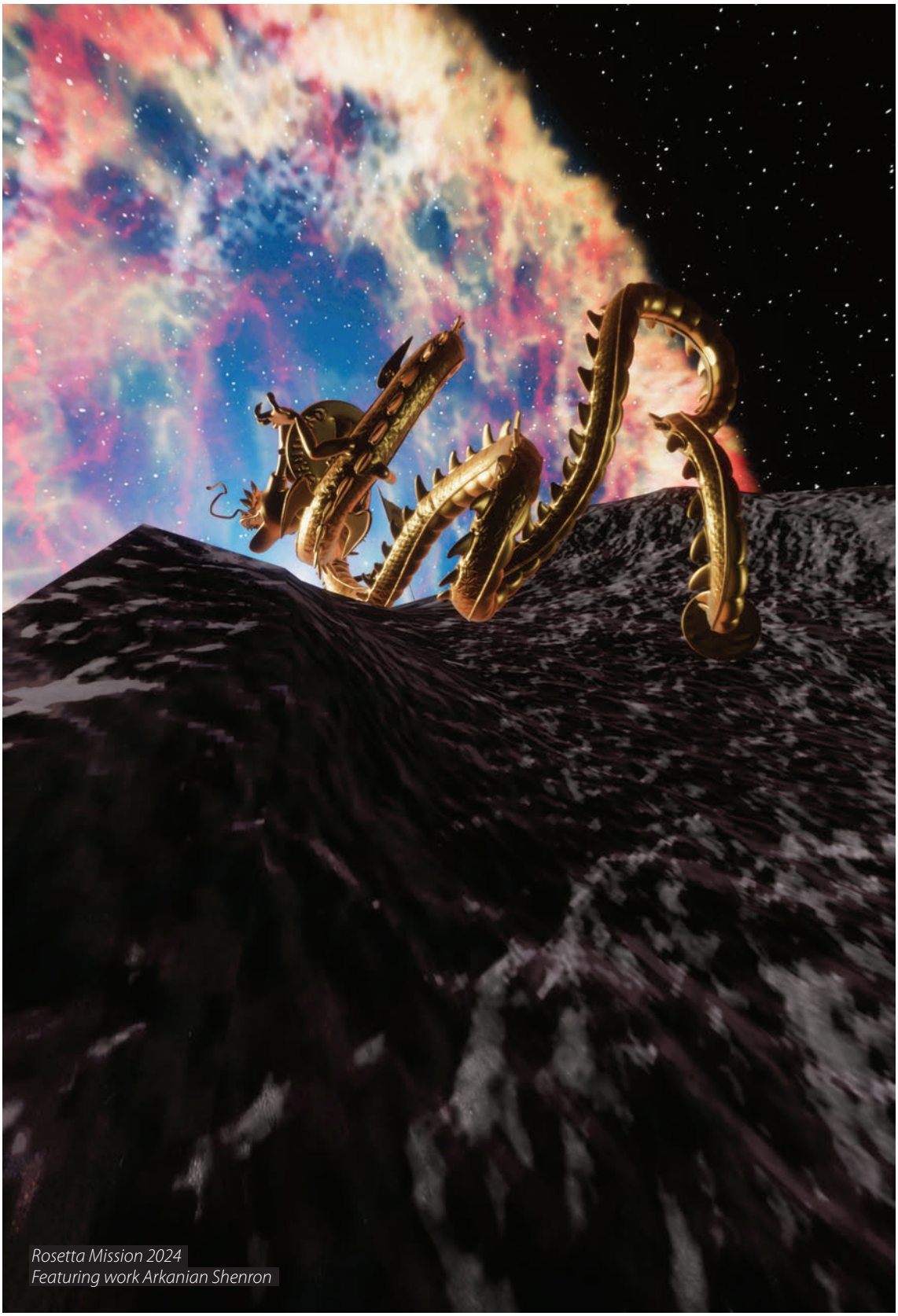

Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring work Arkanian Shenron

Speculating Kinaxixi

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1. Urban spaces are never what they appear to be. Vision is tethered to the present, while cities are replete with spectral presences, like those emanating from the sedimented violence of colonialism or the pristine visions of development utopias. Archival reconstruction and critical deconstruction can retrace or denounce this ghostly matter. Yet they fall short of addressing its expression – the force it harbours, the form it takes, the effects it conjures. When the overlapping temporalities composing a place are arranged in a linear sequence, what is gained in historical clarity is lost in speculative insight. What that means when it comes to write (a) place is the question that kept haunting me as I negotiated, under the scorching sun, the elongated roundabout of *Largo do Kinaxixi*, looking for a merciful shade and some kind of entry point to access the multiple layers composing this most intricate of Luanda's sites. Today, the square has a sleek attire. After renewal works, it reopened for the 49th anniversary of Angola's independence, November 11, 2024. It has new patches of grass, benches, surveillance cameras, streetlights, public restrooms, an amphitheatre and a luminous fountain. All this makes up for the eerie emptiness that had been left by the demolition of a famous market, almost twenty years before. At the centre of the square, a little puddle evokes the original meaning of Kinaxixi [from *kina* – pit, hole; and *xixi* – spring water], if we are to follow Luandino Vieira's etymological proposition.[1]

2. In his Marxist recipe for critical urban theory, David Harvey urges 'to get behind the surface appearances' and 'unmask the fetishism of commodities'.[2] Such a revelatory endeavour can surely explain Kinaxixi, at the cost of losing something else, however, something intangible emanating from both past and future, something that lingers in the atmosphere like spectral dust, feeding a spell that seems to hold the city in its grip. The accumulation of time, value and desire in certain urban places makes them pregnant with overflowing intensities that are recalcitrant to causal interpretation and dialectical critique. In Walter Benjamin's illuminating analogy: 'The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure – precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the contents of dreams'.[3] What if certain places likewise dreamt on our behalf, so overfull with memories and expectations that they spoke to us as if through digestive hallucinations?[4] If this is the case, then a different epistemological stance could be foregrounded, a knowledge that resisting the surgical desire to penetrate the surface would rather try and 'adhering to the skin of things', seeking to attend to their metastable juxtapositions rather than flattening them into a linear narration.[5] Such a knowledge would be perhaps closer to a mode of divination than to one of revelation.[6]

3. 'Dreams deserve solid foundations' [*os sonhos merecem bases sólidas*]. Thus read a banner from Grow Construction, on the fence encircling the building site of the Kinaxixi Shopping Centre. In their

rendering – the only *place* in which they are completed – the three towers dominating the square look like any other tower that has been mushrooming in central Luanda since the end of the civil war [1975-2002]. Grotesquely severed, socio-economically, from the rest of the city, the skyline of central Luanda, as a shiny crystallisation of the dark agency of Angola's oil reserves – Africa's second largest – reflects back on the streets through its mirrored façades, with hypnotising effect. Take the Kianda Towers, four buildings scraping the sky at almost 100 metres, locked in an encircling embrace, mirroring Luanda's bay on their blue glass facades as they affirm – the company responsible for their shimmering cover suggests – 'Angola's capacity to project itself towards the world'.[7] This is not the case of the Kinaxixi towers, however. Notwithstanding their completion date(s) having been announced several times already, they remain unfinished, their concrete entrails fully exposed, until a new influx of investment would restart the construction work and give them the shiny cover they crave for. Mirrorless, for the time being, they are condemned to see their concrete nakedness reflected back in the water, their skeletons emerging shakily among the leaves and the occasional rubbish floating in the puddle. Perhaps this is what the puddle is for: a device for catoptromancy divination. By placing one's body at the right angle between the water, the towers and the sun, a reflection appears, a dialectical image conjuring the towers as the present ruins of a dubious future.[8] The photographic reproduction imbues the reflection with a magical value. It tempts us to look for the futures nested into the image like particles of *cacimbo*, the drizzly mist that engulfs Luanda's mornings in the dry season, as a static where the city's optical unconscious buzzes intermittently. In the picture I took, the towers are looming over the statue of Njinga Mbandi, the cunning and ruthless 17th century queen warrior of the kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba, heroine of anti-Portuguese resistance, and icon of the square's current revamping: 'The Queen is Back', reads a giant billboard, 'Where History has Future'.

4. Quinaxixe, as it was originally spelled, was the name of the lagoon that flooded this area, and whose 'muddy waters', writes Arnaldo Santos, 'were copper-coloured and looked metallic and thick beneath the intense sun'.[9] For a long time, the lagoon had been the limit of colonial Luanda, the threshold where urbanisation ended and woodland began: *Hic Erant Leones*.[10] About a century ago, the contradictory dialectics between civilisation and wilderness was solved with typically colonial manoeuvre: the lagoon was covered, and *Largo Leonardo Carneiro* was born. It is said that Kianda, the water spirit of Kimbundu mythology that inhabited those waters, has been restless ever since. The puddle I am staring at, a reference to the ancient lagoon, can hardly contain Kianda's exuberance, which overflows in the collective imaginary, real estate brochures, and the subsoil. In 2023, a building collapsed a few steps from the square – its foundations had been infiltrated by water. A similar fate had been foreseen for a 20-storey building that the Portuguese had left unfinished a few years before the 1975 independence, after realising that underground water had made its foundations shaky. In the next decades, hundreds of people would precariously inhabit its unfinished structure, without running water, electricity, parapets, and façade, while the sinister silhouette of a crane was watching over them from the top of the building – unconcerned, unremoved. Finally, in 2012, the crane was taken out, the people evacuated, the building demolished. In *O Desejo de Kianda*, a 1995 novel by Pepetela, the buildings around Kinaxixi begin to mysteriously fall down, one by one, as Kianda's fugitive desire erodes the concrete structures that imprisoned her aquatic domain.[11] According to a survey, at least 36 buildings in Luanda are currently at risk of collapse.[12]

5. Today's unfinished towers grow over the invisible ruins of the Kinaxixi Market, itself demolished in 2008. This impressive example of modernist architecture, built in 1950s from a project by Vasco Vieira da Costa, was an iconic place of the capital. It was there that Agostinho Neto, the first president of independent Angola, loved to spend his time 'at six o'clock of a hot evening / and just sit there' – as one of his most famous poems goes.[13] With time, the market had become more than a market. It was a place of meetings, marches, encounters, as well as an informal market sprawling around the formal

one. Among the general dismay at its senseless destruction, some ventured as far as defining the original construction a '"cry of freedom" that, challenging the colonial regime, set a novel architectural posture'.[14] The pernicious celebration of Portuguese modernism as an exception to the fascist regime in power by then – hence its common definition as 'tropical modernism', rather than colonial – tends to depoliticise the architectural dimension in the same way as the imperial nostalgia depoliticises the aesthetic of old Luanda.[15] Disseminated through an extensive market of books, films, documentaries, blogs and dedicated social media pages, colonial *saudade* transforms Lusophone Africa into a screen where a nostalgic posture toward a beautiful past that is no longer is projected, while systematically erasing the violent conditions that made that supposedly glamorous life possible in the first place.[16]

6. In the sixteen years that took renovating the square, the queen Njinga, also known as Ginga, was relocated in the courtyard of the ancient fort dominating Luanda's bay. During this time, she had to share the space in the awkward company of a few statues of the former colonial power, there exiled: Diogo Cão, Paulo Dias de Novais, Pedro Alexandrino, Afonso Henriques, Luís Vaz de Camões. Camões, the most important figure in Portuguese literature, is the legendary writer of *Os Lusíadas,* an epic 16th century poem celebrating the "discoveries" of Portugal. In the 1930s, *Largo Leonardo Carneiro* took the name of *Largo das Lusíadas*. In 1935, an imposing monument was erected at its centre. It showed a woman with wings, brandishing a sword, leading a bunch of soldiers. To the annoyance of historians, the winged victory commemorating the first world war would soon be renamed *Maria da Fonte*, after a legendary Portuguese heroine that had led a peasant revolt in the north of Portugal in the 19th century. The square itself would come to be popularly known as *Largo Maria da Fonte*. When the Portuguese ran away, in the wake of the independence, Angolan and Cuban soldiers detonated the statue. A soviet tank stood at her place, until the end of Soviet Union made also that monument obsolescent.

7. When the market was demolished, the indignation was universal. Almost. 'Countries have to modernise', read a vitriolic comment in the aftermath of the destruction. 'Let's stop the whining and clinging to old things. The world is dynamic, life is dynamic. Tear it down and build something that is useful to Angolans'. Like the market, the text continues, 'other buildings will come down so we can have a Modern Angola without reminders of a past of servile condescension'.[17] There is no need to buy into the narrative of Lusotropicalism to understand that destroying the market has been a reckless and foolish act. One hardly incoherent with the climate of Angola's noughties, however. After the end of the long, bloody civil war, the winning MPLA party has been systematically replacing the political question of national reconciliation into an infrastructural endeavour at national reconstruction.[18] Particularly in Luanda, the past has been methodically effaced in a oil-inebriated haste, while the future was re-modelled towards the ideal of a rich, advanced, global city – a new Dubai, as the limited imagination in power pictured it, whose skyline was meant to materialise a 'desire to stress disjuncture with the past'.[19] In 2015, Luanda achieved the dubious feat of becoming the most expensive capital of the world for expats.

8. I talk to a young architect who works in an atelier involved in the revamping of both Kinaxixi square and rua Rainha Ginga, a key commercial avenue and oldest street of Luanda's city centre. The project *Nossa Ginga* [our Ginga] is based on a few placemaking interventions with benches, trees and posters – most of which were gone, or rapidly decaying, when I visited the place a few months later. From Forbes to the São Paulo 14th Biennale, *Nossa Ginga* has gained international admirers, positioning itself, as the description in the Biennale's website goes, as 'more than an architectural or urban project . . . It is a movement of social, cultural and economic transformation for Luanda'.[20] We end up talking, as it happens, about Luanda's chronic lack of maintenance, reflected in the infrastructural decay of many of rua Rainha Ginga's buildings. Since the Government has amply shown to be incapable of dealing with the problem, he argues, there is only a solution left: to force the local

inhabitants to sell their apartments, and let the private companies in. They will know how to turn it into a world class street – like Oxford Street in London, Avenida da Liberdade in Lisbon, or Brooklyn in New York. A pretty curious bunch of references, I ponder in silence, so different between themselves and so at odds with rua Rainha Ginga's actual vibe.

9. The new Kinaxixi is meant to 'recover the feeling of joy, represent aspects of Angolan culture in a didactic way, and provide inclusive experiences to all users', as I read from the website of the architectural atelier. The aesthetic incorporates various historical and cultural references, objects, masks, even ceramic tiles [*azulejos*], whose colours evoke the fruits and vegetables of the old Kinaxixi Market, while informal vending is now prohibited. This gives an eerie twist to the stated intention 'to turn the square into an open air museum'.[21] Arguably, Kinaxixi already embodied the complexity this flat rhetorical expression suggests – albeit in a rather less subdued way. As Roberto Vecchi argues:

> Here we have evidence of the multiple temporalities – and narratives – that combine in the heterogeneous time of the city, including those that belong, as objects of destruction, to a phantasmatic plane and therefore transcend an exclusively synchronic line. In this sense, one could consider Kinaxixi an open-air museum of Angola, both in terms of mythography as well as history and spectrography.[22]

Including, we may add, the multiple futures that have been rehearsed and have crumbled in this square. This is why unmasking or denouncing its current revamping is far from being enough. When urban places are under a spell, the question is not only one of demystifying but also, perhaps most importantly, one of reenchanting: 'out-fetishizing the fetish', as Michael Taussig puts it: *enfeitiçar o largo*.[23]

10. In a recent installation, Kiluanji Kia Henda reimagined the moment when Angolan and Cuban soldiers detonated the statue commonly known as Maria da Fonte. He does so by shifting the focus from what was destroyed – a symbol of colonial power – to the acoustic result of this gesture, as it resonated on the emptied plinth: the clamour of the explosion, the chanting of the soldiers, the actual *cry of freedom* that, for a moment, inhabited the square. Diving into the visual archive of the time, Henda further composed a series of collages into eight posters depicting eight imaginary music groups: "Imperialist Killers", "Anticolonial Sonic Waves", "Iconoclastic Sound Systems", and so on. *The Sound Is the Monument* [*O Som é o Monumento*], reads the work's title. [24] In the persistent rhetorics of colonial *saudade*, which I myself heard reproduced at times, by locals, in Luanda, the destruction of Maria da Fonte was an example of the natives' lack of cultural sensibility – a similar rhetoric accompanied the criticism of the market's destruction. Conversely, the current reconstruction of Kinaxixi seeks to retrofit the square within the continuum of history, carefully smoothing over its frictions, not so dissimilar to what the colonisers did with the old square. Henda's montage avoids these equally essentialising moves.[25] It repurposes the past – its invisible ruins, dissipated sounds, and contested memory – by working against the grain of historical method, swapping accuracy for evocation, linear reconstruction for critical montage, historical narrative for absurdist fabrication. By wrenching out Kinaxixi from the continuum of history, his divinatory experiment is able to express the atmosphere detonated in the square in the aftermath of liberation, and the way in which the past still lingers in the square's present like dust, that is, like 'a prediction scattered in infinitesimal particles, dancing and silent, similar to so many dots of randomness: dots of the future'.[26] As the title of another piece dedicated by Henda to Kinaxixi goes: *History is a Bitch*.[27]

(Right) Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring speech by Carlo Rovelli

Endnotes

1 José Luandino Vieira. *Papéis da prisão. Apontamentos, diário, correspondência (1962-1971)*, edited by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, Monica V. Silva and Roberto Vecchi. Leya-Caminho, 2015: 745.
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5 Michael Taussig. *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses*. Routledge, 2018, 44.
6 Filip De Boek. Divining the city: rhythm, amalgamation and knotting as forms of urbanity. *Social Dynamics* 41(1), 2015: 1–12.
7 See https://www.reynaers.pt/inspiracao/referencias-de-projectos-em-aluminio/fachadas-kianda-towers-luanda
8 In the ancient practice of catoptromancy [from the Greek *κάτοπτρον,*: mirror], mirrors were deployed as a divinatory rather than reflecting surface, a twisted art of speculation [from the Latin *speculum*: mirror].
9 Arnaldo Santos. *Quinaxixe*. Casa dos Estudantes do Império, 1965: 11 (my trans.)
10 Lion traps were set in this area, as ordered by the Governor Sousa Coutinho in an April 8, 1767 letter, in Manuel Costa Lobo Cardoso, *Luanda Antiga*. Museu de Angola, 1951: 12-13.
11 Pepetela. *O Desejo de Kianda*. Dom Quixote, 1995.
12 Faustino Diogo. Pelo menos 36 prédios estão em risco de desabar em Luanda. *Expansão*, 12 May 2023 [online].
13 Agostinho Neto. Kinaxixi, in *Sagrada Esperança*. Livraria Sá da Costa Editora, 1974 – the quote is from the translation by W.S. Merwin.
14 Elisiário Miranda, José Manuel Fernandes and Manuel Correia Fernandes. *Mercado Municipal do Kinaxixe/Kinaxixi (Quinaxixe)*, see https://hpip.org/pt/heritage/original/74
15 Nuno Domingos. Colonial architectures, urban planning and the representation of Portuguese imperial history. *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 14(3), 2015: 235-55.
16 See e.g. Roberto Vecchi. A nostalgia colonial no País da saudade: fantasmagorias e pós-memória. *Confluenze. Rivista di Studi Iberoamericani* 12(2), 2020: 169-181.
17 In Clara Onofre, Angola: E o mercado histórico veio abaixo. *Global Voices*, 29 August 2008 [online].
18 Jon Schubert. *Working the system: a political ethnography of the new Angola*. Cornell University Press, 2017; Claudia Gastrow. *The Aesthetics of Belonging: Indigenous Urbanism and City Building in Oil-Boom Luanda*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2025.
19 Paul Jones. *The Sociology of Architecture: Constructing Identities*. Liverpool University Press, 2011: 123.
20 See https://bienaldearquitetura.org.br/programacao/nossa-ginga/ (my trans.)
21 See https://doladob.com/portfolio/mercado-do-kinaxixi/
22 Roberto Vecchi. Genius loci e a imprescritibilidade do mito: arquiteturas simbólicas em tramas urbanas pós-coloniais (Luanda e Maputo). In *Memória, cidade e literatura: de São Paulo de Assunção de Loanda a Luuanda, de Lourenço Marques a Maputo*, edited by Magarida Calafate Ribeiro and Francisco Noa. Edições Afrontamentos, 2019: 201-211, 206 (my trans.).
23 Taussig, *Mimesis*, op. cit. In a similar sense, Antonio Bispo talks about *enfeitiçar* [i.e. bewitch, from feitiço, fetish, originally meaning spell, charm] the language of the coloniser in order to weaken its power. Antonio Bispo, *A terra dá, a terra quer*. Ubu Editora, 2023.
24 See https://www.aml.pt/agenda/o-som-e-o-monumento/
25 Cf. Gunther Gassner. Wrecking London's skyline? A political critique of how the city is viewed. *City*, 21(6), 2017: 754-768
26 Georges Didi-Huberman. *La Conoscenza Accidentale. Apparizione e Sparizione delle Immagini.* Bollati Boringhieri, 2019[1998]: 61, my trans; see also Benjamin. *The Arcades Project,* op. cit.: par. N10, 3.
27 See https://oinstituto.pt/en/kiluanji-kia-henda/

Luca Pozzi, Transmedia Ecosystems: From the Political Square to the Relational Hub

Luca Pozzi's contribution to lo Squaderno #73 explores a multi-platform ecosystem designed to transform geopolitical tension into collective dialogue. The experience originates in the Augmented Reality application "Dark Collection For Eternal Peace," through which a series of liminal squares are re-semanticized by the "Third Eye Prophecy": geolocated digital monuments that act as urban Easter Eggs. Invisible to the naked eye but summonable via Android devices, these works manifest as acts of resilience and witness at the heart of the social fabric through the active presence of the observer on the ground.

These ephemeral interventions also serve as access portals to the "Rosetta Missions": Virtual Reality hubs with six degrees of freedom (6DoF) where interdisciplinary personalities converge to contribute to the emergence of a new multilateral perspective. The objective is to co-design – beyond geographical, political, economic, and religious boundaries – new practices of cultural diplomacy within a "middle ground" conceived as a digital Rosetta Stone.

Specifically for this issue, the journey focuses on "Rosetta Mission 2024," a meta-conference for peace created by Luca Pozzi in collaboration with the Perimeter Institute of Waterloo. The immersive architecture, grafted onto the Third Eye Prophecy geolocated in Rafah (Palestine), consists of a digital reconstruction of the comet 67P (previously studied by the European Space Agency between 2004 and 2016). On the comet's surface, site-specific contributions meet from figures such as Greta Thunberg, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Carlo Rovelli, Monia Ben Hamouda, Vincenzo Agnetti, Angelo Plessas, Patrizio di Massimo, Albert Einstein, and Bertrand Russell, alongside the voices of the LGBTQ++ community. The path is enriched by monologues from contemporary scientists who connect Quantum Mechanics, Multi-messenger Cosmology, and Information Theory in the search for a new universal harmony.

Watch the Meta-conference for Peace on Youtube

Dark Collection for Eternal Peace 2025
Tiananmen screenshot from AR Application

Luca Pozzi (Milan, 1983) is an artist and interdisciplinary mediator inspired by the worlds of art, physics, multi-messenger cosmology, and computer science. After graduating in Painting from the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milan and specializing in Computer Graphics and Systems, he collaborated with visionary scientific communities including Loop Quantum Gravity (PI), the Compact Muon Solenoid (CERN), and the Fermi Large Area Telescope (INFN, NASA). By studying quantum gravity, cosmology, and particle physics, his theoretical research is converted into a series of hybrid installations characterized by magnetic sculptures, levitating objects, Virtual Reality / Augmented Reality / Artificial Intelligence experiences, and a performative use of photography based on an alienating sense of suspended time and multidimensionality.

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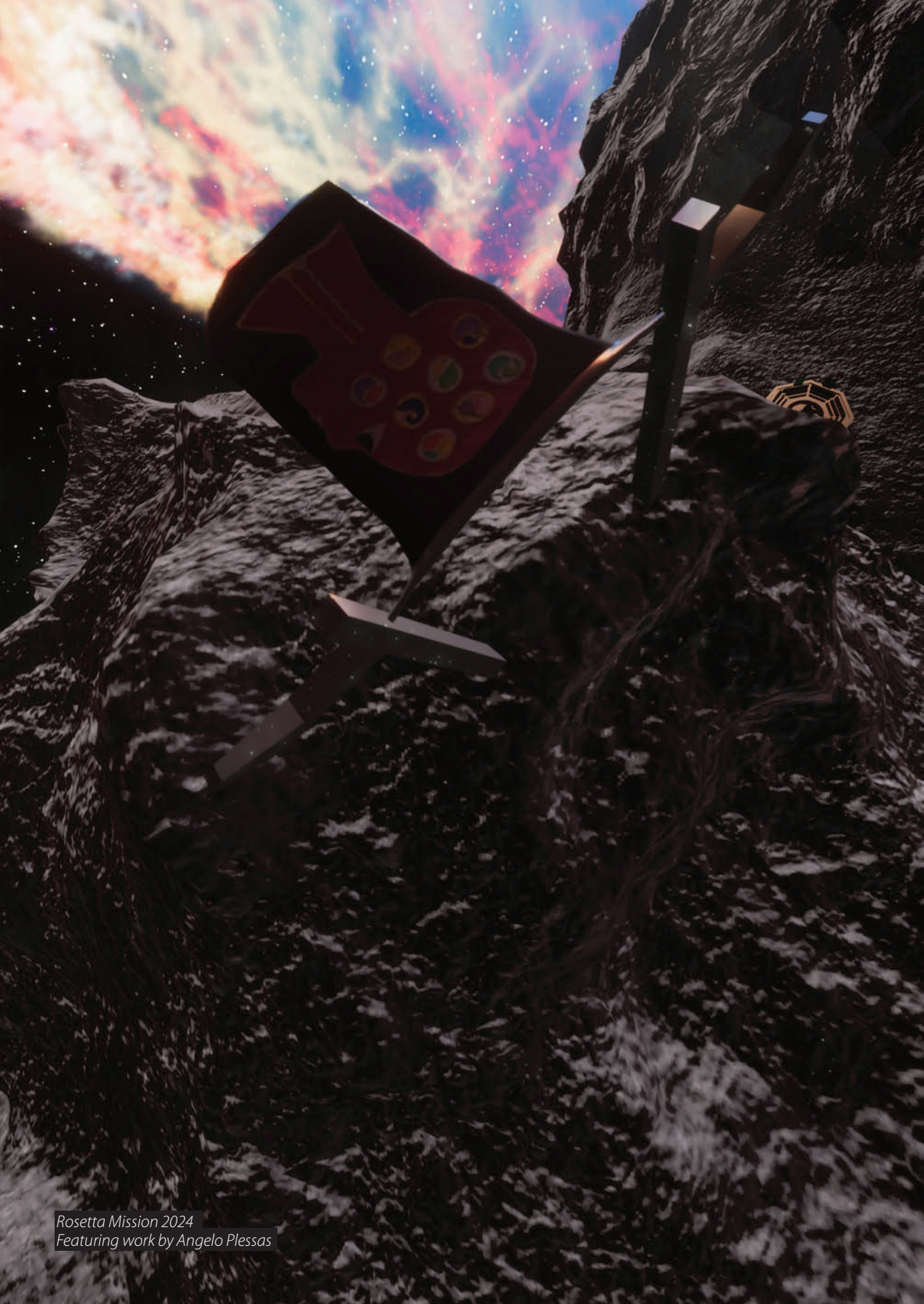

Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring work by Angelo Plessas

The reusability of public squares

Four contradictory demands in the wake of sustainable urban development

Mattias Kärrholm

I have been studying public squares in Lund and Malmö over the past twenty years (e.g., Kärrholm 2005; 2015; 2017), often focusing on how their uses have changed over the decades.[1] Looking back at these studies, I have seen how the squares of these two cities increasingly have turned into crowded pedestrianized areas for extraordinary events and weekend or evening entertainment, rather than catering for more mundane needs (Van Melik et. al. 2007: 28 f.). The development of regional retail areas and the increase in internet shopping have meant that public squares are steering away from everyday goods and services (Weltevreden et al. 2005; Delage et. al. 2020; Barata-Salgueiro & Guimarães 2020). Not least in central public places, we see how a slow process of de-retailization is coupled with the catering for temporary visitors and tourists, often leading to quite cluttered design solutions affording e.g., short meetings, refreshments and digital services.

Reusability is a fundamental characteristic of public spaces: public spaces are meant to be appropriated, yet must constantly resist permanent appropriation (Brighenti 2010). In this sense, traditional public squares and spaces are also true examples of circularity: they are built structures that have accommodated changing needs over decades or even centuries. In recent decades, particularly in response to calls for *sustainable urban development*, it seems as if public squares are expected to meet a range of new demands that sometimes risk undermining their cyclical and reusable nature. Based on my former studies, I will here bring up four such demands on our public squares, demands that seem to put their reusability at risk. These demands have been studied in the Öresund region, but I believe they can be relevant also for discussions on other contemporary squares associated with so-called sustainable urban design.

First, we have *densification*. In Swedish cities, densification is pursued as a means of sustainable development, often by building on open (more or less) public spaces such as parking lots, yards, and parks. This frequently results in a decrease in public space per capita. The effect of densification – both of population and space – manifest itself differently for various groups. Many people have seen their domestic spaces shrink, for example, due to the closure of common areas (public laundries, etc.), the increase of large families living in small apartments or through housing experiments with compact living (Kärrholm and Wirdelöv 2019). This has made some groups more reliant on public facilities, such as squares and parks than others, increasing public space related inequalities.

Second, we have *colonization*. As a response to pedestrianisation as well as to declining retail in urban centres, public squares are increasingly animated and furnished (Wirdelöv 2020). We can see how private interest increasingly colonize public squares, for example, through outdoor restaurants,

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1 This article is a revised and expanded version of a problem that I first presented in Kärrholm (2026).

advertisement campaigns, and new gadgets for hire, like electric scooters (Flores and Jansson 2021). Post-COVID trends such as outdoor offices and 'walk-and-talk' meetings have increased white-collar workers' use of public spaces during office hours (Troije et al. 2024). Sustainable lifestyles and technological developments have also led to the proliferation of new street furniture, such as cell phone and bike charging stations. In short, public spaces are becoming increasingly crowded with objects and activities that, although often catering for some kind of public demands, often involve a privatization of space and the colonization of actors with vested and commercial interests.

Third, we also see ongoing tendencies of *specialization* (a division of labour). Over the past few decades, many central public squares have become more specialized and homogenized. Squares become themed as, e.g., open-air food courts or event squares. This specialization of certain spaces has resulted in micro-zoning and a homogenization of urban areas. During the second half of the 20th century, we could see how retail and services clustered over the decades into large well-defined territories. This trend of has contributed to the development of a city à la carte (Kärrholm et al. 2017), which may offer a great variety of options for mobile and well-off citizens but can leave others in lack of needed services. It also increases travel and may lead to the deterioration of basic social infrastructures and local communities (as local and small shops must compete with large-scale facilities), especially affecting less mobile and less affluent segments of the population. In the Öresund region, where people might live in Lund, work in Copenhagen and shop in Malmö, we are (as in many other places) witnessing the development of a region *à la carte*. In some cases, this might lead to the development of different kinds of *urban deserts*, as basic infrastructure is replaced by well-organized and large, but themed and far in-between enclaves. *Food deserts* (Shaw 2006), which are still quite rare in Sweden, might be one of the more severe and well-known examples of this phenomenon, but other kinds of urban deserts could easily be listed as different services are centralised, often declining in number, while growing in individual or agglomerate size.

Fourth, we have *programmatic expansion*. In contrast to specialization and theming, we are also seeing an add-on of the number of specific programs (rather than generic uses) that individual public spaces are designed to accommodate. These programs might often cater for 'the common good', still they might lead to conflicts with existing uses in on-going struggles for space. In response to sustainable development, new programs have been added to public squares and other spaces, such as health promotion initiatives (outdoor gyms, new running tracks, benches designed for therapy or social interaction, etc.) and stormwater management through blue-green solutions. There is also a tendency to design public spaces with "weak" or underrepresented groups in mind (Sandström et al. 2024). Other programs reflect a posthumanist approach to urban planning (Holmberg 2015), catering to animals, like pollinators by avoiding grass cutting (sometimes inhibiting human-centred activities). These add-on programs might introduce new social challenges at the sites where they are implemented. In fact, programmatic expansion, such as the introduction of blue-green solutions, has in several cases been shown to trigger new spatial conflicts on how to use public space (Mottaghi 2023). An increase in the number of specified programs might increase spatial controversies, while in fact not adding much to the versatility or polyvalence of that space.

Squares have a public and democratic role to play, and this role means that they must remain a spatial resource and potential arena for the new issues that our society might need to tackle, now and in the future. The disappearance of local everyday life and the new focus on entertainment and the visiting middle-class might be problematic. Although possibly successful at attracting larger crowds, the trends mentioned might nevertheless lead to a larger and more structural problem: a decrease in the very publicness of public space (Brighenti 2010). Public spaces are important social infrastructures (Klinenberg 2018); they enable and direct social relationships. They also play an important role as places for community-building on different scales (Sandström 2019). Their publicness relates to

their potential to cater for a variety of different activities, interests and groups (cf. Marres 2005), and this is where these trends might pose problems. That colonization decreases public space for the gain of private interest is quite clear, but specialization might also contribute to a decline in publicness; and as program expansion and densification put extra pressure on our already crowded public squares (without necessarily making them more accessible), the risk of conflict, segregation and lockout effects increase.

The four tendencies mentioned here have been documented in different studies, but so far only in fragmented ways, often treating each tendency or part of it as a singular problem. These problems are interrelated and often operate on multiple scales, across different places, districts and even cities. A more ecological approach to public spaces to create a more holistic understanding of how different public spaces interact is much needed. How can our central squares meet contemporary demands related to urban sustainability, without compromising their ability to accommodate new activities, groups, and uses over time? How can we ensure the circular affordance and reusability of our public spaces?

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Rosetta Mission 2024
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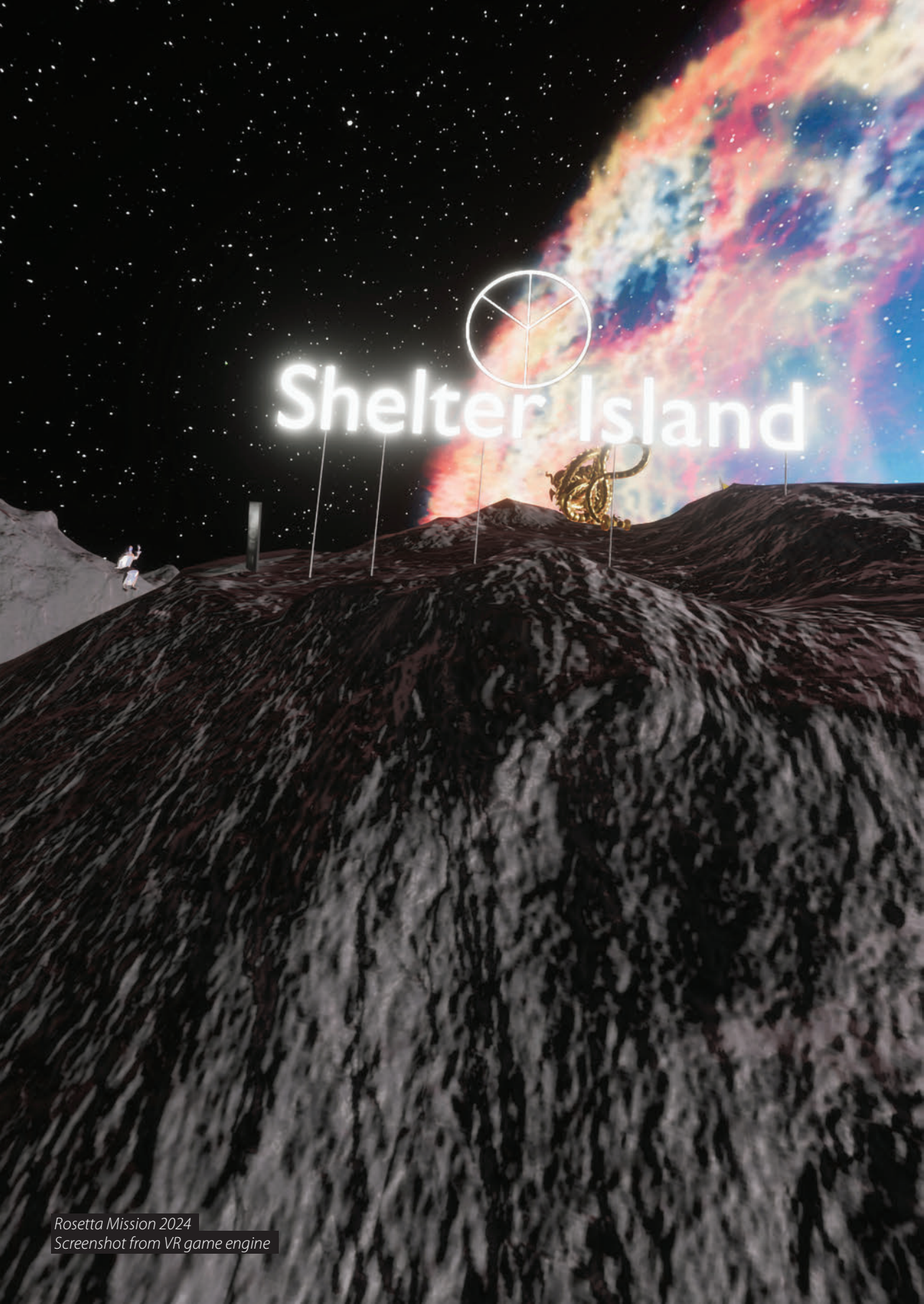

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Screenshot from VR game engine

Where the Square Still Is
Care, Security, and Infrastructure in Exarchia, Athens

Anna Giulia Della Puppa

Urban life has long condensed itself around squares: spaces of encounter, circulation, celebration, exchange, and conflict, where everyday routines intersect with extraordinary events and collective life becomes visible. This is also the case of Exarchia Square in Athens. Exarchia is a dense inner-city neighbourhood, historically known as a political, cultural, and social reference. Its square has functioned not only as a meeting place or a site of political mobilisation, but as a lived environment shaped by informal practices, affective attachments (Navaro-Yashin 2009), and layered memories (Kenti Kranidioti 2023). Over the past decade, Exarchia has been increasingly exposed to overlapping and contested processes of touristification, real-estate pressure, and large-scale urban regeneration – processes whose outcomes remain uncertain and whose effects on the neighbourhood's material fabric and social composition are still being actively fought over (Pettas, 2019, Pettas et al. 2022). The construction of Line 4 of the Athens metro – and, more specifically, the decision to construct a station in the Square – has emerged as a highly contentious infrastructural intervention.

For many inhabitants, this project has not appeared as a neutral improvement of urban mobility, but as part of a broader attempt to reorder the square according to a precise spatial and moral imaginary, one privileging legibility, control, and regulated forms of use over informality, openness, and political unpredictability. Exarchia Square thus stands at the intersection of competing visions of urban life, where different urban futures are projected and disputed: futures articulated through infrastructural promises of security, regeneration, and aesthetic order, and futures grounded in lived practices, persistence, and attachment. It is within this collision of material transformations, memories, and imaginaries that the square has become a site of struggle, revealing the political stakes embedded in contemporary urban environments.

The intentionality of urban infrastructure

The controversy surrounding the future metro station in Exarchia Square has made particularly visible what is often rendered opaque in large-scale infrastructural projects: their intentional dimension (MacFarlane, Rutherford 2008, Rodgers, O'Neill 2012, Kallianos et al. 2022). This intentionality does not reside solely in official plans, technical drawings, or public narratives of urban improvement, but emerges through the frictions (Tsing 2005) generated by implementation itself, even when infrastructure exists only as a construction site. The prolonged enclosure of the square, the militarised management of the construction site, and the progressive subtraction of accessible space have been experienced by many inhabitants not as temporary inconveniences, but as deliberate spatial operations.

The metro station has come to be perceived less as a transport intervention than as a mechanism for

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reorganising urban life: reconfiguring presence, regulating encounter, and redefining which forms of sociality are deemed admissible in the heart of the neighbourhood. Conflict, here, is not an accidental by-product of infrastructural development, but one of its constitutive conditions. As the square was progressively fenced off and transformed into a construction site, the materiality of the intervention – metal sheets, barbed wire, police lines, heavy machinery – has imposed a new regime of visibility (Brighenti 2010) and immobility upon a space historically characterised by openness, permeability, and a dense coexistence of often competing heterogeneous uses. This transformation intervened directly in the affective and relational ecology of the square, producing a widespread sense that neutralisation preceded any promised future redevelopment. Against this background, Exarchia Square has increasingly been understood as a site of infrastructural struggle: a space where the politics of urban futures are not only articulated through plans and projections, but materially enacted, contested, and lived in the present.

Persistence, loss, and everyday conflict

In late June 2025, an initiative organised by the neighbourhood assembly opposing the metro station took place along the narrow strip of space left outside the construction site, pressed between the metal fencing and the façades of the buildings on Themistokleous Street. Two historians had been invited to speak about the history of the square. Marianna, a journalist who has lived in the neighbourhood since her university years, introduced the event by articulating a shared assumption: squares become squares because people choose to inhabit them, and they are preserved because people persist in inhabiting them, regardless of circumstances. The violent enclosure of the square in August 2022, she recalled, had seemingly aimed not only at erasing its physical space, but at cancelling its history altogether. And yet, despite police presence, metal barriers, and severe restrictions on movement, inhabitants, workers, regular visitors, and political collectives had not stopped gathering there. Their continued presence, she argued, both prevented the construction site from operating in opacity and allowed the square to retain a form of everyday use. Through the repeated acts of tying banners, writing slogans, organising gatherings, and insisting on reaching the square, inhabitants actively turned the metal fencing into a contested surface, extending the square onto the very device designed to enclose and neutralise it.

Following a court ruling in November 2024 that forced the partial removal of the fencing for safety reasons, a narrow five-metre-wide strip along Themistokleous Street was formally returned to public use. For the assembly, this fragment has become, once again, "the square." Not as a restored public space – the vast majority of the area remains fenced off – but as a reclaimed terrain wrested from enclosure and sustained through ongoing acts of care and repair. What takes shape along this narrow strip of pavement is not a settled common space, but a form of the square that exists only insofar as it is actively maintained. Its openness is neither given nor neutral; it is produced through presence, insistence, and practices aimed at keeping the space accessible against renewed pressures of enclosure. Care, here, operates as a situated effort to hold the space open – an effort that remains fragile and exposed to appropriation. The tensions that traverse this space do not stem from a plurality of equivalent uses, but from an asymmetrical struggle over its orientation. As collective initiatives and assemblies work to reassert the square as a space of shared life, other forces move in to normalise and take advantage of what has been reopened. Café tables advancing toward the fence and the parking of delivery scooters serving nearby commercial activities appropriate the liberated surface, quietly redirecting it toward consumption and private appropriation, rather than collective use. These frictions trace the shifting line along which practices of liberation and commoning are never secured once and for all. In this sense, Exarchia Square persists not as a commons in itself, but as a space where such practices are repeatedly attempted, interrupted, and taken up again (Stavrides 2016; De Angelis 2017; Federici 2018). It does not endure as a stabilised object, but as a process that remains

politically alive precisely because it is never allowed to settle: a space continually reopened against enclosure, securitisation, and even quieter forms of capture.

This obstinacy can be fully understood only by moving backwards, to a moment that precedes it and gives it affective density. At dawn on 6 November 2023, heavy machinery entered the fenced-off square under the protection of riot police. In the weeks that followed, seventy-four mature trees were pruned and felled, completing the transformation of what had already been an interdicted green space into a barren expanse. For many inhabitants, the destruction of the trees was experienced as metonymic violence: cutting the trees meant cutting into the life of the square. Pain, anger, and despair circulated widely, not as fleeting reactions but as shared affective states through which the square was rearticulated as something more than a physical site. Even as its material substance was being dismantled, Exarchia Square persisted as an affective and relational space, insistently named as "Our square".

Erotes and lamarines – Memory, visibility, and material politics

Long before the square was physically stripped of its greenery, the disappearance of its landmark – a century-old lamppost adorned with three intertwined putti (*Erotes*, in Greek) – signalled an initial rupture in the material and affective continuity of the space. For many inhabitants, the Erotes were not merely an ornamental element, but a shared point of reference through which encounters, memories, and everyday trajectories were oriented: one did not simply meet in the square, but under the Erotes. Their removal did not simply subtract an object from the square; it unsettled a dense web of relations that tied people to the place. Over time, the Erotes had been repeatedly re-signified through paint, banners, and adornments, not as acts of degradation, but as gestures of attachment and political belonging. Taking them away thus anticipated, in symbolic form, the more extensive material losses that would follow. It was through this earlier intervention that the square first began to be experienced as something under threat: an affective space whose continuity could be interrupted, displaced, and reconfigured.

Yet in response to their disappearance, the Erotes did not vanish from the square's social life. They re-emerged in other forms: papier-mâché replicas, carried during demonstrations and lifted above the crowd on long poles, transformed the absent monument into a mobile presence. Through these acts, the Erotes ceased to function as a fixed urban object and became instead a circulating figure of affect, loss, and persistence. What was at stake was not the preservation of a monument, but the defence of a shared point of orientation — a material anchor through which the square had long been inhabited and remembered. If the Erotes condensed memory and affect, the installation of the *lamarines* (the metal fence surrounding the building site) marked a shift toward a radically different spatial regime. Erected rapidly and without consultation, the tall metal sheets surrounding the construction site replaced openness with opacity, horizontality with vertical enclosure. Where the Erotes had offered a point of convergence and recognition, the lamarines imposed a logic of separation and interdiction, transforming the square into an inaccessible volume rather than a traversable space.

Over time, these metal surfaces did not remain inert. They became the primary interface through which the conflict over the square was made visible. Inhabitants and assemblies refused attempts to aestheticise or normalise the enclosure, turning the lamarines into a contested political surface. Banners, slogans, and images addressing not only the metro project but broader struggles were attached to them, inscribing alternative meanings onto the very infrastructure designed to block access and visibility. Through these practices, the lamarines ceased to function solely as barriers and were enacted as surfaces of confrontation. While official plans and renderings projected a future-oriented, pacified square, the fenced perimeter imposed a present of suspension and control – a present that

inhabitants repeatedly intervened upon. In this way, the conflict over Exarchia Square unfolded not only through demonstrations or legal disputes, but through a struggle over materiality: from the removal of the Erotes to the appropriation of the lamarines, the square is continuously reconstituted as an affective and political space, precisely because its material form is being contested and continually undone.

Security, care, and infrastructural neutralisation

Enclosure and the removal of the Erotes articulated the square as a space to be secured: a site whose access, visibility, and legitimacy were reorganised through control. In this sense, security did not arrive as a neutral response to an already transformed space, but emerged through the very material operations that reshaped the square, protecting the construction process while simultaneously exposing inhabitants to new forms of risk and uncertainty. The controversy over Exarchia Square has thus brought to the surface a fundamental divergence in how security is understood and enacted. For inhabitants, insecurity is experienced as something tangible, but not reducible to a single register. On the one hand, it concerns concrete risks to physical integrity, produced by enclosure, excavation, restricted access, and the obstruction of movement. On the other hand, it involves a different, though intertwined, dimension: the progressive erosion of those relational infrastructures of care – understood here as the situated, interdependent practices through which safety and continuity are sustained in everyday life (Simone 2004, 2021; Care Collective 2020; Jupp 2022, Wiesel et al. 2021).

These two forms of insecurity are not the same, nor are they interchangeable. Rather, they converge, reinforcing one another, as the material reconfiguration of the square undermines both physical safety and the dense web of social relations through which mutual care, and everyday coordination had been sustained. From the perspective of the transport authority, by contrast, security is framed as a technical requirement ensuring the uninterrupted progression of works. Metal fencing, continuous police patrols, and barbed wire materialise an aesthetic-affective infrastructure of security (Pavoni, Tulumello 2023) oriented toward the protection of the construction process itself, normalising surveillance and exclusion in the name of order and efficiency. In this configuration, what appears institutionally as a secure environment is lived by inhabitants as a space made insecure.

Security thus operates as a technology for governing the future through the present, pre-emptively organising social life (Neocleous 2008). Indeed, by privileging a particular conception of safety, the construction site does not merely manage risk; it anticipates the forms of urban life deemed acceptable once the works are completed. Legal challenges and political actions brought by the neighbourhood assembly have made this intentionality visible, showing how the political effects of infrastructure are not accidental side effects, but anticipated consequences embedded in its implementation (Truscello 2020, Mbembe 2024). In this sense, infrastructural conflict is not a contingent disturbance, but a struggle over the futures being materially produced – and foreclosed – in and through the square.

Conclusion – The square as political form

Exarchia Square shows how the square, as an urban form, operates less as a container of social life than as a site where the political is continuously produced. Its enclosure, partial reclamation, and persistent inhabitation reveal that the political does not emerge only in moments of open confrontation, but through everyday practices of care, attachment, and insistence. Even when reduced to fragments, the square remains a space where collective life is negotiated and reworked. At the same time, the case of Exarchia shows how contemporary infrastructures function as apparatuses of governmentality through which urban life is governed (see Larkin 2013, Kallianos 2018). Through securitisation, enclosure, and the reorganisation of access and visibility, infrastructural projects anticipate and delimit future forms of urban life in advance. In doing so, they do not only redistribute risks to physical

integrity, but also erode – or attempt to reconfigure – the community-based infrastructures through which safety, care, and political life are collectively sustained. The struggle over Exarchia Square is therefore not only about a metro station, nor solely about opposing an infrastructural project. It is about defending the possibility of inhabiting uncertainty, of sustaining relational forms of safety, and of contesting futures that are materially scripted in concrete, steel, and security dispositifs. In this sense, the square persists as a political form: fragile, contested, and irreducible to the futures imposed upon it.

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Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring speech by Raymond Laflamme

Through the Lens of Urban Squares
Everyday Life and the Visibility of Social Transformations

Gülce Özdemir

I. Natalia met Quimet at Gràcia's Plaça del Diamant during the Festa Major de Gràcia, the annual street festival in Gràcia (Barcelona, Spain) (Rodoreda, 1959).[1] During their marriage, Natalia cared for Quimet's pigeons, a quiet symbolic domestic suffering that has since been commemorated in the square itself: today, a sculpture of a woman gazes skyward, surrounded and trapped with pigeons. This sculpture evokes Mercè Rodoreda's very well-known novel, translated in English as *The Pigeon Girl*, *In Diamond Square*, or *The Time of the Doves,* which is set in the years surrounding the Spanish Civil War. Just as Plaça del Diamant has become a site of collective memory, many other *plaças* across Gràcia similarly structure urban life, offering a stage for both everyday interactions and public gatherings. Over the past decade, Gràcia has experienced intensifying gentrification, marked by rising rents, the influx of third-wave coffee shops, and the mushrooming artisanal workshops that have displaced longstanding local businesses.

Urban squares stand at the crossroads of change. These urban laboratories turn everyday life into a lens for understanding broader social transformations. In this article, drawing on autoethnographic reflections as an eight-year resident of Gràcia, I examine the neighborhood's changing landscape since COVID-19, exploring its relation to gentrification and local politics. Using an in-depth case study of the Festa Major de Gràcia, I combine observation with participation: from the summer of 2024 to 2025, I volunteered on Carrer Mozart (Mozart Street).

II. Industrial development and economic expansion in Catalonia at the beginning of the twentieth century attracted migrants from both rural Catalonia and other parts of Spain (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014). This wave of Spanish internal migration continued during the 1950s and 1960s, driven by economic growth following the long post–Spanish Civil War recovery period (1936–39) (ibid.). Catalonia was a net-immigration region even into the 1970s and 1980s, although at slower rates than in the previous two decades (Bover and Vellia, 1999). The city limits expanded to accommodate this growth, although 7% of the population lived in *barracas* (unregulated, self-made housing units) in the city's peripheral areas, with little access to resources such as running water or electricity (Gallego Vila, 2018). These new neighborhoods, now inside the city's structure, were not recognised as part of the city until the 1980s (ibid.). Since this expansion in the early 1980s, Barcelona has cultivated various city images ranging from cultural capital to tourism capital.

While in the early 1990s the city promoted itself as an alternative locus of cultural activity, attracting

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students, intellectuals, artists, and bohemians, by the late 1990s Barcelona had "become the pioneer in the promotion of the city as a logo and as a commercial brand," a process achieved through both the stigmatization of undesired groups and the entrepreneurial gentrification of the city (Tsavdaroglou, 2016). In this sense, Barcelona opted to become a tourism capital rather than a cultural capital, through "massive evictions and demolitions of political squats, [the] criminalization of migrants, sex workers and other 'undesirable' groups," many of whom had played a significant role in the city's cultural vitality (*ibid.*). Barcelona became a leading tourist destination in a short period of time: in 1990, 1.7 million visitors stayed in hotels in the city; by 2023, that number had risen to 12 million (Barcelona City Council, 2024).

The economic boom associated with the 1992 Olympic Games transformed the city's layout itself. Following similar approaches to the World Expos of 1888 and 1929, the Games' concession was used to justify major undertakings to address urban issues, some of which had been projected two decades earlier (Gallego Vila, 2018). These plans were an effort to rebuild and promote public space. At the same time, Barcelona's transformation into a global city led to rising housing prices, declining housing availability, and intensified competition for public space (COHRE, 2007). The "Barcelona Model" aimed to position the city competitively as a global city (Oakley and Ukpabi, 2015; Cocola-Gant and López-Gay, 2020). But the fallout of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis accelerated the precarization of the right to housing through "evictions, mortgage repossessions, the growth of homelessness, the expulsion of low and middle-income population from the central neighbourhoods, the rise of rents and the growing difficulties of accessing affordable housing are the symptoms of housing precarity at an urban scale" (D'Adda, 2021, p. 742).

III. Street drinking (*botellón*) is a common social practice in Spain, where people gather in public to spend time together. Gràcia squares are no exception to this common practice. Plaça del Sol and the steps of the church in Plaça de la Virreina, for example, are often filled with large groups of young people meeting there at night. *Botellón* offers an alternative form of nightlife outside bars and clubs, allowing young people to socialize in open public space at lower cost. It also supports a small informal economy for street vendors. However, the practice has sparked a debate about alcohol consumption, noise and nuisance. Efforts to restrict *botellón* shape how public space is used and determine who is allowed to use it. In Spain, there is no single national ban on public drinking; instead, control relies on a combination of municipal ordinances and the national security law *Ley Orgánica 4/2015 de Protección de la Seguridad Ciudadana* (often referred to as the "Ley Mordaza"), which allows authorities to sanction behaviors considered disruptive of order. Before COVID-19, these rules were applied unevenly, and large gatherings in squares were often tolerated. For instance, in Plaça del Sol, the police regularly arrived around midnight to clear people out under the pretext of cleaning, using routine sanitation as a soft enforcement tactic that displaced gatherings without issuing fines. During and after the pandemic, however, enforcement intensified. Health regulations expanded police powers, while heightened surveillance made street gatherings more visible and more easily punishable. At Plaça del Sol, at least two patrol cars circulated through the square roughly every fifteen minutes and often remained stationed there for extended periods, preventing people from sitting on the ground. Even when bars had reopened, *botellón* remained prohibited.

During one observed incident in 2021, I was sitting on the ground with a friend drinking a non-alcoholic beverage when patrol cars arrived at the square in the afternoon; people around us immediately stood up, anticipating enforcement, but officers used hand gestures to command everyone to remain seated while they checked and fined individuals who consumed alcohol across the square. These practices show a shift from earlier tolerance toward saturation policing. In the summer of 2025, a week before the Festa Major de Gràcia, I was sitting on the ground in Plaça de Vila de Gràcia along with volunteers from Carrer Mozart, eating empanadas during a dinner break. Although we weren't

drinking, two police officers told us that sitting on the ground was forbidden and added that eating there was also not allowed. Rules originally meant to control drinking expanded to restrict ordinary activities. During the final week of Festa Major preparations, 20-30 volunteers moved tables and chairs into the square for a collective dinner, but the police did not intervene, revealing how enforcement is shaped not only by the act itself, but also by scale, visibility, and organization.

Policing and the commodification of urban squares go hand in hand, with terrace seating now dominating the summer evenings. As a result, residents who want to participate in public life are effectively pushed into paying for terraces, a structurally induced demand that also creating queues and dysfunctions. There were, however, two notable exceptions to the dominance of commodified, policed space. On April 28, 2025, a nationwide blackout cut electricity and mobile signals, transforming urban squares into sites of spontaneous gathering and information exchange. Along with my flatmate and our neighbor, we moved to plaças to get info about the situation. In the early hours of the blackout terrace bars were still serving cold drinks, but ground-level spaces gradually filled with residents. Once the terraces ran out of cold drinks and could no longer accept card payments, they all closed, and the plaças returned to the people who sat, chatted, shared music, and listened to the radio to exchange news. When electricity returned in the evening, the community collectively celebrated. The blackout functioned as an unplanned catalyst that reactivated dormant urban practices and drew residents back into plaças. This moment highlights both the fragility and the enduring possibilities of non-commercial urban commons. The second notable exception emerges during protests and festivals (such as Festa Major de Gràcia), While protest takes shape as a deliberate politics of disruption, festivals rely on tightly managed coordination and control, producing a sense of collectivity without changing the city's underlying order. Yet my recent conversations with Gràcia residents suggest that the neighborhood's plaças are returning to their pre-COVID state.

IV. Hatred against tourists has become common in Barcelona. One local resident said: "The worst is those Germans; they come and spend their high salaries in Barcelona." I also observed local elderly residents complaining about tourists and Airbnbs in the neighborhood. Once, while sitting at a terrace in Plaça de la Vila de Gràcia with a blonde friend, a waiter threw the menu to us — she had been mistaken for a tourist. During the Foguerons de Sa Pobla a Gràcia festival in 2023, friends from Belgium experienced a physical push that escalated into a verbal confrontation, with one saying, "Because of you we cannot live in Barcelona anymore." During Festa Major in 2024, other friends speaking English on Carrer Mozart were told by a passerby in Catalan that their English was terrible, prompting a response in Catalan. Verbal and non-verbal aggression has been more common toward African, Asian, and Latin American migrants (Özdemir, 2024). In Gràcia, the gap between the EU and extra-EU immigrant populations has narrowed over the past decades, but started widened again in the 2020s (Municipality of Barcelona, 2026). It might not be a shock, then, that the examples above suggest that "Western" migrants are increasingly subject to similar treatment in Gràcia. These everyday forms of exclusion and verbal or physical aggression are more visible and amplified during highly symbolic neighborhood events, such as the Festa Major de Gràcia, where collective identity, belonging, and competition intersect.

The Festa involves a competition among streets to determine whose decorations are the most elaborate. The award ceremony takes place in Plaça de la Vila de Gràcia. During the 2024 edition volunteers gathered in the square wearing street-specific t-shirts and carrying pieces of decoration that visually signaled collective affiliation. As Carrer Mozart was announced as the winner reactions were mixed. Some volunteers from other streets applauded, while others expressed dismay and attacked verbally the team – "Speak Catalan!""Sell empanadas!". Water bottles were also thrown. Carrer Mozart is indeed a multicultural street with communities from Brazil, Argentina, Morocco, Turkey, Germany, Italy, Australia, the UK, and Venezuela. Similar events reveal how local debates about belonging

reflect broader struggles over Catalan identity. Under Franco's dictatorship, the Catalan language was banned from public life, threatening its survival. Today, Catalan endures as a central marker of regional identity and cultural heritage, as highlighted during the 2017 referendum on Catalan independence.

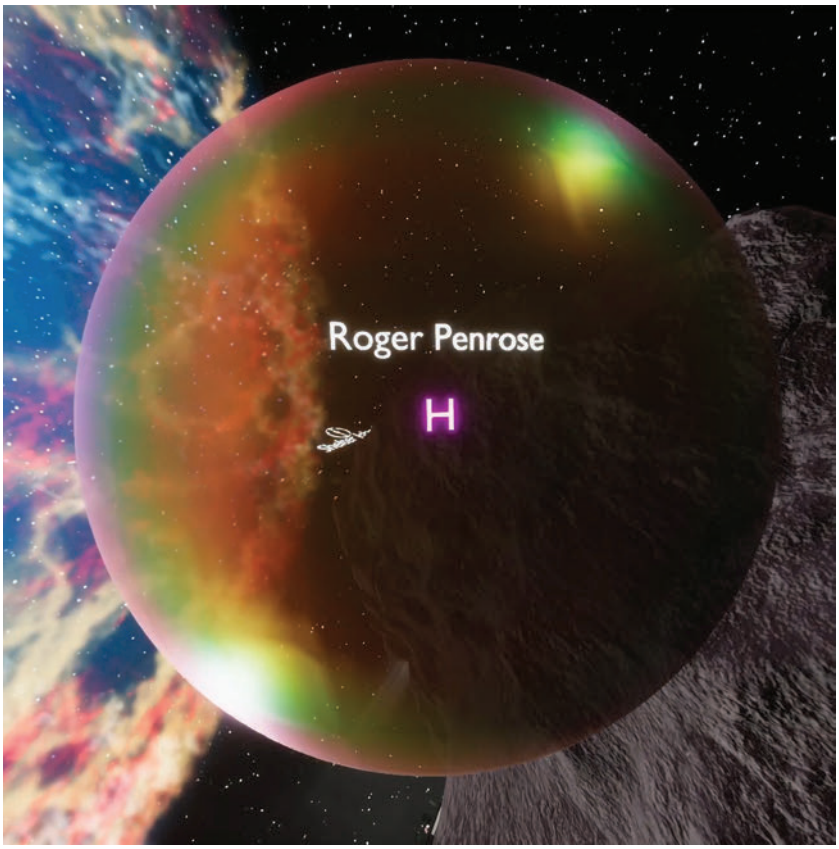
Anti-migrant sentiment has grown in Barcelona. Based on hours of conversations with volunteers from Carrer Mozart and other Gràcia residents, feelings of exclusion emerged as a recurring theme. Event migrant residents who speak Catalan and participate in traditional activities, such as Correfoc, report discrimination, demonstrating that language fluency alone does not guarantee inclusion. For example, a Latina migrant and Mozart volunteer who has lived in Barcelona for over twenty years was rejected for a job in a local grocery shop because her Catalan was not fluent enough.

V. In the 2025 Festa Major de Gràcia, the cultural themes chosen by different streets highlighted tensions around identity, belonging, and neighborhood change. Carrer Mozart focused on a feminist reinterpretation of the Catalan legend of Sant Jordi. Traditionally, the story recounts how Saint George kills a dragon to save a princess and is closely associated with masculinity, heroism, and Catalan cultural identity. Mozart's version challenged these gendered roles, emphasizing care, cooperation, and alternative forms of agency. Other streets also chose themes explicitly linked to Catalan culture, like Correfog and Castellers. The Plaça team visually reconstructed the neighborhood as it existed prior to recent waves of gentrification. Decorations referenced small, family-owned shops that had disappeared over time, invoking nostalgia for a pre-touristic and ungentrified landscape.

Across the neighborhood, public walls and street signs carried slogans such as "Refugees Welcome" alongside "Tourists Go Home," staging a moral distinction between humanitarian deservingness and consumption-driven presence. The signs emphasised Gràcia's political positioning as in solidarity toward forced mobility, and hostile to extractive forms of temporary urban use. The migrant occupies an intermediate, unstable position: neither fully valorized like the refugee, nor fully rejected like the tourist, subject to suspicion and conditional acceptance depending on legality, class, or intent. Labels such as "expat" and "digital nomad" rebrand privileged mobility. Neighborhoods like Gràcia, with high proportions of European and North American residents, avoid the label "migrant area" associated places like Raval, with racialized and working-class populations. In this sense, "migrant" operates less as a demographic descriptor than as a racialized and classed marker of marginality (de Genova, 2002). I was surprised of a USA citizen without a residence permit living in Gracia, and she was surprised that I referred to her as a migrant, since being a migrant in her country is directly linked to being an "undocumented Latino".

Within this context, migrant integration emerges as a contested process, rather than a universally supported goal. While migrants may be symbolically welcomed as abstract figures of solidarity, concrete practices of integration can still be perceived as threatening to established hierarchies. In a gentrifying neighborhood such as Gràcia, efforts by migrants to demonstrate cultural integration may be interpreted, not as inclusion, but as competition over symbolic ownership of space. In short, everyday life in Gràcia shows that urban plazas are central sites for negotiating identity and social inclusion. Tensions arising from gentrification and identity politics are not abstract forces but embodied practices, through which access to public spaces is performed and challenged.

(Right) Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring speech by Roger Penrose



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Rosetta Mission 2024
Screenshot from VR game engine

On a yellow bench
at St Johannesplan in Malmö, Sweden

Johan Wirdelöv

At the square St Johannesplan in the city of Malmö, Sweden, there is a church, a shopping mall, several bus stops, fast food restaurants, and the entrance to an underground railway station. At times there is a lot of people in movement. It is a square where things compete for my attention as I leave way for cyclists, avoid street promoters and fundraisers, or keep looking for the right bus to arrive. Sometimes there are demonstrations or events.

Another actor in the attention game of St Johannesplan is a piece of furniture – a bench. It competes by use of color. It is yellow. The clear bright color really stands out and gives the impression that something special is being signalled.

This yellow bench is called a friendship bench, and it is part of an awareness campaign about mental illness. The intention is to break the taboo about mental illness and encourage conversations. Besides the one at St Johannesplan there are 12 other yellow friendship benches around the city, and variations of this campaign can be found in other Swedish cities as well as in other parts of the world.

The idea of linking a bench to conversations about mental illness was developed in Zimbabwe about 20 years ago. In the Bantu language Shona, depression is called *kufungisisa*, which means "thinking too much." In Zimbabwe, the friendship bench has been placed in a confined environment by a healthcare institution. In Sweden, it has instead been placed in public places, like St Johannesplan. It has also been given a metal plaque with a QR code that leads to a website about mental illness.

The friendship bench is different from most other public benches. It is more than just a part of an infrastructure for meeting people's need to sit down. With its striking yellow color and its connection to mental illness, it is a piece of furniture that produces meaning in ways that most other benches do not. It is a thematized piece of furniture, associated with a specific topic. It presents itself like a sign.

Sociologist Erving Goffman has described social life as a theatrical performance in which we wear different masks in different situations and try to control the impressions we give to those around us. Through Goffman's eyes, urban space can be seen as a landscape of theatrical stages on which we perform in full view of strangers. The unspoken norms and codes of conduct that surround us is like a theater script.

Based on Goffman's theory, the friendship bench can be understood as a stage within a stage – a miniature stage nested in the more extended stage of St Johannesplan. Sitting on a very yellow bench attracts more attention from people passing by, as compared to sitting on a regular bench. This follows the ancient urban logic that if something is highly visible – such as a church tower or town hall – then it is important. With its bright yellow color, the bench creates an state of aesthetic exception in the space, and its extraordinary appearance rubs off on those who sit on it. The yellow color

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becomes like the spotlight on a stage.

We don't often think about the long line of civilizational development that has led to the furnishing of today's urban spaces. If we speculate on how an *Ur*-furniture at some point may have originated it may have happened as a hominid once sat down on a rock or a log. To become furniture, this rock or log needed to be more than just a rock or a log. To be transformed from a piece of nature into a piece of civilization, it must have become meaningful. It must have been charged with some kind of significance.

The stone or log may have been transformed into furniture through repeated use, so that over time it became associated with a particular individual or activity. The original piece of furniture may have been linked to a ritual, a leader, or an everyday chore. Perhaps a piece of nature first became a piece of furniture when two hominids fought over it, and one of them thought, "I usually sit here," and then carved a mark into it to claim it.

In a next step, the idea must have arisen at some point that a piece of furniture could be designed to play a role in how the person sitting on it is perceived by others. Someone discovered that a piece of furniture can work as the framing of a person. There are many historical examples of how furniture with distinctive aesthetics has had the effect of highlighting and elevating the person sitting on it.

Archaeologists Vassilis Petrakis and Platon Petridis have written about a small clay figurine as one of the earliest examples. The figurine is over 8,000 years old and comes from the ancient city of Çatal-höyük. It depicts a majestic goddess enthroned on a piece of furniture resembling an armchair. At each of the armrests is an animal head, perhaps a large feline. Seen from the front, it is thinkable that the goddess is resting her arms on the armrests while grasping the animals' necks with her hands.

Someone has thus had the idea that an individual with power should sit on a piece of furniture that expresses this power. According to Petrakis and Petridis, the figurine conveys the goddess's dominance over the wild animal kingdom. The goddess seems to possess some animal power. Throughout history, people in power have followed the same logic and and had themselves elevated by one of the descendants of the *Ur*-furniture, namley the throne. What we sit on affects how we appear to others. Imagine trying to negotiate your salary while sitting on an unstable stool.

We can understand the yellow friendship bench as part of a long history of furniture with a social impact. Someone who has read Goffman might describe the friendship bench as a so-called *front-stage*. Frontstage behavior is characterized by being exposed to the gaze of others, while backstage behavior is more free from the pressure of wearing a mask and from the demands of expectations and behavioral codes. It could be said that the friendship bench forms a kind of condensed frontstage. In an already public context, such as a public square, the bench makes the person sitting on it even more highlighted and exposed.

On the other hand, mental illness is not just any topic. It is more difficult to talk about than, for example, a broken arm or hay fever. The bench is therefore partly about something that may seem to belong backstage, and to define it only as frontstage would therefore be incomplete. Here, a contradiction emerges. A bench at a square is public, but the subject of mental illness is intimate. In this way, the friendship bench is of a twofold nature – a frontstage backstage.

However, frontstage and backstage, or for that matter the related concepts of private and public, are in fact often mixing, overlapping or blending together in urban space. The city is full of frontstage and backstage in transformation. Think of how some people wait for the bus while talking on the phone with the speaker function on, or think of how someone's houseplants, paintings, and bags of clothes are being carried in plain sight from a moving van into a new home. The friendship bench can in this way be understood as a deliberate arrangement of a frontstage-backstage dynamic that is

characteristic of urban space in general.

When I have passed by and seen people sitting on friendship benches in Malmö, I have tried to overhear conversations and intrepret their use of the bench. My impression has been that people sit on it just like any bench, and – as far as I have percieved – not often specifically for talking about mental illness. At St Johannesplan, I have seen people putting down their shopping bags to rest for a while, or having a take-away coffee while waiting for the next train departure. I once saw a small group of anti-war protesters using it as a kind of base camp, placing a speaker on it and attaching a flag to it.

It seems that the friendship bench at St Johannesplan is more active as a medium for a campaign, rather than a *de facto* seat for therapeutic talking. There is something important to notice here, says the the eye-catching yellow color. It indirectly points towards some kind of societal institution behind the gesture, that wants to show good will.

The agora of ancient Greece was a place for gathering and discussing shared concerns. The friendship bench can be understood as working in this tradition as it raises its voice in a specific matter. This may be where we find the particularity of the friendship bench in relation to the *Ur*-furniture and its descendants. In contrast to the many historical pieces of furniture that have served as a stage for a person being seated, the friendship bench is a stage, or throne, for a concern.

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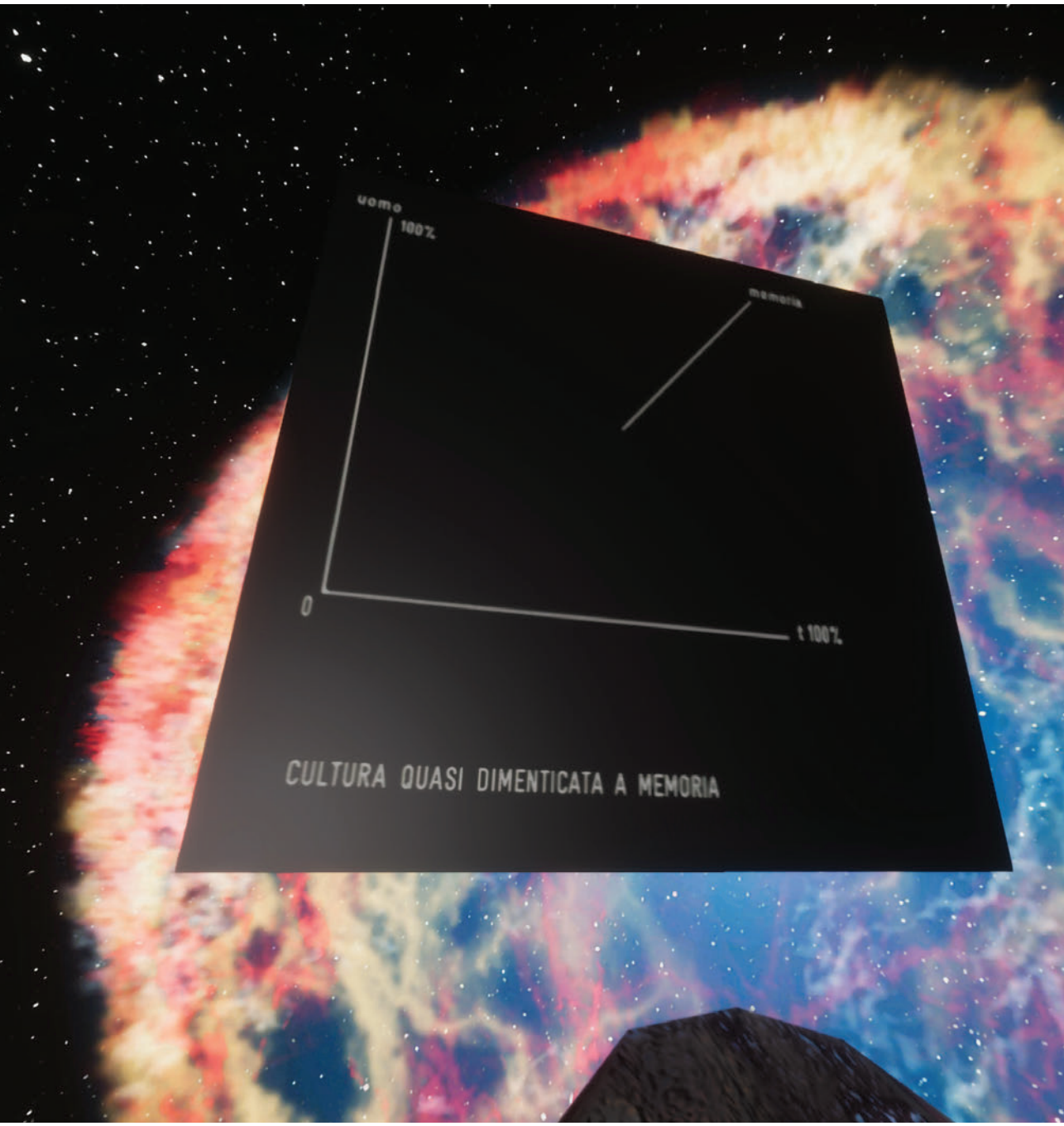
Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring work by Patrizio Di Massimo



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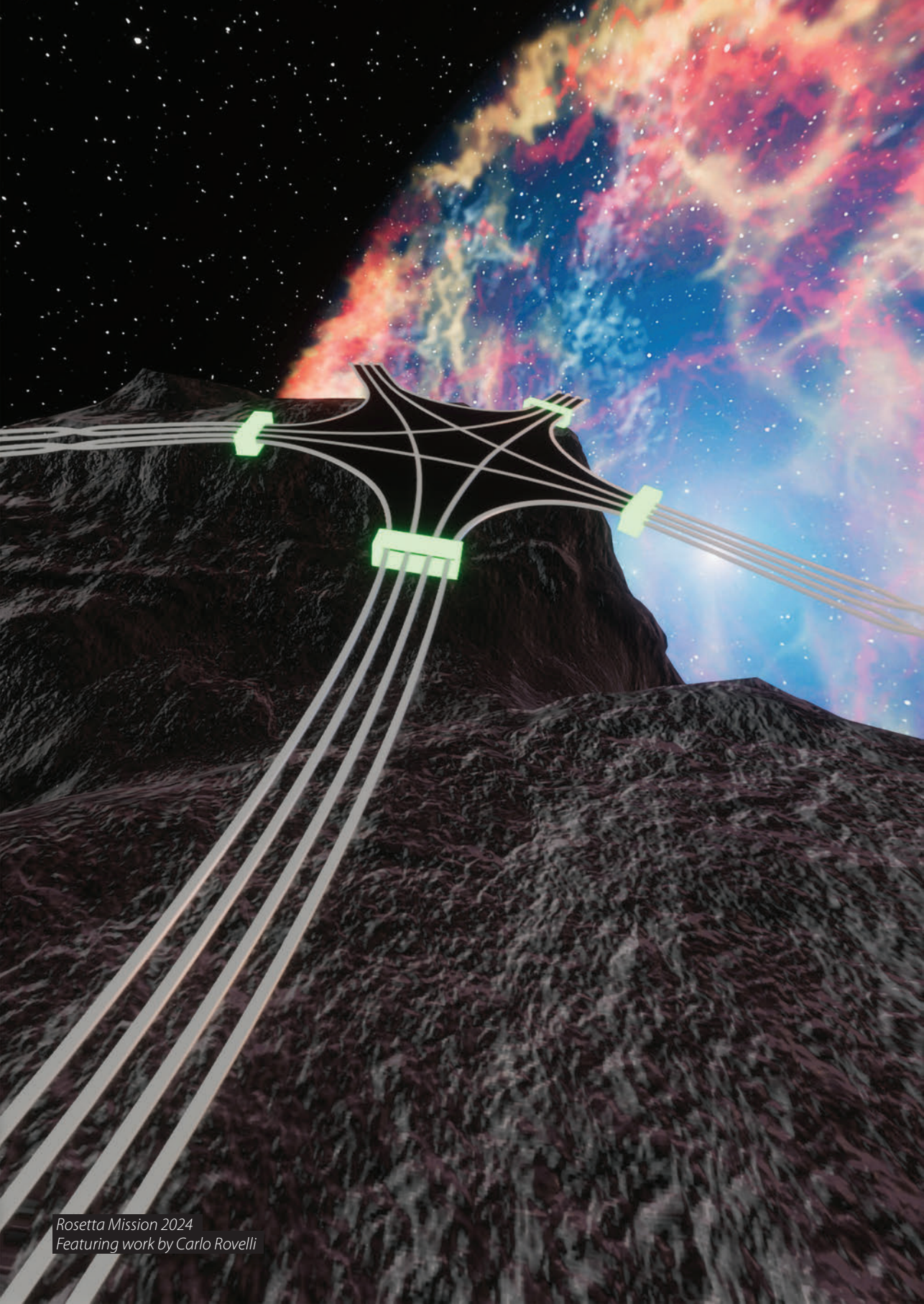

Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring work by Carlo Rovelli

The Piazza Exercise

Rosa Salzberg

"I've never set foot out of the building before, during a lesson,"[1] marvels one of my students as we leave the classroom with its stiff rows of front-facing desks and take the short walk from the Department of Sociology to Trento's Piazza Duomo. The sky opens up as we pass the entrance to the cathedral and move into the large and beautiful square – somewhat less beautiful today as workmen are in the middle of setting up temporary structures for a coming sports festival, including a large glass box to display a luxury Audi. We stop near the towering *tiglio* (linden tree), once a gathering place for the homeless or those looking for work, that still provides some shade for elderly people sitting on benches underneath it on this sunny day. Nearby, an impromptu occupation is taking place, to do with the war in Palestine; protestors have laid cushions on the ground and are encouraging passersby to come and talk with them. Seemingly oblivious, tourists are taking photos of the square, and themselves, or sitting down on the steps around the fountain to eat a gelato or just rest their feet.

We form a ragged circle and I tell the students something about the most obvious features of the square, from a historian's perspective: the *palazzi* that once belonged to the most prominent families, several still covered in Renaissance frescoes; the grandiose fountain of Neptune, added in the eighteenth century; the imposing medieval Duomo itself, dedicated to the patron saint San Vigilio. And not far away, beneath our feet, the remains of the original Roman city of *Tridentum*.[2] "Why are piazzas important?" I ask. "What kinds of functions do they have, now and in the past?" A few students shyly chip in: they were marketplaces. Spaces for rituals. Places of punishment. "What kinds of messages were these buildings and monuments meant to send?" Some become more animated: they were symbols of power – of the church, the nobility, the urban authorities; contributions to civic beauty; expressions of local pride.

Together, we note the rare signs of nature – aside from the mountains encircling us – that persist in this most urban of spaces. As well as the *tiglio* and the tinkling of the fountain, there is also the strip of coloured paving that reveals where a *roggia* or stream used to cross the square. Once a place where people drew water and did their washing, it was covered over in the nineteenth century as part of efforts to make this central urban space grander, more hygienic, more practical. When we look at some historical images of the piazza, the differences between past and present become more obvious. One student notices how the fountain originally was surrounded by a chain fence, presumably to stop people sitting on the steps and besmirching what was meant to be an elegant civic monument. "It looks like a gigantic parking lot!" remarks another, struck by a photo which shows how, not much

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1 I am grateful to all of my Research Methods in History students over the past four years who have engaged in this exercise with me, and whose work I have drawn on in this essay.
2 For more details, see Oradini and Bocchi, 1989.

more than half a century ago, the piazza was full of cars, like many Italian squares in the first era of mass motorization.

Then I let them loose for a while, to walk and look, stop and take notes, with some keywords to stimulate their observation further (Sound, Communication, Gender, Memory . . .), and instruct them to write a report about it afterwards. Some are bewildered by being asked to think about and do history in this way. But pretty soon they start to observe things about this space that they pass through every day but never pay much attention to. Many of them comment on its commercialization in contrast to the past. Yes, this was once a place of trade, among other things, and it is still the site of a weekly market, but now the piazza has become a site primarily dedicated to tourism and consumption: at the expensive bars and restaurants that flank it, and upmarket chain stores with their familiar signs; via the photos of people standing in front of the fountain or the Duomo, that will be posted on social media or never looked at again. The students perceive how this accentuates and reveals inequalities too. "We can't really afford to sit down at the cafés and restaurants around here," they admit. "The piazza is more a place you just pass through on your way somewhere else". "But we still meet on the fountain steps sometimes", someone adds, "for lunch or a few beers late at night". A few notice how some of the most marginal members of this society also find ways to occupy the grand space, at least temporarily, like the riders with their neon bags and their bikes, waiting around for the next delivery.

I learn from them as they learn from me. Drawing on their nascent training in ethnography and other qualitative social science methods, my students never fail to articulate new aspects of the interplay between past and present that have not occurred to me before. Like one who points out how the function of the piazza in the past as a site of gathering, sociability and communion is now increasingly eroded as people walk through wearing headphones, or gazing at screens - simultaneously inhabiting other "digital town squares" as their bodies move through the urban space (cf. Jachna, 2021). One student evokes Foucault, drawing attention to the security cameras peering down at us from high up on the clocktower (which centuries ago housed the city prisons and rang to mark the nightly curfew), and wonders about the continuity between forms of urban surveillance in the past and the present. Another takes the initiative to collect some oral history, interviewing passers-by including the longtime urban resident who complains that "you don't see the cripples here anymore, the people with crooked teeth, the beggars . . . everything is so clean and orderly", as the piazza is taken over and tidied up in preparation for the festival.

Long before Trento, I moved from Melbourne to London and Venice to research and then teach history. These travels pushed me to think about how the unique form of different cities shapes how they are lived in over the centuries. My thoughts were fed by talking to and reading the work of other historians who, in recent years, have focused ever more on streets, squares and piazzas in the past not just as built spaces, but as stages of public life. Using archival documents, images, the writings of travellers and locals, they have worked to bring these spaces back to life in all their complex activity; as vital loci of commercial transactions, political ritual, protest, punishment, information exchange, entertainment and much else.[3]

Spending time not only in the archive and the library but around the city also transformed my own research on Venice's publishing industry in the early modern period. It helped me see how the famous Piazza San Marco, as well as other *campi* (squares) that dot the city, were crucial sites for the performance, sale and consumption of the printed pamphlets and images that were beginning to roll off the newly invented presses. These spaces thus contributed to making printed texts part of a multi-

3 See, for example, Milner, 2006; Van Gelder, 2020; Nevola, 2021; Rospocher and Valseriati, 2025. Many of these works have been inspired by seminal texts of sociology, in particular De Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991.

media urban culture, that could reach many people beyond the wealthy and educated minority.[4]

Taking walks with historians of art and architecture improved my ability to 'read' the city and its buildings. I saw how the piazza transformed slowly over the centuries, the target of continual interventions 'from above' as well as persistent pushback 'from below'. As in Trento's piazza in the nineteenth century and today, Venice's rulers also sought to renovate Piazza San Marco in the Renaissance period, clearing away lean-to shops, street gamblers and impromptu urinals to make an appropriately grand stage for extravagant state rituals and an elegant 'gateway' into the city for the many travellers who disembarked at the adjacent *molo* (Howard, 1975; Salzberg, 2021). And still, sources indicate how squares like this one continued to be filled with ephemeral activities, some of which pushed the limits of political or religious propriety.[5]

Over time, I also smuggled the city into the syllabus. In Venice, I began to experiment with sending my students of Renaissance history to sit for an hour or so in one of the *campi* around the city, to observe and write about what they saw and how they thought these spaces might have moulded urban life in the past; the kinds of encounters that they promoted or prohibited. When I moved further north to the city of Trento I carried this practice with me. Now closer to the Austrian border than the Adriatic; now teaching sociology students instead of Renaissance historians. A very different city: smaller than Venice, and less often a destination in its own right than a stopping off point on the mountainous road between Northern Europe and the Italian peninsula. So the Campo Exercise became the Piazza Exercise, part of my course on Research Methods in History, and a way to reflect on how historians might study place and space, as well as make use of some of the 'mobile methods' pioneered by their colleagues in the social sciences.[6] Perhaps also a callback to earlier ways of doing history – on foot, in the open air (Readman, 2021) – as well as just an excuse to get out of the classroom.

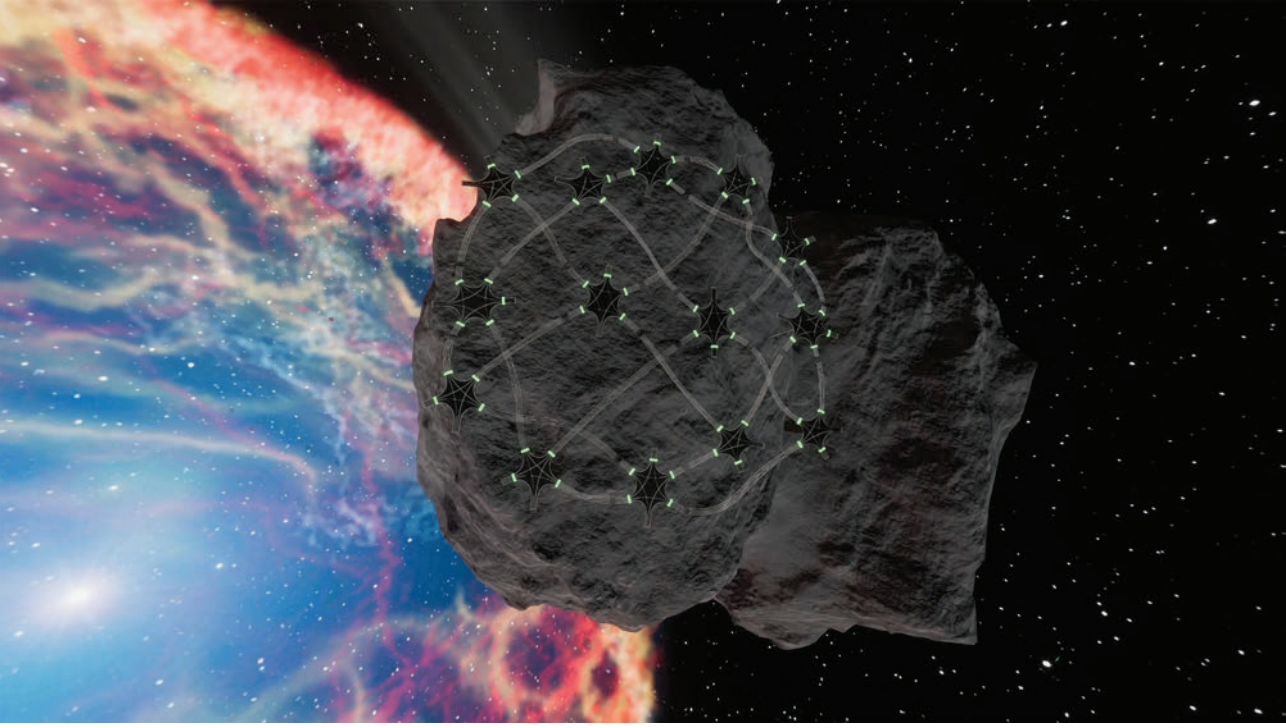
Over time I have come to think of the Piazza Exercise not only as a teaching tool but as a way of training attention. It asks students to slow down in a space designed for circulation; to notice the dynamics of power carved into stone and stucco, but also the quieter, more ephemeral acts that continually soften and rework them.[7] The piazza reveals itself as layered and unfinished – shaped by centuries of regulation, ritual, protest, commerce and spectacle, and by the fleeting occupations of those who sit, linger, deliver, demonstrate, or simply pass through. It becomes both classroom and archive, though not a tidy one: more like a palimpsest constantly being overwritten. And still, questions surface that refuse easy answers. As one student from Kiev rightly wonders, "Why did the residents of a town surrounded by mountains install a fountain with a giant statue of Neptune in the middle of the central square?"

4 Salzberg, 2014. For an exploration of similar ideas in a later historical context, see Henkin, 1998.

5 For example, Giacomo Franco's early seventeenth-century print of charlatans, actors and musicians performing and selling their wares from improvised stages in the piazza, to eager crowds of foreigners and locals.

6 For introductions to the 'spatial turn' and the 'mobility turn' from historians' points of view, see Rau, 2019; Salzberg, forthcoming. On 'mobile methods', see also Kusenbach, 2012.

7 The free smartphone apps *Hidden Trento* and *Hidden Venice* – part of the HistoryCity app collection –, which I was lucky enough to work on, have a similar aim for a wider public. For more, see Nevola et al., 2022.



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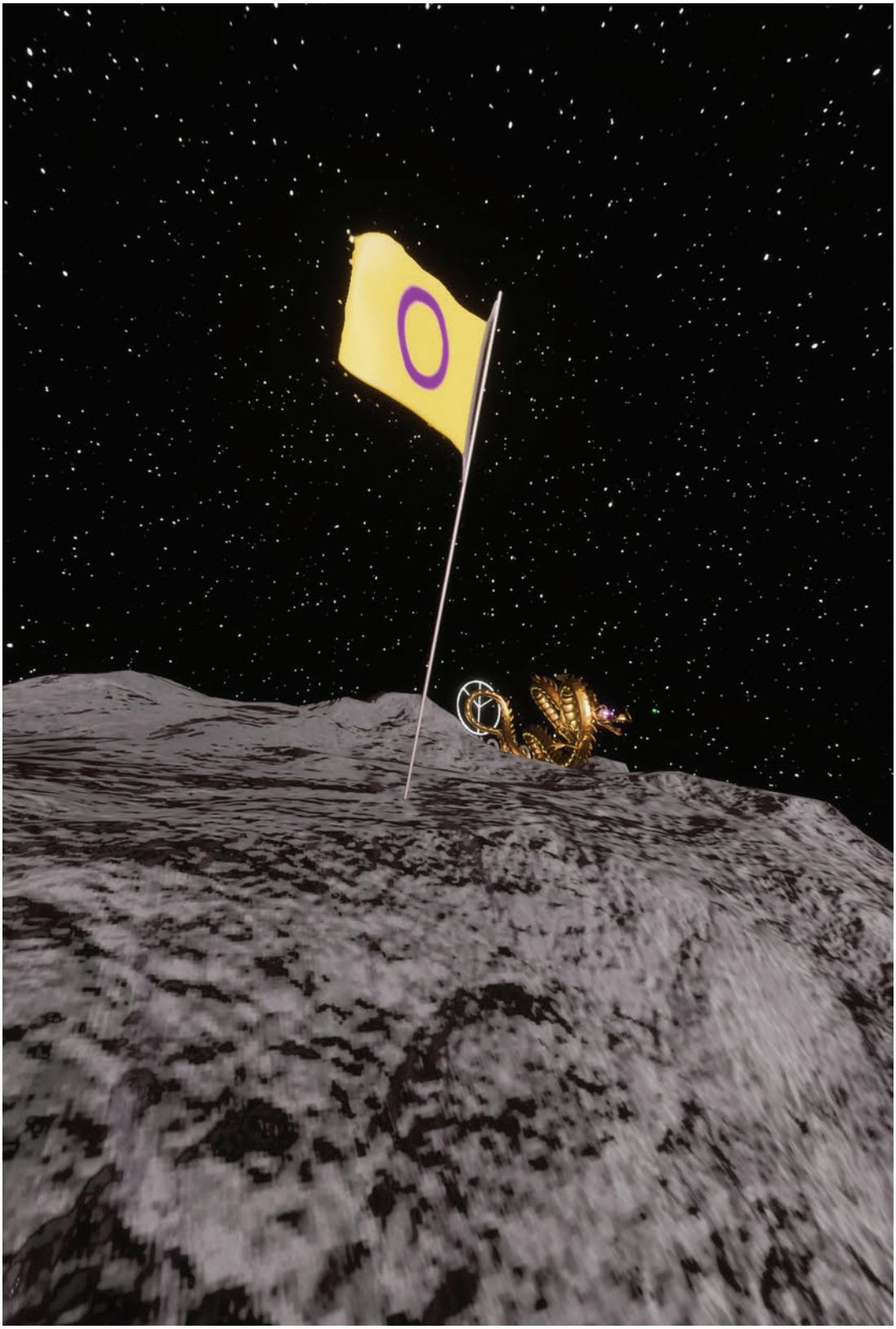
(Above) Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring work by Carlo Rovelli

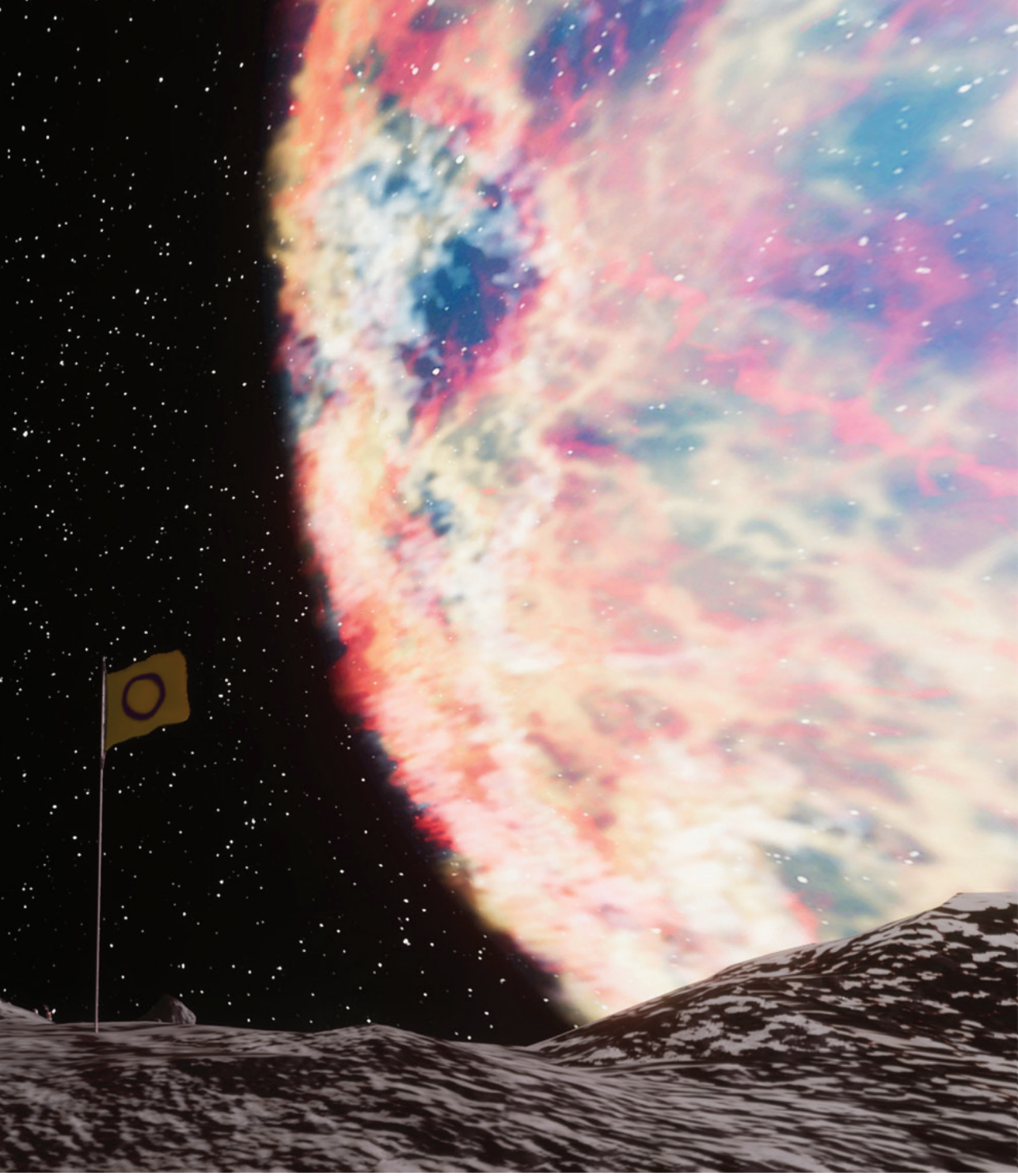
(Right) Rosetta Mission 2024
Featuring work by
LGBTQ++ Community



Rosetta Mission 2024
Screenshot from VR game engine

lo Squaderno 73
Urban Squares

edited by // Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Cristina Mattiucci & Andrea Pavoni
Guest Artist // Luca Pozzi



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

More Info | http://www.iosquaderno.net/?page_id=2
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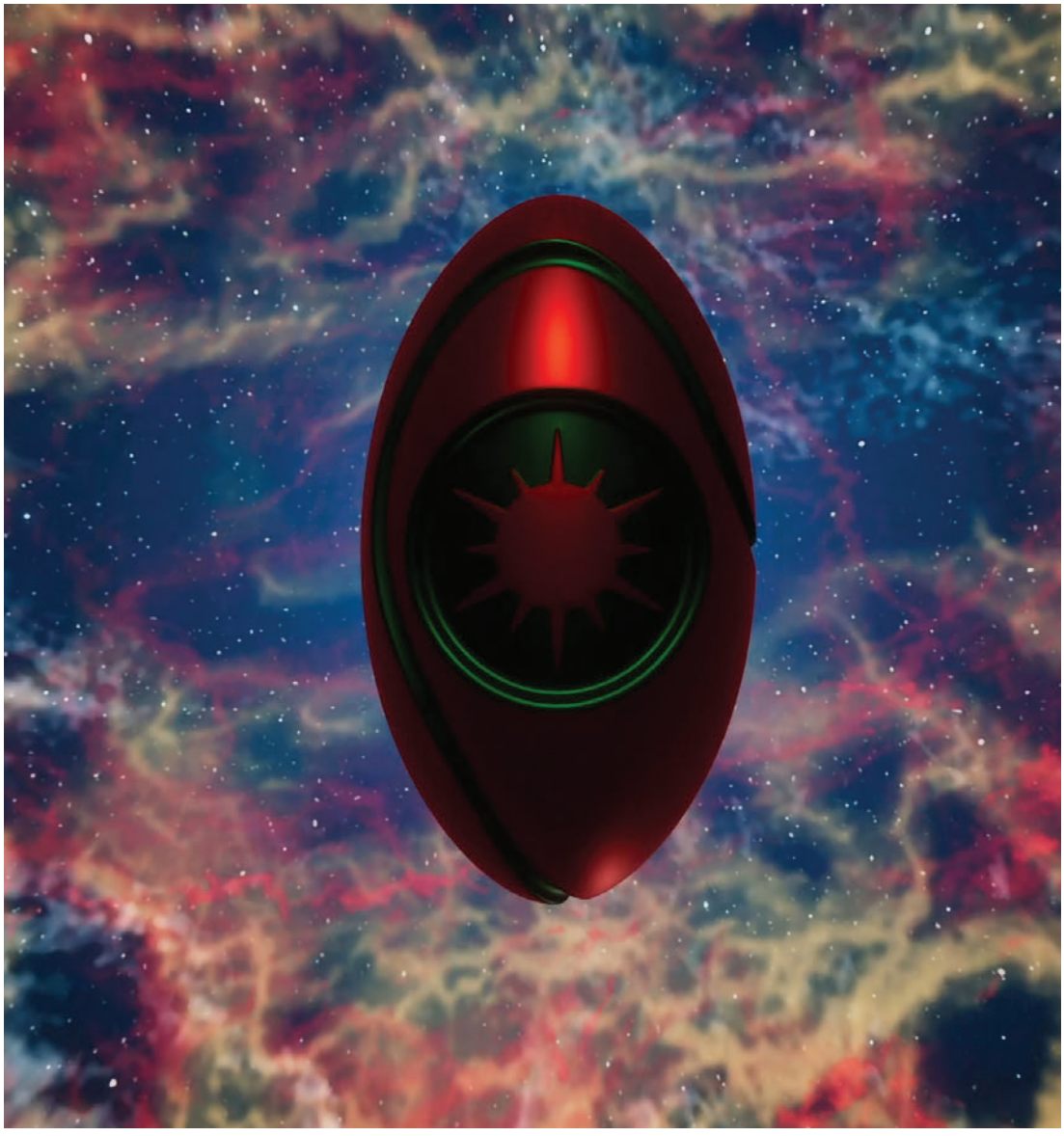

In the next issue:
After Dark

sQuade