

Still Life – Natura Morta: the landscapes of proximity

Saša Dobričić
University of Nova Gorica
sasa.dobricic@ung.si

Marco Acri
University of Nova Gorica
marco.acri@ung.si

Abstract

Likewise, in Still Life, the empty streets, unoccupied piazzas and void shop windows indicate the presence of man who built and exploited them, but now as unused, these features appear in their masterful externality. The unknown, invisible, unthinkable tiny nature has evaded and inhabits us and our inert cities as its most familiar cultural context. The city in stasis is not any more alive but is still not dead: it is on threshold where urban life cannot be directly experienced, although its mise en scene still teases us as something recognizable. For an instant all these pieces of the city are no longer part of a total, of an order that must function. Becoming pieces of the daily inertia, as an outil deposited on the table, extracted from a mechanical spatial totality, they do not function at all, they are unassimilable and unthinkable as they were, inviting us to rethink and discover what is still thinkable. Are Standstill cities, amplified domesticity and puzzling set of oxymorons that drive current urban chronicle just consequences of the battlefield between us and virus or rather symptoms of another syndrome?

Keywords

Landscape, Proximity, Still Life, COVID-19, Domesticity.

Introduction

The proliferation of interpretations arising with the COVID-19 pandemic emergency is characterised by a common concern: how do we make sense of the pandemic? Although we have all learnt about difficulties that making science imposes, the investigation and knowledge of virus remains anchored to the realms of science, while the rest of humanity is realising that ‘healthy society’ needs more than one voice. This multitude of voices and apprehensions are running in parallel with a daily updating upon the spread of the pandemic, being mainly circumscribed around the most tactile experience that has affected humanity: How to make sense of social distancing and of all other consequences that restrictions have caused?

To make sense of efforts we are called to make, it is obviously not enough just to acknowledge the goal: in this case the limitation of COVID widespread for the sake of the common safety. Making sense requires that ‘individual will’ somehow convincingly adheres to a higher purpose. As a matter of fact, the finality, the purpose, without a genuine adherence to it, cannot assure us nothing but a quite elementary role which is functional to a purpose, but certainly is not yet a sense-generator, although acting as a good source of motivation. But in a highly uncertain and unpredictable context, the desire

to achieve the common goal might appear as driven by some kind of subtle persuasion, which annihilates any sense-generating action. Indeed, so far, we have been witnessing many episodes where the slightest doubt about the nature of our will calls immediately into question the very meaning of our actions, i.e., efforts.

This is the reason why often these reflections upon making sense of pandemic, or making sense of the distancing and other consequent efforts that at this stage is required, often emerge under other than purely functional or purpose-oriented interpretations, searching for a deeper meaning in the current pandemic situation such as: what have we learnt from this situation? Will this epidemic make us wiser? Are we on great learning curve? What is the sense of an effort to achieve a goal whose envisaging is at any moment undermined by contradictory assertions and unpredictable factors? In other words, how to make sense of something that can appear in any moment as a non-sense?

This paper will question just some assumptions that stubbornly drive contemporary spatial interpretation, although the current pandemic situation revealed the deficiencies that afflict their reliability with almost striking honesty. Static cities, empty buildings and discarded pieces of public life on one side, and on the other, the overexploitation of do-



Fig. 1 – City in standstill: Empty Market in Piran 2020 (Photo: Aljaž Lavric)

mesticity and its glittering on-line performance, all together merge into unsteady and highly contradictory structures that hint a new light and open to different narratives of their functionality or on sudden lack of it.

These contradictions are punctually reflected in terminology and requirements that proliferate in public jargon: oxymorons such as 'new normal', 'social distancing', as well as those that point at inconsistencies of current living conditions, such as, being a flexible worker by staying rigidly at home or even 'remote learning' which is experienced rather as mystifying contradiction by many children today. Although, we have realized that 'doing nothing' for some time might have an unexpected and beneficial personal, social and environmental consequence, can the encouragement of key driving oxymoron 'doing nothing', for the sake that nothing happens, be comparable to doing something?

In other words, do these new agglomerations of sense, although still puzzling, open to a new learning and sense-generating strategy beyond inevitably denouncing that the prevailing assumptions somehow do not keep pace with the increasingly turbulent expressions of the changing world?

Outside the frame: The Still Life and the City in Standstill

The social distancing does represent an oxymoron: how can there be distancing if what characterizes the very sociality is the proximity between individuals, and broadly living beings? Similarly, to more notorious "Still Life" or "natura morta"¹, the paradox remains unsolved: how can something like nature, that is impregnated with life, be dead? On the paradoxical character that governs Still Life, Victor Stoichita² states:



Fig. 2 – City in standstill: Empty Square in Aveiro 2020, (Photo: Carolina Silveira)

“The expression ‘Still Life’ - a late definition - is an oxymoron. How can nature, the fundamental quality here is life, be dead? Here is a paradox that remains irreducible even by resorting to the terms with which *natura morta* was initially defined in the eighteenth century: *stilleven*, *vie coye* [...] It is always an adjective noun, but the adjective (still, coy) nevertheless contradicts in any case intrinsic to a noun (*leven*, *vita*): movement, life in fact” (Stoichita, 2004, p.29).

Looking from the window, as in the paintings of Edward Hopper³, empty urban sceneries together with few masked beings appear as imbued with apparent calm of the atmosphere, which all together design the unity and the perfection of the image: an impeccable composition, however turning out to be false, still remains extremely inquieted. Buildings, squares and parks appear as accessories of daily life with no narration behind, no tale, no great story, just a mere composition,

where the gaze is merely on things and on art of assembling them. Our ordinary urban landscapes still appear somehow familiar, but lacking the allure of life they result overexposed in their structure, composition and materiality. Likewise, in Still Life, where utensils, animals and objects, do contain the traces of humans’ hand which, by disposing them on a table as ornament or as food, extracted them from the course of time; the empty streets, unoccupied piazzas and void shop windows indicate the presence of man who built and exploited them, but now as unused, these features appear in their masterful externality (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

As a matter of fact, the observer of Still Life recognizes that behind the surface there is nothing but pictorial, but acting as a surplus of real which is solved in lack of reality, the triumph of illusion is nevertheless able to reactivate observer’s body and senses.

As excessively realistic but not edible apples in the Dutch Still Life (Gombrich, 1961), the empty buildings as unruined ruins gain in illusion. As Paolo Fabri quotes and specifies on the power of the vision of this art to enact desire and passion:

“You little women getting fat, don’t look at the painted fruit that looks like life. So that your foolish eye does not torment your heart, and that an idea may arise for the foetus. Because the vision of this art must quickly touch the desire of the soul” (Fabri, 2001, Hech, 1998, p. 60)⁴.

The absence of human crowd chattering reveals the illusory quality of stagnant cities at the threshold between real and its ideal representation. Comparable to the illusion of nature’s rest in winter, which appears out of motion but still in performance, the *mise en scene* of the city in arrest still teases us as something recognizable. As non-consumable goods in Still Life, the city in standstill is a non-consumable city, not any more alive but still not dead, right on the threshold of its immortality, as the reflection of M. Bloch suggests:

“Life has settled itself in between and on things, as on objects that do not need to breathe or feed, which are ‘dead’ but not decomposing, are always present without being immortal [...] Culture has settled on the back of things, as if they were its most familiar scenario” (Bloch, 1930, Vertuani, 2009, p. 43).

Paradoxically, what drives this standstill, the “urban Still Life”, the “living dead city”, is the unknown, invisible, unthinkable life of tiny nature that has invaded ‘the back of things’ and inhabits us and our inert cities as its most familiar cultural context, revealing art as far from being specifically human act. In fact, so far, all components of nature and culture that made the very essence of our survival have been systematically exiled in an outer space outside the cities, being considered as an additional ingredient to the completed urban opus. With the entrance of this accessory into the scene, although in the form of the tiniest natural actor, the status

of background radically changes and, at least up to now, still drives the heart of the urban performance. Nature as *outil*, as mean for exploitation and component of productive support, or as ‘contour’ a worshiped background of the urban scene, becomes now a true insider of the scene. Urban landscapes appear now as they are, the scenarios where background matters as foreground. Nature re-becomes, not simply and only, a full and stable urban resident, but rather an active producer of a new contract of coexistence with other clandestine lives, that represent the expression of the migratory dimension of life and design different scenarios of proximity (rather than of distance).

This ultimate inadequate substance of cities has been only exposed with striking honesty by the intrusion of the new virus. These marvellous machines where the induced proximity of people and things acted as a compass of production of future scenarios, now result as outdated places corresponding to a life that had not been ours for at least a century remarkable denounces Emanuele Coccia: “More generally all cities, regardless of their degree of development, were the dross of an insane project that we need to get rid of as soon as possible: the idea that to make the existence of an indefinite number of human individuals possible it was necessary to concentrate them according to a purely monocultural logic in a small space, excluding every other living species. The city is a strange project of mineralization of life based on the illusion that human life can be nourished only by contact with stones, steel, glass. All the life we need for living, all we eat, was exiled elsewhere. And all life that was not part of our needs was kept even further away, in spaces called forests, literally the extreme outside - a sort of refugee camp for life that does not concern us” (Coccia, 2020)⁵.

As a matter of fact, the tradition considers the image of nature always starting from the assumption of traces of some cultural space that points at

existence of civilisation: the city as an inner scene from which it is possible to contemplate an outside. What *Still Life* indeed incessantly points out, is the dilemma between natural and cultural, pristine and artificial, living and unanimated. It blurs these dualities through a sort of interiorisation of outside nature into the inner cultural milieu: pieces of nature are framed within objects of everyday life. In the same way, the window frame is a sort of fundamental catalyser of the outer world 'beyond' the frame, of an outside which is captured in observer's eyes and melted with an inner 'cultural' space, that all together activates the aesthetic experience of Landscape. At this point is worth reminding that landscape painting represents indeed a sort of history of the emancipation of the outer, of nature considered as backdrop or decorative element. The history of landscape painting expresses the migration of nature, from the background acting as peripheric element to the domination of the entire scene, which is the same movement embodied by *Still Life*, where unanimated and irrelevant everyday stuff moved from margins to the heart of narrations (Stoichita, 2004)⁵. In fact, on the inner side of the frame, *Still Life* is constituted inside the frame, within the landscape of familiar things of nature and culture, that all together make the web of our daily life (Bryson, 1990)⁷. Indeed, for the spectator of *Still Life* there is no difference among real, painted or fake flowers, they all strike observer's taste with the same aesthetic gaze (Vertuani 2009, p. 131). Similarly, for the observer of 'still cities' the real city is rather in observer's eyes; for an instant the real, imagined or simulated have the same weight: there is no other real outside that is not at the same time inside, no public that is not profoundly private. The interpretations of the city, while out of use, opens now to new levels of expression and to a different formal and functional register.

The visual education of 17th century, introduced by *Still Life*, triggered the art of observation to step

out from merely artistic borders and to conquer the realms of life in all its everyday nuances. However, this challenge was actually a thorough interrogation around its own possibilities of being art. Accordingly, the city in standstill may be considered as well as a sense-generating instant: an instant in which pure and inanimate objectivity of the city drives the interrogation around the sense of cultural and territorial foundations that stand at the origins of its generation.

Within the frame

We have pointed out how a long history of a solid contract between material essence of cities and the crowd, as its animated counterpart, have been perfecting an idea of proximity mainly to accommodate a narrow coexistence between humans and their productivity by rising the barriers to any non-fully controllable non anthropic presences (Fig. 3).

Along these landscapes of power, misery, and celebration made of buildings, monuments, forums of public life, also the world of objects has been progressively creating its own realm. The abundance of stuff and the communicative gaze of commercials prevailed over the immovable urban substance and made the very glue of the new contract of proximity between the city and its inhabitants. The coexistences were negotiated according to the rate of offer and consumption and progressively an overwhelming setting of merchandises served to humanity to interpret and erect its world (Argan, 1965, pp. 197, 202)⁸.

Crowd and stuff and their reciprocal celebration consumed as an ordinary urban ritual have dominated urban performance, representing the ultimate expression of its wealth (Fig. 4).

The friction between this hybrid accumulation and buildings blocks designed the patterns of coexistence and proximity that shaped our urban experience. Nevertheless, the unprecedented experience of urban standstill and its persistent iter-



Fig. 3 –Rising barriers to non-controllable presence: The return of the border during COVID-19 in Trg Europe, Nova Gorica/ Gorizia 2020 (Photo: Kristian Petrovčič)

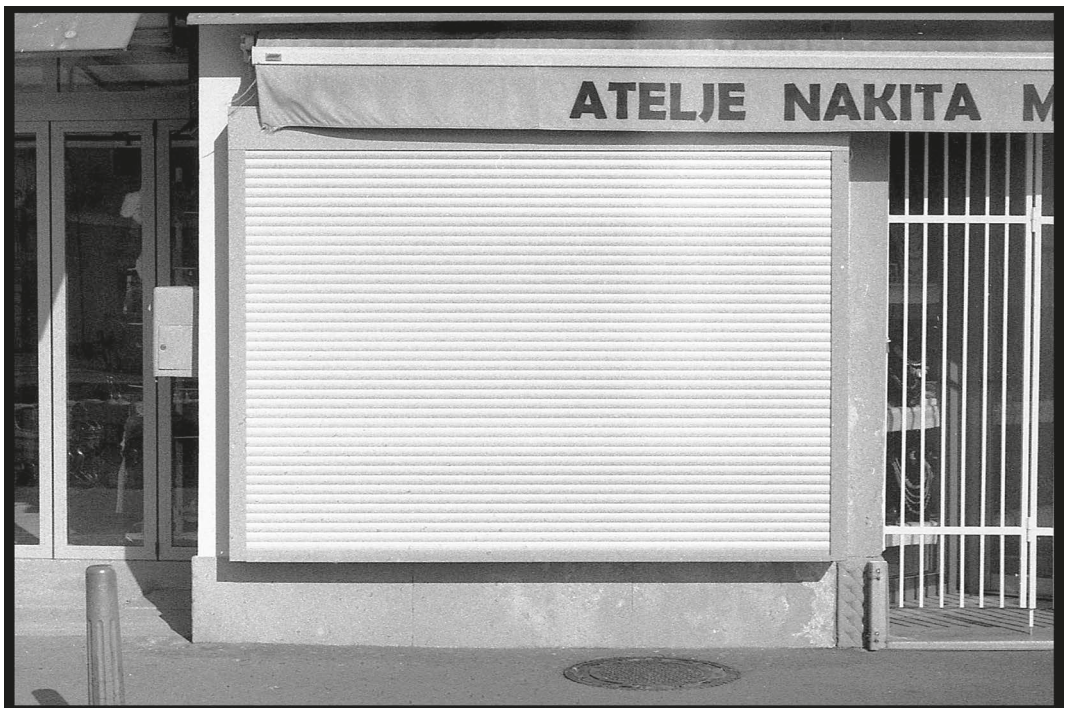


Fig. 4 –City in standstill. Weakening of urban wealth: closed shop in Piran 2020, (Photo: Aljaž Lavrič)



Fig. 5 – Pieces of closing city: Prohibited use of leisure facilities, Trzin 2020 (Photo: Domen Vinko)



Fig. 6 – Pieces of closing city: unusable bench on the panorama, Nova Gorica 2020 (Photo: Kristjan Petrovčič)

ation affected this founding metabolism of urban wealth. We can all observe now how under the weakening of these daily frictions, whether in form of consumption or simply *flânerie*, the urban prestige founded on accumulation and abundance vanishes, right at the changing pace of restrictions. The outdated advertising on facades, dark shop windows, abandoned stuff, all appear as unordered collection of simultaneous but distinct time segments, a collection of instants that denounce the intimate dimension of time in standstill: an interference between before and after, a disturbance that make sense. It is in Still Life of the 17th century that this different grammar of time is masterly embodied. In depicting the collection of transient instants with perishable items like flowers, seafood and fresh fruits (out of season) Still Life overlaps a set of items captured in the instant of existence just before decay. It is not rare that these compositions include also half empty glass of wine or sliced pieces of bread that further trigger the character of instant: as partially consumed items, these residuals actually depict and challenge the process of becoming. As pending announcements and commercials on the pieces of closing cities or the iteration of signage that discourage the use of urban furniture, these suspended urban images, in between vanishing and becoming, unambiguously point at both: the outdated character of before and potential redundancy of after (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6)

As in Vanitas, Still Life with skull, once the time of life is over and the crowd, as living body of the city, has been dissolved leaving behind only the epigraphs of abundance, the stasis crystallizes and transforms what remains into things, into objects. The emptied and obsolete citadel, deprived of life, is equated with the accumulation of objects that still retain traces of passed life. The human substance of urban vanitas is captured and its decay is suspended. The decomposition is concluded and the living matter has left only bones, the non-decom-

posable form that has reached the status of the object: if the notorious urban decay still represented a living process of transformation, although increasingly weak, then the buildings that are only facades, the squares and streets that are only pavements, are like the skeleton or the fruits in still lives, final stage that persists unchanged unable to age.

Summing up, still cities are shedding a new light on the presumed urban wealth and the unravelling power of its economic surplus demanding for a new contract of proximity, that goes far beyond the model of simple occupancy. Indeed, the subtraction of animated counterpart of urban performance unavoidably demolished certain narratives that made up our urban world and its accredited biography. Looking from the eyes of Still Life we were able to establish a pictorial relationship with the inaccessible nature of outer urban phenomena. Being far from simple depiction of urban facts, the Still city acts as a powerful thinking and experiential model.

Inside the Frame: the amplification of domesticity

However, while outside tiny beings were occupying the urban scene, on the other side of window frame a whole new discovery of domesticity was taking place. Without any declination of time, in a puzzling scenario without before and after, different domestic, private and public actions were performing at any time of the day or all at the same time in a digital regime (Fig. 7).

The same friction between people and that bunch of accumulated stuff with no merit representing the gaze of urban performance, migrated now inside the domestic walls in a melting pot of daily routine. The interiorisation of the outdoor interaction and avoidance, performed at work, school, theatres and parks, imposed a thorough reconsideration of the domestic spatial matrix as one of the powerful sense-generator of our lives. Indeed, during the pandemics, lockdowns and forced immobility seemingly permitted to get into deeper relation with our domestic place.



Fig. 7 –Puzzling domestic scenario under the digital regime during the pandemics 2020 (Photo: Domen Vinko)

Although for many the domestic shelter resulted more entrapping and less protective than outdoor, we have all sharpened the cognizance of our relationship with space in this unprecedented augmentation of inhabiting experience (Fig. 8 and Fig.9).

Beyond the intensification of liaisons re-established with the collection of things that brand our place as home, we have gained in envisaging new networks of sense where objects, their position and use design a more complex and senseful network of relations. The spring lockdown and the restrictions that followed, have emphasized how our idea of domestic space does not stop at the entrance of our homes but is rather extended outside in a network of places which we inhabit together with others, with our social infrastructure in an intimate, safe, solid and comfortable manner, at least as we do it within our inner domesticity. As a matter of fact, the relations that we establish with our living spac-

es, whether outdoor or indoor, private or public, often vanish under the pressure of daily routines, of the everyday order that we consume in the familiar economy (while taking kids to school, stop and chat in shops or back from work, etc). The current situation has actually enhanced the powerful relationship that we establish with place in all its nuances and contradictions. Indeed, the immobility regimes, whether deliberately pictorial as in *Still Life* or simply imposed one as current safety regime, reveal the political dimension of our relationship to place and placemaking (Devine-Wright et al., 2020).

Indeed, people not benefiting from larger domestic environments, comprising gardens and open-air areas, have certainly faced more difficulties to overcome restrictions in comfort and were more exposed to the spread of virus, demonstrating the direct relationship of COVID-19 and health inequalities with social inequalities and space conditions (Tinson, 2020).



Fig. 9 – Diary from quarantine: entrapping domestic scenario (Photo: Domen Vinko)

A particularly important role was played by the quality of built environment available for community of neighbourhood, such as inner courtyard gardens, accessibility to roof terraced areas and other open-air facilities: in other words, the entire set of all those common and social spaces that act as the nearest extension of our inner domestic space and improve our well-being by overcoming and amortising the space limitations of private space. Indeed, according to classic theories the inside and the outside are not isolated entities but a meaningful set of connections, understood as a foundational dimension of place-making (Alexander et al., 1977). The ground-breaking obstruction of the inside-outside dialectics, caused by current arrest, offers a unique opportunity to study how our place attachment is generated, but also to understand its counterpart, the anatomy of interference as a momentous also in terms of sense-generating relationship.

Many different, often contradictory stories are circulating and depicting home-experiences: from places of re-experiencing the family in safety and calm, to the opposite, obstructive environment of psychological and physical oppression, but also stress-generating machines driven by overwhelming digital surveillance. However, these new narrations of our idea of home are emerging and circulating around the globe with quite disruptive effect on the traditional normative and social practices, as well as on the political underpinnings that shaped our idea of place and place-making. The research carried out by Social Life shows that people had occasion to experience other possible uses of their place and thus rethink the organisation of spaces in parallel with the differentiation of activities and uses that lockdown imposed:

“If a lot more blocks of flats had gardens - to allow socialising in a distance ...a physical space for melding public and private space [...] I'd be thankful to be

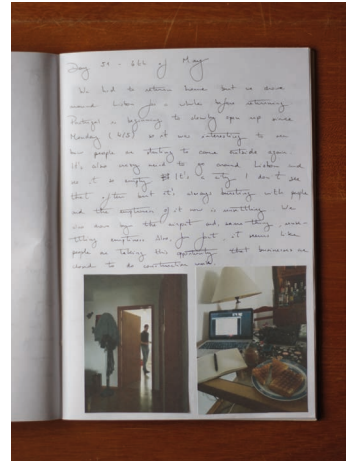
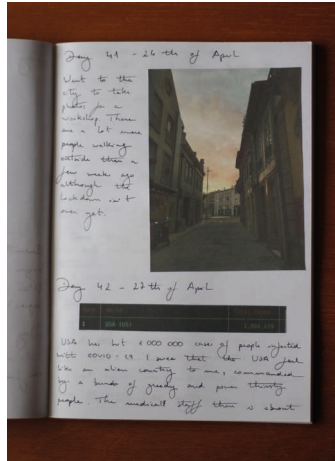
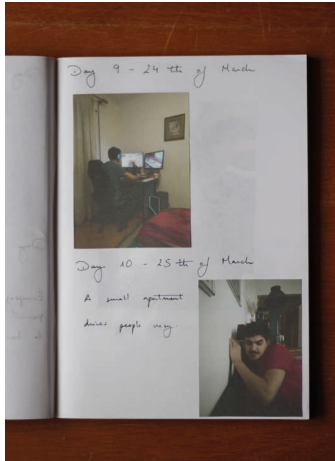
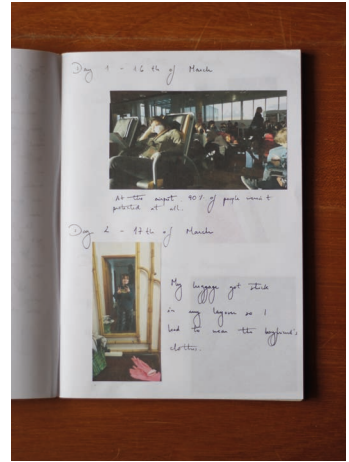
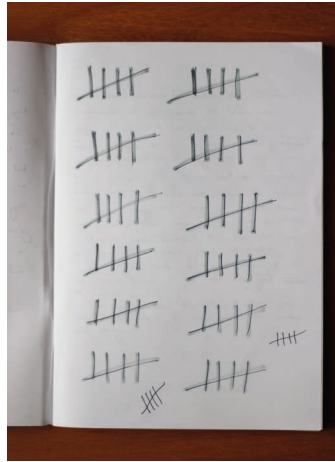
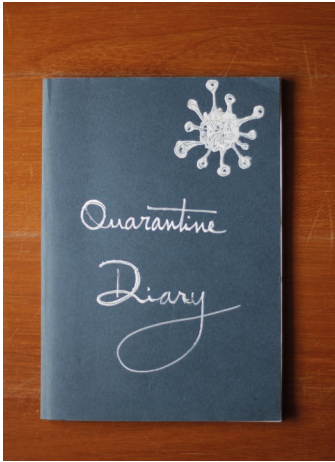


Fig. 8 –Diary from the quarantine 2020 (Photo: Carolina Silveira)

outside and stationary [...]. We would make it more adaptable; we were thinking of knocking a wall down so the kids' bedroom would be connecting to our bedroom" (Mostenau, 2020, p.6).

Now, the need of adaptability and space flexibility is rather a typical situation when there is asymmetry between the use of lived space and the capacity of space, as a resource, to respond to additional needs of habitability, between the demands that supplementary uses impose and the number of possibilities that space can carry. A capital-oriented social structure generates these frictions. One of the characteristics of capitalism is indeed to ask for (and rely on) the spontaneity of adjustment. People, as things on market, adjust and are flexibly prone to adapt to a 'new normal': after all, we accept and adapt with striking inertia and apathy to a series of new rules and means that actually affect the areas of our fundamental functioning. Even if we ignore that many people faced limitations in terms of accessibility to on-line social arena, - which makes this social logic simply asocial and unacceptable - the very idea of "spontaneous flexibility", where things can be adjusted at infinite pace and triggered by a momentum that turns from exceptional to permanent, simply ignores any cognizance of the notion that any social space is not a simple product (Bourdieu, 1985) but rather a network of relationships that absorbs things and beings, with order or disorder, in their simultaneous coexistence (Varma, 2015)⁹. The mediation between space and living place, between its measurable capacity and the quality of necessary relationships of coexistence within, is not extendible forever, and flexibility faces its limits in the real quantity of social substance on which the system (domestic or public) is based. This is a real illusion of infinite flexibility (Kurz, 2011)¹⁰, that should seriously reconsider our design attitude. Another significant revealing factor comes from our use of public spaces all along the duration of the emergency.

Taking into account the bright allure of human creativeness, it is rather curious to note that we were literally unable to reactivate and revitalise a large number of empty spaces, spread around the cities as dead bodies. Our infinite creativeness prone to spontaneous flexibility was simply unable to envisage these enormous dismantled blocks as resources open to new possible uses.

The proximity: the art of distancing

What is our relationship with public places when they are not inhabited, consumed or lived as products (touristic, financial, commercial, residential), as spaces pervaded by certainty of the established program? Even more important, what are the urban strategies when buildings, piazzas, public places turn into empty, unused or underused assets, resulting more as potential resources rather than battlefields among us and tiny organisms, in the sake of preserving failing forms of predominant economy? As Latour points out in his recent interview for the Guardian:

"[...] COVID pandemic is not a, as many have imagined a sort of revenge of nature [...]. The history of medicine has thought us that we are living with viruses, they are inside us and they change our social behaviour until we do not get used to them [...]" (Latour, 2020).

Such statement found numerous confirmations in the scientific world, because "[...] viruses are mortal until they do not get used to us [...]" (Bergant Marušić, 2018) we cannot eject them and they do not come as an external event, like other natural calamity (extreme weather events, earthquakes, etc.). Latour insists:

"We are still to check if this moment of extraordinary withdrawal has sprung any reflection upon the possible alternative futures. For example, instead of seeing how important the other problems are, instead of shifting toward other questions of social justice, environmental crisis, etc. on new awareness of what really matters, this emergency is seemingly

enforcing the focus again on economic crisis. Which is really weird because economic is just one of many ways of deciding what matters, so we still persist on one narrow vision, producing and selling is only one of many ways of designing and maintaining our life" (Latour, 2020).

Will we be able at all to see the Earth as our inner resource asking for new art of inhabiting with the extended community of living beings rather than just as a silo to occupy? On the other side, the overwhelming proliferation of design aerobics with solutions that envisage additional flexibility of spaces, adapted to physical distance, by rethinking the idea of proximity on one side and intimacy on the other, are a striking proof that our relation with space is still limited within the notion of final product, although infinitely flexible and adaptable, rather than of resource, as an inner, although limited, carrier of possibilities, dependences and interactions.

Here is worth mentioning that the majority of the citizens-driven local actions, targeting innovative urban solutions to mitigate restrictions caused by the emergency could be defined more as tiny urbanism - similarly to the Miyawaki tiny forest approach - consisting in small-scale interventions driven by local creative co-produced actions. The more disruptive active engagement, intended in traditional form of right-to-the-city practiced in social interactions, assembly, gatherings, has been re-structured in a multitude of 'tiny actions' distinctly focused on envisioning additional uses for residual spatial and social substances: whether spatially by occupying areas free of traffic, by greening and re-arranging forgotten plots of land, or socially, by activating networks of solidarity and support. However, the key driving factor in all practices turned to be the re-establishment of some sort of proximity, its rehabilitation, rather than the additional elaborations of distancing as its mitigation. These social as well as spatial smuggling actions, do not hold any disruptive character of building and demolishing, but are

emerging as tiny expressions of what characterizes the most intimate dimension of our 'art of living with' rather than the 'art of building against or for'. Such smugglings are acting as residuals of political resistance, once performed in social body of crowd, able now to reactivate the potentials of space intended as resource that calls for its cultivation. Rather than seeing it as a final product where there is nothing to add or simply as piece of land supply prone to its infinite occupancy and exploitation, these cultivation actions made a radical shift from a logic of choice to a logic of care. They are explicitly calling for a new relation between knowledge and action, risk and responsibility, which turns to be particularly important when dealing with uncertainty and complex situations (Funtowich and Strand, 2011). These re-considerations of space based on re-arrangements that chase proximity, actually act as a counterpart to a big scale omni comprehensive urban strategies and design innovations that rely on infinite interpretations of flexibility and its declinations in physical distancing techniques.

However, flexibility has been intertwining ambivalently with proximity for decades now. Smart workers adapt to work everywhere and frequency of always new emergencies is systematically dismantling traditional relationships between space and time almost in every aspect of our lives. The 'flexible man' (Sennet, 1999)¹¹, the smart man is in profound crisis because of dismantlement of its inherited relationship that links the work to the related community, with its shared spaces and the cycles of repose and production. The disappearance of the traditional geography of work, and sociality in general, has affected the traditional notion of proximity already for decades, already before the emergence of COVID-19 that utterly exposed it, with remarkable honesty.

Smart worker, smart student, smart society, by working, studying, socialising, erected in front of a monitor, has aligned everything to the vertical po-

sition of spectator under the authority and surveillance of the flexible eye that operates at distance. The socially and physically distant mass has forgotten its body, transforming itself into a dispersed and distanced public (Brichenti, 2010, p. 73). The urban crowd, the last bulwark of sensible world, where the clashing of body to body reveals how the world performs, is now riskily deactivated. For the understanding of the experiential dynamics driving the mechanism of proximity, the investigation on the nature of touch, in reflection of Agamben, results useful. Following Aristotle, the touch would be the only sense that does not operate upon a medium (metaxy): hearing depends on the air, which, moved by sound body, strikes the ear; the medium of the sight is diaphanous, which illuminated by colour acts on vision (Keele, 1955, p. 384); whereas with the touch we perceive the tangible not because of the medium that exerts an action on us, but because we perceived it together - within the medium. This medium is not external to us, is within us, is our own flesh, that simultaneously while touching, is moved and touched: “[...] in contact we touch our own sensitivity, we are affected by our own receptivity” (Agamben, 2021). By touching each other, clashing against things and bodies, we make, above all, the experience of ourselves. And this is exactly what occurs in isolation: we do not contemplate just our distance from others, but above all the distances within ourselves (Stan, 2020).

This is the reason why the ambivalent nature of crowd is possible: being part of a crowd may encompass isolation, as in *flânerie*, as well as to be lost in a crowd may embody participation, as in public gatherings. Regardless of the separateness or proximity, exclusion or inclusion, considered in terms of measurable spatial or social distancing, the determining factor of being in contact is not only the experience of other, but the experience of ourselves. Paradoxically, proximity turns to be the art of distance adjustments made by our own flesh; and the prac-

tise of co-existence, out of any mediation, protocol, norm, or measure, is art of calibrating our own receptivity, within the shared experiential dimension of living-together¹².

It is worth reminding that the World Health Organisation in spring 2020, probably with the aim to preserve the proximity, suggested to use the expression of physical distancing rather than the one on social distancing, which actually may endure isolation rather than protection. We could indeed count on, as WHO indicates, the advancement of technology and keep connected socially otherwise. While this might save us as social beings, even though it is still hard to imagine us as community of physically inert individuals, it paradoxically strikes even harder upon the assumption that people do need physical places to get in relation, to clash upon the world to reveal it as sensible, and that our environments do determine our sociality. To exclude the extended environment, whether built or natural, signifies that we stress again the presumption that we are and can be separated from any outer nature. It presumes that our idea of habitability may exclude the relation with others, neglecting again that the co-production of habit is possible only if co-designed with the extended community of living beings, although we are product of our environment and it impacts us as a major factor of change.

On the opposite, all our future will be designed around the idea of proximity, not only and not so much among humans, but on the art of living next to the other living beings that simultaneously co habit and co-produce our common playground. As in *Still Life* the emphasis will be on the “[...] *techné*, that is the art itself [...]”. The disenchantment begins when things stand one next to the other, simultaneously, when there is no front that impedes the vision of what stands behind.

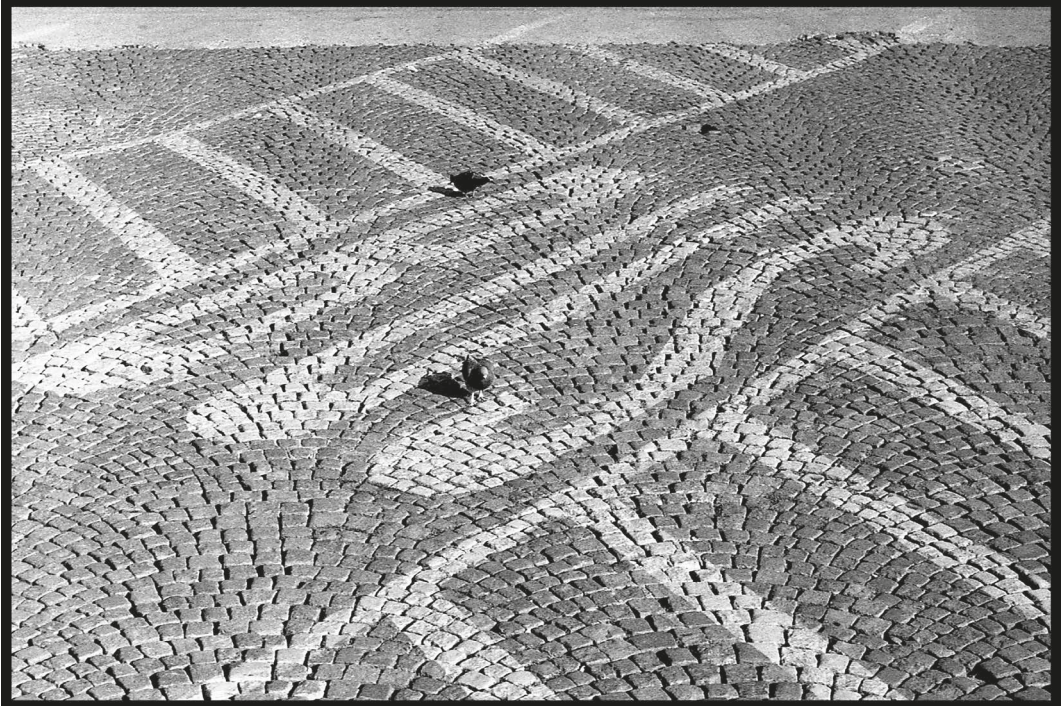


Fig. 10 – Piran 2020 (Photo: Aljaž Lavrič)

Conclusions

Buildings, squares, streets, parks and tufts of grass do not cease to be pieces of the city, grey and green, fragments of culture and nature, but seen now, emptied and out of sense, one next to the other in standstill, questions both: their ordinary functionality and extraordinary flexibility, opening to a further space of meaning to be gained. For an instant all these pieces of the city are no longer part of a total, of an order that must function. Becoming pieces of the daily inertia, as an *outil* deposited on the table, extracted from a mechanical spatial totality, they do not function at all, they are unassimilable and unthinkable as they were, inviting us to rethink, to discover what is still thinkable. The imposed stasis, revealed as powerful political tool, has disactivated urban space and has made possible a new visible knowledge of urban facts. For the first time the urban machine has stopped as in a crystallized im-

age and the enigma of the magnificent urban conglomerate has been dissolved, giving us the unprecedented opportunity to see its composition in which everything, however marginal, poor, despised, alive or dead, organic or non-organic, can now claim out its non-belonging to a constituted urban order and emancipate its difference, redesigning the net of new proximities even those that are not proper.

Anyways, once ceased the wonder of the standstill and the scandal of the invasion, the habit of seeing and thinking these variable pieces of the wider, invisible and unthinkable, set of urban conglomerates as legitimately inhabiting their own space within our common life will hopefully persist: perhaps the pictorial and artistic spirit of nature will finally invade the cultural body of city, from margins to the centre at such stage that it will represent its incarnation, literally acting in contact, within its own urban flesh? And the spirit of place, the *Genius Loci*,

far of being expression of some cultural or natural, pristine or eternal nature of things, will return to be again a question of *techné*, a purely technical and artistic artefact, made up by all possible proximities that co-existence of different species can reciprocally enact; cherished not because of their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studied and loved them as the scene, the stage, of their fate.

“Thus, there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order. Naturally, his existence is tied to many other things as well: to a very mysterious relationship to ownership (something about which we shall have more to say later); also, to a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 486).

Endnotes

¹“In German and English ‘natura morta’ has another name that is far more beautiful and correct. This name is *Still leben* and Still Life: *vita silenziosa* (silent life). It refers to a painting, in fact, which represents the silent life of objects and things, a calm life, without sound or movement, an existence that expresses itself by means of volume, form and plasticity. In reality, the objects, the fruit, the leaves are motionless but could be moved by the human hand or by the wind. Still Life represents things that are not alive in the sense of movement and noise but are connected to the life of humans, animals and plants; these things are of this earth, which breathes life intensively and is filled with noise and movement”, (De Chirico, 2008, pp 476). translation by the authors.

²Stoichita made a thorough insight on the status of painting as an object, as a very recent acquisition that relates to a new form of artistic fruition of art, more aesthetic and ornamental, less mystic and celebrative. His inspection addressed the meaning of the frame, referring for example to the provocative performance of Gijbrecchts in 1675 that was depicting the back of a painting.

³Edward Hopper is often cited as precursor in depicting the current pandemic urban scenario, referring to his contribution in the early 20th century on the loneliness of humans in social contexts. Although Hopper often underlined the excessive stress put by the critics on his “loneliness”, his paintings clearly reflect the distance of individuals in spaces. Matthew Baigell considered him the painter of those unable to find a position in society, those who had invisible barriers with others.

⁴“Vous petites femmes qui devenez grosses, ne regardez pas le fruit peint qui paraît ressembler à la vie. Afin que votre œil insensé ne tourmente pas votre cœur, et que ne naisse de cela une idée pour le fœtus. Parce que la vision de cet art doit rapidement toucher le désir de l’âme.” Translation by authors.

⁵Translation by authors.

⁶In the words of Stoichita, the inanimate object passes from parergon to ergon. From the edge of the scene, as outline and embellishment, the still life enters the centre of the scene ready to play the leading role. In Still Life as in Landscape, as modern pictorial genre, margins and backgrounds represent two fundamental instants of the demolition of limits of pictorial.

⁷Bryson relies on the idea that, differently from other painting subjects, Still Life represents the “world minus its narrative”, thus the pure composition of objects as per their essence.

⁸“Undoubtedly, the immense production of Still Life paintings during the 17th century, is an indication of the imminent crisis of the religious, celebratory, representative function of art, indeed of the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric conception that supported the historical and allegorical function [...] It could be said that Still Life of the 17th century, and precisely because of the remote and forgotten religious and allegorical implications, heralds the era of ‘commodity fetishism’”. Translation by authors.

⁹Warma recalls the lessons of Le Febvre on the present wrong use of ‘social distance’: he investigates the role played by technology during the COVID-19 emergency in substituting the traditional physical social space in urban contexts.

¹⁰Kurz stresses on the unfulfilled promise that capitalism is capable of self-regulation and adaptation. The author also insists on the sick tendency of the system to impose more and more work as a recovery solution, that has clear and serious effects on the daily life and use of space.

¹¹The basic, fundamental idea of Sennet on flexibility is that its pursuit has generated new structures of power and control, rather than created the conditions to set us free. In his theory three conditions have contributed to

the setting of these structures, namely the discontinuing reinvention of institutions, the flexible specialization of products and the concentration of power without centralization of power.

¹²Roland Barthes formulated his lectures, *How to Live Together*, around a question: “At what distance should I keep myself from others in order to build with them a sociability without alienation and a solitude without exile?” (Bert, 2002, p.1). Barthes speaks of ‘living-together’ (*i.e.*, *vivre-ensemble*) referring to adjustments of distance rather than of excludability.

Credentials

The pictures included in the article have been given for courtesy of the School of Art, University of Nova Gorica, <http://www.ung.si/en/study/school-of-arts/> , <http://www.ung.si/en/study/school-of-arts/>.

The subjects of the photos are scenes made by students for their homework assignments during the lockdown.

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