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Hodos: The Streets and Methods of (Post-)Pandemic Cities

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Entering: Urban Life Today

As a contribution to a book that seeks to explore experiences of life and its forms in the contemporary city, I will attempt to map out some of the aspects and elements, movements, and strategies, that we deploy to live, act and inter-act in our urban environments, specifically now that our social fabric has been so thoroughly uprooted by the COVID pandemic and its demands for our immediate response. In order to sketch some insights into this constantly changing disorderly order, taking into account the instability confronting the structural recurrences or permanents, in this chapter, I want to address the temporary redesign of the public spaces of the (post-)pandemic city. My analysis explores how this outlines the conditions for distance and presence, mobility, and connection. Specifically, I will propose a set of conceptual coordinates to think about, or think with, these current urban interventions from a creative-humanities perspective. This proposal brings together a reflection on what we see happening on the streets of our cities with a methodological reflection on the intersections of urban, creative, and theoretical practices.¹

To situate my aim, let me first acknowledge the contemporary moment of writing this chapter as the global pandemic has impacted, still is impacting, or will soon again impact our local conditions for urban living – at home, in shops, schools, and in our workplaces, but perhaps mostly on the (accessibility of) our streets: *en route*, on the commute

¹ Although my examples are European, taken from my own direct environment in The Netherlands, the issues broached here have much wider relevance. For a more global perspective and examples from also the Global South, see the report of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN): unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374264.

between these places. Streets have been emptier than usual, or our passages in public spaces have stopped, halted, or been rerouted. The past two years have been challenging, frightening, frustrating, and also insightful and productive in different ways for all of us, globally. We have been dealing with illness and perhaps even death, with anxiety and grief, stress and boredom – going in and out of lockdowns, working and schooling from home, in our layered, shrinking, and expanding bubbles. But this is only one side of the undeniably problematic situation. For, in addition, the possibilities for movement and circulation, connection and exchange have not only been diminished but also been differentiated and, in some ways, also multiplied. For, online communication has exponentially increased our connectivity from and between the different domains we inhabit.

In our efforts to stay mobile, connected, and productive, we respond to the current situation from these various domains, whether or not they are all located in the same place: at home, school, work, health center, or in other places and venues, while we negotiate our own or other people's absence and presence. In order to achieve that negotiation, we have been navigating changing circumstances and the shifting rhythms, pace, or stopmotion of our activities. For those of us working in academia, our workload seems to have doubled, with our productivity both skyrocketing in some areas and grinding to a halt in others. Of course, this increase or decrease depends very much on the moment or the task at hand. Some new working formats, questions, and debates may inspire us. Focus and overall physical as well as intellectual energy, however, have also been escaping us at sometimes crucial moments.

In the face of these challenges – on individual and global scales, and pertaining to our bodies, minds and hearts – questions about possibilities and impossibilities for adaptation and resilience have been loud and persistent. These questions and challenges pertain to our daily life, our work life, and our public life. They interfere in our scholarly and didactic practices. In that practical framework, they ask how our embodied experiences impact on our thinking. The overall question that emerges, then, is this: How can we best (re)design our research and teaching? This entails the following more specific questions, which all have a practical side to them, as well as intellectual consequences. How could – or perhaps even should – we respond to societal issues, and contribute to public debates? What are new,

renewable, or remaining possibilities for scholarly exchange? How can we foster insight and inspiration from the current moment that is productive for our short-term and longer-running research agenda's? And what are the methodological implications of the research questions now presentifying themselves? These questions are sometimes urgent and demanding, and sometimes inspiring, as they bring together the conundrum of the present and the possible of the futurity that this present also harbors.²

But equally important, because simultaneously and intimately connected to our personal experiences and scholarly practices, the creative field is also responding. What insights are artists, activists, designers, performers and curators providing us, with their reflections and proposals? What is their role in the temporary or perhaps longer-term reconfigurations of our homes, schools, offices, and public spaces and the connections between them? How can creative design suggest new contours for our public presence and mobility? It may be able to do this by shaping productive distance, (re)routing our passages, and reconfiguring the “ins and outs” within and between these spaces. But then, we must wonder, and examine, what design principles work for and with these challenges and questions in shaping responsive and situated proposals.

To further situate the writing of this essay, its aim is also inspired by the coincidence of, and connections between, two projects I was involved in and that took shape during the first phase of the global pandemic. The first was the co-curation of the *Media Architecture Biennale of 2020* (postponed until the Summer of 2021) and the co-writing for a book project *Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities* (Van der Tuin, Verhoeff, 2022). This book was written during the first year of the pandemic. It is a book that proposes a glossary of theoretical concepts for a creative-humanities approach for contemporary (mostly or primarily urban) culture. Both projects explicitly, albeit differently, deal with the intersection of daily (urban) life, artistic and creative work, and cultural inquiry. This makes them relevant for the goal of the present essay and the context of the book in which it appears.

² Some recent publications that address, precisely, COVID's impact on both our (media) culture and on our scholarship about it are Ong and Negra (2020); Keidl, *et al.* (2020); Kopecka-Piech and Łódzki (2022).

First, the Biennale. The timing of this edition of the Biennale was poignant. With the curatorial theme of “Futures Implied”, its focus was on the role of (media) architecture and design practices in and for public space, and the futures that are implied in this design. The perspective the Biennale proposed is one that productively brings together the future-orientation of creative practice with the critical engagement with the past and present of cultural analysis. As such, the Biennale reflects on how design proposals for our cities can offer productive forms of engagement with already-present, yet to be fostered, made resilient and also transformative potentials of urban life. In other words, it fosters the possibility to affirmatively work with and through various pressing and intersecting urban challenges and frictions, in order to make things better whilst “staying with the trouble”, to put it in Harawayan terms (Haraway, 2016). Or, in other words, to avoid escapist, denying, or too-dismissively solutionist attitudes in response to, any trouble that the historical moment presents us with.³

Then, the book. In its different medium and format, this publication also addresses the dual role of creativity and criticality in engagements with contemporary (urban) life. It sketches the conceptual terrain of a creative humanities that takes shape at the productive meeting point of theory and philosophy of the humanities. This approach is inspired by new materialism and media and performance theory. It encounters creative practices, in the broadest sense of the word. This implies an engagement with contemporary culture that embraces the uncertainty of the position and moment of being “in-between”. As we have articulated this in the introduction:

The *creative* aspect in creative humanities takes shape in the (literally) productive connection between making practices and thinking practices: making as/through thinking and thinking as/through making. These generative practices are emphatically experimental and comfortable with knowledge production in uncertainty, multiplicity, and friction (Van der Tuin, Verhoeff 2022, 2).

In the following, I want to bring into connection the current temporary redesign of urban public spaces on a street level with artistic work that responds to such new frameworks, guidelines, and challenges, and with possibilities for and being present, mobile, and connected in our

³ For more about the Biennale and the curatorial statement about the topic of “Futures Implied”, see www.mab20.mediaarchitecture.org.

cities. Avoiding any attempt at fixating what is by definition in movement, in-between and across these every-day and artistic encounters I will propose a set of conceptual coordinates that together sketch a perspective on the not only current, but perhaps fundamentally *unfinished* nature of cities and urban living. This implies that pedestrian interventions – both in the sense of “everyday” and “on street-level” as per its Latin etymological root of “pedester”, meaning “going by foot” – and artistic interventions, including reflections by artists on such interventions. Both are inspiring examples of the “futures implied”, in a phenomenological as well as a methodological sense. The encounter this spectrum of interventions yields offers a productive ground for distilling a method that brings together engaged criticality and productive creativity – a creative humanities engagement with what we may call the *hodos* of urban living.

Hodos: Concepting (with) Interventions

Ancient Greek terminology was, and still is frequently deployed as providing concepts for specific domains within urban societies and ecologies. Well-known examples are *demos* (the public), *oikos* (home), *agora* (market), *polis* (city), or *gaia* (earth). In line with these other invocations, I propose to adopt *hodos* to denote the street or “street level” of urban living. Etymologically, *hodos* (ὁδός) means threshold, road, or street, but importantly also “journey” or “way” – in the combination of a “way to get somewhere” and a “way of thinking”. This double meaning also becomes clear in the compound-word *methodos* (μέθοδος) which connects “meta” (pursuit) with “hodos” (way) as the “way towards”. *Hodos* as a concept, therefore, not only refers to the street as a location, or a level on which we locate “public space”, but also, and more specifically, to the situatedness of urban experiences, relations, and practices that emerge from and in this location, as we traverse public space, *along the way*. *Hodos* as between locus and trajectory, between “street” and “way”, then, articulates a performative perspective on the city as a scenographic grid on (or against) which we move, act, and connect, or navigate (Verhoeff 2012). As more than a word, because also harboring such a performative perspective, this approach to creative humanities takes on (or takes off from) the concept of *hodos* to connect the street with method.

At this point, a few words about this shift from word to concept to method are in order. In practice, methods are perhaps *applied* in the creative acts that respond to a question or need. However, before such applications, methods are already *implied*, hidden in the concepts with which we make sense of the world, our direct surroundings, or the tasks at hand, realizing them in our thoughts and acts. In the act of mobilizing concepts in response to questions, whether concrete or abstract, their methodological and critical potential becomes actualized. This, I and my co-author of the glossary mentioned above have called the “methodologicity” of concepts:

As proposals to think with, theoretical concepts are mini-theories that *articulate* – that is, give expression to and (hence) actualize – and *activate* “structures of feeling” [...] and constructions of thought. As our partners in thinking and making, they can be the tools or instruments that provide perspectives on objects (for example, things, events, phenomena) and our relating with them by bringing in and out of focus aspects, processes, and implications. [...] The precise unfolding of this process in analysis or creation *mobilizes* (or articulates and activates) a concept toward an *argument*. Or to flip this definition, conceptual arguments build on the situated activation of a concept in relation with an object (thing, event, phenomenon) and a subject who actively draws (out) this relating. This is how the methodologicity of concepts – what they do and how we work with concepts – harbors their *criticality* (Van der Tuins, Verhoeff 2022, 6-7; emphasis in text).

What, then, is the methodological heart of hodos as a concept, and its potential for criticality? When we take the street as the *situation* where things happen, where we not just happen to be but more importantly, where we move, act, and connect, the street is very much the domain where urban, public life takes shape. This we can call in ontological terms the flow of its *site-specificity*. The phenomenological and epistemological underpinning of the concept suggests how this is both *situational* (of experiences) and *situated* (of knowledge). I propose, then, that a perspective on the hodos, or urban living at a “street-level”, therefore, brings together these three aspects in reflection on how site-specific phenomena bring forth situations in which the subject, in relation to her surroundings, can perceive and reflect on her surroundings, and on her ambulant, mobile position within in. Position and mobility go hand in hand.

Such a situated and performative perspective on hodos is particularly relevant when we think of how interventions work – whether

they are practical and pedestrian, such as, for example, the current signage on the pavement for social distancing, or artistic and activist projects. It helps us think how these interventions work with, and in response to, this tripartite perspective on the street-level of urban living, and whether or not the latter address larger societal, ecological, or health-related challenges and questions. As interventions, working from an inherently *temporary*, that is, a time-based, impermanent, and inherently mobile and dynamic situatedness within the mediated infrastructures of our public space, we can recognize experimental – and hence, also inherently provisional – strategies deployed in experimental artistic projects. Such projects work to make visible and thereby debatable, or by exploring alternatives, for example, by repurposing, rescaling, repositioning, or reterritorializing the technological assemblages that shape our habitats and habits. However, in other interventions that are more practical and mundane, we may recognize similar strategies, albeit for a different purpose.

This view of interventions of all kinds connects *hodos* to *methodos*: the situated, street-level of the “method” of urban intervention. Urban interventions, as temporary and experimental – in the widest sense of the word – in various ways offer specific perspectives on the city from such a situated perspective that harbors a transformative potential from both a creative and critical stance. As the mundane and sometimes regulatory practices – e.g., currently the use of chalk, tape, paint – point to a future implied, artistic work points back to, and reflects on, such practices. With such a firmly situated, “hodological”, experimental engagement with (and in) the contours – as figurative demarcations and performative incentives – of public space for our experiences and actions in it, critical artistic and/or activist work is radically different from any sort of external, dismissive form of critique. With, inquisitive, that is, searching and analytical responses to the challenges and questions of urban publicness in our time, we can notice urban interventions on the street level. We can consider these not only descriptively, as positions or locations, but also fundamentally, as strategies for a perhaps more productive form of relating and reflecting on the city’s “futures implied”.

This relating through situating ideally yields not only a reflection on the situation, as if one were not fundamentally part of it. More importantly, it offers reflection on its (and our) own position

in the thick of our place, space, and time, which is, simply put, our street-level presence in contemporary cities. The intervention as cultural “object” – think of examples such as performance, text, image, installation, or screen – reflects on the conditions within which it is embedded, as well as on the materials it works with. But it also reflects on its own potential as part of, and beyond, this condition. Moreover, through its situatedness in public space, the object positions its public as collaborators, or participants invited to be part of a (self-)reflexive process. This change of status performed by the object of course also affects the researcher and her methods.

Figuration: Plotting with Chalk, Paint, and Tape

Let us return to what we encounter on the street. In various states of lockdown, re-opening, and with changing rules for distancing, the streets and surfaces of our cities are temporarily marked with points, circles, arrows, and lines. These figures structure our possible presence and itineraries of our passages on the streets, in the parks, and within the walls of public spaces. The pavements, grass, monuments, and walls function as canvasses for signage, imagery, and writing. This is done with ephemeral materials such as chalk, paint, and tape. In a short essay I co-authored with my colleague, performance studies scholar Sigrid Merx (2021) we have called these signs “figurations of inter-mediacy”: visual forms that *plot*, or insert, outline, and thereby structure temporary scenographies for performing presence, mobility, and connectivity in public space. With “plotting” I allude to the inventive creation of a plot, a narrative of events happening in a predictable sequential order. The concept of figuration, here, refers to the way in which spatiotemporal re-design – e.g., by means of such ephemeral, surface materials – pre-structures the possible movements, directions, or actions that it affords and invites. Inter-mediacy refers to the in-betweenness – agentially, temporally, and spatially, hence, plot-wise – of the responsive, performative, and inherently unfinished character of such acts of figuration.⁴

⁴ For the glossary entry on the concept of figuration, see Van der Tuin, Verhoeff, 2022, 98-100.



1. Image: Sanne Leufkens for Platform Scenography. www.theaterkrant.nl/nieuws/anderhalvemetertheater-platform-scenography.

A temporary plotting of space that marks where to stand or sit, or to go from “here” to “there” is a plotting of presence as well as of (staggered) mobility. We can see the use of dots, or closed circles, and the lines between them, to indicate intermittent standing positions and the procedural order to follow to get to the end point (fig. 1). But we can also recognize a plotting of presence in the use of open circles painted in, for example, the grass in parks as the outlining of spatial containers, or “terrains” – a plotting of dwelling (fig. 2). Such markings of container spaces can also be seen in the plotting of spaces for collective presence; for example, the bracketing of standing positions by painted dots and circles or taped-off squares plotting public spaces for collective protests (fig. 3).

Plotting (in) the street as an urban scenographic act in current (post-)lockdown cities thus involves the use of figures and shapes that both indexically indicate and symbolize “endorsed” positions. For example, a dot or a closed circle marks where we are to stand. Or the figures may symbolize the border of a terrain, as “safe spaces” with open circles or squares. These figures can be seen as scripting space, marking



2. Kees Joosten. www.stadsleven.nu/2020/05/30/eerlijk-delen-van-de-ademruimte-in-pandemietijd.



3. ANP. www.omroepbrabant.nl/nieuws/3213863/tilburg-verwacht-zaterdag-honderden-demonstranten-tegen-racisme.

both an inside and an outside of where one can be present amongst others. Or, as media scholar Marek Jancovic puts it poetically:

Even adhesive tape, in its sticky ordinarieness, can turn into a complex technique of inscription. Arrows and lines and various textual instructions can be written on the ground in tape. Suddenly, entering a supermarket requires choreography and direction. The ground becomes a legible medium, dictating how we must orient our bodies and what directions we have permission to take (Jancovic 2020, 223).

These allusions to scenography, or here, choreography, suggest not only a system of regulation and control, dictating or prescribing possible movements, but can also be understood as a form of experimental design that is responsive, performative, and inherently unfinished.⁵

I have used the qualifier “unfinished” a few times above already. This notion is not as casual as it might have seemed so far. It can transform from a word to a concept. In his work on, what he calls *unfinished media*, media theorist and philosopher of technology Roy Bendor characterizes unfinishedness as a strategy of those media or texts that “provide scaffolding for imaginative engagement [...] in order to engage, evoke, provoke, or stir their users’ imagination” (Bendor 2018, 146). While his perspective is on unfinishedness as a strategy to entice the imagination, in the cases I am bringing in here, I see unfinishedness as a starting point and outcome, yet also as the process of performative acts of, and because of, figuration. The ambiguity of the concept of “contour”, for example, binds these two aspects – figuration and performativity – together.

The unfinishedness of more functional acts of figuration in public space have inspired responsive and interactive media installations for public space that demonstrate also aesthetic and reflexive ambitions. Examples of design proposals for public space are *Personal Space in Cities* by experience designer Lim Si Ping and her interactive art studio handson (www.hellohandson.com/work) and the *Smart*

⁵ The necessity of such interventions in pandemic cities has inspired various ludic and artistic creative design proposal. See for examples the collection assembled in the online magazine *Dezeen* (www.dezeen.com/tag/social-distancing) or collected by Sam Bell in the article “14 Clever Design Solutions from Around the World” for the *LA Times* (December 29, 2020; www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-12-29/14-clever-covid-19-design-solutions-from-around-the-world).

Distancing System by artists/designers Jolan van der Wiel and Nick Verstand (jolanvanderwiel.com/projects). Both are prototypes of media systems that use motion tracking technology, data visualization, and light projections to track and trace the spaces around bodies in movement. Projecting dynamic and shape-shifting drawings on the pavement of our streets or floors of the indoor public spaces of transit, such as airports, railway stations, shopping malls, and more, they demonstrate how figuration, here quite literally, also reflects back on us. Indeed, intervening in the already-present, and therefore less-obtrusive structuring principles of signage that usually directs and regulates our movements and behaviors within public space, the temporary use of chalk, paint, and tape – or light – not only offers contours as performative maps for presence, mobility, and connection, but also, by means of indexicality, make us aware of our own dynamic positioning within these unfinished performative spaces.

Crossing: Experimenting with Installation, Performance, and Mediation

A concept that inherently appeals to an awareness of unfinishedness and performativity is *crossing*: the crossing of lines, possibilities, spatial demarcations, to name but a few.

From the end of March until the beginning of May (2021), De Pont Museum in The Netherlands presented *National Chain 2020/Social Practices* (fig. 4), a project by the American artist Rita McBride, and a collaboration with the German-Cypriot choreographer Alexandra Waierstall and students from Fontys Dance Academy located in the city of Tilburg in The Netherlands. Planned to be able to be shown *live*, if possible, for the duration of the exhibition, De Pont Museum, like all museums in the country, had to keep its doors closed during the lockdown. The installation-with-performance could, however, also be followed via livestreams and on social media, specifically via the project's Instagram account (nationalchain_socialpractices).

The work as we got to see it consisted of a re-installation of Rita McBride's work *National Chain* (1997): a monumental grid that is suspended on shoulder height throughout the central museum space, located in a former textile mill, and divides the space into segments of equal size – not coincidentally in squares of 1,5 x 1,5 meters, the



4. René van der Hulst.

Dutch standard for social distancing rules at the moment of its installation. For the duration of the museum's closure, the installation was activated and demonstrated by the dancers. As stated in the project's press release, the work invites reflections on the reconfigurations of public space as a result of COVID-related distancing rules by offering a site of experimentation and play:

National Chain 2020/Social Practices is in response to a request from De Pont to address the remarkable impact COVID-19 has had on society. [...] Visitors are encouraged to engage with the floating structure and navigate together, exploring the perspective shift that allows for funny, playful and informative interaction in the newly defined public space established in 2020.

As we now know, on-site and filmed dancers had to be our proxies as their performative explorations of the installation enabled and demonstrated the activation of its affordances for movement and interactions. The artist Rita McBride states:

2020 has brought us many opportunities to become more conscious of the basic assumptions we have for accepted social interaction. *National Chain*

has always provided a shift of perspective for people who have engaged with the installation over the years. It always offered experiential surprise and humor; providing new positions for looking, relating, moving and standing still⁶.

There are many points of connection between this work and today's question around redesigning contours for presence, mobility, and connection in public spaces. Not only because of its symbolic use of a suspended grid materializing in, and taking over, the museum space, but also because of its shaping of, and in, inter-generational, inter-disciplinary and inter-medial collaborations. Its experimental characteristics, as well as its multi-platform, and spatiotemporally and materially distributed format connected to the questions with which I began this essay. As we wrote in our glossary,

The concept of “crossing” both activates its meaning as a noun – a crossing – and as a verb – to cross. As such, it harbors a specific spatiotemporal logic. A crossing as a meeting point is both an endpoint and starting point – a where and when crossings can happen and take off. A crossing is a nexus in motion – a movement of convergence (of a past), intersection (in the present), and divergence (toward a future) with the performative potential of interference or diffraction (Van der Tuin, Verhoeff 2022, 64).

In McBride's installation, we see crossing at work in a great number of ways. For example, as a location to cross on the street, we see the intersection of moving bodies, structures and obstructions that shape the grid on which these bodies interact, separate, and pass one another. The act of crossing is here challenged. The grid-shape of the installation is not only horizontally cut up in squares, but also vertically it divides the space: bodies must duck, jump, climb, in order to cross. As a media space, the installation crosses domains of online and offline, and digital and physical mediation. In a locked-down museum space it becomes an experimental lab version of the street, attempting to intersect and interconnect between the inside and outside. The undefined status of the space as it is figured is characteristic, not only of an emergency solution to the lockdown problem but also,

⁶ Press release for the exhibition, available at https://depont.nl/user_upload/user_upload/Press_Release_McBride_Waierstall_and_Fontys_Dance_Academy_at_De_Pont_museum.pdf.

more generally, it functions as a statement on the fundamentally unfinished state of all public space.

Unfinishedness: Staying with the Draft

Way, pathway, trajectory: these nouns all suggest both development and endpoint or destination. Paradoxically, any destination also suggests following directions and destinations that its “future implies”. This leaves every design also a draft.

About design for cities, architect and theorist Gretchen Wilkins and researcher in computational design Andrew Burrow recommend we should embrace its inherent unfinishedness as they ask if the endpoint of design perhaps best considered a final draft:

Isn't keeping things unfinished the most open and the best way of getting things done? [...] If final drafts indicate that a piece of work is effectively done, but not finally, they also indicate future potential within that work (more than a termination of it) [...] If endings are then designed with this agenda, to anticipate or encourage future work, then incompleteness and completion might coexist as two sides of the same coin, strategically as well as incidentally (Wilkins, Burrow, 98).

With their positioning of unfinishedness as also at the heart of finishing, they conceptualize both unfinishedness and the draft. Drafts are material (sketchy, moveable, temporary), representational (need interpretation), functional and proposing as well as creative and critical (as they call it, “creatively incomplete”, 100). This calls for an embracing of the paradox between states, of any state being ambiguous and conversational, as well as meaningful and ambitious (future-oriented). In hodological terms, Wilkins and Burrow state that “a key to acting in the new networks and navigating their shifting connections is [...] to adroitly manoeuvre in the territory of finishing” (101). This is the method of hodos.

In this essay, it was my intention to suggest some conceptual coordinates to think about and with design interventions that respond to the need to rethink the shaping of our public spaces by offering possibilities for presence, mobility, and connection within the paradoxical parameters of spatial distance. From a creative-humanities perspective and zooming out on contemporary city life, I was enticed

to reflect on the hodos as the site-specific, situational, situatedness of the street. From a methodological reflection on the intersections of urban, creative, and theoretical practices it seems not only permissible but even logical to exit this reflection with an endorsement of unfinishedness, or in a more common word, the status of any brief, provisional urban situation as always a draft. Staying with that is a way of keeping the pursuit of redesigning new possibility constantly alive, mobile, and positionally specific. Only with that endorsement is it possible to continue drafting, and thereby bettering the social fabric of the urban environment.

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