The Zombie Public
Or, How to Revive 'the Public' and Public Space After the Pandemic

Eric Kluitenberg

The media is flooded with projections of futures with or without 'the virus'. [1] In both dystopian and utopian accounts, as well as more level-headed attempts to extrapolate scenarios, finite terms drawn from uncertain predictions are often used, precluding clear judgement. Instead of writing these scenarios off as nonsensical, they should be understood as what they are: ideological projections that attempt to shape rather than predict possible futures. Who is 'shaping'? Under what prerogative? In service of which ideological a-priori? Serving which material (political / economic) interests?

While any critical reader could answer these questions, it might be more productive to shift away from these predicted (contingent) futures and towards what has already happened. What can be done right now to thwart the endeavours of the 'shapers'? How can we open up this contingent future to the public interest that concerns us all and should be subject of an open, critical, and truly public debate, rather than the object of flawed and illegitimate attempts at social engineering? A way to start is to trace the associations of those determining these contingent futures (human and non-human), to establish the most beneficial forms of living together in a continuous feedback loop of 'composing the good common world' [2]. [3]

Such a complex undertaking needs to be a collective effort, comprised of individual actions, not necessarily at all points coherent, nor even commensurable. Successive 'matters of concern' need to be explicated, which bring us together exactly because they divide us. [4] Therefore I do not aim at a comprehensive analysis, but focus on interrogating the shifting spatial dynamics and regimes of urban space as they pertain to a specific 'matter of concern': the demise of public space and the zombie-status of 'the public' that still tries to inhabit this 'disassembled' space. This shift in spatial dynamics, underway for a long time, has been greatly intensified and accelerated by the spread of the SARS-C0V-2 virus and the (state and corporate) policy responses to the 'global pandemic'.

This demise of public space results from the increased entanglement of physical (urban) space, digital networks, and the biological body. Within *Open!* we have already investigated different aspects of these dynamics, mostly with respect to the emerging 'techno-sensuous spatial order' of Affect Space *[www.onlineopen.org/affect-space]*. [5] The increasing shift towards the somatic, the tendency to bind the biological body ever more tightly into this emerging spatial order, connects this exploration more or less directly to the current *Open!* research on touch and feel in the digital age.

A crucial area of attention had been the increased densification of urban public spaces as they become overlaid with mobile media and digital communications and media networks (3G, 4G, 5G). These new types of urban densities are directly embodied *and* electronically

mediated, producing a constant sense of being overwhelmed by unceasing flows of information and sensation – an 'overflow' [6] that privileges affective relations (in urban space) over more deliberative forms of social interaction and most of all a desire for physical encounter. While such interactions at the affect-level are highly non-linear and unpredictable, they are in no way arbitrary. Their analysis assists in understanding erratic collective behaviours amid grave political and social tension.

Initially, the international lockdown, and the surprising lack of substantive protest against it, seemed to contradict these observations. The most recent turn of events, however, reveals the continued vitality of Affect Space – its unpredictable but in no way arbitrary non-linear dynamics that enable exponential growth in collective actions appearing as if out of nowhere. Fuelled by the urgency and divisiveness of an assembling matter of concern, the affect-driven dynamic of these actions quickly exceeds the original issue, meanwhile drawing in a multitude of previously unrelated actors. Here I refer to the suffocation of an unarmed (Black American) citizen by Minneapolis' police officers and the subsequent outpouring of anger and frustration, evolving into a global chain of protests in (previously locked down) urban public spaces around systemic racism and police violence. Particularly the strong responses and solidarity gatherings outside of the United States seemed to hint at a dynamic that transcends the specific issue at stake and points towards a transnationally shared affect, yet strong enough to break the prohibitions on close gatherings in public space.

Suddenly not the dynamics of Affect Space, but the lockdown and social distancing policies themselves were declared obsolete overnight. Yet the threat of the demise of public space resulting from the technologized politics of touch and feel remains ever present. In view of these contradictory dynamics, can the analysis of Affect Space help to elucidate some of these problems?

What Has Already Happened?

With the lockdown the freedom of assembly has been suspended. Mass gatherings are illegal (what the recent anti-racist protests showed is that they are not impossible, but they are in violation of legal frameworks). Local regulation is translated into national law, and serious concerns have been raised about the supposedly temporary nature of this often hastily compiled legislation. [7] Many borders are closed. In general, the response to the pandemic has been a return to the archaic nation-state, [8] which is deeply unsuited to deal with a paradigmatically transnational calamity.

The most problematic response has been the deployment of mobile and wireless tracing technologies that trace and isolate contacts of a contaminated individual, the effectiveness still very much under debate. With that anonymity in public space is eradicated. It is, however, exactly this anonymity in public space that allows a collection of individuals to transform into a 'public'. What these technologies thus translate into is the abolishment of public space altogether. Open access to public space is the ability to act collectively as a public: untraceable as individuals, counterbalancing the expansion of private, corporate, and state control of the public domain. This vital political function of public space is at the edge of extinction.

From Affect Space to Somatic Space

The concept of Affect Space was first proposed in a long-read essay in 2015. [9] The contours of a model were suggested building on three constitutive elements:

- A **technological** component: Interconnected communication networks, in particular internet, mobile media and wireless networks perform a crucial function to mobilise large groups of people around ever changing 'issues at stake'.

- An **affective** component: A recurrent characteristic is the affective intensity generated and exchanged in these mobilization / activation processes in overlapping mediated and urban public spaces – instantiated in the body of the physical actors at the screens and in the streets. Reasoned arguments seem to play much less of a role here than affective images, aphoristic and suggestive slogans and embodied collective rituals.
- A **spatial** component: The affective intensities generated in the activation process cannot be shared effectively in disembodied online interactions at the screen. This lack stimulates the desire for physical encounter, which can only happen in a physical spatial context – paradigmatically in (urban) public space, where mobile media then feed the action in the streets immediately back into the media networks.

In two subsequent public research trajectories [10] we found that the increasing densification of urban spaces, resulting from the massive presence of a great diversity of people, skills, knowledges, and economic and political functions, intensified by the growing presence of mobile media and communications devices and dense wireless communication networks, introduces the principle of an affective threshold: once connections in these urban concentration zones exceed a critical density, the overwhelming sensory exposure produces a shift from deliberative towards primarily affective relations in public space.

Crucially, the passing of the affective threshold is not only determined by a spatial densification, but also by a temporal intensification. Intense events, protests, calamities, collective shock, violent confrontations (military, police violence, violent mobs), many distributed in near real-time, all contribute to an acceleration of communicative exchanges (posts, tweets, live-feeds, text messaging, photo and video sharing, televised reports) that quickly overwhelm the human capacity for cognitive processing. Within the new constellation of mobile and wireless media both production and reception of these messages happen simultaneously on site and remotely, where all these message streams feed into each other, unleashing an autocatalytic intensification that can only be felt but no longer qualified.

Group formation under these conditions determined by the primacy of affect, tends to coalesce around shared affects rather than around shared sociopolitical issues ('matters of concern' [11]), or shared beliefs. The density of connections allows for a very rapid activation / mobilisation of previously unrelated social actors – accounting for the impression that such massive gatherings, as we have seen over and over again since at least 2011, and most recently in the mobilisations around the Black Lives Matter movement, seem to appear out of nowhere. The dynamic of these gatherings is indeed highly nonlinear and unpredictable, yet in no way arbitrary.

Philosopher Brian Massumi, whose approach to affect informed this research, observed about this dynamic that there may still be an issue or a specific event that produces a suspense resulting in a collectively shared affect. The massive protests in response to the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack in Paris in 2015 comprise a clear example. The event is experienced collectively based on the suspension of narrative continuity that the Hebdo attack produced and the intensity of the attack itself and its mediated representations. However, what then unfolds from this shared affect, expressed in the Hebdo case in spontaneous massive public gatherings in several European cities, depends entirely on the capacities and tendencies with which each individual enters these collective situations – it unfolds *differentially* from there. Narrative coherence or 'sameness of affect' does not exist in these situations. There is only affective difference according to Massumi. He qualifies these situations as a process of 'collective individuation'.[12] As a result, the original issue / matter of concern is quickly surpassed and what remains is the intensity of the collective event (the shared affect) and its differential unfolding.

The Somatic Deficit

It was clear from the outset that this dynamic of affective activation / mobilization would not go away with the lockdown. Mediated online connections became the primary replacement for embodied encounters under the lockdown conditions of social separation. The combination of social separation and density of mediated connections inevitably produces an affective gap, an experiential lack of physical connection to the events witnessed on the screen. In our previous research we observed that there is quite obvious an enormous difference between witnessing an event, particularly intense events, physically up close or instead mediated from afar:

Both types of experience may be charged with intensity, but the mediated experience is necessarily characterized by delimitation, a lack of physical cues or proximity, an absence of participation in full. The more dramatic the witnessed action, the more anaemic the mediated experience feels. It is this tension between a charged event witnessed from afar and its intensity unfolding in the immediacy of embodied space that fuels the desire for physical encounter. [13]

This experiential and affective gap between the embodied and mediated experience can be called the Somatic Deficit. The paradoxical situation many of us, billions in effect worldwide, found ourselves in, mediated up close and physically distanced, produced a massive collective somatic deficit. Not the sudden emanation of public protests ignoring and transcending the lockdown measures came as a surprise, but much rather the long period of apparent lack of contestation against the rushed measures imposed to curtail the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the Covid-19 disease it can cause. However, this delayed response may account for a gradual build-up of intensity, an intensified somatic deficit that could ultimately not be contained.

Rather than eliminating the dynamics of Affect Space, the lockdown may well have laid the foundations for these dynamics to reinstate themselves with unprecedented vigour. That the new wave of public gatherings in dissent manifested themselves through massive protests against institutional racism and police violence towards singled-out ethnic groups – a long overdue outpouring of collective indignation – might first and foremost have provided a focal point for the expression of this somatic deficit. The implication to take from this is that the somatic deficit might henceforth express itself in and through a variety of 'matters of concern', but crucially lacking any form of narrative coherence, and thus constitute a continuous factor of political and societal instability. However, it also indicates a potential for change.

Contact Tracing: Some Technologies Should Simply Not Be Developed

Authorities around the planet, both in supposedly democratic and more authoritarian political constellations, are keenly aware of the unsustainable nature of the lockdown measures – slightly tongue-in-cheek, Temporary Strategic Zones. New control mechanisms need to be implemented under the intense time-pressure exerted by a growing collective somatic deficit. The extraordinary but not entirely unpredicted conditions of a rapidly spreading global pandemic provided the tactical momentum (likely desired for a long time) to push through new legislative and technological interventions that would otherwise be immediately dismissed under justified public outrage.

The relentless drive to use personal communications media to trace individual and collective movements in public / urban space – to render as it were this space entirely transparent – now exceeds the mere capture of people's sentiments, views, movements and associations in (public) space. New wireless- and network-enabled sensing devices come in mundane guises: fitness trackers and their immediate link up with online dashboards where movements, heart rate, temperature, breathing patterns can be

analysed in real-time as well as after the act (usually some sportive activity or exercise). Smart watches fitted with increasingly sophisticated sensor technologies as well as optional add-ons that can monitor virtually every aspect of our bodily functions.[14] With the integration of these technological capabilities in health apps installed by default in most smartphones, meticulous somatic self-surveillance becomes ubiquitous. The deployment of so-called contact tracing apps, as a leaked UK government memo in *The Guardian* 13 April 2020 reveals could allow for situations in which 'ministers might be given the ability to order "de-anonymisation" to identify people from their smartphones'.[15] The partnership of Apple and Google to jointly develop Covid-19 contact tracing technology emphasizes the focus on user privacy, and intends to certify this by allowing only storage of contact data on the individual device and not via an online database or platform.[16] This, however, gives no guarantee that these companies will not be simply ordered by various governments in countries where the technology is deployed to make this data accessible for relevant health and policing authorities.

Furthermore, once in operation it will become very simple and attractive to link the contact tracing technology to the somatic sensing technologies discussed earlier, as both are integrated into the same devices and so-called ecosystems (combinations of integrated hardware and software). Thus, textual, auditory, visual and audiovisual exchanges, as well as physical movements, shared spaces, the number of contact moments with one or more identified actors, heart rate, breathing patterns, body temperature, blood pressure, (changes in) galvanic skin resistance, the number of steps taken, the periods of inactivity, hormonal cycles, respiration levels, and many other somatic functions can be rendered entirely transparent. Meanwhile identity can be verified by voice analysis, retinal scans, facial recognition, fingerprint scans, and other bodily markers.

Once in place all these different data points can be correlated by any government or authority that is willing to deploy these technologies for such uses, which is to say by any and all authorities, regardless of their political signature. The only option to avoid this scenario is not to develop these technologies and reverse them where they have already been deployed. The step by Apple and Google to integrate these contact tracing technologies into their respective operating systems means, however, that they have become in effect virtually unavoidable for all users of smartphones based on the iOS and Android platforms, which is the vast majority of citizens in the more developed economies.

The proposition that there could be such a thing as a privacy sensitive tracing app is preposterous. The technology offers only one choice: between traceability versus privacy – both notions are mutually exclusive. With the prospect of complete transparency and traceability in public space the possibility of entering public space and the public domain anonymously is eradicated. It is, however, the very possibility of anonymity in public space and the public domain that allows a collection of individuals to transform into 'a public'. This possibility is crucial to any idea of open governance, which depends on collective action that is not reducible to an individual act.

Sociologist Noortje Marres argued for the requirement of the public being untraceable, as part of the investigation into public agency in hybrid space conducted here in 2006 *[www.onlineopen.org/public-im-potence]*:

(…) the agency of the public derives in part from the fact that this entity is not fully traceable. That is, the force of the public has to do with the impossibility of knowing its exact potential. And this for the following reason: when a thing is publicized in the media, whether a person, an object or an event, this involves the radical multiplication of the potential relations that this entity can enter into with other things and people. Thus, when something starts circulating in public media, this brings along the possibility, and indeed the threat, of an open-ended set of actors stepping in to support this entity, and to make it strong. The fact that the public cannot be definitively traced back to a limited number of identifiable sources is thus crucial to the effectiveness of the public: this is what endows

publics with a dangerous kind of agency. This also makes it clear why the wish to concretize the public, to boil it down to the real actors that constitute it, involves a misunderstanding of the public.

The citizen assemblies post-2011, the so-called 'movement(s) of the squares' have demonstrated the importance of physical encounter with the unknown other as the fundamental 'basis' for civic sovereignty and open civic/democratic politics. It is exactly this principle of not knowing who is assembling that enables a multiplicity of different people to enter into a new social relation. The failure of the 'movements of the squares', their lack of political efficacy, has been their inability to translate these insights and experiences into effective forms of civic governance. However, this has in no way invalidated the importance of such open, impromptu forms of citizen assemblies for establishing new forms of pluralistic civic governance.

Another Post-Covid-19 World Is Possible

The problem of traceability of the (former) public is not technological, and the problem of the Covid-19 pandemic (or others that are certain to follow given the excessive human demographic pressures on this planet), is not medical. Both are political problems that rely on political choices that need to be made and were necessary reversed or redirected – with Latour we might say 'redesigned'. [17] Here are a few concrete steps towards this:

1. All restrictions on the right to freedom of assembly must be suspended as soon as possible.
2. The further development of tracing technologies and their deployment in public space must be aborted. The technology is too dangerous. Its adverse effects far outweigh any possible benefit.
3. The right to disconnect must be enshrined in law *[www.onlineopen.org/mindful-disconnection]* – as a constitutional right.
4. All eventual SARS-CoV-2 / Covid-19 vaccines must reside in the public domain so that the vaccine(s) can be efficiently reproduced by local producers and made available to an as broad as possible share of the global population. Private actors who might be deemed essential to these efforts can receive a reasonable retribution for their efforts and investments – the allocation of which is a political decision (i. e., what is reasonable given specific local conditions?).
5. In the absence of a vaccine or effective treatment, the capacities of care systems must be dramatically increased. Testing capacities must be scaled up, as well as traditional forms of contact tracing by health agencies. Protective measures for vulnerable sections of the global population must be radically extended.
6. These measures must be sustained for as long as required. The absence of a vaccine and / or treatment cannot be an excuse for the suspension of democratic and civil rights and principles, including anonymous access to public space and freedom of assembly.
7. The primacy of public interest over private interest in political decision making must be asserted.

References

- Kluitenberg, Eric (2015): 'Affect Space – Witnessing the Movement(s) of the Squares', published March 10, 2015 by *Open! Platform for Art, Culture, and the Public Domain*: Affect Space *[www.onlineopen.org/affect-space]*.
- Kluitenberg, Eric (2017): '(Re-) Designing Affect Space', published September 19, 2017 by *Open! Platform for Art, Culture, and the Public Domain*: (Re-)Designing Affect Space *[www.onlineopen.org/re-designing-affect-space]*.

- Latour, Bruno (2004): *The Politics of Nature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Latour Bruno (2005): 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public', in: Latour, Bruno & Weibel, Peter eds. (2005): *Making Things Public, Atmosphere of Democracy*, ZKM / MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Latour, Bruno (2008): 'Cautious Prometheus ? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design: (With Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)', lecture, in: Fiona Hackne, Jonathn Glynne and Viv Minto (editors) *Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society* – Falmouth, 3–6 September 2009, e-books, Universal Publishers, pp. 2–10, www.bruno-latour.fr.
- Mackenzie, Adrian (2010): *Wirelessness – Radical Empiricism in Network Cultures*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Marres, Noortje (2006): 'Public (Im)Potence *[www.onlineopen.org/public-im-potence]*', in: Kluitenberg, Eric & Seijdel, Jorinde (eds.), Hybrid Space, *Open!*, Amsterdam, 2006.
- Massumi, Brian (2015): *Politics of Affect*, Polity, Cambridge (UK) / Maiden, MA.
- Rheingold, Howard & Kluitenberg, Eric (2006): 'Mindful Disconnection – Counter Powering the Panopticon From the Inside *[www.onlineopen.org/mindful-disconnection]*', in: Kluitenberg, Eric & Seijdel, Jorinde (eds.) *Hybrid Space, Open!*, Amsterdam, 2006.

Eric Kluitenberg is an independent theorist, writer and educator, working at the intersection of culture, politics, media and technology. He was head of the media and technology program of De Balie, Centre for Culture and Politics in Amsterdam (1999–2011), and taught theory of interactive media and technological culture for a variety of academic institutions, including the University of Amsterdam, the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and Academy Minerva Postgraduate Studies in Groningen. He was also a scientific staff member of the Academy of Media Arts Cologne. Currently he teaches media and cultural theory at the Art Science Interfaculty in The Hague. In 2013 he was a research fellow at the Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Publications include: *Techno Ecologies* (2012); *The Legacies of Tactical Media* (2011); theme issues '(Im)Mobility' (2011) and 'Hybrid Space' (2006) for *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*; *Delusive Spaces – Essays* (2008); and *The Book of Imaginary Media* (2006). He is working on the preparation of an international anthology on Tactical Media co-edited with David Garcia, to be published by MIT Press in 2017. Projects include *FREE!? – A one day journey into the cultures of sharing* (2013), *Economies of the Commons* conference series (2008–2012), *ElectroSmog – International Festival for Sustainable Immobility* (2010) and *Next 5 Minutes 3 & 4 – Festivals of Tactical Media* (1999 / 2003).

Footnotes

1. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.
2. Latour, Bruno (2004): *The Politics of Nature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
3. www.modesofexistence.org.
4. Latour Bruno (2005): 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public', in: Latour, Bruno & Weibel, Peter eds. (2005): *Making Things Public, Atmosphere of Democracy*, ZKM / MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
5. See also: '(Re-)Designing Affect Space'.
6. Mackenzie, Adrian (2010): *Wirelessness – Radical Empiricism in Network Cultures*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
7. See the advice of the Netherlands Council of State of June 10, 2020, on the 'Tweede Verzamelspoedwet Covid-19' (Dutch only): www.raadvanstate.nl.
8. Also Bruno Latour observed this in his column for *Le Monde* and *Critical Inquiry:* 'Is This a Dress Rehearsal?', criting.wordpress.com.
9. Kluitenberg, Eric (2015): 'Affect Space – Witnessing the Movement(s) of the Squares', published March 10, 2015 by Open! Platform for Art, Culture, and the Public Domain: Affect Space.
10. See also final report 'reDesigning Affect Space' (2019), www.coolmediators.net.
11. Latour Bruno (2005): 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public', in: Latour, Bruno & Weibel, Peter eds. (2005): *Making Things Public, Atmosphere of Democracy*, ZKM / MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
12. Massumi, Brian (2015): *Politics of Affect*, Polity, Cambridge (UK) / Maiden, MA, pp. 109–110.
13. Kluitenberg, Eric (2017): '(Re-) Designing Affect Space', published September 19, 2017 by *Open! Platform for Art, Culture, and the Public Domain*: (Re-)Designing Affect Space
14. A good example of such health applications are Apple's HealthKit, ResearchKit, and CareKit. See: developer.apple.com.
15. *The Guardian*, April 13, 2020: 'NHS Coronavirus App: Memo Discussed Giving Ministers Power to "De-Anonymise" Users', www.theguardian.com.
16. Press release, April 10, 2020: *Apple and Google partner on Covid-19 contact tracing technology*, www.apple.com.
17. Latour, Bruno (2008): 'Cautious Prometheus ? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design: (With Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)', lecture, in: Fiona Hackne, Jonathn Glynne and Viv Minto (editors) *Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society* – Falmouth, 3–6 September 2009, e-books, Universal Publishers, pp. 2–10, www.bruno-latour.fr.

Crosslinks

Affect Space: www.onlineopen.org/affect-space
Public (Im)potence: www.onlineopen.org/public-im-potence
Affect Space: www.onlineopen.org/affect-space
(Re-)Designing Affect Space: www.onlineopen.org/re-designing-affect-space
Public (Im)potence: www.onlineopen.org/public-im-potence
Mindful Disconnection: www.onlineopen.org/mindful-disconnection
Mindful Disconnection: www.onlineopen.org/mindful-disconnection

Tags

Activism, Affect, Public Space