

Away from Omelas, Towards a Care-Full City

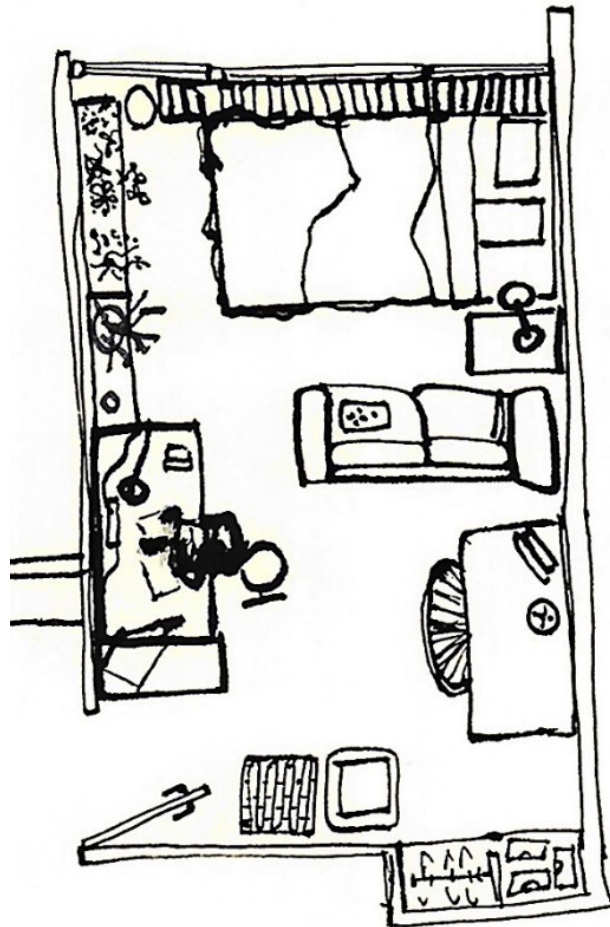
Story Telling as a Defiant Spatial Act

Anna Borbàla Hausel

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This Theoretical Statement is submitted to fulfil the requirements for the Master of Science MSc, Architecture program at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne in 2025. It was completed under the supervision of Prof. Dieter Dietz, mentorship from Claire Logoz, and additional guidance from my PDM Pedagogical Advisor, Prof. Charlotte Malterre-Barthes.

Abstract



*Figure 1: My Room, a drawing test.
From where I learned to go out into the World.*

Exploring the complex interplay of experiences of marginalised communities in public spaces, this Theoretical statement aims to uncover how spatial design adapts to their needs and vulnerabilities to understand better how cities shape our bodies and lives and how these architectural choices perpetuate or mitigate fear and violence. Public spaces, defined by systemic oppression and norms favouring dominant groups (cis non-disabled white men), exclude and endanger marginalised individuals, requiring intersectional and care-full political and design strategies to make systemic change to address these inequities fully. These communities – notably racialised groups, queer or gender-non-conforming individuals, differently abled or neurodivergent people, women, and others – face discomfort, violence, and exclusion daily. Their personal stories reveal how systemic biases are embedded into urban design, creating recurring themes of fear and avoidance. Understanding these intersectional perspectives is essential for addressing diverse needs without oversimplification or unintended harm.

This research aims to map some of these stories and voices using hand drawing to learn the everyday vocabularies of complaints and oral histories. These methods centre personal narratives as testimonies to systemic flaws while identifying spaces for resistance. The drawings, inspired by Huda Tayob's hand-drawn architectural techniques, highlight the care and sensorial respect for the community, positioning drawing as an act of curiosity. It also borrows from Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," reflecting on exclusionary practices' moral and spatial implications, proposing an alternative perspective grounded in care, community, and lived experience.

The work's presentation embeds accessibility and inclusivity. A diverse bibliography reduces reliance on white-cis-male authors, and Dyslexie font enhances accessibility for neurodivergent readers. The research critically engages with the lived realities of marginalised groups, questioning how design can transform public spaces into truly inclusive environments.



Figure 2: EPFL MA3 Studio, Week 2

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Preface

Before we start, I wish to contextualise this object, this text/essay/story, into its academic realities. This is a document produced for an academic degree. It should present my interests, knowledge, and capacity to do research, which I have acquired in the last six years of study. In the three months of this work, I have tried to unlearn straight lines, normative solutions, academic snobbishness, political neutrality, hustle culture and ableist aesthetics. I have used these 12ECTs gainfully to read and create something fundamentally a **Complaint** (Ahmed, 2021).

This **Complaint** is in some ways personal; I have faced urban fear and violence due to my neurodivergence, my queerness, and my feminine appearance. In other ways, my privilege – my whiteness, the financial and emotional support of my parents, my alignment with the gender I was assigned at birth, and my capacity to function at a "high" level, among others – has protected me and hid me from the brutal realities' others experience.

Trigger Warnings

This essay addresses sensitive topics, including experiences and fears related to racism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, and sexism, and includes themes of depression. Additionally, it discusses bodily functions such as urine and menstrual blood. While it does not describe explicit acts of violence or gore, it engages with the fear and impacts of systemic oppression, discrimination, and mental health challenges and openly discusses sexual violence.

Reader discretion is advised.

Introduction

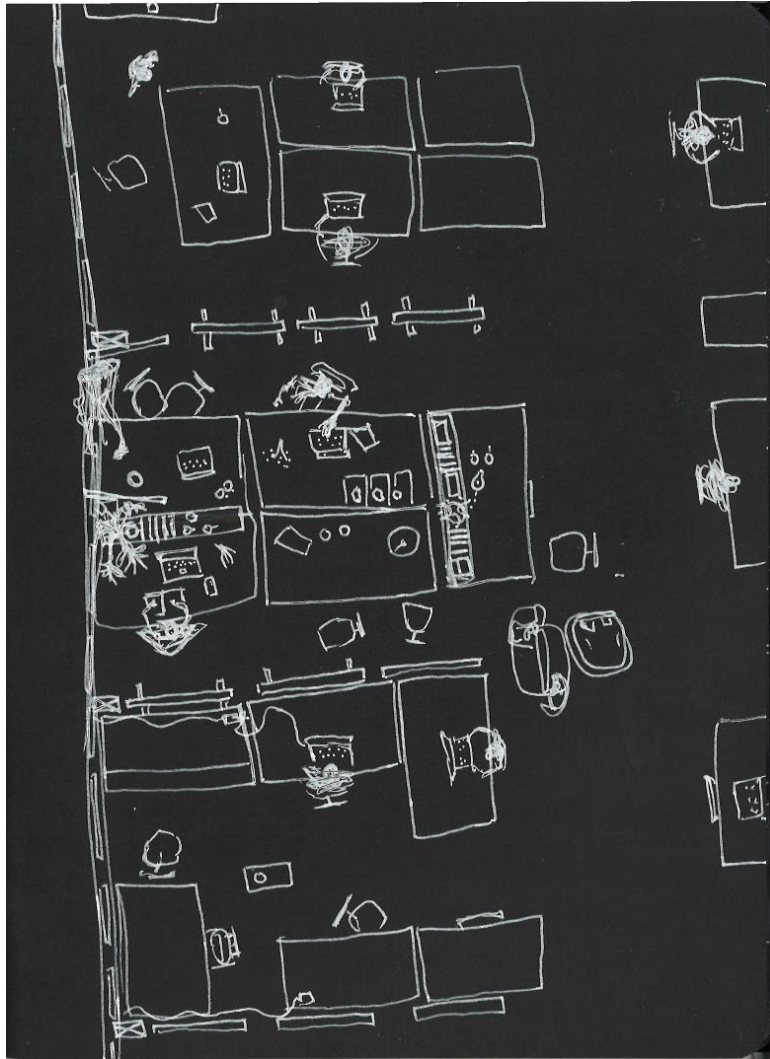


Figure 3: EPFL MA3 Studio, Week 10

“A Queer Map

A mess can be a picture of a complaint.

A mess can be a picture of a life.

A mess can be a picture of an organisation.

[...] It is a map of what has been filed, what has been kept secret, and what would be threatening if revealed; a filing cabinet can be an institutional closet.

I think of all those lines, those paths, those wires, those strings, threads too: so much can unravel, come tumbling out, so much, so many.

When I think of that mess as a queer map, I still think of complainers, of all the trails you follow, those dead ends, those stops, those blocks, going back, going this way, that, how you cannot go forward, go there, be there. To follow a trail is to leave traces behind despite the effort made by organisations (and others) to wipe those traces away.

Sometimes, the work of complaint becomes the work of leaving traces of complaint: that is what it means to get mess out. A mess as a map: a tangle can tell us where you have been. A mess as a map: a tangle can be what you find, how you find, and also then, how we find you.”¹

¹ Sara Ahmed, “A Mess as a Queer Map,” December 23, 2020, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2020/12/23/a-mess-as-a-queer-map/>.

Complaints of the Commons

At their most basic definition, public spaces are places where people living in a city can gather and use facilities.² These places, such as streets, parks, public transport and toilets, are virtually unavoidable. Thus, they should ideally adapt to the needs of all populations.

However, we hear stories from marginalised communities about their discomfort or the dangers they face in our shared spaces daily. Racialised groups, transgender and gender non-conforming people, neurodivergent and differently abled individuals, as well as women, people with children and elders, can experience fear and face violence by just existing in public. The neutralist stance that the urban commons are politically impartial is fundamentally impossible when some bodies have become inherently political by their non-conformity to the status quo, such as (implicitly) defined by the ruling class: white, non-disabled, cis men. Those who diverge from this norm in multiple aspects, intersectional groups, are all the more vulnerable and are statistically more likely to face danger or repudiation, including but not limited to sexual and/or physical violence and death.³

These marginalised groups tend to use stories and their telling as safety strategies – warning others – and to revindicate their right to space – complaint. The stories are of discomfort, danger, and fear, leading to avoiding specific spaces, perhaps the impacts of bad lighting, the challenges posed by public restrooms, and broader concerns around safety.

² UN-Habitat (2018). SDG Indicator 11.7.1 Training Module: Public Space. United Nations Human Settlement Programme. P. 9.

³ Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Miriam Gleckman-Krut, and Lanora Johnson, “Silence, Power, and Inequality: An Intersectional Approach to Sexual Violence.”

Through an architectural lens, one might question what physically defines discomfort. Then, norms will be introduced, encouraging designs that address the needs of one or more of these groups. However, who decides which populations benefit from these aids? What happens when the modifications end up harming instead of helping? Or harming others? Herein lies the nuance of intersectional thinking, and this is where architects and spatial designers must learn to look to the complexity to understand the intricate realities of cohabitation: in Sara Ahmed's words, a (Queer) Mess. The post-Rationalist design world looks to issues as symptomatic simplifications of these Messes: like picking a strand of a knot and pulling. Perhaps we must first pause and look at a multifaceted image of the knot and understand what tied it so in the first place.

Mapping the Mess

Philosophical, sociological, and political discussions often highlight how marginalised bodies coexist under intersecting layers of active oppression.⁴ These layers are intrinsically tied to capitalism, which uses marginalisation as a tool to maintain a surplus labour force and perpetuate income inequality. As Marx theorised, marginalised populations serve Capitalists by ensuring a disposable labour force, sustaining systemic inequality, and maintaining the cycle of production and consumption.⁵

Such segregationist violence, which upholds this Capitalist Society, is also explored in Ursula Le Guin's famous short story *The Ones Who Walked Away From Omelas*,⁶ whose "ideal" but profoundly corrupted eponymous City lends its name to this Theoretical Statement. Le Guin's rhetorical style is fascinating

⁴ Ashley J. Bohrer, "Intersectionality and Marxism," in *Historical Materialism*.

⁵ Robert Chapman, *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism*.

⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*.

in the face of the challenge of universally defining both the utopia and dystopia of Omelas, which equates to capturing the human nature of good (comfort) and evil (discomfort)—she leaves it up to the reader. How does one perfectly put subjective universal truths into words?

Researching the subject of “Marginalized Communities Facing Violence In Public Spaces” has been incredibly compelling because, when brought up, almost everyone will respond with a story about challenges with accessibility or stories of lived experience, either their own or of someone close to them. Should we extrapolate a universality of experience, perhaps a fundamentally human experience of feeling marginalised? Or can it be that individuals whose bodies do not fit the status quo have developed communication and storytelling techniques as a spatial practice, helping to reveal how cities embed themselves into their lives and bodies? Leslie Kern presents a revealing, honest and compelling geographical analysis of (intersectional!) feminist spatialities and problematics, which was the original inspiration for the axis take in this Statement: that story-tellings of our urban spaces are a spatial resistance to the violence we face.⁷

The more one listens to these stories of urban acts of violence, the more one recognises how widespread these issues are. From parents struggling to find a hygienic space to change their babies to individuals transitioning genders who feel unsafe in public spaces to racialised people whose bodies are perceived as a threat or exoticised and eroticised, people have had to find solutions to build community and hope in the face of the aggression and ostracisation.

Mindful Methodologies

This Theoretical Statement’s research adopts a qualitative approach to explore how these relationships manifest in everyday life – how personal stories become testimonies to how our cities are

⁷ Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*.

(mis)constructed. The starting point of the Theoretical Statement was finding Urban Nomadologies, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari, as anti-state War Machines.⁸ Three branches of research emerged from this foundation: drawing (looking), interviewing (asking), and analysing (listening). The project's meta-analysis accompanied the study as an embodied process.⁹ My experiences, surroundings, and hands make this personal; even with the best intentions of "objectivity," my biases and way of seeing the world would shine through. Therefore, I have tried to keep the "voice of the author" as distinguishable and transparent as possible.

To document spatial stories that I had heard in the process of my research, I conducted individual interviews with three women whose bodies had faced violence or threat. I then weaved the three discussions, three different testimonies, into one Scripted Discussion between four people (myself included). During the interviews, they had a list of three subjects, points I wanted to discuss, and access to pen and paper, where they were asked to draw themselves in public spaces. These drawings, as well as other doodles we made, are dispersed in the script.

I intend to keep the anonymity of my interviewees, but for transparency, the three people interviewed are personal social connections, friends if you will. I have chosen not to present their "labels", qualifying or proving their intersectionality; I included the contexts of the types of bigotry they have faced, evident throughout the script through their words and perceptions. The interviews took around 1:15, so much of the discussion remains unused. However, their voices have been preserved as close as possible to authentically theirs: I remove repetitions, correct some grammar and regroup the thoughts they shared

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Brian Massumi, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

⁹ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective."

with time gaps. It is important to note that all three women have non-English mother tongues and grew up in different cultures. Some of these stories appear in the text; some will not.

To insert the analysis for the more classically “theoretical” part of the Theoretical Statement, I have annotated the discussion with sources and resources on the subjects that intuitively were shared or came up with. Using the graphical language of Imre Lakatos, the Script and the Annotations negotiate for space on each page.¹⁰ This means the text has two possible readings: the scripted story alone or the scripted story with my comments. Since the “theory” cannot be understood without reading the discussion, it aims to critique and highlight that even in theory, a grounding to the lived realities must be constant, and no over-abstraction is taken.

Much of the research, study and work took place in the studio space provided to final-year MArch Students in EPFL. Therefore, it has acted as a spatial anchor and served as a biweekly repeated research subject for how the dynamics of social spaces evolve and are experienced. In the hand-drawn style of Huda Tayob’s drawings of the Cape Town Markets,¹¹ Architectural drawing emphasises a sensorial respect for the community and positions drawing as an act of care. While potentially anecdotal to the final work, this ritualisation of drawing shaped the thought process of understanding common space as individual stories and negotiations and training my hand to the automatism of the drawing style. One significant difference to Tayob is my inclusion of the human body. She leaves them out, offering anonymity and protection to the communities she documents. I decided to show them.

¹⁰ Imre Lakatos, John Worrall, and Élie Zahar, *Proofs and Refutations: The Logic of Mathematical Discovery*.

¹¹ Huda Tayob, “*Subaltern Architectures: Can Drawing ‘Tell’ a Different Story?*”

The three site drawings are part of the stories: the Geneva Station, the Rue de la Tour, and the Public (paying) Toilets of the Gare de Lausanne. They intend to showcase the spaces recounted and serve as spatial illustrations to accompany the reader. Drawing them became performative: I occupied space with an A2 drawing flipbook and drew in the rhythms of my perception. I decided to include my notes from the drawing experiences in the annotations, as they contextualise the drawings.

Finally, I filled my bibliography with as few white-cis-men as possible to diversify the work's academic axis. Also, to ensure as much access to this work as I have control over (as a text written in English in a non-English speaking country), I use the font Dyslexie,¹² which enables Neurodivergent readers, including myself, to read the typography more fluidly.

¹² Dyslexie Font, <https://dyslexiefont.com/en/>.

Act I

take a seat around my metaphysical table.

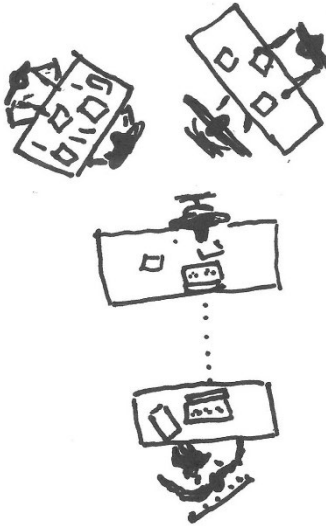


Figure 5: The Interviews

A

All right, everyone, I've started the recording. Is everything okay? You all have paper, right? Here are the pens; now it's up to you! L, you seem really stressed.

L

I am really stressed.

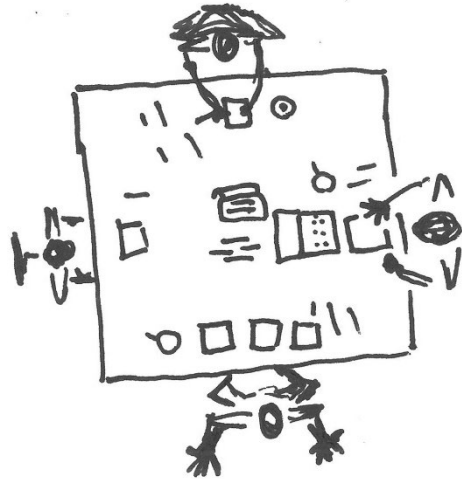


Figure 4: My Meta-Physical Table

A

Is it because of the subject, or is it something else?

L

I think I'm just generally stressed.

K

Is everything okay?

L

I don't feel like everything can be okay right now.

K

Because of workloads?

L

Yeah, I think it's the workload. I have so much to do, I can't manage everything else, and I don't have time to be okay about the rest of my life.¹

A

Intense. I understand. I feel like we're all carrying a bit of stress right now.

L

I guess. Also, I'm not sure I can talk and draw simultaneously!

T

Neither can I. I'm struggling to do two things at once.

A

That's fine! We can take small breaks; you don't have to make the most beautiful drawing ever. It's just to occupy your hands and give me an image of you.

K

Are you doing one too?

A

Of course. I will do three, I think since I'm interviewing you separately. I've also been thinking that since I'll be writing it as a conversation, I must include myself in it, too. What I am doing is a little biased, right?

¹ For temporal context, the interviews were conducted in November 2024. The persistent news of Genocide in Gaza, bombing in Ukraine, the re-election of Donald Trump in the USA, and stories of climate change and hurricanes, accompanied by the incoming cold of fall flowing into winter, had a significant load on our common unconscious.

You're all sharing your thoughts with me, but I also join each discussion and have my own experiences and views... I think I need to be a fourth character.²

T

Of course, you are biased. There's a reason why you're working on this subject. It's also something we all talk about quite often.

A

Yeah, exactly. I've noticed how much people around me talk about urban spaces as anxiety-inducing. Or maybe what I mean is that I hear a lot about fear and violence in them. This is why I

wanted to talk to the three of you. Your experiences really resound with the research I've been doing. I think you also have interesting perceptions on these questions. Embodied knowledge.³

T

I wonder if we also talk to you about this because we seek out those with similar experiences—or at least that we understand each other better and thus get closer quicker.

[Gong pings; K takes a long, deep breath]

² I had initially intended to write myself out. During the third interview (with T), I noticed that I had already inserted myself into the narrative and my transcriptions. I have removed as much of my thoughts as possible to leave space for others' words but have included some exchanges.

³ I cut out most of my reactions about the bibliography, I leave this first one in to show them. In the footprints of Donna Haraway, who argued in *Situated Knowledges* that knowledge must be contextualised into the reality of the human bias and their lived experiences — that science is not neutral, and one cannot remove their view and pretend to have a god-like overview; that the limitations that come from the human experience can positively inform work, and acknowledging the lived experience can further the author's intent because of their positioning therein.

T

I love that meditation app, K.⁴ How was your day?
Were there many people out and about?

K

Today was charming. I worked, walked 15 kilometres, got home and started making dinner. Then I realised I promised to talk to you. It works well because dinner will be ready when we're done.

A

That's good! Just don't forget about the oven...
Please show me what you are drawing!

K

I will draw a background afterwards. I am using tracing paper so that I can do something with it. I can put the rest of the scenes on another page.

A

I will do more decoration: I am trying to draw myself with my earphones. Since I always have them on, they are a part of me. Also, it shows my own experiences.

T

You know, I also have them; they're just smaller. Talking about our habits, it's not just about the habits themselves. I have been thinking about what's underneath—why we do what we do and how we make sense of it.

A

This is part of why I am doing this. I wonder what will come out of this discussion... L, would it help if I showed you what I'm drawing?

L

Maybe.

⁴ “Mindfulness Bell”, Application, <https://mindfulnessbell.langhoangal.dev/en/index.html>.

K

Nice. Oh, that's amazing.

T

Aaaah, A, I am struggling with this drawing. I cannot get the proportions right.

A

Oh, come off it. It's excellent, your hands don't have to be as big as your face! Look, I've managed to become a bit orange!

T

You're not kidding; you look a bit peachy.

[everyone laughs]

A

It is a bit funny; I should soften the colours. Your drawing reminds me of **Sherlock Holmes!**

T

Haha, yes! A little. I always wear my coat like that in the evening. My hair's curly and short, so it's got that vibe.

Act II

my body vs. their opinion

A

Does it make sense for me to ask you about this?
To talk about body and space or marginalisation
in public urban places?

K

Maybe if you had asked me these questions three
years ago, I wouldn't have had much to say. At
that time, I was highly able-bodied. I was very
sporty and always fit, so I didn't feel like I didn't
belong in public spaces. I moved freely and easily
in public; perhaps there was some fear, but fear

is an everyday experience for women.¹ Sometimes,
you worry when you're alone on a dark street, and
you see two guys approaching or someone drunk
starts talking to you. Three years ago, I would
have only been talking about those kinds of
experiences.

But then I got so sick.² I could barely reach the
railway station. So many times, I fell there. In
Geneva's railway station, these little rubber
strips on the floor help people with vision
impairments navigate, but they were a challenge

¹ This is a horrible truth. Violence against women is a continuous theme in many books. While it is the question in feminist books such as *She City* by Nicole Kalms, more intricacies can be found through intersectional theory. An interesting axis to approach Kalm's reading of "woman-centred" architecture is Audre Lorde's *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, which critiques white feminism as a Tool of the oppressive patriarchy. The absence of nuance concerning social hierarchies among women generates privilege and exclusivity and further disadvantages POC, trans, queer and differently abled women. This subject is also explored in Sara Ahmed's *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: "If happiness requires turning away from violence, happiness is violence."*

² The experience of bodily ability changes the way one sees space. Louise Kern's *Feminist City* discusses this through the lens of pregnancy, physical limitations, and spatial modifications. She describes how changing the body or the body's capacity for movement distorts the geographies around a person. Paths are modified to account for bathrooms, and access elevators or escalators redefine available destinations.

for me. As I got increasingly tired, I couldn't lift my feet properly. Even that half-centimetre bump would catch my shoe, and I'd fall.³

³ Figure 6: 12/12/2024 in the afternoon, around 4 p.m.

I spend an hour sitting, drawing, and observing the main hall of the Geneva Station. It is a "quiet moment" on a Thursday. I remember the stories of K's body fighting through here so often to get to the hospital. Through her eyes, through the words of her story, the train station becomes a violent obstacle course, fast-paced and aggressive. Even stationary, the space feels like it moves in rapid torrents.

The open space encourages disorganised darting for speedy travellers. People flood through at irregular intervals, heading every which way. Sometimes, people slow down, looking at their phones or trying to find their train. Bigger groups cluster, blocking space—sometimes even standing on the marked pathway for visually impaired people. The escalator is blocked for repairs; people queue to use the working one. Sitting spaces are absent, so people sit on the stairs. People linger, standing along the periphery of the space.

My body is observed while I draw. People come to stand next to me and stare but leave quickly when addressed. In a vague, open way, there is so much noise that it becomes indistinguishable through my earphones. There is lots of light. I crouch proprietarily over my page, turning my head like an owl to see behind me. Being knee-height here makes me vulnerable; I bend against the wall to avoid the many legs. What is it like to fall here, to struggle to stand with so many feet trampling by?

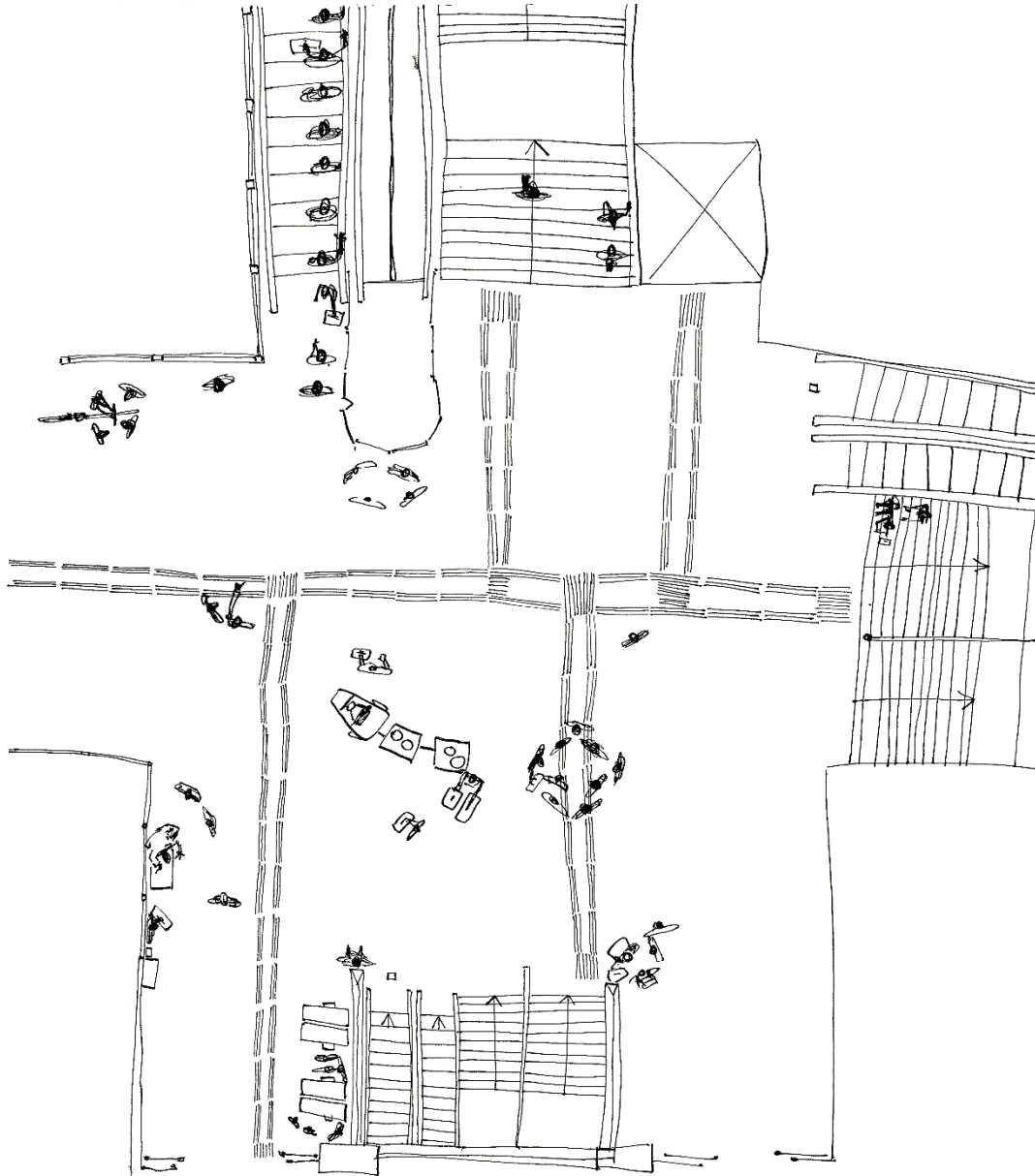


Figure 6: Geneva Cornavin Station

When I was sick, I realised how difficult it is to navigate the world when you don't entirely fit people's expectations in public spaces.

For instance, that was when I noticed how old-fashioned my railway station is. You must step up maybe 50 or 60 centimetres to get onto the train. I've since heard they're planning to change that, as this is one of the last platforms that hasn't been updated to align with the train doors.

I wondered how anyone managed. I'm pretty sure people in wheelchairs couldn't use those trains at all. I was too weak to manage the steps. I had to pull myself up, and I had no choice. I did it, but it was incredibly hard: really, really hard. It was also a humiliating experience because it made me feel weak, unsafe, and like I didn't belong. The world was telling me I wasn't supposed to be out there.

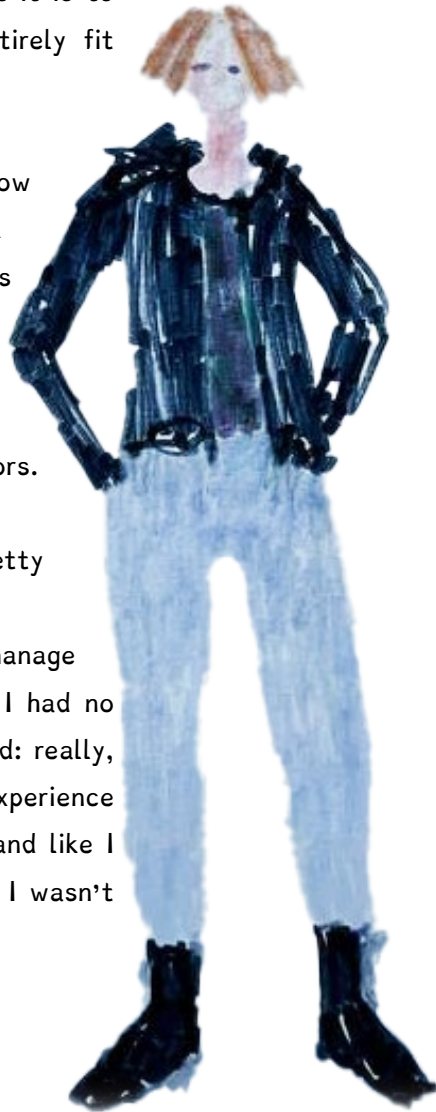


Figure 7: K's Self-Portrait, Version 1

L

For me, public space is always the most challenging thing. At the beginning of my transition, I was always getting looks. My mother used to tell me: “Oh, it’s not because you’re trans. It’s because you’re tall, and a tall girl generates looks from people.”

K

You realise that space can be hostile. But we can always have this underlying sense because they often are. Sometimes, though, the hostility is camouflaged. It might seem like appreciation or something harmless on the surface. But you sense it very early—these subtle signals register before anything overt happens. ⁴

⁴ Another angle to approach women’s violence is through understanding sexual violence, such as done by Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Miriam Gleckman-Krut, and Lanora Johnson in *Silence, Power, and Inequality: An Intersectional Approach to Sexual Violence*, who decipher and explore sexual assault through its interpersonal hierarchies of power and dominance, and its lack of research in academia. In the same subject, Katherine McKittrick situates Black women’s bodies and sexualities in the centre of a colonialist remapping of Western society in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*.

L

I remember thinking about how I would be perceived at the beginning of my transition. The biggest thing I have noticed is how people look at me. Before, I had never felt noticed because I was maybe less noticeable.

A

Do you have any examples?

L

The first thing that comes to mind is being on the train and having someone looking at me. The person in front of me was staring at me. It’s the first time it has happened to me, being perceived, or at least I noticed it happening. It was on a tram in Geneva when I was going home after the day in school – just minding my own business and scrolling on my phone. This old lady was looking.

At me... and looking at me, staring at me. Then she started frowning. And kept looking at me. So, I asked her if I could help her; if something were wrong since I wasn't used to it, I thought something was wrong, you know, am I bleeding or something drastic? But she was like,

“Oh,
no,
no,
no,
nothing.”

And left.

She made me understand that my presence in public was a subject for people to frown at. That's the message I received. I still get this feeling that it is not expected that I'm in public or that they don't expect me to be on the tram going home.⁵

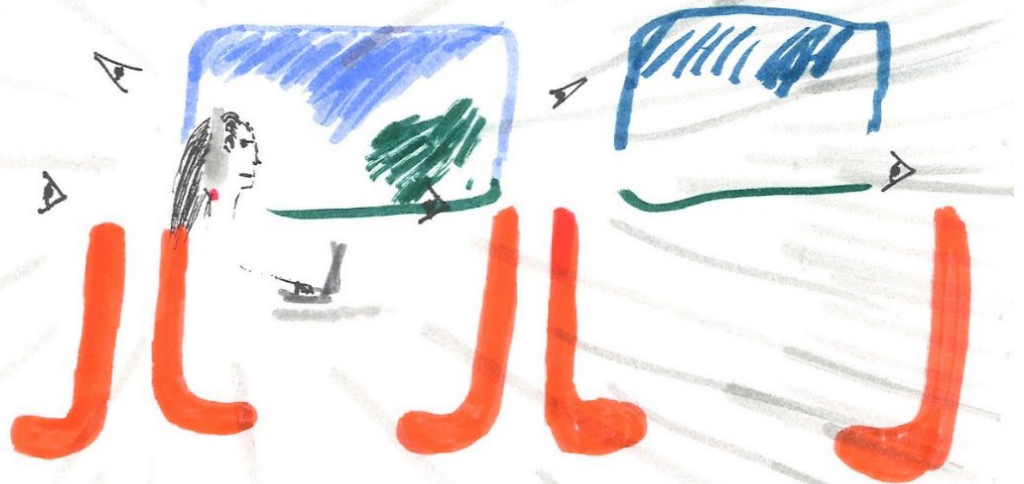


Figure 8: L's Auto-Portrait

⁵ Trans women face abundant judgement from cis-women and feminist activists. As discussed in Catherine Nash's *Trans Geographies*, the radical feminist movements of the 70s and 80s branched into trans-exclusionary radical feminist groups, TERFs. A detailed breakdown of these political hate movements is presented in "J. K. Rowling" by Nathalie Wynn (ContraPoints on Youtube).

Since then, I have needed to think about where I'm going: if I will be safe on the way there and what my plan is if something goes wrong. If I feel like I'm not safe, what can I do quickly? If I'm wearing a crop top, I'll have a jacket with me that I can close to hide that I'm wearing one. If I wear makeup, I have wipes, so I'll take it off if I'm not feeling OK. I always have an escape plan. Some days, I decide this is too challenging: I won't step out the door.⁶

I don't know what preparing for a fight feels like, but I think it feels like what I do to go out. It's checking whether I have everything I need to win or return without any scars. I believe that I need to be prepared. Otherwise, bad things are going to happen. Preparing for the worst makes it less surprising and more manageable when something goes wrong because I react planned. Then, I get to be right about my expectations.⁷

⁶ Regarding learning to deal with new realities for young trans people, James David Todd discusses the exhaustion accompanying transitioning in *Exhaustion, Exhausting Temporalities, and Young Trans People's Everyday Lives in the UK*. Although concentrating on youths' lived experiences in Britain, the concept of spatial shrinkage echoes in L's story. Her limiting herself to the outside world and the cautious geographies these actions create align with those that Todd reports.

⁷ While I could quote here scientific journals discussing the interplays of anxiety (such as *Uncertainty and Anticipation in Anxiety* by Dan W Grupe and Jack B Nitschke, which lays out these dynamics formally), I think the version of this thought process that is most accessible and clear, is Pixar's 2024 *Inside Out 2*. The new Emotion, Anxiety (a character), explains their reasoning and planning, which leads to a significant anxiety and depressive episode. They account for all the possible bad things that could happen and then are satisfied when they are correct, which creates a spiral of anxiety-inducing choices and reasonings.

Getting to my mother's old house used to be complicated. I had to go by an old theatre, which always had men lingering outside, watching me. I felt disgusted passing by them, even if the space was big enough for everyone. I started preparing myself to go there and tried to find techniques to avoid feeling too bad.⁸

T

I think I also worked a lot on avoiding situations. It's not that I look tough, but I try to be a bit unapproachable. I generally assume it's necessary to scare men, especially. It's something I remember from when I was little, maybe still in Brazil: we watched a documentary about different types of psychiatric issues related to crime (like

sociopathy, things like that). And what was striking was that statistically, if you've been a victim of violence, it's more likely to happen again; they were wondering why. They explained that often, those who have already been victims seem a bit more fragile in public spaces, that they appear more afraid.⁹

Since then, it left such an impression that I've made an effort to appear truly unapproachable mentally. And I feel like it works a little. It's to the point that people tell me I look like I'm angry. But at the same time, I'm super colourful, so I know that as soon as I smile, I immediately look cuter. So, I kind of play with that.

⁸ I had initially intended to draw the Théâtre de la Gare in Geneva; however, my presence there made me sincerely uncomfortable with the people watching me. I decided to draw somewhere else from L's stories. Perhaps it would have been a positive experience to reclaim the area as I had with the other drawing, but I chose to listen to my instincts.

⁹ This is called Revictimisation. Many studies have been conducted about rape revictimisation in various groups. For college students, the effects and behaviours that influence this phenomenon are explored in *Intervention for Sexual Revictimization Among College Women* by Terri L. Messman-Moore and Amy A. McConnell.

A

So, the lines in your drawing give off “leave me alone” vibes?

T

Hahaha, yes!

K

They think it's a kind of service to women to express appreciation. But I have to say that it happens less now since I'm getting older. Spaces change as you get less attractive. You grew up with this stupid stuff and then noticed it no longer happened. And then that also makes you feel like: “OK, I'm not attractive anymore.” It's more that I feel more private like my presence is not of public importance.

L

That's an interesting way to put it! It feels like being bombarded by judgment. In a way, it also used to be validating for me. Part of me was satisfied by getting noticed, having my femininity perceived and sparking interest. Now that I don't need the validation since I get it from other places, I feel the terrible part. I feel watched and followed.

A

Do you feel like the perceptions of you have changed?

K

Yeah. With my age, maybe it's even that I become a little bit invisible. It's nice. But I also realise what it takes to become safe. At the same time, when you become invisible, you also consider whether it is that secure.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ursula Le Guin's 1976 novel *The Space Crone* explores the change to becoming “unobjectified” and “uncommodified” through the lens of the capitalist patriarchy: “*The woman who is willing to make the change must become pregnant with herself, at last. She must bear herself, her third self, her old age, with travail and alone.*” She discusses the difficulty of de-sexualisation that the female body experiences

When I started being sick, before the worst of the treatment, I still lived in Lausanne near the Hermitage, and I had to go up to catch the bus. I remember this one time when the bus.

I was waiting at the roundabout. And it's a little bit up, and I was trying to run after the bus, who saw me and was waiting for me.

I was running, but I was already very, very ill, and I was ridiculously slow.

Then the driver commented to me when I got on, saying that I could have at least tried. And it was so humiliating. As far as I was concerned, I was running. He felt justified in his comment; he

felt like he had done a service for me, waiting for me on the bus.

But if you are sick, you know, you cannot perform correctly how people expect you to perform in a public space.

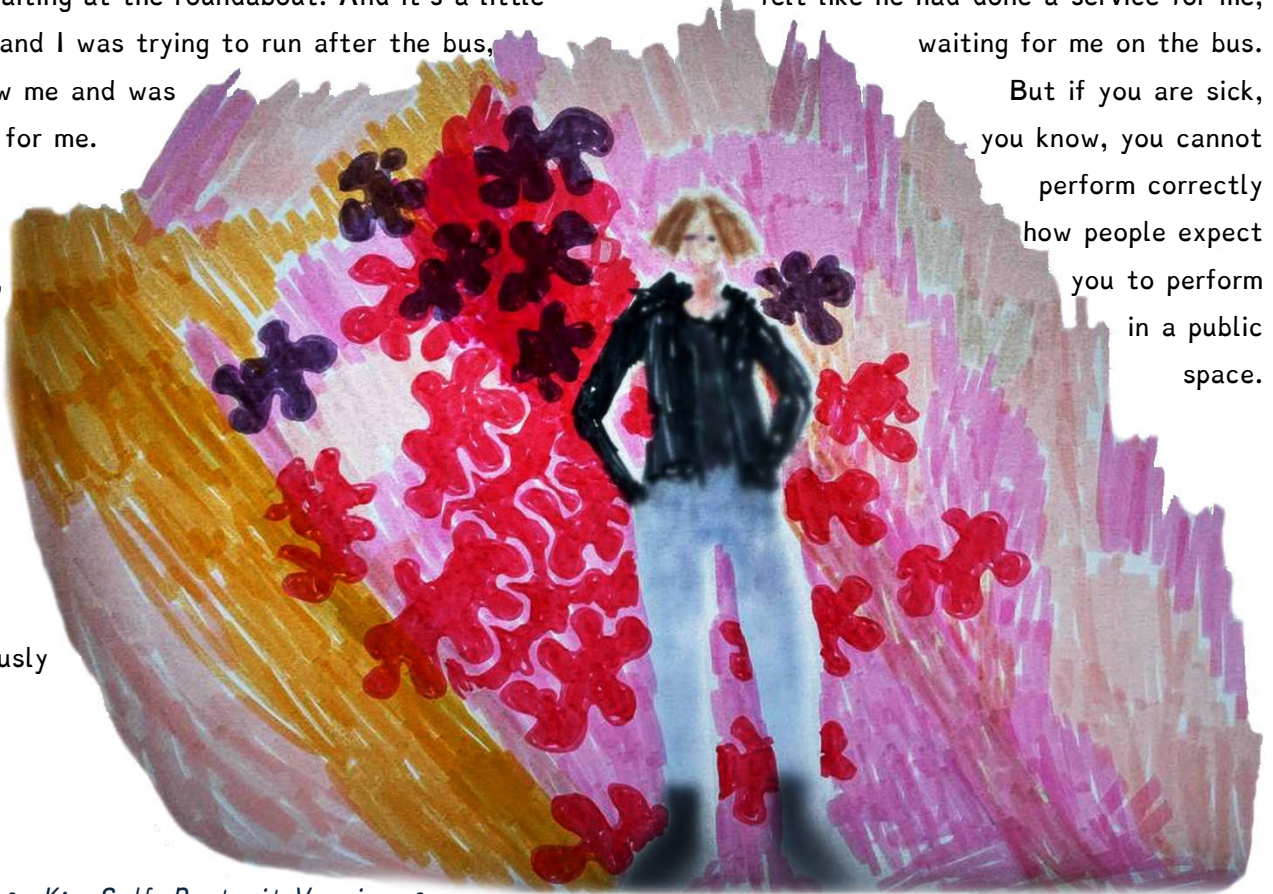


Figure 9: K's Self-Portrait Version 2

through menopause. She also highlights how older women's experiences tend to be erased, reobjectifying them to their un-reproductivity.

T

For me, sometimes, it depends on my hair. When my hair is long and curly, it attracts much attention. People approach me and tell me I'm "brave" for wearing it like that. I know they probably mean well, and I understand the intention, but I find it highly clumsy. Calling me "exotic" isn't exactly a compliment. I can imagine it's not meant maliciously, but it still annoys me. It's a little reminder: "Oh, you're very different. Amazingly, you dare to be here with us and embrace that difference." When it's long, it almost feels like an invitation for people to touch or pull it. It makes me uncomfortable. It's like my body is treated as public property.



Figure 10: T's Auto-Portrait

A

That's awful.

T

Before coming to Switzerland, people made it clear that I was different. I think I was just a bit weird as a kid, asking too many questions at my evangelical church or elsewhere; I believed too strongly in God. I didn't fit anywhere. So, when I came to Switzerland, I worked a lot to integrate and make friends. It took me a while to realise that I was weird. Only recently have I been reflecting a lot on why I developed certain habits.

For example, I noticed that I use headphones in public spaces to control how much I hear or don't hear around me. It's funny because people used to criticise me for it. They'd say I was too in my bubble, too unapproachable on the street. Recently, I've been thinking about why I developed these defence mechanisms.

A, how did you realise something was different for you? For example, when did you notice your neurodivergence and start being able to talk about your needs?¹¹

¹¹ Neurodiverse people fit into an “up and coming” population on which sociological, political and geographical research is focused. One exciting input to the discussion around ableism in society, which can be extrapolated to urban spaces, the “pathology paradigm”, and the capitalist mandate for productivity (which I would call hustle culture) is Robert Chapman's *Empire of Normality*.

Like many others in the crosshairs of politics and sociology, the book also provides a valuable warning to avoid over-using the current oppressive tools as solutions for inclusion. Especially considering the wave of “super-power-ification” of neuro-divergent traits (namely in the tech industry), rewriting neuro-divergent struggles instead into machines of ultimate production possibility. (p. 140) Alongside this, he discusses the medication for mental divergencies, for example, how Autism namely is still being researched to be cured.

A

When I was in my mid-teens, I struggled with open public spaces. The noises and lights became nearly impossible to cope with. Basic things like people laughing or the cooing of pigeons mixed with intense LED lights or the rain were too much. Even buses running late would throw off my entire day and ability to function.¹²



Figure 11: A's Auto-Portrait While Talking to L

¹² Discussed on p.373 of *Neurodiversity in the City* by Therese Kenna: "Understanding the intricacies or minutiae of everyday life for those who are neurodiverse exposes complexities and challenges that urban life presents. A relational lens orientates us to recognise that the city is a challenging environment for those who are neurodiverse, and to consider the processes and practices that assemble or coalesce to make spaces acquire meaning and ultimately become inclusionary or exclusionary." She highlights how relatively banal events and noises can overwhelm or overstimulate neurodivergent individuals.

Luckily, my family was aware of ways to help with sensory overload, such as using headphones on public transport to block out the noise. So, at some point, I just said, “Listen, I’m losing it. I can’t leave the house. I need help.” For Christmas that year, I got a pair of headphones that block out the sound. I still use them.

T

That’s good. Only recently have I been able to identify my sensory issues. I’ve been using my headphones more than ever for the same reason. It feels like a shield. How is your drawing going?

K

I’m overdoing it and obsessing over it.

A

If you want to see mine, I’m also overdoing it, but I like it.

K

I love it. So, I have a portrait and a background. And then it can be either way, you know, it can be the person in focus, and the background is an afterthought. Or you can put the person behind the background, and then I will become a ghost. I also gave myself a little bit longer hair than I have.

A

By the time I finish this project, it’ll have grown even more and become the right length.

Act III

urban aliens

A

Do you feel represented in the images you see in the streets?

L

I was walking home recently, and there were those big screens. It lit up powerfully, with a straight couple on it, and I was like, “OK, yeah. So, this is shoved in my face right now.” The double standard is horrible. Politicians say things about how “these awful people shove their sexuality into our faces; think of the children!” But how is this any different? In public spaces, everything needs to be cis, straight and white; and for them.

If you are not that, you aren’t supposed to be there.

You are told that you shouldn’t be there by people, screens, or posters. And in the ads, the women are always hyper-sexualised; sometimes, it’s just really objectifying.¹



Figure 12: L's Vision of the Street, Drawn by A

¹ Even with its woman-centricity (excluding non-binary and gender-non-conforming people as well as tending towards white feminism), *She City* has a fascinating insight into the effects of advertisements in the city. The pornographisation of the image of women’s bodies is still omnipresent. Studies show that billboard and LED screen images influence women in public spaces to feel more vulnerable. She also discusses how these images lead to a societal normalisation of violence against women. (p. 70–75)

T

I was recently in Paris for the International Women's Strike, and one ad stood out to me, which was not great: a Dior perfume. It stuck with me because, during the march, this ad was right along the road. Someone had spray-painted "ad = sexist" right next to the woman's face in the poster. I can draw it for you!

A

Do you feel like ads represent you in any way?

T

It's interesting because physically, I'm significantly represented in the media – just not how I want to be. I've been cutting myself off from advertising in a pretty radical way. The only ads I see now are in public spaces – billboards and such. I live in a media bubble, and I find it even more shocking when I step out of it. I fit the idealised image of a "perfect Brazilian." I match the "ideal mixed-race woman" stereotype – my hair is curly but not kinky, and my skin is lighter.



Figure 13: The Ad, by T

It sparks many fantasies; people think the exotic thing is so stylish. ²

So yes, I'm represented, but in a highly stereotypical way. But people in my family who just got a different mix of the same genes aren't; they, for some reason, are too different. And if you talk to me, I don't fit that image. I don't do the things people expect of me: no samba, no capoeira, and I've never been to Carnival because my family is Evangelical.

It reflects my story well, though, of belonging nowhere and not entirely fitting into any group.

L

I like the nights when there are meteor showers best because they turn off the lights and screens in the city. You can walk around wholly unseen, head in the stars.³

² *"The 'not-quite' spaces of black femininity are unacknowledged spaces of sexual violence, stereotype, and socio-spatial marginalisation: erased, erasable, hidden, resistant geographies and women that are, due to persistent and public forms of objectification, not readily decipherable."* (p. 61) McKittrick explores these "not-quietness" of space, or the lack of trace, of violence acted upon Black women, and the politics that this entails, and which they embody. She argues that the body histories that map this geography demonstrate a possibility of altering into a New Geography.

³ *Empire of Normality* briefly discusses the implementation of low-sensory moments in public spaces or supermarkets, which Chapman links innately to the capitalist need for consumerism, and that these solutions centre profit, not the comfort or needs of neuro-divergent people. He argues for overarching systemic change, distancing such "solutions" from capitalism.

From an architectural standpoint, the normative relationship designing and planning have with accessibility becomes effectively white-washed check-boxing without addressing the true nature of the needs of various groups.

A

Do you feel comfortable being outside alone at night?

L

I like to hide in the dark at night. It feels safer and more anonymous. There are fewer people and cars, and I can walk in the shadows and be seen less. Now, I like to find patterns and geometries on the ground. It helps me deal with the streets. I guess it's a way to avoid seeing people watch me, but it's also a tool for abstraction.

T

I can feel people's eyes on me, too. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm just being paranoid, imagining it.⁴ But no, I'm not imagining it. People even come up to me and say they've seen me elsewhere... So yeah, I know people are watching me. And it's been that way since I was very young.

I use many protective techniques to ensure my safety, so I don't think I can pretend to be comfortable. I'm used to living with headphones

⁴ The feeling of being watched appears in anti-racist literature regularly. *Walking While Black* by Garnette Cadogan explains his experiences of trying to make a home in the US and the (police) violence he faced. He says that even when friendly, he is perceived as a threat and criminal.

It is also one of the attributes Nirmal Puwar qualifies as "*Space Invaders*" in the book of the same name. She discusses the patronising nature of the stare of white eyes, questions the legitimacy of the dissonant body, and makes the person understand that their presence is alien and impeding the status quo. The bodies that aren't dissonant (white, cis men) she calls "somatic norms" and that their appearance or presence is natural and wanted.

In the lane of Puwar, and referencing her, Sara Ahmed says: "*When a body lines up or is in line, you might only see one set of lines, or maybe you don't see any; when things appear as they should, the right way up, they recede. When a body does not line up, things appear queer or wonky.*" In her 2014 blog post "*White Men*".

on, but I can't wear them at night. I feel like I have to stay alert to everything happening around me.

K

I'm also much more careful, you know, around my limits. I can usually travel easily, but for example, I try not to stay at places late because I know that when I get tired, it could be a problem. Less so now, probably; however, I hold this deep memory of helplessness. Knowing I could not get myself out of a situation was horrible and scary. I used to think I could do anything; I no longer believe that. So, I am always home in the evenings, safely inside. It's not that I'm scared of the dark, just that I like to be home. I am also awake very early.

A

Should there be more lighting or less?⁵

T

I don't think it's a matter of lighting, unfortunately. Lighting helps—I'm not saying it doesn't—but the main thing is seeing the streets or the people around you. Groups, especially groups of men, immediately set off alarms. If two men aren't together, you feel much safer because there's an observer.

There have been times when I had to run. It even happened recently in Lausanne. I was returning from a night out and took a street I usually feel comfortable with (though not anymore). As usual, I tried to appear more imposing—not avoiding eye contact or speeding up my pace.

⁵ Going back to *She City*, Kalms presents data showing the gap between masculine and feminine comfort levels in low-visibility environments. She also introduces the concept of a “Fish Bowl Effect” when light is too aggressive and makes women and girls feel too visible, from which she advocates for careful situation-defined lighting choices that don't require lighting to be “stronger and whiter.”

She also discusses the danger that homeless women face in the evenings and how the light has an active relationship with their bodily safety and autonomy. (p. 212–227)

But this time, a guy started following me, which made me uncomfortable. Then, two other guys hiding suddenly appeared in front of me. The fact that they were hiding triggered all my internal alarms.

In that situation, I told myself not to confront them by shouting, “Get lost!” Instead, I stopped, turned around to face the guy following me, and said, “I know you’re following me. Stop.”

He was about to say something to me, but I decided not to keep going down that street. I turned around and went back the other way.⁶

⁶ Figure 14: 21/12/2024 around 4:30 pm.

In the strange, segmented flux of a peripheral urban road connecting the bustling shopping area to the quiet domestic streets, I sit with T for around 30 minutes on the cold asphalt. The light disappeared slowly, with the sun falling so early in the winter. A road that felt empty in the passage was surprisingly energetic and moving. Cars came in rapid succession into the pedestrian street. Electric bikes whooshed and whizzed by. The steep angle of the road defined the speeds and gaits of passersby, people bracing themselves slightly at the beginning of their trek up or galloping with long strides down with the aid of gravity.

A group of hiking backpack-clad young people smoking weed stood near us, saying their goodbyes. A car was parked on the zebra crossing, loading or unloading from their trunk to the audible discontent of other vehicles who had to squeeze by on the circulating road at the bottom of our pedestrian area. I tell T about Le Guin’s Omelas. The presence of a tall but thin tower, jutting into each passage and blocking visibility from each side, strangely stunts circulation. Without light, you can only orient yourself through the sound of footsteps. It worries me that the uncomfortable geometry is used to jump women on the street.

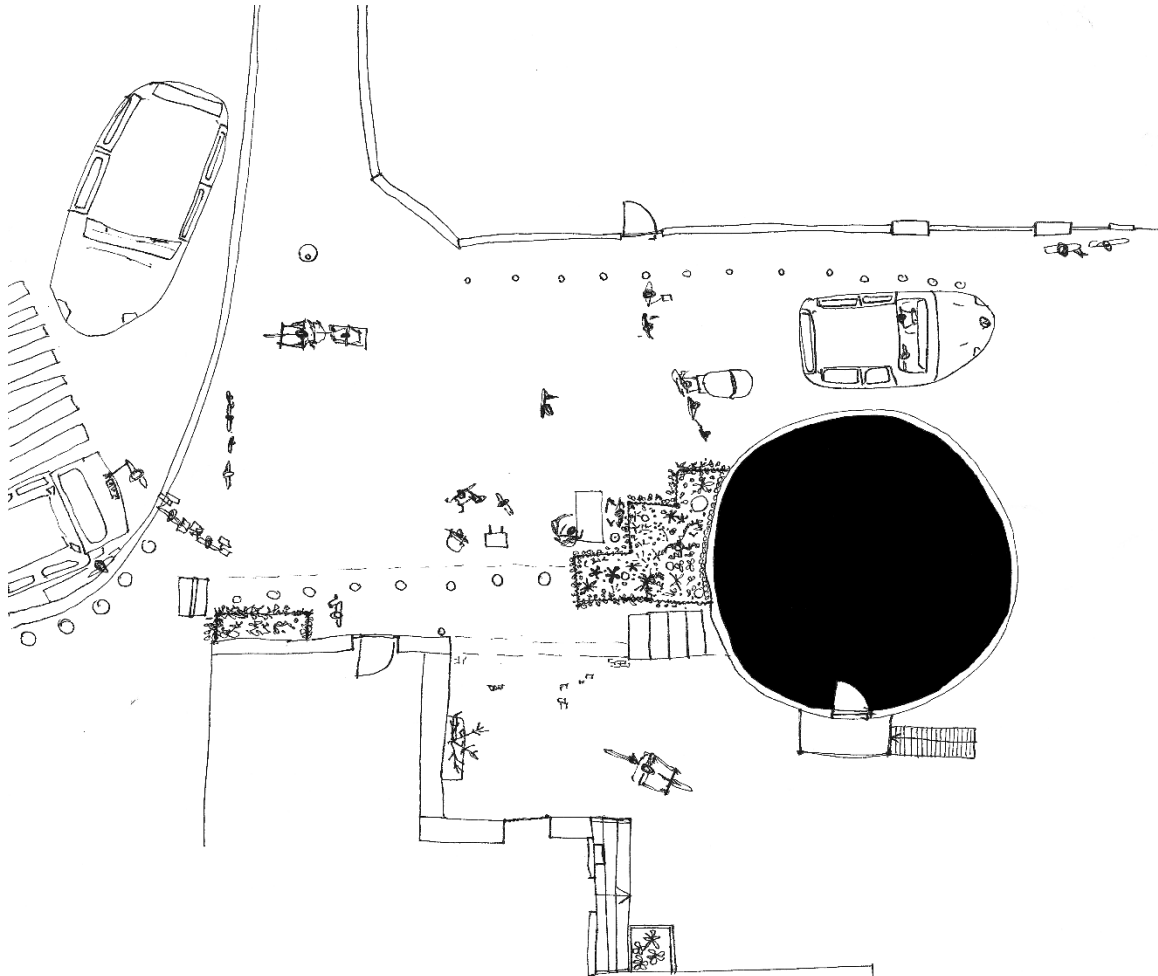


Figure 14: The Rue de la Tour in Lausanne

I think of the anxiety that the stone walls hold that comes with old echoes of vulnerability and the threat of sexual violence. The lighting here is good; there are lamp posts everywhere, with dark yellow lights, which are the ones I usually like. They are not on yet, but the weaning light brings T's story to mind. What would I do if that happened to me?

A

What street was it?

T

Rue de la Tour.

A

It's good to know that. I'll make a note of it.

T

Giving advice and sharing techniques like this has become so routine.

A

Does this kind of thing happen to you often?

T

A lot less often now, fortunately. Much less than when I was younger. Strangely, people don't approach you based on attraction but on whether you seem vulnerable. For example, when I'm in unfamiliar places like Paris, I don't even dare to drink much. I must make sure I'm confident and look confident, too.

Act IV

public toilets aren't just for decoration.

K

I take many trains from where I live to Geneva, where the hospital is, and have had many problems with them.

L

Really?! I love trains. They are a bubble of safety for me. Look, I even drew myself in one.

K

The toilet is often closed, and I used to complain about it. I used to write the train company complaints about it because this was an absolute nightmare.

This is a one-and-a-half-hour train ride for me. And when I was in that position of not being able to hold my urine for that long, it was embarrassing and humiliating. And then they told me to go pee before the train left.

Well, I couldn't; there was not enough time. And the train only runs once an hour. It's not that I can take a little time; then, in 10 minutes, I'll be fine. Because it's not the case. I had a lot of very, very horrible experiences with that. Sometimes, I considered peeing in a coffee cup and did not care. I just thought, if somebody sees me, they see me. But I didn't want to pee myself.¹

¹ Access to the bathroom is critical. The right to sanitation is a Human Right, but sadly, it is still not adequately addressed worldwide. Amanda Klasing's Human Rights Watch report "*Going to the Toilet When You Want*" states that half of the world's rural population has inadequate access. Leslie Kern discusses the violence associated with relieving oneself and how some feminist movements (namely in India) are directly linked to the fight for safe, hygienic toilets.

In urban areas in Western countries in the Northern hemisphere such as Switzerland, these questions mainly revolve around the care of the existing facilities. The issue with public toilets is that the public needs to hire someone to take care of the spaces—the absence of cleaning leads to unhygienic and nauseating environments. Here, the capitalist mechanisms of disdain for care actions are centralised; the labour of a person who cleans the toilet (often an immigrant woman) is not valued, as Kern explains.

A

Yeah, especially since you need good hygiene because of your lack of immune system. Privacy is one thing, but you cannot be walking around with the possibility of an infection. At some point, medical needs come before propriety.

K

After the hospital, I had to drink three litres of water just because of the medication I was taking so that it didn't harm my kidneys. I was always aware of the distances I must cross to get to a shop or the pharmacy. So, I would always have planned spots to pee. I knew there was a toilet in the Migros if it was open.

Also, I knew there was a hotel where I could walk in very confidently, and then they would think I was a tourist who stayed there.

If you have a kid with you and they need to pee and the train only goes once occasionally, then if you get off it to pee, it adds another hour to your trip, not to mention the state of the railway station toilets, which are in a horribly dirty² Or are not free.³

² Issues with public toilets in big cities can also be related to toxicophobia since they become beacons of privacy where people can do as they wish. This is also part of Foucault's concept of Heterotopia, where certain parts of public space possess different social customs: public toilets have been known to be spots for homosexual men to meet privately and (relatively) safely.

³ The free access to public toilets, hygienic facilities and products is a flagrant issue for homeless people, especially for those who menstruate, which doesn't often cross city-dwellers minds. Peeing is a state of vulnerability (as the genitalia are exposed).

L
The fact that most clean public toilets in Switzerland have fees feels so exclusive. Only

people with two francs can pee comfortably, and everyone else must pee in a cup on the train. That's unbelievable.⁴

⁴ Figure 15: 06/01/2025 at 2 pm.

I decided to go to the paying public toilets in the Lausanne train station to draw the space. There is an attendant who is cleaning and managing the area; I ask if I can sit there for half an hour to draw. She is visibly confused but kindly accepts. This time, people actively interacted with me, talking to me, not openly questioning my presence but visibly curious.

The space is cold and smells like stale urine and lots of chemicals. I worry I make people uncomfortable, so L and I stay silent and listen. The attendant is charming and caring. She meets everyone with care, and people seem to know her. Some people are rude, and the attendant replies with careful politeness, probably used to slight verbal abuse. A man comes in; she knows him as he lends her his phone charger. She gives him the key to the disabled bathroom while he tells her about his mother. A cane is in front of that bathroom; I wonder who left it behind. The same toilet accessible for mobility-reduced people is also for baby changing.

Someone is digging through coins in her pockets to find enough to pay; she is urged to go through.

Everyone looks like they feel observed, all owl-eyed, watching each other. I don't want to breach people's comfort; I don't go in to look inside at the stall's geometries. This drawing feels different, more sterile and more intimate to those around me. People are discussing intimate subjects, unpaid bills, or phones being cut off.

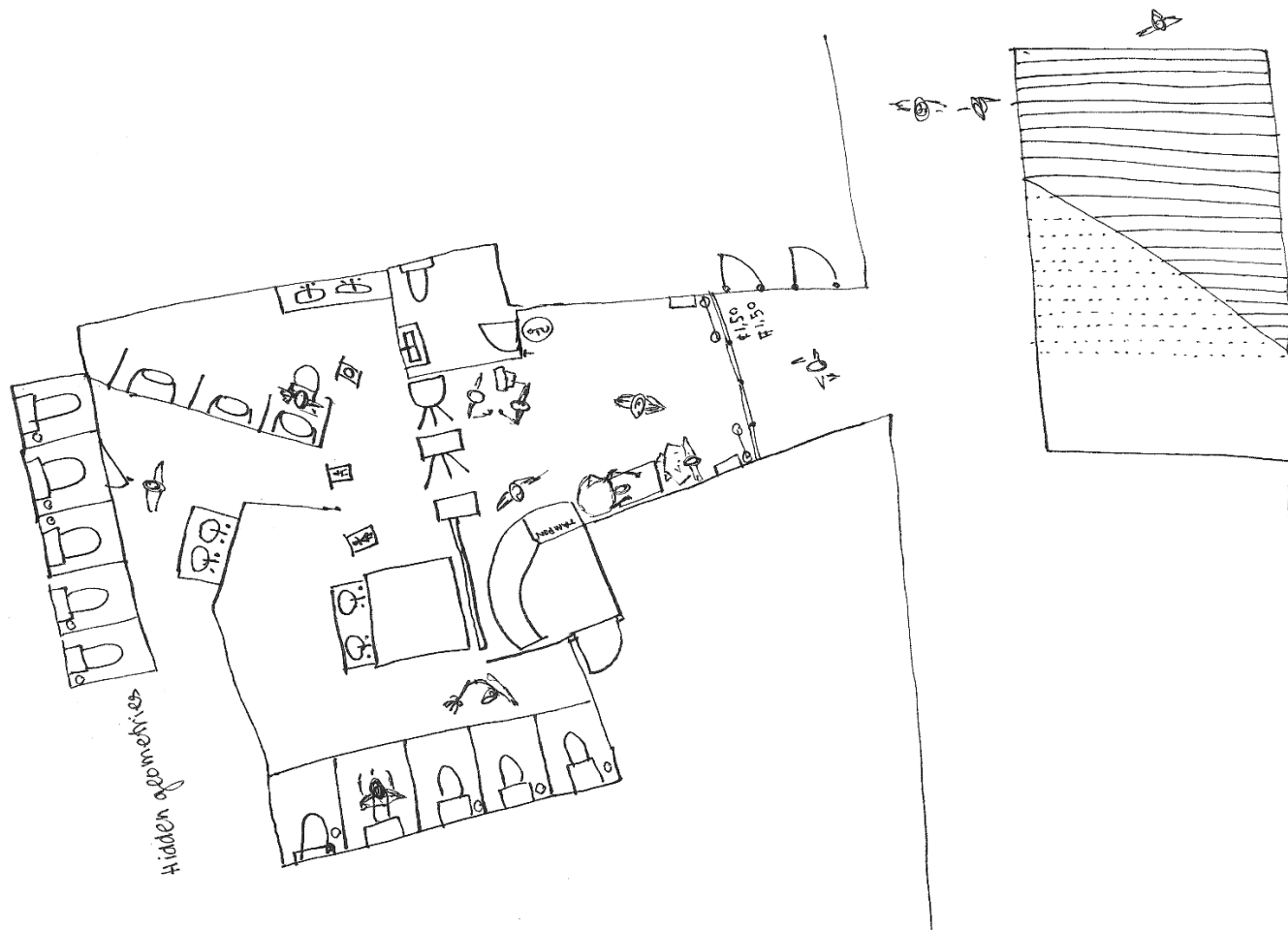


Figure 15: The Toilets of the Lausanne Station

Would people tell me to leave if I entered the men's area? I wonder what it must feel like for people to make you feel like you don't belong here. What do you do if none of the three options ("Femmes", "Hommes", and "Hommes, Urinoirs") fits you?

T

With my IBS, I've learned never to hold it in. I know some people prefer to wait until they're home. I don't have that luxury. If I try to wait, I'm in pain for the next few days. So if I need to go, I go – no questions asked.⁵

Something challenging for me was when I started using a menstrual cup. It was a nightmare. To do things properly – like rinsing the cup; you need running water, which is impossible in public restrooms. So, I used to carry little bottles of water with me. But even having to leave a

restroom with blood-stained hands is just not acceptable.⁶

Now, I use menstrual underwear, which makes things a bit easier. It's incredible how poorly our infrastructure is designed for menstruating people and how much discretion is expected from us. When trash bins aren't where they're needed, and figuring out how to throw things away discreetly, it feels like we're expected to stay invisible.

K

Ah, oh no. I need to check the oven; I think something's burning. I'll be right back!

⁵ Anja FletenNielsen's *The role of toilets in public spaces: An interview study with individuals experiencing gastrointestinal issues* discusses how issues with the public infrastructures and toilets directly influence the capability of disabled people to exist outside. Kern also discusses the successes of activism for the creation and consistent implementation of "accessible toilets," with strict proportions enabling people to use the facilities they need.

⁶ The encompassing review by Shawna Lewkowicz and Jason Gilliland on "A Feminist Critical Analysis of Public Toilets and Gender" discusses the perspectives and needs of women and feminine biologies. They advocate for access to hygiene infrastructures for "menstruation, pregnancy, menopause, and caregiving," which are not innately designed into today's public bathrooms. Leslie Kern criticises social taboo and abstraction that relegates menstruation to women's toilets to be dealt with in secret.

A

Go, go! L, how has it been for you?

L

I find the whole setup a bit crazy. The lines are always so much longer for women; it feels like the bathrooms are just designed stupidly. People are waiting around to pee, with free toilets right next to us, but no – it's for men, so we cannot. It's absurd. I guess for me, bathrooms started becoming a big subject when I started transitioning.

I got used to not going to pee for a whole day when I started transitioning because I didn't feel comfortable at all. It can be more complex when I don't know anybody around and nobody knows me. I didn't want to go because I felt like I was imposing on women, entering a space that was not mine, and it was hard for me to accept that it was also for me. And thus, I did not go to the bathroom. I also didn't hydrate enough; this way, I could get through a whole day.

Unisex bathrooms are nice because I don't think about it.⁷ Well, I think about which door I will go

⁷ In *She City*, Nicole Kalms discusses the women's fear of non-gendered bathrooms. How they put women into vulnerable positions, faced with men and threatening bodies in spaces that had been thus far "safe." Leslie Kern, in her similar-sounding *Feminist City*, states that such fears are rooted in transphobia. She, however, points out the religious difficulties that can arise in mixed-gender toilets and underlines how not all solutions can help everyone. Kern concludes the need for systemic change to address inclusion and safety correctly; however, he advocates for access and design care to ensure all bodies have safe access to sanitation until systemic change can happen.

Additionally, since this has become a significant talking point in transphobic narratives, Nathalie Wynn, in the video essay on *J. K. Rowling*, analyses the "bathroom problem" and equally concludes that transphobia is a cause for such issues.

to. That's how my brain works: I have choices and make patterns. I always choose the second door.

T

Oh, and I always avoid the second stall! I try to go for the last one, never the second. I feel like it's too easy, the most obvious choice, so everyone goes there.

It's interesting how patterns are ritualised to make us comfortable, however. I guess I never really had anxiety about bathrooms. Hydration is essential, however...

K

I'm back! It is a bit more crispy than usual, but the food will be fine.

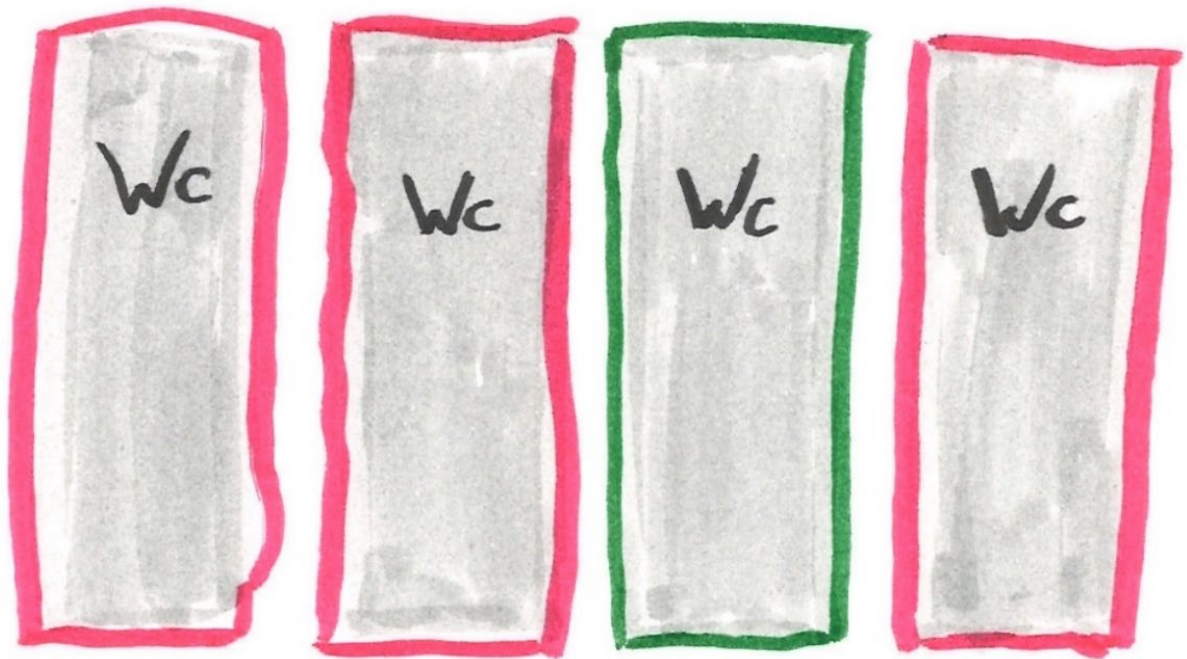


Figure 16: The Correct Bathroom Door, According to L

Act V

in search of hope

A

We've reviewed the questions I had planned, and I think we've all finished our drawings. Do you have any questions for me?

L

Do you think it's possible to make public spaces feel safe for people who don't feel safe right now?

A

It's a tricky question. My answer, I think, is that we need systemic change. That's part of the complexity I'm trying to capture in my work. I feel like the Institution I am in is guiding me toward simple solutions like adding more lighting in public spaces so that endangered bodies (although mainly white, non-disabled, cis women) might feel more comfortable.

T

I guess it's clear that is not the way forward. What could help, however? Isn't this the whole issue, that not everyone has the exact needs and that they can contradict each other?

A

Everything is full of nuance. We can't just bandage the situation, which is what doing everything problem by problem is. What we need is system change, not symptom change.

L

I like that: system change, not symptom change.

K

Me too.

A

And the problem is that when we address minority bodies, we tend to isolate them. We focus on helping women, or women with children, who are an already very privileged group, even with rational fears and needs, of course, but this excludes and further endangers anyone who doesn't fit perfectly into that box. What about all the other bodies?

Adding ramps, for example, helps some populations, but the way we add them can be overly "check-boxy". A 20-meter ramp doesn't make getting from point A to point B easier. If you're using a wheelchair or a stroller, you might

lose control, need a break, or even roll backwards. We forget to think about things humanely. It's the same for the geometries of public bathrooms and lighting. As architects and urban planners, we believe in rational terms: there's a problem, so we find a solution. But it's not an individual design problem; we should consider the complexities involved.

We can all agree that streets can feel scary. But I also think people (men) are learning to acknowledge, "Hey, I might be the one who's scaring others on the street."

L

Yeah.

A

So, yes, we *can* make people feel safer in public spaces by reclaiming space and putting our bodies en masse into the commons. Even though I'm not a big fan of the noise, I think protests are ways to reclaim public space.

I also know that the more research I do, the more I don't have all the answers, but I do have hope—and many questions.

L

I don't know how I could unlearn the feeling that people are always looking at me when I'm out in public. It feels like it's written in my brain in indelible ink. Even if people aren't looking, I think it before going outside.

A

Maybe then it's more about understanding the issue of being perceived. Sometimes, we don't want to be noticed and do everything we can to avoid being seen. But being perceived is part of the human condition. If we were never perceived, we would feel lonely. This balance is complicated, and I'm not sure I'm the correct person to bring all the answers.

However, something like that woman on the metro staring at you. Othering is a type of violence, too. It's a form of aggression. I think that's something we can address. There's an informational aspect and a genuine need for change in how we view public space—not as a commercial, capitalist, utilitarian area, but as a communal, human space. It shouldn't be about production or consumption but community, relaxation, and transit. It should be a place where

we can feel human together, not as products or things to be used. We need to come together as a community (perhaps a community of communities).

I don't think there's a solution that allows us to avoid seeing each other altogether.

The scary part of being perceived in the streets is the fear of judgment, but more so, the fear of violence, which does have some physical markers. First, we can continue complaining and sharing our experiences and fears. We can also create community care systems where we help each other and dignity and personhood are essential, not consuming or producing.¹

¹ The works of multiple authors I have read make the same or similar calls for care and systemic anti-capitalist, anti-racist change. Ahmed, Chapman, Kern, Puwar, Lorde, and McKittrick all encompass an analysis of the various types of socio-cultural abuses and hatreds and a unifying view of critical hope.

As the next step, and at the end of this Complaint, I would like to advocate for listening – listening to the stories of others in the world around us. However, inaction in the face of violence is also a kind of violence (Ahmed, 2024), so I would also advocate for active participation in thoughtful methods of safely occupying space in the city. I mentioned protests to L, which, of course, have their drawbacks with sensory overwhelm, but there are also options for ephemeral structures and events being introduced into the commons. Community gardens, moving soup kitchens, music, and introducing green spaces in urban areas and access to them are all spatial solutions to some of the problems evoked. These places of resistance to capitalist urbanism can become flagships towards major system reform.

Questioning the systems of complaint is also a way forward. While sharing stories between marginalised people is incredibly important, we must make these shouts much louder. As Gisèle Pelicot said, “*pour que la honte change de camp*” (so that the shame must change sides), these stories of fear, disparity, violence, and humanity must be shared and heard by as broad an audience as possible. The visibility of these stories will help generate compassion and change.

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Use of AI

For this theoretical statement, I used two artificial intelligence systems: ChatGPT.¹ and Grammarly². I used them to correct the spelling, grammar, and occasionally syntax of the various bodies of text and generate formalities such as the institutional credits and the trigger warning.

Moreover, I used ChatGPT to help translate the interview with T, which we conducted in French, and to bulk remove works such as “like,” or “um”.

¹ OpenAI. (2024–5). *ChatGPT* (GPT–4) [Large language model]. <https://openai.com>.

² Grammarly. (2025). *Grammarly* (Version 1.2.78.1397) [Large language model]. <https://www.grammarly.com/>