

Comfort with Less Contact and More Hygiene

Helene Romakin

#sevendaynotificationrate #bundesgesundheitsministerium #vaccinated #vaccinatedtwice #laggedintime

In Germany, between March 2020 and early June 2021, we lived in a period of delay, or better in a temporality of being time-lagged. Seven-day incidence continued showing the number of Covid-19 infections in the preceding week, but determined public health decisions concerning the weeks to come. International European media, however, speak of a 14-day notification rates: In the European Union, they count the infection incidence of the preceding fourteen days, delaying the future by two weeks. In early June, I travelled to Zurich where the future seemed to have finally arrived: Almost everyone vaccinated, or at least spring-loose, hearty along the way. There were so many hugs and kisses, which on the one hand did me so much good, and on the other hand triggered an unpleasant shiver of fear in my innermost being. Would I still catch it on the finishing straight?

#brokenarm #immobilized #painfulvibrations #subwayhandles #benchesinthecity #altbauscenarios #cobblestreets #comfortabledistances

In March I experienced my own personal delay in life: I had an accident and broke my left wrist so badly that I had to have surgery. In the meantime, three months later, I can use both hands for typing, even if I still have weeks or months to go until I'll be fully recovered. The last two months have been a lockdown within a lockdown: slow to immobile and dependent on help from others. Going outside and moving around the city was now inconvenient and awkward. But this gave me the opportunity to perceive Berlin differently, the city in which I have lived for over ten years. The heavy «Altbau» doors at the entrance to the house, which typically and charmingly only open with enormous effort, were now an obstacle. In the first week after the operation, I needed several minutes to get out of the house. The cobble streets, by which one recognizes Berlin, caused additional painful vibrations when walking. The escalators into the subway that never work, the lack of elevators, now produced cries of inner despair. On the old subway cars with handles that you have to turn 45 degrees where the doors always get stuck and barely open, I had to look for fellow passengers who took on this ordeal. In Corona times, they seemed even worse to me, because everyone has to properly grab them to operate. Until recently,

I had wondered for years about the individually scattered benches on the sidewalks of busy streets—who would want to rest there?—I was now annoyed that there were not more of such benches on the way to the medical practice. I would have liked to rest wherever possible. They say that the usual social distance that a person perceives as comfortable is 120 cm on average. Quite recently I would already panic when a pedestrian walking past me was within three meters to my left. The idea of a person bumping into this side of my body still gives me a slight shiver. I lost the functional distance to the urban space and its architecture—everything turned into a very personal confrontation.

#walkingdowntheparks #humanbodiesinpublicspace #bodilyconditions #avoidingcoffee #neglectedbladders

Visiting Zurich, I also realized that the population in Switzerland didn't have a clue what the German public had been through during the lockdown in the winter months. For a few weeks we were allowed to meet only outdoors. Lost in translation, it meant to decide when to take the final drink before going outside. I personally avoided drinking coffee before such a walk because coffee results in a more frequent urge to use the bathroom than other liquids. Then, of course, you had to calculate the radius of your walk, and the time you needed to get to the point of departure, and then back home. Meeting and walking outside, specifically in Berlin, meant to be outside without any shelter from any sudden weather changes and, more importantly, without toilets. Hence, all the walking was limited and scheduled to how much neglect your bladder can take. Very often on the way back home, I was running upstairs to my flat (backyard, 3rd floor!) and started undressing myself in the staircase to make it on time. Obviously, with one arm I had to be careful to avoid such situations because trying to undress hurriedly was no longer an option.

#implantpass #metaldetector #cyborgarchitecture #feelingtrapped #dysfunctional #uncontrollablemovements #inaccessibletreads #architecturefortwoarmed

Now I have an implant passport confirming that I am wearing five centimetres of metal in my arm. At first, I was at least hoping for the fun of causing a bit of a commotion at airport security checks, but the doctors swiftly denied me this fantasy. Which made

me do a self-test with the Laserliner Combifinder Plus metal detector, and it works: My arm beeps—I'm thrilled! So much about the cyborg architecture outside. But the interiors also appeared to change fitfully in my perception. I now experienced my own previously spacious four walls as too cramped. I was constantly getting my clothes caught on doorknobs, dropping dishes, knocking everything over on my way, barely able to open or close doors, showering with one hand wrapped in a plastic trash bag was, in keeping with the image, slow and exhausting. I kept asking myself for whom such apartments, streets, cities are actually built. Definitely for two-armed, strong, healthy people. With only one hand, everything was so uncomfortable and inaccessible. My thoughts, my movements—I still was myself, but with a severe delay. I was slowed down, not only by the Covid-19 enforced lockdown, but by my own body.

#comfortinhospitalbeds #arthistoriansthinkingabout-hospitals #kaschaversusporridge #superfoodasselfcare #foodcomfort

My last sense of real comfort was the hospital bed, one with electric remote controls that lifted my legs and somehow found the position where my left arm rested at ease. In her recently published thought journal, «In Another World», art historian Isabelle Graw writes that she finds hospital beds too narrow and too uncomfortable, and that this novel electric range of motion only made things worse. Perhaps it was due to the high dose of painkillers, but I perceived my stay at the Charité, especially in comparison to the daily trifles at home, afterwards, as almost excellent. However, I can only agree with her about the food: I also longed for a simple «kasha». In Russia, the country of my origin, «kasha» in any kind of mush is constantly slapped onto your plate. In the West, according to super food fashion, it's called somewhat fancier, porridge.

#innovativehandlesolutions #healthcarebuildings #sourcesofinfection #infectionprotection #healthand-care #multiresistance

So while I was in a hospital bed for four days, Facebook was tracking down my location and changing zalando.com ads to innovative grip solutions for health-care buildings «Less Touch—More Hygiene». In hindsight, it's frightening to have personal location tracking from social media platforms brought to our attention like this. However, it was also a bit of a relief, because as a patient I was still the wrong target group for personalized advertising. The company advertised hygienic door handles for hospitals, which increased protection against infection, but also allowed the doors to be opened and closed with elbows. Of course, I would have liked to have that all over the city, especially on the front door entrances to houses.

#morethanhumanrelations #treeoflife #treewhisperer #solace #vulnerability #collectivebeing #findingcomfortinacceptinghelp

Unfortunately, I alone am to blame for my bicycle accident. However, it was the roots of a large tree that caused my fall. At a time when so many books about trees are circulating, it somehow seems logical to me. Albeit, Peter Wohlleben in «The Hidden Life of Trees» or Richard Powers in «The Overstory», do not associate trees with bicycle accidents, but rather with their symbolic and ecological meanings for humans. What remains with me from the last few weeks with only one hand is the realization of how much we as individuals were and still are collectively in need of solace, especially in times of the pandemic. Very few could cope with less touch but more hygiene, which was lacking due to the absence of hugs or other forms of greeting. In a time of delays, loss and alienation, we as a society were more dependent than ever on help and solace from friends and family, doctors and nurses, institutions and politicians. And it is still important not only to give help and solace, but also to actually be able to accept it, and thus to admit and show one's own vulnerability. Maybe I'll go visit the tree again soon, and beg for a little solace.

Helene Romakin, born 1987, is a cultural scientist and independent curator. She is the co-founder and curator of several collaborative contemporary art projects such as LET THERE BE_ in Berlin, and ~ tilde in Zurich. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD at the Chair for History of Art and Architecture at ETH Zurich, on the topic of visual culture and material strategies in the post-Holocene era. Together with Berit Seidel she will teach the seminar «Protect Us From What We Want» in Fall 2021.