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**Quietness, Isolation and Re-Imagining Contact in the City after the Pandemic**  
Gracia Ramirez

[...] The truth in a calm world,  
In which there is no other meaning, itself  
is calm [...]

Wallace Stevens "The House was Quiet and the World Was Calm" (2006: 313)

In the beginning of April 2020, visual artist Daniel Solomons and myself, a film scholar, set out to collaborate to produce something in response to the experience of the lockdown. We departed from a set of video images recorded in London's Liverpool Street Station in March 2019. From the distance of confinement and the stillness of the world-wide shutdown of passenger transport, the video images of the frantic movement of people in one of London's biggest train stations had acquired a different dimension. We wrote a text to accompany the images which took as driving force the last words of Wallace Stevens' poem "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" (2006). The poem evokes an image of quietness and contentment that created various contradictions with the situation that we had been thrown into. We wanted to explore the feeling of seeing mass mobility from the perspective of stillness and belonging to the past as in the present was to be avoided. We anticipated a feeling of loss, of missing other people, of seeing other places. But this mood was ambivalent, hence we set out to explore it and try to render the moment legible. There was some form of moral anxiety, almost an imperative to produce something with the images from 2019 that responded to the moment. Working almost feverishly whilst we were both confined in different locations, the result was a visual poem, the short video piece *And the World Was Calm* (Gracia Ramirez and Daniel Solomons, 2020) which we released online a couple of weeks after by the end of April.

**Quietness in a Turbulent World**

Stevens' poem addresses the perfection of calmness, the contentment of being in the moment, the fulfilment of subject merging with object, the unity of space, time and perception. The poem's images are those of a pleasant summer night, a house, a reader and a book, but it is repeating the word "world" that makes these images immanent. In that "there and then" those elements are the whole world: place is time and time is place and that is true. We all know very well that such sense of unity and perfection of space and time often escapes us when we run around places, anticipating, chasing, perceiving a lack, or even bored. We covet objectives, commodities, recognition, experiences. The promises of consumerism and work that are never fully satisfied. In a capitalist world, never is never enough. Clearly, when the world stopped in Spring 2020 not everything stopped. Most

critically, hospitals, care homes and primary attention became busier than ever, facing a public health crisis at a global level no one alive had ever experienced. Importantly too, communication was frantic. Conversations went around the world, from checking upon family and friends' health and safety, to addressing how we were going to cope with the situation in the short, medium and long term. Technology became fundamental in making viable the continuity of many social and labouring activities. The zeal of our communications also revealed that it was important to carry on. We particularly experienced March and April 2020 as difficult moments when vulnerable relatives fell ill with the virus as hospitals were on the verge of collapse. Many fears and anxieties came to the surface, at the same time that we reacted with shock and consternation at the political management of the situation across different countries: the imposition of stringent restrictions in Spain, where both Solomons and I are originally from, the slow response in the UK, the outrageous irresponsibility of the US, India and Brazil, etc. It soon became patent that the public health crisis had put us all on the same boat but not in the same cabins. How could we find a sense of calm and unity in such turbulent times? In this respect, *And the World Was Calm* was a way of seeking contentment and reconciliation with the consequences of an event which, as in much post-apocalyptic literature, is never explicitly mentioned, but whose effects we started to anticipate.

### **The city, mass mobility and the moving image**

*And the World Was Calm* draws from the long tradition of city symphony films by assembling moving images, voice and sounds to create impressions and rhythmical patterns that evoke and reflect on the urban experience. As Giuliana Bruno (2018) argues, the engagement between moving image art and the modern city is intrinsic to the history of both. Architectural design and engineering for mass mobility defined the experience of modern transit spaces such as railways, arcades, bridges, electric undergrounds, department stores, pavilions, etc. These spatial demarcations created new geographies of mobility which involved vision as much as touch, as in their design comes to the fore our ability to see and come into contact with other objects and beings. The experience of these urban spaces is also marked by motion and so they involve the ability of sensing one's own movement in space, the faculty of kinaesthesia. Following Bruno, this tactile or haptic reading of modern spaces prepared the ground for early cinema with its sequential, transient and fragmentary character, arrangements which aimed to mobilise spectators' embodied responses of affect, imagination and memory. Accordingly, our theoretical understanding of moving image art is better conceived beyond the optical and remapped into the haptic. This standpoint helps to reflect on the relationship between *And the World Was Calm* and the sensory and emotional aspects that covid's problematising of contact in large cities has provoked.

We looked at the 2019 images inside the railway station while current depictions of standstill cities filled our newsfeeds. Those images of hurrying, unconcerned rush hour feet became stranger than ever. One can imagine Liverpool Street Station in Spring 2020 empty of people and filled with white noise, no mumbling of voices or shuffling of feet, no sound announcements, nor screeching of rail tracks and escalators. The 2019 images of commuters were a hybrid exercise between minimal art and mass observation. Angles and framing reveal a geometric rigour that defines a standpoint from where to detachedly observe patterns of mass mobility. The images recorded contacts: where surfaces touched, people walking together or apart, feet on the ground, hands on rails. Such gaze also

captured oddities, individual gestures, changes of speed and sudden stops which broke the monotonous choreography of transit. From that perspective, one could gauge the formation of individual and collective boundaries and identify the interplay of different signals guiding their movement. We could sense certain rhythms and recall the embodiment of the mass flow, a striking memory seen from the stillness of lockdown and the anxious perception of crowds and social relationships introduced by new social distancing measures.



Figure 1: Frame caption, Gracia Ramirez and Daniel Solomons, *And the World Was Calm*, 2020, UK. Courtesy of the artists.

Representing mass mobility in such a way can also be conceived through what Guy Debord (2009) called the spectacle of the mass characteristic of cities and their display of accumulation. A global city like London has grown as a network of economic, political and cultural powers. In this accumulation of connections lies its capacity to attract people and have a commanding position in relation to the rest of the state and other cities worldwide. In relation to commuting, Debord observes that “this society that abolishes geographical distance shelters a new internal distance inside itself, a spectacular separation” (2009: 214). The commute evidences the city’s power, as it absorbs people during the day, and expels them at night. It is a form of unpaid labour and alienation, even if we can find compensatory strategies in it, such as time to prepare for the day or zoning out. The London commute is a spectacle in itself, expressive of a fundamental schism within people who take part in it and often justify its forms of subjection and alienation.

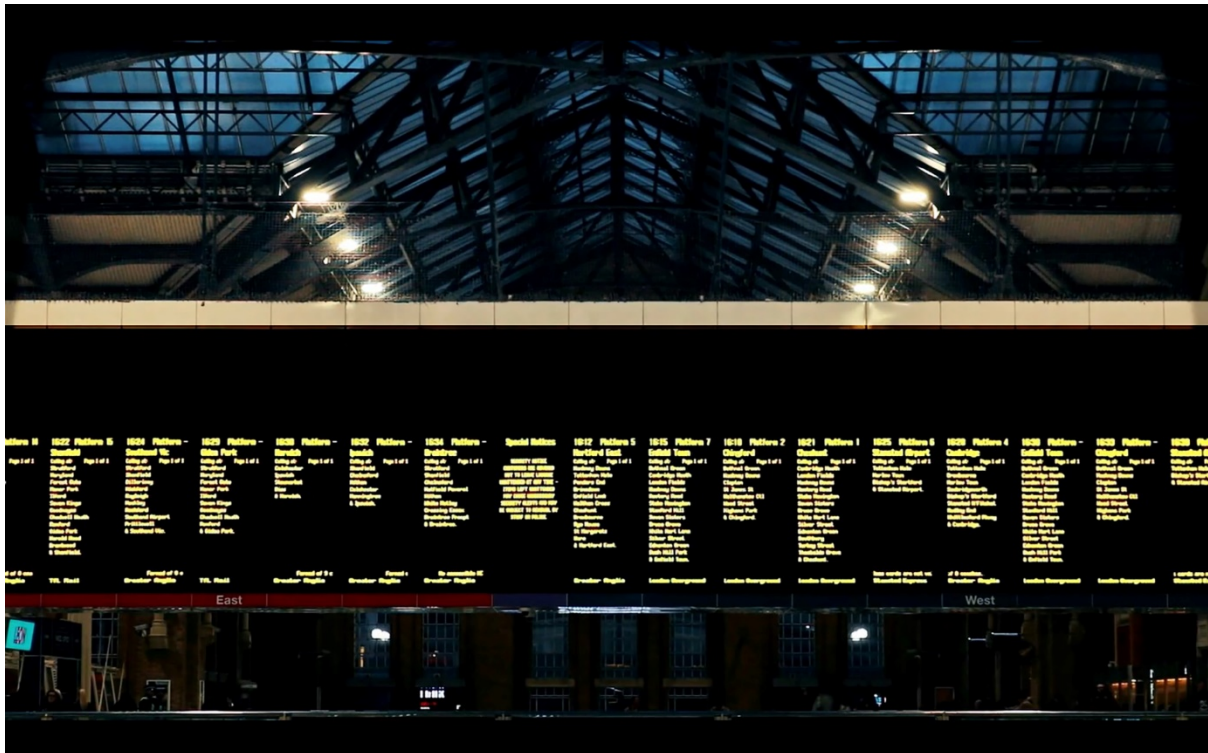


Figure 2: Frame caption, Gracia Ramirez and Daniel Solomons, *And the World Was Calm*. 2020, UK, courtesy of the artists.

### Dwelling: a place and a verb

The video opens with a wide shot of the announcement board. The composite giant screen displays times and destinations as data becomes available. This establishing shot is a powerful reminder that much of life in the global city is governed by centralised data flows which command our behaviour. The architectural space of the train station acts as a resonance box for the sounds there produced. Following the compass of the voice, a dynamic editing of static shots from various heights and angles capture the relentless movement of people any normal day before the covid crisis. These shots evoke the somatic memories of mass mobility through entrancing sounds and visual notes on touch. The voice speaks from the distance of another time and place, imprinting a perspective that notes the pastness of the habits that the images render, and only giving vague references to the detonating events of stopping and distancing. It is a disembodied and detached voice, but also lonely, compassionate, and vulnerable, as if processing a range of previous and present emotions. It takes an ambiguous journey that starts from lamenting past accelerated modes when there was no time for really sensing and only ephemeral interactions. There follows certain longing for opportunities to connect and discover the myriad of possibilities that have been suddenly lost. In the end, the images have faded to black but the busker's singing voice starts to resound in the large space of the hall, remarking some sentimentality yet reassurance of support in others.

The speaking voice's remoteness aims to evoke the idea of being inside somewhere else. It speaks from a dwelling, a place, a shelter, the quiet house of the poem. It has the specific texture of safety that is a home where one feels calm and secure, even if aware that is not the same for everyone. It is a place of relative quietness, where one can experience relief

from mass mobility, a liberation from the time, expense, physical feat, and moral dilemmas regarding interaction with others in the big city commute. But the voice also speaks from the idea of dwelling as a verb, as if continuing to be in a given state, enclosed in it by way of routine, emotional attachment and inertia. It speaks from a time and place that is difficult to locate, neither close nor far from the image but making patent that there has been a radical change. As a result, the tone is somewhat elegiac, like noting the end of an era but feeling stranded in the present, still unable to forecast what will come in terms of mobility and contact with others. Such dwelling is a liminal state where we are motionless until activity resumes or a new cycle starts.

### **Working in isolation, collaboration and cooperation**

While we were working on the piece, it was a continuous back and forth of texts, e-mails and long telephone conversations, as we were not able to sit together to decide on the edit. Elements like sound were recorded on the phone, which gives a peculiar quality to the piece. We did not have much time, but we gathered focus to realise it. Personally, as an academic working in UK Higher Education, during those early Spring days I moved straight from a national strike to a global pandemic response. I turned to online teaching almost overnight, which substantially increased my workload. Meanwhile, my colleague's art projects and freelance jobs were cancelled or put on indefinite hold. We put time into finishing the piece knowing that we would need to show it in an unusual way. We contacted galleries and cultural institutions and gave them permission to disseminate it through their websites and social media. Since we were already acquainted with these institutions, it felt like a cooperation, knowing that both them and us wanted to give continuity to our work while physical contact and exhibitions had been brought to a halt. Many of us, artists and academics engaging in "passionate work" (McRobbie, 2015), have already eroded some boundaries and often are more prepared to work for free in expectation of symbolic or deferred rewards. In this case, the urgency of the moment might justify it, but we are very aware this is not sustainable and cannot be a long-term approach to creative work. Institutions should support the production of work if they are to fulfil their mission and remain relevant.





Figure 3: Frame Caption, Gracia Ramirez and Daniel Solomons, *And the World Was Calm*, UK, 2020. Courtesy of the artists.

By travelling through various websites and social media, the video was able to cross borders at a time that they were closed. We knew that people would watch it on their mobiles and computers and that the sense of immersion and ambiance granted by a gallery space would be lost. Nevertheless, we think of the piece as a transmedia project and at the time of writing we are planning an exhibition proposal and produce a book or 3D object based on the images and text, bearing in mind that a future installation will have to adapt to the new social distancing rules in enclosed spaces. In this lies one of the challenges of the times ahead; we need to get reacquainted with the value of closeness, as we have become very aware of our need to function on proximity and how difficult it might be to live in the distance. It will not be the same for every artist, and not for every medium, but some might seek ways of creating different and adaptable formats to address the new conditions and sensibilities.



Figure 4: Frame Caption. Gracia Ramirez and Daniel Solomons, *And the World Was Calm*. Video, UK, 2020. Courtesy of the artists.

### Re-imagining the city after the pandemic

Urban and visual studies scholars Stephanie Hemelryck Donald and Christoph Lindler (2014) examine the value of deceleration, interruption and stillness in the context of global cities' investment in speed and movement of capital, people, goods and information. Donald and Lindler consider inertia and stillness as ways to tune in with issues of pace, community and belonging and thus engage with the positive aspects of globalisation, those aspects which enable us to network across languages and cultures. We think of the production of *And the World Was Calm* as a record of a moment when mass mobility had to stop, but our capacity to decode such moment and understand its consequences will change with time. As Laura Mulvey (2006) explains, film's indexical character can grasp the pastness of images into an ever-evolving present. The way to the future city and the place of artists and scholars in them should not dwell on narratives of loss and absence that drain energies and put obstacles to imagining beyond that, we need to go beyond the dwelling. What the future will be like will also depend on our capacity to diagnose the ever-evolving present.

Half-way through September 2020, at the time of this writing, the UK government has established "the rule of six" which limits the amount of people that can be seen indoors and outdoors in England. We will have to wait and see what happens when meeting less often and less people acquires a long-term taste but this, along with fears of social surveillance, does not paint a pretty picture for our communities and mental health. We are going to miss contact. Meanwhile, London is living a slow return to the commute. Life in the city centre, previously occupied by office workers and tourists, remains a shadow of its former self. An important part of the city's workforce is still working remotely and despite the government urging them to return to offices, people is not confident enough to embark again on a regular commute. We are fearing contact. Another good number of workers is still furloughed and waiting to hear from employers when the scheme ends, which will rise unemployment figures. Meanwhile, various countries are drawing up the air bridges that had been agreed at

the start of the Summer for tourism to reactivate the economy. Whilst the stagnation of mass tourism can have significant economic consequences, it can be an opportunity for people to reconnect with their own localities and diminish carbon emissions. Mobility will continue to be an engine of the city, as it is important not just for the economy, but also for its politics, cultural and social activities. London is composed of many boroughs which are cities in themselves, localities with their own historical centres, goods and service suppliers, cultural diversities and social etiquette. Within these localities, walking and cycling provide mobility alternatives, but these involve a physicality not suited for every case and connections between different localities are not always available. Geographical distances and borders in the physical space are on the rise, as well as generational divides and inequality because the effects of the pandemic are strongly anchored in structural differences.

This is certainly a challenging context, but one where we can seize power and create new opportunities. We can use moving image art to grapple with the “contact anxiety” we are experiencing, an anxiety resulting from both missing and fearing connections and interaction. As well as new sensibilities towards being in space and feeling other bodies in it, new horizons for mobility and stillness, collaboration and cooperation, and work and domesticity are emerging. We can use moving image art to explore these too and articulate our feelings towards them. There might follow a re-evaluation of the reality of the spaces we share and a recognition of our common responsibilities and interdependences. In the case of scholars and artists, mobility is vital to connect with and learn from different cultures and places. Mobility can be very stimulating and fruitful, even if it is often driven by necessity and underpinned by the politics of institutions such as universities, galleries and cultural organisations. Those whose mobility has been restrained or must shield might seek to connect in different ways and learn new skills to communicate and collaborate. We might become less focused on the quantity of our connections but on the quality of them. New rules of socialisation beyond crowds and mass events are also emerging and cultural programming is trying to creatively adapt to the new ways, with multimodal approaches that overcome physical demands and reach to wider audiences. There also needs to be better acknowledgement of the labour that goes into producing arts and culture and the manifold lives these have and find ways of keeping support for the arts despite the looming recession. Since we have slowed down we can be less rushed to meet goals and more aware of the means to get there. Maybe we will stop to detachedly look at ourselves as a spectacle, find the calmness to engage with such a turbulent world, and reimagine better connections across space.

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