Loneliness, Art, and the City

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Loneliness, Art and the City

David Jenkins

Abstract
Recognition of the costs of loneliness, in terms of public coffers and people’s health, is a relatively new phenomenon. That cities can be experienced as lonely places is nothing new. Responding to this, urban design focuses primarily on designing parks, housing, and plazas that bring people together in public space. However, these designs tend to encourage sociability amongst the already connected and do not address the social needs of lonely people who often feel daunted by the presence of others in public space. In this paper, I compare and contrast David Foster Wallace’s novels and Edward Hopper’s painting as different artistic treatments of loneliness, in order to argue for the memorializing of everyday urban experiences in public space capable of increasing public awareness regarding the profound harms of loneliness.

Key Words
art; Edward Hopper; loneliness; urbanism; David Foster Wallace

1. Introduction
I begin with a survey of the problem of loneliness as an issue of social policy. I then consider different aesthetic approaches to loneliness focusing, in particular, on how David Foster Wallace and Edward Hopper used literature and painting, respectively, to offer remedies for loneliness. While neither approach is entirely suited to application in public space, I argue they can usefully inform an approach to urban environments that takes seriously loneliness, and the challenges of city living, more generally. In particular, I examine the ways in which statues can
be used to focus on, make explicit, and even aggrandize the ordinary experiences of urban space, the joys of communion there, the mundane and sometimes frustrating experiences of dealing with crowds, and the not uncommon loneliness we feel when in their midst. In this way, public sculptures help urban residents reflect on the complex texture of city life.

I examine two examples of this memorialization of the quotidian. First, “The Old Man and the Gulls,” a statue erected in a Green Lake Park in Kunming, China, to honor Wu Qingheng, an elderly man who would daily walk ten kilometers to feed the gulls. Second is “Platform Pieces,” in Brixton, London, in which three statues of commuters wait—for forever—for their trains to arrive. I conclude with comments on the possible value of politicizing these artistic interventions, helping to bring attention to the ways in which urban development fails to serve many people’s most basic social needs.

2. Responding to loneliness

Loneliness is receiving increased political attention. In the UK, a recent government made a material commitment to combating loneliness with a £20 million investment and the appointment of a minister tasked with implementing relevant cross-party work. The Department of Health claims to be sensitive to the health risks posed by chronic loneliness, as evidenced by former Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt’s speech on the “Forgotten Million” and the subsequent appointment of a Chief Inspector of Social Care. Many UK charities, including the Campaign to End Loneliness, are working with this government-led process to tackle loneliness.

In Japan, the situation is lethal. There is the phenomenon of “lonely deaths” (kodokushi), where people who die alone remain undiscovered for long periods of time. In 2009, 32,000 elderly people nationwide died alone, and the overall number of kodokushi tripled between 1983 and 1994. In 2006, approximately 4.5% of funerals were for victims of kodokushi. There is also the phenomenon of hikikomori, people who withdraw from all social contact by not leaving their homes for years.

Loneliness can be devastating in other ways, too. John Cacioppo explored the extensive health consequences of chronic loneliness, arguing it has an impact similar to the effects of high blood pressure, obesity, and a fifteen-cigarettes-a-day smoking habit. There are also the economic costs to consider. In the United States, a study found that “a lack of social contacts among older adults is associated with an estimated $6.7 billion
in additional federal spending annually. In the UK, researchers at the London School of Economics estimate that loneliness costs £6,000/person for a decade of an older person’s life in health costs and pressure on local services. We are, as a species, “obligatorily gregarious,” and our evolution has been predicated on our being able to successfully connect with others. Although there are variations between individuals, and some feel more comfortable being alone than others, there is evidence that our “need to belong” is basic to the species, and that “much of what human beings do is done in the service of belongingness.” E.M. Forster’s prescription that we “only connect!,” that we “live as fragments” no longer, is a hard-wired imperative.

The causes of these dislocations and disconnections are complex and will shift depending on who is lonely and where they feel lonely. One general cause, perhaps, is the fissiparous quality of modernity. Where the village might have given us “thicker” forms of community (Gemeinschaft) through face-to-face relations and shared ethical convictions and values, informality and affective ties between people, modernity leaves us with society (Gesellschaft). Our relations to others are rendered indirect, bureaucratic, formal, and impersonal, closer in spirit to a commercial contract based on rational self-interest. More specifically, technology, changes to our working lives, poverty, increased mobility, bereavement, and other personal factors will affect different people at different times, inducing more loneliness in some than in others. These different aspects of modernity will interact in important ways, and any effective policy response will need to take such interactions into account.

There have been proposals to address these problems. In Japan, where these problems are evidently acute, robots, including cute seals and dogs and human-like dolls, all of which move their heads and eyes in sympathetic response, have been provided to elderly people in an effort to offer them companionship where this is less forthcoming from children or other family members. There are also various market solutions, where the recently bereaved or estranged hire people to act as surrogates, pretending to be family members and acting out the roles of daughters, wives, grandchildren, and the like. Another example, and a headline proposal from the UK’s recently produced loneliness strategy, is for “social prescriptions.” As part
of what are being called “connector schemes,” general practitioners (GPs) can now prescribe dance classes, art groups, walking clubs, and volunteer work to help people who present to them as lonely or who show signs of loneliness into situations where they are more likely to connect with others. Another proposal “will see postal workers calling on lonely older people who sign up to participate, as part of their usual delivery rounds.”[10] In addition, the report also identifies the spatial dimensions of loneliness, recognizing the need for inclusive, extensive, and affordable transport, good neighborhood planning, and housing designed with sociability in mind.[11]

In Australia, the Grattan Institute produced a report in which the role of the built environment is made even more explicit as a means of combatting loneliness. At the report’s conclusion, the authors state: “In planning, building and redeveloping our cities, we consistently consider such factors as financial cost, economic productivity and environmental footprint. The social impact of projects, however, is rarely given equivalent emphasis... yet there is strong evidence that an adequate level of social connection is just as critical to our wellbeing.”[12] The report ends with an appendix listing the available approaches to urban housing, public space, mobility and traffic, and the use of public art to help develop the idea of cities as more social places.[13]

3. Urban loneliness

Rural areas, especially when they are remote from towns or other denser population centers, can also be characterized by loneliness. These, too, are imbricated with issues of space. The Loneliness Strategy Report (UK) alludes to a Rural Coffee Caravan in Suffolk, taking a mobile, common space to more isolated communities, with the aim of bringing people together and establishing connections that will survive the absence of the caravan.[14] However, it is urban environments that have, in light of the proximity of countless others, been traditionally scorned for the loneliness they produce.

In the United States, a strong anti-urban intellectual tradition vilifies the city for its hostility, coldness, and anonymity. As Robert Park, summing up this tradition, puts it: “if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live.”[15] In a similar vein of condemnation, William Wordsworth, on the other side of the Atlantic some 150 years earlier, lamented the streets of nineteenth-century London, in which the “ballast of familiar life” could no longer be counted on:
Above all, one thought
Baffled my understanding, how men lived
Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still
Strangers, and not knowing each other’s names.[16]

Even those who favor cities for the freedom they enable do so out of a romantic sense of the solitude they produce. Charles Baudelaire’s love of Paris came from exalting in the sentiments that so alienated Wordsworth: “Multitude, solitude: terms that to the active and fruitful poet, are synonymous and interchangeable.”[17] The anonymity that troubled and unsettled Wordsworth was that which informed Baudelaire’s “hate of home” that he took as a necessary condition for artistic accomplishment.[18] Both Wordsworth and Baudelaire, in other words, saw the same urban reality, differing only in their assessment of its ethical relevance.

One response to the anti-urban tradition has been the design of urban social spaces. Seating arrangements, the presence of trees, protection from wind and exposure to sun, and access to food and water are all ways of making small, urban spaces sociable. However, William Whyte, perhaps the progenitor of this approach, caveats his praise for such spaces with the following: “plazas are not ideal places for striking up acquaintances, and even on the most sociable of them, there is not much mingling.”[19] A city might be propitious for continuing friendships started at the workplace or at school but for people who do not enjoy associations formed elsewhere, perhaps because they do not work or the work they do involves moving around or is at home, it might be difficult to connect with others. More recent work has also failed to regard these spaces in regards to how they might serve the specific associational needs of lonely people.[20] Even in discussions of “undesirables” in public space, there is little attention to how that space might be developed to serve their interests.[21] They are only ever a problem to be handled rather than claimants with rights of their own.[22] This distinction between making and sustaining connections clarifies the only apparently paradoxical fact that a place can be social without combating loneliness.

In current discussions of sociability in the city, there is much less focus on how social urban spaces might serve the lonely. Skyscrapers are criticized, for example, because of the wind tunnels they create below but how urban design affects the acutely or the chronically lonely is not even hinted at. Given that the aesthetic dimension of cities generally, that is, distinct from issues of sociability and loneliness, figures predominantly in
how cities appear in the collective imagination, this oversight is worth investigating. Is the neon of a Parisian belle époque night better suited to connection than the graffiti-sprayed streets and passageways of Brooklyn? And how might these compare to the urbanism of Atlanta or Houston, shorn of anything but vehicular-based functionality? Is there a way aesthetics might bring London’s urban(e) indifference and cold-shoulder-commuting closer to the street-culture of the more welcoming Lisbon?[23] With these particular questions in mind, I want to pose the following more general question: Is there something designers of public spaces can learn from how artists, working in other mediums, have dealt with and reflected on issues of loneliness?

4. Aesthetics and loneliness

In order to consider how art might offer some part of a broad, holistic approach to urban loneliness, I turn now to a look at how techniques employed within the mediums of fiction and visual art have tackled these issues. More specifically, I examine the work of the novelist David Foster Wallace and the painter Edward Hopper.

4.1 The novel: David Foster Wallace

David Foster Wallace was a writer who argued that literature’s main function is combatting loneliness.[24] He put it in the following way:

Fiction is one of the few experiences where loneliness can be both confronted and relieved. Drugs, movies where stuff blows up, loud parties – all these chase away loneliness by making me forget my name’s Dave and I live in a one-by-one box of bone no other party can penetrate or know. Fiction, poetry, music, really deep serious sex, and, in various ways, religion – these are the places (for me) where loneliness is countenanced, stared down, transfigured, treated.[25]

But what are the specific aesthetic decisions Wallace makes in order to get his fiction to do this kind of work? Crucial to Wallace’s technique is to focus on people’s “excluded engagement in the self,” to recognize the essential aloneness of what it means to be human, as a way, paradoxically perhaps, of gaining “imaginative access to other selves.”[26] In his work, this access is often achieved through extended exposure to one person’s complex of ambivalences, doubts, strategies of self-protection, and vulnerabilities, all presented with a solipsistic simultaneity, helping readers to “jump over that wall of self and inhabit somebody else in a way that . . . [we] can’t in regular
life."[27] By delving deep into the skull of one person and capturing the complexity of what goes on there, we get a sense of what happens to all of us: “What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant.”[28] Wallace helps us feel less alone by laying bare the complexities and opacity of a singular experience of a shared human condition.

In doing so, his intention is to convey, as part of that shared condition, a basic sentimentality. There is a moment when Hal Incandenza, Infinite Jest’s main character, realizes that he suffers from “some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic.”[29] It is thus through extended exposure to the pathetic internal space of his characters that Wallace tries to connect his readers to one another and to thereby treat the loneliness he recognized as an implacable fixture of being human.

The existential timber to the above paragraph's rendering of loneliness makes the novel an appropriate forum for the kind of treatment Wallace employs. Spending time in the other person’s headspace connects us in deep ways to other’s thoughts and sentiments. But this is predicated both on these being fictional others and on the private space books provide. The flesh and bone of another individual from whose head space we are in important ways excluded presents different problems altogether. Attempts to establish connection like this in public space seem to misunderstand the functions of both literature and public space. In other words, the literary techniques Wallace draws on to express and in some ways treat loneliness seem poorly suited to the goods achieved by and material constraints of public space.

Exposing and tracing the convoluted internal pathways of a mind certainly involves a great deal of vulnerability but it is ultimately a controlled kind of exposure. It occurs between author and audience, in a private kind of communication. The fictional quality of the subjects, the traces of autobiography notwithstanding, create a certain distance. We can talk about and think about loneliness without anyone in the room having to actually confess to their loneliness. The public spaces of a city are sites where this kind of exposure and the vulnerability it produces are altogether inappropriate. Urbanists have consistently warned us against any demand for sincerity or disclosure in the shared public life of the streets. Michael
Walzer, for example, argues “public space is space we share with strangers, people who aren’t our relatives, friends, or work associates. It is space for politics, religion, commerce, sport; space for peaceful coexistence and impersonal encounter.”[30]

Richard Sennett goes even further, suggesting that modern cities have created an urban resident who is a “secular puritan, afraid of his own powers to explore what he cannot control in advance.” From such an individual emerges a “community life whose institutions, notably the family, encourage his puritanism to become a permanent way of life.”[31] He looks for intimacy in spaces that should have nothing to do with that sentiment. In contrast to this, citizens should be comfortable with the “prime condition of the city – impersonality.”[32] This means “relating to others as unknowns, puzzles, presences.”[33] Where we attempt to exercise control in urban space, where we cannot relate to others through this impersonality, we fail as mature, capable urbanites.

In a different vein, Marshall Berman does not seem to root urbanism in impersonality so much as a festive urban culture. In his celebration of New Left appropriations of public space, Berman describes a culture of “gathering, agitating, arguing, proclaiming, marching, stopping traffic, dancing, singing, waving flags, taking off their clothes or putting on strange new clothes, expressing themselves and making reasonable and outrageous demands on everyone else in flamboyantly theatrical but intensely serious ways.”[34] But, in none of these three understandings of urban comportment is the sometimes brutal loneliness of cities, and especially cities of New York’s shape and size, taken into account. Appeals to impersonality, maturity, and even the festival of Berman’s New York provide no conceptual space for the interactions and connections that might serve the millions of lonely people populating real cities.

4.2 Visual art: Hopper
Wallace’s characters are exposed from the inside out; delving deep, we arrive at something internal that is shared. An alternative can be seen in another artist famous for his evocation of specifically urban loneliness. Edward Hopper’s treatment of loneliness comes from being able to conjure “iconic American spaces such as diners, drug stores, hotel rooms, gas stations and movie theaters into spaces reflective of the artist’s interior realm, spaces of mood, feeling, contemplation of one’s position in the world.”[35] His paintings are, more often than not, “populated by people alone, or in uneasy, uncommunicative groupings of twos and threes, fastened into poses that seem
indicative of distress.”[36] In contrast to Hopper’s urban melancholy, Wordsworth expressed fear of the violence latent to anonymous urban crowds;

What say you then
To times when half the city shall break out
Full of one passion – vengeance, rage, or fear –
To execution, to a street on fire,

Mobs, riots of rejoicings?[37]

There is no suggestion that such passions lay dormant in Hopper’s cities. In Hopper, attention is not on what cities can potentially and dangerously unite amongst its inhabitants but on how they separate and wall us off from one another.

Beyond this separateness there is also the exposure entailed by living in a city. This is not Wallace’s excavating exposure but, instead, an exposure that, in Olivia Laing’s words, renders us, the audience, complicit in “an estranging act.” Hopper’s Night Windows is a painting which consists of three windows opening onto a lighted, private room. In the first window, a curtain billows; in the second, middle window, we see a woman bending down in a peach slip; and in the third window, there is a lamp, the light of which seems to have turned some red fabric to fire. Olivia Laing imagines Hopper glimpsing this through the window of the city’s El train. However, although we have breached this woman’s privacy, “it doesn’t make the woman any less alone, exposed in her burning chamber.”[38] The exposure of her separateness has not, therefore, brought us any closer to connection with her. In contrast to Wallace’s use of exposure as a route to connection, here the exposure, in being involuntary and snatched, is a breach that cannot serve such a function. But, Laing goes on, there remains something consoling in Hopper’s work. As with Wallace, there is an attempt at treatment here: In paying these lonely subjects his “extraordinary attentiveness,” he shows the subject that it was “worth the labor, the miserable effort of setting it down. As if loneliness was something worth looking at. More than that, as if looking itself was an antidote, a way to defeat loneliness’s strange, estranging spell.”[39]

We should, however, pay careful attention to the way Hopper’s painting are experienced. When we see a Hopper, we are, first of all, often seeing a specific time and a place. This is not to accuse Hopper of being outdated but only to recognize that, in many ways, his paintings capture urban scenes different to contemporary ones. Nighthawks is a New York that is a long way from both contemporary New York and other, say, Midwestern towns and cities. Even where this is not the case—Office in a
Small City has not evidently dated in any obvious way—these remain paintings, viewed in museums, as spaces dedicated to contemplation and aesthetic appreciation. The function of these places is explicit; they are separate from the world beyond. These paintings as paintings, while examples of attention and effort directed at the issue of loneliness, are thus not of urban material and do not infuse the ordinary passages, streets, and spaces of the city. Is there a way then, to take Hopper’s “extraordinary attentiveness” into the street?

In what follows, I want to argue for an aesthetic that pushes against the haughtiness underlying those urban approaches advocated by Walzer, Sennett, and Berman. Their public-space users are too robust for my liking, too urbane. What about those amongst us who feel uncomfortable responding to the openness of public spaces, who are not so capable of responding to this milieu with the appropriate hippy élan Berman evokes or to the demands of public-political participation Sennett calls on or who need the sincerity Walzer’s impersonal encounters cannot provide but are deprived of opportunities elsewhere?

Perhaps it is the case that public space can only do so much. If we care about public space and the functions it needs to perform— and for urban theorists, public urban space is regarded as fundamental to democratic politics—then we need to accept its limitations. Visit a Hopper exhibition, read some Wallace, get a social prescription from your doctor, maybe even pop a few Tylenol, but don’t expect from the city what it cannot give you. if such is the case, we should be honest about the exclusions entailed.

5. Examples of loneliness informing art

In the both art forms considered above, the pain of loneliness is grounded in a paradox. We read about or see people like ourselves, with desires, dreams, and worries similar to ours, who are also impenetrable bodies on the other side of a “one-by-one box of bone” and thus forever separate from us. I want to explore the ways in which coming to grips with this paradox might be moved into an aesthetic appreciation of the use of art in public space.

Urban environments are capacious. They can simultaneously accommodate a variety of purposes,. In contrast to Sennett, who wants to train urban residents in a specific set of comportments, attitudes, and skills, I want to argue that the aesthetics of the urban environment can be used in ways capable of responding to needs that are both intimate and political. We would do well
to remember, as we revel in, say, Baudelaire’s flâneurism, that this was an aristocrat, with deeply reactionary views, who was generally scornful, his poem “The Eyes of the Poor” notwithstanding, of ordinary men and women. The city need not be turned into the extension of the private confessional but it still might be worked into a space of disclosure, exposure, and intimacy.

Rather than using public monuments for their traditional purpose of memorializing (often controversial) historical figures, tributes to sacrifice, monarchical pomp, and corporate-sponsored abstraction, I argue that there is a role they can play in focusing on, making explicit, and even aggrandizing the ordinary experiences of urban space, the joys of communion there, the mundane and sometimes frustrating experiences of dealing with crowds, and the not-uncommon loneliness felt when amidst them. In this way, public art can help urban residents reflect on the complex texture of city life, to understand their ambivalences, fears, and thwarted desires as not uncommon but rather the reflection of a difficult and still relatively new way of living.[41]

In order to make this point, I want to draw on two works of public art from two very different urban settings. The first is “Old Man and the Gulls,” a statue erected in Green Lake Park in Kunming, China in honor of Wu Qingheng, an elderly man who during winter-time would come to the park daily to feed bread to the gulls who migrated there. Another example is that of the three commuters spread across three platforms of Brixton train station, in London, UK, waiting—forever—for their train to arrive.

a) Old Man and the Gulls[42]

Wu Qingheng’s story is a moving one and is relayed via a large stele, as large as the statue of Wu next to which it is placed in Cuihu Park, Kunming.[43] A worker in a chemical plant in the southwest of China, Wu had no family. He started to come to the park when he retired in 1984, soon becoming a fixture of the local park. He would call the birds by name, tending to the sick, feeding them with steamed bread and biscuits. In order to save his pension, he walked fifteen kilometers to the park and, his neighbors remarked, spent very little money on food for himself. Sometimes he would buy egg and corn to make the feed himself. His last wish was to have some pictures taken with the gulls to accompany him to heaven. After his death, his neighbors discovered his personal effects amounted to no more than some simple bedclothes and cooking utensils.
In the statue, Wu is surrounded by birds in different postures, all of them turned toward Wu. One of them sits on his left arm, his wings outstretched into near contact with Wu's chin, as he eats out of his hand. Wu's head is turned in smiling conversation with another. Directly behind Wu is the lake that in winter time—mild by Chinese standards, Kunming is known as the “spring city”—is filled with the real migrating gulls.

By memorializing Wu and his relationship to the park and its birds, the statue does a number of things. First, it recognizes the ways in which people use public space to meet basic needs of sociability, even if this is in communion with birds rather than people. As we have seen, arguments for the preservation of public space often describe the political actions that occur there and the orientations that are learned. But, for some people, the needs it meets are far more basic and personal. Second, it offers a depiction of an especially vulnerable person. As we have seen, elderly people are a demographic especially at risk of loneliness. But, although Wu’s story is a sad one, it is also a celebration of his attentiveness to others. Third, it reduces the anonymity of the city. Wu was not entirely unknown and was on “sidewalk-terms,” as Jane Jacobs might describe it, with the locals.[44]

These connections were not deep but they provided an interactional milieu that offers some sense of belonging. By presenting the story of a real man, who lived and was known in that place, there is an implicit expression of a type of urban community. This is not the thick community of the village, a world in which everyone is familiar with everyone else's private affairs, but that does not render it unworthy of attention and cultivation.

b) Platforms Piece[45]

This public artwork consists of three bronze statues of commuters waiting on Brixton station's railway platforms. Completed in 1986 by Kevin Atherton, in 2016, it was given listed status by Historic England, as two of the figures (Peter Lloyd (platform one) and Joy Battick (platform three)) are believed to be the UK's first public sculptural representations of black British people.

The figures are sculpted into different poses. Lloyd on platform one, leans his back against the wall, his leg cocked rearward in support, arms folded. He looks across to platform two where Karin Heistermann, a young German woman, stands upright. A heavy-looking satchel hangs from her left hand, the right is stuffed into her jacket's pocket, elbow crooked. Joy Battick, on platform three, stands with hands resting on her hips, both
elbows crooked, in the most energetic and forceful of the poses, her bag next to her feet. None of them are smiling, all of them locked into mental preparation for the day ahead.

Two of the statues, Karin and Peter, stand opposite one another, in each other’s eye line. Atherton, in an interview many years later, claimed to have been interested in “flipping the idea of ‘love at first sight’ and playing on the fleeting interactions that people often have with one another in large cities, not least in railway stations.”[46] Atherton evokes Baudelaire’s description of that moment when an eye is caught amidst the anonymous crowd and the air is charged with the sense of the possibilities, of the roads left untravelled: “O you whom I could have loved, O you who knew it!”[47] Joy, separated by fences and a grass-filled border, is not seen by anyone. She lies beyond the possible frisson happening between Karin and Peter.

These three statues capture a number of things about commutes. First, for most people, commuting is not a happy time of the day. Commutes are equated with dead time and lost opportunity.[48] Of course, you are free to do what you want during these hours of non-labor, just so long as whatever that is can be conducted in a stranger's armpit. It is also a time when we are pushed into proximity with countless strangers, in a site inhospitable to connection, and where attempts to so connect are regarded with a kind of urbane suspicion, as primarily intrusions to be nipped in the bud. These realities are reflected by the statues. These statues are alone, but alone with one another—they are, after all, the only bronze objects in the vicinity—and are thus, in however tenuous a way, connected. But the connection between Karin and Peter, the charge of momentary interaction, still leaves Joy alone on the platform beyond. Here, fixed for attention, is a representation of a part of many people’s lives in London, locked into the very location where those experiences are had, that is, not confined to a novel (Wallace) or a museum (Hopper). The specific urban texture of that loneliness, being alone in a crowd of others, the Baudelairean frisson along with the coldness, is here recognized and given a permanent presence amongst a city's residents.[49]

Of course, these statues were not created with the specific problems of loneliness in mind. Neither is it accurate to purport to them the meaning of political interventions. Nevertheless, what they do achieve is a representation of everyday life in cities brought down to a human scale, away from the bombastic monumentality of so much public memorialization. They provide
a point of focus for people to reflect on their own experiences and to see in them a public recognition of those experiences. While there is no suggestion that these will inspire conversations between park-goers or commuters, there nonetheless is a dialogue established between individuals, on the one hand, and what is being displayed by, for, and about the public, on the other. A more concerted attempt to use memorialization in this way can perhaps instill the value of such public recognition in more of our shared urban spaces. It can also, if given a specifically politicized mission, express dissatisfaction with current urban design, casting spotlights on the effects both of architecture hostile to homeless people, and gentrification, where space becomes a factor of production, real-estate a spatial fix for capital, not as something inhabited by the everyday users of the city.

6. Recognizing the limitations

We need some honesty about how much loneliness can be stalled down or treated in the contemporary city. Perhaps, one of the costs of capitalist urban-life is that it is going to make many of us lonely sometimes and some of us lonely all the time. Unless we find a way to move beyond this particular way of organizing production and the social, political, and economic costs it creates, we must accept these as permanent “facts on the ground,” learning to handle them as well as we can. The instability of the system and its tendency to melt everything into air makes this especially tricky but that’s the shape of the challenge.

Is there a way to build acknowledgement of this limitation into a politically motivated, urban aesthetics? In other words, is it possible to use aesthetic devices within our urban environments to express this cost as a cost that we, collectively, permit to happen and are systemically obliged to permit? Policy prescriptions, by their very nature, are not going to advertise their basic, structurally induced impotence. No minister ever prefaced a policy launch with the claim “until the revolution, this is the best we can do.” Bureaucrats and politicians have too much skin in the game for that kind of honesty. Similarly, planners must balance the needs of city users with the plans of their bosses. They must work in the teeth of imperatives that limit the role they might otherwise enjoy.

In some obvious respects, the approach I describe fares far worse than those other policy interventions outlined at the beginning of this paper. There is no suggestion that the aesthetic intervention I describe above will alleviate loneliness by inducing people to connect with one another. In a mode
similar to Wallace's approach, we recognize through these artworks something that has to do with loneliness—for Wallace, it is the result of inescapable mutual opacity in the public artworks, the challenges of urban living—and this recognition can form some part of an overarching means of treating it. But, neither the sculptures nor the novels actually precipitate any kind of meaningful contact with other people. In spite of this, it remains important to consider the context within which these sculptures are inserted. For example, where space is appropriated for reflections on experiences of loneliness that are induced by urbanism, it will inevitably be in (perhaps jarring) contrast to the commercial imperatives scarring the billboards with messages of desire, satisfaction, and completion. A community very rarely advertises its failures to itself as failures. We erect statues to men and too few women of historical importance; we memorialize the monumental tragedies of war and the sacrifices entailed; we fund abstract public artwork the meanings of which are (I wager) obscure to many (most certainly to me). But much less frequent are attempts to memorialize the everyday experiences of urban living.

Part of this memorialization will be to demonstrate, in solid forms of bronze, copper, brass, and other like materials, a public recognition that these experiences do happen, are commonplace, and can be painful. The very publicity they engender has a powerful effect. Again, recent discussions of loneliness have examined the stigma attached to loneliness. Indeed, chronic loneliness is often the result of people being unable to breach this stigma and finding themselves more and more cut off from any kind of nourishing human contact. Part of reducing that stigma is to create a conversation around loneliness. I submit that part of that conversation should not be just around being more accepting of the experiences of loneliness and more willing to reach out to those we suspect of being lonely but of recognizing that the causes of that loneliness are systemic and are the result of certain interests being served over others. Neither *Platform Pieces* nor *Old Man and the Gulls* is political in this way. Nevertheless, they point to an approach that is at least attending to an everyday urban texture, that in being politicized could help articulate a vision of the injustices that are deeply imbricated with that texture.

7. Conclusion

There is only so much that can be done through art, in any of its forms, to combat loneliness. The epidemic proportions of contemporary loneliness demand systematic responses, drawing on all manner of interventions, economic, cultural,
architectural, political and so on. Nevertheless, since cities must have some form or another, it is important to recognize the opportunities such forms provide or fail to provide, for purposive interventions on this (and any other) issue.

In addition, where commerce currently dominates so much of our eye line, when our attention is drawn not to each other so much as it is to the marketplace, we cannot but occlude from view other possible uses of space, other modes of communication, and the articulation of other sentiments and experiences. Advertising is not in the business of describing needs to which it can offer no solution. The togetherness Coca-Cola helps to facilitate between beautiful people means, or should mean, very little to those in the streets below. The basic human demands of seriousness should guide us away from using public pronouncements in this simplistic fashion. Allowing responses to and reflections of loneliness to shape the look and feel of our shared spaces, using memorialization in the way I have sketched, could be one way in which that seriousness can be recaptured in our shared urban environments.

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Endnotes


[14] Ibid. p. 38.


[18] Ibid. p. 28.


[21] Indeed, the current planning consensus in many cities is to *exclude* homeless people from public space. See Robert Rosenberger, *Callous Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).


[38] Laing, *Lonely in the City*, p. 19

[39] Ibid., Ibid. p. 44.


[41] Contrast this to the Gratton’s report claim that public art, such as the event art of Anish Kapoor’s *Cloud Gate* and Olafur Eliasson’s *Waterfall*, makes cities more social. None of these examples reflect on the experiences of isolation in cities. Kelly, “Social Cities”, 54.

[42] For visual images, Google 昆明公园海鸥雕像.


[45] For visual images, Google “platform pieces in Brixton station.”


Incidentally, the statues are sometimes appropriated by staff and fellow commuters. There are pictures of Karin dressed in coats and sheltered by umbrellas. *Cf.* Paul Day’s statue at King’s Cross Station. Its enormity removes it as an object of ordinary attention or appropriation.