

A Crisis of Space

In general, it is certain, that, wherever we go, whatever we reflect on or converse about, every thing still presents us with the view of human happiness or misery, and excites in our breast a sympathetic movement of pleasure or uneasiness ... A man, who enters the theatre, is immediately struck with the view of so great a multitude participating of one common amusement; and experiences, from their very aspect, a superior sensibility or disposition of being affected with every sentiment, which he shares with his fellow creatures.

-David Hume

I take walks every day to bide the time, wearing a mask and staying on the edge of the sidewalks in my small suburban town. During these walks, I have encountered every way to avoid another person when walking past them. Some pass on the other side of the sidewalk, looking down at their feet. Some give a slight nod, yet walk on the grass, dirtying their shoes but safely estimating a six foot gap. One couple split around me, one partner walking well into a lawn and the other straddling the middle of the street, their conversation ongoing throughout the maneuver.

The rest of my time is spent between my devices, usually at my desk, always with the blinds pulled all the way up and the windows cracked so as not to turn my room into a den. This space has featured in a few Instagram posts, hosts zoom and facetime calls, and is cleaned regularly to make it as pleasant a backdrop as possible for these online interactions. Trading away the physical proximity of campus life makes the space I now share seem all important -- it is not just my room, but the vessel in which I appear to everyone I interact with.

Presentation has become the most valuable skill in life forced online. Where it once played a major role in the optional realm of online persona-forming and posturing, it has grown to account for the fact that online life is no longer optional. However, this is not the same as the

presentation of analog, face to face interaction. As I pass others on my walk, I cannot help but see things they do not want me to see. Tan lines and uncomfortably hairy legs are hallmarks of early spring, and I am forced to observe them on men that walk by. They cannot infinitely meditate on what they would like to do or appear as when they walk by me, as I'm only a subject of attention in their space for a few seconds before I pass.

You cannot share a space online -- not really. While yes, this is the entire point of separating to slow the spread of disease, it ends the all-important incidentals of human contact. Through a screen, attention, proximity, vulnerability, and naivety are cast aside. I can never know how I'll walk or exactly what I'll say when I am with a friend in the same space. We meet and talk yet there is always the unpredictable, an understanding that I am with them and we have chosen to be together in the same place, and that while together our attention is each other's. I cannot run out the ringer on a call when the person calling is in front of me, and I cannot spend fifteen minutes working out a witty response when the person I am addressing is looking at me waiting to hear my reply. The men who decide on leaving the house without full sleeves to cover their tan lines do not have the luxury of a mirror image of themselves at all times, quietly letting them know if they are poorly framed or if their hair has fallen the wrong way. Separation must continue, and these vital facets of social life must be digitized, yet it will be at the cost of increased control. Just as I have already chosen to overhaul my room, others will do the same, presenting themselves in the context they want. In this way, space becomes a newly warped commodity.

Socially isolated and online, there is no longer shared space, and there is no longer the openness of physical presence. You cannot sit at your desk the way you sit at a table in a coffee shop and wait for friends to come in and sit down -- you must allow people to access you (or be

allowed access by others), peering in through the window you have chosen to provide. Locality has been replaced by a multitude of platforms, each with a different manifestation of your self selected image. Though we are still connected online, unfortunately we are always in a space of our own, attuned to our own perception, understanding of exactly how we are being observed.