

T HOSE WHO WANDER

On Veduta

Veduta is an interactive dance tour in public space developed by choreographer Sebastian Matthias (SM Collaborations). Via the free chat app Telegram, audience members are guided through the city, individually or together, in their own time.

Veduta was first created for Dresden, Germany (2020) and then for Basel, Switzerland (2021), in collaboration with a group of local residents.

This text was commissioned by Sebastian Matthias as a means to record the experience of the Basel edition of *Veduta* and explore the impressions and reflections that might pop up along the way.

*Sometimes I feel like I don't have a partner
Sometimes I feel like my only friend
Is the city I live in, the city of angels
Lonely as I am, together we cry*

These are the opening lyrics of rock band Red Hot Chili Peppers' 1990s hit "Under The Bridge", a song that came to me as I walked the route of *Veduta* in Basel. As a teenager growing up in a small town, I used to listen to this song on my iPod Nano as I wandered around suburbia, looking for unnamed street corners and hang-out spots where I could be alone and dream. I was mesmerised by the lyrics by Anthony Kiedis, the Peppers' frontman and recovering drug addict, who sung about his hometown Los Angeles and the pain and joy it brought him. In the bitter-sweet longing in his voice I experienced an uncanny sense of attachment, a deep love for the city, despite its rough edges and lonely places.

In her book *Lonely in the City* Olivia Laing writes: "Cities can be lonely places, and admitting this we see that loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity of connection, closeness, kinship: an inability, for one reason or another, to find as much intimacy as is desired." (p. 4). During the covid-19 pandemic of 2020, this sense of loneliness was exemplified, as we, in the city, experienced disconnection like never before: public transport, shopping trips, navigating the streets – the journeys that were once adventurous became social-distanced and anxiety-provoking. In the process, we became detached from our surroundings, and lost sight of our fellow city-dwellers.

Through choreographer Sebastian Matthias's performative audio walk *Veduta*, construed first for Dresden and then for Basel, I re-connected with the city and with those who populate it. Via a telegram chatbot, which I accessed on my smartphone, I was guided across Basel's bridges, streets and squares, which were now filled with voice recordings, images and videos from Matthias's research and choreography. I interacted with the bot by sending my responses to questions and tasks, first moved by its playful prompts and later by my own curiosity. In a shift of perspective, I

discovered new ways of relating to the people who had once been where I was, those who were there with me and those who were to come to Basel in the future.

THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE

As I sat by an idyllic pavilion, a secret hide-out overlooking the river, I listened to a series of voice recordings in which locals talked about the meaning of 'home' for them. Some had never known another home than Basel, while others were passing through the city and were dreaming of other places. "What was my definition of home?" asked the chatbot. I responded in a voice message about my childhood in between countries, and was left wondering how many different definitions of home a place might hold.

On the bridge, the bot asked me to hold up my phone to match the frame of a video with the view of the opposite riverbank. A group of performers, dressed in bright colours, ran across the steps indented into the riverbank, performing a wild choreography with their bodies. They traced the edge of the river, their digital selves jumping, twisting and turning on the other side. Despite the distance, I was struck by their physicality: once they were there, in the flesh, and now they were here on my screen, dancing just for me.

Later, I found myself immersed in people's stories: they told me of the discomfort they felt when navigating dark alleyways late at night, and the joys of finding unexpected hotspots with free internet access. Through their stories of misbehaviour and disobedience, I, too, started to pay attention to the city's unruly corners, and saw it transform into a playground of possibilities. I felt connected to these voices that revealed their thoughts and their secrets to me, these strangers who had let me into their world.

THOSE WHO ARE THERE

The chatbot invited me to overhear a conversation of other pedestrians. I spotted two girls and tried to pick up what they were saying: which language were they speaking and could I follow the local dialect? I challenged myself to hover close by, trying not to let them notice me, so as not to be suspicious – I caught a word or two, and edged away before they caught me. As I removed myself from the scene, I realised that even without interacting with them, I could learn about them through observing their gestures, their movements, the way they sat on the bench. Their bodies spoke for them.

The chatbot asked me to count my steps across the bridge. I thought about how I could use my body to measure the city, and how tracking my movements could be a way to map my crossing. I noticed how I was influenced by another person on the bridge: their legs were longer, and I found myself taking larger steps to keep up with them. Perhaps our individual journeys can't be considered or measured in isolation, rather, they exist in constant relation to others.

Under the bridge, the chatbot shifted my attention to the nonhuman bodies that surrounded me. I sought the nearest object, a bike locked to the railing, and positioned myself close to it. Just before, I had witnessed this scene from above, and now, having inserted myself into it, I experienced a shift of perspective: from the overview to the insider's view. I thought about the map, the tool I use most often to make sense of territory, and how it felt obsolete. Could I also depict, discover, deconstruct a location without extracting myself from it?

THOSE WHO WILL COME AFTER

As well as actively observing the city, *Veduta* challenged me to participate in it. I asked a fellow tourist to take a picture of me, I jumped down the steps outside the theatre while dancing to a jumpstyle tune, I assumed the body posture of a male model in a

shop window. I felt the joy of these corporeal experiences, and I felt that now, it wasn't only my surroundings having an impact on me, but I, too, was having an impact on the city.

From a black letter box I took a gift from a previous participant of the route in exchange for a gift of my own. Seated in the café at the end, drink in hand, I wrote a note which would be passed on to the person who came after me. I was touched by these anonymous exchanges, that together created a chain of links: without having met the others on the route, without having seen their faces, I had experienced their presence. Perhaps I didn't need to know who they were, to care for them.

Loneliness and the desired intimacy that Laing speaks of, are invisible forces. They are felt, sensed and experienced; as are gestures of trust. In isolation, we may have lost the physical confirmation of others, but through creative means and simple tools, such as those offered by *Veduta*, we may find comfort in place. In walking and wandering, a space opens for a love for a city alive with hidden faces.

*It's hard to believe that there's nobody out there
It's hard to believe that I'm all alone
At least I have her love, the city, she loves me
Lonely as I am, together we cry*

"Under The Bridge" // Blood, Sugar, Sex, Magik 1991 // Red Hot Chili Peppers