From Densely Filled Vistas to Empty Piazzas

City Images Interpreting the Oscillating Dynamisms of Urban Reality

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Abstract

Cities have been inspirational for the creators of visual art works long since, first as mere secondary, additional motifs to indicate the "urban" environment of the main scene, then as subject-matters in their own right. Those images could depict both imaginary and actual cities of the past and of the future, including mythological and Biblical locations, documenting distant lands and fantasizing on the appearance of utopian cities. In some of these aspects, the history of city representations shares significant similarities with the history of landscape depictions.

In the present paper, however, I aim to focus on a curious and particular detail in this pictorial tradition. Following and further investigating a brief reflection by Michel Makarius from his 2004 book on Ruins, I would like to compare the visuality and aesthetic effects of dense and empty cityscapes, of which two classical examples could be the capriccios – imaginary views of cities completely filled with aesthetically pleasing elements, including magnificent remnants of the Antique heritage – and representations of cities in which their emptiness is highlighted

to such extent that the observer tends to assume that the real subject-matter of the image is not the city, its buildings, forms and physical components but exactly its being "empty".

These "extremities" on the broad range of cityscapes, i.e., the densely-filled and the extremely depopulated are, however, not merely historical sub-genres of long-gone centuries. These typologies have survived to this day, in various versions and with diverse accents; what's more, they seem to be more relevant than ever in understanding not only the nature of these artistic representations and their aesthetic references, but also in learning more of our contemporary reality itself. It is enough to think of the numerous ways in which artists approach the convoluted issues and challenges of urban life today, with the classical references and visual vocabulary in mind, either unconsciously creating occasional parallels or using them as explicit forerunners to their own works. The density of the global megapolises are represented in artistically novel ways often with socially critical overtones, while the images of empty cities – not long ago, for example, during the recent pandemics and lockdowns – are again resulting in aesthetically inspiring and insightful works incentivizing us to reflect on the oscillating dynamisms of our present urban realities. Therefore, it is particularly beneficial to observe such renderings of our cities and hence to raise more our awareness of the multiple global issues that are often very strongly manifested in the everyday life in large metropolises. Pieces of art thematising the extreme forms of city life can become very efficient ways of constantly reminding us of our duties of taking care of both our cities and our life.

Resumen

Las ciudades han inspirado a los creadores de obras de arte desde hace mucho tiempo, primero como motivos meramente secundarios, adicionales para indicar el entorno „urbano" de la escena principal, y luego como temas por derecho propio. Esas imágenes podrían representar ciudades imaginarias y reales, del pasado y del futuro, incluidas ubicaciones mitológicas y bíblicas, documentando tierras lejanas y fantaseando con la aparición de ciudades utópicas. En algunos de estos aspectos, la historia de las representaciones de la ciudad comparte similitudes significativas con la historia de las representaciones de paisajes.

En el presente artículo, sin embargo, pretendo centrarme en un detalle curioso y particular de esta tradición pictórica. Siguiendo e investigando más a fondo una breve reflexión de Michel Makarius de su libro de 2004 sobre „Ruinas", me gustaría comparar la visualidad y los efectos estéticos de paisajes urbanos densos y vacíos, de los cuales dos ejemplos clásicos podrían ser los caprichos- vistas imaginarias de ciudades completamente llenas de elementos estéticamente agradables, incluidos magníficos restos del patrimonio antiguo- y representaciones de ciudades en las que el vacío se destaca hasta tal punto que el observador tiende a suponer que el tema real de la imagen no es la ciudad, sus edificios, formas y componentes físicos, sino exactamente este „vacío".

Sin embargo, estos „extremos" de la amplia gama de paisajes urbanos, es decir, los densamente poblados y los extremadamente despoblados, no son meramente subgéneros históricos de siglos pasados. Estas tipologías han sobrevivido hasta nuestros días, en varias versiones y con diversos acentos; es más, parecen ser más relevantes que nunca para comprender no solo la naturaleza de estas representaciones artísticas y sus referencias estéticas, sino también para aprender más de nuestra propia realidad contemporánea. Basta pensar en las numerosas formas en que los artistas abordan los complicados problemas y desafíos de la vida urbana actual, sea con las referencias clásicas y el vocabulario visual en mente, ya sea creando inconscientemente paralelos ocasionales o usándolos como precursores explícitos de sus propias obras. La densidad de las megápolis globales está representada de formas artísticamente novedosas, a menudo con connotaciones socialmente críticas, mientras que

las imágenes de ciudades vacías, no hace mucho tiempo, por ejemplo, durante las recientes pandemias y cierres, están resultando nuevamente en obras estéticamente inspiradoras y perspicaces que nos incentivan a reflexionar sobre los dinamismos oscilantes de nuestras actuales realidades urbanas. Por lo tanto, es particularmente beneficioso observar tales representaciones de nuestras ciudades y, por lo tanto, aumentar nuestra conciencia de los múltiples problemas globales que a menudo se manifiestan con mucha fuerza en la vida cotidiana en las grandes metrópolis. Las obras de arte que tematizan las formas extremas de la vida urbana pueden convertirse en formas muy eficientes de recordarnos constantemente nuestros deberes de cuidar nuestras ciudades y nuestra vida.

Palabras clave: representaciones de ciudades; paisajes urbanos densos; ciudades vacías; estética de la urbanidad

Resum

Les ciutats han inspirat als creadors d'obres d'art des de fa molt de temps, primer com a motius merament secundaris, addicionals per indicar l'entorn „urbà" de l'escena principal, i després com a temes per dret propi. Aquestes imatges podrien representar ciutats imaginàries i reals, de l'passat i de el futur, incloses ubicacions mitològiques i bíbliques, documentant terres llunyanes i fantasiejant amb l'aparició de ciutats utòpiques. En alguns d'aquests aspectes, la història de les representacions de la ciutat comparteix similituds significatives amb la història de les representacions de paisatges.

En el present article, però, pretenc centrar-me en un detall curiós i particular d'aquesta tradició pictòrica. Seguint i investigant més a fons una breu reflexió de Michel Makarius del seu llibre de 2004 sobre „Ruïnes", m'agradaria comparar la visualitat i els efectes estètics de paisatges urbans densos i buits, dels quals dos exemples clàssics podrien ser els capricis - vistes imaginàries de ciutats completament plenes d'elements estèticament agradables, inclosos magnífics restes de el patrimoni antic- i representacions de ciutats en les que el buit es destaca al punt que l'observador tendeix a suposar que el tema real de la imatge no és la ciutat, els seus edificis, formes i components físics, sinó exactament aquest „buit".

No obstant això, aquests „extrems" de l'àmplia gamma de paisatges urbans, és a dir, els densament poblats i els extremadament despoblats, no són merament subgèneres històrics de segles passats. Aquestes tipologies han sobreviscut fins als nostres dies, en diverses versions i amb diversos accents; és més, sembla que són més rellevants que mai per comprendre no només la naturalesa d'aquestes representacions artístiques i les seves referències estètiques, sinó també per aprendre més de la nostra pròpia realitat contemporània. Només cal pensar en les nombroses formes en què els artistes aborden els complicats problemes i desafiaments de la vida urbana actual, sigui amb les referències clàssiques i el vocabulari visual en ment, ja sigui creant inconscientment paral·lels ocasionals o usant-los com a precursors explícits de les seves pròpies obres. La densitat de les megàpolis globals està representada de formes artísticament noves, sovint amb connotacions socialment crítiques, mentre que les imatges de ciutats buides, no fa molt de temps, per exemple, durant les recents pandèmies i tancaments, estan resultant novament en obres estèticament inspiradores i perspicaços que ens incentiven a reflexionar sobre els dinamismes oscil·lants de les nostres actuals realitats urbanes. Per tant, és particularment beneficiós observar tals representacions de les nostres ciutats i, per tant, augmentar la nostra consciència dels múltiples problemes globals que sovint es manifesten amb molta força en la vida quotidiana a les grans metròpolis. Les obres d'art que tematitzen les formes extremes de la vida urbana poden convertir-se en formes molt eficients de recordar-nos constantment els nostres deures de cuidar les nostres ciutats i la nostra vida.

Paraules clau: representacions de ciutats; paisatges urbans densos; ciutats buides; estètica de la urbanitat

There are many ways of *experiencing* a city. Some like to focus on the "highlights" of a town, while others more on the everydayness of it, and actually these diverse approaches may come up both when we are visitors or inhabitants of the city. Many tourists like to concentrate on the main attractions, while others certainly want to skip exactly these, and try to get immersed in the regular life of the city and its dwellers. However, even if not as occasional visitors but as proper inhabitant of the city, our attachment to it may be based on certain preferences to places or features we may have, or our connection to the hometown can be more of a general fondness, less identifiable with an actual sight, characteristics or aspects.

Similarly, there are also many ways of *representing* a city. Both professional artists and average image-makers (or image-takers) documenting a city practically right in the beginning arrive to the issue of how to capture the city, how can it be presented and what will it represent in and through the depiction. Needless to say, there is no "one" or "single" and especially no "objective" and "true" rendering of a city, and a picture of it will always bear the features of the creator of the image, independently of whether this creator is a professional artist or not, and also independently of whether she is aware of this subjectivity or not. Preferences, points of views (in both senses of the term), emphases, for example through the compositional choices, selection of motifs, lighting, filters etc. are all contributors to the subjectivity of the final result.

Besides these however, there are also many ways of how to *categorize* all these city-representations. They could be grouped for example based on the grade of reality of the representation, including the issue if the city is an actual town or an imaginary one. Another form of categorization – in case of real, actual locations – could be how they conform to the general(ized) and ideal(ized) image of that particular town. Or, city images can also be classified on what role the city itself plays in the image, compared to other subject matters apparent in the picture, e.g. if the town is merely a background element providing the setting for a main topic, or if it is presented for its own merit.

In the following I focus on two "extreme" forms of appearance of towns: on the overwhelmingly dense and on the manifestly empty ones. In other words, I put such representations in the centre of my present study where the abundance and closely packed nature of the city is what dominates – being tightly filled with physical elements or crowded with people – or, the other extremity, when the clear, empty, silent and often even worrisome stillness is what prevails to such extent that the observer tends to assume that the real subject-matter of the image is not merely the city, its buildings, forms, physical components and inhabitants, but exactly its being "empty".

I am not aiming however at a simple listing of instances of such representations from the history of city images, nor intending to merely describe these sorts of pictures.

What I propose instead is that through the survey and analyses we may be able to understand not only the particularities of these types of city images but also the reasons of their recurrent nature. This recurrent form and ongoing popularity of these topoi in the iconography of the city will then also help us understand past and present interpretations of city life, the highlighting of certain issues, their historical development and relevance for the grasping of our present times and (near) future. We thus hope to learn not only about cities but also *from* cities, in order to understand better our contemporary reality and the most pressing issues we are facing.

When observing city images we can easily note that certain features of the location can be represented – what's more: emphasised – by the one who creates the picture of the town, let it be an artist or a non-professional visitor taking images, including, for example the aforementioned characteristics like the "density" of the town, or its dynamism, calming and tranquil appearance or even the overtly calm, i.e. almost worrisome stillness of the place. However, naturally these are features and characteristics of the city that become perceptible by the permanent or temporary "users" of the city through their experience and experiencing. Since it will be the perception of those who live in it, visit it or promote it (think of the touristic brochures and advertisements), these appearances of a city, with the manifestation of its particularities will also be, in a way, the description of the connection towards this very space. Therefore, the way the location is presented, from the "users' perspectives", will already indicate some features of not only the city itself but of our attachment to it. This attachment is constituted through multiple phenomena and we can recognise this multiplicity even in our daily life. As Dénes Schreiner described it in his recent book: "A city is not identical with its view, although this view also refers to the city. Its becoming available for the experience happens otherwise: through its details, layers, aspects, dimensions, in a constitutive action realised in and through the experience itself." (Schreiner 2020, 87 – translated from the Hungarian original). We can agree with this focus on the experience when observing the environment, and we can also recall the analyses by Adam Andrzejewski and Mateusz Salwa who similarly put a strong accent on this in their proposal of an experience-based landscape ontology, that can nevertheless be adapted to not only natural, but also to urban environment too:

> "(…) *we claim that whenever we describe or refer to something as a 'landscape' we really mean someone's specific way of experiencing a given environment; that is, we focus on how someone is experiencing or at least may experience his or her surroundings in the first place, and in the second on what is experienced in this manner.*" (Andrzejewski–Salwa 2020A, 173 – italics in the original).

In another paper Adam Andrzejewski and Mateusz Salwa also highlight the role of experience when analysing the atmosphere of an urban site as well as possibly of an entire city too:

> *"We would like to suggest that we should think of an atmosphere as a relational feature of a site, that is, as a feature that is ascribed to it on the basis of its empirically accessible objective characteristics and comes into being (appears) only when people sensorially experience the site. (...) contrary to the widespread view within the aesthetics of atmospheres, we claim that an atmosphere is not an entity itself – nor is it a 'quasi-thing' or 'half-thing,' as usually stated – but rather a relational feature of a given site that exists only when we experience it."* (Andrzejewski–Salwa 2020B)

Therefore, we can claim that city image, city life and experience go together. This is why – and connecting back to my aims described above – the discourse about the *image* of the city is not simply about pictures representing certain towns, but is also constituted by the factors of how and why particular aspects may become highlighted at a certain moment in this very image of the city, and what does it unveil of the constantly changing attitudes towards the cities by their "temporary users" or "permanent dwellers". Therefore, first it is important to see some further characteristics from the early history of city representations that will then help us observe the special features of recent representations.

We have images of cities – better to say, visual references to cities – before the independent or autonomous city image was born. Representations of edifices or of a conglomerate of buildings appear in Greek and Roman art, mainly on frescoes and mosaics but also on relief sculpture. These are however not necessarily actual cities, nor created with the later intention of depicting exact views of them, more like allusions to the context. Later, in the Middle Ages, visual references to cities were subordinated to the main subject matter of the work, thus certain Biblical motifs regularly appeared, both real (historical) cities from the Old and New Testament and imaginary cities, for example the heavenly Jerusalem. In this long period again cities were not realistic, even if in Gothic art we start to have such representations where larger parts, or at least certain constructions of a city can be identified. Well-known examples of this include details of the magnificent frescoes by Ambroggio Lorenzetti in the Sala dei Nove of the Town Hall of Siena, representing the Allegory of Good and Bad Government and their effect on the city life and the country (1338-1340), where elements of Siena appear. In a late 14th-century panel by Taddeo di Bartolo, representing Saint Geminianus, we can see the saint holding a small model of the town. From the later decades of the 15th century we can recall the detail of a fresco in the Palazzo Pubblico of Perugia, painted by Benedetto Bonfigli around 1461-1477 that

shows the burial of Saint Ercolano, with the rendering of the city in the background. Besides these Italian examples we can also remember the renowned 1412-1416 cycle of miniatures by the Limbourg brothers in France, the *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry* with depictions and references of the Saint Chapelle in Paris or the Mont Saint Michel in Normandy.

However, this starts to change in the Renaissance, among others in the case of the Venetian artists. Giovanni Bellini for example added clearly recognisable renderings of actual buildings from Vicenza in the background of his *Pieta* from 1505, of which perhaps the most interesting – and, from an architecture historical point of view the most valuable – is the Basilica (in this case not in the sense of a church but of a town hall) before the additions designed by Palladio later in the century. In the Venetian art of the turn of 15th and 16th centuries we can also note that despite the required main subject matter, there is an increased accent on the representation and the aesthetic qualities of the context and environment, both of natural and urban environment. As a result, in certain works we start to think that besides (or beyond) the "official" subject matter, the main focus is on the city itself. As also Filippo Pedrocco described, concerning paintings by for example Gentile Bellini and Vittore Carpaccio, showing state festivities and religious processions:

> *"It seems obvious that, even though the paintings in questions have a narrative intent, it is really late fifteenth-century Venice that plays the leading role, in the splendour of its architecture and the opulence of its everyday reality, and that this reality is the true protagonist of the paintings."* (Pedrocco 1995, 5)

What we can see so far is that there is a double tendency: Cities started to appear not only with more and more recognisability, but also more and more as the dominating motif and main subject matter. The most striking consequence of this double tendency is that the two are actually going in the opposite directions. It may surprise us to read, since one would perhaps first expect that once the city can become the main subject matter of an artwork, its recognisability and likeness – or level of accuracy – further increases in order to achieve an absolute or close-to-absolute sameness with the original. However as we can see in the later development of the genre, the opposite is the case: when and despite the city had become an individual motif in its own right, and its features started to be visually investigated by the artist representing it, the focus is not (or not only) on how it is, but *how it is represented*. This is why we will still not find – and will never find – an objective rendering of any city, not even in the peak period of the genre of veduta in the 18th century, because even there the "personality" of the artist – or, better to say, the personal preferences, aesthetic ideas and ideals and artistic sensibility – will influence and modify the final result. Well-known examples include Canaletto's Venetian vedutas that even if at first seem

FIG. 1. Canaletto: Piazza San Marco, late 1720s oil on canvas, 68.6 x 112.4 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman Gift, 1988, Accession Number: 1988.162, CC0 Public Domain Designation – The Metropolitan Museum of Art

FIG. 2. El Greco: View of Toledo, ca. 1599-1600, oil on canvas, 121.3 x 108.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, Accession Number: 29.100.6 CC0 Public Domain Designation – The Metropolitan Museum of Art

FIG. 3.Marco Ricci: Capriccio with Roman Ruins, 1676-1730 guache on paper, 30.7 x 44 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1954, Accession Number: 54.118 CC0 Public Domain Designation – The Metropolitan Museum of Art

almost photographically "exact" depictions, there are notable changes, distortions and dissimilarities in them compared to the "reality", for the sake of artistic and aesthetic consideration, an approach and solution of which origins we can trace also in El Greco's works, for example in his views of Toledo. The strive for objectivity – and the difficulties of obtaining it – is observable also in those representations of cities that were not born with the intention of investigating the aesthetic effect of the towns, but where the main aim was the "true" rendering of the location, for example in engravings with city views, of which well-known examples are in the oeuvre of Anton van den Wyngaerde.

This is definitely a common point between the history of city representations and landscape depictions: in both genres, as soon as they started to be a dominant or main topic, the mode and way *how* they were represented started to matter more, in fact, so much so, that a proper sub-genre of landscape painting was born, depicting the artist in the landscape, showing him while working on his rendering of the view. (Somhegyi 2017) And, as we saw, this "how" the city was represented refers to not

only the artist's style, but also to the image of the city, i.e. which characteristics of the city are to be presented in the characteristic modes of the artist.

After these considerations we can come back to the two types of city images on which I would like to focus, the densely filled and overtly empty ones. For these considerations we can recall a thought-provoking affirmation from Michel Makarius' book on ruins, concerning Giorgio de Chirico's famous city images:

> *"The agoraphobic anxiety that lies in ambush on the precincts of a great piazza corresponds to the claustrophobic accumulation of vestiges in an abandoned city as reconstituted in capricci by a Pannini, a Canaletto, or a Marco Ricci, around which, clinging to the long-deserted monuments, there floats an aura of mystery."* (Makarius 2004, 196 – italics in the original).

Following and further investigating these considerations, we can make an attempt of not only putting these two extremities next to each other, but also make a brief historical survey of these types of pictorial tradition, in order to see what we can learn from and through them on the oscillating dynamism of cities that affect our contemporary reality too.

The dense city

Starting with the "dense" cities, they clearly refer to an overwhelming urban experience, focusing on the thick accumulation of elements. These depictions emphasise the exaggerated amount of things to see, to visit and to experience. It is important to highlight two further details however. One is that these innumerable elements and "experience-providers" that fill the view and make the cityscape "claustrophobic" (as Makarius called it) can be urban items and people too. The other detail grows out of this: that they are not necessarily resulting in a positive feeling towards "dense" town, but it may end up more and more in certain forms of anxiety. Let's see some actual examples that help us understand not only the singular cases of this sub-genre but also their historical variety.

The capriccio – the grouping of real and/or imaginary buildings, ruins, architectural and sculptural fragments into a fantasy view – was a popular genre in the 18th century; hence not soon after the birth of autonomous cityscapes. Its essence is in the ability of the artist to condense as many magnificent elements – typically from the Antiquity – as possible, to fulfil the interest and request of the Grand Tourists on their trips in Italy. The visitors were often following the recommendations of guide books for the actual sights (Remesar 2021, 4), and this has definitely influenced their interest in collecting works that visually "listed" many of these monuments in an imaginary way.

The artist thus needed to be well-versed in not only painting but also in architecture and its history to create and/or re-create aesthetically pleasing though fantasy views, especially since there is a large variety in the subcategories of capricci that are depending on how much of the appearing buildings are based on actual constructions and/or if they are entirely deriving from the artist's imagination. (Busch 1996, 95) Therefore, in the case of capricci, we have an inspiring and complex interplay of real and imaginary, as it was also highlighted by Rosa M. Vives:

"*They are phantasies, in which ruins, vegetation and water appear to be real. There is indeed a play with architectural fidelity that makes real what is unreal and makes the unreal seem real (...)* (Vives 2021, 13-14)

In this sense, we can add to Makarius' observation that around these monuments there is not only an "aura of mystery" but also one of *mastery*: the artists' special abilities in a broad range of skills and knowledge in various motifs becomes manifest in the paintings. This "mastery" culminated in the oeuvre of Piranesi, who was equally versed in creating actual city views and powerful images composed of a myriad references to the grandeur of antique Roman architecture. In his works, we have

"*an even more intertwined relation between past and present, historical evidence and imaginary supplementation, with possible additional layers of future references. (...) he represents Roman ruins not only to make them present or create the image of their presence but also to actualise their potential. This is what resulted in an almost paradoxical pictorial world, where the artist is showing the ruins' tangible presence exactly through the fantastic constructions developed out of them – or «architecture as vision» in Ivan Nagel's words.*" (Somhegyi 2020A, 106; Nagel 1987, 26)

As mentioned above, cities can appear filled with (and full of) not only architectural elements of noble Antique heritage, but also with people, and the pleasant dynamism and flow of life can also become a popular theme, the best known examples of which can be the views of the passers-by on the Parisian boulevards by the Impressionist artists. In the paintings by Monet, Pissarro, Sisley and others we can see a delightful joy of modern urban life – even if it is, naturally, a rather idealised generalisation, often focusing on and celebrating the pleasurable activities of the (upper) middle class. The nascent issues, social tensions and alienation of the individuals from each other were soon felt by many of the sensitive artists, some of whom referring to the ambiguous results of modernisation in subtle and indirect ways (e.g. Gustave Caillebotte), while others more openly confronting the public with the inequalities in the modern urban reality (e.g. Honoré Daumier).

This is why it will not be so surprising that the celebration of the buoyant pace of modern city life will that one can see in classical Impressionist works soon turn into

FIG. 4. Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Veduta di Campo Vaccino, 1775 ca. etching, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Edward W. Root, Elihu Root Jr. and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant III, 1937, Accession Number: 37.17.13. CC0 Public Domain Designation – The Metropolitan Museum of Art

FIG. 5. Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Interior view of the Flavian Amphitheater, called the Colosseum, from Views of Rome, 1766 etching, 454 × 693 mm, The Art Institute of Chicago, The Charles Deering Collection, Ref. Nr. 1927.4812. CC0 Public Domain Designation – The Art Institute of Chicago

>> FIG. 6. Giovanni Battista Piranesi: The Lion Bas-Reliefs, plate 5 from Imaginary Prisons, 1761 etching and engraving, 566 × 414 mm, The Art Institute of Chicago, The Wallace L. DeWolf and Joseph Brooks Fair Collections, Ref. Nr. 1922.5595 CC0 Public Domain Designation – The Art Institute of Chicago

FIG. 7. Camille Pissarro: The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning, 1897 oil on canvas, 64.8 x 81.3 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Katrin S. Vietor, in loving memory of Ernest G. Vietor, 1960, Accession Number: 60.174. CC0 Public Domain Designation – The Metropolitan Museum of Art

FIG. 8. Gustave Caillebotte: Paris Street, Rainy Day, 1877 oil on canvas, 212,2 × 276,2 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection, Ref. Nr.: 1964.336. CC0 Public Domain Designation – The Art Institute of Chicago

a much more anxious vertigo caused by not only the speed of life in the city, but also by the growth of the city itself, including the exponential increase of its inhabitants. This tendency of the rapid growth of the town and of the increase in the number of its dwellers started during the first industrial revolution, and affected many cities, with consequences not only for everyday life but also for architecture (see e.g. the case study of Barcelona in Remesar and Ríos 2018). From the perspective of the history of aesthetics, it is also curious to see how the category of "sublime", earlier applied to unclassical landscapes and wild natural phenomena, started to be applied to describe the appearance and aesthetic effect of factories and industrial towns (Somhegyi 2020B).

On the other hand, the rapid accumulation of population also results in the inhabitants' alienating from each other as a form of self-defence, as described already in 1903 by Georg Simmel in his renowned essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life*:

> *"The mental attitude of the people of the metropolis to one another may be designated formally as one of reserve. If the unceasing external contact of numbers of persons in the city should be met by the same number of inner reactions as in the small town, in which one knows almost every person he meets and to each of whom he has a positive relationship, one would be completely atomized internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition."* (Simmel 1971, 331)

This easily explains why – at least from what we can learn from the city scenes created by the Symbolist and Expressionist artists – people had started to experience each other as frightening, city life as alienating, or even the city itself as evil. As Sharon L. Hirsch argued, concerning the city-image we can see in Munch's works: *"the evil city deserved its reputation as the breeder of mass personality dysfunction: here, people don't go wrong; they lose their identities altogether."* (Hirsch 2004, 72-73 – italics in the original).

Especially the Expressionist artists mastered the depiction of

> *"the alienating character of the metropolises as well as the anxiety many felt when living in the modern urban environment through the use of harsh and discordant colours, distorted views and strong-contoured elongated figures placed in hardly decipherable and disturbing spaces."* (Somhegyi 2018, 261)

The vibrancy and buoyant pace of the early and mid-20th century cities and metropolises inspired many artists, we can remember among others Fernand Léger and Robert Delaunay in the 1910s, Paul Klee in the 1920s or Piet Mondrian's New York series in the 1940s, who managed to capture – even if in different styles and modes of expression – not only the rapid flow of time or the quick lifestyle burgeoning in such centres,

FIG. 9-10. Michael Wolf: Architecture of Density #39 and #45, 2005 chromogenic colour print © The Estate and Archive of Michael Wolf, courtesy of Flowers Gallery

FIG. 11 -12. Michael Wolf, Tokyo Compression, #05, and #35, 2009 chromogenic colour print © The Estate and Archive of Michael Wolf, courtesy of Flowers Gallery

but also the overwhelming load of various forms of stimuli, of which consequences on the individual life was highlighted by Simmel in his aforementioned essay. The vibrancy and multiple social layers and styles of life in the modern metropolis was also documented in the highly influential experimental movie by Walther Ruttmann titled Berlin, *Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927). A few decades later however, the forms, ideas and ideals of Modernism started to get represented in a more critical tone in Jacques Tati's movies, that often depict satirical scenes of those who celebrate and revere modernist innovations for mere snobbery.

The giant city with its massive population and – as a consequence – the condensed life in small spaces is a recurrent motif also in contemporary art. From this point of view, paradoxically, it can easily lead to similar feelings if we see a huge apartment block for middle-class inhabitants packed together, a forest of skyscrapers growing on top of each other with practically no lanes between them or a beehive-type slum of those most stricken by poverty. Their effect evoked by condensed spaces is very similar, thus it can often raise similar emotions, reminding the observer of the tiring and often frightening closeness of other fellow city-dwellers. Naturally this inhumane condensation of buildings and lives concerns not only the actual living space, but also the use of the city, this is why it is not surprising that often both can appear in the same artist's oeuvre, a well-known example of which is Michael Wolf's Hong Kong and Tokyo series, where he focused on the *Architecture of Density* in Hong Kong and on the "compressed" bodies and faces of underground travellers in the Japanese capital. (Wolf, Tokyo Compression, website and Wolf, Architecture of Density, website)

The empty city

After having seen, with the help of a few examples, a quick historical survey of the overwhelming – and overwhelmingly dense – city, let's try to do the same with the other type, i.e. of the empty city. In the above quote Makarius opposes the "claustrophobic" density of capriccios with Giorgio de Chirico's "agoraphobic" empty piazzas. However, the interest in – what's more, the focus on – the emptiness of the city and cityscape started earlier.

As forerunners, we can mention the Renaissance interest in designing and depicting – in imaginary representations – the ideal town, of which three noteworthy examples are the best known. One is in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, from around 1480-1484, based on a design by Giulio da San Gallo. Another one is in the Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino from ca. 1480-1490, with the possible attribution to several artists, including Luciano Laurana or Piero della Francesca. The third one is in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, from the 1490s, attributed to Pietro di Francesco degli

FIG. 13. Florentine painter, after design by Giulio da San Gallo: The Ideal City, ca. 1480-1484 oil and tempera on panel, 77,4 x 220 cm, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Acquired by Henry Walters with the Massarenti Collection, 1902, Accession Nr.: 37.677. CC0 Public Domain Designation – The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

Orioli or, earlier, to Francesco di Giorgio Martini. These are important examples from the history of city representations, nevertheless, we can consider them more as formal antecedents to the questions that interest us the most here, because the aim of these 15th-century pieces is the investigation of the architectural qualities of the perfect city, with buildings and public spaces designed according to the ideal perfection and principles of beauty (in this way they serve as forerunners to the debates and concepts on urban decorum, see Remesar 2016) – hence the lack of figures seems more like a consequence of this focus on the ideal architecture, and less as a conscious interest in the city's emptiness itself.

The interest in renouncing the figures and consciously stress the emptiness of the city – including being empty of figures –, and the focus on the aesthetic investigation, on the qualities and on the ambiguity of empty space increased in the 18th century. An additional curiosity is that this interest can be traced not only to a similar period but also to a very similar pictorial tradition as the capricci: in certain forms of veduta painting. Just think of such emblematic and also enigmatic paintings as Francesco Guardi's masterwork in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan, titled *Gondola in the Lagoon*, from ca. 1765. On the painting a gondola appears in the foreground while we can hardly see the town in the background, as the entire surface is practically homogenously grey, the colour of the water and sky being almost the same that makes the spotting of the line of horizon practically impossible, especially in the right segment of it where there are no buildings either. One would perhaps argue that the thematic centre of this painting is the gondola, but I think we are closer to understanding its essence if we

FIG. 14 .Eugène Atget: Quai d'Orleans, Ile Saint-Louis, 1900 albumen silver print, 21.9 × 17.6 cm, 90.XM.64.122 The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

FIG. 15. Eugène Atget: The Panthéon, 1924 gelatin silver chloride print on printing-out paper, 17.8 × 22.6 cm, 90.XM.64.34 .The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

consider the vast open area, this accentuated empty space as the real subject-matter of the work. From this it seems that Guardi had found beauty and aesthetic appeal in empty places and in creating pictures that are close to be interpreted as "empty views" just like – and in the same time as – Pannini and Huber Robert in creating densely packed spaces.

Continuing our chronological survey, and similarly as we have done above, i.e. surveying city images filled and condensed with either architectural elements, or with people, or both, also in the case of the empty city we need to enlarge the category to include cities empty either of artificial elements or of humans or both. If seen from this perspective, it can easily make us think of Eugène Atget's Parisian photographs from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The works are famous for their apparent lack of figures, and this omission of people from the otherwise busy metropolis and one of the bustling cultural capitals of the time (and, also of today) is what converts Atget's works so ghostly and uncanny. Hence this showing of the city becomes especially unexpected and surprising when Atget represents segments of the town that we are normally used to see filled with people, not only in our "everyday experience" but also for example in the Impressionist artists' works, almost contemporary to Atget, depicting among others avenues, public parks with monuments or fountains as important centre points in the urban space (Remesar 2020 – see also some of Atget's works of fountains reproduced there). Or, we can remember how Walter Benjamin famously likened them to scenes of crime:

> "A crime scene, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographic records begin to be evidence in a historical trial. This constitutes their hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of reception. Free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate to them. They unsettle the viewer; he feels challenged to find a particular way to approach them." (Benjamin 2006, 108)

The observer can arrive into a similarly "unsettling" position when viewing Giorgio de Chirico's empty piazzas depicted mainly in the 1910s in the period of his "metaphysical painting" (pittura metafisica) – see for example a representative example in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, titled The Red Tower, from 1913 (De Chirico, website). The iconography of these complex works was inspired by and contains references leading to classical mythology, pre-Socratic philosophy, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bergson. This had led to the creation of images that attempt to re-interpret the representability of reality, or, as Paolo Baldacci summarises:

> "(de Chirico) sought a new sensation, evocative but unrelated to the traditional symbol, by selecting psychological facts deposited in the consciousness in reaction to external images. What was the subject of this strange and modern

sensation? De Chirico answered: the 'non-subject'. This did not entail paintings without recognizable objects and forms, but images whose true subject would be nothing – the representation of non-sense." (Baldacci 1989, 62).

Compared to these more general investigations on the status, function and increasing limits of art however, the connection between the image and nature of the city appearing on de Chirico's metaphysical paintings and the growing feeling of unsettledness, alienation and uncosiness experienced in the modern city is in particular examined through these works. Wieland Schmied described this complex artistic and theoretical research of the painter to grasp the current situation:

"De Chirico shows the solitude of modern man in an environment that has become strange. He presents a second 'nature' in a philosophical sense: a nature created by man, and comprised of his artefacts. Human history, human endeavour, is reduced to an impenetrable world of objects. That is the irresolvable paradox of existence: it is entirely made by man, but not for his habitation. No one lives behind the arcades of de Chiricos's palazzi and the factory chimneys stand inactive. The world is nothing but an empty, ominous backdrop." (Schmied 1989, 73 – italics in the original)

Hence the uneasiness felt by the observer when examining these paintings, that represent cityscapes with otherwise aesthetically pleasant elements known from urban settings, including elegant arcades, public monuments, piazzas, fountains and Antique fragments. Uneasiness thus grows due to several features that are perceivable on the paintings: the lack of people, the hardly graspable role and function of the urban elements and most importantly the accentuation of the empty space that will become the paradoxical subject-matter of the works. In Justin McGuirk's words:

"The figures are inconsequential; it is the void that matters, and de Chirico makes the emptiness material. «The hideous discovered void has the same soulless and tranquil beauty as matter,» he wrote." (McGuirk 2020)

In the later decades of the 20th century, the worrisome emptiness continued, what's more: increased, and increased not only in its emptiness but in its worrisome nature and eeriness too. If we think of the empty cityscapes from the second half of the 20th century and in contemporary art, they are, in most cases, empty due to natural catastrophes, tragic historical events or challenging situations of global scale, including financial crisis or pandemics. Just think of the deserted Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, where the Berlin Wall ran in the middle, and that Peter Conrad described as:

"The populous junction became a mined limbo, across which only the gliding angels of Wim Wenders' film Himmel über Berlin – who vault the Wall and

wander through no man's land, undetected by the armed sentries – were able to pass." (Conrad 1999, 64 – italics in the original).

Similarly we can recall, from the decades after WWII, the empty roads in Jon Savage's *Uninhabited London* series from the 1970s, the derelict factory sites and public buildings of Detroit and the amusement park of Pripyat, both of the latter two eaten up by Nature. We may even recall the recent photos of deserted city centres of Tokyo, London, Paris or New York during the COVID-19 lockdowns that all share the same pictorial feature, i.e. that their main subject-matter is not the buildings or the urban environment, but exactly the very desertedness of the environment, the lack of life and the incongruous and disquieting stillness normally a-typical of these bustling centres.

These, and innumerous other possible examples can also be particularly helpful in the profound examination of several further aspects of the city, of city life and of experiencing the city, where the analyses of emptiness plays a crucial role, including for example urban social policy, issues of abandoned neighbourhoods and gentrification, principles and dichotomies of restoration and rebuilding, or, on a more theoretical level, also the connection between emptiness of the cityscape and memory, that are all extremely important aspects and deserve separate analyses, hence could be the subject of further papers.

What we can learn from all this so far? First, that these forms and sub-genres in the pictorial tradition are not isolated cases or separate issues, but are truly recurrent topoi, continuously re-emerging manifestations in the representations of cities. Hence, it is not only in centuries-old paintings where we can see the overwhelming or the empty cityscapes, but we can often find them in recent examples too. Second, that – due to historical circumstances and in the flow of time – even the same city can appear as exaggeratedly dense or extremely empty. What's more, this itself has two sub-categories: the place can sometimes appear as both (dense and empty) in practically the same time-period, like for example Paris in the late 19th and early 20th century being celebrated for its dynamic flow of life and shown in its crime-scene-like sterility. Or the two forms can follow each other, like in the case of those cities that were first shown, in the beginning of the 20th century, for their almost uncontrollable dynamism in the Expressionist artists' cityscapes, then the destroyed and deserted features of the after-war years became typically manifest, then the location appeared again as a bustling contemporary city in the turn of the Millennia and then again the recent pandemic brought the emptiness... Hence the appearances are not necessarily stable, but even the same place can oscillate between these two extreme points.

However, besides the above features there is one more aspect that can attract our attention. We can notice that the interest is constant and the topoi of dense and empty survive through centuries, but the "motivations", reasons and overtones in

their depiction are not the same, i.e. that *why* these special cityscapes are presented in this mode. We can trace a changing attitude towards cities, manifested through their representations, and even if the above two forms in the pictorial tradition (dense and empty) are opposing, their *direction* is similar. This "direction" seems to develop – in both cases – from an admiring and positive view, through a neutral, descriptive representation, to a significantly more ambiguous depiction and finally into a warning, anxious and frightening vision. In the case of the fully packed cities the capriccios celebrated the overwhelming beauty through the equally overwhelming accumulation of archaeological elements. Later this condensation turned into a pictorial world that seemingly still celebrated the modern city life and its flow of people, vehicles and growing buildings in the representation of the place, though it had already anticipated that desperate forms of criticism that often appear in contemporary art too. In this case then we can observe both subtler and more direct ways of making the viewers aware of the most pressing current issues in the global megapolises, including overpopulation and social-economic injustice. Looking at the similar "direction" in which the representation of empty spaces changed we can notice that through these the artists in the beginning were focusing on the beauty and poetic qualities of the location in its stillness. Later on however, around the decades at the turn of the 19th and 20th century the images of empty towns started to emanate a more dubious and even suspicious atmosphere, after which a definitely worrisome pictorial world grew out of them, in the second half of the 20th century and in contemporary art.

Based on these particularities of the tendency and direction of the two pictorial traditions, the contemporary representations of extremely packed cities and crowds in cities, just like the empty cities or emptiness in cities, are often used to highlight – and to confront the observer with – the current challenges, tensions or even catastrophes in our societies.

However, here we can find a further curiosity too. Namely, that the phenomena of density, crowd and mass, as well as of desertedness and emptiness can refer to definitely and obviously *urban* issues – and to collateral issues typically expanding in urban contexts – even without urban elements or city details actually appearing in the work or dominating the work. In other words, we have pieces of art thematising various aspects of urbanity, particularities of city life, social tensions etc. through evoking density or abandonedness, but not showing the city itself, or showing only extremely little of it, hence the piece will not look like a contemporary version of a classical "cityscape" at all.

Just to study a few examples to illustrate this, let's see some artists' works, some of which are focusing on more universal questions related to the aesthetics of the city, aiming to poetically analyse urban reality, while others are more directly examining socio-critical and political issues, even in witty and sarcastic modes.

The Berlin-based Hungarian artist Ádám Magyar has created several series of works that examine the special atmosphere of large metropolises. In his *Urban Flow*, due to the special mode of creating the image by a scanning camera that makes perceivable forms only of the moving elements, the passers-by get transformed into a constant flow of people who seem to be walking in the same direction, while the stable urban details all remain unidentifiable. (Magyar, Urban Flow, website) In his latest series however, titled *Matter*, Ádám Magyar approaches urban density in just the opposite way, by recording settings for weeks, in the same location, and where the myriad of images are projected on top of each other in a video work, hence humans will become an unidentifiable, ghostly flow and only the fix elements are legible. (Magyar, Matter, website) It is easy to see the connection between the two series and the similar attempt of artistically grasping the often frustrating density of such places, the tightly packed masses of human crowd that one encounters every day and that incentivise the urban dwellers to become anaesthetised to both the environment and the situation. Observing these series of works, we can again recall Simmel's precise description from over a century ago:

> *"The mutual reserve and indifference, and the intellectual conditions of life in large social units are never more sharply appreciated in their significance for the independence of the individual than in the dense crowds of the metropolis, because the bodily closeness and lack of space make intellectual distance really perceivable for the first time. It is obviously only the obverse of this freedom that, under certain circumstances, one never feels as lonely and as deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons."* (Simmel 1971, 334).

What we can also learn from Ádám Magyar's work however is that in our instinctive self-defence we tend to disregard such annoying instances, as well as these floating moments and seemingly unnecessary or even disturbing passages when "nothing happens", e.g. when we merely commute together with thousands of others. However, sometimes exactly these "insignificant-looking" and repetitive moments of annoying everydayness is what describes our urban experience the best. This has become particularly poignant in the recent months of lockdowns, when large part of humanity has experienced not only the lack of, but even certain form of nostalgia for, these otherwise neglected and frustrating moments.

The urban crowd – more precisely: the experience of the crowd – this time however symbolising not merely metropolitan life, but political turbulence, can also be taken inside the gallery and can fill the exhibition space, as we can observe in Jompet Kuswidananto's 2016 installation titled *After Voices*, presented in the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF), Sydney. The Indonesian artist installed dozens of pairs of worn shoes arranged in regular rows, as well as some busts of human

FIG 16. Ádám Magyar: Urban Flow, 1865 New York City, 2015, archival inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist

FIG 17. Ádám Magyar: Urban Flow, 1089 London, 2008, archival inkjet print Courtesy of the artist

FIG. 18. Ádám Magyar: Matter, New York City, 2019, Video still Courtesy of the artist

FIG. 19. Ádám Magyar: Matter, Tokyo, 2018, Video still Courtesy of the artist

FIG. 20-22. Jompet Kuswidananto, After Voices (detail), 2016 resin/latex hands, costumes, motorcycle parts, motorcycle helmets, shoes, electronics, flags, speakers, drums, video, sound Installation view, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2016 Commissioned by Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF), Sydney Photo: silversalt photography, 2016

figures floating in the space above the shoes, flags hanging from the ceiling, and these are complemented with various sources of sound, mechanically moving drums, automated hands pretend to be clapping etc. Two adjacent video works concretise the historical references and allusions to the country's recent political clashes. Nevertheless, the installation is not attempting to reconstruct a single narrative. As the artist stated in an interview:

> *"(...) After voices does not refer to one particular moment or event in time. Instead, it displays framgents of incomplete memories and different interpretations of historical events." (Rolfe 2016, 30). This aspect was also highlighted by Alia Swastika's analyses about the work: "After voices underscores the interconnectedness of outside and inside, the point where trauma and hysteria meet. A dialogue between subjective narratives is suggested rather than an account of so-called objective history. As he once said to me in conversation, Jompet is not trying to demonstrate how our history has been manipulated, but, rather, how we can find a way to investigate our own beliefs and pass our stories on to others."* (Swastika 2016, 21).

The "bodiless crowd of ghosts", as Tom Melick described in his review of the show where the installation was presented, may also refer to the convoluted psychology of

crowd, as well as to the challenges of creating an authentic work that elevates the subject to discuss the theme on a more universal level:

"Every crowd manifests a language and an energy of its own. To be in a crowd is to feel both the power and powerlessness that comes from this promise; it's to feel the contradiction of a body amongst bodies becoming both less than and more than itself. It's almost impossible for an artwork to re-create this feeling without diluting its complexity." (Melick 2016)

The dynamics of a crowd in the extreme condition of densification, for example in a political manifestation, and the psychology of these situations, again, most often happening in urban settings, is investigated in a mode that universalises it more by concretising it less geographically and historically in Cinthia Marcelle's and Tiago Mata Machado's video work titled *O Século* (The Century), from 2011 (Marcelle and Mata Machado, O Século, website). Without specifying one historical moment or referring to an actual clash, the work describes the oscillating swings of political dominance and counter-power unfolding in cities, however, this time not only the references to an actual and identifiable urban setting, but even to actual humans are missing. The approx. 10-minute single-channel video shows a segment of a wide road from above, that, in the beginning is completely empty, and in about 5 minutes it gets filled with a large amount of objects – plastic helmets, metal sticks, oil barrels, waste construction materials and domestic appliances etc. – that are thrown in from the right side, but from outside of the video frame, hence it is impossible to see who throws them and towards whom. Smoke and dust also flows in, complementing the confusion of the thrown elements that may easily remind us of the materials and tools "used" in violent political demonstrations and clashes as makeshift weapons. In the middle of the video however the "direction" changes, the frame is mirrored, and the same objects in the same order arrive from the left, again filling the originally empty urban space. Therefore, again the dichotomy of empty and dense are in the focus, in this case however in a thoughtful attempt of grasping the visual "result" and psychological "unfolding" of these situations typically developing in urban settings, without pinpointing a certain place or time – hence the general title of the work "The Century" that can however, despite the minimal(ist) or reductional visual tools employed in the work, efficiently refer to the fragility of the political systems, or, as Christina Li suggested:

"The unknown conflict – erased of any human presence and radically downsized – is evidenced by the leftovers of the clash. The work offers no solution to what appears to be an eternal loop of struggle, suggesting the need to imagine new political strategies to break the impasse of democracy." (Li 2013, 83)

As mentioned above, the physical and visual experience of density of the modern

FIG. 23. Cinthia Marcelle and Tiago Mata Machado: The Century (O Século), 2011. video, 9:37 min. Courtesy of the artists and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo

metropolises, with all the frustrating and claustrophobic emotions connected to such experiences may be aesthetically investigated for understanding the complex poetics of urban reality, and analysed for their social and political relevance, again often connected to metropolitan life where such social tensions and political clashes normally unfold. These analyses can happen also without the typical elements of cities appearing, like the urban context disappearing in complete imperceptibility in (Ádám Magyar) or appearing only as a section of an uncharacteristic street segment (Cinthia Marcelle – Tiago Mata Machado), or even just the reference to the crowd is created, in forms of shoes "standing for" people that appear in the interior of the gallery, referring to the masses of actual people in the streets (Jompet Kuswidananto).
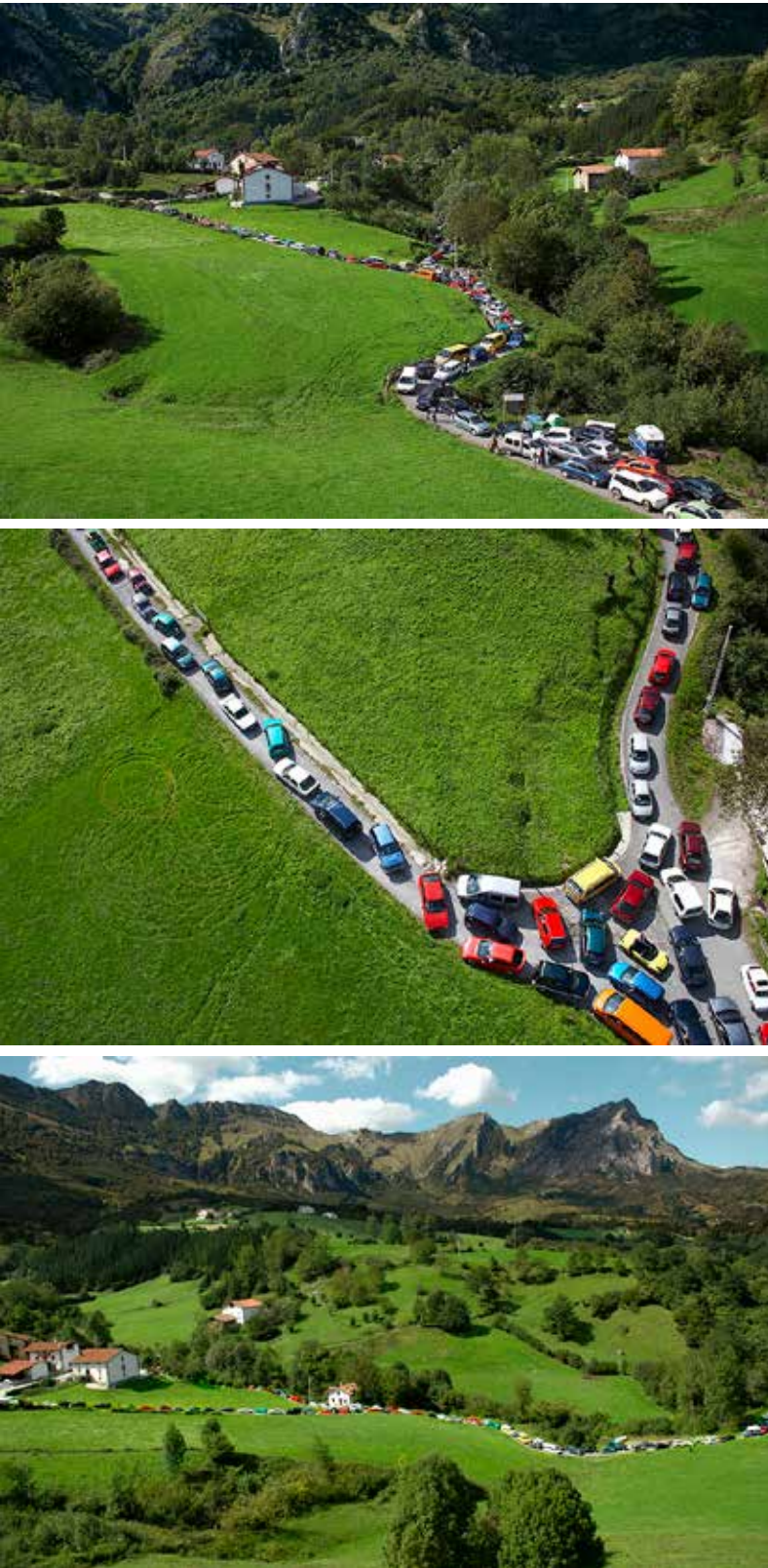
FIG. 24-26. Maider Lopez: Ataskoa (Traffic Jam), 2005.
An open call for creating a traffic jam in the mountains.
Courtesy of the artist

In my last example, the annoying urban density gets completely decontextualised as a sort of sarcastic way of criticising overpopulation and its consequence and manifestation. In the video work and photos titled *Ataskoa* (Traffic Jam, 2005) by Maider López we can see a traffic jam – again a well-known and characteristic example of metropolitan density – however, this time in an idyllic mountain scenery. (López, Ataskoa, website) A narrow road in Intza, Navarra in Spain, one that we imagine having just a few cars passing per day, gets jammed, however *artificially*, with the help of over 400 volunteers in ca. 160 cars, who participated in the project after the artist's public invitation announced in various media outlets. The Instagram-perfect location, as a typical dream-environment for urban dwellers for at least a short escape becomes the space for a vacation-killing nightmare where the frustrating density of the city is imported, thus – really like in a nightmare – haunting those who wish to leave exactly such experiences behind, at least temporarily. Even here however, the work is not merely ironically (re)creating an unusual situation, but gets more complex, as we can read in Fulya Erdemci's curatorial essay from the book of the 13th Istanbul Biennial where the work was also shown:

"Maider López's Ataskoa creates an impossible situation – a traffic jam in the mountains of Basque country – by bringing together contrasting voices, such as environmentalists who

come to the mountain to protest automotive pollution and car collectors who want to show off their antique cars." (Erdemci 2014, 101) This variety of the perspectives was also highlighted by the artist herself in a press-conference: "So, each person came to the traffic jam for different reasons, and that's what I am interested in. Normally, you go to a demonstration if you agree with an idea or ideology." (quoted in Erdemci 2016)

Having examined the main directions in the evolving of empty and dense cityscapes through the historical survey, and then the often openly critical overtones of contemporary examples investigating crowd, crowdedness and their effects, we can see that when getting inspired by and describing the oscillating dynamism of cityscapes, artists can draw our attention to a broad range of crucial issues. Cities can lure inhabitants through their financial and cultural appeal, they may offer wonderful living standards for some, and many can enjoy services, cultural infrastructure and the inspiring interwovenness of the society. However, undeniably there are serious challenges connected to modern city life – some of which had already been noticed and subtly represented by sensitive artist in the birth of megapolises in the late-19th century – and these challenges are constantly growing, in parallel with the equally constantly increasing cities themselves and with the cities' population too. Perceiving these challenges can lead to fear, but can also encourage us of collectively facing them, as also Raffaele Milani reminds us in his book on the art and aesthetics of cities:

"The anxiety of danger is meandering everywhere, it nourishes the fantasy behind which the monsters of collective panic emerge that become, at the same time, paradoxically also elements of social cohesion; what disrupts us, reunites us too." (Milani 2015, 51 – quoted in my translation from the Italian original)

We can thus learn not only about the cities, but, as we could see, also *from* the cities, through the experience and sensibility of artists investigating multiple aspects and issues around urbanity. We shall not forget however that artists are not necessarily offering actual solutions – especially not easy and cheap solutions – it is not their duty either, but the fact that they can teach us to not merely acknowledge but to have the courage to encounter the problems is already the first step of efficiently trying to resolve at least some of the most pressing issues. If we do not listen to them and do not even make this attempt, we have not learned anything from the cities' warning signs, mediated to us by the artists when showing us the oscillating dynamisms of urban reality. We have arrived to a point when the extremely dense and the manifestly empty cityscapes can both be equally alarming, based on not merely the actual experience of these states in the life of the cities – and in the life *in* the cities – but also through the visual inheritance we have accumulated through the works

of art depicting and analysing these states. Such works of art will not only elaborate our experience but even force us to encounter the problems and incentivise us to look for solutions. Therefore, it is particularly beneficial to observe such renderings of our cities and hence to raise more our awareness of the multiple global issues that are often very strongly manifested in the everyday life in large metropolises. Pieces of art thematising the extreme forms of city life can become very efficient ways of constantly reminding us of our duties of taking care of both our cities and our life. Also because, given the common phenomenon of using empty cityscapes as visible references to the results of devastating catastrophes of all kinds, we should really be careful of attentively listening to what we can learn from the densely filled vistas, if we do not want to become the last ones to see an empty piazza.

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