

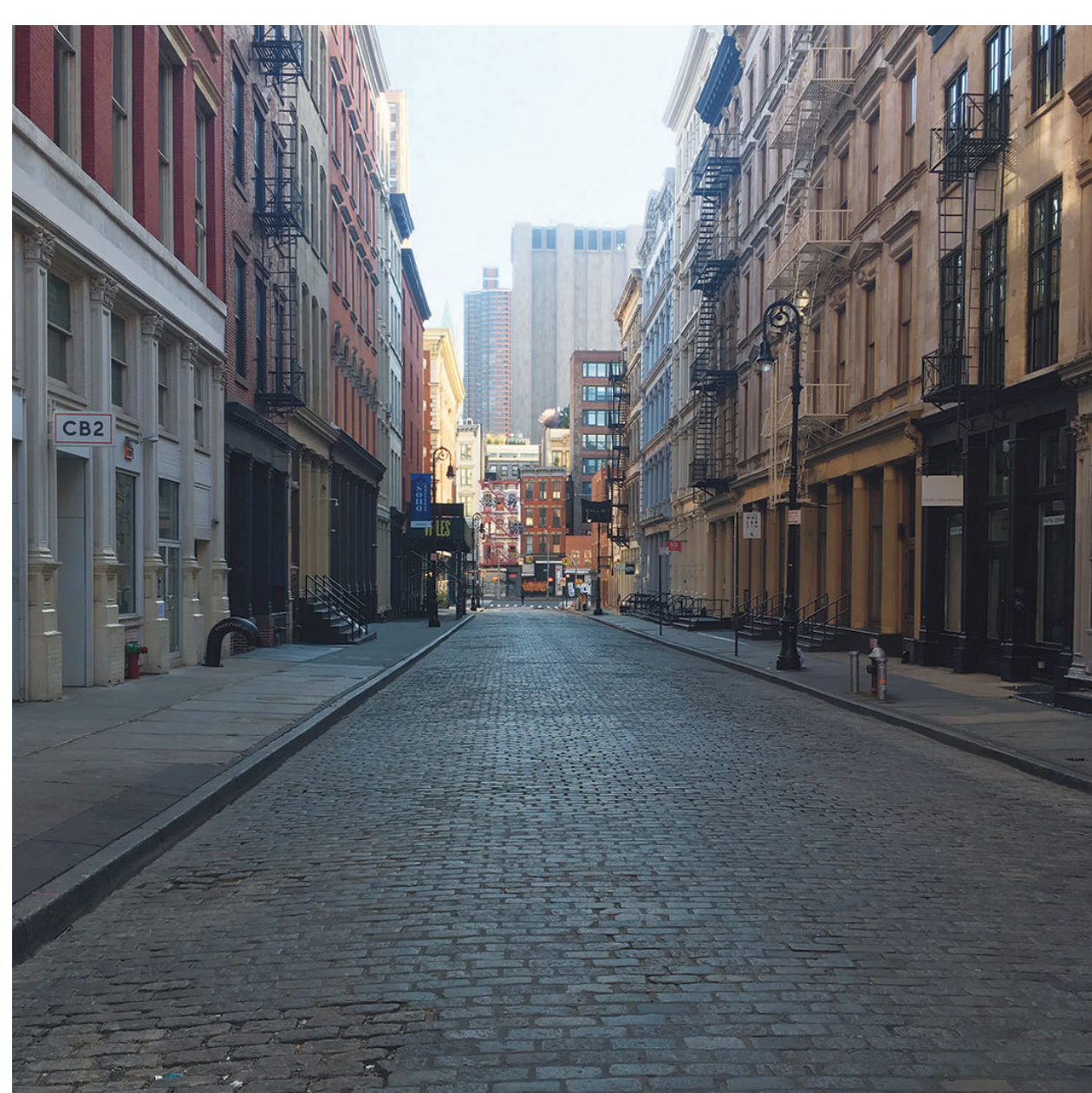
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VIRUS-TIME

John Kelsey



Mercer Street, New York, March 26, 2020. Photo: John Kelsey.

IT'S ONLY A FEW DAYS into lockdown when a friend invites you to join a Buddhist “retreat” on Zoom. Not only is this your first experience with group meditation but it’s your first time on the Zoom platform, where so much of our social life will be conjured away in the weeks to come. It’s an eye-opener: You see 179 other participants, each sitting in their own personal quarantine, organized like *Hollywood Squares* contestants within the grid of the interface, a digitally constructed hive of many solitudes streaming together in real time. You don’t even bother to meditate; you’re too mesmerized by the spectacle of humans communing in this new online here and now. Many faces are wet with tears. There are long silences, which are strange on a platform designed for social interaction: everyone just breathing separately together. The platform itself breathing. A moment made of 179 amputations synchronized on a screen and the weird feeling that we’ve all agreed to disappear here, now, together.

Later there will be Zoom funerals, too, but at this moment you’re being bombarded by emails from galleries announcing “virtual viewing rooms.” The USNS *Comfort*, a sexy floating nurse, sets sail for New York as you continue to track the contagion’s rolling apex in a city whose deserted and shuttered streets are suddenly looking a lot like 1975. Where and when is New York now? All the signs are saying it’s spring: Robins are singing and magnolias blossoming. Time stops, dilates, melts, the hours smearing into one shapeless blur. The first week feels so slow, the next very fast. You keep checking your phone to know what day it is.

In his text “Plot Economics,” published at the beginning of March, Venkatesh Rao writes that “log-level” consciousness is a sure sign of global narrative collapse. When we lose the illusion of a shared thread, we find ourselves reduced to the basic math of a discontinuous, counted-out reality: twenty seconds for washing hands, how many meals can be stretched out of one sack of rice, today’s death toll. We take in the news minute by minute, tweet by tweet, as our sense of human agency bleeds out in a temporality that’s not only plotless but has no end in sight. After only two weeks of this, we acknowledge a shared feeling that things will be very different “on the other side,” but in what way? Can there even be another side?

You read the latest texts by Agamben, Žižek, Bifo, and others, beginning to suspect that Covid-19 is every boomer intellectual’s secret wish come true: If only theory could contaminate and sweep us up like a virus. If only discourse could capture the psychedelic experience of virus-time, where the global disruption of everything seems to play back every fantasy of a general strike. Meanwhile, the human body and brain surrender to an invisible and unconscious hyperobject that’s both inside and outside of us, making us act and feel in ways we never saw coming.

But the virus reveals the strangeness that was already here before the outbreak and the lockdown. You had sensed it only vaguely, but now it’s at the epicenter of your experience, here in the ghost city, and there’s plenty of time to face it. Everything is so fractal and so global at once. The Zoom retreat was the first clear image of this: 179 time fragments concatenated as one distributed “now.” We were already well on our way to becoming these splintered and recombinant solitudes when the coronavirus swept through and devastated our productive networks. Like neoliberalism, the virus is now everywhere: a strange new platform where the ones who can afford to do so disappear and do weird time.

It’s amazing how quickly we all agreed to vanish ourselves within the paradoxical solidarity of mutual avoidance.

Catherine Malabou writes about the necessity of organizing one’s own quarantine within the quarantine, an inner world sheltered from the general situation of social distancing: a state of suspension within the state of exception. Bifo talks about “psycho-deflation” and the desire to reboot experience from a place of exhaustion and surrender. Every evening at 7 PM on the dot your neighbors applaud and bang pots and pans in their windows for a few minutes, making a sonic image of an otherwise disappeared society. In a way, we were already gone. And it’s amazing how quickly we all agreed to vanish ourselves within the paradoxical solidarity of mutual avoidance. When we finally reemerge, will we be ready to collectively address the structural causes of this man-made disaster?

The virus reveals how we were no longer in control of our lives, even before things went out of control. On the other side of this, we’ll be even deeper in debt, collectively weaker, sicker, and even more plugged into Amazon’s and Facebook’s behavioral modification regimes (and 5G). It’s cool how Bifo is still able to hallucinate the possibility of communism under such conditions, now when we’re no longer even able to gather in public. Like the dolphins that are supposedly taking back the canals of Venice. What the virus reveals is the sickness that is finance capitalism, which serves only the few who continue to profit from disasters like this. It exposes the fact that the real disaster is not the virus.

John Kelsey is a contributing editor of Artforum.

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