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idea journal

(extra) ordinary interiors:
practising critical reflection

vol. 18, no. 01

2021

the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association



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practising critical reflection**

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interior architecture educators association**

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cover image

Lying motionless, listless. Consuming time; being present, each moment folds into another. Surfaces becoming expanses of inflections of hue. Normality expands into a stream of observing luminosity. Still image from video by Chora Carleton, 2021.

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this issue's provocation

(Extra) Ordinary Interiors calls for contributions from academics, research students and practitioners that demonstrate contemporary modes of criticality and reflection on specific interior environments in ways that expand upon that which is ordinary (of the everyday, common, banal, or taken for granted).

This theme has two agendas: First, the desire to amplify critical reflection as a key practice of the disciplines associated with this journal's readership. In short, to prompt interior designers, interior architects, and spatial designers to be more proactive and experimental in asserting their specialist knowledge and expertise as critical commentary. This asks authors to reconsider the role of critique and criticism in their scholarly and creative works, or, to demonstrate how to reflect critically upon a design and to locate the design's relation to material, political, social, cultural, historical and geographical concerns. Such an enterprise may reveal whether models of criticality centred on judgement, authority and historicism are relevant, constructive, insightful or generative, or, as Bruno Latour poses, have they 'run out of steam'?⁰¹ This exercise may prompt some to revisit key thinkers who pose new discursive, visual and temporal models for critical practice in this recent age of criticality. We draw your attention to *Critical Spatial Practice* by Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen, which asks for thinking "about 'space' without necessarily intervening in it physically, but trying to sensitise, promote, develop and foster an attitude towards contemporary spatial production, its triggers, driving forces, effects and affects... [to] speculate on the modalities of production and potential benefits of the role of 'the outsider.'"⁰²

We also look to Jane Rendell's introduction to *Critical Architecture*, which asserts that criticism and design are linked together by virtue of their shared interests in invoking social change.⁰³ Whether it takes written, built or speculative form, criticism is an action, which according to Roland Barthes, is a calling into crisis, a moment where existing definitions, disciplinary boundaries and assumptions about normativity are put into question.⁰⁴

The second agenda of this journal issue takes heed of the ordinary, and how, in its intense observation, what is normal or often taken for granted exceeds itself, becomes extra or more ordinary. Everyday spaces such as supermarkets, service stations, laundry mats, hardware stores, parks and four-way street intersections, and banal gestures such as washing the dishes, walking the dog or street sweeping become subject to critical scrutiny and introspection. Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage Around My Room*, Julio Cortázar's *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* are but a few historic examples that draw out critical depth and aesthetic meaning about ordinary interiors, interiors understood in the most liberal sense.⁰⁵ What new actions to the crisis of critical commentary lurk restlessly in ordinary interiors?

While a nostalgic or romantic response to this journal's theme may dwell on interior situations with no special or distinctive features, or explore the persistence and abundance of ordinary interiors, even commonplace spaces, noticed or not, it can not be denied that recent pandemic events world-wide have flung the many facets of everyday life into crisis, including long-standing notions of proximity, intimacy, hapticity, privacy, freedom and rights to access 'essential' services. For many, the world has become home and home has become an internal world, an interior contaminated or augmented by virtual technologies serving as lifelines to a previous highly social and diversified lifestyle. As the interior of one's domestic space finds coincidence with one's isolation bubble, many are finding that interiority and interiors are conflating to take on new meaning, new function, and new configuration. Ordinary scenes of dead flies on windowsills, sun rays pointing to poor house-keeping habits, mounting bags of uncollected rubbish and recycling, shuffling of mattresses, improvised work surfaces, revised chores rubrics, commandeering of the bathroom, and the commodity of headphones and adapters highlight an intensified condition.

Authors are prompted to practice a form of critical reflection on one (extra) ordinary interior.

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open letter as reparative interior: expanding, making, participating

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abstract

Framing the open letter as an expanded interior-in-the-making, this visual essay documents a participatory experiment that took place between the cities of Sheffield (UK) and Gothenburg (SE). The experiment, as one of critical spatial practice, attempted to foster a temporal atmosphere of reparation which aims to counter the global condition of paranoia produced by the COVID-19 pandemic. This essay articulates the visual design of the experiment, the theoretical principles which underpin it, and the significance of critical reflection in the process. The experiment is intentionally left inconclusive, establishing an open networked approach towards publishing as a way of making public, and subsequently allowing the authors to invite readers to contribute to future iterations. As a way of rethinking the visual essay form, the essay deliberately blurs the line between image and text and their relation with the spatial structure of the page.

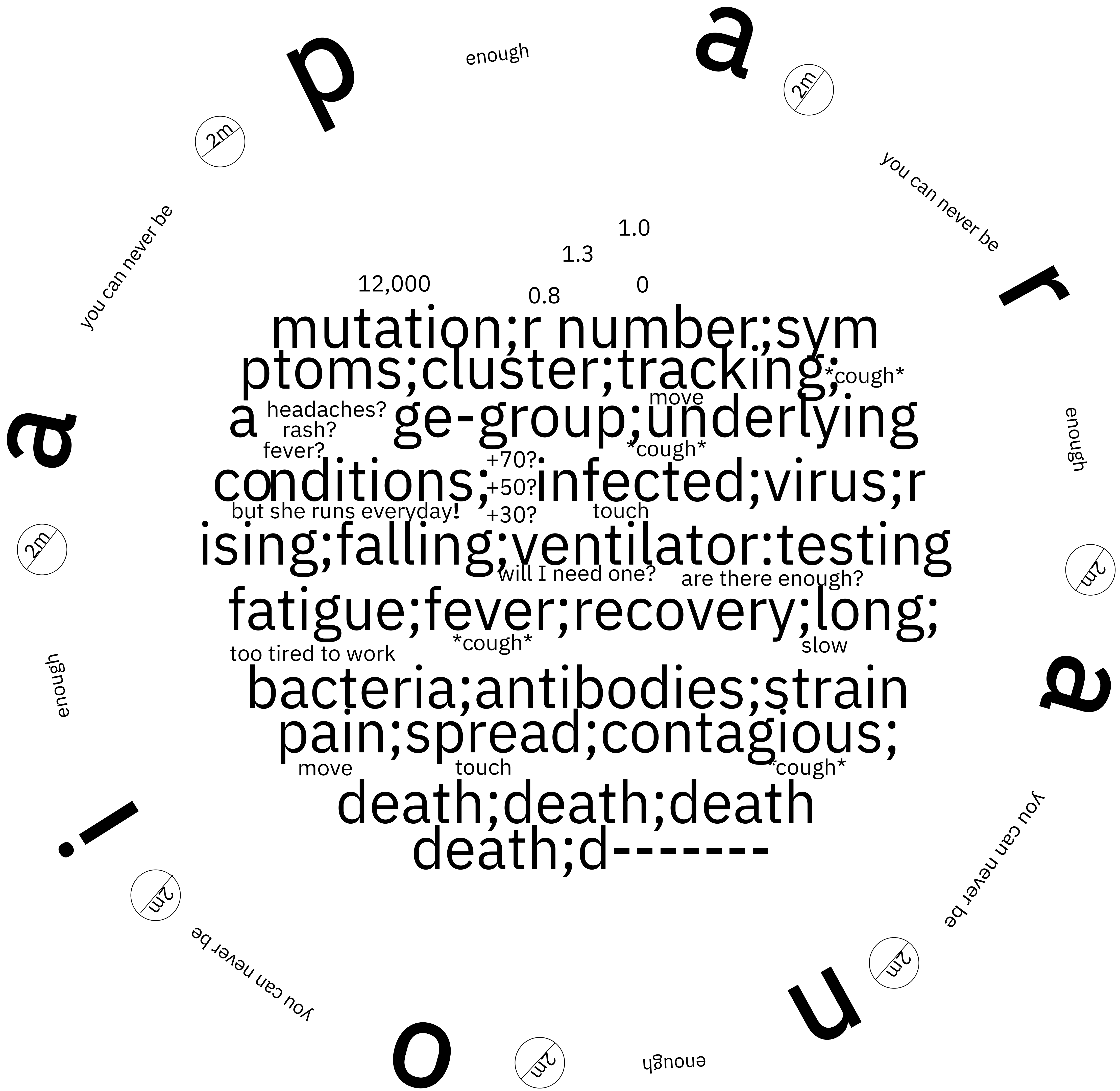
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interiority, public, participation, open letter, publishing, critical spatial practice

Open Letter as Reparative Interior: expanding making, participating



Cathryn Klasto

Jonathan Orlek

T h e
c o r o n a
v i r u s
p a n d e m i c
l i k e

countless global crises before,

has generated and exposed us to collective and self-accelerating paranoia. Paranoia, as an affective negative force masquerading as truth,⁰¹ is a consistent recurring exposure to pain. It's as if every time we read about rising infections and daily death tolls we lightly prick our skin with a needle; one prick barely leaves a mark but the repetition soon leaves us struggling to deal with our open wounds. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has reminded us that the fundamental reason paranoia is an effective way of seeking, finding and organising knowledge;⁰² you can never be paranoid enough;⁰³ our desire for knowing will never be satisfied and as a result, we establish an inescapable circularity in both our thinking and our everyday practices. While Sedgwick engaged paranoia in relation to queer literary manifestations, her psychoanalytic writing on the topic directs us to question our complacency in regard to what knowledge does rather than solely what it is.⁰⁴ To put this into our current pandemic moment, instead of passively accepting our paranoid positions, positions in which we accumulate and emotionally store gloom-ridden data, we should consider what this knowledge and the energy it holds is actually doing for us. To not question this is not only to remain naïve but also to succumb to the notion that tomorrow cannot be allowed to differ from today.⁰⁵ Sedgwick suggests that in order to move away from paranoid reading as a default position, which only seeks to produce symmetrical relations and epistemologies,⁰⁶ we must surrender ourselves to the possibility of hope. The energy of hope does not cast aside the anxiety and trauma produced by paranoia, but rather views its horror-soaked by products as stimuli for thinking otherwise, for cementing the realisation that the future can take a somewhat different path.⁰⁷ Sedgwick deems this hopeful position a reparative position, an affective position in which we can extract sustenance from pain and seek to organise our fragmentary experiences in a way which fills us not only with possibility for what could be, but also with temporary relief from the

d i f f i c u l t i e s ,

of right now.

We began our thinking for this visual essay by initiating a series of conversations around what kind of interior could critically and visually offer itself up to a reparative position in this particular pandemic moment. This interior needed to allow for us to communicate across the confines of our spatial positionings, as we as co-authors were not only located in different geographies but also operating within very different social and governmental responses to the pandemic.

Aligning with architectural scholar Jane Rendell's original framing of critical spatial practice, there was also a desire to locate a hopeful interior, one which would allow us to experimentally resist the increasing isolation made protrusive through pandemic restrictions but nonetheless dictated by the social and spatial order of neoliberal capitalism. **08**

p we chose the form of an open letter to explore how we might connect and relate reparatively in this current extraordinary moment. Open letters are usually used as a last resort; a way of seeking change by exposing and articulating a consolidated position to as wide an audience as possible. Could an open letter also be used in more open-ended ways, as a starting point you can never be

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e enough

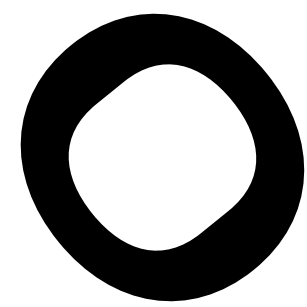
you can never be

In conjunction with political theorist Oliver Marchart's proposition that a public sphere

opens up

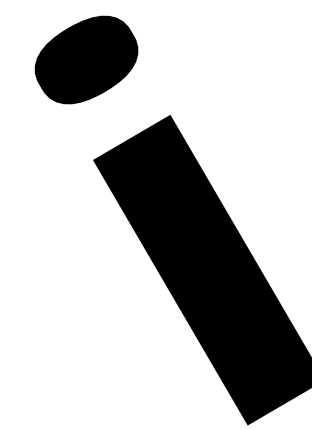
'when the routines, institutions, and identities of our social world are touched by antagonism,'⁰⁹ we also frame the open letter interior as a public in-the-making. The pandemic, as an actively hostile force, has shifted, threatened and terminated our everyday capacity to maintain the social connections which are housed within public interiors. This globalised communicatory

n



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for constructing tomorrow otherwise by connecting as yet-unknown fragmentary experiences. You can never be

Doing so positions the open letter as an interior in-the-making; or a threshold space for extraordinary times.

encourages us to co-create alternative configurations of public interior space where these interactions can continue to take form.

The word 'glitch', as curator Legacy Russell emphasises, has active etymological roots, meaning that it can mobilise as a generative error, a participatory movement to function otherwise.¹⁰ As such, we wanted to devise an experiment which invited people to participate in the collective glitching of the open letter as a public interior space. In doing this, we hoped to spatialise an alliance of relations which would produce an atmosphere of reparation.

As a way of positioning our open letter as an

expanded interior, an interior which has

the capacity to move beyond linear and binary

communication, we chose to

theoretically construct it and visually represent it as a network.

In doing this, the letter interior breaks free from the confines of the envelope as an enclosed and habitable space and opens itself up to an ecology of voices and experiences.

Our letter opened the possibility for multiple voices to emerge, rather than requiring consensus around a single statement, thus questioning how different voices and languages could be appropriately negotiated and hosted. The inclusion of text in both Swedish and English is one response to multivocality. We also hoped that this could be developed by inviting multiple types of response, from the abstract to the specific.

we were interested in how the project could be generative of hybrid voices, by connecting partial perspectives and relays in new and unanticipated ways.

To emphasise the letter interior

as a multivocal communication network, we invited people to respond to our letter by either writing directly to us or by writing to a stranger situated in either of the two cities. Our aim was to showcase the collective set of letters on a website (accessed via a QR code) which would function as a host for the reparative atmosphere, allowing people to view each letter and choose to respond directly to one or to a combination.

In this sense the open letter was positioned as a central node relaying information back and forth, generating the creation of new letter interiors across multiple spaces and times.

As networks have the capacity to adapt and self-configure,¹² we wanted to design our open letter as a template which could be used by those who wanted to respond.

In designing the letter as a template, we chose to create an overlay image of the tram networks of Sheffield and Gothenburg which would function as the structural and spatial foundation. Not only do these two tram networks connect the urban public spaces within both cities, but in overlaying them, they become interconnected, which mirrored our construction of the letter as an

e x p a n d e d
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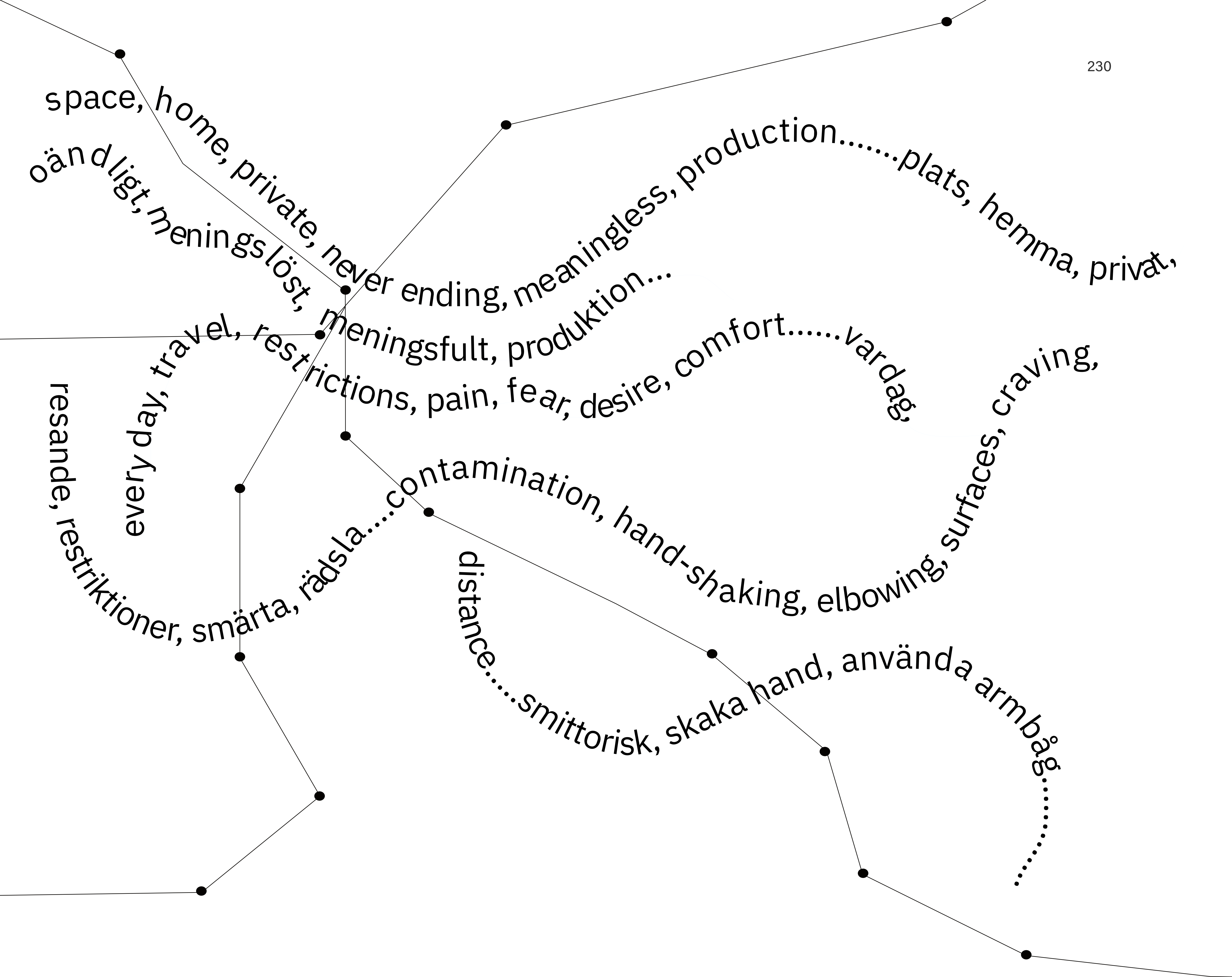
Many open letters identify key areas of concern to which they seek responses; in keeping with this, we chose three words to embed within the tram networked structure which would define the parameters of the response and establish shared points of reflection. Move, Touch, Work, were chosen as ordinary words which have suddenly become (extra)ordinary. Each word has generated a set of changes to the way in which we engage with space and navigate cities in a pandemic.

work
arbeta

move
flytta

touch
röra

We have been encouraged to restrict use of public transport and commute only when necessary. We have been working from home where possible. Encountering objects outside of our homes, such as traffic crossing buttons, handrails, door handles which we previously touched without thinking, now results in the use of elbows, pulling up of sleeves, changing paths – as well, now, the ubiquitous use of hand sanitiser.



These words are also attached to more conceptual and philosophical ideas in relation to the construction of (extra) ordinary interiors: we might think about movement as ‘incipient action,’¹³ consider how work is taken home,¹⁴ and link touch to broader affections,¹⁵ to name a few. As a result of this layered complexity, we offered lines, headings and incidental blank space as an invitation for readers to connect to, latch onto, extend, add to, and fill in. Abstracted and overlaid graphics of the tram networks acted as a pseudo grid system, creating patches to fill with text or lines to spill along and across. It was our hope that through the gathering of responses, we would follow these words around¹⁶ to make visible how our collective experiences of these words transcend the social, cultural, linguistic and spatial boundaries of location.

Another critical consideration when designing the template was our use of scale. As we wanted to challenge expectations as to how an open letter interior could be received, we chose to mobilise three differing scales and subsequent forms to generate three mechanisms of distribution. These three scales were selected in conjunction with our three words, Move, Touch, Work; to emulate Move we chose to engage the movement of the tram lines. We identified the six interconnecting

to the city. To mirror their casual frequency, we selected the form of a sticker with a small scale of 5x5cm. The sticker design detailed the tram network image, the three words in both languages and the QR code to access the website. As the use of QR codes has steadily increased during the pandemic (an example being the UK's track and trace system), we wanted to tap into that established connection point as a way of safely sharing our letter interior. As well as this, using a QR which linked directly to the website which hosted our letter and downloadable templates for others to use, was a way of physical and digital spaces touching. This interaction was a way of acknowledging that the analogue

locations which correlated to physical tram stops within both urban networks as sites to issue the letter. From a practical perspective, this was our largest scale (A2 poster) as it allowed people to stop and read the poster while waiting for a tram (a respite from movement) and it did not require them to touch anything (i.e., picking up a physical letter) making it a safer form to occupy public space during the current times. For the word Touch, we wanted our open letter interior to interact with, as noted earlier, everyday objects which have now gained (extra) ordinary status through ingraining the fear of touch. This included objects with buttons, handles, lids, rails, seats – a plethora of material surfaces which aid our access

letter will likely struggle to support itself without a digital companion, particularly within a time of (extra) ordinary digital reliance. During our own movement of placing the posters at the six tram stops, we left stickers when we ourselves encountered these sites of touch. Finally, to engage the word Work, we printed the open letter on a standard letter A4 scale and left it along with blank A4 templates at our places of work.

Spring Lane
Vasaplatsen

Infirmary Rd
Stenpiren

Valley Entertainment
Centralstationen

Ponds Forge
Grönsaktorget

Crystal Peak
Getebergsäng

Gleadless Townend
Chalmers

Up until now, the focus of this visual essay has been deliberately placed on the design and the motivations behind the experiment rather than on the outcomes. Subsequently, this point in the essay marks a shift, as shortly after the launch of the experiment, we began critically reflecting on

One aspect of concern relates to how we had framed the role of time. Our initial invitation placed a time limit of one month for participation; this decision resulted in us accidentally failing at creating the atmospheric conditions for reparation, as we began to simulate a position of paranoia through worrying about not getting 'enough' letter responses. This made us aware of two things, firstly, that there was a need for us to more fully interrogate and focus our participatory aim for the experiment, and secondly, that we had made the assumption that people would be ready to seek out reparation when they were still in the midst of encountering the difficulties generated by paranoid pandemic living. In some ways, by seeking to expand the open letter interior, we mistakenly disallowed for the retention of its long established parameters, namely, that letter exchange is built on a foundation of slowness; the passing of time allows for reflection, for the gathering of thoughts, for experiences to be first lived and later retold. Another concern was that we had fallen short of our initial aim to design an open letter template which, through integrating the conceptualisation of the expanded and networked interior, would allow others to reuse the template in other contexts. By building the structure of the template out of the tram networks operating with Sheffield and Gothenburg, the template embedded site specificity which in turn, denied the potential for transversability. A third concern was how we had constructed the use of the website. By framing it as a space to publish the letters received, it functioned as a static site of publicness which disallowed for continual critical reflection of the letters through iterative processes of locating multiple forms and sites of publishing.

In response to this awareness and critical reflection, we have chosen to mobilise this visual essay as an extension and reworking of our initial invitation. It seems particularly fitting that we occupy this open-access space as an interior networked site in this way. In blurring distinctions between the publishing and practising of our research, we hope to develop an understanding of critical reflection as an ongoing process, avoiding before/after binaries in relation to our initial action of pasting posters and stickers. As a consequence, the project embraces ‘performative orientations to knowledge’¹⁷ and seeks to collaboratively bring into existence the (yet to be made) interior worlds of our research. We invite readers to enter into a further iteration of the experiment;

Dear Reader,

In 2002, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick thought about our collective habit of ‘paranoid reading’. This is reading by which we expose ourselves repeatedly to pain by, for example, reading Donald Trump’s tweets or a news article about Brexit, the European migrant crisis, police brutality, the death of the planet (the list goes on). The latest target of our paranoid reading is coronavirus; we find ourselves checking death rates and new infection clusters in an attempt to consume everything there is to know about how the virus attacks us.

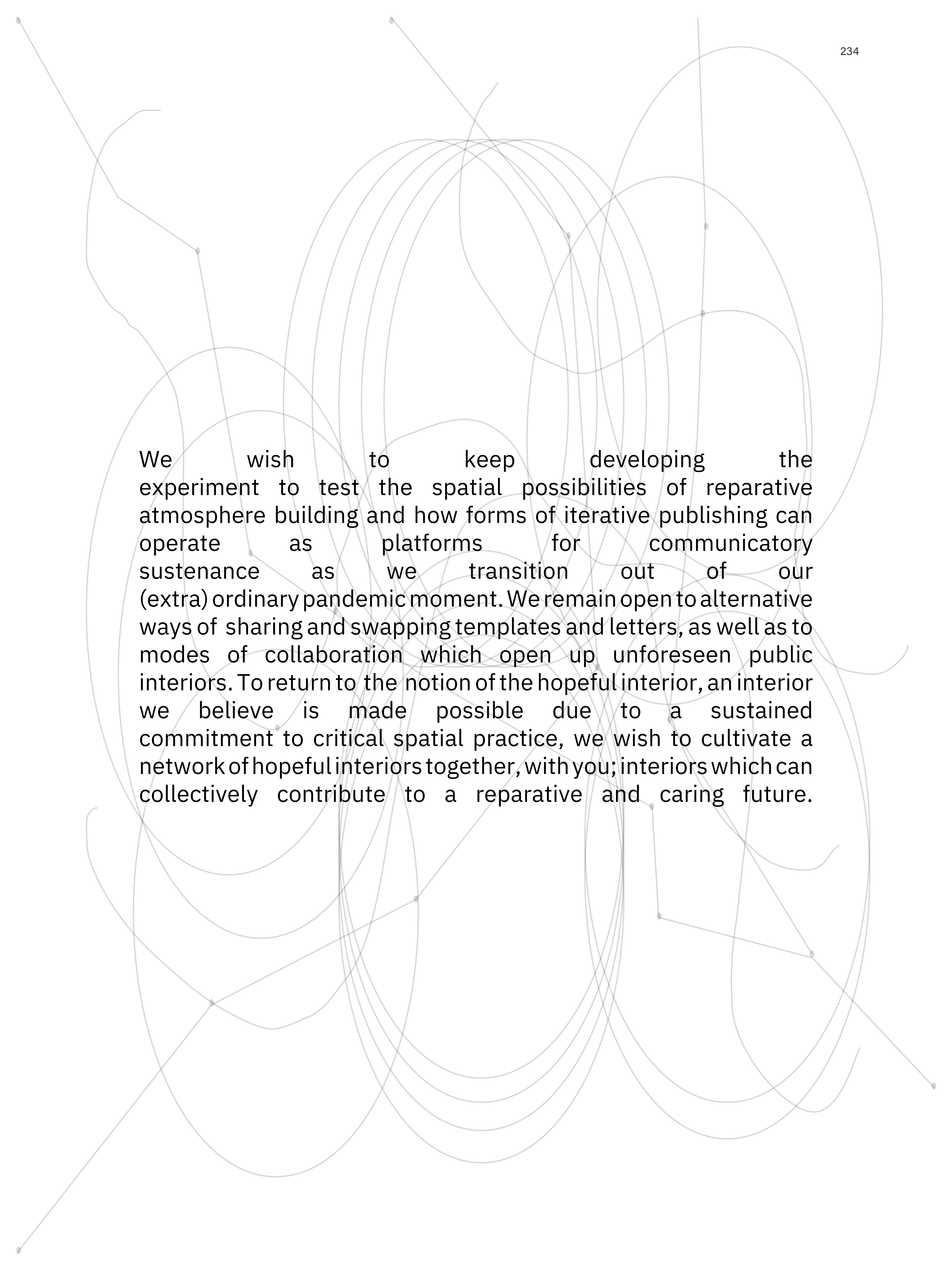
to offer communicatory sustenance which will feed the continued development of a platform(s)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick thought that paranoid reading was not the best way of dealing with a crisis, in fact she proposed that instead, we read reparatively as a way of resisting. This does not mean ignoring the bad and the ugly, but instead it asks us to place our energy and focus into finding pleasure instead of drowning in pain.

which can host this reparative network of open letters.

[We] want to experiment with reading reparatively together through letter writing. [...]

[We invite you to write a letter](#) - to us, to a stranger, or to both, [...] about, with or in reference to, three ordinary words that have suddenly become (extra) ordinary: move, work and touch.



We wish to keep developing the experiment to test the spatial possibilities of reparative atmosphere building and how forms of iterative publishing can operate as platforms for communicatory sustenance as we transition out of our (extra) ordinary pandemic moment. We remain open to alternative ways of sharing and swapping templates and letters, as well as to modes of collaboration which open up unforeseen public interiors. To return to the notion of the hopeful interior, an interior we believe is made possible due to a sustained commitment to critical spatial practice, we wish to cultivate a network of hopeful interiors together, with you; interiors which can collectively contribute to a reparative and caring future.

author biographies

Cathryn Klasto is a transdisciplinary scholar and pedagogist who occupies the intersection of art, spatial practice, design and philosophy. Currently a lecturer in Fine Art at HDK-Valand, University of Gothenburg, her current subjects of enquiry include mobilising network theory as spatial practice, engaging meta-ethics within artistic modes of production and post-production, citational practice, spatial writing, and xenofeminist spatialities.

Jonathan Orlek is an Associate Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University, interested in the intersections between art, architecture and ethnographic research. He has completed a collaborative PhD between East Street Arts and the University of Huddersfield, which investigated artist-led housing as a critical spatial practice. He is also a director of *Studio Polpo*, a socially engaged architecture collective based in Sheffield.

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notes

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