

Ethnographies in Times of Corona Virus

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Public Places in time of Corona crisis



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During the Corona crisis, we as inhabitants of Switzerland were literally called to „stay home“. This meant that we had to reduce our social contacts to a minimum and that any gathering of people was prohibited. Public space is the most important place for social interaction. It is a place of gathering and social exchanges. But what does a space feel like when there are no social interactions, when it is empty?

How was public space experienced during the 2020 corona crisis?

I conducted a visual journal through the public spaces of Sempach my hometown. I chose to use a phenomenological approach to capture the perception I had of the places I visited. Phenomenology takes into account the feelings you have when you are in a place. I chose this subjective approach because it allowed me to convey much more about the place on a personal level to the reader than a more objective approach would.

During the corona crisis I spent my time with my partner in Sempach, a small town near Lucerne. Since I have started my studies in Zurich three years ago, I have only been in Sempach for a few days to see and spend time with my family and friends. Because of an exchange semester in Holland, I didn't spend last semester in Switzerland and Sempach. Although the village is still very important to me, I don't spend much time there anymore. It is the place where I grew up and where I spent all my childhood and youth. Because of the size of the town, the social environment there is almost familiar and much less distant than in a city like Zurich. Since the corona pandemic, I have been staying there. I have been spending most of the time at home in my rooms and working for my studies or have been visiting friends. I have been outdoors only for sports and rarely met familiar faces in the village, as many of them have been following the rules and have kept the social encounters to a minimum.

I see my analysis of the current situation as a personal journey of discovery through my town and photographed places where I most felt the surrealism of emptiness. These are places that in my childhood often had a great significance such as my school or the football field. In order to convey these feelings to the reader, I commented on the pictures with the memories that I associated with these places.

Maurice Halbwachs said in his essay on collective memory (1950) that „our physical environment bears our and the imprint of others“. By commenting on the pictures with my personal memories about them and the experiences that I felt while taking them, I tried to express the intangible dimensions (symbolic, emotional, etc.) that are bound to these places. By comparing these memories with the situation captured in the photographs, I wanted to explore how public spaces are experienced in time of corona crisis. I thus went on a journey photographing places of my memories that I organized around five series exemplifying: public squares, public buildings, schools infrastructures, Sport infrastructures facilities and park.

PUBLIC SQUARES



This place, situated in front of the church, has changed a lot in the last 10 years. I often remember it as it was before. The ground is paved and around the monument there is a big garden with colored flowers. This is also the place for many big events within the village, e.g. for religious big events but also for the city festival. I remember how we used to climb up the monument and try to look beyond the crowd. Normally it is a place full of people and social interaction. Now when I am standing there, the place seems very cold and hard to me. I wonder how everything here is made of stone and how the monument stands alone. There is no music that comes out from the church, no people that stay here. I feel a great unreality and almost a feeling of uneasiness in this place. But I also realize the architectural beauty of the church.



Pictures by Silvan Muff

PUBLIC BUILDINGS



Picture by Silvan Muff



The town hall in Sempach is a place where many cultural events take place. Traditional festivals but also weddings have this place as a starting point.

I realize the beauty of these buildings and nevertheless it feels strange to see a building made for the people so deserted. Instead of human voices, I hear the water pebble shaking in the well and for the first time I look at the sculpture more closely. I had never taken the time to look at it.

SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURES



Picture by Silvan Muff



For six years I attended primary school in this place. I remember my classmates, the teaching, the lessons and the breaks in the playground. I vaguely remember the first day of school, when our parents accompanied us and said goodbye in front of this entrance. I remember the first classroom and the view from my seat to the playground.

I see how the light shines through the trees and realize how steep the slope is here. The bike rack on the left side looks completely out of place without the bikes and I remember the ringing of the school bell. The place is very silent.

SPORT INFRASTRUCTURES



Picture by Silvan Muff



I spent a lot of time on the football pitch in my youth. Until the start of my studies I trained there several times a week and also played games. I associated the place with a lot of experiences with my teammates of the respective age groups. But I also associated it with training in any weather, sun, rain or snow. I always remember this place as hectic and never as quiet and calm. **Now in a time when no football can be played,** I notice the size of this field. **Never before have I seen this place so deserted.** There are the soccer balls, the lines that border the field and much more.

PARK



Picture by Silvan Muff



When I think of the park by the lake, I think of people who swim, fish and enjoy the weather along the lakeside path. Rarely is there a free seat on a bench and you can hear the rustle of the gravel from people passing by.

I feel the symbolic power that this shield has. One little text on a poster has the power to change an entire place's atmosphere. Once again, the whole situation seems very surreal to me. It's hard to imagine that in this beautiful place, there are no people.

Looking at these places, Maurice Halbwachs' quote comes to full meanings in every respect. While I was standing in these different places, the memory of what I used to do became very present. But as the image of the current situation did not correspond to these memories, I felt a strange sense of displacement and surrealism.

By photographing and analyzing these different places, I noticed how on a very personal level a change in my perception occurred. I often perceived architecture and saw buildings as objects that would together form a spatial ensemble. The reason for this, on the one hand, is the absence of people, and, on the other hand, also has to do with my studies of architecture. Over the last three years, I have worked on design projects mainly in Zurich and other cities, but I have rarely analyzed the architecture of my hometown. By taking photographs, I took the time to visit places of my town and actually look at them. When I take a photograph, I pause for a moment, look at the place on its own and capture the moment. Before that, I have rarely been alone in these places and looked at them from a standing still point. Architecture, which has often been the background for social events, was now coming to the forefront. These places reminded me of the Chirico's paintings. They are deserted, and it is only the agglomeration of different architectures elements that characterizes the place.

I have based my work on a phenomenological approach and the experiences I felt in the respective locations I visited. In order to visually convey the surrealistic atmosphere to the reader, I tried to express this mood by associating it to a photo-collage. It is a collage of Giorgio de Chirico's „L'enigma di una gironata“ from 1914 and elements from the pictures of my visual journal. The deserted atmosphere and the composition of individual elements resemble the composition of De Chirico's pictures and describe my feeling of public places during the Corona crisis. I am sure that my memories of these places have now been complemented with another layer. Not only do I see them always full of people, but when I think of them in this particular period, I also remember the architecture, the colors and many other details that I would never have noticed if I had never seen them without people. At this level of sensitivity, I have now acquired a completely different perception of place. One interacts with the place in a different way when there are no people around. One hears other sounds and perceives other smells. I see this experience as very enriching and I believe that I will continue to perceive place differently in the future.

This work was conducted during a class Sociology of Memories at ETH Zurich in the Spring semester 2020.



PhotoCollage by Silvan Muff with the painting of Girogo de Chirico's „L'enigma di una gironata“ from 1914