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ON THE EDGE WITH EVERYDAY LIFE. THE MOTIF OF A WINDOW IN THE CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC

Case study

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Abstract

During the national quarantine and isolation symptomatic of the coronavirus epidemic, the window became the only direct link between people locked in their homes and the outside world. This motif, eagerly taken up to express a longing for lost everyday life, has also become a form of exchange for a new community in crisis. The analysis of the “Sketch your window” action initiated by Gabrielle Thierry shows the relevance of art in times of crisis, its therapeutic value and the possibilities of expressing experiences. The works created during this period treat the motif of the window in a variety of ways, showing the multiplicity of emotions and strategies for coping with the crisis. The window sometimes appears as an “impassable border”, and sometimes we do not even notice its presence. However, all these works have in common is sensible loneliness.

Keywords

social media, art in the coronavirus era, window motif, window in art, draw your window, Covid-19, isolation, national quarantine

Introduction

The years 2020-2021 are also marked in arts by a coronavirus epidemic. Long-term national quarantine and social isolation have led to a surge in the role of social media in shaping the artistic landscape and an almost complete transfer of creative life to virtual reality. It is not only artists who have taken their activities online, such as organising concerts through social media. According to a report published by the UN in May 2020, more than 85,000 museums have had to suspend their activities for the duration of the national quarantine¹. Numerous museums and cultural institutions made their collections available online via virtual tours and organised temporary exhibitions. Events such as the Virtual Night of the Museums 2021 organised by the National Museum in Wrocław also sparked the considerable interest of the public. The cultural sector, particularly affected by the crisis, has made an effort to 'maintain' contact with regular audiences while trying to attract new audiences.

A window, man's only link with the outside world during isolation, becomes a motif eagerly used by artists. It is an expression of longing for the outside world and the lost normality and routine of everyday life associated with the sanitary crisis. As Anselm Haverkamp points out, it is impossible to analyse representations of interiors without an external context. The interior exists only in relation to external to it, and the two concepts remain complementary to each other, complementing each other. As the author of *In/Doors: The Dialectic of Inside and Outside*, points out, the view to which windows and doors open is historically determined. Nature in urban space bears the hallmarks of a public sphere", and the city, unlike landscape, remains limited². During the national quarantine, the window was also a literal meeting place and social interaction. Residents often organised various social events such as quizzes, competitions, concerts and the popular applause for medical staff. All these activities were designed to meet the need for socialisation, social interaction and community building.

Historical outline

The window motif has been known in the history of art for centuries. As early as the 4th century BC, it was used to decorate vases found in southern Italy. Also worth mentioning are the popular 15th-century depictions of saints, including the Virgin Mary, against the opening landscape behind them, and the numerous 17th-century depictions of rooms by Dutch painters. Over time, a significant change has taken place in the use of this motif. In the 17th century, the window was treated mainly as a source of light that did not open onto the landscape, and rooms were full of anecdotal detail. In

1 UN News, *Covid-19 Crisis Closes 90 Percent of Museums Globally, UNESCO Plans for Reopenings*, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1064362> [accessed: 4/09/2021].

2 A. Haverkamp, *In/Doors: The Dialectic of Inside and Outside*, [w:] *Interiors and Interiority*, ed E. Lajer-Burcharth i in., Berlin-Boston 2016, pp. 104–106.

the 19th century, on the other hand, the landscape was visible through the clearances, and the rooms themselves were ascetic³.

Romanticism was fond of the motif of the window and the “suspension” of figures between the inside and the outside world. As Sabine Rewald points out,

The juxtaposition of the close familiarity of a room and the uncertain, often idealized vision of what lies beyond was immediately recognized as a metaphor for unfulfilled longing, as evoked in the words of the Romantic poet Novalis: “Everything at a distance turns into poetry: distant mountains, distant people, distant events: all become Romantic”⁴.

The unfulfilled longings of this period were represented through the juxtaposition of the “close” with the “distant and distancing”. Painters inscribed windows with representations of contemplative figures set in quiet domestic spaces and images of artists’ studios. The window also gradually became the main subject of the painting, focusing a viewer’s full attention. All these performances share **a distanced lack of anecdote and narrative**⁵.

The window motif also evolved in the 20th century, eagerly taken up by Surrealists and abstract artists, among others. One can recall here the paintings of Piet Mondrian or the series of works by Robert Delaunay, *Window Pictures* (1912), in which clearances are deprived of their traditional function, merging inside and outside to form a unity⁶. As Carla Gottlieb points out, in the 20th century, the window motif took a further step towards autonomisation and became the main subject of the painting, which she links to the development of photography. In previous periods, the window was always a collateral motif, giving context to the figures depicted or providing a backdrop to live still⁷.

Sketch your window

Social isolation has ‘romanticised’ the window motif, giving it the dimension of a metaphorical representation of longing. However, unlike in the 19th century, this time is a longing for normality and the routine of everyday life and social interaction. One of the many problems associated with national quarantine is loneliness caused by a prolonged lack of personal contact with loved ones and a shortage of daily social interaction. One of the art projects addressing human needs is the action called “Dessine ta fenêtre” (“Sketch your window”), launched in March 2020 by French artist Gabrielle Thierry. The painter, whose work explores the harmony between colour and music and their relationship with emotions, has initiated an artistic and social project providing an opportunity for social

3 S. Rewald, *Rooms with a View. The Open Window in the 19th Century*, New York 2011, p. 15.

4 S. Rewald, *Rooms with a View...*, pp. 3–5.

5 S. Rewald, *Rooms with a View...*, p. VIII.

6 S. Rewald, *Rooms with a View...*, p. 20.

7 C. Gottlieb, *The Role of the Window in the Art of Matisse*, „The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 22 (1964), no 4, p. 393.

interaction so necessary in times of crisis. Before the epidemic, the artist had organised numerous art projects to disseminate the art to different social groups. The main idea of the initiative was to share the view from your window.

Inspired by the common experience of national quarantine, she referred to a well-known motif in art history. The project was addressed to professional and amateur artists of all ages and countries of origin. Anyone interested in taking part had to post their image on social media and tag it with the relevant hashtag: *#dessinetafenetre* or *#sketchyourwindow*.

As Gabrielle Thierry explains, the lockdown has changed the way we perceive the world and ourselves:

My perception of the world has been shaken. An intimate game is played with the universality of lockdown, with our fears and struggles. We direct our longing for freedom looks towards a window. The window opening to the outside world has become the most valuable today. We perceive them differently. We transfer our expectations and hopes to them. It is a place of expression: we sing in it, we applaud the exploits of those who fight, we communicate, we share music and art, we celebrate life in it⁸.

The window thus became the leading site of socialisation, the only link between ‘me’ and ‘others’ and between ‘me’ and the real world. The artist invites her audience to share their experiences and reflections by presenting the view from her window and showing the lost normality and our longings.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the role of social media, which has become the primary tool for communication and exchange of ideas, replacing conversation and abolishing national borders. A reflection on loneliness, which can directly cause depression, anxiety, stress, and other mental ailments, is symptomatic of the coronavirus epidemic. Depression, by definition, is a drop in mood of varying degrees of severity that manifests itself as “mental distress, slowed psychomotor reactions, increased feelings of anxiety and a range of physical symptoms (insomnia, anorexia, headache, weight loss and sexual dysfunction)⁹”. In doing so, the researchers point out the critical role of conversation and the exchange of experiences in therapy. Patients’ widespread view that only those who have dealt with the illness themselves can understand them completely¹⁰. In this case, art and various artistic activities become tools for dealing with psychological problems. The viewer’s activation also allows the previous viewer to identify with the artist’s experience and share their trauma-induced emotions.

Ekaterina Besson also emphasises that the attempt to recreate the relationship between viewer and artist virtually results from loneliness and states of depressed mood. These attempts alleviate the pain of prolonged isolation, which further disturbs the sense of satisfaction and removes the will to act¹¹.

8 Zob. oficjalna strona projektu: <https://dessinetafenetre.org/presentation> [accessed: 4/09/2021].

9 M. Godfryd, *Vocabulaire psychologique et psychiatrique*, Paryż 1993, p. 32.

10 P. Keller, *La depression*, Paris 2020, pp. 93–94.

11 E. Besson, *Performing Arts at a Distance: Music and Dance Culture during COVID-19*, Transitions et transformations des secteurs « arts et culture » à l’aune de la pandémie, Conference held 27.05.2021 in Paris, recording available online <https://centerinparis.uchicago.edu/events/transdigital20210409> [accessed: 4/09/2021].

Virtual dialogue motivates the motivation to act in a world full of monotony while becoming a kind of “support group”. Initiatives such as “Sketch your window” have not only an artistic role but also a social one; art is becoming above all a therapeutic tool, losing its elitist character. The transfer of art to the Internet and social media allows for its dissemination and the involvement of a primarily passive audience in active participation in artistic actions.

According to the definition proposed by Kaplan and Haenlein, social media is a type of online application that allows content to be created and shared between users. The most popular social media include Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter, with the first two being the most popular in the cultural sector. Researchers analysing the marketing potential of social media emphasise the emotional involvement of the recipient and on stimulating them to take action, for example, to share interesting content or to like a post¹². The “Sketch your window” campaign organised through these media makes it possible to reach a large audience. What is more, the marketing potential is fully exploited: it actively engages viewers in interaction - after all, the main objective of social media is to stimulate action and reaction to the posted content. As Monica Marchese notes, museums and cultural institutions are still learning how social media works and use it to its full potential. Through them, museums try to meet the main expectations of their audiences, namely education and entertainment¹³. The virtual experience of the museum collections is a substitute for the direct experience in the gallery. This experience responds, in a limited way, to the need for contact with artists and protects artists from being forgotten.

The action initiated by Gabrielle Thierry lived to see an exhibition organised at the Mediatheque in Vannes (open from 28 May 2021 to 25 August 2021), featuring a selection of works created during the period of the first national quarantine in spring 2020. The representations are framed by texts about windows - a combination of text and drawing for which the institution is famous. As the painter emphasised, the first quarantine was characterised by the hope of ending the isolation as soon as possible. The exhibition was accompanied by the production of a brochure of several pages and a report produced by the French television channel Tv5Monde, which was viewed over 300,000 times. The exhibition aimed to present the variety of experiences and emotions felt by those affected by quarantine. The slogan “drawing is a tool of freedom¹⁴” accompanying the exhibition directly refers to the symbolism of the window motif in the coronavirus epidemic.

12 D. Caoa, M. Meadowsa, D. Wongb, S. Xiaa, *Understanding consumers' social media engagement behaviour: An examination of the moderation effect of social media context*, „Journal of Business Research”, 122 (2021), p. 836.

13 M. Marchese, *Museums and Social Media in the Time of COVID-19*, 2020, <https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/2020/10/museums-and-social-media-in-the-time-of-covid-19/> [accessed: 28/08/2021].

14 Por. <https://dessinetafenetre.org/exposition-dessinetafenetre-au-musee-des-beaux-arts-la-cohue> [accessed: 29/08/2021].



Fig. 1. Olivier Massebeuf, *The Courtyard*, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-2ifuVqVsQ/> [accessed: 5/09/2021].

An analysis of the works posted on the project website makes it possible to identify a few prominent representation trends. The first is to show just the view from the window without highlighting the window frames or interior elements. Françoise Coulon presented a view of the empty garden. A bench and a table with two chairs seem to be open to the viewer's presence and invite him to relax. The perspective from which the scene is presented bridges the distance between the garden and the viewer, who might remain unaware of the existing barrier. One gets the impression that the artist is standing in the garden and deciding where they should sit. The absence of elements such as a window sill or a window frame and the colours of the painting, especially the dominance of green, emphasise optimism and shorten the distance between confinement and freedom, even though the painting is characterised by solitude and the absence of human figures, the outside world appears as something close at hand.

Another group includes works that suggest a distance between inside and outside. A viewer is confronted with the representation of a window behind which another world unfolds. Olivier Massebeuf presented his view of an empty Parisian street. The outer sill is shown in the lower-left corner of the representation. The viewer leans out of an open window overlooking other seemingly abandoned buildings. There is no sign of life or any movement in the neighbouring windows. The grey and white colour scheme emphasise the pessimism of the depicted scene. The window, though open, is an

impassable barrier, and the inaccessibility of what lies beyond the window is further emphasised by the perspective. The view of the street seems to be “steep”, captured from the sixth, the highest, the floor of the tenement, and the road itself are, in fact, a spatially narrow courtyard formed by neighbouring buildings situated close to each other. This treatment increases the feeling of claustrophobia and confinement, and leaving the house is impossible.

Another example is the work of Nadine Urien, who, on a vertically positioned work that imitates a window depicts a view of a garden in light green colours and a blue sky. However, access to the garden is visually restricted by horizontal bands of black paint representing the roller blind. The black contrasts in colour with the idyllic landscape outside the window, exposing the sudden nature of the changes that have occurred. What until recently was part of everyday life suddenly became inaccessible. The viewer has separated from the outside world, and the visual barrier is reminiscent of prison bars, emphasising the pessimism and emotional distance from what is outside the window. Despite physical proximity, access to the outside remains limited and apparent. The viewer can add to what is inaccessible to the eyes by filling in the gaps using memory. However, the distance between the viewer and the world is evident whether the window remains open or closed.

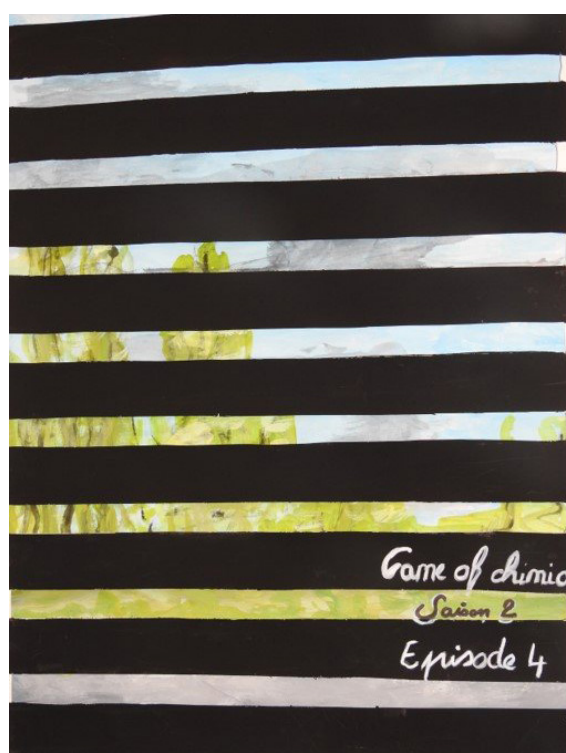


Fig. 2. N.U., *Thinking about Covid-19 patients and everyone else in isolation*, 2020, <https://dessinetafenetre.org/galerie-dessinetafenetre> [accessed: 06/09/2021].

The third group of works most strongly intensifies the individual's sense of remoteness from the outside world. The window becomes merely an element of interior design, from behind which landscape elements are visible, and the artist does not even make an effort to cross this barrier. Rosemary Kessler presented her window together with a room fragment, emphasising the contrast between the familiar and the external. The view opens up to neighbouring buildings and leafless tree branches. The closed window is shown to the left of the canvas. Decorative elements and painting utensils intermingle on the lower part and the right. The author has thus added her work to the long tradition of window representations in the artist's studio. Kessler looks to the view outside her window for inspiration for her work.

Another artist taking part in the "Sketch your window" action is Bénédicte Roullier, who, in one of the representations included in the window series, has shown a passage in another room, visible through an open door, which, like the window, acts as a link between what is inside and what is outside. The pile-up of boundary elements multiplies the viewer's sense of distance from what is outside the flat. In another work, Roullier presented a window reflected in a mirror above a fireplace. The passage enters a well-known private space full of personal objects and trinkets.

However, the artists emphasise confinement to the house and the impossibility of crossing the border between the two worlds, and the windows, sometimes visible only from the corner of a room or as a reflection in a mirror, become a kind of obsession, surprising us in every room, their sight haunting us. However, it is impossible to cross the border, and the inhabitants become more and more distant from the outside world.



Fig. 3. Bénédicte Roullier, *Paris 14*, 2020 <https://dessinetafenetre.org/galerie-dessinetafenetre> [accessed: 06/09/2021].

The last distinguishable group is the representations of people inscribed in the window's context. Artists like Sylvain Cnudde paint self-portraits. On the left side of the canvas, the artist has depicted a view of vegetation almost entering the bedroom through an open window and the neighbouring residential buildings. On the right, however, he presented his self-portrait while drawing in the reflection of a windowpane. This emphasises the impossibility of crossing the transparent barrier of the window, even when it remains open. There are also views of lonely people on the streets. Katarzyna Siedlecka presented a view of one of the streets of San Francisco. On the opposite pavement, the author sees a figure walking a dog. In addition, in the windows of the building opposite, we see several other figures looking out onto the street, alone or in pairs. The sketchy nature of the figures makes it impossible to identify them, and the anonymous outlines of the silhouettes do not represent specific people but are such a familiar phenomenon regardless of the location. Despite the proximity of neighbours and passers-by, we remain alone, each in his world separated from the others by a pane of glass, and the contour outline further visually distances us from the seemingly close people we cannot get to know due to lockdown. It is irrelevant whether the window opens onto a cityscape or nature. Experiences of loneliness, alienation, and anxiety characterise most of the works presented.



Fig. 4. Katarzyna Siedlecka, *San Francisco*, 2020, <https://dessinetafenetre.org/galerie-dessinetafenetre> [accessed: 06/09/2021].

Summary

The project was trendy and successful, as shown not only by the number of works submitted but also by similar initiatives proposed, among others, by the Landscape Institute of the Catholic University of Cordoba (Argentina), where competition was organised to submit works showing the view from a window. Other artists also independently referred to this motif during the quarantine. One example is the work of Italian illustrator Vito Ansaldi, who referred to this motif on 24 December 2020, wishing observers a merry Christmas and publishing the drawing *The Window on Christmas*, the central part of which presents a Christmas tree-shaped opening, formed by dark curtains. In addition, the “tree” was decorated with lights hung outside the window. The artist’s only companion, a cat, has been placed on the window sill with its back to the viewer. The performance of the window on Christmas evening carries a strong emotional charge. Many people were forced to spend Christmas Eve alone, away from their loved ones. Thanks to its colour scheme and the lack of introduction of human figures, the illustration expresses reflection and longing, especially acute at the time of a family holiday. On the other hand, Photographer Marcus Cederberg offers the opposite perspective, presenting the windows from the outside, treating them primarily as a visual motif.

Open or closed, the window becomes the only link with the outside world, allowing us to remember that we are not alone and the epidemic will end one day. During this time, art takes on a form of therapy and contact, allowing a bond to be maintained between the artist and their audience and between

the audience themselves. Once again in history, a motif known for centuries has taken on a strong symbolic dimension, becoming a metaphor for lost everyday life and an expression of longing and nostalgia.

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