What I thought was an end turned out to be a middle.
What I thought was a brick wall turned out to be a tunnel.
—Tony Hoagland [1]

COULD ART HELP RESET TIMELINES and break down barriers as we struggle to overcome Covid-19? Could it heal the collective PTSD we anticipate, even while we are still enduring the trauma itself?

Art as healing has particular significance for cities, where creative enterprise and culturally diverse public arts are catalytic for postpandemic recovery. A recent WHO report synthesizing global evidence from over 3,000 studies indicates that arts integration provides vital public health benefits across large populations and diverse communities [2]. Not only does it promote mental and physical wellness, but effective arts interventions can address health inequalities and inequities [3]—such as those exacerbated and exposed by Covid-19.

For many artists, hard hit by the pandemic [4], the prospect of post-Covid reentry to cities raises anxiety, cautionary optimism and creative possibility. In late 2020, Felicia Cleper-Borkovi, 2112 Inc. cofounder and Leonardo/ISAST governing board member, spearheaded an international exhibit and competition, City without Senses, inviting artists to explore their pandemic experience and imagine urban reanimation [5].

My response, New World City (NWC), a collaboration with artist William T. Ayton, experimented with an augmented reality digital cityscape installation contained within a continuously revolving, floating AR orb [6] (Fig. 1). Reassuringly meditative, NWC hovers midair, suspended as our sense of time and place. An altered urban landscape contains a geometry of AR forms. Spirals allude to DNA; ovate structures convey rebirth and renewal. NWC requires the digital intimacy of handheld interface—inherently personal yet collectively shared, mirroring our experience of Covid as a simultaneously individual and mass-scale trauma.

For cities, this trauma has distorted their signature sights, sounds, smells, taste and feel. Dramatic reduction in automotive and industrial pollution transformed skies and skylines. Late-night lights were turned off or toned down, their neon buzz subdued. Cities acquired new soundtracks: the cadence of crowds and traffic replaced by wildlife, wind, mask-muffled voices, the shuffle of tentative footsteps, the piercing cry and echo of sirens. Smell and taste were disrupted by protocol—if not by virus—no longer rising from street vendors, food trucks, restaurants’ open doors. Touch became sanitized, restricted or prohibited through contactless encounters, distanced from shared surface, from skin. We avoid textures of turnstiles, touch screens, handrails; hands are neither shaken nor held.

Cities infused with creative spaces invite reawakened senses, social reentry, renewal and recovery. Art as sanctuary safeguards fragile yet fundamental freedoms, including rights to health, science, arts, culture and freedom of expression [7]. Public art is an affirmation of healing and hope. As Claudia Núñez-Pacheco and Jorge Olivares-Retamal remind us in this issue’s “Art as Refuge: The Symbolic Transformation of an Electronic Installation in the Midst of Chile’s Social Unrest” [8], sometimes the best way to protect human rights is to exercise them. Perhaps, this is the ultimate healing power of art.

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References and Notes
3. D. Fancourt and S. Finn [2], “Summary.”
4. G. Guibert and I. Hyde, “Analysis: Covid-19’s Impact on Arts and Culture” (National Endowment for the Arts, FEMA and Arrogate an augmented reality digital cityscape installation contained within a continuously revolving, floating AR orb [6] (Fig. 1). Reassuringly meditative, NWC hovers midair, suspended as our sense of time and place. An altered urban landscape contains a geometry of AR forms. Spirals allude to DNA; ovate structures convey rebirth and renewal. NWC requires the digital intimacy of handheld interface—inherently personal yet collectively shared, mirroring our experience of Covid as a simultaneously individual and mass-scale trauma.

Fig. 1. Scan this QR code with the camera app on your mobile device and then point the camera at the graphic marker to experience New World City.

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