

Touching with your Eyes

A Photo Essay by Alisa Oleva

I grew up in the suburbs of Moscow in the 1990s, with not much to own or to do. Because of this, walking and loitering have always been some of my main activities for fun. Later, I moved on to urban exploration and became part of a gang that was hopping onto roofs of trains, sleeping on rooftops, and walking miles along a highway or through a forest to get to an abandoned location.

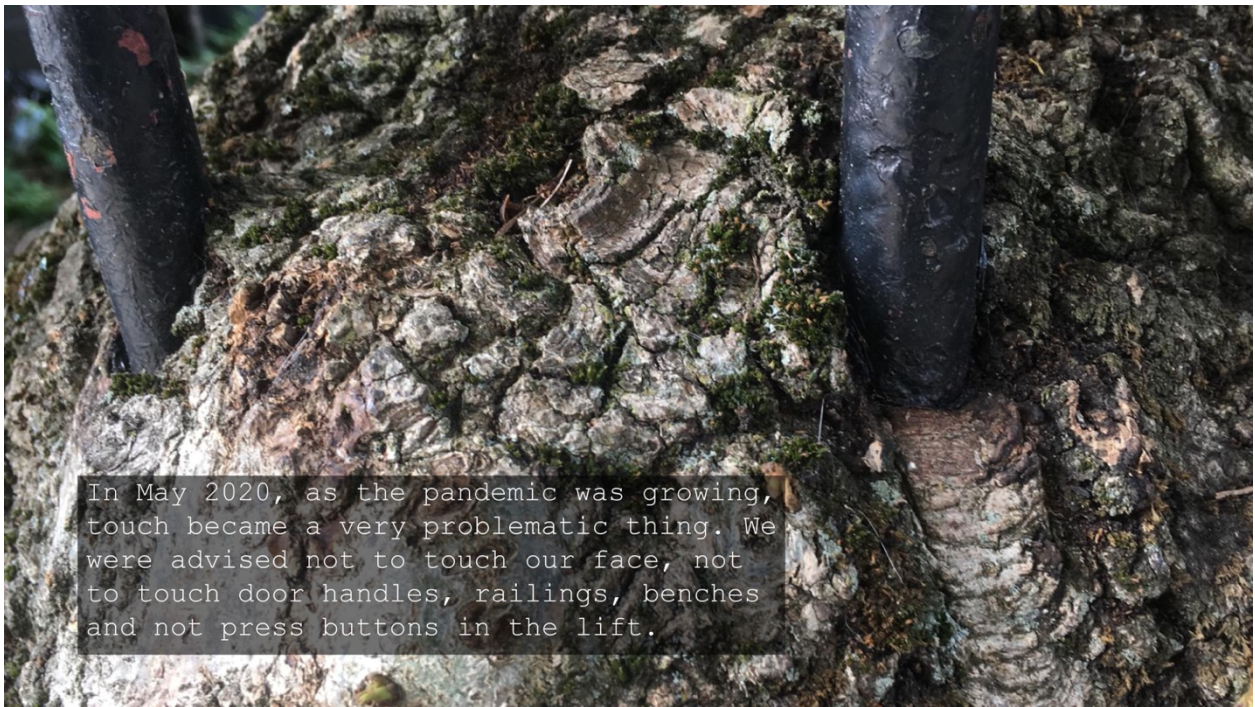
When I was 16, I moved to London. As a stranger in the UK without a fixed 'home', I mainly walked, turning the streets of London into my new home. So, walking has just always been there. At Goldsmiths I learned about walking art (that it even exists!) and I felt so happy and so *at home*. Ever since I have been making work that almost always involves walking in some way—for the audience, for myself, imaginary walking, simultaneous walking, audio walks, soundwalks...

During the COVID-19 lockdown in London, several people invited me to create walking scores. Suddenly, in the pandemic, walking was the only thing left to do. And it seemed best that we do it together, even if we were far away from each other. So I started doing various simultaneous walks, such as a [Zoom Walk](#), and a piece using WhatsApp called [Safe/Unsafe](#), among others. There were different cities: Moscow, Saint Petersburg, London, Ontario, Minsk, Tel Aviv, Edinburgh, and I engaged with different communities, as they took part in in my walks—the Walking Artists Network, parkour community groups, gallery mailing lists, etc.

The walking score presented here was created for The Residents Association's Unlocked Walks series. They are based in Edinburgh, but online sharing helped me to bring different audiences together across the world. Aware of the people who might like to join but do not have easy access to data, or who could not do the walk on the day, I hope that this walking score allows it to be re-enacted and walked into the future.



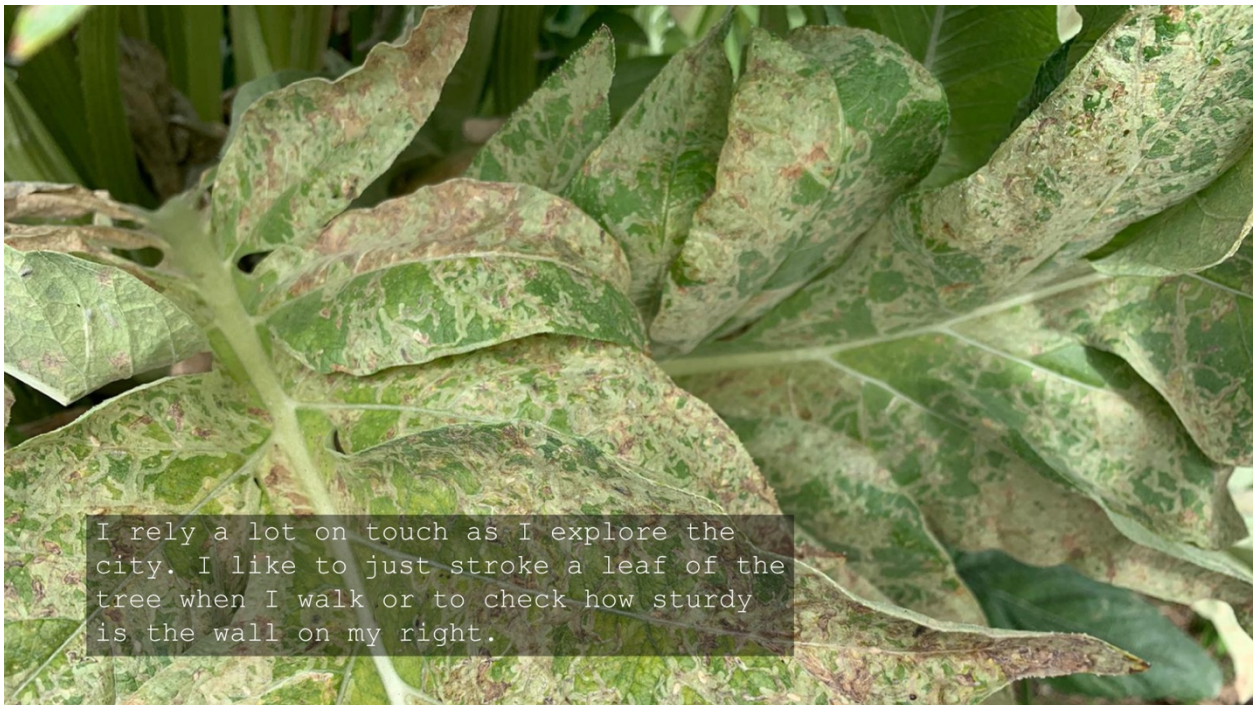
Go out on a walk. Take photos of all the things and surfaces you would like to touch. But don't touch them.



In May 2020, as the pandemic was growing, touch became a very problematic thing. We were advised not to touch our face, not to touch door handles, railings, benches and not press buttons in the lift.



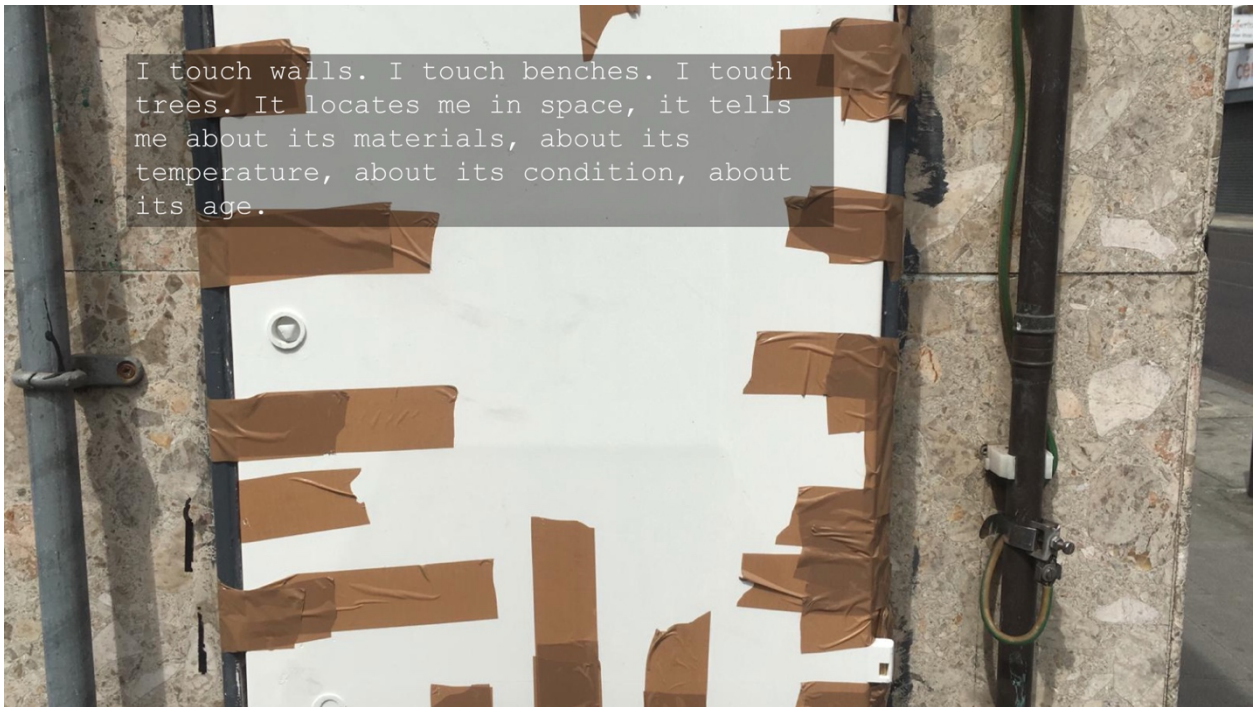
We were told to wash our hands. For 20 seconds. Again and again. And to use hand sanitiser. Until the skin of the hands became so dry.




I rely a lot on touch as I explore the city. I like to just stroke a leaf of the tree when I walk or to check how sturdy is the wall on my right.



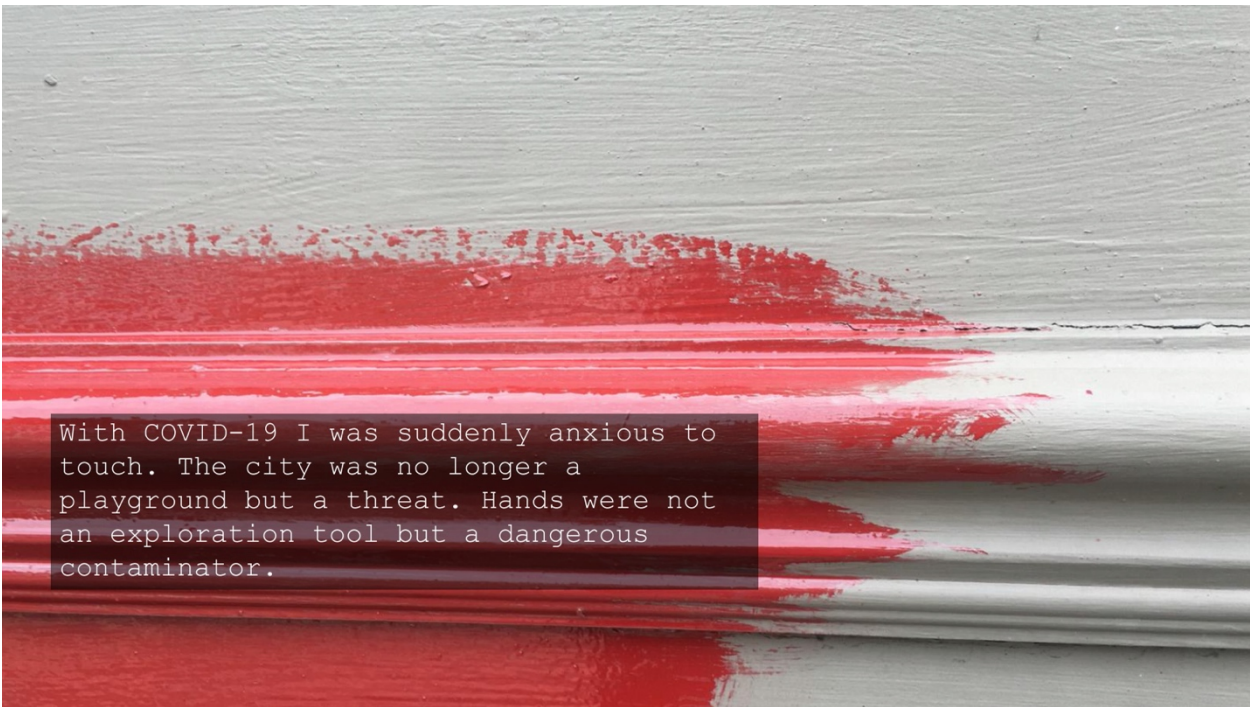
I am a parkour practitioner so touching the city, getting to know its surfaces, shapes and textures is a big part of exploration and getting to know and interact with a space.



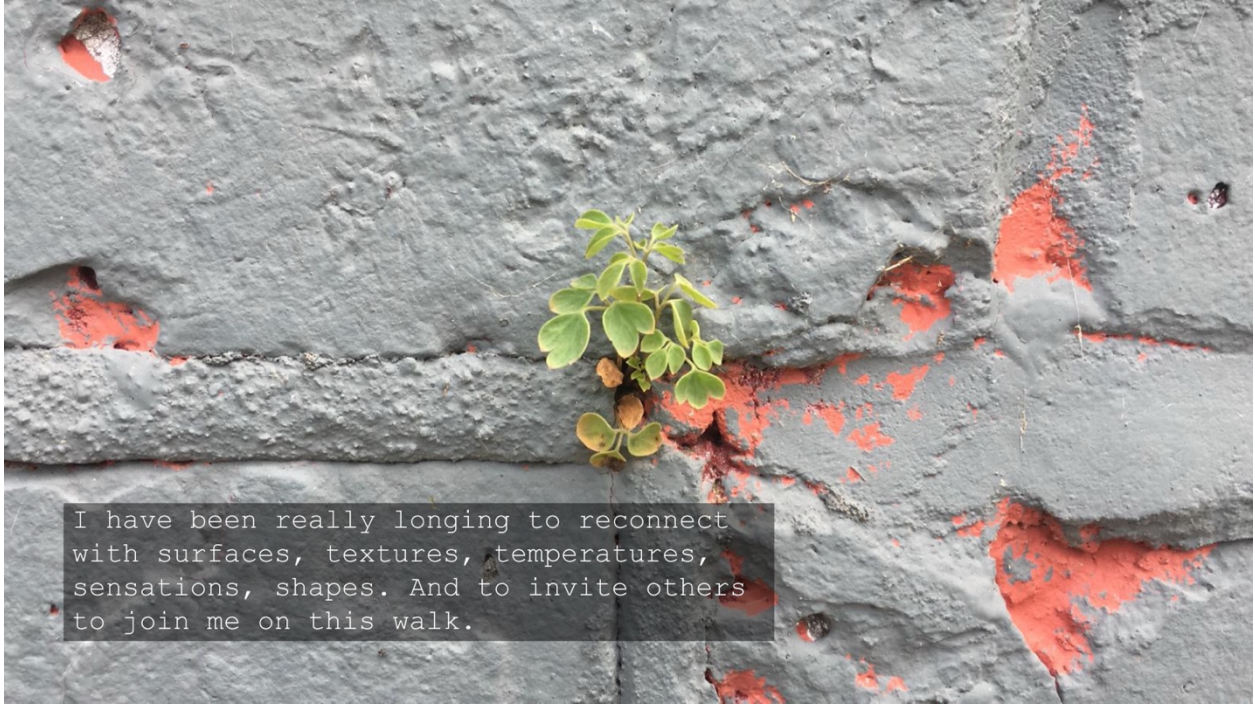
I touch walls. I touch benches. I touch trees. It locates me in space, it tells me about its materials, about its temperature, about its condition, about its age.



How often do you stop to touch a tree or a flower? Or a railing? Or to wipe the leaves from the bench? Or trace the wall of the building with your finger?



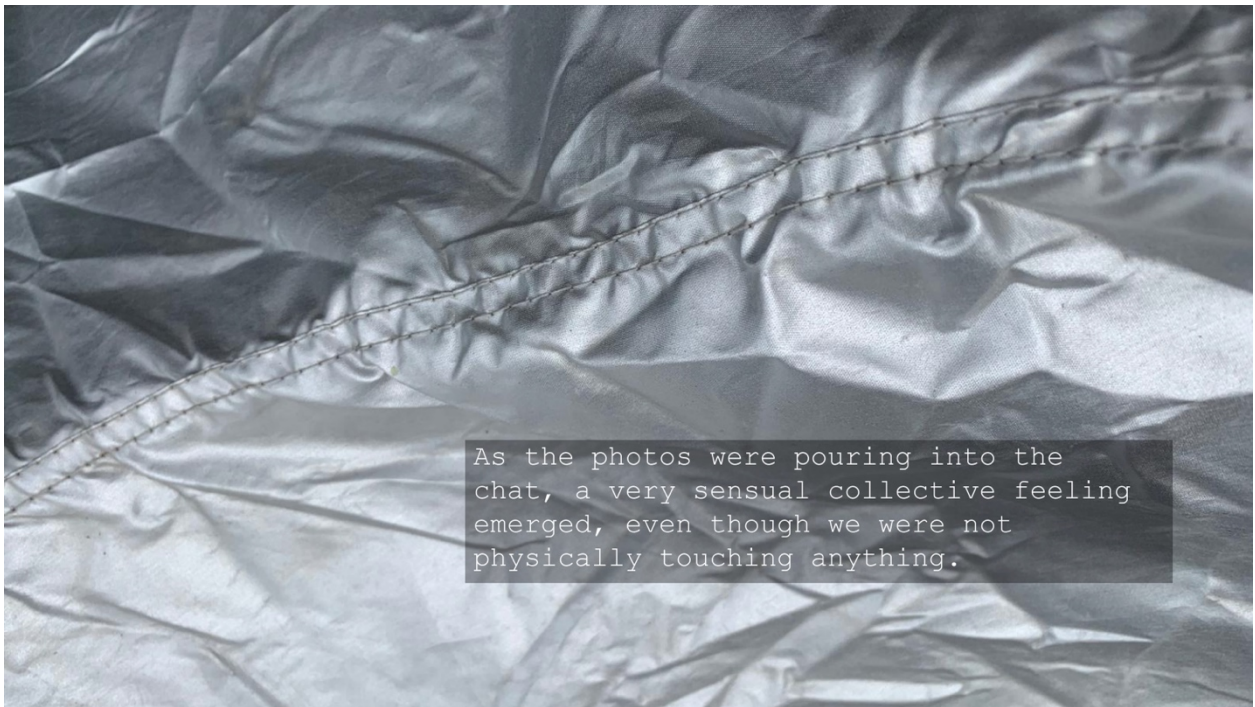
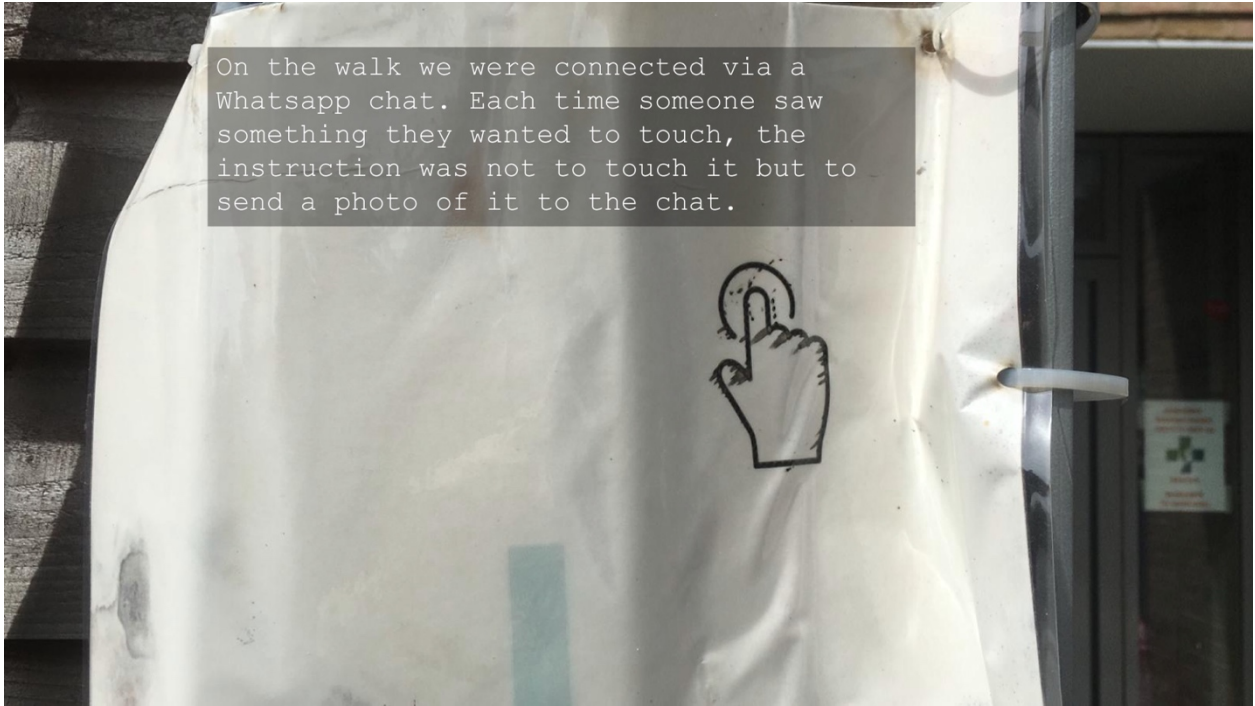
With COVID-19 I was suddenly anxious to touch. The city was no longer a playground but a threat. Hands were not an exploration tool but a dangerous contaminator.

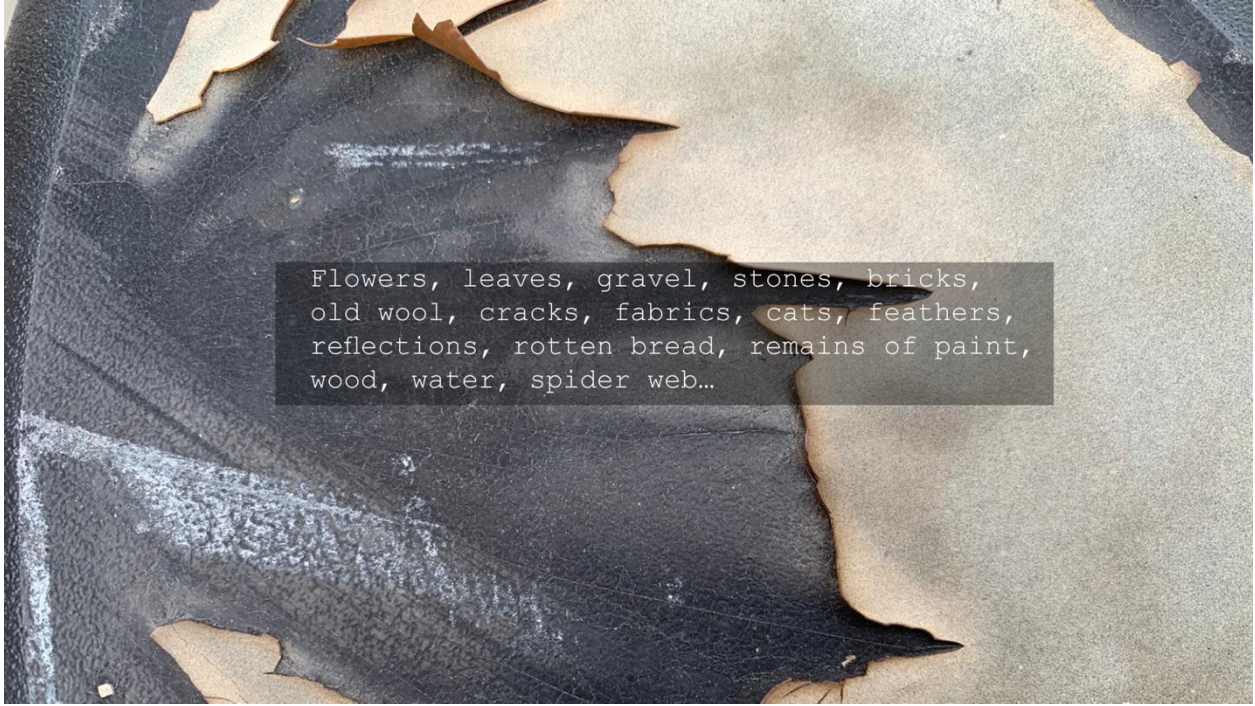


I have been really longing to reconnect with surfaces, textures, temperatures, sensations, shapes. And to invite others to join me on this walk.

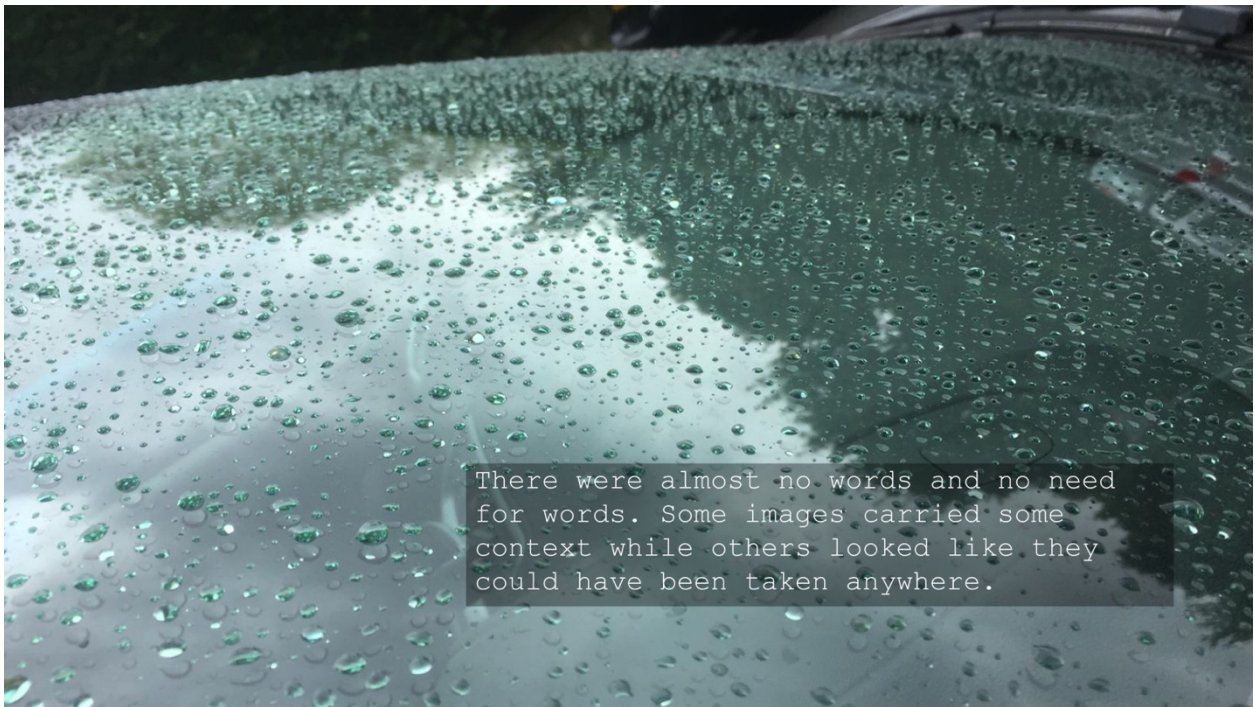


While we were still not able to meet, we could walk together. In different cities and places, yet at the same time.

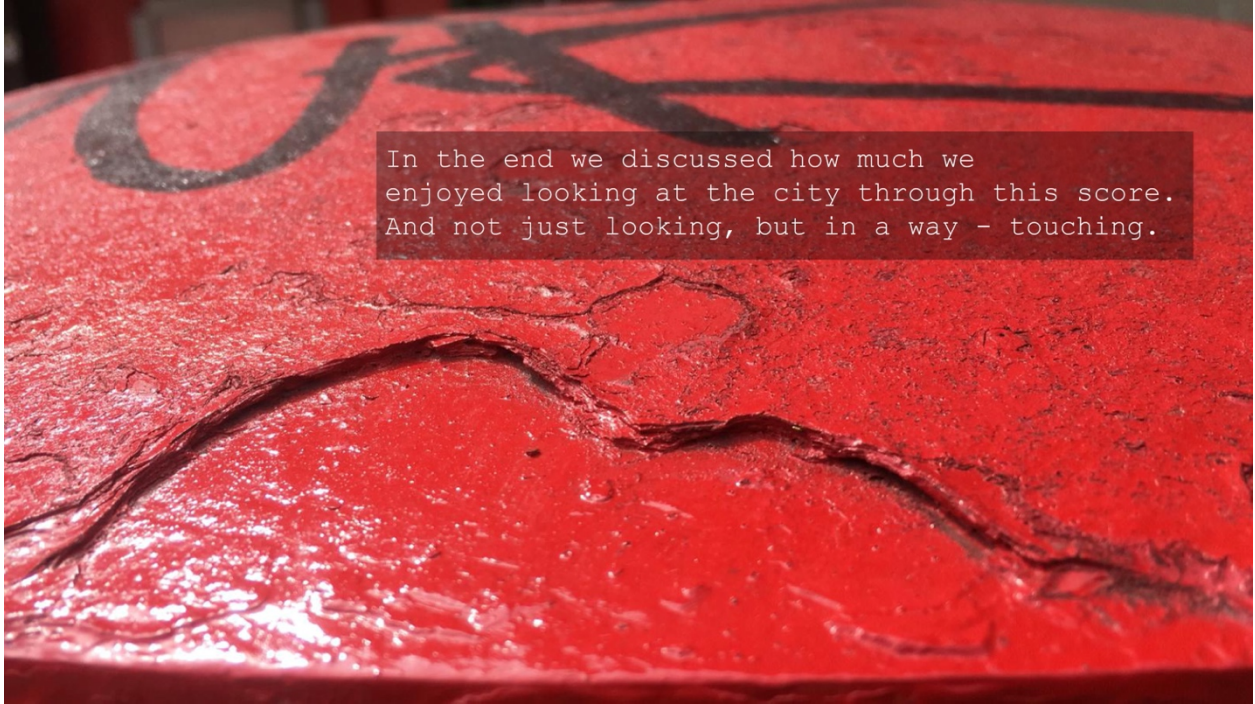




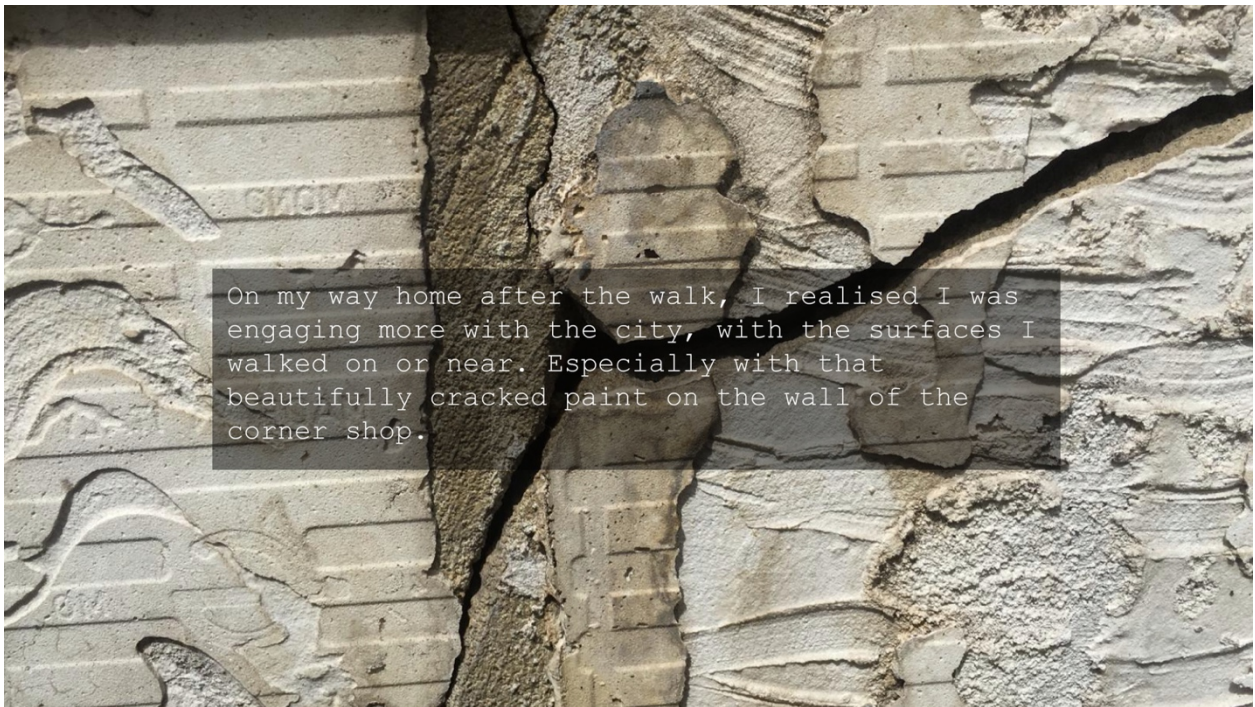
Flowers, leaves, gravel, stones, bricks,
old wool, cracks, fabrics, cats, feathers,
reflections, rotten bread, remains of paint,
wood, water, spider web...



There were almost no words and no need
for words. Some images carried some
context while others looked like they
could have been taken anywhere.



In the end we discussed how much we enjoyed looking at the city through this score. And not just looking, but in a way - touching.



On my way home after the walk, I realised I was engaging more with the city, with the surfaces I walked on or near. Especially with that beautifully cracked paint on the wall of the corner shop.



Photos are by the participants of the
Touching with your eyes walk.

