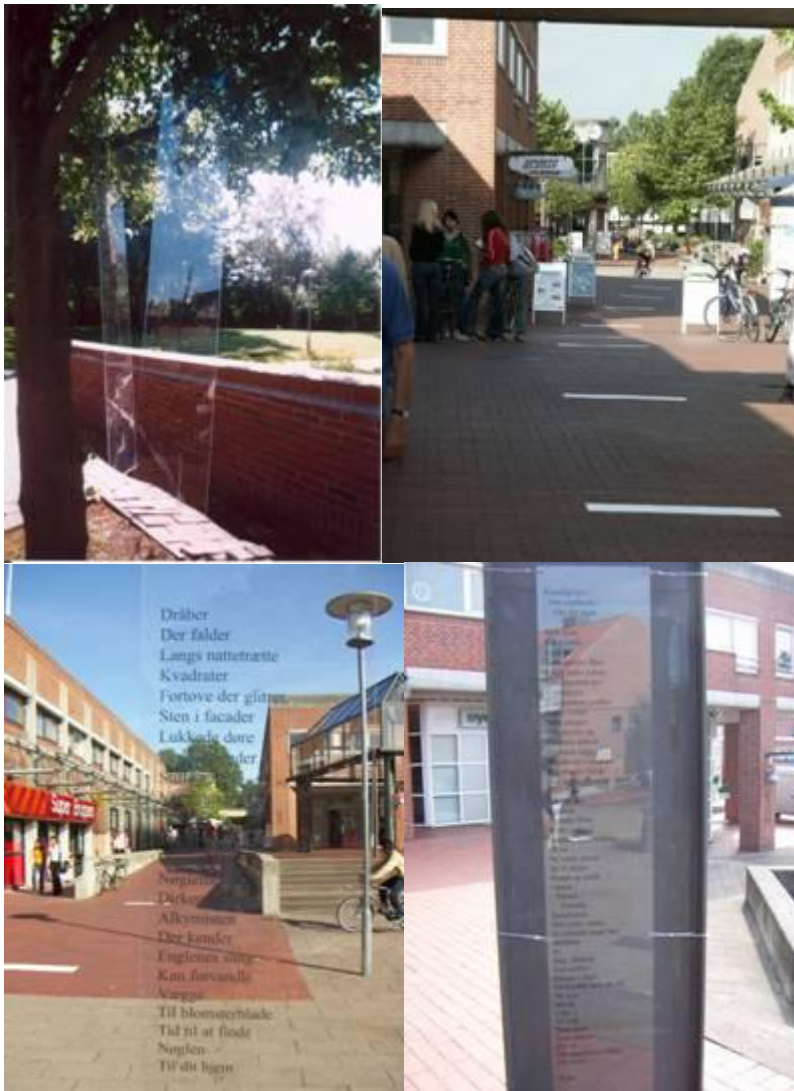


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### The City as a Collection of Poetry:

*Værløse Bymidte den. 3.sept. – 12. sept. 2004' | Lyrik-installation / Bog / Digtsamling* reflections over and description of the poetry-installation / public art project and it's implication for the concept and reality of the city.



I have always seen the city as a place where every object, every person, every configuration of light and shadows are not dead matter or persons without subjectivity configured in a system.

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The City is the world of Imaginations, a humanized space. That's paradoxically why the city sometimes can be felt like the most dehumanized you can experience, an empty street is a void.

The idea of an empty city, a ghost city is deeply disturbing. A city where there is no humanity is considered a dehumanized, cold and cruel place unlike the wilderness in the nature which is open and free.

It's interesting when we talk about the empty in connection to a City, we are talking about a space filled with buildings, colors, light, shadows. The power lines can still be working, it doesn't reduce the emptiness. When we talk about the emptiness in the city, we can very well be talking of a space filled with matter and energy. When we are talking about the emptiness in the city, what we are talking about is the absence of the human.

If the city is condensed human imagination, in both material and spiritual form, it is a fragmented world of imaginations, there is no unifying narrative, but you can find narratives and well structured syntax in it, like the transport system in a well organized city, together with situations, buildings, persons which connection and meaning seems open, mystic, metaphorical. You can find anything between this to extremes. The City is still unified in the physical and spiritual identity of being a specific City, with a name and the cities are of the earth are linked together as being entities which are recognized by official standards to be registered as cities.

There is a very strong resemblance to characteristics of poetry and collection of poetry in the form of a book, registered with the international standard book number.

In my point of view it is more than a resemblance. The city is a collection of poetry a collection of poetry where anyone and anything is contributing to the poetry, anyone is a poet, anyone and anything in the city is a part of several poems. A collection of poetry which is both spiritual and

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physical, which is well registered and full of what not could be registered in any system, which is the case in any book of poetry there have been published.

If this is the case you can make any city or town be perceived and be manifested as the collection of poetry it already is by installing written words in it in a way, that is clear that everything can be perceived as words and that words are both spiritual, physical and human.

This is what I wanted to clarify with my poetry-installation / public art project.

The pictures in the start of this paper are from the poetry-installation / public art project, there was a co-operation between the conceptual- public artist / poet Jan Hatt-Olsen, all people in downtown Værløse,<sup>1</sup> Værløse Municipality and the local business life. Værløse is a town with 18000 inhabitants, in Furesø Municipality in the Greater Copenhagen area. Downtown Værløse was transformed into a collection of poetry from 3. sept. – 12. sept. 2004, by the installation of 61 new poems by Jan Hatt-Olsen, printed on 61 transparent plexi glass plates ( 2 m x 0.3 m ) placed on pillars, walls, hanging down from trees and placed in large pots filled with soil as small poetry trees at every square in the area and by the installation of 4 poetry roads with a length a little over 1 km, constructed of 141 stickers ( 1m x 0.3 m ) pasted to squares and streets. Each road was a poem and each sticker contained one line of the poem. In each road the stickers of poetry were placed with regular intervals. Each poetry road would have its own visual rhythm.

Downtown Værløse as a Collection of Poetry was published by the experimental Danish publisher Tiara. ISBN nr, title and author was printed on one of the plexi glass plates and placed on the second pillar in the main square, when you arrive from the local train station.<sup>2</sup> )



During the 10 days downtown Værløse was transformed into a collection of poetry, people would together with the printed words on the plexi glass plates see spaces in the making, reflected, on the other side, in front of them and shadows of the words. In the area is situated the town hall, post office, cinema, library, culture house, coffee shops, police station and almost all shops in the city and some residential areas.

During the 10 days people were living – as poems and writers themselves – in a collection of poetry, a poetized urban space. They would be part of a book with many beginnings and many endings, with a structure which is radically different from the codex book or the scroll. It would be a book, where you had to use your body and all your senses to participate in the book.



In the picture you see one of the stickers pasted to the ground, which in most of the area consist of red bricks, the main square in the area is actually called the red square. The sticker is part of a poetry road from the city hall to the culture house. Translated to English the word printed on it means 'some thing is being broken' or 'which is broken' a by passer had pasted on to the sticker a new little yellow sticker, with the text on it 'it is prohibited to paste' other examples are that people would make sticks with small papers on them with a few words and plant the sticks in the pots with soil, next to the poetry trees. To put your tags on others work is a part of what is accepted in the rules of street art. In the picture to the right, small sticks with words are like small new trees of poetry growing up around the poetry tree. In the end of the installation period of 10 days there developed a play of poetry in downtown Værløse, but that one of the many aspects of the answer to the question what is a city ?. A part of the answer is social creativity the play with fragmented meaning, objects and relations in a coherent setting, a play of poetry.

A more full view of the installation/intervention and other articles about it can be seen at the online catalogue <[www.lyrik-installation.dk/Vaerloese](http://www.lyrik-installation.dk/Vaerloese)> or the printed catalogue.<sup>3</sup>

The installation/intervention in the city was made possible by the new digital production techniques. The installation/intervention would have been extremely expensive without the new digital techniques and utopian to put through the political, fundraising process. This new digital

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techniques of printing have made it possible to transform large urban spaces to books, with all the implication it have for concepts of literature, the author/authors, the book and the urban space. It is a very new development I don't think it will change the answer to what is a city? but it will help to clarify it.

I will make it possible to highlight that the city as a text, visual poetry and written poetry essentially is the same. The city as a collection of poetry is a hyper complex reality you can live in, leave or enter and at the same time it is a Chôra a space in-between, even the smallest scratch in a wall, a person walking on a street or a written word is a gateway to poetical transcendence. Expressed by the art historian Nicoletta Isar "The city of Værløse miraculously became the city of words of poetry – *Alphaville* – the place where man poetically dwells" ( Isar 5)<sup>4</sup>



To achieve that in an urban space I thought it necessary, that the installation/intervention was an integrated part of the architecture and infrastructure in the whole area. If the installation/intervention has been confined to a special art space, it would not have the ability to augment the reality of every day life and every day urban space. Public art and street art can very easily risk being art for the art interested and ignored by the rest of the people. I think that art shall break away from that position and be an active agent in the urban life. I think that art should fuse together with the urban space, the goal is not to create art in urban space but to create



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the urban artscape together with all other participants in urban space. That art not should be an intervention in the city, but a integrated part of the humanized power, energy and matter of city



The purpose of making the poetry-installation in downtown Værløse an integrated part of the architecture and infrastructure in the whole area was also to highlight that the structure of the book as a text is in high degree connected to the structure of the book as a physical and social space. You can view poetry in the codex book or the scroll in the same manner as you view poetry in urban spaces. The scroll is a two dimensional space, with one dominant dimension and to main directions, the scroll is like a road. You could take any street in a city and install text in it, like you would do in a scroll, like you could look at the main road through downtown Værløse as it was a scroll. One of the comments I got when I was taking photos from the installation was from a girl who told me that she really liked to bike through the main road early in the morning, because when she biked the lines on the poetry road would meet her eyes one line after another, just when she was passing the stickers with words printed on them. All she was passing felt like poetry. She was reading the road like a scroll.



A city of with a street plan as a grid like many cities in North America will become a book with many beginnings and endings, with many ways of moving through the book, for some people a never ending story.

The codex book also has structure very common to many cities, squares connected to each other by a subway line. Every page number is a station every page is the urban space you will come up to when you enter the city from the subway station. When I went to Berlin and London for many days it was like reading in codex books, when I took the subway from one page to another, but the structure here is more complex than the traditional codex book, there are a net of subway lines. It is more like reading hypertext on the internet with its many routes.

You also use your body and all your senses when you are reading a scroll, a codex book or read hypertext on the net. There is a social dynamic connected to navigate in the codex book, the scroll and the hypertext as there is a social dynamic connected to navigate in an urban space, to navigate in a city.

The poetry-installation / public art project *Værløse Bymidte den 3. sept.– 12. sept.2004* / *Lyrik-installtion / Bog / Digtsamling* where I made downtown Værløse into a collection of poetry



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/ a book / a poetry-installation was selected to be one of the 30 examples of street creativity in Europe exhibited in City Living – Living City | the 6'th European Biennial of Towns and Town Planners in June 2005.

On basis of the work I was selected to participate in the biennials street creativity sessions and present a charter for street creativity in Europe at the biennial, later on I have joined a national network for urban planners in Denmark and from February 2007 I got a job as art urban planner in Furesø Municipality in the greater Copenhagen area.

My experience is that artist/poets, urban planners and other people can work together without great difficulties in creating an augmented reality in the city to re-enchant it and transform urban spaces to urban places.

The reason is that there is so much common ground between literature, art and the city, that instead of in the urban space making enclosures of art, literature, commerce, working spaces, relaxation, sport, infrastructure and private spaces, you can fuse the different dimensions and let them enhance each other. It is possible without loosing the necessary functionality of the city to create an augmented reality. Here I use the term augmented reality in contrast to realities in the city, which is split up in confined spaces.

William Blake (1757-1837) is a strong source of inspiration for this work. In his illuminated books,<sup>5</sup> which I always have perceived as cities, he developed an idea of the visual, the materials and words as being at the same time visual art and poetry. Everything has meaning, everything is a language of art that in Blake's art expresses the world as it really is and art can change the perception of the world, so people can see it as it really is.

If the doors perception were cleansed  
every thing would appear to man as it is.

Infinite

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For man has closed himself up, till he sees

All things thro' the narrow chinks of his cavern. (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, pl 14)

An illuminated book of Blake is not a part of a three dimensional world, but a part of an infinite humanized world, the world as it really is by Blake, where every little detail even the period mark, a leaf of tree or a scratch in the wall is a gateway to a new living world of art.

The nature of infinity is this: That every thing has its

Own Vortex, and when once a traveler thro' Eternity

Has passed that Vortex he perceives it roll backward behind

His path, into a Globe itself unfolding: like a Sun:

Or like a moon or like a Universe of starry majesty,

While he keep onwards his wondrous journey on the earth,

Or like a human form, a friend (with) whom he lived benevolent. (Milton a Poem, pl. 14)

I share with Blake the idea of a work of art as a process, an eternal journey (so long there is a world of imaginations it can travel through) I think the same is true for the city. The city is a process, it is a journey through the world of imaginations of everyone, who is living it, using it or thinking of it. I do not fully share Blake's antirealism. There is a world out there, but it can be fused with the world of imaginations to create an augmented reality in a way never seen before, by the help of the new digital techniques.



It is here essential to note that the real world by Blake is the World of Imagination, the three dimensional Newtonian space or the two dimensional paper is a part of the Vegetative Illusion.



Blake's form for antirealism corresponds well to modern and postmodern theories of perceiving everything as text as signs, with infinite possibilities of reading or more fixed in a system. There is a very important difference in the ontology. In Blake's art everything has a complex existence in itself and in dialogue with others. In Blake's cosmos everything is animated, everything is humanized.

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It sounds like a concept for virtual world game, played on a computer or shown in a film. But Blake insists that he sees everything in the world as in his illuminated books. This was a fact that led many in his time to look at him as mad. He started in a rationalist time. At the end of his life there was by some young artists a shift into a more romantic time, where Blake's view was more acceptable.

What is so special about our time is that you can take Blake's philosophy and use it to understand what a city is. You can use it to understand the outer reality of the city, its social dynamics, its physical infrastructure and architecture.

You can combine Blake's cosmos with urban planning.



You can change the perception of the city and clarify the ontology of urban space. A way to do it is in large scale installing poetry in a form, which is recognizable as poetry for everyone in the urban space, as I did by the printed poems on the plexi glass plates and on stickers pasted to the ground creating roads of poetry. It is important to do it so it is just as much urban planning and architecture as conceptual - public art / poetry and include the whole downtown area or a whole neighborhood, so people have to take part in it and use or misuse it in their daily life, just as they

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would with every urban neighborhood, with every downtown area or the whole city. This process involves a close collaboration with the urban planners of the city, the municipality, the local commerce and the citizens.<sup>6</sup> When the art urban plan, the City as a Collection of Poetry is dense very dense, the animated, the poetized, the humanized will not be confined in the virtual, the private, the inner space, but will transform all the objects and persons in the public space to poetry and poets. The city will be perceived to be the collection of poetry it already is, regardless if you make poetry roads with stickers and install printed poetry on transparent plexi glass or not. This change of perception will change the urban spaces to urban places. The change from space to place is characterized, by the meaning being created in and fused together with space. A process well known for the flaneur or for the more purpose orientated people known from the spaces, which are not only connected to movement, but where they have experienced to physically or mentally stop for a while and get the experience of stories being created. Places they can tell stories about to others or to themselves.





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When I did my work in downtown Værløse, most people liked it, but the ones who were provoked, were provoked by the fact that the poetry was everywhere, so you could not ignore its presence and at the same time you had to get close to read the word on the plexi glass and on the stickers. They told me that it was ok that I have put so much poetry up in downtown, but they thought it was provocative that I have not done it in billboard style with large letters on banners, so they easily could see it when they were passing through the urban space. It was provocative that they have to stop to read it and at the same time felt it could not be ignored. At the end of the installation period many people told me that it actually had changed their way of perceiving the downtown area, the term they used was that the place has become more magic.



A year later I talked with the director of the municipality and he told me that it actually had changed the political atmosphere. It was easier to get visionary proposals through the political process. With a Danish expression there *was højere til loftet* now . The direct translation of the expression is *higher to the ceiling*.



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The City as a Collection of Poetry is not a personal inner experience or an experience you can have and present in different virtual spaces. It is not utopian to day to make it a shared experience a shared fact, to make it something which is out there in the *real* reality of the urban space and the people using it, creating it and living in it, because of the many new possibilities connected to digital technique. It is a very real possibility to re-enchant the city. To make it an enchanted place.

The reason why it is so is that it is not something from a fairytale, it doesn't demand some kind of magical spell to do it. It only demands an answer to the riddle what is a city? and as it often goes the answers to riddles is to see the obvious. In this case that the city is a condensed, fragmented and still coherent manifestation of the human in both material and physical form.

The city is like a book of poetry and if you go deeper into the investigation to find the answer of the riddle. I think you must conclude the city is not like a collection of poetry. The city is a collection of poetry and we and everything around us are all poets and part of poems when we are a part of the city. The City is condensed humanity in all its aspects.

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### Notes.

<sup>1</sup> All the pictures in the article are taken by the Jan Hatt-Olsen with the following exceptions Nicoletta Isar, highest photo on p. 1 left. Niels Plum, highest photo on p. 1 right, photo on p.6 left.

<sup>2</sup> The isbn nr. is 87 ( Denmark ) 90739 ( publisher code for Tiara ) 09-4 ( number of publication ). The photo was used as the official title, author, isbn nr. site in the printed catalogue to illustrate how works of art and urban space, downtown areas and cities travel through different kinds of realities and medias.

<sup>3</sup> The printed catalogue was published 2004, Copenhagen. It was edited by Jan Hatt-Olsen and contain besides the description and photos of the poetry-installation and an article of its concept by Jan Hatt-Olsen, articles about the poetry-installation by the art historian Ph.D. Nicoletta Isar, philosopher Ph.D. Cynthia M. Grund, MA in communication Kristian Harting and MA student in semiotic and literature Ditte Boegh Thomsen. The web-catalogue is still being updated by Jan Hatt-Olsen, the mentioned articles can also be seen in the web-catalogue.

Both the printed catalogue and the web-catalogue are considered to be a part of the process / poetry-installation / book / collection of poetry *Værløse Bymidte den. 3 Sept. – 12 Sept. 2004 / Lyrik-installation / Bog / Digtsamling*

<sup>4</sup> Nicoletta Isar is Ph.D., Associate Professor of Art History, University of Copenhagen, with whom I have had long discussions over the possibilities of art to re-enchant the world, by not making art for arts sake but let art fuse

together the with rest of the world, Nicoletta Isar walked around with me in the poetry-installation in downtown Værløse one of the days in Sept. 2004 )

<sup>5</sup> The Facsimile reproduction of William Blake's illuminated books published by Thames and Hudson is used ( isbn nr. 0-500-28245-5 )

<sup>6</sup> I wish to thank specially the mayor of the municipality Jesper Bach, chairman of the cultural committee Jens Svendsen, director of the municipality Michael Schrøder, chief of the library- and culture section Bente Høegh, chief of the landscape department Christina Kastrup Madsen and culture adviser Annemete Andersen-Hoppe. I wish to thank many more, including the funds which supported it together with the municipality, all the people and commerce in downtown Værløse and the different Medias which reported from it.

It was a long process and so far as I know a whole downtown area has never been turned into a collection of poetry before, so the municipality was very visionary and took a risk in supporting the project.

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( The article can also be seen in the web-catalogue under articles <[www.lyrik-installation.dk/Vaerloese](http://www.lyrik-installation.dk/Vaerloese)>