City of Play. The Great Urban Game to Come

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Play freely

In his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, published in 1938, Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga develops an analysis of play as a practice actively participating in the social construction of individuals and society, as it precedes culture. What makes this practice possible is that "play is first and foremost a free action" (Huizinga 1938: 25) because it always unfolds as a specific time outside of everyday life. Play establishes its own rules to which players consent; it can never be commanded, otherwise it would lose all its interest. This is, in fact, one of the motifs of dystopian games represented in cinema in recent decades: from *The Hunger Games* to the more recent *Squid Game*, the game becomes alienating when participants are forced to take part.

While "play is superfluous" (Huizinga: 26) because it is merely a pretext for escape, it encourages players' agency by offering them a unique experience of social interaction within a liberated time, because it is chosen: freeing up time to engage in a non-productivist activity already attests to the power of action it contains. In this way, play acts as a practical implementation of ethical and sensible issues that players may encounter in their daily lives. It simulates conditions of interaction in favor of a rule or a choice of players. For the duration of the game, it symbolically transposes and rearranges power relations existing outside the game and shifts players' perception of experienced situations.

Political play

The philosopher of art Jacinto Lageira updates Huizinga's thought: it is through this initiatory dimension that "it clearly appears that play is not only a free practice, but above all, play pushes one to act in order to achieve freedom. [...] Players are engaged in the action of play, which also represents human actions in their social and political interactions" (Lageira 2015: 157). Lageira calls for vigilance regarding the political dimension of play, particularly through the question of fair play in relation to sport: depending on the values that frame the game, it can very easily become a tool for manipulation or enslavement. It is at this point that Huizinga's approach is criticized by the Dutch artist Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys, known as Constant, in his introductory text to New Babylon, a utopian urban planning project he developed from 1956 onwards. More than vigilance, he delivers a formal notice on the role of play in a utilitarian society: play must be a moment of leisure and not entertainment.

Behind the enslaved *Homo faber*, there is "a potential Homo ludens in each of us. The liberation of man's ludic potential is directly linked to his liberation as a social being" (Andreotti 2008: 223). Play can only be an emancipatory framework if it serves the mass of workers, and not the prerogative of the idle owning class. It is necessary to invest in the inscription of play in the daily lives of players, as a space-time for re-subjectivation—that is, a moment when players can once again think of themselves as subjects in control of their actions—because "play is a struggle for something or a representation" (Huizinga: 35). One must have control over one's own time as one might have control over public space to develop ludic-constructive urban situations whose transformative power extends beyond the framework of representation.

"Art in and within the city"

The same applies to art if we believe the vision held by the Situationist International, of which he is a member. At the turn of the 1960s and in the pursuit of the avant-garde, art was transformed into instructions, performance, and documentation (Szeemann 1969). It is simultaneously information and a form of life—it manifests itself in daily life, like a newspaper. The aim now is to live art to intensify life, and even to surpass art so that life becomes more interesting than art (Berréby 2004; Filliou 1998). The motive for creation becomes an incentive to take action, to realize utopias, or to materialize power dynamics. The urban space is the fertile ground for all experiments, starting with the right to the city—the capacity of everyone to produce public space in service of the common good.

The individual who engages in creative urban practice is an amateur player. Like professionals—urban artists—they identify the grey areas of urbanism, rewrite the rules of conventional usage, and develop practical knowledge of desire paths. Through symbolic and pragmatic experience, they immerse us in novel sensible configurations that contribute, through empathy, to redefining our habitus and encourage our ability to act on our immediate environment. Art in and within the city, if not solely the product of authority, can be perceived as a game, as much as an initiation into citizen participation practices. Reciprocally, play as urban creation activates a political reading of spaces.

Education through intervention

"City of Play. The Great Urban Game to Come" is a workshop designed to encourage participating students to examine the current state of the right to the city. The workshop explores how play can contribute to the discovery, understanding, and transformation of our living spaces. With guidance from artists Coco Bergholm and Laurent Lacotte, and teacher-researchers Mathieu Tremblin and Jeremy Hawkins, students engage from 10.02.2024 to 14.02.2024 to observe, raise awareness, and make visible power dynamics, potentially contributing to their rebalancing through the implementation of contextual, creative and playful urban games.

The workshop is held in English. It includes a tour of the exhibition "Mode d'emploi: suivre les instructions de l'artiste" from 27.09.2024 to 01.06.2025 in MAMCS – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Strasbourg curated by Philippe Bettinelli and Anna Millers.

A selection among the projects is made by art director Georg Barrighaus (ComeTogether Projeckt e.V.) to be shown in the "City of Play" exhibition in Mülheim, Duisburg, and Essen (Germany) between May and July 2025.

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What does urban gaming mean to you?

The aim is to play in the city. For me, it means to have FUN while living in it.

In my opinion, it also signifies to link again our childhood memories, by doing some simple activities and breaking the effects that the judgment that other people can have on us.

So, the game is very simple! You just have to loose up yourself in your daily lives. By doing this, gradually, you'll extract your body and your mind from societal norms. With these "unusual" behaviours, the goal is to take a new liberty — and to see people's reactions.

Johanne

THE waving game

The waving game can lead to confusing and/or embarassing situations: play at your own risks.

The game is simple: whenever you are walking in the street and you see someone gazing out a window inside a building, wave at them. If they reply by waving back at you: congrats, you won! If not, too bad, you can try again with someone else. Winning brings a gleeful feeling, as you built an innocent connection with a stranger.

Mathilde B.

In creating urban games, noone can outplay children. The perfect example is chalk drawing on the sidewalk, perhaps a disappearing tradition, interesting nonetheless. It is quite non-invasive to the urban & quality of urban spaces, yet with the unmatched creativity and curiosity of children, it can transform the dullest places into more cheerful ones. It could well be transformed into a collective form of creating temporary art.

Maury Drord

Urban Treasure Hunt
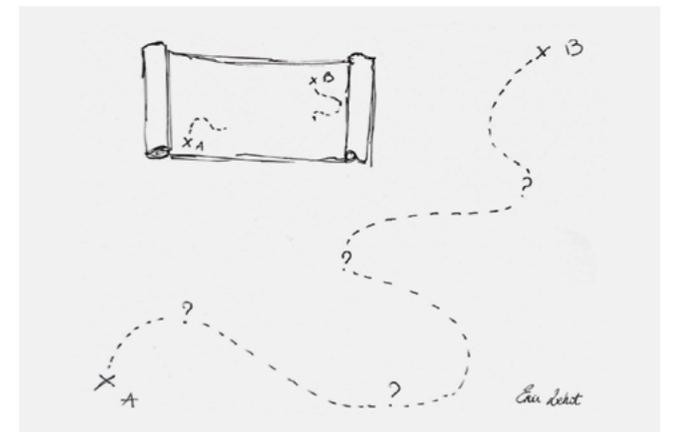
The purpose of this game would be to create a collective/ interactive treasure hunt map. Only the starting point (A) and the destination (B) would already be decided. The map with those 2 informations would be left in the city and people would be free to add any step they want on routes between A and B. In the end, we would end up with a map that makes you discover new places added by people, see things you've maybe never seen and explore the city differently.
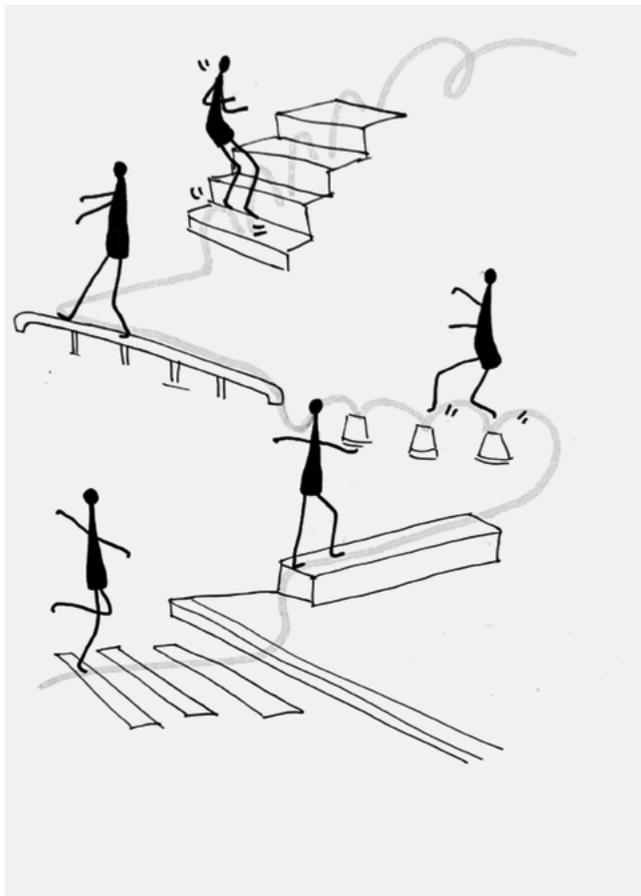
Explore the space using various urban elements : ground marking, railing, crosswalk, sidewalk ...
Create your own track in the city thanks to these city element that allow you to walk, jump, run, across, climbing ...

Célia Giraud
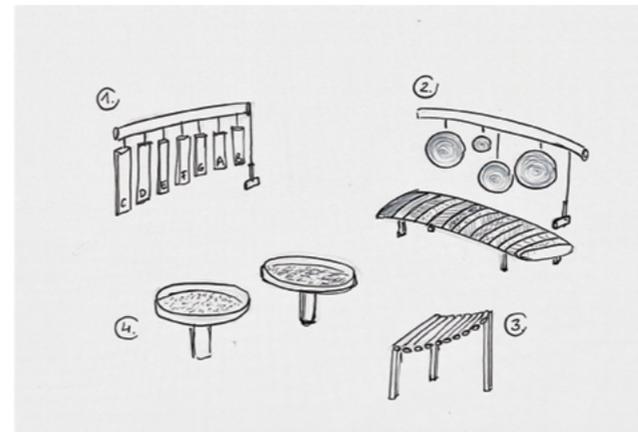
GAME OF SOUNDS

• THE GAME IS CREATED IN SEVERAL LEVELS. IT IS SUITABLE FOR BOTH INDIVIDUAL PLAY AND GROUP PLAY. INSPIRATION FOR THE DRAWING FROM THE BAREFOOT TRAIL „VALGUMS" IN LATVIA.

1. DIFFERENT MUSICAL NOTES
PLANES WITH DIFFERENT SOUND PROPERTIES, TO PLAY, HIT WITH LITTLE HAMMER.

2. SOUNDS OF MATERIALS
DIFFERENT TYPES OF WOOD, METALS AND OTHER MATERIALS, TO BE PLAYED WITH DRUMMING. (OAK, BIRCH, MAPLE.)

3. BLOWING THE SOUNDS
WHEN BLOWING IN DIFFERENT PIPES WITH VARIOUS LENGTHS SOUNDS ARE CREATED.

4. OCEAN DRUM
INSTRUMENT FILLED WITH SAND AND SMALL STONES CREATE SOUND OF OCEAN WHEN PLAYED.

WHEN SEVERAL PEOPLE PLAY TOGETHER A CHOIR OF DIFFERENT SOUNDS IS CREATED.

Elizabete Dreimane
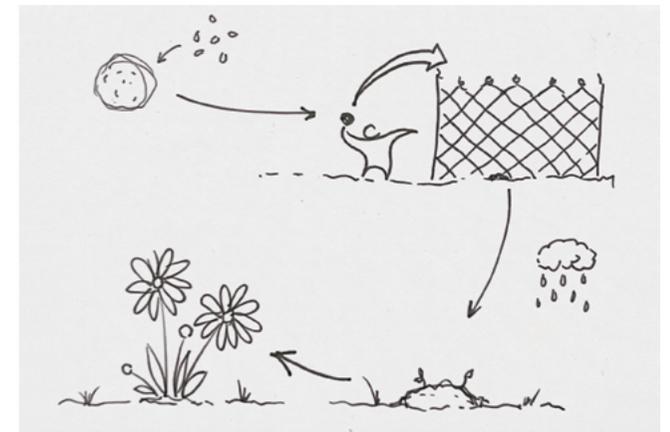
Le "seed bombing"

~~Lancer des boulettes de t~~
Throwing balls of dirt with seeds inside on abandonned areas of the city.
With the rain, flowers will glow and give vallue ~~the~~ to this empty space.

(Concept of " guerilla gardening" from the USA.)

Noemi Lorenc
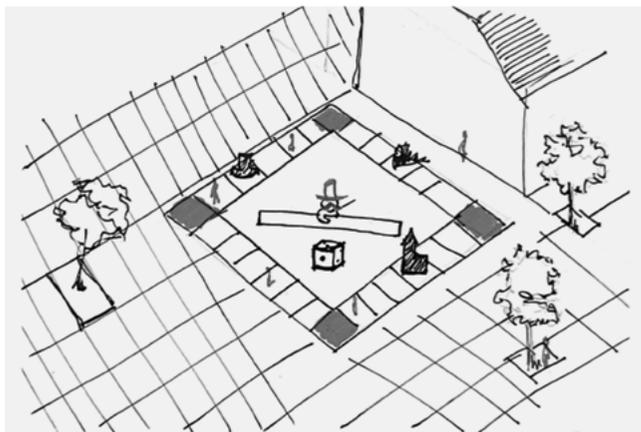
Play MONOPOLY in the image of your city with your friends.
Choose a square to set up it on a human scale.
Each city can create it own game with its famous places.

MATHIS Ludivine

When children write with chalk on the floor. You have to follow the road in the direction indicated and play the games.

- Ximena Sabogal

Unlocking the Wall

The idea of this installation is to install doors on walls/gates of private building/spaces and then painting (or not) an imaginary world behind the door.

The goal would be to question the limit between public and private spaces. "Why can't I go behind this wall?" "Who owns it?" "Who decides if I can enter/see? inside?" "What is this building made for?"

To what extent is public space limited/controlled? Can we change these limits?

Kaleb Hodge

Get Invisible!

—

Coco
Bergholm

A cabin
in the city

—

Laurent
Lacotte

Balancing freedom of speech

—

Mathieu Tremblin

What do you gain from playing?

Freedom
Agency
Joy
Knowledge

Adulting is Childplay

—

Kaleb Hodge
Mathieu Hoerth
Julie Huertas
Niels Fily-Keller
Tom Jehli
Agathe Le Deaut
Noémi Lorenc
Émilie Lucot
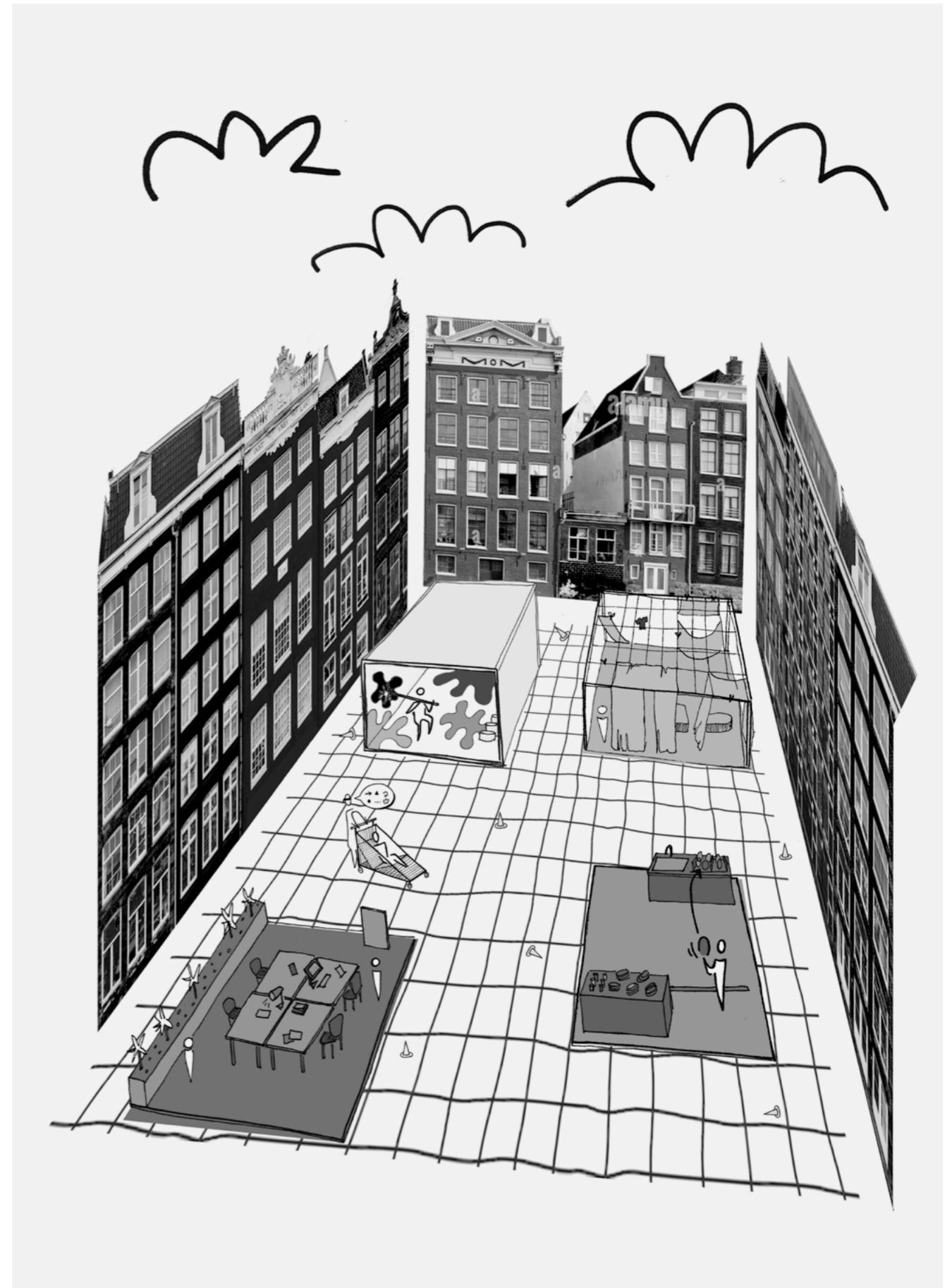
Stakes

The goal of the "Adulting is childplay" games set is to perform playful chores, by taking part in 5 activities to complete a to-do list: "Dish Tossing", "Admigami", "Hang out your laundry", "Caddy Ride", "Color Cleaning".

"Dish Tossing" consists in simplifying the chore of doing the dishes by allowing you to bring the dishes without moving, by throwing them into the drying rack. "Admigami" consists in turning the annoying task of sorting and filling administration papers into a creative and calming moment. "Hang out your laundry" consists in turning your laundry into a tent to hang out under the drying rack. "Caddy Ride" consists in turning the boring activity of shopping into a blindfolded cart ride through the city. "Color Cleaning" consists in making the cleaning chore into an experimental childish painting performance.

Field

The game is meant to be played in a large square in the city as "Adulting is childplay" consists in an entire thematic playground.

Rules

To play the "Dish Tossing" game, you need to set the dining table for several people, with plates and glasses and a kitchen, with a sink and a drying racks. Position yourself at the dining table, collect the dishes and, without moving, throw them directly into the kitchen, plates in the racks and glasses in the sink.

To play the "Admigami" game, you need to set a desk with office supplies and a big quantity of various administrative papers. Follow the instructions sheet to create origamis of wind-wheels with provided paper straws and brass fasteners.

To play the "Hang out your laundry" game, you need to built a rope assembly using a wooden structure, or existing street furniture. Take clothes, sheets and pieces of fabric and arrange the space by laying these out on this giant dryer rack. The place to hang laundry becomes a childish improvised cabin to hang out enjoying drop shadows.

To play the "Caddy Ride" game, you need to install a wooden long chair style seat inside of a shopping cart. Then, one player sits in the cart guides, while the other player pushes, blindfolded. The 2 players interact and coordinate thus to wander around the city for a ride.

To play the "Color Cleaning" game, you need to a 3D white room canvas, a mop and paint buckets. Then, the player enters the room and uses the paint buckets and the mop to create a cleaning mess.
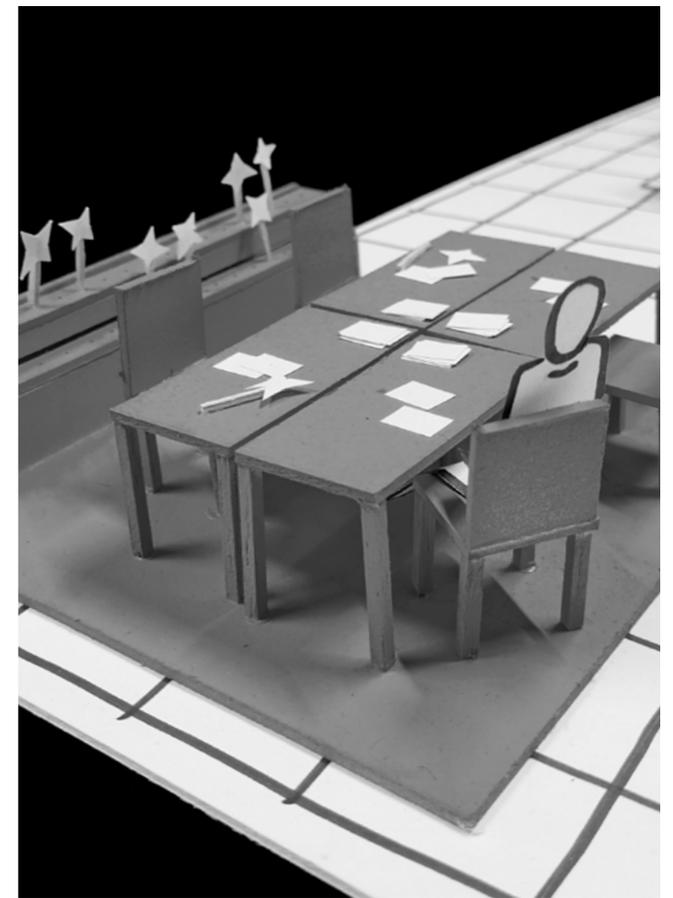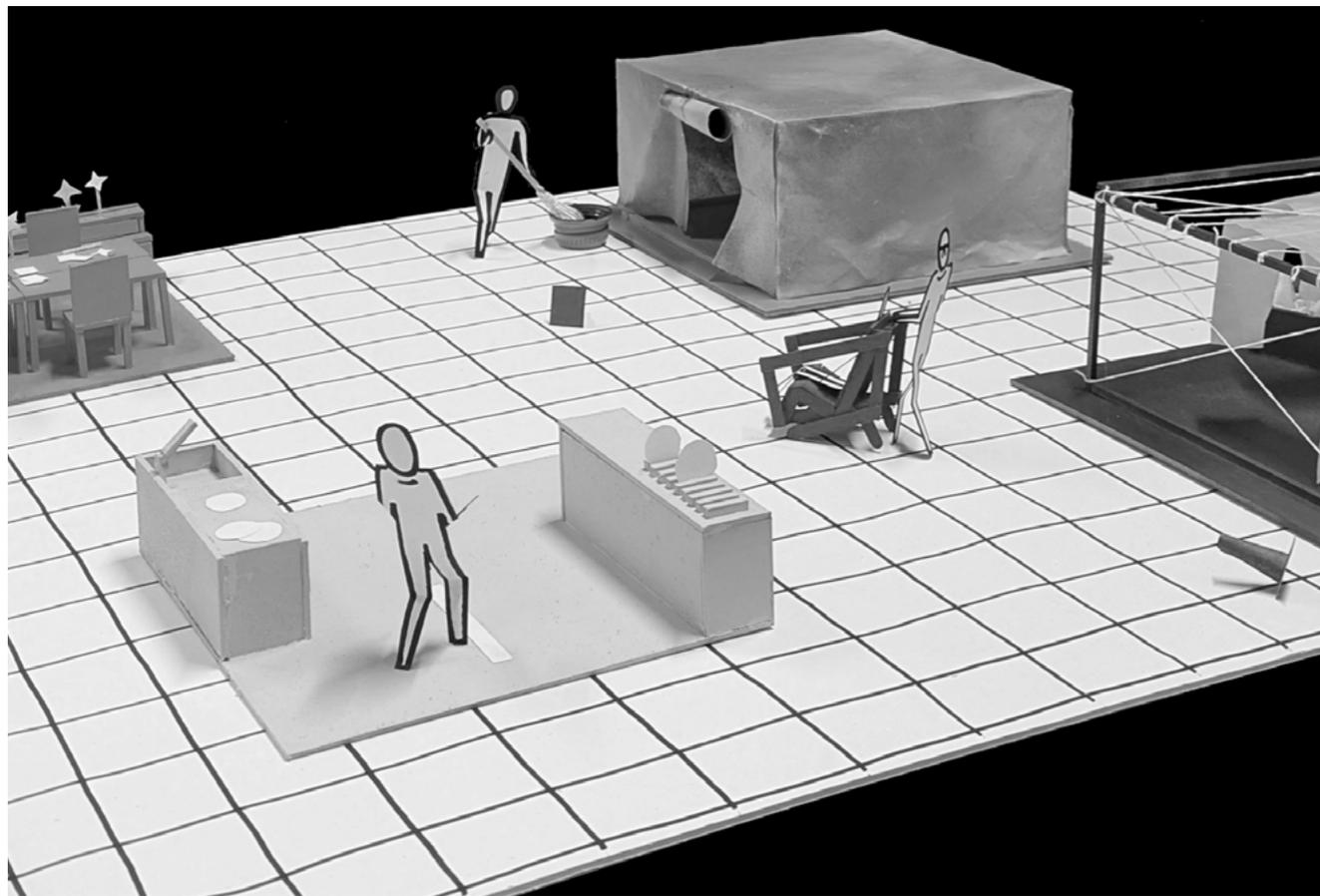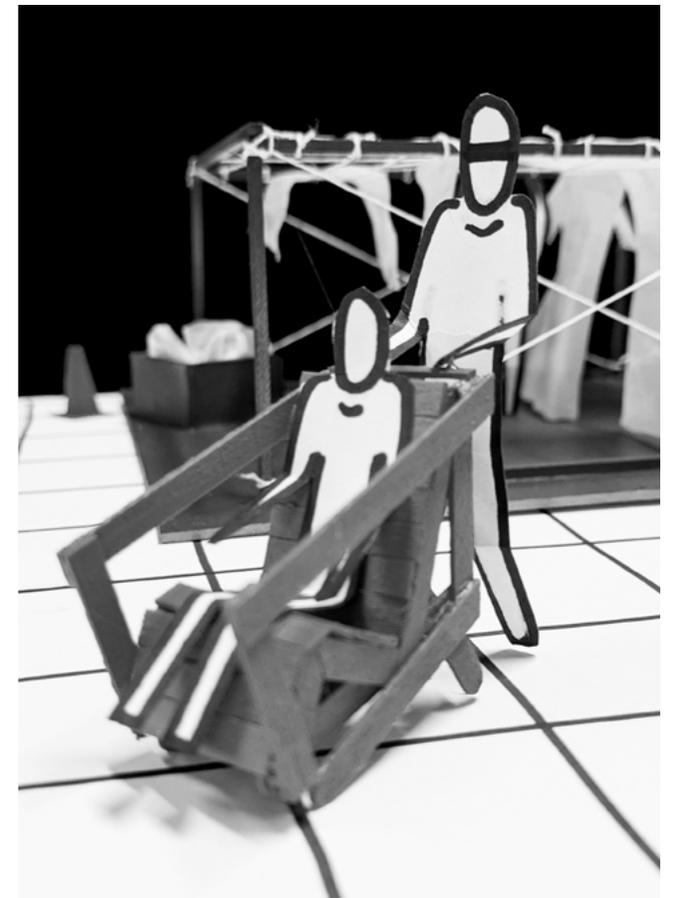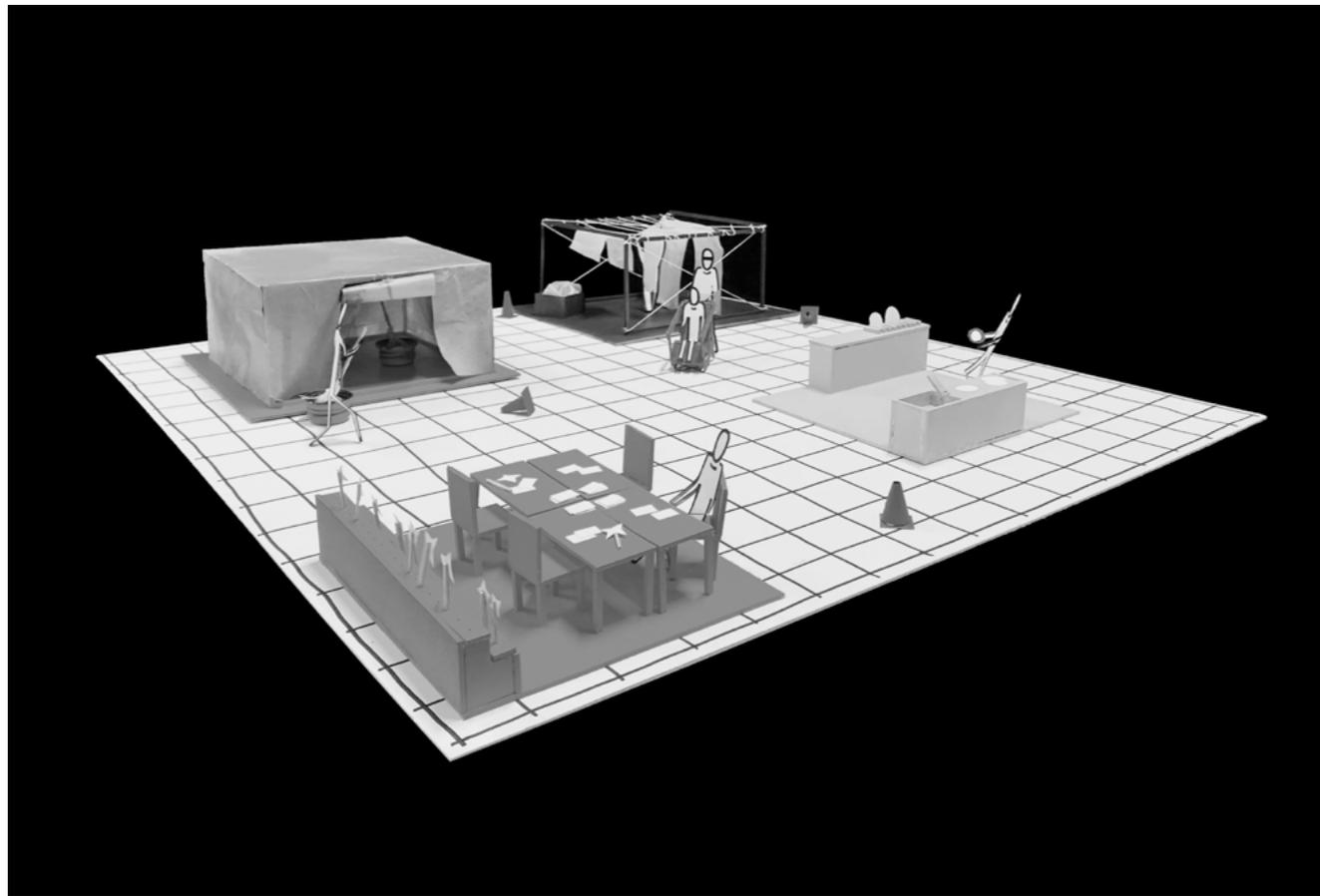
Cards
for Hope

—

Valentine Beigneux
Maeva Bernardin
Elizabete Dreimane
Maciej Drozd
Erin Lehot
Toms Martins Šaķis

Stakes

The goal of the "Cards for Hope" game is to evaluate the quality of the surrounding city and take positive action. People are invited to notice different aspects of the city and encourage them to improve their surroundings.

Field

The game is meant to be played in a city square or on the street.

Rules

To play this game, you need a folding game board in the form of a bag with the question "Would you dare to see?" written on it; 1 instruction booklet; 12 cards; various objects such as bird seed, plant seed, 1 Chinese lantern, 1 transport ticket, 1 food coupon, 1 chalk stick, 1 paintbrush with paint, 1 sheet of self-adhesive paper and 1 permanent marker, 1 screwdriver with screws, 1 blank petition template.

The game is played as follows:

1. Open the fabric bag and lay it flat.

2. Arrange the numbered cards around the center of the bag and place the tools in the middle.

3. The youngest player starts the game by drawing the first card. Reads the question and answers "Yes" or "No", if the answer is "Yes" then the player puts the card down and it is the next player's turn. If the answer is "No", the player flips the card, reads the task aloud, and completes it immediately or as soon as possible or, if necessary, discusses how to complete it with the group.

4. If players disagree on a "Yes" answer, set the card aside. After all, the cards have been drawn, the players discuss the card, and those who said "No" decide which of them will take action.

5. After each turn, the next player makes his turn, and the rules remain the same.

The game ends when all cards have been drawn. Everyone who has taken action to improve the city wins! If no one flipped a card, congratulations—your city is already in great shape!

Narrative of experience

We —Alis, Luigi, and Erik—met in the city center of Strasbourg, at Place Kléber, to open a fabric bag asking us one question: "Would you dare to see?". The bag was filled with various tools, an instruction booklet and cards.

We spread the bag flat, arranging the numbered cards in a circle and placing the tools in the center. According to the rules, the youngest of us began.

Luigi read aloud the first card: "Would you like to spend time contemplating this place?" He smiled and answered "Yes."

Next, Alis drew the second card. The question read: "Is there more public transportation than cars?". She looked around—it was rush hour, and the streets were crowded with cars. She answered "No," and turned the card over. Her task was to give someone a free bus ticket. She walked up to a big red SUV and knocked on the window. The driver rolled it down, and with a warm smile, she handed him the free bus ticket.

Then it was Erik's turn to read a card. "Can you hear the birds singing?" he read, listening carefully to the sounds of the city. He heard people chatting, the tram passing by, and the rumble of cars—but no birds singing. He drew the card and read the task: "Take a bag of seeds. feed local birds. help birds thrive in your city." From the tools provided, he took a seed ball and hung it in the nearest tree, hoping that some birds would soon come to enjoy it.

Card by card, we continued, sometimes agreeing, sometimes challenging one another. As the game ended, we sat back and reflected. The city already was much quieter than it had been in the afternoon, and Erik noticed a little finch in the tree, pecking at the seed ball.

Every action—big or small—felt like a brushstroke on the canvas of their city. We hadn't changed Strasbourg overnight, but we had seen it with fresh eyes, shared warmth, and sparked little ripples of hope.

Musical Toolbox

—

Ana Álvarez
Ximena Sabogal
Eleonora Sua
Elba Umpiérrez
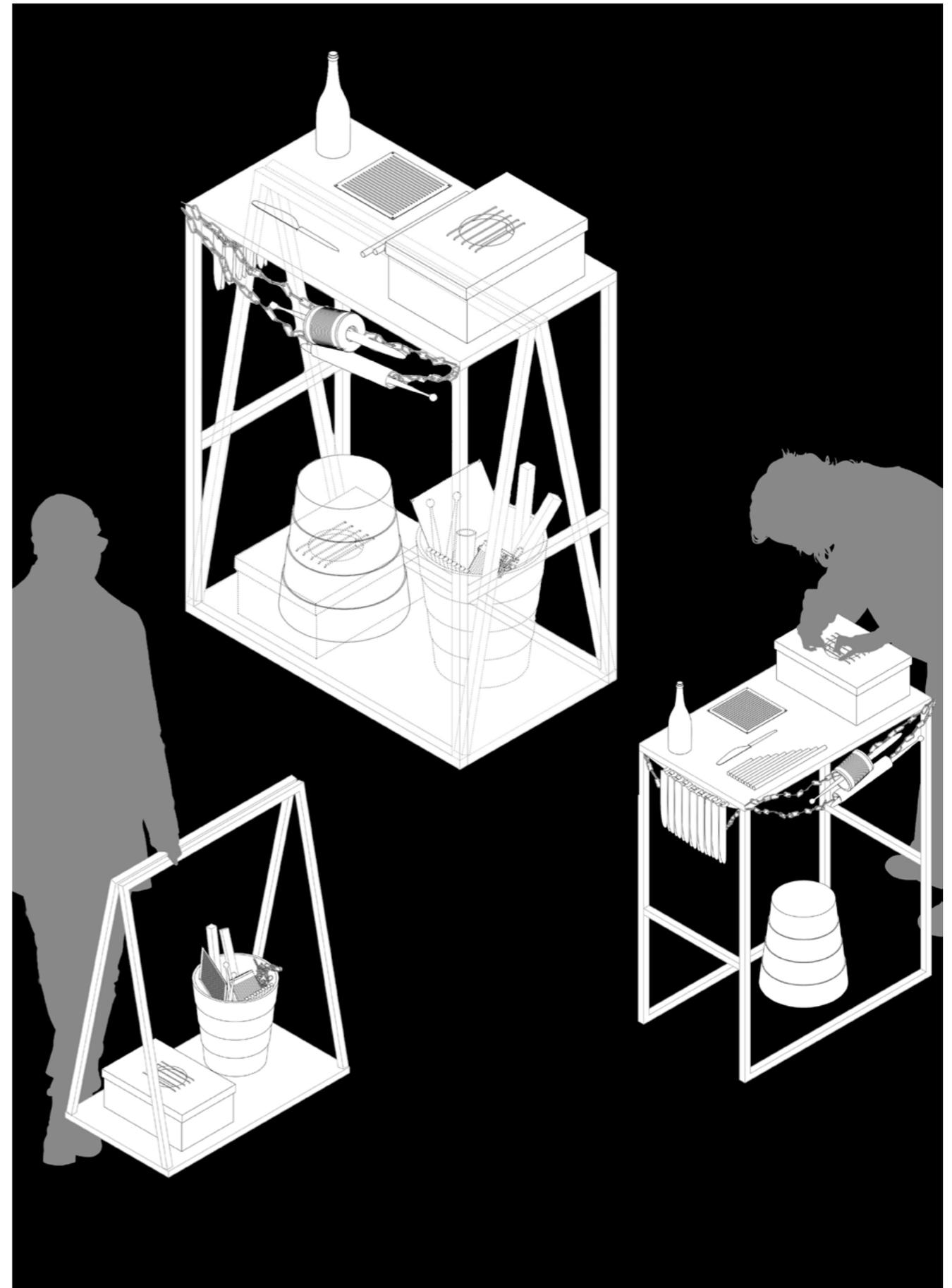
Stakes

The goal of the "Musical Toolbox" game is to play with the city soundscape, by interacting with its materials and infrastructures.

Field

The game is meant to be played in any urban environment with sound ambiences and material qualities.

Rules

1. Create your own musical toolbox using upcycled found objects.

2. Walk arround the city with your musical toolbox.

3. Experiment sounds with the environment.

4. If the atmosphere of the environment doesn't suit you, move your toolbox around the city and start again.

5. Have fun.

6. Have more fun.

7. Record and share your noises, sounds and melodies on an online platform.
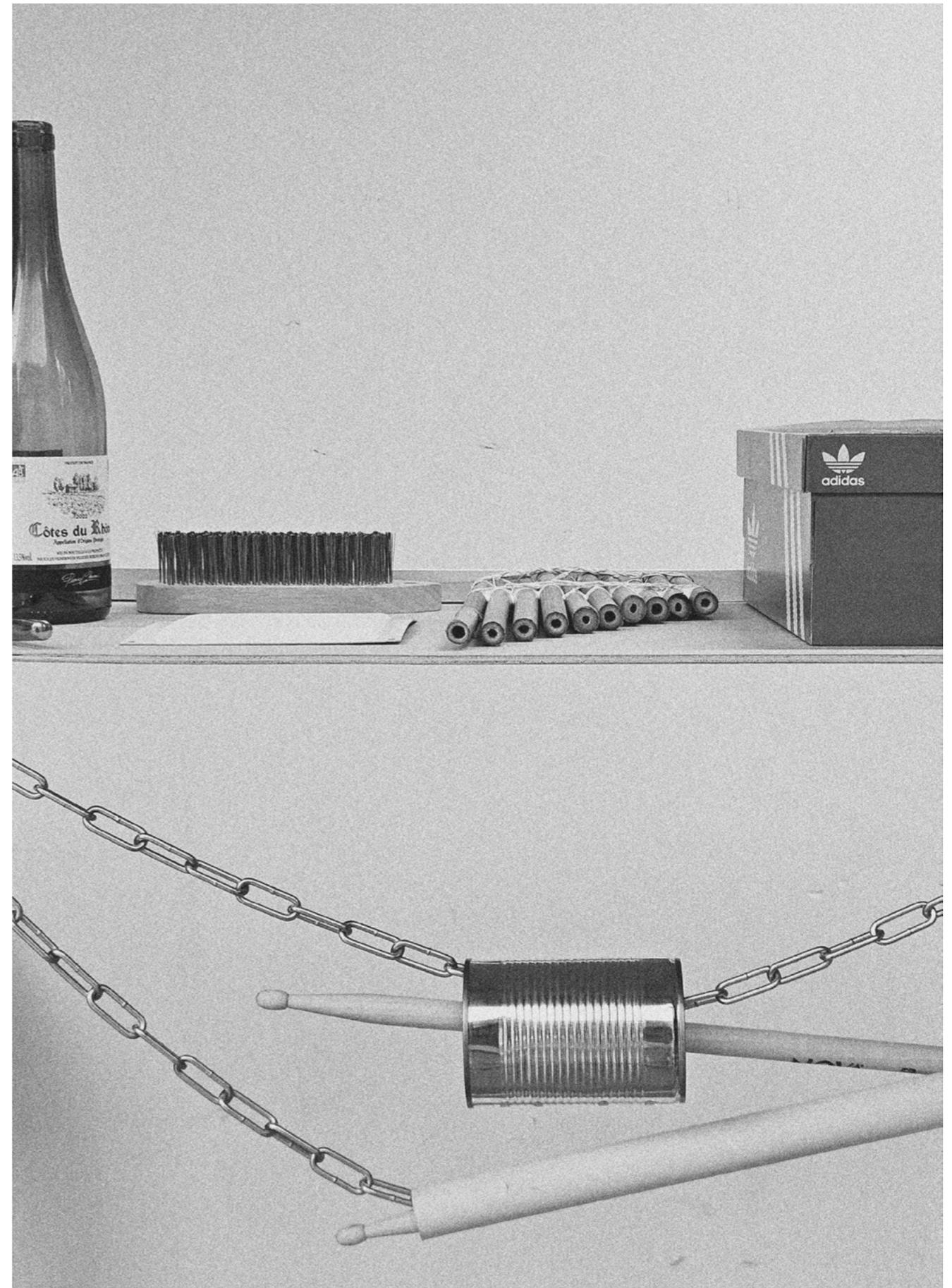
Narrative of experience

It's a day like any other.
The sky is grey, the streets are crowded,
and people walk quickly without looking around.

Noise is everywhere: horns, engines, hurried footsteps, stressed voices.
Everything seems to move forward out of inertia.

He's walking too, lost in thought, almost unaware of where he is.
Then something catches his attention.
A table.

Right in the middle of the sidewalk, as if it had appeared out of nowhere.
On it, some strange objects: chains, a box with strings, a small drum
—tools he doesn't immediately recognize.

He stops.
Steps closer.
Touches a string.
A sound spreads through the air, something different.
The clash of two chains rings out instead of a car horn.

He tries another object.
The rain, which had been falling in a dull rhythm, now seems to follow a melody.
A flute accompanies the drops.
The hum of engines becomes the background to a guitar.
Without even realizing it, he's making music.

Each movement adds a sound.
Each sound joins the ones left by those who came before him.
The city begins to change.
Not in its buildings or its streets, but in the way it sounds.

For the first time, it's not just chaos—it's harmony.
And everyone can take part, leaving a piece of music for those who come next.

Urban Game № 4

Self-Reflection

—

Joel Alves
Vianne Heid
Pedro Lõpez Fernández
Teodor Merla
Lucia Nückel
Daniel Pacheco Orozco
Anna Schiller
Delia Schlossee

Stakes

The aim of the "Self-Reflection" game is to generate a playful interaction between passers-by and the city, interrupting their daily routine and drawing attention to self-awareness by means of an optical game.

Field

The game is designed to be played in places with two parallel walls, such as tunnels or alleyways with a certain density of passing people.

Instructions

To play this game, you'll need a self-adhesive mirror foil and the series of "coded" posters printed with reverse text featuring stories and questions in three languages.

1. Stick the mirror film at eye level on one of the flatter walls.

2. On the other wall, facing the mirror, stick the "coded" poster.

First option: passers-by look at the "coded" poster first. They can't read it and have to look for a mirror to decode the reversed text.

Second option: passers-by see the mirror first. They look at their reflection and then discover the poster's "coded" message.

Through this process of discovery, they stop and reflect on themselves between the message appearing in the mirror and their reflection.
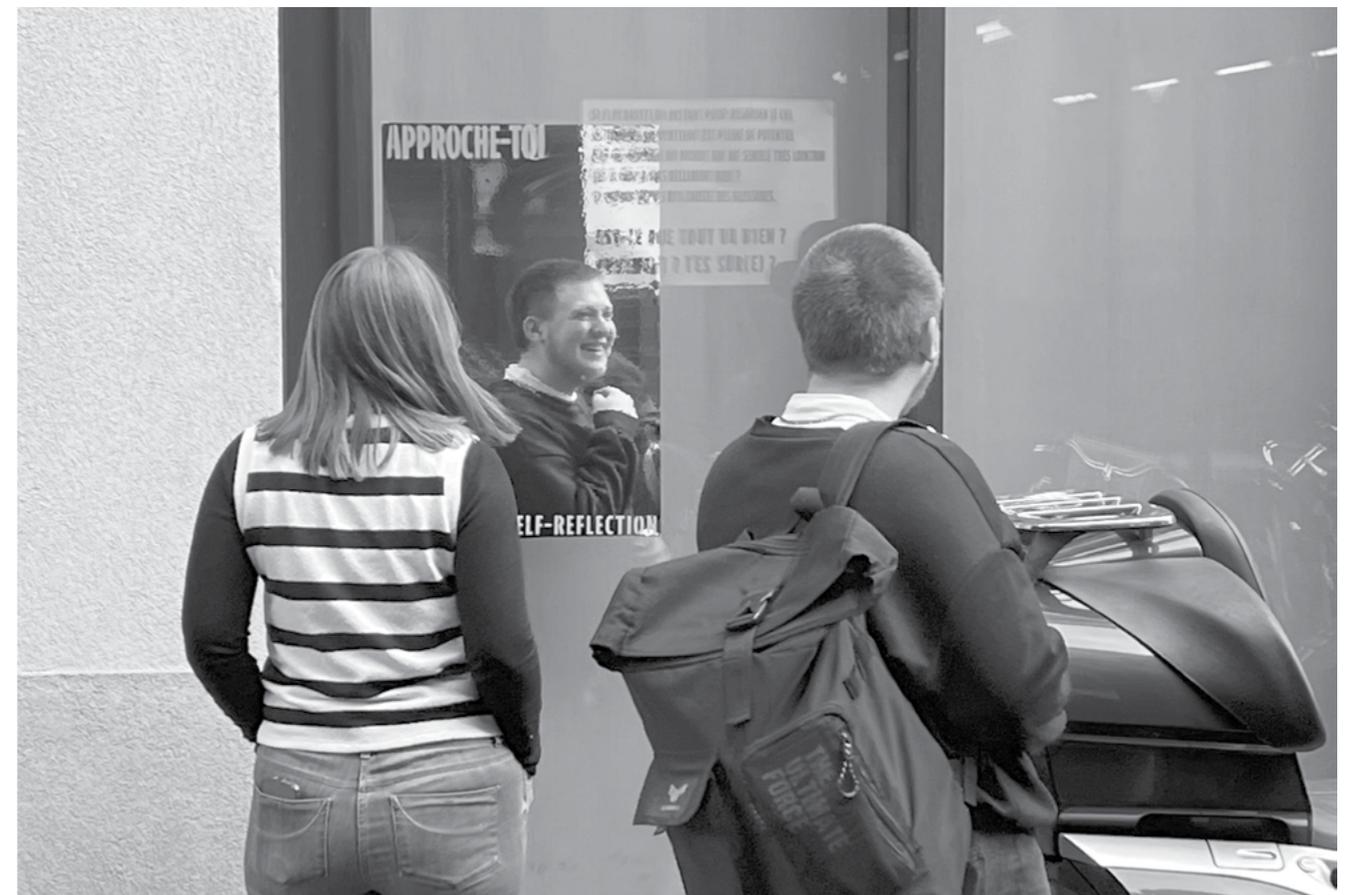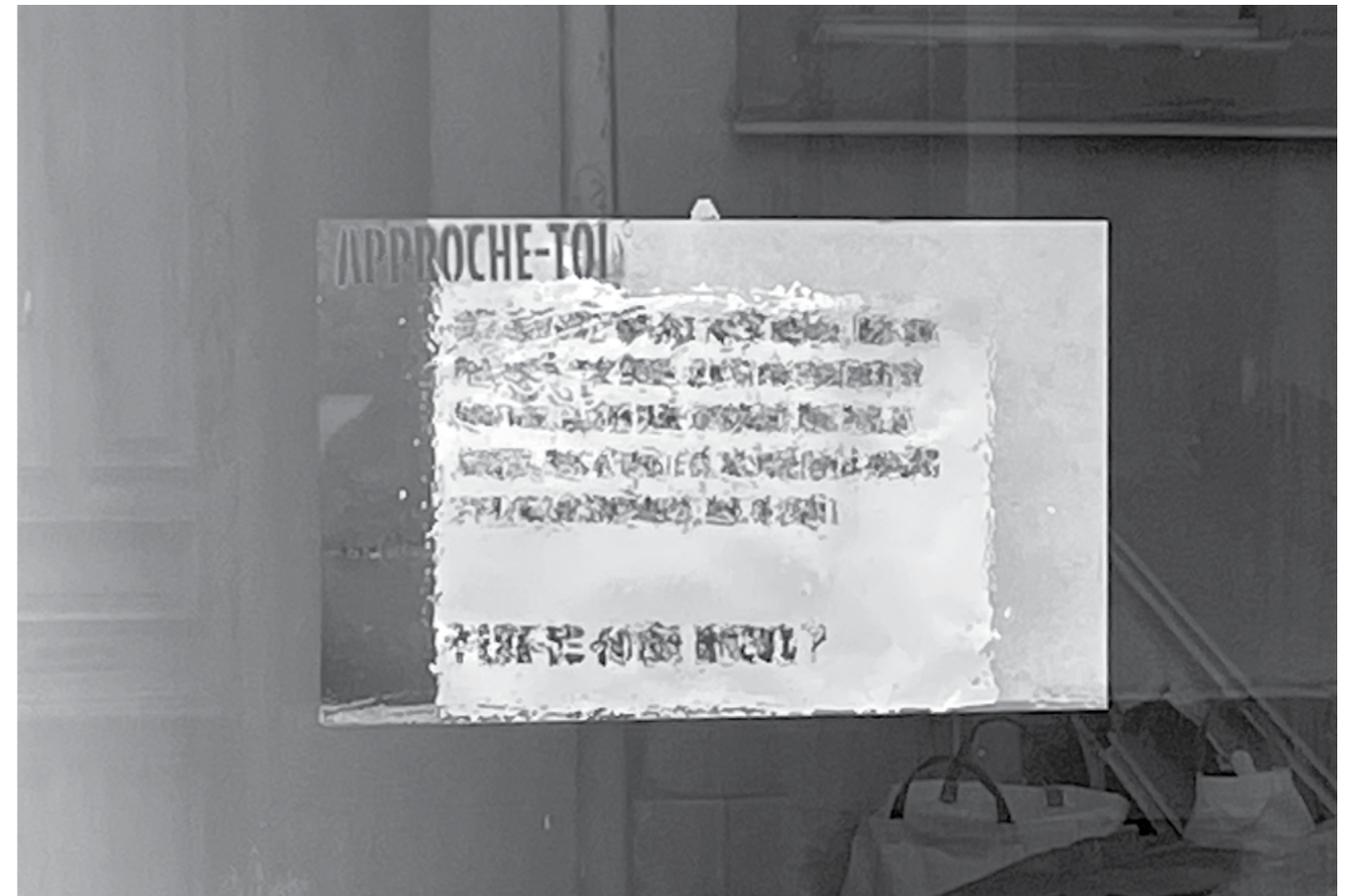
Narrative of experience

The game took place right in front of the architecture school and caught our attention. It was fun and we immediately wanted to take a photo in the mirror while making faces. At first we saw the text reversed, but it wasn't until we were in front of the mirror that we realized we could read the text.

Although it seemed pretty obvious afterwards, it was surprising and fun. The text got us thinking about self-reflection and body image.

Some people are less comfortable with their image and body, because of the body shaming of fashion and advertising, or because of childhood memories of harassment. This game got us thinking about the other person's gaze and how to meet it.

While we were taking our photos in front of this mirror, passers-by came up behind us and looked at us. This intrigued look could have led to a discussion, a smile or a meeting.

During the process of creating the game, we realized that our intentions hadn't been understood at first. But as we paid closer attention, and stopped our frantic race for results, we came to appreciate and experience unexpected interactions and situations. In the end, this is what creating this game has taught us: to make public space more fun and more open to others.
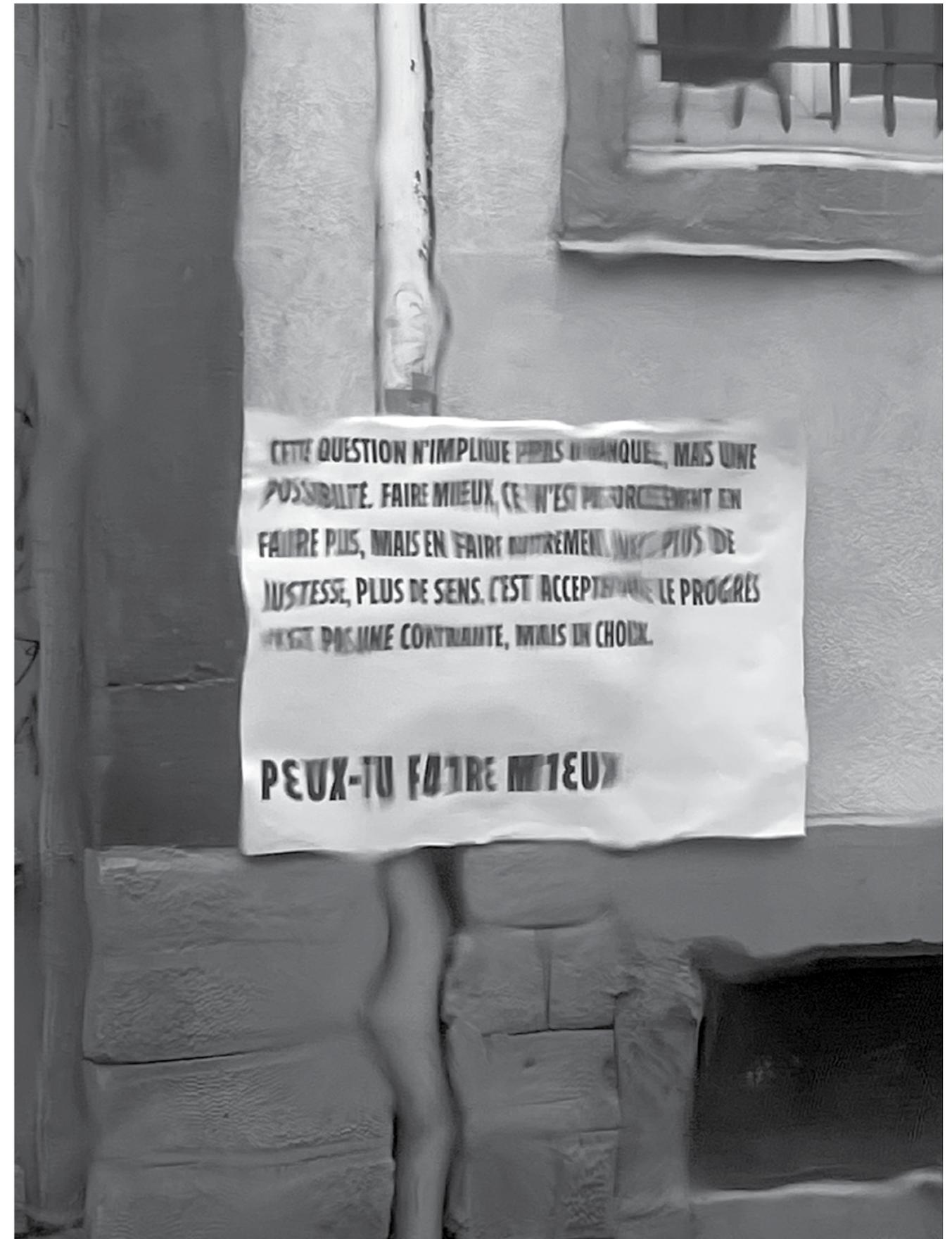
Stamp your Ground!

—

Mathilde Bernhard
Alix Couffrant
Belis Erdem
Johanne Louis-Lancrenon
Ludivine Mathis

Stakes

The "Stamp your Ground!" game is designed to improve your knowledge of the city, so that you can use it in your everyday life. It enables players to understand how the city works, and to discover it from a new angle by taking an interest in hidden places. The game is a means of fostering the social dimension, by creating interaction between several people, out of the ordinary, in order to exercise the players' right to the city.

Field

The game is meant to be played in a downtown area. This issue was created especially for the city of Strasbourg.

Rules

To play this game, players need an leaflet, their attention, their body, and around 2 hours.

1. Players must follow the route on the provided map so as to visit different areas. In each area, players need to find a location that matches the description on the leaflet. Locations are identified site-specifically by a logo displayed in the entrance of the place.

2. Inside each location, a stamp is in possession of the host. Players must give a secret code to the host in order to be asked to explore the location and perfom a small task inside. Once this interaction is comlpleted, players obtain from the host the stamping in return.

3. Through their journey, players must complete an image composed with the various stamps. The final image appears as a reminder of the players' interactions with the different locations.

In order to replay the game in a different city, the organizer must adapt the structure of the game to a series of locations. Each stamp must be designed to highlight the values of each selected location where it is deposited. The template for the secret code phrase, which will be the key to reaching each stamp in each location, must be agreed with the host of each location, while the host must decide what task needs to be completed to obtain it. Finally, a map with clues to the locations in the various areas must be drawn up to articulate the route.

Narrative of experience

We set the meeting point for the start of the game in a well known public square: about ten to fifteen people joined us and we started the game.

The first stop being a building on this square, the stickers placed on its doors really helped the players to find it. Because they naturally divided in teams instead of doing it each on their own, players were enjoying the game better and being less shy about talking to strangers. In the first spot, the challenge to complete in order to receive the stamp was to ask someone which building in the city was their favourite: as the employee was the one giving the stamp to players, we did not expect what happened. Instead of asking the employee, a player went to ask a visitor! This was really fun to witness, because it was a genuine stranger to stranger interaction the game had created, as it was meant to do.

After this first stop, players got really into the game and competitive: it became a race of who was going to find the next stop first. Locations came one after another and everything went very well. However, we noticed players were being less and less brave. Because people working at the locations we chose knew the game was a student project (and not a corporate city event), players got a bit lazy about completing the challenge and ended up just asking employees for the stamp. This would probably not happen if the game was official and anybody could do it: being the only group expected is very different from being a small group among many others.

As employees were expecting us to come, they were ready with the stamps, and did not really care about the challenge, and players were tired from the intensive week. Nonetheless, every employee from the places we stopped in was willing to participate and was very interested in the experience: the players did not always complete the challenges, but they almost always talked to the people stamping their leaflet and learned more about the place they visited.

Multiple players told us they enjoyed the experience and were happy about their leaflet being complete with all the stamps and it being a nice souvenir to hang on a wall.
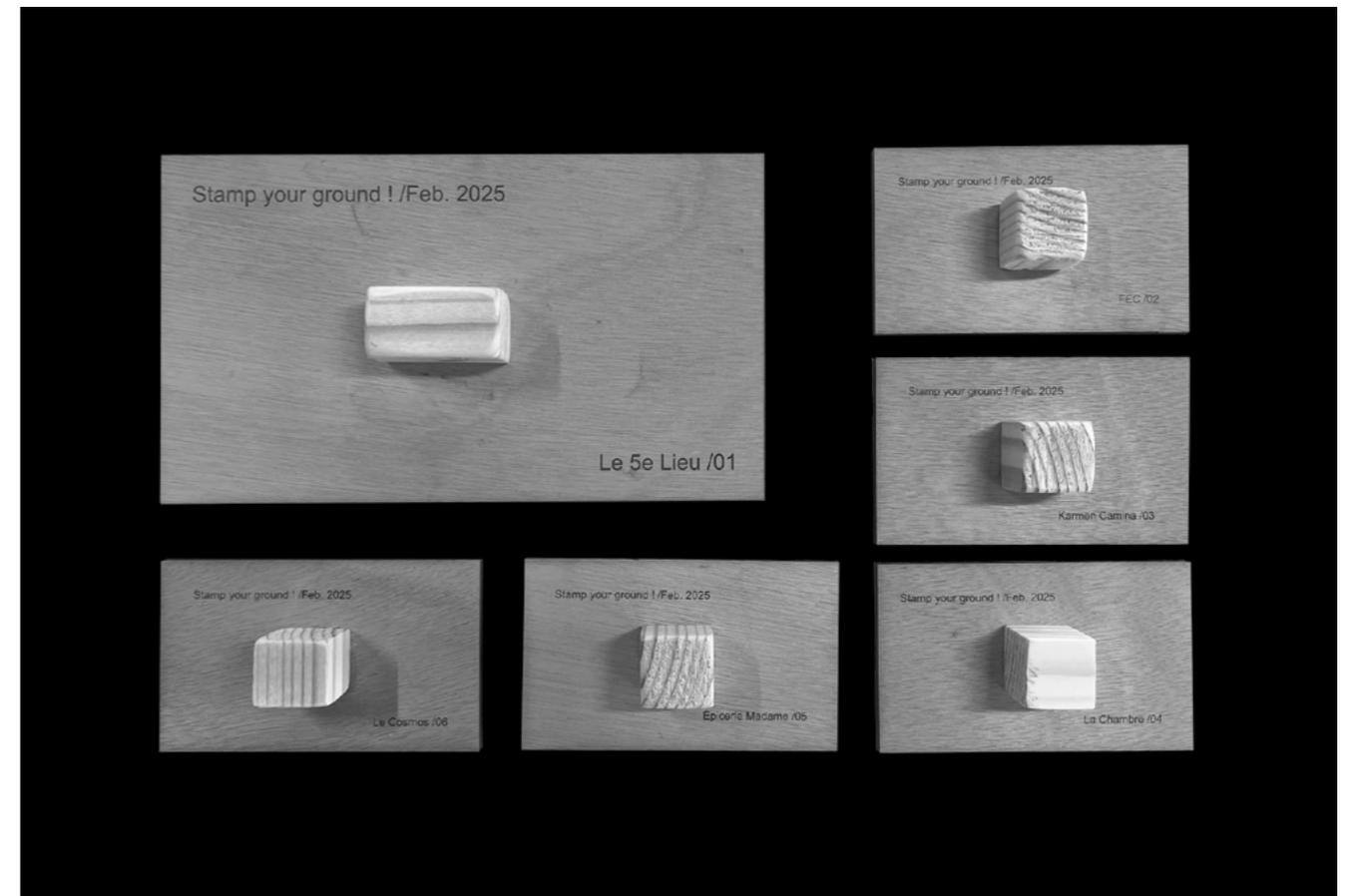
Urban Game № 6

Stick & Tell

—

Taha Ben Mena
Célia Giraud
Ouissal Herrar
Myriam Kidzié
Léna Rondwasser
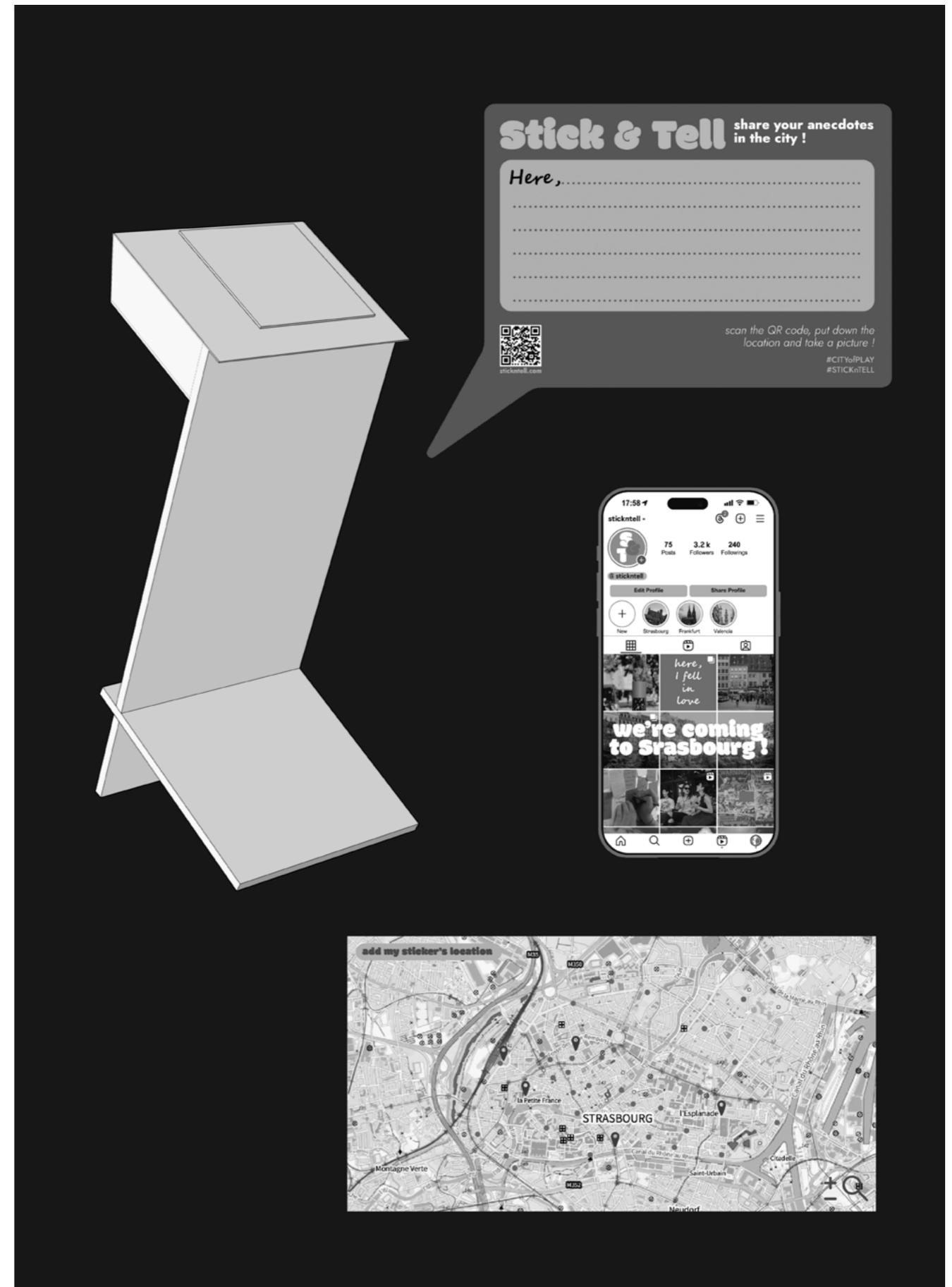
Stakes

The goal of the "Stick & tell" game is to gather and share personal, site-specific stories within the city's public spaces. By inviting locals and visitors to leave traces of their own memories, the game transforms everyday places into meaningful landmarks. This collective narrative forms an interactive, evolving city tour where anonymous voices turn the familiar into the extraordinary.

Field

The game is meant to take place across multiple locations in the city. Players interact with the game through a mobile station device, exploring different neighborhoods to uncover and contribute stories. The game encourages movement, curiosity, and a new way of experiencing the city.

Rules

To play this game, you need to spot a mobile "Stick & Tell" station in public space, take a moment to stop and dive into the game. It's simple, creative, and open to everyone:

1. Take a sticker and write a short anecdote that happened to you in Strasbourg.

2. Go to the location where the story took place and stick your sticker there.

3. Scan the QR code on the sticker to pin your story on the interactive map.

4. Take a photo of your sticker and share it with the hashtag #STICKnTELL.

5. Check the map to read and explore other people's stories throughout the city.

6. Follow us to see your story exhibited soon.

As the station moves, discover new spots, and share more stories!
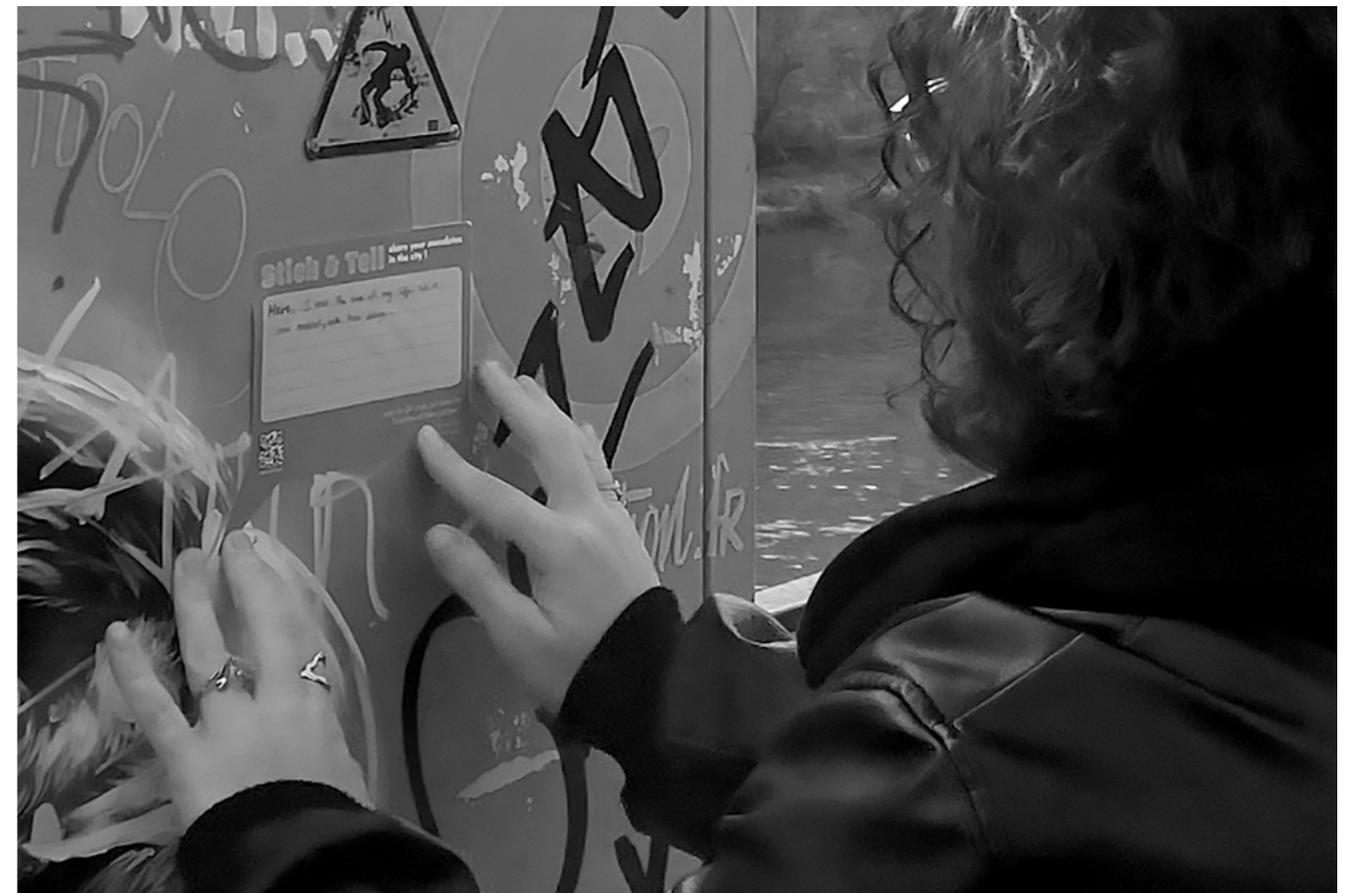
The Black Paper Game

—

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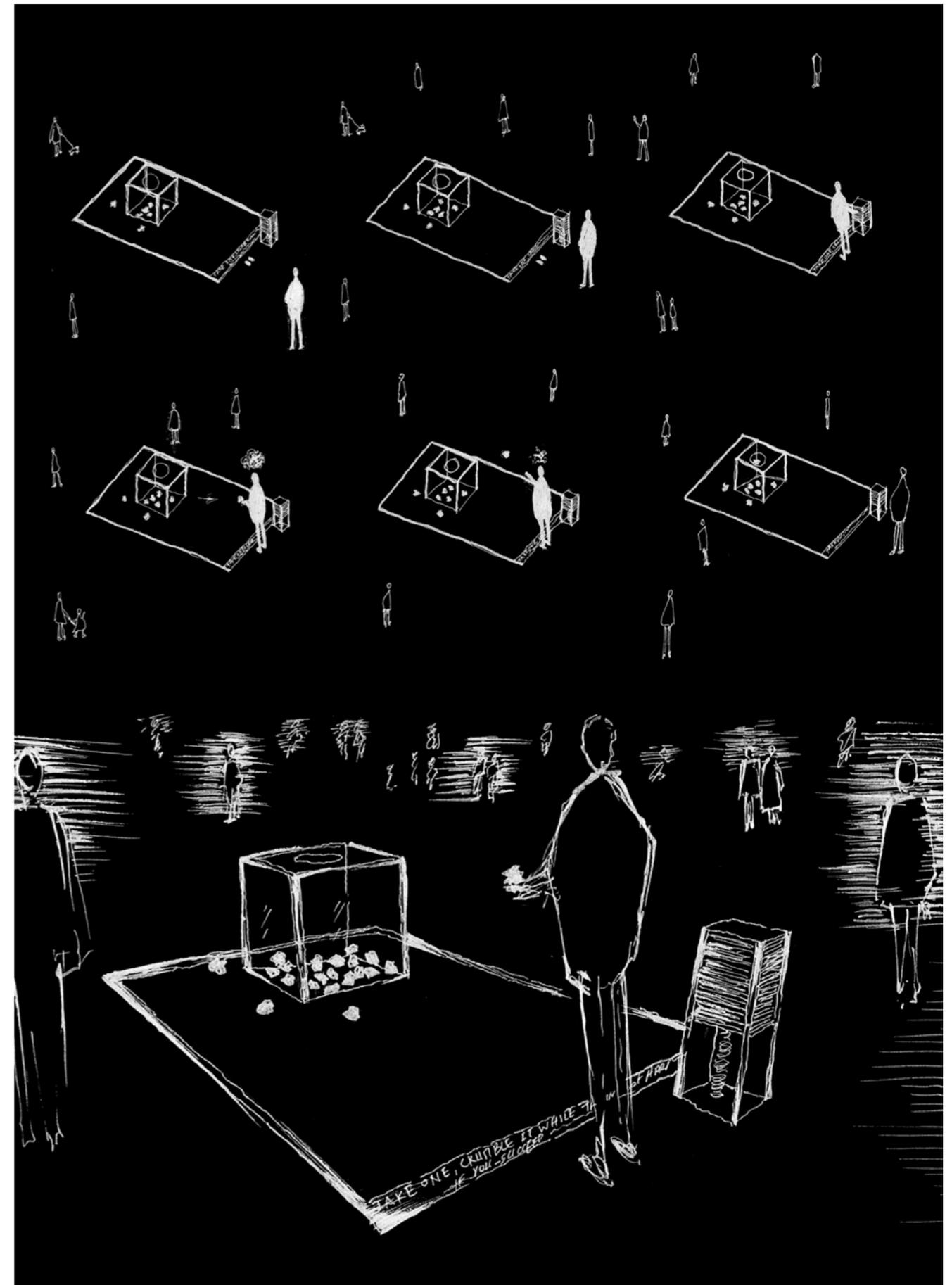
Stakes

The goal of "The Black Paper Game" also known as "Get Rid of It" is to offer a cathartic space for expression in the heart of a public area. Passers-by are invited to engage in a symbolic process of letting go, within a personal and emotional liberation in the middle of the public space. The black paper becomes a metaphor for negative thoughts that participants are ready to leave behind.

Field

The game is meant to be played in a busy public space, such as a square, park, or festival. The playing area is defined by a black tape outline measuring 300 × 450 cm with instructions on the ground. A central transparent box is placed at the center of the area. A black paper dispenser is positioned outside the area. Footprints guide participants to the ideal position to engage in the game.

Instructions

To play this game, you need a set of black A4 sheets of paper representing negative thoughts to be expressed and crumpled, a transparent box symbolizing the act of liberation by «eliminating negative thoughts,» a spring-loaded dispenser ensuring smooth distribution of the sheets, a square marked with black tape to demarcate the playing area and write the instructions, and an illustration on the ground representing footprints to guide the players.

1. Attracted by curiosity, a passerby reads the instructions written on the ground.

2. The player stands on the footprints drawn on the ground and takes a black sheet of paper.

3. The player thinks of a negative thought and vigorously crumples the black sheet, symbolizing their rejection of this thought.

4. The player attempts to throw the crumpled sheet of paper into the transparent box in the center of the area. If successful, this symbolizes the liberation of their negative thought. If they fail, they can leave or try again: the act of participating has already engaged them in the cathartic act of letting go.

The accumulation of papers in the central box creates a constantly evolving collective process, a symbol of introspective thoughts left behind, for which the game is an invitation to turn the page in a playful way.

Urban Game № 8

Trashball

—

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Stakes

The goal of the 'Trashball' games series is to make the streets cleaner by getting rid of some of the garbage found in the streets in a fun way inspired by existing games of skill.

Field

The game series is meant to be played in a street where you can find a street furniture garbage can to which you can attach a sign, or near which you can draw with chalk paint on the ground.

Rules

1. Pick up some garbage on the ground.

2. Go next to the garbage can.

3. Follow the instructions for the skill game:
- throwing line levels for "Trashball";
- target for 'Trashchery';
- hopscotch floor pattern for "Hoptrash".

4. Make an aim and throw!

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PRATIQUE MANIFESTE N°7

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