

'Remarkable . . . superbly written, fascinating'

ADAM FOULDS

'Powerful, poignant and magical'

HELEN MACDONALD

THE
LONELY
CITY

ADVENTURES IN
THE ART OF
BEING ALONE

OLIVIA LAING

THE LONELY CITY

IMAGINE STANDING BY A WINDOW at night, on the sixth or seventeenth or forty-third floor of a building. The city reveals itself as a set of cells, a hundred thousand windows, some darkened and some flooded with green or white or golden light. Inside, strangers swim to and fro, attending to the business of their private hours. You can see them, but you can't reach them, and so this commonplace urban phenomenon, available in any city of the world on any night, conveys to even the most social a tremor of loneliness, its uneasy combination of separation and exposure.

You can be lonely anywhere, but there is a particular flavour to the loneliness that comes from living in a city, surrounded by millions of people. One might think this state was antithetical to urban living, to the massed presence of other human beings, and yet mere physical proximity is not enough to dispel a sense of internal isolation. It's possible – easy, even – to feel desolate and unfrequented in oneself while living cheek by jowl with others. Cities can be lonely places, and in admitting this we see that loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity

of connection, closeness, kinship: an inability, for one reason or another, to find as much intimacy as is desired. *Unhappy*, as the dictionary has it, *as a result of being without the companionship of others*. Hardly any wonder, then, that it can reach its apotheosis in a crowd.

Loneliness is difficult to confess; difficult too to categorise. Like depression, a state with which it often intersects, it can run deep in the fabric of a person, as much a part of one's being as laughing easily or having red hair. Then again, it can be transient, lapping in and out in reaction to external circumstance, like the loneliness that follows on the heels of a bereavement, break-up or change in social circles.

Like depression, like melancholy or restlessness, it is subject too to pathologisation, to being considered a disease. It has been said emphatically that loneliness serves no purpose, that it is, as Robert Weiss puts it in his seminal work on the subject, 'a chronic disease without redeeming features'. Statements like this have a more than casual link with the belief that our whole purpose is as coupled creatures, or that happiness can or should be a permanent possession. But not everyone shares that fate. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I don't think any experience so much a part of our common shared lives can be entirely devoid of meaning, without a richness and a value of some kind.

In her diary of 1929, Virginia Woolf described a sense of *inner loneliness* that she thought might be illuminating to analyse, adding: 'If I could catch the feeling, I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness and silence from the habitable world.' Interesting, the idea that loneliness might be taking you towards an otherwise unreachable experience of reality.

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Not so long ago, I spent a period in New York City, that teeming island of gneiss and concrete and glass, inhabiting loneliness on a daily basis. Though it wasn't by any means a comfortable experience, I began to wonder if Woolf wasn't right, if there wasn't more to the experience than meets the eye – if, in fact, it didn't drive one to consider some of the larger questions of what it is to be alive.

There were things that burned away at me, not only as a private individual, but also as a citizen of our century, our pixelated age. What does it mean to be lonely? How do we live, if we're not intimately engaged with another human being? How do we connect with other people, particularly if we don't find speaking easy? Is sex a cure for loneliness, and if it is, what happens if our body or sexuality is considered deviant or damaged, if we are ill or unblessed with beauty? And is technology helping with these things? Does it draw us closer together, or trap us behind screens?

I was by no means the only person who'd puzzled over these questions. All kinds of writers, artists, filmmakers and songwriters have explored the subject of loneliness in one way or another, attempting to gain purchase on it, to tackle the issues that it provokes. But I was at the time beginning to fall in love with images, to find a solace in them that I didn't find elsewhere, and so I conducted the majority of my investigations within the realm of visual art. I was possessed with a desire to find correlates, physical evidence that other people had inhabited my state, and during my time in Manhattan I began to gather up works of art that seemed to articulate or be troubled by loneliness, particularly as it manifests in the modern city and even more particularly as it has manifested in the city of New York over the past seventy or so years.

Initially it was the images themselves that drew me, but as I burrowed in, I began to encounter the people behind them: people who had grappled in their lives as well as work with loneliness and its attendant issues. Of all the many documenters of the lonely city whose work educated or moved me, and who I consider in the pages ahead – among them Alfred Hitchcock, Valerie Solanas, Nan Goldin, Klaus Nomi, Peter Hujar, Billie Holiday, Zoe Leonard and Jean-Michel Basquiat – I became most closely interested in four artists: Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol, Henry Darger and David Wojnarowicz. Not all of them were permanent inhabitants of loneliness, by any means, suggesting instead a diversity of positions and angles of attack. All, however, were hyper-alert to the gulfs between people, to how it can feel to be islanded amid a crowd.

This seems particularly unlikely in the case of Andy Warhol, who was after all famous for his relentless sociability. He was almost never without a glittering entourage and yet his work is surprisingly eloquent on isolation and the problems of attachment, issues he struggled with lifelong. Warhol's art patrols the space between people, conducting a grand philosophical investigation into closeness and distance, intimacy and estrangement. Like many lonely people, he was an inveterate hoarder, making and surrounding himself with objects, barriers against the demands of human intimacy. Terrified of physical contact, he rarely left the house without an armoury of cameras and tape recorders, using them to broker and buffer interactions: behaviour that has light to shed on how we deploy technology in our own century of so-called connectivity.

The janitor and outsider artist Henry Darger inhabited the opposite extreme. He lived alone in a boarding house in the city of Chicago, creating in a near-total void of companionship or audience a fictional universe populated by wonderful and frightening beings. When he gave up his room unwillingly at the age of seventy to die in a Catholic mission home, it was found to be stuffed with hundreds of exquisite and disturbing paintings, work he'd apparently never shown to another human being. Darger's life illuminates the social forces that drive isolation – and the way the imagination can work to resist it.

Just as these artists' lives varied in sociability, so their work handled or moved around the subject of loneliness in a multitude of ways, sometimes tackling it directly and sometimes dealing with subjects – sex, illness, abuse – that were themselves sources of stigma or isolation. Edward Hopper, that rangy, taciturn man, was occupied, though he sometimes denied it, with the expression of urban loneliness in visual terms, its translation into paint. Almost a century on, his images of solitary men and women glimpsed behind glass in deserted cafés, offices and hotel lobbies remain the signature images of isolation in the city.

You can show what loneliness looks like, and you can also take up arms against it, making things that serve explicitly as communication devices, resisting censorship and silence. This was the driving motivation of David Wojnarowicz, a still under-known American artist, photographer, writer and activist, whose courageous, extraordinary body of work did more than anything to release me from the burden of feeling that in my solitude I was shamefully alone.

Loneliness, I began to realise, was a populated place: a city in itself. And when one inhabits a city, even a city as rigorously and logically constructed as Manhattan, one starts by getting lost. Over time, you begin to develop a mental map, a collection of favoured destinations and preferred routes: a labyrinth no other person could ever precisely duplicate or reproduce. What I was building in those years, and what now follows, is a map of loneliness, built out of both need and interest, pieced together from my own experiences and those of others. I wanted to understand what it means to be lonely, and how it has functioned in people's lives, to attempt to chart the complex relationship between loneliness and art.

A long time back, I used to listen to a song by Dennis Wilson. It was from *Pacific Ocean Blue*, the album he made after The Beach Boys fell apart. There was a line in it I loved: *Loneliness is a very special place*. As a teenager, sitting on my bed on autumn evenings, I used to imagine that place as a city, perhaps at dusk, when everyone turns homeward and the neon flickers into life. I recognised myself even then as one of its citizens and I liked how Wilson claimed it; how he made it sound fertile as well as frightening.

Loneliness is a very special place. It isn't always easy to see the truth of Wilson's statement, but over the course of my travels I've come to believe that he was right, that loneliness is by no means a wholly worthless experience, but rather one that cuts right to the heart of what we value and what we need. Many marvellous things have emerged from the lonely city: things forged in loneliness, but also things that function to redeem it.

WALLS OF GLASS

I NEVER WENT SWIMMING IN New York. I came and went, but never stuck a summer, and so all the outdoor pools I coveted remained empty, their water spirited away for the duration of the long off-season. Mostly, I stayed on the eastern edges of the island, downtown, taking cheap sublets in East Village tenements or in co-ops built for garment workers, where day and night you could hear the hum of traffic crossing the Williamsburg Bridge. Walking home from whatever temporary office I'd found that day, I'd sometimes take a detour by Hamilton Fish Park, where there was a library and a twelve-lane pool, painted a pale flaking blue. I was lonely at the time, lonely and adrift, and this spectral blue space, filling at its corners with blown brown leaves, never failed to tug my heart.

What does it feel like to be lonely? It feels like being hungry: like being hungry when everyone around you is readying for a feast. It feels shameful and alarming, and over time these feelings radiate outwards, making the lonely person increasingly isolated, increasingly estranged. It hurts, in the way that feelings do, and

it also has physical consequences that take place invisibly, inside the closed compartments of the body. It advances, is what I'm trying to say, cold as ice and clear as glass, enclosing and engulfing.

Most of the time, I sublet a friend's apartment on East 2nd Street, in a neighbourhood full of community gardens. It was an unreconstructed tenement, painted arsenic green, with a claw-footed bathtub in the kitchen, concealed behind a moulding curtain. The first night I arrived there, jet-lagged and bleary, I caught a smell of gas that grew increasingly pronounced as I lay unsleeping on the high platform bed. In the end I called 911 and a few minutes later three firemen trooped in, relit the pilot light and then hung about in their big boots, admiring the wooden floor. There was a framed poster above the oven from a 1980s Martha Clarke performance called *Miracolo d'Amore*. It showed two actors dressed in the white suits and pointed hats of the Commedia dell'Arte. One was moving towards a lit doorway, and the other had flung both hands up in a gesture of horrified alarm.

Miracolo d'Amore. I was in the city because I'd fallen in love, headlong and too precipitously, and had tumbled and found myself unexpectedly unhinged. During the false spring of desire, the man and I had cooked up a hare-brained plan in which I would leave England and join him permanently in New York. When he changed his mind, very suddenly, expressing increasingly grave reservations into a series of hotel phones, I found myself adrift, stunned by the swift arrival and even swifter departure of everything I thought I lacked.

In the absence of love, I found myself clinging hopelessly to the city itself: the repeating tapestry of psychics and bodegas, the

bump and grind of traffic, the live lobsters on the corner of Ninth Avenue, the steam drifting up from beneath the streets. I didn't want to lose the flat I'd rented in England for almost a decade, but I also had no ties, no work or family commitments to tether me in place. I found a lodger and scrimped the money for a plane ticket, not knowing then that I was entering a maze, a walled city within the island of Manhattan itself.

But already this isn't quite right. The first apartment I had wasn't on the island at all. It was in Brooklyn Heights, a few blocks away from where I would have been living in the alternate reality of accomplished love, the ghostly other life that haunted me for almost two full years. I arrived in September, and at immigration the guard said to me without a trace of friendliness *why are your hands shaking?* The Van Wyck Expressway was the same as ever, bleak, unpromising, and it took several attempts to open the big door with the keys my friend had FedExed me weeks back.

I'd only seen the apartment once before. It was a studio, with a kitchenette and an elegantly masculine bathroom tiled all in black. There was another ironic, unsettling poster on the wall, a vintage advert for some kind of bottled drink. A beaming woman, her lower half a glowing lemon, spritzing a tree hung liberally with fruit. It seemed to epitomise sunny abundance, but the light never really made it past the brownstones opposite, and it was clear that I was tucked up on the wrong side of the house. There was a laundry room downstairs, but I was too new to New York to know what a luxury that was, and went down unwillingly, scared the basement door would slam, trapping me in the dripping, Tide-smelling dark.

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Most days I did the same things. Go out for eggs and coffee, walk aimlessly through the exquisite cobbled streets or down to the promenade to gaze at the East River, pushing each day a little further until I reached the park at Dumbo, where on Sundays you'd see the Puerto Rican wedding couples come to have their photos taken, the girls in enormous sculptural lime-green and fuchsia dresses that made everything else look tired and staid. Manhattan across the water, the glittering towers. I was working, but I didn't have anything like enough to do, and the bad times came in the evenings, when I went back to my room, sat on the couch and watched the world outside me going on through glass, a light bulb at a time.

I wanted very much not to be where I was. In fact part of the trouble seemed to be that where I was wasn't anywhere at all. My life felt empty and unreal and I was embarrassed about its thinness, the way one might be embarrassed about wearing a stained or threadbare piece of clothing. I felt like I was in danger of vanishing, though at the same time the feelings I had were so raw and overwhelming that I often wished I could find a way of losing myself altogether, perhaps for a few months, until the intensity diminished. If I could have put what I was feeling into words, the words would have been an infant's wail: *I don't want to be alone. I want someone to want me. I'm lonely. I'm scared. I need to be loved, to be touched, to be held.* It was the sensation of need that frightened me the most, as if I'd lifted the lid on an unappeasable abyss. I stopped eating very much and my hair fell out and lay noticeably on the wooden floor, adding to my disquiet.

I'd been lonely before, but never like this. Loneliness had waxed in childhood, and waned in the more social years that followed. I'd lived by myself since my mid-twenties, often in relationships but sometimes not. Mostly I liked the solitude, or, when I didn't, felt fairly certain I'd sooner or later drift into another liaison, another love. The revelation of loneliness, the omnipresent, unanswerable feeling that I was in a state of lack, that I didn't have what people were supposed to, and that this was down to some grave and no doubt externally unmistakable failing in my person: all this had quickened lately, the unwelcome consequence of being so summarily dismissed. I don't suppose it was unrelated, either, to the fact that I was keeling towards the midpoint of my thirties, an age at which female aloneness is no longer socially sanctioned and carries with it a persistent whiff of strangeness, deviance and failure.

Outside the window, people threw dinner parties. The man upstairs listened to jazz and show tunes at full blast, and filled the hallways with pot smoke, snaking fragrantly down the stairs. Sometimes I spoke to the waiter in my morning café, and once he gave me a poem, typed neatly on thick white paper. But mostly I didn't speak. Mostly I was walled up inside myself, and certainly a very long way from anyone else. I didn't cry often, but once I couldn't get the blinds closed and then I did. It seemed too awful, I suppose, the idea that anyone could peer over and get a glimpse of me, eating cereal standing up or combing over emails, my face illuminated by the laptop's glare.

I knew what I looked like. I looked like a woman in a Hopper painting. The girl in *Automat*, maybe, in a cloche hat

and green coat, gazing into a cup of coffee, the window behind her reflecting two rows of lights, swimming into blackness. Or the one in *Morning Sun*, who sits on her bed, hair twisted into a messy bun, gazing through her window at the city beyond. A pretty morning, light washing the walls, but nonetheless something desolate about her eyes and jaw, her slim wrists crossed over her legs. I often sat just like that, adrift in rumpled sheets, trying not to feel, trying simply to take consecutive breaths.

The one I found most disturbing was *Hotel Window*. Looking at it was like gazing into a fortune teller's mirror, through which you glimpse the future, its spoiled contours, its deficit of promise. This woman is older, tense and unapproachable, sitting on a navy couch in an empty drawing room or lobby. She's dressed to go out, in a smart ruby-coloured hat and cape, and is twisting to look down into the darkening street below, though there's nothing out there save a gleaming portico and the stubborn black window of the building opposite.

Asked about the origins of this painting, Hopper once said in his evasive way: 'It's nothing accurate at all, just an improvisation of things I've seen. It's no particular hotel lobby, but many times I've walked through the Thirties from Broadway to Fifth Avenue and there are a lot of cheesy hotels there. That probably suggested it. Lonely? Yes, I guess it's lonelier than I planned it really.'

What is it about Hopper? Every once in a while an artist comes along who articulates an experience, not necessarily consciously or willingly, but with such prescience and intensity that the association becomes indelible. He never much liked the

idea that his paintings could be pinned down, or that loneliness was his metier, his central theme. 'The loneliness thing is overdone,' he once told his friend Brian O'Doherty, in one of the very few long interviews to which he submitted. And again, in the documentary *Hopper's Silence*, when O'Doherty asks: 'Are your paintings reflective of the isolation of modern life?' A pause, then Hopper says tersely: 'It may be true. It may not be true.' Later, asked what draws him to the dark scenes he favours, he replies opaquely: 'I suppose it's just me.'

Why, then, do we persist in ascribing loneliness to his work? The obvious answer is that his paintings tend to be populated by people alone, or in uneasy, uncommunicative groupings of twos and threes, fastened into poses that seem indicative of distress. But there's something else too; something about the way he contrives his city streets. As the Whitney curator Carter Foster observes in *Hopper's Drawings*, Hopper routinely reproduces in his paintings 'certain kinds of spaces and spatial experiences common in New York that result from being physically close to others but separated from them by a variety of factors, including movement, structures, windows, walls and light or darkness'. This viewpoint is often described as voyeuristic, but what Hopper's urban scenes also replicate is one of the central experiences of being lonely: the way a feeling of separation, of being walled off or penned in, combines with a sense of near-unbearable exposure.

This tension is present in even the most benign of his New York paintings, the ones that testify to a more pleasurable, more equanimous kind of solitude. *Morning in a City*, say, in which a

naked woman stands at a window, holding just a towel, relaxed and at ease with herself, her body composed of lovely flecks of lavender and rose and pale green. The mood is peaceful, and yet the faintest tremor of unease is discernible at the far left of the painting, where the open casement gives way to the buildings beyond, lit by the flannel-pink of a morning sky. In the tenement opposite there are three more windows, their green blinds half-drawn, their interiors rough squares of total black. If windows are to be thought analogous to eyes, as both etymology, *wind-eye*, and function suggests, then there exists around this blockage, this plug of paint, an uncertainty about being seen – looked over, maybe; but maybe also overlooked, as in ignored, unseen, unregarded, undesired.

In the sinister *Night Windows*, these worries bloom into acute disquiet. The painting centres on the upper portion of a building, with three apertures, three slits, giving into a lighted chamber. At the first window a curtain billows outward, and in the second a woman in a pinkish slip bends over a green carpet, her haunches taut. In the third, a lamp is glowing through a layer of fabric, though what it actually looks like is a wall of flames.

There's something odd, too, about the vantage point. It's clearly from above – we see the floor, not the ceiling – but the windows are on at least the second storey, making it seem as if whoever's doing the looking is hanging suspended in the air. The more likely answer is that they're stealing a glimpse from the window of the 'El', the elevator train, which Hopper liked to ride at night, armed with his pads, his fabricated chalk, gazing avidly through the glass for instances of brightness,

moments that fix, unfinished, in the mind's eye. Either way, the viewer – me, I mean, or you – has been co-opted into an estranging act. Privacy has been breached, but it doesn't make the woman any less alone, exposed in her burning chamber.

This is the thing about cities, the way that even indoors you're always at the mercy of a stranger's gaze. Wherever I went – pacing back and forth between the bed and couch; roaming into the kitchen to regard the abandoned boxes of ice cream in the freezer – I could be seen by the people who lived in the Arlington, the vast Queen Anne co-op that dominated the view, its ten brick storeys lagged in scaffolding. At the same time, I could also play the watcher, *Rear Window*-style, peering in on dozens of people with whom I'd never exchange a word, all of them engrossed in the small intimacies of the day. Loading a dishwasher naked; tapping in on heels to cook the children's supper.

Under normal circumstances, I don't suppose any of this would have provoked more than idle curiosity, but that autumn wasn't normal. Almost as soon as I arrived, I was aware of a gathering anxiety around the question of visibility. I wanted to be seen, taken in and accepted, the way one is by a lover's approving gaze. At the same time I felt dangerously exposed, wary of judgement, particularly in situations where being alone felt awkward or wrong, where I was surrounded by couples or groups. While these feelings were undoubtedly heightened by the fact that I was living in New York for the first time – that city of glass, of roving eyes – they arose out of loneliness, which agitates always in two directions, towards intimacy and away from threat.