

Walkabout

Proposals for
Safer Communities

Volume 2 / Issue 4



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**Pedestrian Flags Over Dane County:
Artwashing in the Anthropocene**

For some, the desire to see and be seen is vanity; it is what distinguishes the promenade from the walk. For others, the mutual gaze is the very foundation of ethics. In the case of pedestrian safety, seeing and being seen is neither frivolous nor abstract.

In 2019, over six thousand pedestrians were fatally struck in the United States alone.¹ This works out to a pedestrian fatality every ninety minutes.² Additionally, the problem is only getting worse; pedestrian fatalities grew at a rate nine times higher than other traffic fatalities between 2010 and 2019.³ Though other factors play a role (alcohol is significant), the fact that three quarters of pedestrian fatalities occur after dark demonstrates the importance of seeing and being seen. At first, this may seem like a matter of visibility, not *visuality* — a problem for engineers, not artists. However, a closer inspection reveals myriad entanglements with political, ethical, and aesthetic concerns. We can follow these tangled paths in two local interventions: Pedestrian Flags Over Dane County and its companion project Artful Crossings.



Pedestrian Flags Over Dane County was initiated in 2003 by the non-profit organization Safe Communities Madison-Dane County. Safe Communities found that only six percent of Dane County drivers yielded to pedestrians at a crosswalk, as legally required. The rate increases to ninety percent with their intervention: pedestrian safety flags held in receptacles at either end of a crosswalk. Each flag is a three-foot wooden dowel with a 12 × 12-inch square of orange vinyl attached. A pedestrian waves the flag to signal their intent to cross and carries it across the road to increase their visibility, depositing the flag in the opposite receptacle for the next pedestrian to use. Such an approach to public safety is open to several criticisms, but the addition of a public art project, Artful Crossings, throws its assumptions and internal contradictions into sharp relief.

Shortly after the launch of Artful Crossings, *Isthmus* reporter Jay Rath described the installations as “miniature museums” on Madison street corners.⁴ Whereas Rath frames Artful Crossings as a sort of supplemental cultural amenity, Safe Communities frames Artful Crossings as a makeover: “our current ‘ugly duckling’ holders will be retired and replaced with street art featuring local artists on newly tooled boxes.”⁵ By seeking to mitigate, or at least mediate, the visual disruption of the safety flags, Artful Crossings betrays a fundamental contradiction. Safety flags only work if they are visually disruptive, but such a disruption is an eyesore that must be hidden or beautified.



At issue in the contradictory impulse to conceal the hyper-visible pedestrian flags is not just visibility but visibility. At stake is the “autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and sayable,” the power to classify the built environment into eyesores and amenities.⁶ Were the original flag receptacles (small PVC tubes with instructional stickers) actually uglier than street signs, trash cans, power lines, utility markers, parked cars, or countless other features of the streetscape? Of course not. The features that represent the interests of the powerful have simply been naturalized. In a car-centric city like Madison, that means the interests of drivers are prioritized.

Safe Communities’ “Tips for Responsible Drivers” and “Tips for Assertive but Safe Pedestrians” reflect these priorities. Both documents frame traffic laws as suggestions.⁷ Drivers are told, “Stay distraction free. Put down your cell phones when driving, NEVER text and drive!” as though the Wisconsin law prohibiting texting while driving is an optional practice for drivers who want to be extra responsible. Obeying the speed limit is likewise listed as a “tip.” Whereas pedestrians are instructed: “Point to the other side of the street with the flag high, while standing with at least one foot in the street (the legal trigger for drivers to yield). Look assertive!!” The parenthetical reference to the pedestrian’s legal right is immediately undermined by the imperative to appear a certain way to drivers. The legal right is not enough. The pedestrian must appear a certain way to the driver who, as if deputized by the state,



will permit or prevent the exercise of the pedestrian's right. The driver controls "the recognition of the other" that is required "in order to have a place from which to claim rights."⁸

Elsewhere, pedestrians are told to "give drivers a smile, a wave, or 'Thanks!' to demonstrate to drivers that pedestrians appreciate their courtesy!"⁹ By positioning street-crossing as a gift given by drivers, Safe Communities obscures the actual problem that prompted the safety flags: drivers breaking the law and endangering pedestrians. The intervention disempowers the pedestrians it claims to help. As feminist theorist Sara Ahmed observes, "it is this very structural position of being the guest, or the stranger, the one who receives hospitality, which keeps us in certain places."¹⁰ In turn, "Tips for Responsible Drivers" concludes: "And thanks for stopping for pedestrians!" Safe Communities treats drivers who obey the law as though they are doing a special favor, thus perpetuating the problem the program addresses.¹¹

The interpersonal ethics of the mutual gaze between driver and pedestrian illustrates how Pedestrian Flags Over Dane County makes a collective problem (increasing pedestrian fatalities and widespread disregard for traffic laws) into a matter of personal responsibility. The neoliberal notion that such problems should be solved without governmental action is further built into the project, since it is a non-profit (Safe Communities), that gathered the data and designed the intervention. City



of Madison Traffic Engineering lends authority to the project, but the Artful Crossings receptacles are, in fact, built by another non-profit, a hackerspace called Sector67. Even the flags themselves have been turned into an opportunity for individual action: the Safe Communities website offers “Instructions for Assembling and Repairing Flags,” fittingly written by a volunteer from a neighborhood association.

Collaborations with non-profit organizations and neighborhood groups do have the potential to strengthen communities, but that potential is sidelined by Pedestrian Flags Over Dane County and Artful Crossings. For example, the Adopt-a-Crosswalk Application and Agreement states, “Crosswalks for the Pedestrian Flags Over Dane County program can be adopted by neighborhood associations, neighborhood watch groups, business associations, police departments, local streets departments, individual businesses or other groups that can demonstrate a commitment to maintaining a flagged crossing.”¹² Communities are not only asked to provide their own safety, but they must also prove that they are able to do so. Yet Safe Communities acknowledges it “vulnerable folks like children and the elderly who really need [the pedestrian flags].”¹³ Business associations and neighborhood watch groups conjure industrious, vigorous people contributing to society, while “children and the elderly” are portrayed as helpless. Nowhere in the project are pedestrians conceived as a constituency, an association of their own with particular needs and abilities.



The sort of associations endorsed by Safe Communities are not inclusive. Indeed, their incentive are often opposed to the interests of pedestrians. A project that builds true solidarity among pedestrians might exceed the neoliberal ambitions of Safe Communities and lead to organizing for more substantial investments in health and safety. It is telling that the individual, DIY spirit of the pedestrian flags does not extend to crosswalk painting, stop signs, speed bumps, HAWK signals, or other more costly interventions.

Just as the collective power of pedestrians as a constituency is obscured, so too is the collective danger posed by driving. The individualistic framing again plays a role, addressing “responsible drivers” rather than systems like urban planning or civil engineering. Indeed, the label “responsible drivers” operates like “clean coal.” Even in the limited context of Safe Communities’ own intervention, the fact that only six percent of drivers *are* responsible points to a collective problem rather than a shortcoming of personal responsibility in ninety-four percent of people. This limited context is beside the point, though, because the parallel with clean coal is more than rhetorical. Driving is dangerous not only because pedestrians get struck but because transportation generates the largest share of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States.¹⁴ In its articulation of safety, Artful Crossings portrays danger as local and easy to handle. Drivers are freed from the guilt of contributing to climate change and isolated from its impact — at least for a while longer.



The unseen constituency of pedestrians and the unseen dangers of climate catastrophe are linked, and the realization of the former may lead to the recognition of the latter. This must be done in a productive way, however. In *The Lost Art of Walking*, Geoff Nicholson writes, “the main problem I have with the activist walking lobby is that its members seek to make a hard and fast division between walkers and drivers: walkers are saints, drivers pure evil...Most of us are both walkers and drivers... It’s not clear to me that absolute virtue resides on either side.”¹⁵ While the uneven climate impact of driving versus walking seems clear, Nicholson is right to reject the neoliberal framework of personal morality and responsibility. Public art can spark the nuanced conversations Nicholson advocates, but this potential is not realized by Artful Crossings. Instead, Artful Crossings celebrates the status quo. It hides the radical alternatives viewers could imagine, and demand, beneath the shallow solidarity of local pride and cheerful imagery. It engages with only the symptoms of neoliberal necropolitics — DIY civil engineering and a non-profit safety net — while collaborating with the interests that perpetuate these problems.

Such criticisms could be leveled at plenty of public art projects, but something particularly important is at stake in pedestrianism. The vulnerability of the walker, especially in environments that are hostile to walking, lays bare what artist and theorist Jill H. Casid calls the “exacerbated forms



of vulnerability and exposure by the retractions of state supports.”¹⁶ Especially vulnerable are those for whom walking is a necessity rather than a choice, from refugees abroad to underserved people in Madison. Walking also affords an opportunity to see what is ordinarily kept out of sight. Since cities like Madison prioritize the comfort and convenience of car-owners, it is pedestrians who encounter the externalized costs of those priorities. Thus, we come full circle to the ethics of seeing and being seen. For artists to bear witness to hidden and invisible violence, they need to go beyond the apologetic impulse of Artful Crossings. If “the aesthetic dimension of necropolitics resides precisely in seizure, captivity and immobilization,” then what is needed is an aesthetic of redistribution, liberation, and mobility.¹⁷



Notes

- 1 "Pedestrian Traffic Fatalities by State: 2020 Preliminary Data." Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), 2021.
- 2 "Pedestrian Safety." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 6, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/transportationsafety/pedestrian_safety/index.html.
- 3 "Pedestrian Traffic Fatalities by State" GHSA, 2021.
- 4 "Creative Crosswalks: A Public Art Project Decorates Madison Street Corners." *Isthmus*, September 6, 2015. <https://isthmus.com/arts/Pedestrian-Crossing-Art/>.
- 5 "Pedestrian Safety." Safe Communities, June 4, 2018, <https://safercommunity.net/traffic-safety/pedestrian-safety/>.
- 6 Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "The Right to Look." *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 473–96.
- 7 "Pedestrian Safety." Safe Communities.
- 8 Mirzoeff, 474.
- 9 "Pedestrian Safety." Safe Communities.
- 10 Ahmed, Sara, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8.2 (2007): 164.
- 11 "Pedestrian Safety." Safe Communities.



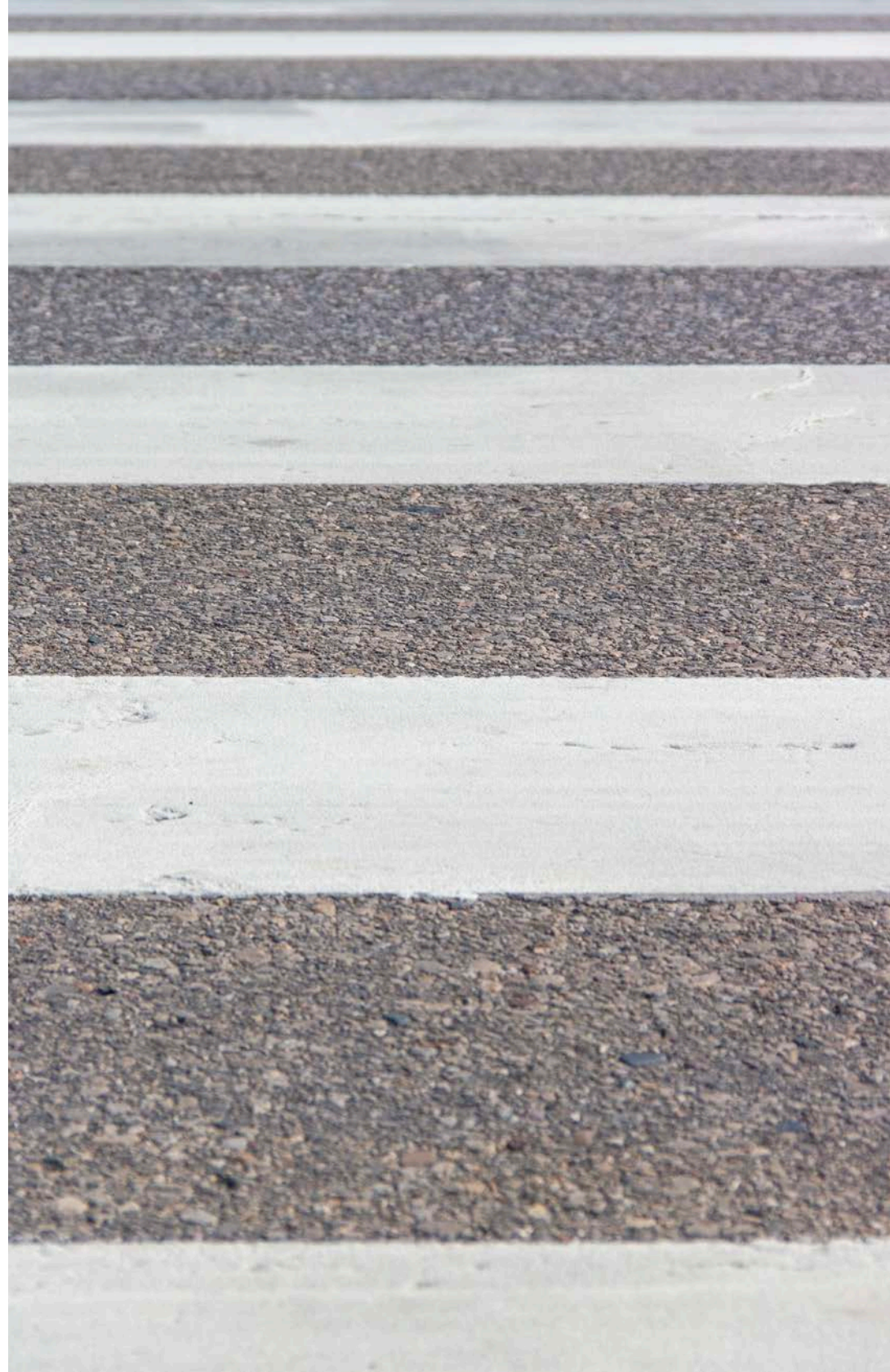
- 12 "Pedestrian Flags Over Dane County Adopt-A-Crosswalk Application and Agreement." Safe Communities, 2014, <https://safercommunity.net/wp-content/uploads/158169-256079.ped-flag-application-agreement.pdf>.
- 13 "Learn to Cross with Pedestrian Flags." Safe Communities, 2016, https://safercommunity.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/LEARN_TO_WALK-1-traffic-safety-pedestrian-safety.pdf.
- 14 "Sources of Greenhouse Gas Emissions." Environmental Protection Agency. <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/sources-greenhouse-gas-emissions>.
- 15 Geoff Nicholson, *The Lost Art of Walking* (New York City: Riverhead Books, 2008), 14.
- 16 Jill H. Casid, "Doing Things with Being Undone," *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, no. 1 (April 2019): 31.
- 17 Gržinić, Marina, "What is the Aesthetics of Necropolitics?" In *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics*, ed. Natasha Lushetich (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 17–36.



Afterword

In retrospect, it seems obvious that a critique of individual action in the face of collective danger was a response to COVID-19. Yet, when I began *Proposals for Safer Communities* in fall 2021, I simply wanted the slogans to speak to issues beyond pedestrian safety. The realization that this was a COVID project occurred gradually, then crystalized when I read *Safety Orange* by Anna Watkins Fisher.¹ The book had been published in December 2021, just as I completed the seminar paper from which I crafted the essay above. Fisher eloquently articulates the bigger picture I had begun to make visible: “how fluorescent orange symbolizes the uneven distribution of safety and risk in the neoliberal United States.”² Rather than summarize Fisher’s arguments, I will encourage readers to read her concise and compelling work, available for free through Manifold and Project Muse.³

- 1 Anna Watkins Fisher, *Safety Orange* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).
- 2 “Safety Orange,” University of Minnesota Press, <https://www.upress.umn.edu/9781517913397/safety-orange/>.
- 3 <https://manifold.umn.edu/projects/safety-orange>.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/98567>.





NO
SHO
DIE
FOR
YOUR
COMFORT



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RIGHT
WAY IS
RIGHT -
NOT A
PRIVILEGE













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Madison, Wisconsin

Proposals for Safer Communities shows how the politics and aesthetics of Madison's pedestrian safety flag program place the burden of community safety on individual action — a theme with renewed resonance during the COVID-19 crisis, when this project began in 2021. By adding messages to Madison's pedestrian flags, each street crossing becomes a protest. Walkers can reassert the shared responsibility for their safety. Walkers can reinscribe the connections among dangers — not just vehicle strikes but also pollution and climate change.

Waving a flag can be an act of surrender or a rallying cry. *Proposals for Safer Communities* seeks to make walkers visible in a new way, not as vulnerable individuals but as members of the multitude.