

just
guff #9



THE
BUTTON

I haven't touched a pedestrian light button in over two months. I stopped pressing them when coronavirus fear rapidly increased back in mid-March. My need for recurrent button-pushing results from my daily exercise regime of an hour-long morning walk. For many years my post-breakfast stroll involved a lap of Chapel Street, passing through the suburbs of South Yarra, Prahran and Windsor. When the pandemic came to town I decided to change my route in order to avoid as many people as possible; I now stick to the quieter surrounding side streets, walking somewhat parallel to Chapel Street and therefore crossing the same three main roads, making for six potential button-meeting moments on a round trip. Since traffic has been much quieter than usual during this time I decided early on to simply cross these roads when traffic was clear, so that I didn't have to touch any buttons, avoiding both germs and the need for constant hand sanitising. I deem the old sleeve-over-the-hand method as unsuitable since the virus has a surface life, and this alternative has always seemed weird to me anyway – it's easier to clean the tip of your finger than the cuff of your jumper. I've joked to family about getting ironically hit buy a car, rendering my reason for avoiding the buttons redundant. I realise that the likelihood of catching the virus from one of these buttons is miniscule, but my avoidance of them now feels like a habit that I can't break.



There are less people on my new walking route, but over the past two months it has felt like I am forever moving to the nature strip to avoid close proximity to other pedestrians, or onto the road of the smaller side streets due to their narrow paths and lack of nature strips. The occasional fellow walker will also considerably move in order to maintain the social distancing requirement of 1.5 meters, but annoyingly the majority seem nonchalant. And don't get me started on passing joggers (too late)... with their heavy panting and flying beads of sweat, if they quickly sneak up on you there is no time to move away from them and their floating fluids. I never say anything out loud to these thoughtless passers-by, and I try not to let my passive aggressive mutterings affect my appreciation of the birds, flowers, and sunshine (the later of which there is less of with our fast approaching winter).





Clearly I have some obsessive tendencies; I was a little bit of a germophobe prior to the pandemic, but I assume I'm not alone in my avoidance of buttons (and other outdoor infrastructure that poses a potential infection threat). Back in pre-pandemic days I could push a pedestrian button with minimal hesitation; will I now forever fear that big round button? Due to the lockdown rules I don't go further than a 3km radius from my home; the restrictions are presently slowly being eased, but there are still only five reasons to leave your house. Perhaps when restrictions ease further (and our containment of the virus continues) my fears will also ease, and one day I will find myself once again freely button-touching and crossing roads with the guiding light of the little green human figure.



Button etiquette. In my past button-pressing life, if I could see that a button had already been pressed (thanks to the circular red light) I would refrain from unnecessarily pressing it again; but it can be an instinctual thing to do, so is a forgivable oversight. Although, when you are standing right next to the button and someone walks up and presses it again, the proximity feels like an insult, as though they are insinuating you are too stupid to have pressed it already. Or when you are waiting with a group of strangers at the lights, then a late arrival assumes that none of you have thought to push the button (which does occasionally happen and there is mass disappointment when no green light ensues) but if I'm the late arriver I like to give people the benefit of the doubt and assume they have fulfilled their pedestrian duties. And there are those that suffer from button-tapping-frenzy; pressing the button numerous times in quick succession as though this will inform the lights that they are in a hurry... Unfortunately it doesn't.



Some pedestrian lights automatically change (in sync with the vehicle lights) without the need to press the button; I wish ALL of them did this! Traffic signal timing takes various things into account, but it always feels like a minimum of regard is given to pedestrians. Two sets of pedestrian lights on Chapel Street (that I previously crossed on most days) would automatically change – so there was never any need to dash to the corner to press the button in that sacred moment before the lights change, which when missed can often mean you either have to wait for the next full round of light changes or riskily cross in impatient defiance of the flashing red figure/man/woman (female-shaped pedestrian lights exist in some places). Even though Chapel Street is a little quieter at this point in time, it is not quiet enough, and my present desire to avoid people and busy shopping areas outweighs the minor convenience of automatic pedestrian lights. In light of the current pandemic the City of Melbourne have made all pedestrian lights within in the CBD automatic and have put up signage telling people they don't need to touch the buttons (I have not seen this in person but have read about it online).



The future of traffic light buttons. I wonder if there is good reason as to why all pedestrian lights can't be set to automatically change; if there is, then perhaps they could instead use sensor technology to determine when a pedestrian is waiting to cross. Detector technology is currently used at some intersections to increase the amount of crossing time to match the speed of pedestrians, so couldn't similar technology be used to eliminate the need for overly fondled buttons? **Traffic light buttons of the past.** Writing this zine reminded me about the older style pedestrian buttons; there used to be an old one in Windsor, which I photographed in the pre-pandemic year of 2015 (see right). This particular button has been since been replaced by its more modern counterpart. The newer large round buttons are definitely more ergonomic and they are designed to help both sight- and hearing-impaired pedestrians. But I do love the retro aesthetic of the old buttons; a reminder of simpler times. I wonder if any of these still remain in Melbourne... Perhaps you live near one?



To press or not to press. Friend or foe. It's... **THE BUTTON!**





*just
guff*

I have decided to remain relatively anonymous in my zine making (to allow for more creative freedom) but if you want to get in touch for more/other or possibly new editions of *just guff* you can email me at:

justguffpress@hotmail.com

just guff #9 © May 2020. Printed in Melbourne, Australia.