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These Boomboxes Beg For Money In Cities Where Homeless People Aren't Allowed To

“Songs For Thomas Piketty” is a protest against the cities that are pushing out the homeless in the name of commerce.



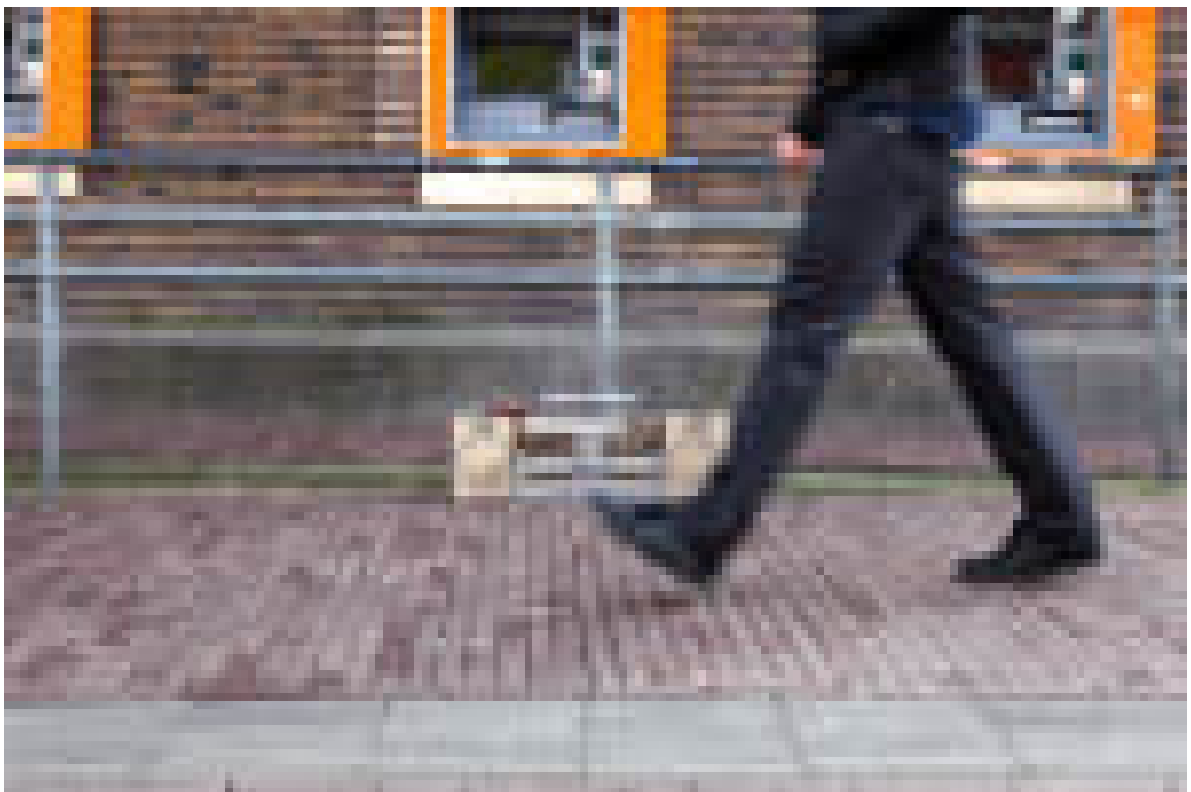
BY **ADELE PETERS** 3 MINUTE READ



An art project called *Songs for Thomas Piketty* is a protest to anti-panhandling laws.



Sitting on a street corner in the Dutch city of Utrecht, a boombox plays a recorded message asking for spare change.



The recording—and a cup on top for donations—are standing in for homeless people who are no longer allowed to panhandle in the city.



Each boombox plays someone singing a song about unity—like the French anthem *La Marseillaise*—and then a real recording of someone asking for help.



Panhandling is banned in the Netherlands, and in downtown Rotterdam, the city is trying to attract more tourists by sanitizing the area.



The same thing is happening around the world. Anti-homeless spikes on sidewalks or walls are increasingly common.







Sitting on a street corner in the Dutch city of Utrecht, a boombox plays a recorded message asking for spare change. The recording—and a cup on top where people passing by can leave money—are temporarily standing in for homeless people who are no longer allowed to panhandle in the city.

“For a few years, I’ve tried to show the exceptions to the rule—the people and gestures we might not meet on the streets, because society tends to make them invisible,” says artist Dries Verhoeven, who placed the begging boomboxes throughout Utrecht and nearby Rotterdam in an art project called *Songs for Thomas Piketty*.

Each boombox plays someone singing a song about unity—like the French anthem La Marseillaise—and then a real recording of someone asking for help.



Panhandling is banned in the Netherlands, and in downtown Rotterdam (Amsterdam's poorer, grittier, cousin) the city is trying to attract more tourists by sanitizing the area. Benches are designed to make it impossible to sleep. "City marketing is of growing importance in the way public space is been shaped," says Verhoeven.



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The same thing is happening around the world. In the United States, the number of cities with bans on panhandling went up 25% between 2011 and 2014. The number of cities with bans in specific neighborhoods went up 20%. **Anti-homeless spikes** on sidewalks or walls are increasingly common.



Public space is less often truly for the public. “The design of that space is increasingly being left in the hands of parties with commercial interest,” he says. “Public buildings—train stations, museums, and hospitals—are looking more like shopping centers, and users are approached as consumers. It is all very pleasant but it feels like a false reassurance. Like elevator music. Such developments give me the need for contrast, for graffiti. It has aroused the desire in me to cause disruption, to place question marks in the public domain.”

Streets that have been cleaned up mask the fact that inequality still exists. “The greatest danger is that we start to feel too at ease in our thinking, that we become complacent, that we think that the sterile street represents the world,” he says. “What the homeless can do is to remind us of poverty.”

He thinks the project could work in other cities—even those, such as San Francisco, where the problem of homelessness is still so visible that people walking by tend to ignore someone begging on the sidewalk.



“Art in general can offer resistance to this tendency to tune things out, it can deactivate our ‘autopilot,’” Verhoeven says. “When you find yourself giving more attention to a machine than to the poor man it represents, you might start thinking about your usual attitude to the homeless or needy people in society.”

It might even make someone more likely to give some spare change the next time they pass someone. The boomboxes have successfully collected some money.

“The work functions as an anonymous transfer of money,” he says. “I find it quite ironic that people nowadays feel more at ease when helping an invisible person—for example by making an online banking donation to a reliable organization—than helping someone who is standing physically in front of them.”

The boomboxes will be in Utrecht streets through June.

All Photos: Willem Popelier

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adele Peters is a senior writer at Fast Company who focuses on solutions to climate change and other global challenges, interviewing leaders from [Al Gore](#) and [Bill Gates](#) to emerging climate tech entrepreneurs like [Mary Yap](#).. She contributed to the bestselling book [Worldchanging: A User's Guide for the 21st Century](#) and a new book from Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies called [State of Housing Design 2023 More](#)

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