

THE PLURALIST

9.1977

WORDS

IN BLUE

NEON

THE META ISSUE

NOVEMBER 2022

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From Conceptualism onwards, artists have started using words as a medium for making art. With these practices, words have become more than just linguistic elements. They started shaping as objects, sounds and spaces. Artists from Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner to Jenny Holzer and Bruce Nauman have used language to push the boundaries of art creation and to show the many ways in which meaning can emerge with and beyond words. It always fascinated me how silences, blank spaces and breaks emphasise messages, like symbols without a physical body. A big word on an empty wall lit in neon colours can reach the viewer in ways in which a book composed of thousands of words never could.

Through the theme of this issue, I wanted to emphasise that we don't need a lot of words to communicate with each other. All we need are the right words. And a context to utter them. This intertwining dance of words, which to some extent are mere visual symbols, shaped into meditations, abstractions, theories, poems, instances. They all mediate each other creating, what I hope it will be, a very enjoyable reading for you all.

X,  
Lera

And a new academic year starts.

As the wheel starts to spin again, we wanted to create a space for the student body to meet and for their practices to dialogue, to interact. The Pluralist aims to stand as a stage for students' voices to resonate with each other and fill the RCA's walls with fresh ideas; we strived to encourage explorations of alternative ways of communicating such perspectives that would challenge the boundaries of languages in their literal form.

The Meta issue is a collection of stories, reflexions and observations sent to us through the prism of interpretive words; words as single or group of distinct and meaningful element(s) of speech or writing, in the shape of texts, typographic experimentations, photographs and illustrations. The collection gathers instinctive and personal communication means, that attribute the issue with a certain level of honesty and warmth. The diversity of the cohort's contributions made the design challenging, but the issue abounds with exciting prompts for the year ahead. I hope you enjoy experiencing the community's statement, detailed in 9.197 words.

\*  
Camille

In the past what I experienced was  
the fragmentation of the world  
The violence of language: of making the cut  
And trying to make the part form the whole  
Pieces and pieces  
My mind became the interplay of dissolution and emergence  
Of language cutting up the world  
I fell between the voids in sentences, the gaps in meaning  
I tried to prise open linguistic structure  
Coherence and sense  
In order to find something  
To complete the picture

But from the very start, our enterprise is doomed  
The picture we strive to complete  
Is a false one  
It was made broken  
It is the trapped reflection of a dying sun  
We cannot make it symmetrical  
We cannot complete the circle

Fragmentation  
Chaos and night

The false promise of reason  
Of the puncture marks of real contrasted with the imagined

Cut off from the Mundus Imaginalis  
The mythic  
The metaphorical

Deployed into several competing camps  
At war

Trying to cover the same terrain  
Staking their claim

While ceaselessly detaching from the ground of being

Fragmentation of heart and mind  
Heart-mind

Fragmentation of body and soul  
Body-soul

Image and substance  
Image-substance  
The substantial image  
Not substantiated by words  
But by world

Experience  
Tirelessly proliferating and enfolding context  
Texture

The erogenous, bumpy surfaces of the real  
I brush with my fingers  
And explore with my mouth  
No words were spoken  
What is communication in absence of language?  
What are words without world?

How can I form the shape of a sphere, a triangle, a tetrahedron  
With my throat?

It's dizzying  
Maddening

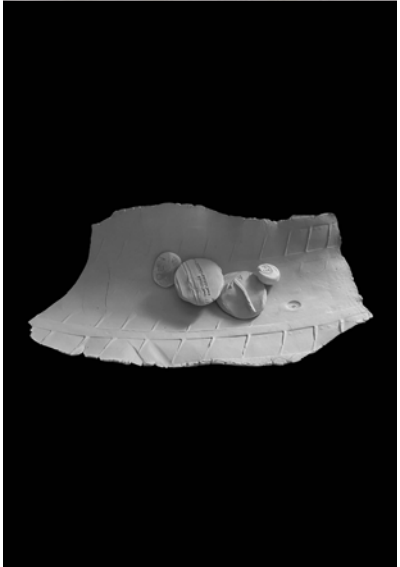
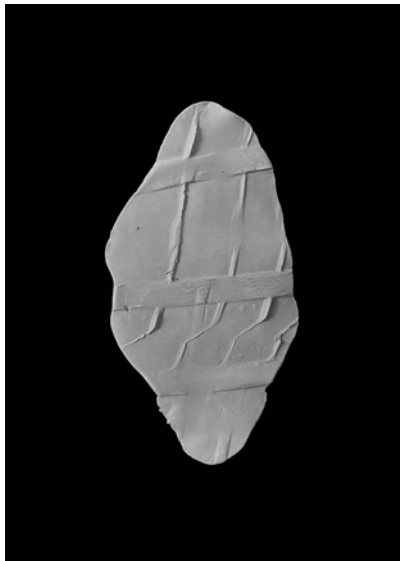
It doesn't lead anywhere  
Meaning:  
A space without directional coordinates

Losing the real to find the real

Renunciation of language  
Forms  
Shapes

The colours of the personality  
Perhaps all along that void was holding me  
Sailing me to the other side  
Crossing unimaginable distance  
Through the eye of the needle  
Or navel  
Mother tides  
I wanted my shapes to feel like poetry  
Like and alike  
Something familiar  
I wanted one thing to be translatable into something else  
With no sense of loss  
I wanted to see in full colour  
H.D  
To turn the vibrance up  
And I wanted to tell someone about this experience  
And I wanted to stop





# THOSE RUNNING MINDS Lakshita Munjal

Sitting with strangers  
Held by their bubbles.  
Everyone's minds lost  
Somewhere up their past.

Some scroll  
Some look around  
into nothing; but something  
Sad faces  
Tired faces

Sculptures of our past,  
Some care too much  
Some don't as much  
Those running minds.

Some judge  
Some admire  
Some want to be admired  
Others hide!

Patterns mix  
Colours mix  
Wrinkles mix  
Looking dejected

Finding seats  
Searching for eyes  
Admiration, then  
Dejection  
Lumps up to reflection.

I sit there  
Wanting to be desired  
By the running minds  
At the Delhi metro.



On text and context

120

g foglie di basilico

70

g olio extravergine di oliva

60

g Parmigiano Reggiano

40

g pecorino

30

g pinoli

1

spicchio di aglio  
sale grosso

250

g di pasta essiccata lentamente  
trafilata al bronzo

Recidere foglie di basilico dal  
ramo della pianta  
di basilico.  
Mettere le foglie di basilico da  
una parte qualsiasi.

Aspettare

Mettere l'aglio all'interno del  
mortaio.

Impugnare il pestello e con  
flusso incessante roteare il pes-  
tello all'interno del mortaio

abbiate cura

che il pestello aderisca alle  
pareti del mortaio.

Aggiungere sale in quantità  
sufficiente.

Recuperare le foglie di basilico  
metterle nel mortaio  
nel mortaio mettere anche i  
pinoli

ora

Nuovamente colpire con  
il pestello

Per evitare il distacco dalla  
personalità  
Apportare a piacere variazioni  
al movimento

Destra sinistra sinistra destra  
destra destra sinistra

allo stesso tempo

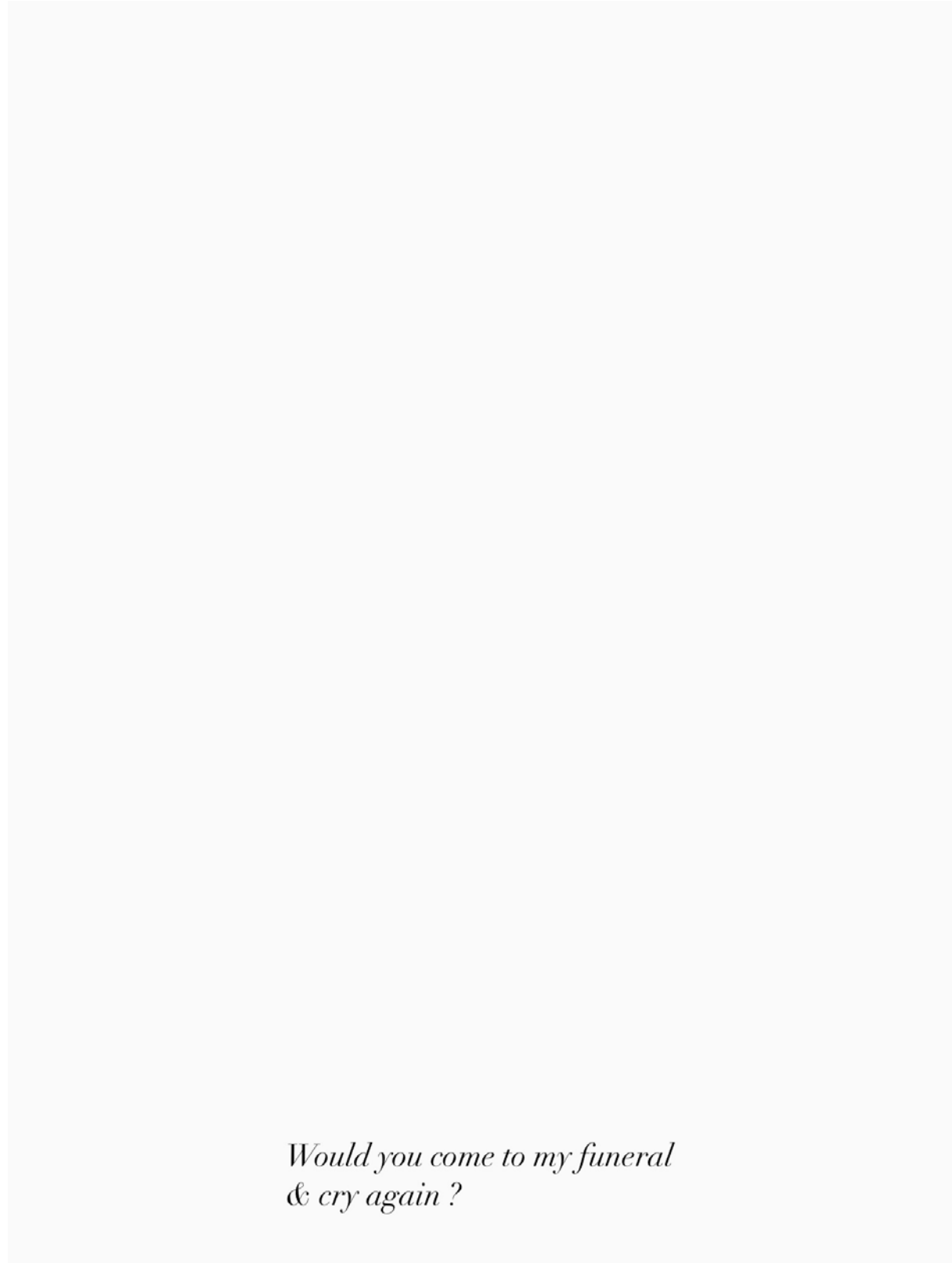
Aggiungere olio a filo.  
A filo: adagio

Mantenere comunque viva  
l'esecuzione

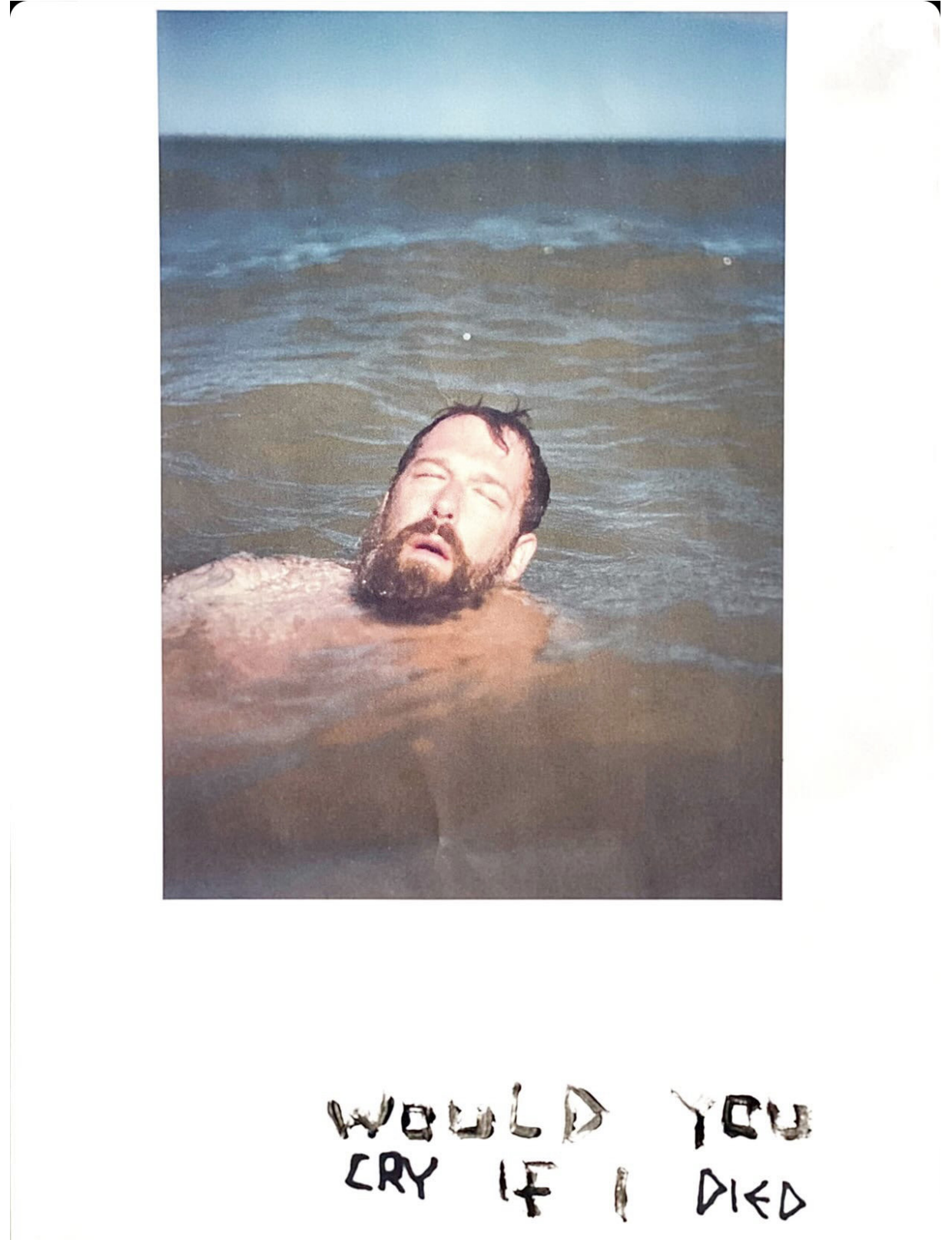
Viva

Il pesto è pronto

+++++Non augurate buon appetito ai vostri commensali è segno di cattiva educazione+++++



*Would you come to my funeral  
& cry again ?*

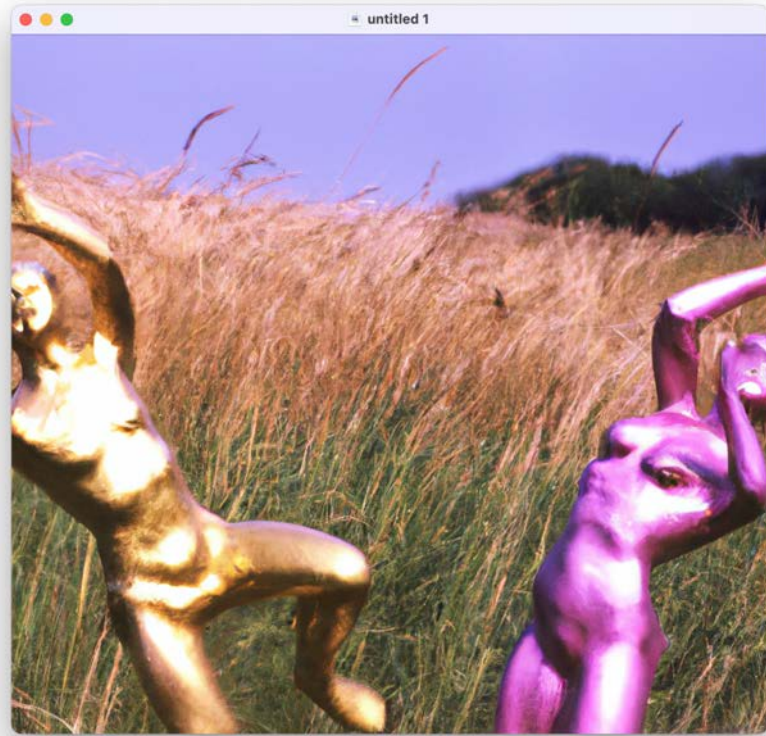


WOULD YOU  
CRY IF I DIED



# THE VERY LAST DAY Benjamin Holmes

```
text 9
and / on the very last day, the sun oscillates on
the horizon, ---/---. .//. -->%
:~::~ #. *****
Ce. Çâ. ---& *****
.~*
theories wear off, indecision prevails.
---*
```



The performative capacity  
of the text depends of  
the variation of its latitude  
(collocation)

and

The non-reducibility to the  
common denominator ask the  
audience to activate a proce-  
dure of approximation to  
the text itself, determining in  
the recipient the slippage  
from meaning receptor to  
meaning producer

and

The text, outwardly  
individual contribution,  
becomes collective fruit

and

# KATZ' ATLAS: MEDITATIONS ON AUTO-ABSTRACTION AND HETEROGLOSSIA IN MONTAGE MOVING-IMAGE WORKS WHICH INCORPORATE PRIMARY MATERIALS DERIVED FROM THE SCIENCES

Ann Upton

When the primary materials used in a still-image or moving-image montage film work are derived from the sciences, complex investigations of perception and meaning arise.

Diagrams, illustrations, and visual outputs, produced by or in support of specific scientific studies, should be presented along with a contextual underpinning of their relevance and meaning for a reader to understand them as they are intended. This may take the form of a body of text referencing the figure; a verbal explanation during a presentation where the figure is presented to the attendees; a caption underneath an image in a book or article; or in the case of data visualizations, a key that allows the reader to decode its meaning. When visual materials of this nature are stripped of this essential context, they cannot be easily read or understood – particularly when the figure acts as a symbolic representation of a concept, theory, or data set, as opposed to a directly recognisable iconographic or pictorial representation of an object, such as an x-ray in a medical textbook.

An expert in the field to which a symbol relates, i.e., an informed reader, will likely be able to understand its intended meaning to a degree without the inclusion of descriptors or keys. Their understanding hinges on their prior study or knowledge of the field. The average observer however, an uninformed reader, who does not possess any prior knowledge of the field to which the symbol relates, will not be capable of understanding or decoding its original intended meaning. In this instance, the figure auto-abstracts, and reduces to its formal qualities.

Abstract Forms can be categorized as a subset of Nonsense Forms.<sup>1</sup> Gibson classifies Nonsense Forms as those which “do not specifically represent (are not a projection of) a recognizable object.”<sup>2</sup> Gibson notes the relevance of the reader’s ability to recognize and understand the content of an image in its categorization:

[It should be noted that a drawing may also be meaningless for a quite different reason, because, although, the object is an accurate projection of an object, the object is not recognisable to the observer. Biological drawings and mathematical constructions are often of such nature.](#)<sup>3</sup>

This places scientific diagrams, illustrations, and outputs, in the same grouping as abstract artworks and unintelligible symbols, when the observer or reader does not have the ability to decode that which it was created to represent.

David Katz’ Psychological Atlas<sup>4</sup> contains hundreds of drawings, diagrams and symbols relating to the field of Psychology as it was understood at the time of its publication in 1948. These figures are numbered and accompanied by a written index, explaining the function of each figure as it relates to the field. Notably, this index appears in the pages before the printed figures. As such, when the reader glances at the illustrated pages of the book, the figures are accompanied

<sup>1</sup> J.J. Gibson, What is Form? Psychol. Rev, 58 (1951), 403-412 (p. 407). <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 407. <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 407. <sup>4</sup> David Katz, Psychological Atlas, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948). <sup>5</sup> Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, (New York : HarperCollins, 1994) p. 133. <sup>6</sup> Gibson, What is Film Form? p. 407. <sup>7</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Film Art: An Introduction. 12th edn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2020) p.61. <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.54. <sup>9</sup> Zorns Lemma, dir. Hollis Frampton (1970). <sup>10</sup> Bordwell Thompson, Film Art: An Introduction, p.55.

only by their assigned numbers, and the other figures with which they share a page. If one of these pages were removed from the book and presented without the accompanying index to a reader who is thoroughly informed in the history and theories of the field of psychology, the reader would be able to understand the meaning of the symbols presented only by their previous knowledge of their meaning. If we suppose that the page without the accompanying index is presented to a reader without any previous knowledge of the field of psychology, or of the book’s title or origin, an entirely different outcome emerges. In this instance, the uninformed reader can only derive meaning from the figure – which they cannot truly read as a symbol – solely based on their interpretation of its form, and the context within which it is presented. It is this publication which has sparked this meditation on auto-abstracting symbols and their use in montage film. If we suppose that the figures depicted in Katz’ Atlas could be repurposed by a montage filmmaker, the resulting work will function through a heteroglossia determined by the experience and knowledge of the filmmaker (writer) and film audience (reader) alike.

Scott McCloud argues that “[e]xpressionism and synaesthetics are distortive by their nature. If strong enough, their effects can obscure their subjects.”<sup>5</sup> What we are discussing here, however, is not a case of the thwarting of our ability to recognise the meanings in symbols by the sheer influence of powerful formal properties and synaesthetics. When the subject represented by a symbol is highly specialist and unintelligible to the reader, it is stripped of its symbolic quality and rendered a Nonsense Form. The observer, with no other mechanism to decipher the figure, can then rely only on their synaesthetic abilities, and interpret the formal qualities and contexts presented to them without an understanding of their source or intended meaning. The uninformed reader can then form independent associations and readings of the figure based on these interpretations:

[The fact is that nonsense-forms are never nonsensical; they are never actually meaningless to an observer, but are simply unspecific or ambiguous. The perceiver discovers a succession of objects in the picture or, if not objects, then surfaces, edges, and fanciful constructions which are often aesthetically interesting.](#)<sup>6</sup>

The uninformed reader’s aesthetic interest in the figure as described by Gibson has the capacity to engage their attention and prompt an independent process of coding and decoding of the figure and its context.

[A complex film engages our interest on many levels, creates a multiplicity of relations among many separate formal elements, and tends to create intriguing patterns of feelings and meanings](#)<sup>7</sup>

The non-narrative montage film as we are imagining it could certainly be regarded as a complex film. The non-narrative form can provoke in its reader an instinct to investigate the work, to draw conclusions from the patterns and connections between the materials displayed on screen. As the reader engages with a work, they “enter into an active participation with [the parts of a series or pattern], creating and readjusting expectations as the pattern develops over time.”<sup>8</sup> The montage film can, in a sense, train the reader to understand the coded meaning of its combined elements. Bordwell and Thompson cite Hollis Frampton’s structuralist film Zorn’s Lemma<sup>9</sup> as a “cinematic picture puzzle”<sup>10</sup> which indeed trains its reader to understand its meaning through its structure. The reader’s drive to understand a complex film, to interpret its coded meaning through associations

<sup>11</sup> Birgit Mersmann, 'Digital Abstraction: Interface between Electronic Media Art and Data Visualization', in *The Iconology of Abstraction : Non-Figurative Images and the Modern World*, ed. by Kresimir Purgar (New York : Talor and Francis Group, 2020), pp.176-192 (p.181). <sup>12</sup> Ryoji Ikeda, *Datamatics* (installation), Multiple Locations, 2006-ongoing. <sup>13</sup> Mersmann, 'Digital Abstraction: Interface between Electronic Media Art and Data Visualization', in *The Iconology of Abstraction : Non-Figurative Images and the Modern World*, p.182. <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.182. <sup>15</sup> Jenn Tran, 1119 SUNSPOT DRAWINGS & 14

and formal analysis, is the essential active component that fuels the dialogic nature of the film itself.

Birgit Mersmann considers "data visualisation as a form of digital abstraction."<sup>11</sup> In doing so, she examines Ryoji Ikeda's installation *Datamatics*,<sup>12</sup> created by the digital abstraction of raw data into "computer-generated sound-images."<sup>13</sup> It is Mersmann's description of the viewer experience which is of interest here:

...they rhythmically flicker in black and white with intermittent color accents, assembling computer graphic structures and outlines that remind the viewer of bar codes and diagrams, test images, records and interference patterns – even of a predigital electronic era.<sup>14</sup>

Mersmann's suggestion that the visually abstracted data reminds the viewer of imagery related to data and computer sciences indicates that the interpretation of the uninformed reader does not fall far from the primary intention of the source material. Of course, without the computational power to reverse the digital abstraction processes that resulted in this visual output, the reader cannot understand the true meaning of the source material. Here that computational power is equivalent to the prior knowledge needed for a reader to decode the isolated pages of Katz' Atlas.

Ikeda as presented by Mersmann can be considered an informed writer. The data sets used were known to the artist before their abstraction. So too, in a sense, is Jenn Tran, whose short animation work 1119 SUNSPOT DRAWINGS & 14 CARTOONS OF THE SUN<sup>15</sup> was created following the interpretation of an act of data mapping. The film is about the daily Sunspot drawings at the Mt. Wilson Observatory in California, a practice which has been documented since 1917. Tran asserts that "[she doesn't] really understand the scientific notation of the sunspot drawings themselves,"<sup>16</sup> however her knowledge of their intended meaning and purpose would indicate that she is indeed, for our purposes, an informed writer. The animated work displays notational figures and symbols, overlapping, interacting, and scattering across the screen. As in Mersmann's analysis of Ikeda's installation, we should acknowledge that similarly, even an uninformed reader would have the capacity to recognise the elements present in SUNSPOT DRAWINGS as being associated with data sciences and mapping. Without the context provided by the title, however, it is unlikely that they would connect the notations to the referenced Sunspot drawings. If we consider an instance where the film is screened in a gallery space, and a circumstance where the reader does not engage with the written context provided (including the film's title), then this too would result in an auto-abstraction. Should the current sunspot drawer view the film, an entirely different reading would occur, as even without knowledge of the film's title, they would surely recognize the notations presented – though the newfound animated context of the notations may challenge their reading and decoding of the piece as a linear translation of the act of Sunspot drawing. Indeed, their reading of the formal qualities of the work, such as the pace of the animation, the sound design, the montage-like overlapping of the animated elements, would be informed by their previous understanding of the notations represented, though they do not directly reference any scientific material and are therefore subject to formal and associational interpretation.

CARTOONS OF THE SUN, online video recording, Vimeo, 16 June 2021, <<https://vimeo.com/563723082>> [accessed 9 October 2022]. <sup>16</sup> Jenn Tran, 'Small Work', Jenn Tran, <<https://jenstrann.com/Small-Work-1>> [accessed 09 October 2022]. <sup>17</sup> Michael Haverkamp, *Synesthetic Design : Handbook for a Multi-Sensory Approach*, (Basel : Birkhäuser, 2013) p.253.

Both reader and writer draw from their lived experience and their experience of other works in their perception and understanding of the montage piece as we hypothesise. Degrees of previous study and understanding, along with many possible formal interpretations or derived associations for each individual element or figure included in the montage work result in an impossibly broad spectrum of interpreted meaning. The result is a dialogic communication between writer and reader(s), with an infinite number of co-existing possible readings. The uninformed writer can determine the meaning of the elements they arrange as they see fit, based upon formal principles and an instinctive emotional response to the symbols in a structuralist practice operating according to the unique principles of their own perception. When presented to the informed reader, their prior knowledge may replace the meaning as coded by the uninformed writer with the concepts they themselves associate with the symbols, according to their previous experience of the field to which they originally relate. Without overwriting these associations, they will not understand the meaning as intended by the uninformed writer. When we consider the montage film as an artefact of structuralist communication, the result is almost aphasiac.

This brings about the question, where is meaning determined? If it is determined by the creator of the work, then our questioning can rest there. If we consider that the meaning of a work is determined by the interpretation of the reader, a far more intriguing result emerges.

The recipient, namely the person receiving the information, however, requires background information in order to decipher the symbol – he or she must be capable of learning the meaning. Thereby, the term meaning refers to a relationship between a perceptual object and a concept.<sup>17</sup>

The understanding of meaning as outlined here asserts that it lies in the relationship between form and concept. In the case of a dialogue between the informed reader and the informed writer, this understanding is a straightforward one. However, once we introduce either an uninformed writer or uninformed reader, (or indeed both simultaneously), we are challenged to understand meaning as a spectrum of infinite outcomes, dependent on the lived experience, prior education, formal analysis, and processes of visual and auditory association of the individual. As such, a writer, informed or uninformed, who implements primary materials derived from the sciences in montage-based complex filmmaking, can create a work with an intended meaning that never translates to its reader. An uninformed reader of a work of this nature, can progress to an informed reader, given the opportunities and resources to familiarize themselves with the source material and its original intended context. However, an informed reader cannot by any traditional methods transform into an uninformed reader. In this way, they lack the privilege of the uninformed individual, to assign a systematic coding of meaning to the materials and contexts presented in such a film unique to their own perceptual instincts.



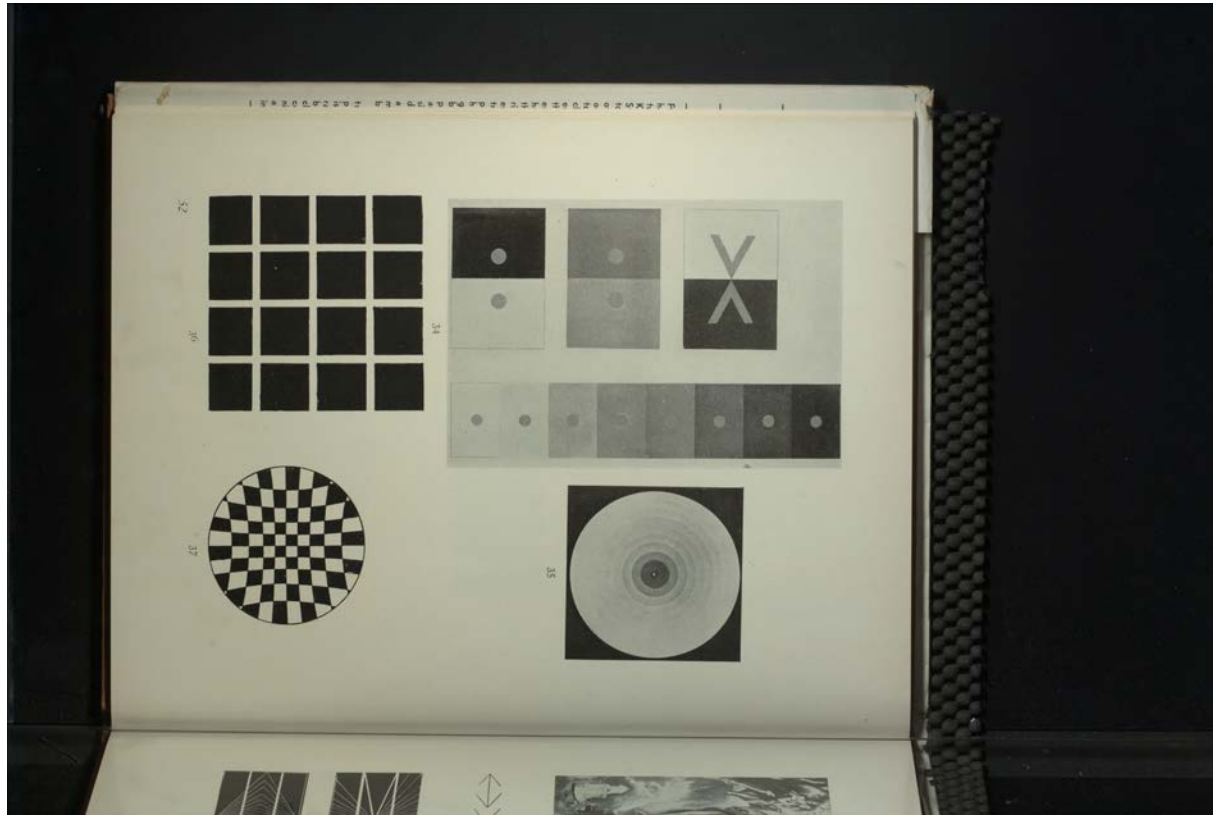


Fig. 1

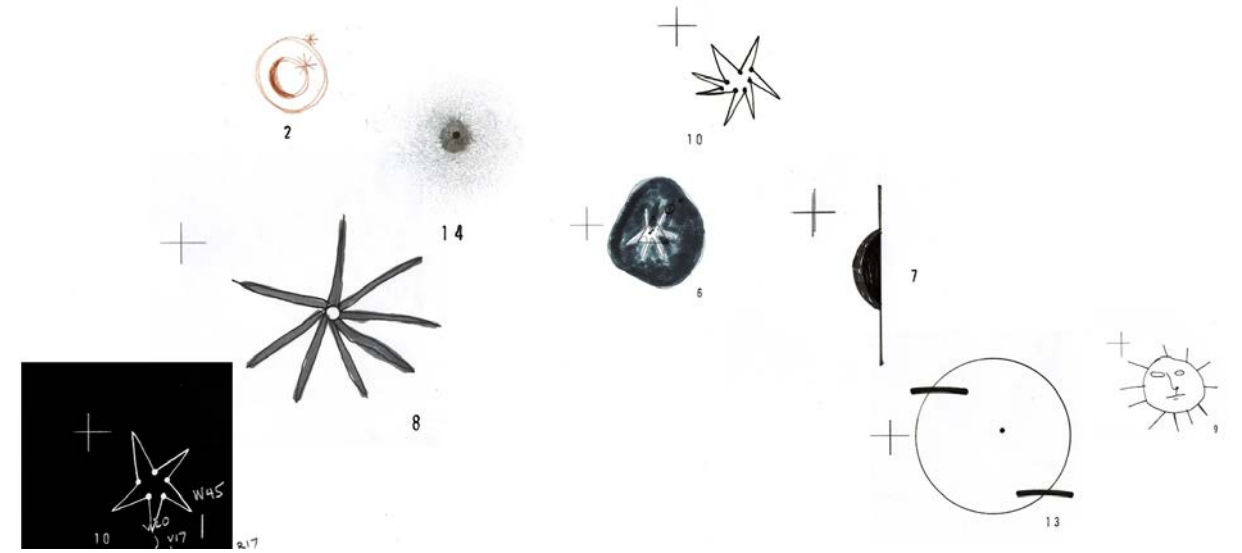


Fig. 2

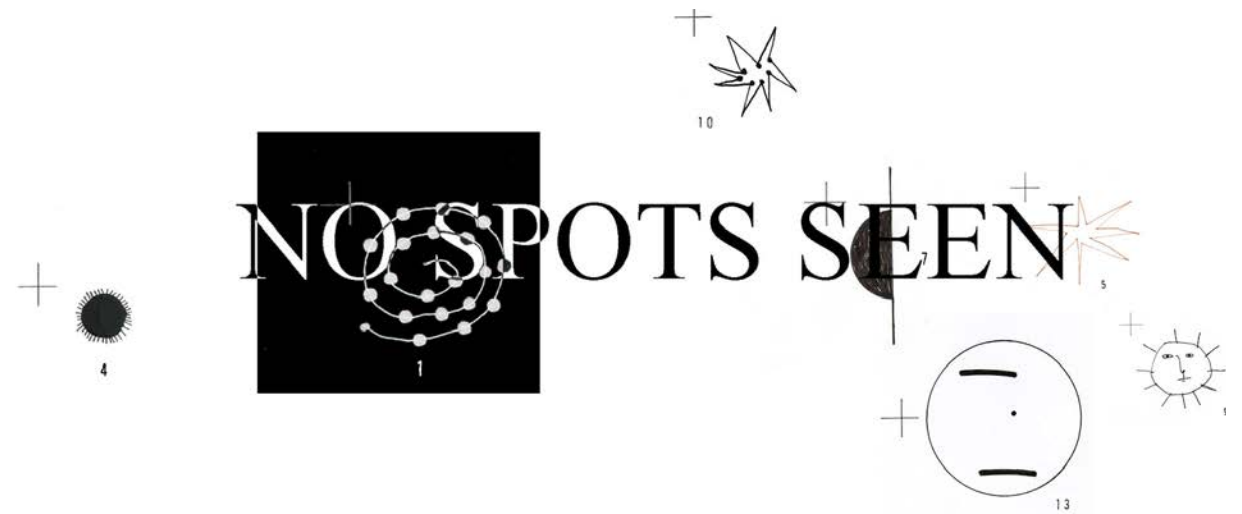
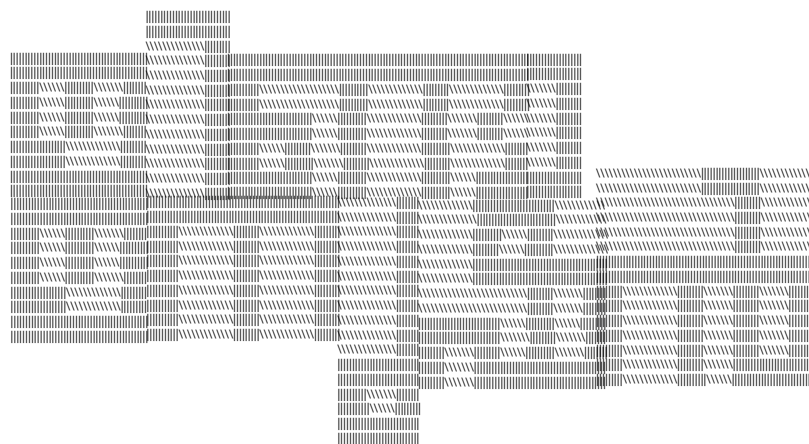
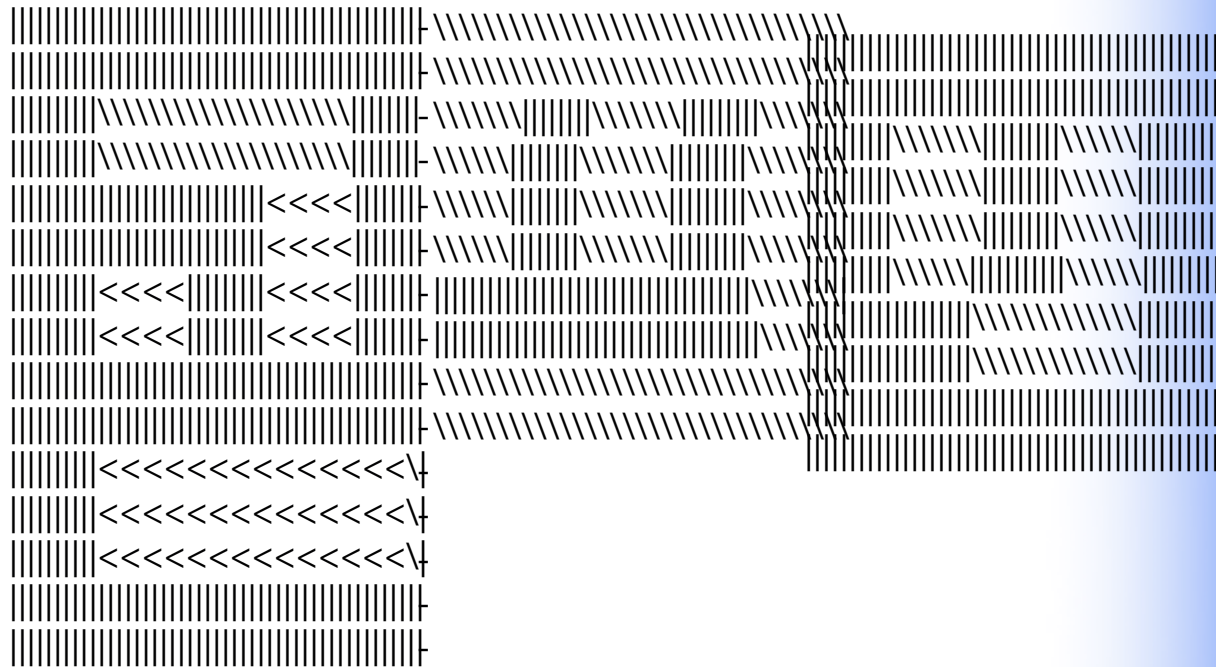
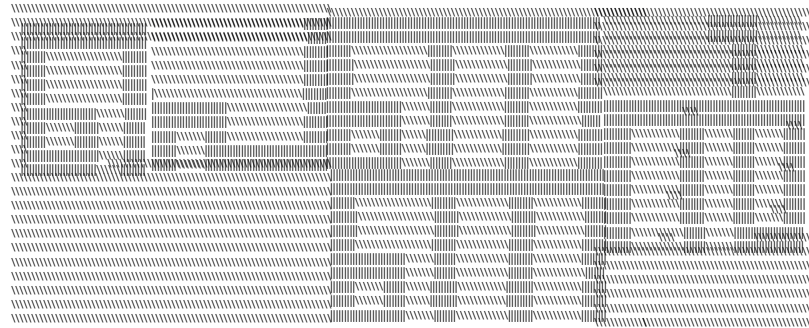


Fig. 3





*Circles, Concentric*

//As *The Total Rhythm* bobs down the stream  
towards a distant, hovering sun, ~~~~~  
~~~~~O

-we study the doctrine of \~|~/  
/( *promotional pricing*.\* \*\* - .....  
—— LANGUAGE √ MONEY √ POWER ——

-all without referring once  
to "*the real world*".

/.and as he reads further mystical ideas about  
structure, .... (&) ... ////////////////  
=====! \_and\_ & the thought garburates  
*the object of thinking* - (?) (\$?)

the atmospheric grid **lapses** into obscene  
angles, ——/) the flaming rainbow flares its  
lunar body, /)

/ the earth as a spine for vocabulary,  
/ as companion to life-adjacent fractals,

.....——\\\\\_|||\_|||——--.....  
( ) ( ) my lungs sift dirt beneath the  
crushing weight of a personality. \*^\*.\_

TOTAL SAVINGS

\$1.50

THE COLOUR BLUE  
THE FEELING BLUE  
THE SOUND OF BLUE

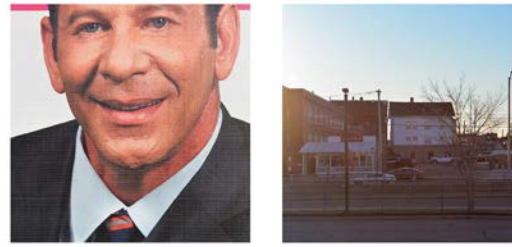
—/—.....  
like building a  
little ocean in the  
backyard.  
like life, but  
- meaning-enriched.  
<#####>  
&.....\$ / and / ... /// so, but /... like practicing  
ideological nudity  
in the mirror.  
////////////////////////////////////...../ & / .....////////  
/// "Don't mind us, we'll just be basking in our  
androgyny," \_\_\_\_\_ and, / and the \_\_\_\_\_  
//. crystalline accountants take turns  
dropping buckets into the sea.  
\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_  
and / on the very last day, the sun oscillates  
on the horizon, —-/..... ..//. -->>%  
:::: #. \*\*\*\*\*  
Ce. Çà. \_\_\_\_\_& .....  
..\*  
theories wear off, indecision prevails.  
.....\*  
... and if that doesn't work, bro  
try crushing it up and snorting it...

This ain't it...

— —  
— .... —  
— —  
"Oh wait,  
it's over  
here, this  
is it."  
..... and still, /... the paper towel dances in a  
refracted breeze.  
and .. ? and the room  
quivers, / we see our simulated *passion* for  
what it is... (*almost...*) /// and ...  
<~>. // \*. \*. p.s. im thinking of  
ending things.  
- - - —. {#},, ||^~^\\....  
\_\_\_\_\_  
..// and all of us here, / barefoot at  
The Glow Ranch, {\*\*\*\*\*}  
living off the internet, sustenance browsing,  
=====~!~=====  
// the earth is our little holographic thing,  
// a fungus we contracted at a rave in a dream.  
=====

# AMBULANCE CHASERS Abraham Adams

Abraham Adams (b. 1985, US) is an artist whose work has been exhibited at Galerie Barbara Weiss in Berlin and Artists Space in New York. His books include *Ambulance Chasers* (MIT Press, 2022, with a text by David Joselit), *Nothing in MoMA* (Punctum Books, 2018), and *Before* (Inpatient Press, 2016).



*Ambulance Chasers* (MIT Press, October 2022) is a series of photographic diptychs: on the left, the faces of personal injury lawyers photographed from roadside billboards; on the right, the landscapes they survey. The gesture is a double rotation: each photograph is imagined as the spectator of the other, and in each pairing, the exorbitant promises of the animated lawyers are deflated by their juxtaposition with an often featureless roadside landscape. The ambulance chasers smile, grin, grimace, scowl; their hair is neatly coiffed, slicked back, unnaturally dark. They gaze at country roads, busy highways, empty intersections, blue skies, building sites, and parking lots. They offer assistance—at a price. [Adams's conceptual performance and art historian David Joselit's text investigate the behaviour of images and offer an account of American precarity. [via MIT Press]]



# 在两种睡眠中间

## IN THE MIDDLE OF BOTH SLEEPS

[In the room. A and B lie on the bed. The room is not too dark, and street lights can be seen through the curtains.]

[A] Hmm?

[A] ...

[A shakes B gently.]

[B] ... Hmm?

[A] There was a very strange sound just now, a bit scary.

[B] Sound?

[A] Yeah, just now. It woke me up, but now it's gone.

[B] What time is it? Are you all right?

[A] It's almost five. I'm fine, yeah.

[B] This early?

[B] I didn't hear it. What kind of sound was it?

[A] Well ..... it was loud, felt like it was right by me ..... It was so rhythmic I thought it was an alarm going off somewhere.

[B] Huh?

[A] I don't know what it was ..... Should we go check the house?

[B] Sure. Do you want me to go and look?

[A] Maybe together?

[B] Okay. Let's go then? I'm turning the lights on.

[The two of them get out of bed and turn on the lights in the room. The room is at the end of a corridor, which is narrow and not very long, and could be illuminated by the room's light. They walk through the corridor and enter an open and dim space where there is a kitchen and a living room.]

[B] Are you cold?

[A] I'm fine, are you?

[B] I'm okay.

[A] Doesn't seem to be the smoke alarm.

[B] Nothing here in the kitchen either. You want to check the window over there?

[A] Okay.

[A] Doesn't look like anything's wrong? The door... The door is locked.

[B] It shouldn't be something from our house.

[A] That's weird...

[B] Hmm... let's go back.

[A and B turn off the lights and go back to their room.]

[B] What direction did that sound just come from?

[A] It sounded close ..... Could it have been outside, near the window?

[B pulls back the curtains.]

[A] The trees outside are so dark, look.

[B] Yeah, I can't even tell apart the leaves.

[A] It's so quiet. Maybe I was dreaming?

[B] Hmm?

[A] That sound, it was particularly loud for a while, but now it's gone again .....

You didn't hear it either.

[B] I probably didn't... Hmm, I don't think so.

[A] Ugh, maybe it was a sound in my dream.

[B] You just had a dream? Was it a bad one? Do you want a hug?

## 河边哼歌

### Hebianhengge

[A] Sure.

[They hug and talk.]

[A] I heard it in a daze too... I'm not really sure. I thought I was dreaming, and I was lying for a while, but it was still there.

[B] Hmm.

[A] I think I kept my eyes open, and the room was dark but I can still recognise it... But it feels surreal to have such a loud voice in here... It's also hard to tell if I'm dreaming when it's so dark...

[B] ... Hmm, go on.

[A] It was a... very rhythmic sound, so rhythmic that it made me a bit anxious, like it was coming from some kind of machine. I don't know how to describe it... What was it like... I actually kind of don't remember.

[B] Like the sound from a smoke alarm?

[A] A bit, yeah, that kind of repetitive sound ..... but not so much like a machine because it wasn't quite accurate either. I thought it was an alarm going off somewhere at first, but I'd never heard anything like that before. I'm still a bit scared now that I think about it.

[B holds A and sways with them.]

[A] The sound was very close to me, but it also surrounded the house, wrapped around it... and covered it. It was quiet too, so the sound felt louder, more unreal, as if it was the only thing in the world... It was as if the room and this sound hadn't existed at the same time before, so the room as well became a bit unfamiliar to me. Before I woke up, I was lying there and felt like it was about to push me out of this room.

[B pats A on the back and holds A closer.]

[B] ... Have you been awake for quite some time before you woke me up?

[A] Yeah.

[B] ... There are really a lot of things around us that might be making weird noises. It makes me feel quite insecure.

[A] Hmm, when it rains too. The sound of rain here is a bit louder than in other places.

[B] Yeah... Even light rain can be noisy heard from our house, as well as the neighbours going up and down in the staircase, and closing doors. All sorts of sounds get amplified.

[A] Like it's going to seep into the house at any moment?

[B] Yeah, something like that. When I'm scared, I want to hide under the quilts. Sometimes when I'm especially scared, I need something else to distract me, or just to go figure out what it is that scares me.

[A] Yeah, I feel safe under the quilts as well, like I have an extra layer of protection.

[A] The rain or the people coming up and down the stairs, I know they probably won't really come in, but I'm still scared to some level... It's the same this time.

[B] I think we've tried to make this house as safe a place as possible? We're familiar with its insides and we've been living here for quite a while, and we're getting to know how to be comfortable in this space.

[A] Yeah, it took a long time to get used to—

[inaudible]

[There is a sound that can be heard in the room.]

[B] Ow, is that the sound—



[A] —Ah!  
 [A] Sounds like it, but a little different ... I don't really remember what that sound was like.  
 [B] It's really loud. Is it a bird? Or some other animal, after all there are trees right outside our window.  
 [A] Possibly?  
 [A] My impression was that it doesn't have such a long interval. But I'm not really sure...  
 [A] ...  
 [B] ...  
 [B] Hmm...  
 [A] I haven't heard anything like this before. It's probably bird season.  
 [B] What did you just say?  
 [A] Hmm...  
 [A] Oh, I said it took me a long time to get familiar with the house back then.  
 [B] Uh-huh.  
 [A] I remember when we first moved in, it was so empty. At first, I was scared to go into the living room and couldn't stay there for very long.  
 [B] Why is it still making the sound? It's so noisy—  
 [A] It seemed to me that it only serves the purpose of dining and storage, because I didn't go there too often and was not familiar with how it looks at different hours. The light wasn't very good either...  
 [inaudible]  
 ... But then we put rugs and the sofa in there and now it's a place to stop and do something else.  
 [B] ..... Mmm... We would have had no reason to stay in the living room for a long time. It's only recently that we've been changing places to work sometimes, and with the space opening up, that I've noticed how the light changes in the living room, which I don't get in my room.  
 [A] Yeah...  
 [A] I'm actually not that familiar with the room in the early hours either. So that's how the light is at this time of day.  
 [B] Yeah... I spend most of my afternoons sitting at a table in the corner of the room. All I can see in front of me are two walls, and turning my head to the right I only see a window facing the road and can hear our neighbours talking downstairs.  
 [A] Hmm.  
 [A yawns.]  
 [B] There would be little change in experience... Then when I go out of the room and see the kitchen, bathroom and living room, I'd think it's so spacious.  
 [A] Would you feel like leaving the room is temporary?  
 [B] I would feel a bit uneasy. It's reassuring for me to go back inside, because it's already full...?  
 [A] Mmm...  
 [A] We have moved the furniture around a lot of times. The rooms are full of our stuff too, we have so much stuff.  
 [A] It's like my presence can extend to these things, and they occupy the house with me, or as a part of me. So that I can just walk around or stop and rest, and not feel like I'm just here for a while.  
 [B] I would feel that a lot of the decisions we make living here, in relation to the house, have to do with moving out finally.  
 [The sound of birds stops.]  
 [A] Ah, it stopped.  
 [B] I'm actually kind of used to it haha.  
 [B] Yeah I mean... It's just that in such a short amount of time we've given up a lot

of things that would make this place feel more like a home and opted for the less expensive and temporary solution. I've also been thinking a lot lately about what can be disassembled quickly when the time comes, how long it will probably take, and what we can't quite handle ourselves and need to hire a professional. It's still a bit sad when occasionally my mind races to calculate how long it will take for the traces of our stay to be completely removed. It's happening really quick.  
 [A] Yeah... I always remember how the previous residents of the house arranged the spaces.

[Birds start chirping again.]

[B] Ahhhh—  
 [A] —Not again...  
 [A] Well, sometimes I think about how it used to be structured and what the people who used to live here would do here and how they lived... Like there would have been no bed in this room, they wouldn't have slept here, and they probably hadn't seen this room at night without the lights on, right? Nor would they have laid down and looked at this tree as we are doing now.

[The tree is a black, flattened shadow, a little darker than the sky.]

[A] We'll be leaving soon, too.

[B] Yeah.

[A] ...

[B] ...

[B Yawns.]

[B] ... Why don't we try to sleep now, it's still pretty early...

[A] Sure. Do you have earplugs?

[B] They should be on the nightstand, have a look.

[A] Okay.

[A] I'll try to get some sleep then.

[B] If it wakes you up again, you can wake me up.

[A] Good night, then?

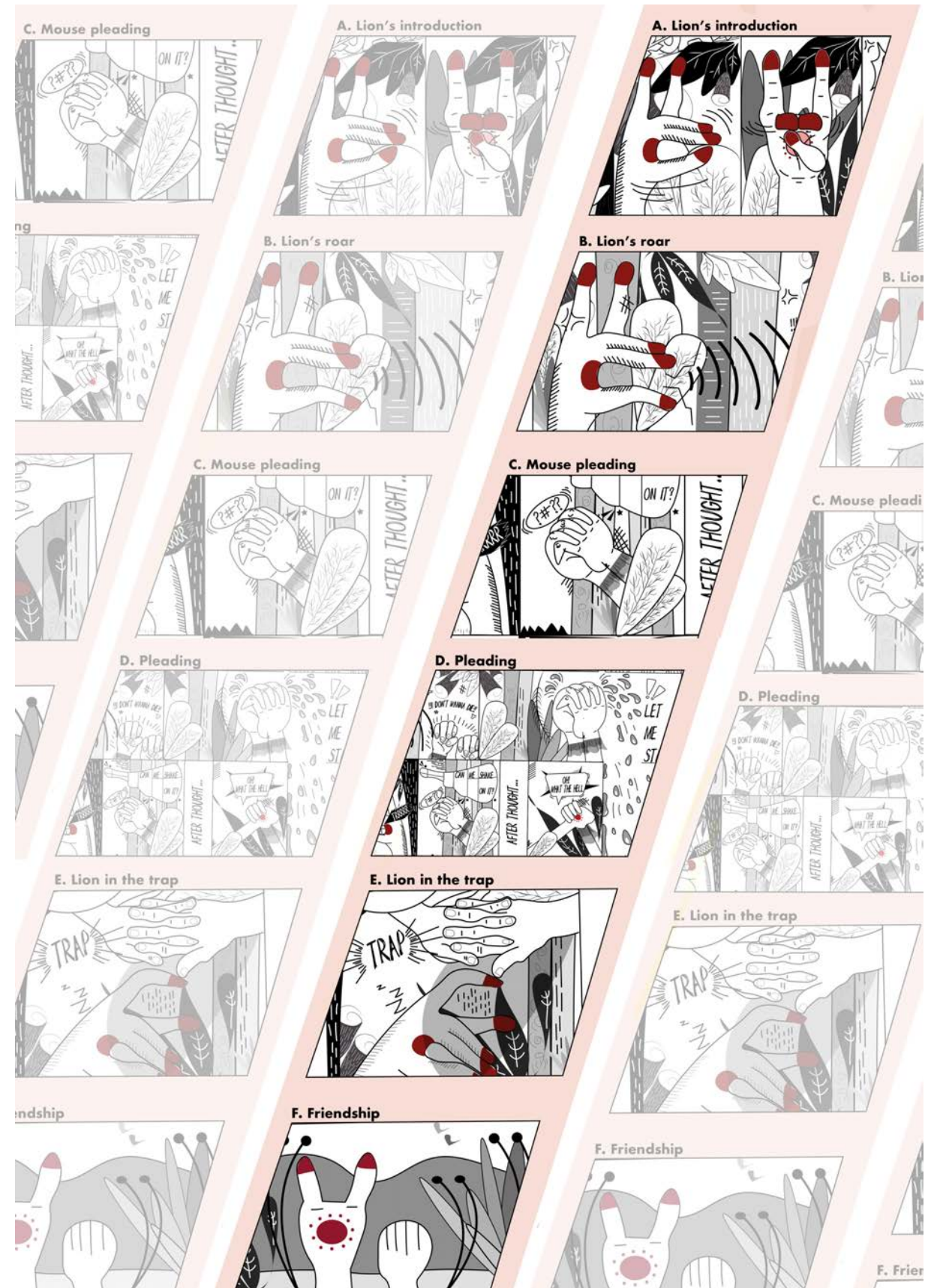
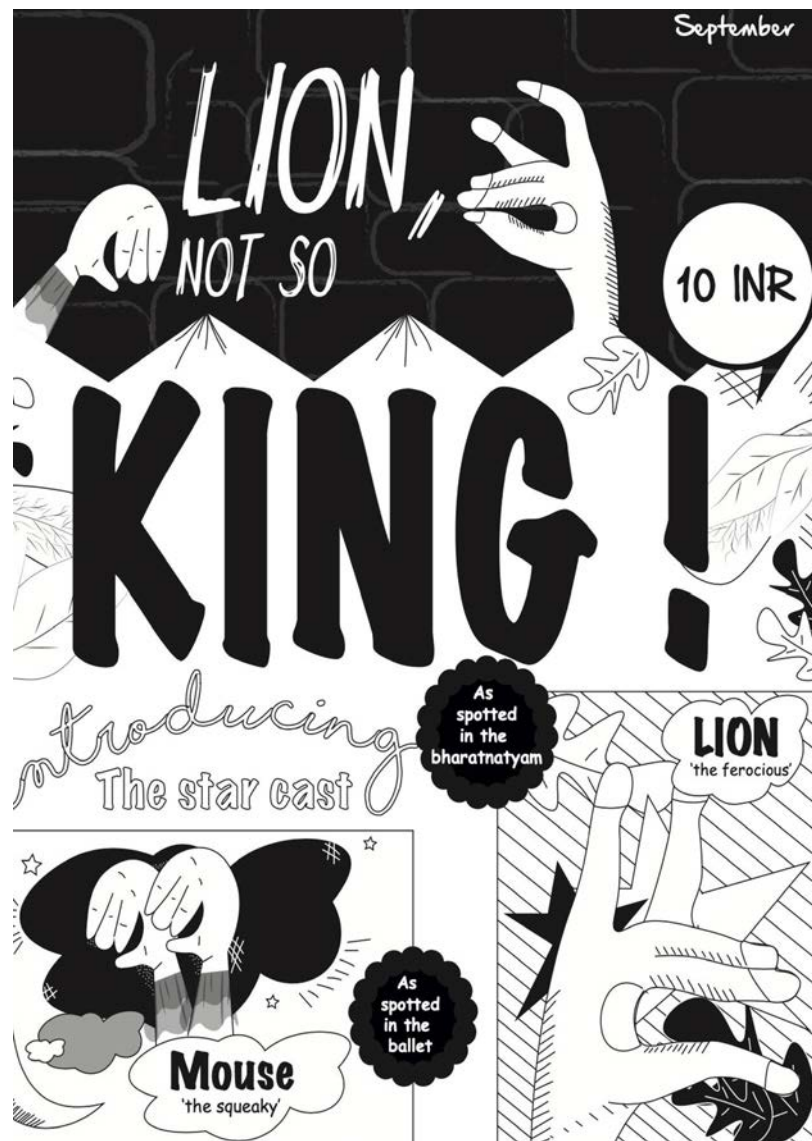
[B] Good night.

# LION, NOT SO KING! Tanya Chaturvedi

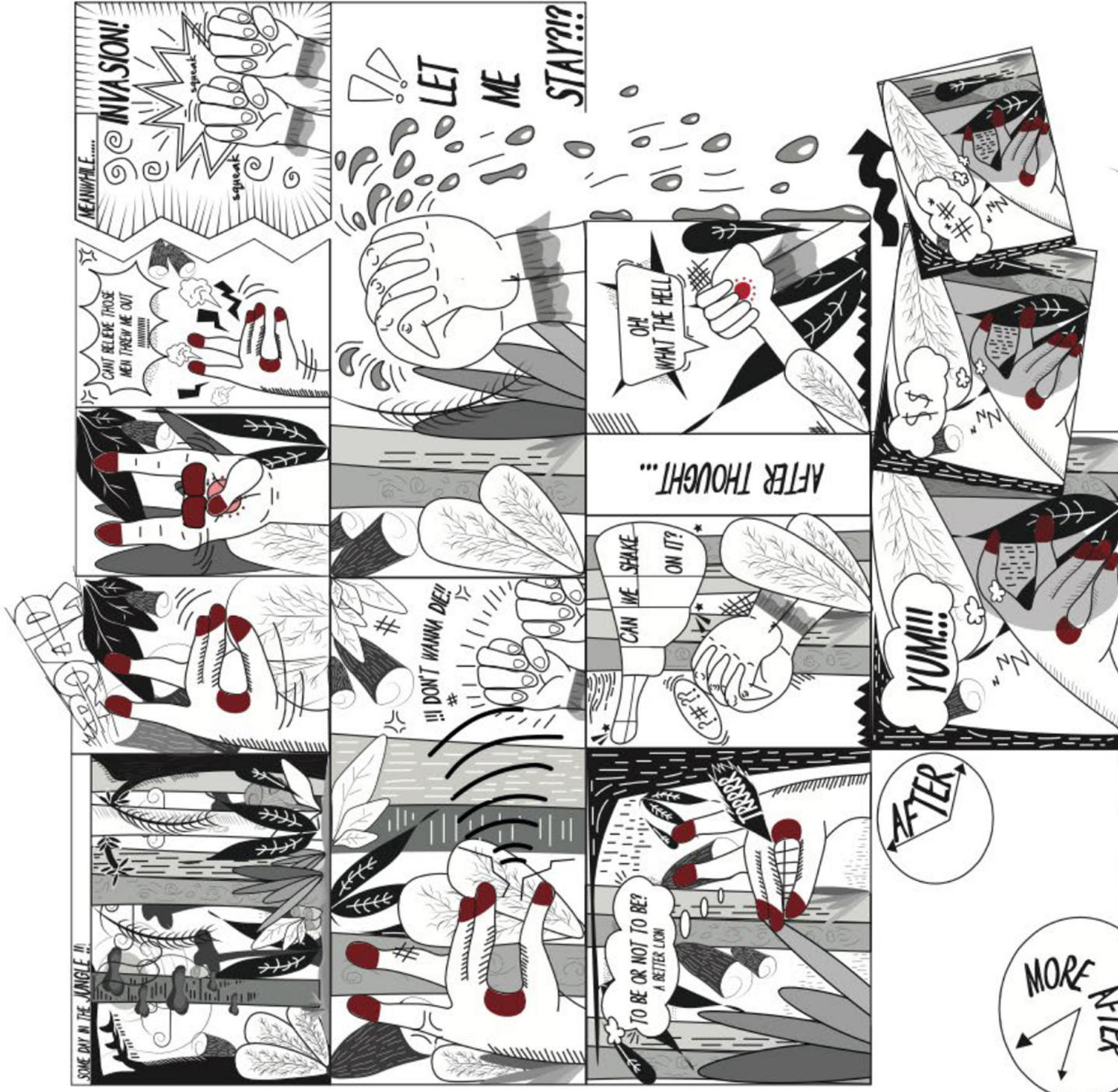
Aesop's Fable of the Lion and the Mouse and its existence in Chinese, Indian and Western culture helped the project's development towards a study of symbolism in communication. The idea of the project was to understand the harmonious existence of cultures and the interactions of culture-specific hand gestures.

Lion, not so King! takes its elements from two popular dance forms – Ballet from Italy and Bharatnatyam from India. A harmonious collaboration of cultures from the East and the West influenced me in the decision to analyse these dance forms. The physical aesthetics of these dance forms helped me mould the characters aesthetically, the symbolic lion and mouse.

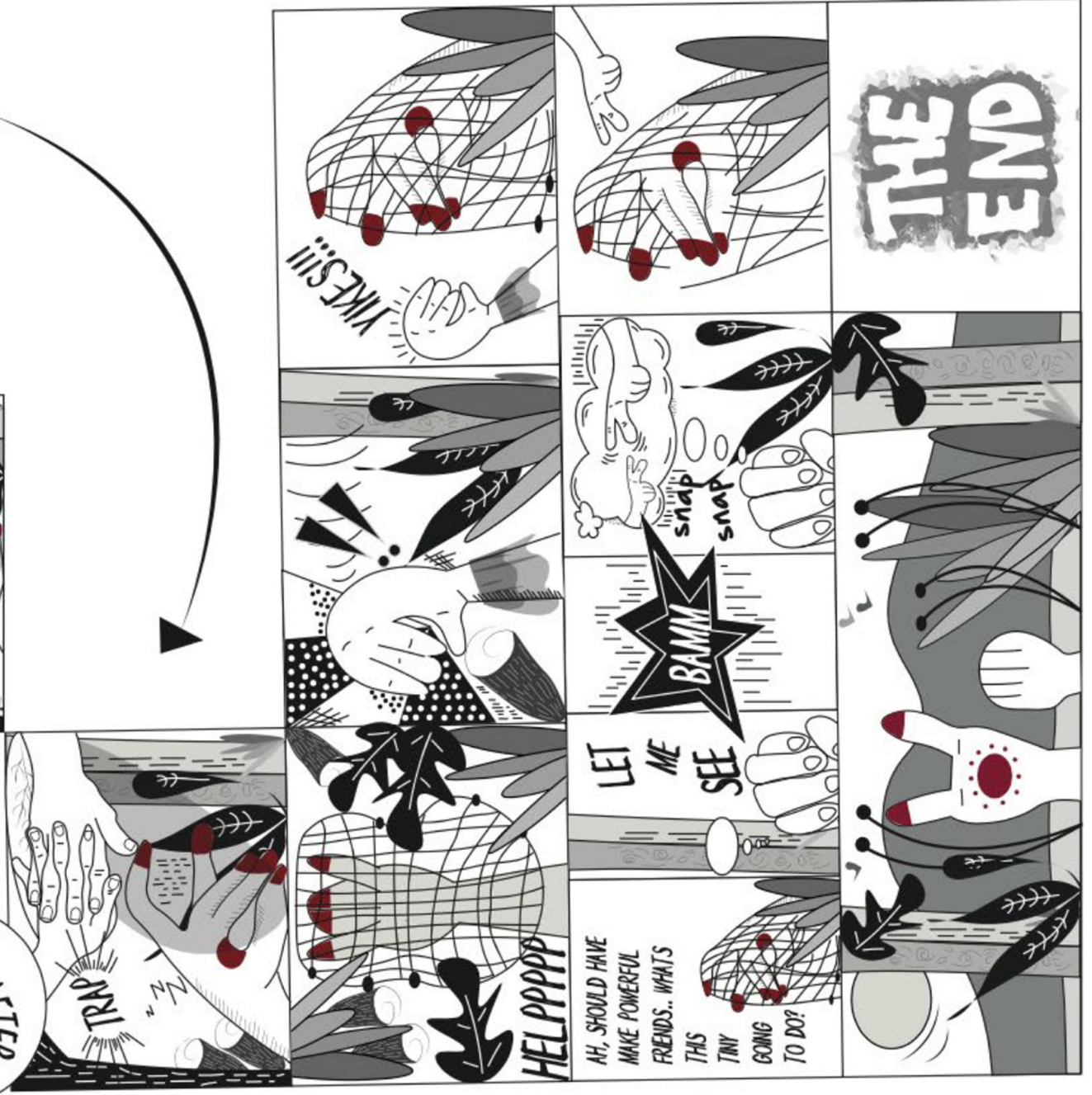
This comic is an ongoing experimental project which is later adapted into an animation that investigates the different responses of young adults faced with learning about cultural harmony through the use of symbolism, without any preconceived notions.







MORE AFTER





# KATHAKAAR: THE STORYTELLER

Shubhangini Dhall

When I read the brief for this edition of The Pluralist, I found an interesting line. The very first one actually.

“The meta issue is all about language, signs & symbols in all their forms, a contemplation on how the joint dance of these elements creates meaning.”  
“Dance”

Dance in itself is a way to engage these elements, to create meaning. There is a vocabulary of the dance - language (songs, poetry, music), symbols (certain gestures) and signs (emotions, body language), and the combination of all these three conveys the message. The message of the dance. Let’s muse about this theme through a dance form.

I have been training as an Indian Classical Dancer since I was 10. My guru, Jayashree Acharya, has nurtured me in the dance form of “Kathak”. Kathak comes from the word “Katha” which means story and Kathakar means storytellers. For years, the “Kathakars” or the storytellers/performers have been narrating mythological tales through dance. And over the years, the stories have taken a contemporary route, connecting the audience to social issues and topics that are relevant to today's times.

People all over the world come and watch Kathak recitals and I am sure that there are many who don’t know the language. But as the theme of the edition goes, it’s the joint dance of the words, the signs and their symbolism that convey meaning. In Kathak, there are movements, footwork as well as facial expressions, that work together to convey the story. A very essential aspect of Kathak is emoting, called the “Navaras” – the foundation of emotions. It is made up of two words – “Nav” means nine, and “Rasa” means emotions.

The emotions are love, laughter, anger, compassion, disgust, fear, courage, wonder, peace. But instead of labelling them, I would like you, the reader, to guess the emotions.

We, as humans are the same – language is just the way our thoughts are expressed. When we don’t speak the language then the actions and the gestures say it all. And since dance is a way to express without language barriers, I would say that to dance is to be human. It is in fact a universal form of communication. In the end, it is the dancer conveying his or her message to the audience - of love, aspiration and, last but not least, devotion to art.





# DARK ROOMS Arjuna Keshvani

The place in question stands at the edge of a suburban thoroughfare. Out of the town and uphill towards a roundabout, the road dilates and merges effortlessly with a long, flat, dusty motorway. The road is lined with red-orange rocks that converge outwards into vast and desolate stretches of abandoned farmland, littered with precarious stone structures which flicker past the eye like oddly articulated corpses.



The place in question is a parking lot – a raised concrete gray slab. Beneath, tiny cars trickle in and out like bees entering and leaving the hive. From the raised hill which ascends from the road, where I am positioned with my camera, I see dimly-lit figures swarming across the surface of the concrete above, minute masses which converge and dilate as if magnetized. Their whoops of victory and groans of disappointment are audible. It is dusk – but in the light, the top of the slab will reveal itself a tacky mini-golf course, littered with iridescent sculptures of fat women in arabesques and animals, oddly human-like, improbably proportioned.

Later, I will learn that the road on which the concrete slab is positioned is called *Estr. Ponta da Piedade*. *Piedade* is Portuguese for *piety*. This road was once part of a pilgrimage route. I myself am here on a pilgrimage, of sorts. A pilgrimage to a concrete slab – or rather, to what lies beneath. I came here looking for a place which no longer exists. I came here looking for ghosts.

My mother grew up in a small mining town called Elliot Lake. The family, two young immigrants and four daughters – the youngest of whom was to pass away a few years later from a heart defect whilst dancing to *Dead or Alive's* “You Spin me Round”, a song which sent shockwaves across the UK, topping the charts in 1985 – had moved to this middle-of-nowhere North American town on account of the uranium mines, which it was my grandfather’s task to monitor. He spent his days in the mines, counting the levels of radioactive waste which the plant spewed endlessly out into the lake, in a likely futile battle to prevent what seemed like an inevitable ecological disaster.

My mother and her younger sister attended the town’s local primary school. In her class photo, she is distinguishable as a dark face against a mass of white, her ebony hair in two long plaits, like those native American women after whom she fashioned herself. She told me once that she felt an affinity with them, with those people her teachers and classmates called *savages*. Their skin and hair was dark, like hers, and they communicated with each other in mysterious tongues she could not understand.

The valley of the concrete slab is called *Valle da Gafaria*. (*Gafaria*: Portuguese for “leprosy hospital”.) Walking in circles round the perimeter of the slab, I come across the foundations of the leprosy hospital that gave the valley its name.

A report, published by the *Journal of Osteology*, tells me that archaeologists found the remains of eleven individuals here, in the cemetery associated with the hospital, whilst the site was being dug up and torn apart to make way for the concrete slab. This space is a remnant of what Foucault calls “the heterotopias of primitive societies” – privileged, or sacred, or forbidden places, reserved for those who are, in relation to society, in a state of crisis. Adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, the sick. The most significant attribute of these places is that they are *elsewhere*. ‘Leprosy disappeared’ Foucault writes in *Madness and Civilization*, a text spawned from a combination of his experiences working in a mental hospital, and his own mental illness. ‘The leper vanished, or almost, from memory; these structures remained. Often, in these same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated, strangely similar... With an altogether different meaning and in a very different culture, the forms would remain.’

I stand here, under the spectral shadow of the ceramics factory which once stood on this ground. Its unsavory odors would have been carried away from the city by the prevailing westward wind. There is no wind today. The air feels thick and heavy.

My grandfather was born in a village in the Indian province of Gujarat. His father made his living going door to door, polishing pots and pans. He met my grandmother in London. Her family, like so many other Muslim families in India both fleeing and profiting from British colonial rule, had crossed the sea to Tanzania generations before. My grandmother grew up in Dar es Salaam, speaking Kutchi, Gujarati and Swahili. She spoke Arabic during prayer. She had dreams of becoming a hairdresser. She met my grandfather, and got married. A year later my mother was born.

English was my mother’s first and only language. At home, in Elliot Lake, my parents did not speak to her or her sisters in Gujarati, nor in Kutchi. Even amongst themselves my grandparents spoke in English, reverting only occasionally to their own in hushed voices and darkened rooms.

My mother recalls playing cowboys and Indians at lunchtime. She of course would always play the Indian. She tells me this proudly.

(I am certain that at times, she wished she could have played the cowboy.)

I went to Lagos, to the town of the concrete slab, to visit a museum advertised on google as the *Slave Market Museum* – so-called because it was ostensibly erected on the ground where the first large-scale sale of enslaved people in Europe had taken place in the 15th century. Where my map directed me, I found instead a discreet white façade and a leering statue of a man gazing out to sea.

1 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux). 2007. p.6. 2 I was told by the municipal archaeologist at the museum in Lagos that a body had been dug up during a preparatory excavation of the leprosarium, though she made it clear that the investigators “were far from thinking, at the time, that she could have been a slave... even though the skeleton had dental modifications and thus corresponded with



One of the founding fathers of European colonialism, this man, I was later to learn, was responsible for organizing the first slaving expeditions to the west coast of Africa. Opening up the sea route to India to European colonizers with advanced ship-building and navigational technology, the Portuguese were the first of a collection of European imperial powers to traffic, transport and profit from the sale of large shipments of human cargo – both internally in Africa, and in European ports. They can be credited for “restricting bondage, for the first time in history to peoples of African descent”<sup>1</sup>. This process has since been coined the “Africanization of slavery”. At some point during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fueled by Portuguese imperial expansion and the human trafficking which enabled it, the signifiers “black” and “slave” converged, for the first time, towards one signified.



Inside the museum, I entered a white, airy space illuminated in soft light. I was the sole visitor. Each room heralded a group of long, rectangular black obelisks, symmetrically arranged and filled with an incoherent selection of seemingly random objects which bore no explanation of their relationship to the slave trade. An ivory tusk washed up on a beach nearby during the 18th century; a reproduction of a 16th century map of the city walls. No reference was made to the violence that the enslaved underwent at the hands of the Portuguese – nor to the trade’s continuing resonances in the town, or indeed the country, which is still tangibly, almost garishly haunted by its afterlife. This afterlife is tangible in the venerated monuments of slave traders and colonizers littered across the cities, in the racist remarks thrown down at predominantly black tour groups in the streets of *Bairro Alto*. In the comments I hear repeatedly that the Portuguese “don’t see race”.

During a 2009 excavation of the ground on which the concrete slab now stands, archaeologists began to dig up human remains.

A single skeleton had been found here once, years earlier. It was rumored that the body had belonged to an enslaved African woman. This information does not appear on the public record<sup>2</sup>.

a woman of African origin”. I later found out, from a professor of history at the Universidade NOVA de Lisboa that investigations by a well-known Portuguese archaeologist (whom I will not name), who had worked under the Estado Novo, had made claims at the time that the body belonged to an enslaved African woman.

My grandma has been writing a memoir. She calls it “her book”. A couple of weeks ago, I asked her to email me a copy of it. It is riddled with misspelt words, composed in a language of pronunciation. Words appear in her native language, Kutchi, sentences are left unfinished.

She writes of her childhood in Dar es Salaam. ‘I sang in English as well as Gujarati, I remember so well my tutor named Kantaben, she wore a cotton sari all the time with her brown frame glasses and a wonderful smile’.



She writes of her father: ‘I remember he always wore 3 pec. Suites and ties and sometimes necktie, in the summer time he wore khaki shorts and linen shirt & he always wore a khaki hat like an English gentleman. His clothes were always pressed with a light sprinkle of starch.’

I took you to Lagos because I loved you, and I didn’t speak Portuguese. You spoke Spanish, and that helped. I took German at school because I wanted to read philosophy. Now I only read in translation.

In Lagos, the woman at the museum tells you of the 158 bodies they dug up from the ground under the concrete slab. “Tirados”, she says, with a dramatic gesture, *thrown*, into the pit near the hospital, the rubbish dump, the trash heap, where bodies were flung and inhumed in strange positions, some with their limbs still shackled together. The dump was periodically burned, she tells you, to reduce contamination and foul smells. I sit on the margins with my camera and film you.

She tells you that there are likely many more bodies still buried beneath the concrete slab, in this place, I think, where a black burial ground has become a literal infrastructure for white progress.



We sit on the banks at the edge of the Thames. That vast body of quicksilver and sludge and sewage, under the shadow of Cleopatra’s needle, that great obelisk uprooted from its land of origin by an Englishman with a passion for Egyptian

antiquities. A few hundred feet to the south, towards Embankment pier, the ghost of an Indian elephant who once traversed the ice of the frozen Thames – the same elephant who was later shot to death whilst on display at the 1924 British Empire exhibition in Wembley, in the same stadium which was later to become home to the English football team. Writing of the exhibition in her essay ‘Thunder at Wembley’, Virginia Woolf envisions the scene as a kind of apocalypse, a spectacular incarnation of the impending collapse of the British imperial project. “Colonies are perishing and dispersing in sprays of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates. Ash and violet are the colors of its decay”. We do not think of these things – instead, we watch the dappled twilight transfigure the London skyline in shades of shifting iridescence, the haphazard monolith across the water, the spire of St Paul’s. We talk of Hounslow, where your family had their first dental practice. You tell me you think that Indian immigrants here are marked by their servility. It is servility which has enabled them to survive. You tell me you want to go to India in the summer, and you want to take me with you. You joke that you will buy me a palace in Jaipur.

Now I am back on the hill, watching English tourists play golf atop this concrete grey slab, and all I can think is that I miss you.

It was after her youngest daughter passed away that my grandma began to devote herself to the kitchen. She was no longer able to speak, but her speech translated itself into her cooking. What language is there for a grief that has no expression? The memoir she is struggling to finish, in her small home with my grandfather in British Columbia, is interspersed with recipes. In the linear narrative of her childhood, they appear without warning and with obsessive frequency, reeled off mechanically, like sleeptalking, where form is lost and syntax becomes meaningless. Like anamnesis, like knowledge from a forgotten time. *Half tea spoon chillie powder, crushed 1 tspn ginger 1 tspn garlic, 1 tea spoon cumin seeds, one teaspn turmeric powder, two large squeeze fresh lemon juice. 2 med onions, 3 large fresh tomatoes. One small bunch coriander cut up into small peaces. Few fresh chillies. 8 pieces of Halibut, or Cod, or Talapia.*

Sometimes, when we breathe together, when you touch my wrist before turning to sleep, to enter that dark room from which I am absent, I feel we have said more to each other than a whole river of words.

It is 1960 – eleven years after the release of Theodor Adorno’s essay, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, in which he made his infamous remark that it was “barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz”. Paul Celan – born Paul Antschel, a Jewish German-language poet of Romanian descent – has just been awarded the Georg Büchner Prize in Darmstadt. Exactly ten years from now, Celan will drown himself in the river Seine, having left behind an unfinished letter to Martin Heidegger, a thinker with whom he had a relationship that was marked by paradox, ambivalence and contradiction. Heidegger’s thought was at once his greatest influence, and his greatest source of distress. It was in Heideggerian thinking that National Socialism was entrenched. Heidegger himself was a former Nazi sympathizer. Yet his thinking was, at the same time, perhaps the most closely aligned with Celan’s own. Heidegger: the man who wrote that *language is the house of being*, the man who would dedicate his career to redefining the idea of Being itself, which had been contaminated, he claimed, by Plato and had never since recovered – a task possible only through the reinvention of the very language of Western philosophy.

In response to Heidegger, Celan begins to write both *within* and *against* the German language. He will use it, destroy it, reinvent it, turn back on itself. Language, for Celan, is the only thing recoverable from the rubble of Auschwitz. *It, the language, remained, not lost, yes, in spite of everything.* In Darmstadt, in his prize speech, he will justify his reason for continuing writing poetry after Auschwitz. *In spite of everything.* He will place genuine poetic expression not directly in language, but in the space between speech and silence. In the space of the breath. *Poetry is perhaps this, he will say: an Atemwende, a turning of the breath.* It is the space between languages, between language’s torn and shredded shapes and forms, irrevocably disfigured, a space of non-language. A relationship to a presence which is ineluctably elsewhere. A turning of the breath: a motion, a pause. An impossible gesture.

Maybe love, too, lies at the turn of the breath. *I love you* – when there is nothing left to say. When there are no words.



Once, after a long afternoon of sharing memories of his past – his childhood in India, his time at university in Leeds, as a lecturer in Victoria – my grandfather looked at me, and asked what it had all been worth. I couldn’t meet his gaze. I didn’t know how to reply.

I can now admit to myself that, as a child, I was mortally embarrassed by my grandparents – the way my Nanima said Kleenex instead of tissue; they way she missed her articles and couldn’t pronounce the letter “v”, and called a stove a *stowe*; of her thick accent and her ungrammatical sentences; of my Nanbapa’s habit of talking to strangers and introducing me as his granddaughter who *studies in Oxford*.

Under the *Estado Novo*, or “New State” – the Portuguese authoritarian regime which lasted from 1933 until 1974, making it the longest lasting dictatorship in Europe – Portuguese policy in Africa was directed towards fabricating a social stratum of so-called *assimilados*, Europeanised Africans who would be capable of operating the colonial machine even in the absence of the colonizers, whose numbers and influence would dwindle progressively across the course of the century. In this way, colonial ideology might continue to proliferate and perpetuate itself, unceasingly, much as it had done in India through the injection of the English educational system into the veins of the country.

My grandma writes of having her appendix removed at the age of thirteen, at the European hospital. She writes of falling in love with her surgeon, Dr. Kerr, who she describes, with admiration, as “an Englishman from the UK”. “He was



# IT TASTED BLUE Benjamin Bird

'It tasted blue' letterpress postcard, edition of 35. 2020

This work is a playful thought on the impossibility of colour, and description and the senses, partly inspired by blue food. The blue is also a reference to the utopic impossibility and the tension within the colour of both natural /unnatural, limitless and technological failure being beyond description and measure.

handsome and wore a tweed jacket”, she writes. “Sure I had a crush on him, when I came out of my anesthetic he was standing right beside me, I held his tie & said I love you.”

Under the *Estado Novo*, the process of assimilation was complex, often highly surveilled. One account even makes reference to a covert surveillance system which monitored already-assimilated families, to ensure they did not teach their children any African languages. This facilitated the erasure not only of language, but of cultural memory itself.

Today, in Portugal, no census exists to tell us what percentage of the population is of Afro-descent. This makes it nearly impossible to prove that racial discrimination is still a problem.

In Lagos, I am accumulating images and replacing my memories with them. It is a slow and mechanical process of erasure.



With each image, I frame you out of my memory, reconstruct the past piece by piece, picture by picture.

In Portugal, there is not a single monument commemorating the lives of the formerly enslaved, on whose backs the country was built, nor for the bloodshed in the colonies.

In Portugal, children of immigrants of the Portuguese colonies, born and raised on Portuguese soil, are still unable to access Portuguese citizenship. They are displaced into a legal black hole – a dark room. They are categorized as Guinean, but do not know Guinea-Bissau, and are unable to speak Creole. They are classed as Angolan, but cannot speak the languages of their country, and are unfamiliar with its cultures and traditions.

Today, in Portugal, white tourists play golf on top of a black grave.

In British Columbia, my grandma cooks and struggles to finish her memoir, to preserve a piece of herself. Her wonderful life. Mix well the chilies and coriander leaves in a small food processor and garlic and set aside. *Mix butter milk water, salt, turmeric powder and make paste channa flour and mix together...*





9,197 WORDS IN BLUE NEON THE META ISSUE

CONTENT EDITOR LERA KELEMEN DESIGN EDITOR CAMILLE LE FLEM