

Berlin
January 2022

Dear Henri,

Do you remember when we walked along the river? We were going to buy flowers in the big barn home improvement store on the outskirts of town where these kinds of places are usually found. We walked through spooky little quiet streets and through parks and playgrounds, silent of children at that time. It was a slow hot day with the sun hanging high. As we walked further out toward the home improvement store, the houses became sparser and newer, and then gradually gave way to building sites where even newer houses were being built, though on that day I remember diggers standing still, steel maws lowing in the dirt.

Diggers at rest fascinate children who recognise, I suppose, something of their monstrosity – or perhaps they know a machine of excavation and extraction when they see one. Maybe they correctly intuit that such technologies – and philosophies – underlie the structure of the world. Besides diggers and excavators, children's books in the global North very often feature dinosaurs, and just as often, beasts of the African plain: lions, elephants, zebras, rhinos. Since neither lions nor dinosaurs can be fully domesticated by other means, I wonder about what is at work, and at stake, in this domestication through narrative as part of the greater European project. Whatever and whomever can be bought, sold, extorted, or put to work will be, and whatever or whomever somehow escapes this set of relations is given to the children as a set of colorful signifiers as though to instill a sense of the absolute and totalising sovereignty of the modern anthropogenic lifeworld. The lions and tigers and elephants eat ice cream and wear pyjamas and go to sleep in little beds at night. At times when Lux was very small, I grew full of despair about the figures that populate children's books in Europe and America; the sugar and cotton that feature so large in a European childhood imaginary, the zombie baby dinosaurs bouncing around in sneakers and t-shirts. The bright and unfading colours of the petro-colonial macabre, vivid as candy. When you start to see it, you can't unsee it.

We walked past the structures of people's temporary homes under bridges and the quiet trees by the path out of town. These appeared with greater frequency in the outskirts

where the newer houses would one day be built, and then these dwellings gave way to autobahn and roadbridge and the flying flags of hardware stores with car parks vast as plains. I remember that we filled a cart with flowers – the kind of flowers, I specified, that grow sometimes in graveyards. You had the institution pay for it in one of these gestures that always feel like thievery and subterfuge. We took our flowers outside and waited under a little canopy of petrochemically-treated sailcloth for the guys to come with the van. The general affect was Suburban Bucolic, which is to say it was theatrical in the extreme. The Good Life is a fiction and everybody knows it, but at a certain income one is able to acquire enough props to complete the set. A row of show sheds had been erected for perusal along one wall of the enclosure and I went to look inside. None quite big enough for a bed.

While we walked I had been telling you that this would be my last art work, that I had lost both the ability and the desire to make art work, that what I had made was in any case no good. You listened without attempting to persuade me otherwise. At that time I felt that the failures were mine; that I had lost some knack by which the work might respond adequately to the problem of being in the world, right now, in this slow collapse which produces so much suffering. I said, I think, that the rollercoaster was a fucking joke: the biggest failure of the lot, also in the sense of its scale; ridiculous, useless, a piece of stupid wasteful hubris. And it was, you know. It is.

All summer long we worked on that thing in the sweaty metal workshop. I was slowly regaining most of the movement and strength in my right arm and hand after the long illness that left me paralysed, and I was enjoying the feeling of being a ‘man at work’ once again, macho selfies in my welding helmet. We didn’t use sketchup or CAD; there were no drawings, no measurements, no plans that we didn’t immediately abandon once we started working. After a brief attempt at tacking the track in equidistant increments, we abandoned our little jig and went on doing it by eye, to hell with symmetry and precision. In this way it felt like a real thing we were making. It felt real as hell, hanging six feet above our little skulls in a huge swooping curve that could kill a person outright if it fell. Joe’s Curve, I called it. Joe is an artist and skater who understands how ideas move through the body. In English, to make the form of a circle by any means is to *describe an arc*, though not by words or numbers, and when I think of this phrase I think of Joe and the huge halfpipe curve whose flow he knew intuitively. Of the rollercoaster’s three legs, the leg that supports Joe’s Curve is the largest and most stable, in that it stands up by itself in space. This seems like a cheat somehow and I regret it a little, like it represents a loss of nerve in the face of huge gravity. Had I left Joe in charge of the leg perhaps it would’ve been different. But, as the last big curve hung above us in the workshop like god or the guillotine, I felt the full awe-fulness, horror and glory of the rollercoaster and all its stories. The long curve of modernity:

locomotive and automobile, steel, steel and the contortions of steel, the gouged wounds of every mine that maims the habitus. The high climb and the inevitable fall. It was terrible. And in its way, as gods can be, it was beautiful.

But then, with the stand-alone leg propping the thing comfortably into the upper reaches of the well-lit kunsthalle and all the nice fluorescents blazing away, I felt the failure of the work very keenly. It seemed anamorphic in this ugly Pixar movie way that I've come to see as politically suspect, even fatal. Unlikely coalitions of mechanical automata. Competitive cars with carceral plotlines. Discrete emotions that struggle within a brain for the neurotic primacy of 'happiness.' Easier to imagine toys and cars and synapses as sentient entities than to grant full personhood to the people whose land and whose labour were stolen in order to produce the project of American modernity. When they say it's easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism, I've come to think that what they *really* mean is that it's preferable.

At some point in recent months, I applied for a research grant in order to give myself time in between the relentless production cycles of the working art industry which, as you know, can be as extractive and unsustainable as production cycles elsewhere. My proposition was to carry out a non-exhaustive and unscholarly study of extraction logic in the contemporary afterlife of the industrial revolution (along with all the chained and broken horses of that particular apocalypse). I gave it the working title *A POETICS OF PRECARIOUS MATERIALISM: hunting the unconscious of petrochemical modernity*. Areas of proposed study were to include: the use of mining metaphor in different European languages, the psychic formation of the neoliberal subject, psychosociological aspects of the gig economy, neurobiological theses on splitting, indigenous narratives of repair, theological perspectives on the wound, Black Marxism and psychoanalysis, children's literature, pit mysticism, neo-colonialism, art historical examples of rupture, and Hollywood as a psychocultural repository of extraction ideology.

My application was unsuccessful, of course. Research requires a method and focus, and I had none. Precision is not my strong suit and I'm no academic – but this felt like a problem of inextricability: every time I tried to zoom in on something it seemed only to get blurrier. The problem lies in how intimately and intricately 'the unconscious of petrochemical modernity' is entwined with my life in all its parts. Every philosophical or psychological apparatus at my disposal – the old 'I-am' of which, therefore, I think – all formed and informed by the totalising theology of extraction in its looping logic.

It starts at birth, and doesn't let up.

While gathering notes towards my unsuccessful funding application, I was struck by a children's movie chosen by a friend for our kids to watch together one afternoon. The movie is more or less canonical though I'd never seen it before, with my lifelong distrust of the Pixar-Disney universe since I was its target demographic, long ago. It is one of the most extraordinarily undisguised Fordist fantasies of petrochemical modernity I've ever seen emerge from the metabolic gut of the Hollywood dream machine, ideologically optimised for children: *Monsters Inc.*

Made in 2001 – the last utopia before the Planes came – *Monsters Inc.* offers a version of the world in which the figure of the Child (at least in the hegemonic model of the white bourgeois nuclear family under an extractive racial capitalism) is figured as a site of primitive accumulation. The film anticipates the crisis of fossil fuels and petrochemical production values, but seeks to continue “the pattern of abundance for 20th century living” established by Henry T. Ford in his first American production line. In the world of *Monsters Inc.*, though, the workers are less a faceless and undifferentiated proletariat (whose collective labour power could, in theory, make or break an entire infrastructure) and more a bunch of neoliberalised individuals, competing with one another in a numbers game won by qualities of looks or character, as with the affective economies that succeed the factory. With a render farm made up of 3500 Sun Microsystems processors, the production of *Monsters Inc.* is itself an allegory of some kind, and in every way it's a piece of propaganda – although, as with most of Hollywood, Netflix et al – the real ideology seems to emerge from the unconscious of the show, which makes it all so much worse.

It made me feel hopeless. What kind of counter-propaganda could ever hope to rival the slick saccharides and rubberised anamorphs of the billion dollar happiness machine in which exponential and unstoppable growth ideology functions as the happy-ever-after? In unending accumulation, after all, there can be no happy-ever-after: where there is no dying, there can be no living.

Like all flimsy propaganda whose self-fulfilling prophecies have given way to self-evident decay, the fairytale of extraction as birthright now requires continual maintenance at the level of metaphor. I hoped, against hope, that one day our kids will get something better than this, as their minds grow into their bodies and their bodies into the world, but then again, I thought, this *is* the world.

Though it hasn't always been this way. And someday, I'm sure of it, this too shall pass.

The rollercoaster had arrived ahead of Joe and me in Freiburg, and it was already lying in its parts on the floor like a big puzzle to solve. We stepped off the night train into a

bright morning and went for coffee, where we talked, I remember, about a show you had planned to curate one day. The show was about psychedelic modes of thinking, or philosophy and psychedelics in the western context, or something like that. I'd spent the entirety of the first lockdown growing magic mushrooms which I dried and powdered and put into capsules and sent all over the world to anyone who needed or wanted them, a gift economy. I wanted to do something concretely helpful during a time in which people were very much afraid. While I was never very interested in tripping as such (too anxious and slippery a history to think about losing one's shit as something to do for fun), my experience with the little mushrooms has always been gentle and instructive, like the feeling of being very clearly presented with an answer to a central question. You only have to stay quiet enough to receive it. Low to the ground.

I gave you some of the mushrooms I'd brought along "just in case" – a gift economy for the road, maybe. We didn't talk much more about it. At some point you wrote to me to say you'd eaten them in the forest, and that they had given your body permission to dance.

There's a video of you and Lux dancing under the rollercoaster. Something about the winding steel spirit had also animated you both that day. So what? People dance everywhere, and god knows there's enough space in any museum or kunstverein to allow for some spontaneous movement of the body. But the fact is that there's something sacred and deathly about these spaces that seems to promote stillness, even stasis. Like in Protestant churches; which, as I've said before, is more or less what they are.

I've been thinking about the phenomenological qualities of the mushroom. How it works, how it grows. How these little bottom-feeders of the forest perform miracles of transubstantiation through their own bodies, like any saint; how they spring into life from death, and connect death to life in an ongoing cycle. There are species of mushroom that live and die across the span of a single day, and yet the mycelium – the rhizomic data-body that underlies the individual body – lives on, proliferates, throws up some more life here and there, ducks back under, gathers its data in a matrix of living nodes, pass it on. It thrives in the undercommons.

Last night I woke up at 4am, and I had something to tell you about substrata versus skyscraper. It had something to do with time, and acceleration. Weren't the old ones right to mistrust the automobile and the train and the airplane? Among other reasons – the guzzling of petrochemical fuels and the flatulent emissions that poison the air – it seems like a hubristic intervention into the rhythm of a life to travel such distances in so short a duration. Only the ancient trees could approximate such great heights – and

then only after long years of slow growth – whereas a whole city can go up in weeks and months, like some kind of metastasis. But I've been thinking, too, about how states collapse while the substrate endures. How there might be ways of thriving that don't look like priapic skyward proliferation. Ways of being amongst and under that bypass border walls. And ways of feeling through the fact; that every one of us is just a fragile fleshly body whose apparition in the world is very quickly over, born of and returning to the decay from whence we came.

*

There is something ideological about the fear of decay and ruin, given that both are eventually inevitable, no matter how you cut it. "Fascists, by and large, hated [ruins]." writes Henry Zhang¹. "Hitler's inner circle was scandalized by Albert Speer's suggestion that the Reich's buildings be erected with a sense of how they'd look a thousand years hence. Speer, the canny rhetorician, pointed out that he was actually trying to minimize, not produce, decadence—even destroyed, his buildings would be free of the ugly, rusting rods so common in WWII rubble: they would be as comely as toppled Roman pillars. The futurists, who might have thumbed their noses at Speer's neoclassicism, shared this hatred for rust."

I think about the two pillars at the door of the kunstverein, erected during the third Reich. Your colleagues asked me for some speculative projections of the space in 50 years, and I said maybe it would be a place to house climate refugees. And in another hundred years, or two? Who knows. A ruin is what happens when a building is killed, or left to die. Ruined buildings speak of failed states, impoverished municipalities, fallen civilisations. Ruins are to cities as corpses to the crowd, and we've lost the art of public mourning.

I learned a long time ago that nothing can survive in a museum and this was a good lesson that saved me a lot of heartbreak. To bring a living thing into a gallery is to kill it dead. The relational aestheticists might have believed, for a second, that there was something vivifying about dragging the delicate temporalities of lived intimacy into this deathly space of financing and reification, but you'll never eat soup with your friends in the same way². "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles" wrote Guy Debord, and these lines, at least, still ring true. "The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, *an*

¹ <http://www.heichimagazine.org/en/articles/476/ruins-melancholy-diaspora>

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uz8HHU2Es_4

autonomous movement of the nonliving.³ It is this palpable sense of zombie capital that animates every Sehgal choreography and Tiravanija curry; the body recognises a revenant when it encounters one, and shrinks away from it. But it's all right that we're doing death work out here in the slow collapse of the long West and the end of a world. People need spaces in which to greet and contemplate death, after all. At best it's devotional, our works like relics and headstones and plaques in memoriam to everything once sacred to the failed project of modernity. It's important to grieve.

And after all, the museum has always been a mausoleum, since inception. Sometimes I think that contemporary art is an expression, or an evolution, of the votive; essentially ecclesiastical in its nature. This is the preferable way to look at it; makes our work feel like part of a sacred lineage. But on other days – and these days come more frequently now – I think it is instead an evolution of the fetish, a concept invented by the colonial anthropologists to justify the violent deterritorialising theft of objects and artefacts. They *knew* these objects to be vessels or vectors of magic and meaning and significance, but perhaps they knew, too, that to take these seriously – as nodes in a matrix of world – would risk undoing everything. The whole project. The work they imagined they were doing in ripping worlds out of worlds, kept captive and undead behind glass for the interpretive gaze. The exhumations, extractions and extortions that made up the modern magic they thought of as empirical. The idea that simply *looking at something* could provide the data by which to communicate its true essence; the idea that someone like a colonial anthropologist could ever hope to understand what [he] was looking at.

Of course now most of these conceits are widely understood as false and corrupt – at best a wilful elision of fuller truths. Nonetheless these same conceits still undergird the contemporary art industrial complex in which both of us find our employment. Only in recent years have I ever done business with museums, and I'm always surprised to learn about the highly delicate business of keeping old and/or expensive artworks out on the circuit. These, like heads of state, must not be allowed to die. To keep them preserved, insurers and lenders insist on precise conditions of humidity, lighting and temperature, like in the morgue.

And then of course there are the dinosaurs, dug up from the fossil fuel substrate and domesticated in death by the benevolent, paternalistic omniscience of modernity. I read somewhere that most paleontologists working today are employed in the mining industry. I grew up in a university town, and as a kid I'd wander around the natural history museum with its skeletons of Megalosaurus and T-Rex; in a glass case,

³ Italics my own. https://monoskop.org/images/e/e4/Debord_Guy_Society_of_the_Spectacle_1970.pdf

reconstructed from mummified tissue, was a full-sized taxidermy of the famously extinct dodo.

So in the end I made a ruin for the museum and we called it a rollercoaster. The skeleton of an animal machine that finds itself dead in the art church with flowers growing in its bonecage. This is our tradition, our culture, what we're working with; at the very least, we ought to call a spade a spade and, with that spade, to dig our own graves. Exhumation, extraction, accumulation. Dead tissue and silicate, relic and quarry, propped-up capital on its taxidermied hind legs, a waxwork. The preserved and desiccated remains of living things and ideas, pinned on silk like Jesus and vitrined under glass forever, or at least until the end of the world.

I said it would be my last work and in a way, perhaps, it was. It's easier to imagine the end of art than the end of the art world – at least for a modern subject like me whose understanding of art has always been that of something rarefied, reified, removed from life itself. I wouldn't say, though, that it's preferable. So who knows. There must be ways of moving that are more like the mushroom than the airplane, low to the ground. Closer to the dead, which is closer to the earth, to life. And I remember how you danced in the forest and under the rollercoaster, and how Lux ran around in wild circles like the looping bend of Joe's Curve, and how we made it strange and right by turning all the lights off so that it wasn't possible to *look at* in the same way, and how the kids of Freiburg came to the opening and walked around with torches like Night At The Museum, which – seen from a certain perspective – is a decolonial fantasy in which relics and artefacts imprisoned in the endless carcerality of the archive and their undead nonlife under glass attain sentience in order to practice love and kinship, seek revenge, and return to the dust from whence we all came, finally free.

Well, Henri, I don't know how to conclude a letter like this, but like capitalist modernity it has already gone on too long. It's been a rollercoaster, as they say.

Thank you for everything, and I hope this finds you dancing where you can.

All love,
JD