

I am very sorry Mat. I'm actually devastated. I have wronged you. I had promised you a text... and here I am, 2am on Monday night, empty-handed.

This feels like a defeat on multiple levels. It's shit to let a friend down, always. It's even more shit when you know that your friend is also a comrade, fighting from the same side of the unforgiving trenches of the labour market.

I liked it, back in the days, when at the van Eyck I would hear your voice calling me "luv". Unmistakable. Quite a recognizable voice you have, Mat. Quite husky, if I may say so. And I love your accent. It makes me nostalgic about a time of socialist British history that I have never experienced, but which I can very easily imagine. (Nostalgia, here we go... our favourite word.) Who knows when I'll hear your voice saying "luv" again...

I know you have been stressed these days. I actually sense that you have been stressed for a while now. In one of your last emails, you have advised me to breathe, drink water, take vitamins, get some sleep. I knew these were tips you were also giving to yourself. Why are we so stressed these days, Mat? Why is it, ah?

The other day, I saw an illustration published in The Economist (imagine, The Economist! Among all the magazines...). It showed a woman – tight hair bun, sleek silhouette, dark deep shadows underneath her eyes – busying herself with the following actions: making coffee, scrolling through her phone, covering her eyes, presumably filled with tears. The caption read: "Two weeks of war and I'm trying to figure out my life".

Yes, also the war. The war (I let these two words take their space, fill the space around me). This new war. One war among many other wars. Just this one feels ridiculously close. Proximity should not be a reason for stronger empathy, but someone now it does. Maybe we are just afraid.

Since we were together at the van Eyck, a new war has happened. And a pandemic. And Brexit has eventually become a reality – from people in suit shaking hands, to a set of rules that have changed the course of peoples' lives: the engine of bureaucracy sets in motion. And we have also tried to figure out our lives.

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I find it increasingly difficult to work "on my things" recently. By "my things", I mean all the work I do (or try to do, with difficulty) besides my "office job". My office job is cool: I shouldn't complain about it. I like what I do (which is rare); it provides a regular entry every month (which is great); and it's relatively well paid (which is a miracle). But I'm not in complete control of what I do and of the clients I work for. "Clients" and "working for", for example, are words I'd never use if I was talking about my personal practice. Like a few weeks ago, when there was that shit show with the Russian Pavilion... I'll tell you more about this later, maybe.

I'm not sure what's holding me back from being better at dealing with my own personal projects. I'm a freelancer, for god's sake! And I'm 31 years old, aia. Maybe I don't have enough self-discipline. Actually, it's pretty self-evident I have almost none. Everything works well when I've someone telling me what to do, dictating the rules. I remember when I was little it was so easy: my dad would come wake me up, raise the shutters, and this meant that the day was starting – another engine set in motion. Now it's more difficult. I need to raise

the shutters for myself. Maybe I'd still prefer someone raising the shutters for me. Michel Houellebecq wrote an entire novel about it, titled 'Submission'. Maybe I'm a true catholic at heart.

I think there is also an element of insecurity, of self-questioning. I often find myself wondering whether what I do is relevant in any way. Is it? For who? For the world? For society? For the environment? Am I even helping myself?

I studied political philosophy and for a while I thought I would work for an NGO, or in the field of international relations. I actually did, for a couple of years, at Amnesty International. It was shit. I didn't like it in the slightest. Being confronted everyday with the most tremendous issues and seeing how little we could do with the tools available to advocacy made me feel powerless. I quit after a while and reinvented myself as a curator. The "legend" goes that a certain political or social agenda can be pursued also via other means, such as those that the arts provide. These tools – more diagonal rather than linear – would have a weaker impact on the short term. But, on the other hand, they would be better in the long run. They would train society at formulating the right questions, rather than pretending to have some quick answers. I still buy this narrative, but there is something that still makes me feel I took a cowardly choice.

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I've been looking to make my practice political, in the wider sense of the term, whatever it means. (I am aware I keep fluctuating between naive idealism and cynicism. I apologise for that).

Some time ago, in an article written for the platform Art & Education, our common friend Natasha wrote: «Further, we who teach in art schools have a profound responsibility to equip all our students with an embodied understanding of critical race theory and intersectional feminism. They will not survive ethically or intellectually as artists if we fail in this respect.»

In an interview with Kalle Lasn published by the CCA entitled "This is What Existential Crisis Looks Like", he writes that «ecology, psychology, and global governance» are today's most urgent issues. The ones we need to tackle to face «an urgent, nauseous present.»

I subscribe to each of their words. And we have also tried to figure out our lives.

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When you told me about your exhibition, I had the impression all your words were coated with a sense of nostalgia. To be clear, I was sitting on a balcony – there were some rays of late-February sun, and I soon got cold – and I was hearing your voice from the phone as if it was a portal into an antique prophecy. We have spoke at length about our common fascination for the concept of nostalgia. We are both nostalgic beings, I'm afraid, what would you say? Ah!

Nostalgia, a pain (algos) for returning home (nostos). We keep returning to this concept. We are nostalgic for nostalgia perhaps. Ahaha, so meta!

I've recently read about something called "Morestalgia" (Riccardo Benassi, 2019) which is defined as "a heightened nostalgia mixed with an element of envy and dearth. This evokes a desire to experience something for which there are no role models in one's own wealth of

experience. This hybrid nostalgia instead takes its form in the immersive world of the internet and social networks, where the feeling of individual experience is made public and standardised". Are we more stung, Mat? I'm not sure.

Perhaps it doesn't matter where we position our longing, but it matters that we experience it. And I'm sure many, like us, experience it too. A sense of generational collective melancholia. The slow cancellation of the future.

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I don't know if we have the right to be nostalgic. The risk of indulging into some kind of backward-looking stasis, into some conservative passivity, is around the corner. You also mentioned it during our call, and I think you are right. It's time to take a step away from it. To emancipate ourselves.

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Some time ago, our friend Persis wrote a beautiful text that really captures what I'm trying to say now. The text is quite long, but the conclusion will do.

*1. Dear hauntology,*

I betrayed you. I've been betraying your vows, your affects, the subdued longing you expressed so softly only I could hear it in the cracks, the glitches. For years I've been drenched in your sadness. A sadness I named political. (...)

Maybe I've outgrown you. Maybe the magnitude of your scope has been paralysing enough. Maybe I'm just happier, for some reason. After a year of intensified sameness, glued to the screen and bored to death by the daily routine of pandemic life, I've come out with altered perception. I choose to live. I choose to be with what is already here. Betraying utopia by enacting the Othered real I so long deemed to be out of reach, as a negative of the present.

Later I'll ask Persis if it's OK that I include a part of her text here – that I make her words a little bit ours.

Good night, Mat. Drink a lot of water, take all the vitamins, get some sleep. I'm sure everything will be fine.

*Erica Petrillo, Milan, April 2022*