

So Close and So Far.
by Josh Plough

As I am writing this, I am staring out of my living room window, to my garden, at a recently massacred bamboo thicket. Before, it was completely overgrown and consumed the entirety of the space. Any activity in it was restricted to crawling through this two-storey tall swaying forest. When I had to go to the shed and enter this mysterious place, I would often try to recapture that sense of childlike wonder one inevitably loses. I never managed to though. The bamboo, if it didn't directly harbour my imagination then it did a quarrel of sparrows. At times it seemed like hundreds of them lived in there, all talking and singing to one another. Then the landlord came. And my little menagerie was ripped up, destroyed and defeated, with only a small patch surviving the onslaught of someone else's reason. The sparrows left, my garden was quiet. I miss it because the singing would sometimes ruffle me from my reality of cigarette butts, plastic bags, empty bottles, old pallets, overflowing sewers and the creeping of something greenish over something whitish.

This lack distanced me from my imagination as reality sunk in. I no longer had an intravenous of whimsy, just anchors in the material. My space to think, or my invitation to think had been removed. I now have to trust the artist to create these moments where fissures between myth and reality, between us and politics, between me as a writer and me as a freelancer and me as a citizen appear. My multiplicity is opened up through a Socratic dialogue with Alex's bronze, brushed cotton, extruded polystyrene and paper.

For this occasion, we can dispense with the formalities of contemporary art writing and settle into this curiously herbaceous mindset. '-isms' and '-ologies-' can and should melt in presence. And here, just for now, just for me, they're a pool of water to be aware of but to step over. Alex Farrar's presentation is a constellation of works. They're placed by the artist, sure, but they're held there by something quite different. They're an aftermath that yearns for someone to be present, if only to prove they were witnesses to something by involving us as live bodies. As if we become their proof, their expert witnesses who can connect and convey their message to an outside world. I first met Alex during his residency/exhibition *Being as Becoming*

at Onomatopée in Eindhoven, where I'm the city curator. The platform he was provided with sometimes felt like a stage, somewhere he could perform his work, or maybe work his performance? I'm not quite sure which. He spent days, weeks and months in the exhibition, his body became so close to the material of both his practice and the space. Walls and curators seeped into his work as the area between the inner, him, and the outer, his environment, met in the things he produced.

This crossing over and bridging of worlds can often invoke dreamscapes of inclusivity and the communal. However, there is an absence in these works. His 'Semblable Forest' leads to want as our journey from the root ends abruptly and we notice that not only have they been cut short, but their matter replaced. What was alive, through fire, has now become cold. To stay in-between them is to be reminded of a presence these living things once held. We attribute a lot to the lives of trees, they inspire us to build while harbouring our fears. They can talk to one another through underground mycelium networks and sheltering whole communities. This semblance does nothing of the sort, Alex made sure of that when he burnt them out of their moulds. The shadows that scare us in the forests have been cast and placed so we can look down upon them, instead up through them.

The 'Night Sweat Paintings' that ring the space make us recall those woeful nights of self-doubt and fear. They catch a specific moment of a night's sleep, there's no tossing or turning evident in these entombed people. They're defiant in their pose. Their materiality speaks just like that of an effigy. But, instead of fingers pointing to heaven and crisp expressions of power we see bodies melting within their medium. Instead of offering us assurances they seed insecurity. But these sweat paintings are more ennobling than carved marble as they show the absurdity and frailty that's ever present; some of them look as if they're dancing while others are curled in a ball, which ever position they take they're still alone in space. They become palimpsests of thoughts we'll never know as their visible trace becomes our material as we place ourselves within the walls. Their sweat is our sweat.

Alex's 'Umble prints', when read against the bright confident colours, puncture our expectations. When their titles of Crumble, Fumble, Jumble and Tumble are met with the bravado some of them exude, they bring to my mind the universal image of the insecure bully.

Here an affront of colour covers up a troubled soul. In some, lips nearly touch but never will, while in others, fragments of his finger nails are suspended amid the text. We're not sure if they're floating or sinking, maybe implying the body is less dense than we think when confronted with a world solely constructed by definitions. Looking down on all of this is Alex's Gestalt Cornicing. The profile of a speaking face is extruded to create a subtle contortion of lines and shadows that cap this meeting. To realise that there is actually someone in the rafters whispering to you the line must be broken. Only then, in the gap, can you see The Unknown Narrator's mouth opening and closing.

Yet is this an absence or an abscess, the latter taken from the Latin abscessus 'a going away'. Because these works leave us guessing things like whose body was there and why have those trees been uprooted and recast? The presentation is a going away of space by creating it. By separating things from their specific contexts and then re-combining them Alex has created orphaned objects, over which a suggestion of melancholy hangs. It is a going away of the everyday as we want to know it. Something is wrong, something is trying (needs) to be fixed if an artist can encapsulate our being through an abscess of action and space.

But how can we grasp or catch this space? I guess we can't, we just have to be aware of it. And to become conscious of it we have to be candid about it. We're drawn to them through the anxiety they convey. This going away of action occurs when we're close to them. So close that it's the space inside us that brings them all together. They form a whole, but more a human whole than a mathematical one. One full of fraught, lost and promised potential and the space, the space, the space, the space.

'..Haven't you noticed that the more the means and tools of observation are perfected, the more distant and elusive become the goals? With each new discovery a new abyss opens. We are more and more lonely in the mysterious void of the universe.

I know that you want to lead men out of the labyrinths of superstition and chance, that you want to give them certain, clear knowledge, which according to you is the only defence against fear and anxiety. But will it really bring us relief if we substitute the word necessity with providence?'

This is an extract from a widely contested letter that has nevertheless been attributed to the 17th-century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer. He was moved to write it having looked through a microscope at a droplet of water. What Johannes previously thought was pure like glass turned out to be ‘strange creatures swirling around like in Bosch’s transparent hell’. He wrote the letter to the microbiologist Antonie van Leeuwenhoek to confess his thoughts about science and its relationship to art. The scientists, despite this letter’s consternation, have ended up inheriting the earth. And we are indeed, 300 years later, lonely in this mysterious void.

This loneliness is, for me, present in Alex’s response to contemporary conditions. The artist himself describes how his works situate the exhibition in the midst of an unseen act of destruction. There is a contradiction at play here too. I talk about going away from something while asking myself to get closer and closer while wanting a specific materiality to deliver me something ethereal. This somatic contradiction is manifest in the analogy of the abscess. Our contexts shift when our lives get punctuated by such a thing. Its presence is precisely the reason for our distance as our fingers explore the immediate while the mind travels further and further and further away.

‘Why is this here and what caused it?’

Intrusions are usually the things that can help lull us out of something; the destruction of a bamboo grove, the discovering of another world that exists under a polished lens, a disturbing assemblage of young trees cut down upon reaching maturity and sweaty bedsheets featuring the shape of someone we could know. These all provide the space we need but are often denied, the space between imagination and us, between birdsong and trash.

Josh Plough is the city curator and editor at Onomatopoe Projects in Eindhoven, where he works in the shadow of the Design Academy Eindhoven. He graduated from there with an MA in Design Curating & Writing and is critically sceptical of the DESIGNart it produces and how design in general is being dealt with and defined. Currently, Josh is working on a project that brings art and design research within reach of the public and policy makers; with the aim of widening the debate surrounding technology and the city. He is also saving up for a telescope.