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YESTERDAY in a *YEAR*

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Prologue

This exposition is an accompaniment to my work *Yesterday in a Year* (2026), elaborating on the intentions, decisions, and theoretical frameworks involved in the process of creating it. Early on in this process, I decided to use the work as a personal investigation into different forms and understandings of affect, which had been a core interest of my artistic practice for around four years.

Yesterday in a Year is divided into three parts, placed inside a labyrinth made of white cotton stretched between metal poles, roughly 6 by 6 meters in size. As you enter, you first encounter a printed text about memories of a dog I had as a teenager. After the printed text, the viewer is met with a video installation with a text about memories of the cat I had as a teenager, presented as subtitles without an image, accompanied by a sound recording on headphones. After that, the labyrinth continues with 4 more corners, culminating in a double padded, slightly sound insulated center.

From the moment I first encountered the concept of affect, it had a certain mystique around itself that didn't quite let me go; it seemed as if it were the glue that connects my consciousness to the world it's existing in. Art, within this cosmic sandwich, seemed to me as if it were inherently connected to this breach from mind to matter. After all, art is nothing more than physical things with which we engage mentally, more often so than physically.

Affect studies, as an interdisciplinary field, is historically split into two dominant traditions regarding the understanding of the term itself. In one of the two, affect is conceptualized as an elemental state, functioning as a motivational system, and constituting a fundamental part to the understanding of the human psyche. This tradition has its root in neuroscience and psychology, is reflected in Silvan S. Tomkins's theory of primary affects and Antonio Damasio's theory of basic emotions, and has more recently been extended by the works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lisa Cartwright, and Teresa Brennan. The second, mostly associated with the humanities and more specifically philosophy, defines affect as an intensive force, arising as distinct intensities, with focus on the pre-conscious, materiality and bodily experiences. This tradition is heavily accredited to Gilles Deleuze building on Baruch Spinoza and further expanded in Brian Massumi's theory of autonomous affect and Nigel Thrift's non-representational theory.

In my opinion, both of these traditions share a beautiful intention: To better understand why we do what we do. (Ott, 2017, p. 1)

Chapter I

- *This is an image of my dog in the garden* -

Yesterday in a Year has become an unraveling of personal memory in an attempt to activate the affects stuck to similar memories inside the bodies of others. I started out with a story about an image of my dog. The initial idea was quite simple: deducting the image out of a portrait and, instead, writing around it. This has led me to a curiosity about memories of childhood pets as a sort of affective trope. A lot of us have memories of this kind, and I think they're generally easy to relate to, since many people had their first encounter with death and sorrow through the suffering of a pet.

Stories like these are emotive due to our search for meaning in death and misery, a universal forcefield of autobiography and affect. Here, the beholders of said memories went through a process of creating a narrative on their own terms, claiming control over a chapter within their autobiography where, in fact, control was lost. Judging from my own experience, I feel like the finding of meaning in these memories is simply how I learned to cope with them; as in, I create meaning around a negative memory so I can relate to it positively, or meaningfully at least. Here, affect lends power to both its meaning and the memory - or its retainment - itself. It functions as a force that not only deepens the significance we assign to a memory but also strengthens its persistence, making it more central to our personal narrative.

The process of remembering was a consciously, as well as subconsciously, active endeavor. I started to dream about the dog and noticed how I began to form the habit of checking the spot where she used to sleep every time I passed it, even though her bed was long removed. However depressing that may sound, it gave me some reassurance.

As an artist, I have come to understand that I could never experience my work the way a viewer could, since I am its maker. The affect I am working with, on the other hand, distinct to me as clay to a potter, is noticeably lending power to the memory it stuck to, making me *act* beyond my conscious control. The sticky nature of affect is famously elaborated by the writer and ex-Goldsmith's professor Sara Ahmed. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she claims that affect doesn't originate inside you as a pure, private feeling, nor does it belong inherently to objects. Instead, affect accumulates through contact and circulation, sticking to objects, signs, and, in this case, memories over time, acquiring intensity through repetition and association (Ahmed, 2004). Here it is important to note that affect, within Ahmed's framework, has an orienting nature. The affect, adhered to this memory, pulls me to check for the dog. This, although far from empirical proof, is also in line with the understanding of affect as an elemental state and follows the logic of psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins' theory of primary affects, which finds them "to constitute the primary motivational system", an "innate biological [...] mechanism, more urgent than drive deprivation and pleasure, and more urgent even than physical pain" (Tomkins, 2008, p. 4, 354, 355), wherein he also notes how affect "lends power to memory, to perception, to thought, and to action" (pp. 356). In this sense, me checking for the dog is an affectively triggered compulsion, where the active recollection of my memories about the dog resulted in an activation of the affect stuck to it,

demonstrating how, in line with Tomkins, affect not only accompanies, but actively propels an experience, functioning as its main motivational factor.

All this remembering cannot be discussed without acknowledgment of its traumatic nature. Me having to force-feed my dog - while I was far too young to successfully rationalize the harm I was inflicting on whom I love as an act of love - was at least somewhat traumatizing. Before getting into this, I feel like I need to first clarify the context of what sort of trauma this would be. What we call childhood trauma is quite different from what a psychiatrist would call a trauma to an adult. Although there is no all-encompassing definition of psychological trauma, a key point to note is that in adults, trauma is an overwhelming experience that can threaten a person's sense of safety, well-being, or identity, cutting so deeply into one's experience of normality that someone suffering from a trauma of this sort cannot return to the normal they had before experiencing it. Here an emotional trauma can cause a distinct physical injury to the brain. A childhood trauma, on the other hand, is a bit more vague to pinpoint since it is deeply related to the fact that the child's brain is still somehow growing and changing. Traumatic experiences in one's childhood tend to rather manifest themselves behaviorally, as in, possibly leading to addiction, eating disorders, or depressive tendencies. To make it more confusing, all this comes on a very wide spectrum of severity, but to just give a statistical insight: around seventy percent of people globally are considered to experience a traumatic event in their lifetime. It seems most clarifying to me to stress that the traumatic experiences I am talking about are not severe.

Now, as I am actively remembering these events, I notice a confusion in their timeline. I can remember how the dog's character changed over time, how her appearance changed, how she needed years to overcome her constant anxiety, jumping up at every unexpected move I would make, but the memory of force-feeding her is basically singular, as if it happened once or maybe twice. As a matter of fact, I had to regularly shove food down her throat over the course of seven years, and I cannot help but feel as if it made me love her so much more.

As I was starting to look into writings about trauma, specifically within art, I stumbled across the following quote several times, all in relation to the 9/11 attack and how trauma splits time, described by . Brown describes traumatic memories as occupying "neither a 'then' nor a 'now'" and its meaning "being neither significant nor nonsensical; it is neither pure fact nor pure fantasy; it comes both from within the subject (the endogenous fantasy) and from without (the original scene of seduction, and the second, possibly quite banal event that recalls it)" (Brown, 1992, p. 239 & Walker, 2014, p. 311). I want to highlight two things here: A) the suffering of my dog is not comparable to the most prominent terror attack of our time, and B) the dual negations made within this quote are oddly poetic.

To be neither then nor now, neither significant nor nonsensical, but from both within a subject and the reality it is existing in, could very well be the abstracted blueprint for an artwork or a poem. Traumatic memories exist outside of time, inside the mystical, the non-ordinary, a place of supra-normality. Exactly this space has been approached by many artists and writers through their work, a place so filled by the affects of memories that there is no room left for the logic of linear time.

At this point, I need to take a step back.

I cannot stress enough how important it is here, to differentiate between the severity of different traumata. The suffering of a pet is clearly a less drastic cut into my experience of the normal than a collective trauma such as 9/11, or any personal experience of horror, such as becoming the victim of another's violence, would have been. I have been stretched, rather than torn. Paali was a happy dog, and I, although deeply impacted by this experience during my most formative years, have rather gained from it than lost.

All this, nevertheless, suggests the possibility of a beautiful trauma. I think there is a sort of cultural obsession around trauma, since, believing the assumption that almost three-fourths of us will experience something traumatic in our lifetime, trauma should be understood as a non-deductible component within the complexity of human life.

Chapter II

- This is a video of my cat imitating a group of birds -

As a continuation from the text about the dog, I was looking to expand the logic of the emotive text into video: a memory, shared as subtitles to a video without image. This added two new dimensions to the work: A) I have full control over how fast the text is being read, as in, the pacing of the subtitles, and B) the addition of sound.

Both of these attributes pull the work from literature into cinema, although remaining based on a literary core. I have wondered for some time what I actually want from this video, since a repetition of the first chapter would be redundant.

The realization of it being cinematic brought me to see it as a tool for creating suspense within the work as a whole. As I see it, I pulled the viewer onto a journey inwards with the text about the dog, and now, the work must continue to maintain tension. My style of writing, albeit resonating the previous tone, became more reductive, playing with a horror movie approach of withholding information, as in, the monsters you can't see are always the scariest, and fear, I figured, could contribute to the affective power of this work.

Within the story, which is a narrative leading up to the death of my cat, I refrain from giving the final piece of information, and instead try to imply a sense of danger through a red background and the timing of sentences in relation to the sound recording playing.

More important to me than the writing about a childhood memory, particularly how my irresponsibility lead the cat's demise, is the use of sound. The recording I used is a binaural field recording of birds flying around my head and a cat imitating said group of birds. The characters within this recording reflect the characters in the story: a cat, birds, and me. That being said, the sound cannot be understood as an illustration of the narrative; the main correlation of the two is that I have constructed them, one into a linguistic narrative and the other into non-linguistic information. Although fundamentally different in medium, the process of making this recording was quite similar to writing the story, as they are both fabrications rather than accurate representations. I began by setting a stage, picking a location to make my field recording, which in this instance was an apple garden where I knew I would find many birds that are used to close human contact, since the cafe next to the garden was a primary source of food for them. I noticed how they got used to eating scraps off of plates and cutlery that cafe guests would leave behind. Due to this they were also remarkably comfortable with getting

very close to humans, since the most courageous birds would get first pick and end up with a bigger share of bread crumbs, butter, and cake icing. My plan was clear: for the perfect recording of birds flying around my head, I would need to sit perfectly still, with decent chunks of butter on my fingertips, and record through binaural microphones stuck into my ears, hoping as many birds as possible would be tempted enough to fly right onto me.

Happily, it all worked out, and they ate the butter right off of my body, producing a crystal-clear and very tactile recording of flapping wings, picking beaks, and porcelain-scraping claws; sometimes up to ten little birds at the same time.

This, paired with a found recording of a cat vocalizing - or rather, attempting to vocalize - an imitation of bird-sounds, became the recording I installed in *Yesterday in a Year*.

Field recordings are mainly understood as recordings of environments, but should not be understood as truthful representations of environmental sound.

The work *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1998) by Hildegard Westerkamp addresses this beautifully. A field recording accompanied by a soft spoken voice guides the listener through sonic space eventually activating audio-effects like a high pass filter or equalizer to show the listeners how it actually felt to be on this beach on specifically that day, filtering out the low frequencies to show how the breeze felt in real life or turning up the treble to show how it seemed impossible to hear some small details through the city noise, specifically when one tries to focus on only them.

The point here is that listening in space is an embodied experience, informed by so much more than just signal transmitted from the inner ear into the brain. The field recording placed inside *Yesterday in a Year* becomes an embodied experience of sound and memory, and the birds in the headphones are not the birds on my fingers. They are entangled in a dynamic of narrative and a search for meaning.

I wanted possible feelings arising from this sound installation to remain up to the viewers' interpretations, reliant on their own personal history. A psychiatric biological expansion on affect studies, *Affect Script Psychology* or short ASP, proposes that such visceral responses are not just personal experiences, but are deeply interconnected with the social and material world, informing and being informed by social structures, personal history, or even the political. In the words of the psychologists Vernon C. Kelly and Margaret Thorsborne, accredited with the establishment of ASP: "affects are our biology, feelings are our psychology and emotions are our biography" (Kelly & Thorsborne, 2014). Broken down into digestible language, this claims affects are inputs to our senses, feelings are how we take notice of these inputs, and emotions are, depending on previous experiences, our reaction to them. To me, sound is interesting within this chain of cause and effect because it can have an impact on us through both biological and biographical means. All this suggests the listening experience of the recording in *Yesterday in a Year* to be fundamentally shaped by personal memories of the viewer. After seeing the exhibition, some described it as joyful and relaxing, while others had a more anxious response, agitated by the nervous swarming of the birds.

Chapter III

To round up this work, I was aiming for a bodily, sensorial culmination. *Yesterday in a Year* is, as previously mentioned, both situated in and made of a labyrinth, and every labyrinth needs a center.

The decision to use sound insulation as a final part of the work came quite naturally. I work in sound and, to me at least, no sound is quite as striking as the lack of it. Silence, or more specifically an acoustical change from a wide open space into a small muffled one, has the wonderful power of switching our ears from a listening to a navigation device, and the sensation felt during this switch is very curious to me. Our ears make up the main source for our sense of balance, and through spatial reverberations we are able to hear and feel space. Once stripped of these reverberations, a small alarm seems to go off in my brain, my perception is shifting, and all of a sudden I seem to have to look for other information on what is up or down, left or right. As to why specifically this seemed obvious to use in the work: a labyrinth is a space of disorientation, and I wanted the center to be the pinnacle of just this.

Before I come to the point of this, I must point out one more thing in relation to our sense of hearing: the position of the ears on our heads. Our eyes are, as with all sight hunters, in front, evolutionarily specialized to focus on what we chase or otherwise concentrate on visually. Our ears are, just as the eyes of a goat, pointing sideways; other animals, like dogs, can rotate their outer ears to listen in a specific direction, something we didn't adapt to localize prey. Goats have eyes on the side to see threats coming from all angles, prioritizing a larger field of vision over seeing three-dimensionally. A goat's eyes are, just like our ears, a warning system. Our sense of vision is so focused on what is in front of us that our sense of hearing is essentially the safety sense. In terms of affect, our hearing is our sense of fear.

Here, the gesture of sonic reduction inside *Yesterday in a Year* becomes interesting to me. Fear, although not necessarily an affect, is a familiar feeling, which comes very close to a core definition of both the psychological, and the deleuzo-massoumian understanding of affect; it makes us *act* - fight or flight, to say it plainly. In the work, I wanted to utilize this power of activation. I think the curious sensation of sudden silence feels almost as if one would chug a double espresso and metabolize all that caffeine within a fraction of a second, like a spark of intensified perception. I hoped this spark to anchor the previous journey through memories, narrative, and sonic environments inside the body, inside the sensory. After all, outputs of architecture, sound, and even written language all end up as inputs into the same body and brain, resulting in an embodied experience beyond conceptualizability.

Epilogue

Seven months later, *Yesterday in a Year* as a work, exposition, and exhibition is nearing a state of being finished, and I cannot help but feel a little mopey about it.

To at least partially answer a core question I had while making the work, especially whether I can activate affects that stuck to memories and somehow condense them inside a space, I think the most truthful realization regarding this is the importance of an inside versus an outside. The labyrinth was situated in a much bigger space - an industrial hall with high ceilings - and many of the viewers I spoke to mentioned this change in atmosphere as fundamental to their experience of the work. Here, it is important to keep in mind that the walls of the labyrinth were made of fabric which was only stretched from about 50 centimeters off the ground upward; hence, there was neither a proper isolation from the rest of the space nor anything more than the appearance of privacy. The way back out from the center of the labyrinth, passing the video and the text, which by then are beginning to become readable as symbols for the memory of their previous experience, seems crucial for the work as a whole. Also, the spiraling way of the labyrinth, to me at least, was an effective physical contribution to the shaping of a situation meant to *circulate* affects between bodies, memories, and sounds. This, I understand as an argument for simplicity and fairly straightforward conceptual choices. I have by now come to think of the work as somehow pre-conceptual, as in, there being nothing a viewer is supposed to understand; rather, I hope a viewer can have a personal insight into the experience itself. A reflection on the feelings arising from this experience seems quite profound to me, but then again, of course it does, since the memories I was writing about hold a profound meaning to me.

Conclusively, I begin to consider an affective power in memories as mutual to a memory's ability to be meaningful. The distinction here lies in one being more personal than the other. Feelings, scholarly speaking postdating affect, are famously contagious, and so it seems, is the fact that we give meaning to memories of this kind. Here I would claim that the sharing of a, to me, meaningful memory leads to the activation of an affect stuck to a similar meaningful memory in the viewer. In this logic, meaning would almost function as a sort of tool to localize the memory which this specific affect has stuck to. This would also indicate that the affect stuck to my memory can be the same as the affect stuck to another's memory, as in, the affect being universal. It is the memory's meaning, which is personal.

One last remark about the stickiness of it all: Earlier in this essay, I mentioned how I began to dream about the dog and how I formed a habit of checking a bed long removed. Two of the viewers who saw *Yesterday in a Year* texted me after seeing the show, letting me know that they had a curious dream about a cat during the night that followed. Whatever that may mean... hurray!

References

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Further Reading

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