

**Rearview Mirror Towards Reality**  
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### **From a Grain of Sand to a Pearl to a Grain of Sand...**

"The sublime holds within it the principle of unpredictability." — [Friedrich Kittler]

A great many plants — in the way that they populate the dusty barrenness of railroad embankments, grounds of decaying and barely intact factories and less-frequented ways — are immigrants, genetic flotsam traveling as blind passengers bearing goods from throughout the world and, strewn occasionally from out of the wagons of progress, become indigenous.

They make it in these strange surroundings through their own quality of toughness. Their expansion is initially explosive, then their rank growth moderates to a cultivation, but which never becomes native, since their life is one in a ghetto. Symbioses that they enter into are of short duration. They settle into ranges, zones which human beings and their botanical culture of utilization do not require, do not even notice. A no-man's-land — highway median strips, winter harbors, railroad switching yards, half-deserted gas stations on back roads, fields surrounding airport runways — places abandoned by human emigrants, blank spots in the cartography of culture.

They constitute a flora with no audience, without definition and regulation between admiration and weed. They live in the tristezza of being overlooked, despite all the noise blaring about them in the stillness of decline.

A wild tangle of metaphors and romanticism grows rampantly around the work and the person of Just Merrit, or perhaps only around my thoughts about him. Either way, both of us are equally devoted to such arabesques. We — at least I — can not have it any other way, and whoever will should enter this uncultivated land with a sunken, microscopic gaze — that strange, staged world which we both have long regarded from a seated position.

Just Merrit sought out such a no-man's-land and settled down there, reservedly, hesitantly though not uncommodiously: the ruins of the ideals of the Industrial Age, the Voest [1] or, to be more precise, its digestive tract, the scrap yard. The smoke stacks of these ruins are still smoking. Not that dilapidation has already disfigured it, but it is not difficult to see from the vegetation that has begun to infiltrate that this Moloch of diehard production is in its last throes, already more museum than industrial giant.

What are the reasons that move someone to seek out such a morbid, or at least nostalgic, ambience? In Just Merrit's hierarchy of importance, the correct, precise context with the steel works seemingly occupies the uppermost position. But also his personality needs to be embedded in a romantic environment of soot, rust and dust. He requires the sense of protection of a no-man's-land and not that of an exquisitely cultivated nature preserve thick with hikers, to thus see the sublimity of decline as a parable and not as a fact in a story for school children.

The smell of proletarian labor raises no suspicions; it is free of the need for explanation to art and politics. It is too innocent and naive, as if anyone could even ask ... So is every artist, with no ifs, ands or buts. The honesty of the effort and the aesthetic of the fabrication determine product like a creator. Hard work and not skill is the final determinant of quality.

With Contained, a workshop grew onto the works, a mimicry of a written off, weeded out epoch. A foreign body, like a speck of dust or, better yet, a seed, anchors itself in the system, begins to be detected, overgrown, absorbed. It germinates. The final product which is the goal of this evolution is a vehicle, a "seminal airborne apparatus" that floats forth, perhaps to the ruins of digital ecstasies ...

Steel was the decisive material of the Industrial Revolution. As iron, it formed the architecture, drove the sign language of progress and finally raised labor to the central and exclusive definition of being human. No longer did the product stand for the individual, but rather the production did. The work done by hands became the works of machines, man the actor was transformed into an observer.

Acceptance and recognition in society becomes synonymous with the function performed in the process of manufacturing products for society. I becomes we, mine becomes ours. The religion of fabrication made systematic fragments out of human beings — the famous-notorious little cog — whose responsibility also refers to a merely fragmentary one.

Being a component of production makes responsibility superfluous, and so begins the delegation of these concepts to the realm of politics as well as to art. One assigns the governing; the feeling, thinking, living are done on one's behalf. Here are anchored the roots of failure, although the fascination of indifference, the utter lack of feeling can not be denied.

Without a doubt, the "patricide" contained in this tradition was necessary. At the end of the 20th century, at the end of the fermata of every tradition of knowledge, it is legitimate to say this. The frustration over the confinement of form, which, as is well known [*A. Loos*], is what makes the holes in the shoes, has given way to frustration over the complete lack of influence upon the final results. The fondness felt toward the end results of this epoch can be explained as resulting from the egotistical love for the unloved.

The success of industrialization is remarkable and nevertheless understandable if one factors in laziness as the eternally operative mainspring driving human creativity in fashioning tools. It runs like clockwork. It is quite beneficial to have the work done, even if machines are soon stealing jobs and, as robots, populating our occupational nightmares. They are becoming duplicates of ourselves; otherwise, we would have to hate ourselves as their creators instead of them. Just as the human machine with its productive potential now becomes troublesome — it had to work — so very pleasant seems the productive Land of Cockaigne [instinct domain]. Without the responsibility of acting, the apathetic acceptance of laziness triumphs. Responsibility means time, work and intimacy — thus, everything which is unsuited to the arbitrariness of a Land of Cockaigne.

With guile and culture, we have transformed paradise into the Land of Cockaigne of the throwaway society, and we have practiced irresponsibility — which in its true sense means the renunciation of work — for so long that the idea of turning back from the abyss of ecological catastrophe is beyond naive fantasy. We have nothing and everything at the same time, only to be able to throw "it" away if it relates to us. Ego is without aura, without the information of the possession, to be able to consume over and over again.

The discovery of the self by means of a product must fail if a majority of the inhabitants of the "industrialized" world have no products of their own, to say nothing of a presentable résumé to show. But we still have the terror of the cultural archive [*B. Groys*], the terror of the recognition through work. What, and who of us, will survive. Where is the chance to gain entry into the memory of the "culture"? No solution, ergo, one produces — unwillingly and brazenly at the same time — art or children.

And there is more — of the horror, of the hazards of laziness and paralysis: When a human being does not produce products on his own, sooner or later, his own ego becomes a product, a machine and a medium — human as astronaut in the universe of information. Each of us is ego and sufficient unto himself [*H. Ibsen*]. Communication would only disturb those screwing around with information, oblivious to the world. Only, what are the objects of ego? If you only live once, what should you play with? One life, one game, one chance and no dependable traditions, no rebirth, at best, an authoritarian hereafter [with singing of hosannas].

One slip-up, one false decision, and the product, ego, is spoiled. But no matter, nobody sees it anyway, except the ego which, forgotten in the machines of leisure, must work on itself. The memory of the body replaces that of the brain. The traces of time are in the body [not on the body, *A. Assmann*] and not in the form of knowledge.

The more or less creative — for we have now gone beyond innovation as the imperative of modernity — intelligentsia flees to the camps of self-discovery or art-as-hobby. Since, naturally, everyone is an artist when there are only two authoritative determinants of art: one may become an artist by the self-proclamation of one's work as art; or through the designation of a piece of merchandise as a work of art and its producer as an artist. The "golden calf" of individuality has made comprehensibility to a viewing public a matter beside the point. There are as many works of art as there are claims asserted and assumptions introduced. Once an ego has been counterfeited, productivity is possible and the impossibility of verification is the back door into the archive of the oligarchies of inheritors and handers-down — art as the outcome of commerce's power of self-assertion.

So, that is the scenario from which Voest offers protection. Without the embarrassing contortions of the self-defined avant-garde and the fenced-off garden plots and mixed-medley casseroles of post-modernism, it lives on in the archaic halls of heavy industry as if in a laboratory of transitoriness — rather more a part of this transitoriness, like a parasite that dies or moves on after its host has succumbed.

Just Merrit enlivens the narrow passage between present and past, or the moment of metamorphosis from culture to history [from now to yesterday]. He anticipates history in his aesthetics and nevertheless flirts with the élan of progress in his works. Speed without acceleration, neither positive nor negative — simultaneously, a glimpse to the future in the rearview mirror — fleeting. The function has come to an end and a new one has not yet been found and the seeds are sprouting in the "not-yet-ruins" of a "not-yet-past."

The feeling of being protected can be found only where the function of the protector is not present. The bunker does not offer protection in war; it does so only in peace, through its superfluousness — the sublime in the absence of fear. And to dispel a misconception [*P. Weibel*]: Faschistoidität comes about as a result of action and not observation. Not the products of Fascism but rather their production is reprehensible. Long ago, dictators safeguarded the idea of ruins as an indicator of their power. They loved the bomb as an

instrument of destruction which only one race would survive. Their aesthetic is the wrecking and the wreckage. Just Merrit moves through this transition.

His hodgepodge/museum resembles a replacement parts depot of modernism, a "genetic data bank" of a post-constructivism never consistently carried out. He administers fragments whose charm lies in their lack of function, in the kitsch of the parable of the lonely cogwheel as the human being without relationships. Of course we are all tiny, insignificant gears — just without a machine.

As much as Just Merrit loves the aesthetic of the collective, the work with his body, with his senses, means the cancellation of this aesthetic. He himself is the collective, and the collective that actually exists is a collection of autists. The symbols and signs of modernism no longer possess in his assemblage an incisive political truth. His comprehension through imitation succeeds as a result of his understanding of the falseness of the gestures and rituals of commerce.

Remembrance is just not a product; it is indivisible, it cannot be bought and sold. Fragments are the catalysts of memory, they apply to everyone, even if no memory resembles another. Just Merrit's laboratory of the past is, in this sense, a machine against forgetting [like writing, Plato], his morality is "remembering" as opposed to "being reminded."

*Contained*, though, also signifies autonomy. At first glance, the containers might seem like mobile homes without wheels, stranded in some corner of the world. *Contained* is everything one needs to survive on an island — and it is precisely this will to survive, and not that toward culture, which is determinative. If *Contained* is an adventure in the style of "Robinson Crusoe," then Robinson is Friday too. One culture is not explaining itself to another one; rather, a culture is explaining itself to itself.

An aspect of romanticism arises once again: first, that of machines and tools, salvaged and brought to the island, which promise new designs of culture — which three things would you bring with you to a deserted island ...

On the other hand, it is the chance to live a lonely, to be sure, but unobserved life — autonomy "in its most beautiful form," since you can do whatever you want, dispatching to the despots of the concerns of culture interchangeable pieces of scenery decorated with props for the company orangery, larger or smaller "oddities and sensations" which survive only in the greenhouses of commerce. You have done your duty and can stay where you want, surrounded by genuine beauty — if possible, naked and lazy.

And what is that supposed to mean, that the Gypsy wagon has no wheels? You will not be able to drive anyway, to the next "host" or the next epoch, even if they are stupid enough to build a highway. On the electronic superhighway, there are no side streets; as always, it is a question of the "toll." What can you do? For all those who can not achieve emancipation and autonomy, pull into the truck stop and relax. Once again, the machismo of a man's job, of moving on, of the smell of oil and hot rubber. Once again, a long stopover in a timeless space. And anyway, the commercials always tell us to "take a break" [but who wants to be dead?]. Driving, with or without cargo, takes time, lost time. The erotic of the provisional, without responsibility, being ego alone — gliding, rolling, pausing in a temporary measure of life, in a cheap imitation of a dwelling. Second-hand *gemütlichkeit*, used by strangers, with traces not of our, but of my. Time is a cogwheel. We experience time only through the traces that it leaves behind. If they are not traces upon us, we do not suffer [nostalgia of the flea market].

There lies the beauty, the contentment of time squandered, scot-free; time that overcomes us, stroke by stroke. There we receive signals from the island toward which we are, regrettably, not underway. We are still living among the currents of the new, its concepts having long since come unmoored. We have no raft named *Contained*.

If Just Merrit makes himself comfortable in his easy chair, that can mean nothing good for this epoch. However highly one may praise the vitality of the Computer Age and its endless [because an approach not yet begun] possibilities and perspectives, with its appearance begins the long decline, and our fascination will become a prayer for the health of a dying man. Chips crumbling to sand.

In *Contained*, Just Merrit brings to life a time machine in which time no longer has a function; its task consists of dissolving time. He himself conducts research into the essence of contentment and of necessity. He assumes a place in society without any curiosity, a society which would let him become a part of the audience, with no possible detour, no possible alternative. Curiosity and boredom as styles of play are one and the same — thus he remains a concerned outsider without the possibility of understanding, a foreign body.

The most fundamental character of the modern spectacle is the staging of its own collapse. If the new is the ultimate determinant of art, then the only art there can be is the old. What chances does the pearl have, to not end up on the necks of the bourgeoisie, to not lay before swine, than to become once again a grain of sand.

[1] VOEST: founded in 1938 as "Reichswerke Hermann Göring", important armament producer for the Third Reich. After 1945, transfer to Austrian State Industries. Before the world steel crisis, largest employer in Upper Austria with up to 30.000 employees. Since 1970, numerous restructuring measures.

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