

TO BREAK OPEN THE DAILY: VLATKA HORVAT'S PHOTOGRAPHIC INFRAORDINARY

Between 1969 and 1975, Georges Perec worked on a project that he would never finish. He chose twelve places in Paris that were important to him. The plan was that he would visit one per month over the course of a year, and write two texts: one describing the things he could see at that place, creating as “neutral” as possible an account of it. The other he would write at a remove, recalling what he saw, and how it made him feel, describing the memories associated with the place, etc. The project – *les lieux de mémoire*, the places of memory – was a way for Perec to maintain a connection to those places, to keep their memory alive in his mind and his writing: a personal archive of the city. He would put each piece of writing in a sealed envelope, and when twelve years were up, he would publish them all together. As is only natural for a writer who is sure he's done something worth sharing, he couldn't hold out that long, but began to publish them here and there. And then, without the suspense he had built into the project, he lost interest in it, and dropped it altogether.

I thought of Perec's project as I paged through Vlatka Horvat's *To See Stars over Mountains*, her visual diary of the year 2021. Horvat took a photograph a day, during and out of lockdown, on walks around her neighborhood in London, and later, on a couple of careful trips elsewhere. But this diary, as I've just called it, is more than a visual record. It is something closer to Perec's memory project: the image taken *sur place* – the description, through photography, of what is; and then the intervention into the world of the photograph, an amplification or transformation of it that responds creatively to that place, and tries to capture or playfully reimagine its spirit. Two different looking processes: looking at the world while moving through it, then looking at it once it's become a picture.

The images are rhythmed by sameness. To take a walk, every day, in the same place: in some ways our behavior during the pandemic took a similar shape to what we did before it, just on a more limited scale. Our lives are formed by repetition; our patterns of dailiness are interrupted by other patterns of dailiness. The sameness of the lockdown walk is echoed by the sameness of the ten-day period of isolation.

We make ourselves habits so we can break them. We make art for the same reason: to break open the daily and see a new earth, hidden in plain sight.

Perec thought about dailiness and habit in his work; they were his enduring subjects. The source, really, of his ethics. “Question your tea spoons,” he wrote in his essay on the infraordinary – what happens when nothing is happening. “What is there under your wallpaper?”¹ Horvat asks a related question in her photographs and her interventions. What can we see, if we look at the same landscape long enough? *To See Stars over Mountains* is attention exaggerated, the infraordinary become extraordinary through focused regard.

What if there were ladders to the sky here? Or levitating starbursts? What if the top of that building floated a hundred yards above it? Trees rubber-banded together; a misty field, the field itself misted out with white crayon. A chunk of the landscape missing, or something unpredictable added to it. Imports and exports. Solar panels everywhere! Children’s toys stacked high on top of the houses. A snaking red path up into the sky, right out of the frame. A ski slope in the clouds. A red satin bookmark emerging from a window, like a tongue. Windows and doorways in the foliage. Brutalist fantasies softened. Stories in the trees. Ley lines, invisible lines directing our gaze, our energy, shaping our perception. Echoes in the landscape. Invisible energies, located. Colors, presences. These impossible worlds, right in front of our eyes. Abstractions, abstractions.

Soon, I’m looking at images that seem doctored, though I can’t say for sure: are those colors part of the picture, or were they added later? Do streetlights really look that weird? What a strange shape is a roof, an umbrella, how marvelous the things reflected in a muddy puddle (but here again I don’t know; has this puddle been tampered with?). Horvat is defamiliarizing the familiar, turning a known landscape – surely after looking at it so many times it becomes known, even to those of us who have never set foot in it – into the surreal, full of unexpected juxtapositions and marvels. “To write,” wrote Perec, “to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise

scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark, or a few signs.”² To write on the photograph – writing on writing – is to bring out something that is already present in the image; to furrow the trace that exists in the mind’s eye, and that, henceforth, will now exist indelibly, invisibly in the world.

The one that sticks with me, as I work on this essay, then go away, then come back to it again, is from 17.08.21. A tree; or rather half a tree. Or no: it’s a tree, growing at an angle; just in front of it – their trunks aligned so they appear to be one tree – is another, one that has no leaves on it. Something has had its way with it – nature? The tree surgeon? One branch leans off, ending in a tangle of smaller twigs. Half the photo seems to have burned away, bandaged with masking tape, its edges curling at the border. Or is it an overlaid sheet of paper that’s been burned? I could ask but I don’t want to know the answer. When we speak on the phone Horvat tells me she is drawn to margins and edges – where a thing meets the world, and other things. What is the space of the edge, she asks, if not a space of possibility in which something can unravel and disintegrate and blend in with things that are not “it”? What if we were less attentive to borders, and more to their ambiguities?

I am still thinking about our conversation, and her photographs, days later, in this blurry space between Christmas and New Year’s, as 2021 tips into 2022, wondering what the next year will hold for those of us longing to trace new patterns in our lives, alert to anything that might help us do it – from news reports and new scientific studies to books or films or images that help us keep the doors to our hearts propped open.

Art helps us imagine other ways of being by disrupting what we think we see.

— Lauren Elkin

1. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Trans. John Sturrock. London: Penguin, 1997, pp. 210-211.

2. *Species of Spaces*, p. 92.