

<sup>119</sup> Stijn Pommée

*Like a Letter Addressed By a Child*

Posing that “to live is to go from one space to another, trying insofar as possible to not bump into things,” the book itself moves from the space of the page “Space begins in this way, with only words, signs traced on the blank page” to that of the bed, the bedroom, the apartment, the building, the street, the quarter, the city, the countryside, the country, Europe, the world and space, like a letter addressed by a child.<sup>1</sup>

## FIRST THINGS FIRST

I’m writing.

*Wait — who is writing?*

Let’s clarify: I am writing.

I’m sitting on a chair; behind my table; behind my computer.

There’s a classroom. I’m on the sixth floor. I just got out of the elevator. There are multiple windows in the classroom. I get distracted and take a look outside — I see — a playground, children running around.

Now, if we zoom out a bit more. We look down on two buildings and some space in between; together they constitute the space that we call our school.

Perhaps we should stop there.

Or, rather, get back to the writing.

I’m writing about, developing and exploring my own interests within this text.

*Which are?*

Well, I do have my particular interests at this moment.

A very short list:

- *gloves*
- *the colour pink*
- *children’s drawings*
- *chalk*

Whatever! — They’re important to me, but I also feel like there are already many things happening around me that are, perhaps, even harder to look for, to explore, because I’ve grown so used to them.

*What exactly is happening around you then?*

As I said; right now; the table, the chair, the school; I can see the cars moving on the highway out of the window, and the metro, number 50, that I took this morning, just arrived. I’m looking at my screen, and I move my fingers on my keyboard, constantly going back and forth within the text until I get a sentence that speaks to me. I end with a dot.

<sup>1</sup> Percec, Georges. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, London Penguin Books, 1997, p. 13

*Do we start from there?*

No, first things first. Let’s start with the beginning of my day instead.

The morning.

My morning.

Actually, forget about mornings. I hate mornings.

Well, no, I don’t. I just hate getting out of bed. My mind needs to get through a 10-step program update before it’s ready to face the day.

Maybe I shouldn’t mention the 4 cups of coffee that I drank last night. But I like working at night! When everyone is asleep and it’s dark outside — it’s the time I finally find some kind of gap where everything seems possible.

All right, I finally woke up. Can I move on and start talking about the daily then?

When we talk about the daily, we assume a routine. This routine blinds us as much as it guides us throughout the day; some people keep to a very strict routine, some people hardly have one. I have a particularly messy one.

Within this text the most difficult part was somehow thinking about ways to get out of the text. What is happening around me, as I’m writing?

*I can take a look!*

What do others experience as well, when they are reading this text?

*This might be harder, since I’m only myself.*

Eventually I found that in order to read and write it’s very important to step aside every now and then.

## SOMEONE ELSE WHO’S SOMEWHERE ELSE

I’d like to introduce someone else besides me: someone that’s never here, but rather far away: the tourist.

The tourist is looking for an experience that is as far away from their daily life as possible.

The tourist is not only somewhere else, he’s also usually someone else; the antithesis of what people would like to be. I became very fascinated with this figure. But, let me make a quick detour, again.

I’d like to move back towards the text; its black shapes. Towards the alphabet. Trying to get a grip on this alphabet, and understand it, I started watching ‘L’abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze’, an eight-hour series of interviews between Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet. Moving from A to Z, Deleuze chooses one word for every letter, which generates a talk.

From ‘A for animal until ‘Z for zig-zag’; at first, I failed to see that they explored everything except the alphabet itself.

<sup>2</sup>

Guattari Felix, *Machinic Eros — Writings on Japan*. (Minneapolis, Univocal, 2015) p. 146

Deleuze mentioned something about traveling, though:

In his explanation of “V as Voyage” with Claire Parnet, Deleuze says that traveling, even, and perhaps especially, to meet other intellectuals is, in fact, the opposite of traveling.”<sup>2</sup>:

Deleuze: “To go to the ends of the earth to talk... to see people before for talking and to see people after for talking, this is a monstrous image, Its a cheap rupture... A trip is not enough to create a real rupture. If you want rupture, then do something other than travel... Nothing is more immobile than a nomad. Nothing travels less than a nomad. But there are trips that are true ruptures... In a sense, I feel no need to move. All the intensities that I have are immobile intensities... There is a geo-philosophy, I mean, there are profound countries, my very own foreign lands that I don't find by traveling.”<sup>3</sup>

I have similar sentiments about my own travels. There's the fear of being a tourist, but what does that mean? The fear of only being a passive visitor, a spectator, someone who only contemplates?

Tourism might be a special kind of voyeurism: one that is socially accepted.

Both the tourist and the traveller have become clichés. The first is supposedly wallowing in self-indulgence, while exploiting the culture they come in contact with. The second is usually defined as someone who really tries to immerse themselves into the culture they visit, but might as well be just as delusional.

That said, I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with being a spectator. Jacques Rancière argues that:

Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story.<sup>4</sup>

And whether the tourist is guilty of the exploitation and fetishizing of other cultures (which are certainly important structural issues to address) depends entirely on context. (Who is traveling where? How and why?)

In any case, the tourist has many bad and good connotations for sure.

But I guess I'd rather see what I can make of the word itself until something is left that I wouldn't mind spitting out again. To reclaim the word, in that sense.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “V as Voyage” in Gilles Deleuze from A to Z, trans. Charles J. Stivale (Cambridge: MIT, 2011), video

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## HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE?

It might be interesting to take a look at the earlier meaning of the words tourist and tourism, whose use started around the 1800's:

William F. Theobald (1994) suggested that “etymologically, the word tour is derived from the Latin, ‘tornare’ and the Greek, ‘tornos’, meaning ‘a lathe or circle movement around a central point or axis’. This meaning has changed in modern English to represent ‘one's turn’. The suffix -ism is defined as ‘an action or process; typical behaviour or quality’, while the suffix, -ist denotes ‘one who performs a given action’. When the word tour and the suffixes -ism and -ist are combined, they suggest the action of moving in a circle. Describing a circle implies returning to one's starting point, so a tour is a round-trip journey, i.e. the act of leaving and ultimately returning to the original starting point. Therefore, one who takes such a journey can be called a tourist.<sup>5</sup>

If traveling seems to be simply to return to where one already came from: why bother moving at all?

Walking seems to be the most simple step that can be taken in order to observe something. Most of us make our way through the world by walking.

I think the tourist becomes much more interesting when I see them as a pedestrian, a flâneur or even a psychogeographer. The pedestrian is merely someone who gets to a certain place by their feet. The flâneur is someone that walks at their own pace, “free from the pressures of the workaday world”, the romantic archetype for the psycho-geographer, who “drifted through space” as a means of interpreting the world around them.

The tourist, then, is someone who moves, and ultimately comes back to where they started.

*But where do they move, then?*

The tourist moves elsewhere, which is: somewhere far away?

Is going elsewhere really necessary to be called a tourist?

I guess ‘elsewhere’ is, most of all, a place where conditions are present that make it easier to sustain a particular state of mind. If everything is new, if you don't know the way, if you have to ask something in a language you're not familiar with, and it's not possible to fall back upon old habits, of course you experience everything in a way that is much more open and sharp than when you are in a place that you are accustomed to.

As such, being a tourist is most of all a question of attitude ‘towards’.

And I don't feel the need to make this distinction anymore between ‘here’ or ‘there’.

I wonder: Can I be a tourist regardless of where I am?

<sup>5</sup> Theobald, William F. . Global Tourism (Oxford ,Butterworth-Heinemann) p. 6-7

## TALKING THE TALK BUT NOT WALKING THE WALK

There seems to be a profound connection between walking, thinking and writing: Walking helps us organize the world around us; writing organizes our thoughts.

Henry David Thoreau penned in his journal, “Methinks that the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow.”<sup>6</sup>

And in fact, I do feel like I constantly need to displace myself in order to write. If I remain seated too long in one particular spot, I just get distracted. I decided to distract myself on purpose instead.

Already at home, I move from table to table. And outside: from the library towards a cafe, to another cafe, and another one; to a bench in the park, to the canteen at school, until I get back again to my table at home; just to be able to have this walk in between. I’m not sure about the exact distance; how much I had to walk in order to write.

But walking also happens according to formed habits. We usually don’t notice our surroundings anymore when we are busy reaching a familiar destination. I became intrigued by strategies to somehow get around these habits.

I found a book by Georges Perec, ‘An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris’, in which he sits down in a cafe, and writes down everything he notices for the following three days. In the preface of his book, he clarifies:

How are we to speak of these ‘common things’, how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are.

What is needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we’ve been pillaging from others. Not the exotic anymore, but the endotic.

To question what seems so much a matter of course that we’ve forgotten its origins.<sup>7</sup>

It seems like all we have to do to become aware of these ‘common things’ is to be aware. To become concentrated, we have to concentrate. And to begin, begin.

*But I don’t think that’s easy at all?  
I hardly knew where to start.*

When writing his novel, Georges Perec kept track of everything that passed by. Writing down what he saw also immediately forced him to focus on his surroundings. A diary is usually reflective. It speaks about the day that went by already. An agenda

6 Thoreau David, A Book of Quotations. (Mineola, Dover Publications, inc., 2000) p. 26  
7 Perec Georges, Species of Spaces and Other Pieces (London, Pinguin Books, 1997)p. 209

organizes the days that still have to happen. The book by Georges Perec is a rare example of something in-between.

Because when we, in one way or another, document our lives, we immediately turn the very activity that makes that possible into a part of it.

It’s similar to the observation documentary-film maker Chris Marker makes in the movie ‘Sans Soleil’ He notes that he cannot always distinguish anymore the memories he has from the things he encountered in life, and the things he has seen through the lens of his video-camera. And perhaps, it doesn’t even matter.

And hopefully I don’t end up with a text in which I only write that I’m writing that I’m writing that I’m writing that I’m that I’m writing that I’m writing that I’m writing that I’m...

*Please, quit it!*

...writing.

Because eventually, what use is it anyway, for the writer to write that he is writing?. And in, turn, for the reader to read that they are reading? That they are, in fact, doing what they are doing — as if they didn’t know already?

Well, you might have forgotten. But of course reading is not just moving your eyes from left to right, just as walking is not just moving your legs back and forth. Which is why I’d like to take a closer look at these actions, that very much make up the days of our lives; to discover other strategies; shifts, that force us to notice what is right in front of us.

## REAL RUPTURES

Shifts might be very useful tools to move around our habits. Shifts can show themselves as incidents, but they can also be employed quite consciously.

For instance, I found out that Walter Benjamin claimed that;

Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The flâneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them.<sup>8</sup>

A more familiar example of such a strategy would be someone who walks their dog. The dog might want to run, dragging its owner on the leash, or stop all of a sudden. At any rate: interfering with the path the owner would have taken on their own.

And what about strategies for moving through a book, for instance? I enjoy it a lot when I discover a book has clearly been used by someone else before me.

Whether a lot of sentences are traced by a pencil, side-notes appear in the margins or scribbles adorn the page, I started seeing these marks as directions to read a book in a different way: read with someone else’s perspective on top of it: A reading within a reading.

Fair enough, but what exactly is a shift? Is it simply a change?

Well, let’s not talk about the shift, but first about the trick. Because all these shifts might look like some kind of tricks.

This trick is performed beautifully. This trick thrills and excites.

But, unfortunately, the trick is limited to itself.

Because the trick might seem to be about a woman, or about a saw, or about the

8 O’Rourke Karen. Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers (Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2013) p. 8

box she has entered right before she is split apart. In the end, the only body the trick has is its own “trickness”

Whereas I think a shift is something quite different altogether. The shift also disrupts, stings slaps or pricks, for maybe even just a second. But in any case, always directs, changes your attention towards —

### *What Exactly?*

I found the following excerpt on a piece of music by Erik Satie. A great, and — perhaps even better; failed shift:

Satie thought it would be amusing to have music that would not be listened to ... that would vary like the furniture of the rooms in which it was played...

Before the performance, an announcer informed the audience that the experiment was taking place, and stressed the importance of ignoring the music during the intermission: “We urge you to take no notice of it and to behave during the intervals as if it did not exist.” Satie’s expectations were dashed, however, when the audience scurried back to their seats and listened in rapt attentiveness. Satie was enraged by this and, according to Milhaud, shouted at his audience: “Go on talking! Walk about! Don’t listen!” The audience ignored Satie’s demands but not his music, as they remained engrossed and silent. Milhaud summed up the situation poetically by noting that “Satie had not bargained for the charm of his own music.”<sup>9</sup>

## WHAT A BOOK IS

A book is a sequence of spaces.

Each of these spaces is perceived at a different moment.

— a book is also a sequence of moments.

A book is not a case of words, nor a bag of words, nor a bearer of words.

A writer, contrary to the popular opinion, does not write books.

A writer writes texts.

The fact, that a text is contained in a book, comes only from the dimensions of such a text; or, in the case of a series of short texts (poems, for instance), from their number.

A literary (prose) text contained in a book ignores the fact that the book is an autonomous space-time sequence.<sup>10</sup>

## SPACE IS THE PLACE: THE PAGE

Consider a book used as an exhibition space, like the acclaimed Xerox Book published by Seth Siegelaub and John W. Wendler, in which artists were asked to create work that was specifically made for the dimensions of the book itself. The book-as-exhibition, which was basically the premise for the phenomenon of 'artist books' altogether, or Ulises Carrión's statements about books can both be seen as attempts to reclaim the worth of the book: protect its autonomy, or to find exhibition alternatives to the gallery wall; to convey a book more as, perhaps, a work of architecture.

The bottom line seems to be that the book is definitely not just a carrier of something else, nor just an object, - albeit it can be used as such.

Stripped away from its original purpose -the book is now used to balance a table — underneath one of its legs, used as a pillow, or to protect someone from the rain — or might be thrown in a rage at an unfortunate other.

*Clear enough.*

But a book is very much a space. Multiple spaces, even. These spaces cannot be conceived at the same time. With the turn one page, a spread gets revealed, another hidden. The book, the thesis, the novel, the publication, the catalogue, the magazine, the booklet, the paperback, the atlas, the encyclopaedia, the codex: All spaces! Spaces, spaces and even more spaces!

A collection of books quickly turns into a library. Whether it's a personal, or a public one.

And not only because its shelves function like hedges, but also because of the simple fact that the books inside of the library are all closed - which immediately excites curiosity, makes me conceive the library as something particularly labyrinth-like. A place filled with things that don't reveal themselves unless you open them.

## SILENT MATERIAL

From the space of the page we return back to the traces on the page. Those traces consist of letters, that all come together in the alphabet, and punctuation. Every text, like this text, is a possible reconfiguration of all these symbols together.

Punctuation marks, especially the spaces in between words, are implicit. On their own, they're silent.

The margins of this page might expect a thumb to be folded over them.

The space between the words wasn't always there. The space, most of all, makes it easier to read, to distinguish the words. In ancient Rome, for instance, literacy was rare, and words were just attached next to each other. There was no need for readability. The illegibility of text allowed people to keep written language for themselves.

This space is very much a material.

And within the book, even language, even the tiniest letters have material qualities. Whether they are imbedded in the page, or printed on top of it.

An image will be a different image if it is printed on another material.

A text will be a different text if it is printed on another material.

There is no text, nor image that exists outside of its material.

## THE BOOK INSIDE-OUT

But let's get back to the writing. Where did it all start?

The first thing I ever wrote was my own name. I wrote down a hesitant S. Yet, I wrote it in reverse: I did not go on from there I went back. And the other letters of my name attached themselves to it. One by one, from right to left, they went into the wrong direction immediately. But they still went somewhere?

We didn't simply learn to write our names, we learned to write them "on". On drawings, above texts, underneath forms. To mark things as our own.

I heard a story about a child that had problems reading. He traced the lines on the paper with his fingers. As he approached the end of the page, his finger would simply cross the line dividing the book in half. He went from one page to another. He just simply crossed the page! I thought that seemed like a very good way to read.

But all of that was in the past. And not to get lost again: what is this action of reading anyway?

Kurt Vonnegut writes:

To expect someone to read a book is like having someone arrive at a concert hall and be immediately handed a violin and told to go up onstage.<sup>11</sup>

As it turns out: reading in itself is already a performative act.

But what about a book with pictures? The above quote somehow implies, again, that looking, and perhaps listening as well, is a passive act. That reading seems to take more effort than looking; this might be why looking apparently doesn't qualify as performative, which again, perpetuates the idea that being a spectator is a passive role, and therefore a bad one.

I don't think it is.

This understanding of the performative nature of reading would seem to suggest that any literal performance extraneous to a literary text would be superfluous. The performance is intrinsic to the act of reading.<sup>12</sup>

Does that make any action related to the book performative?

What about simply flipping through a book? Turning the pages? Going through the book-space? A book can become completely immersive, making the reader forget about their actual surrounding. The reader acquires a space to which no one else has access. I was also quite surprised to learn that in the past, it wasn't as usual that books were mostly read in silence.

We take silent reading for granted, but it was by no means always a common practise...

... Until well into the Middle Ages and in some cases well into modern times, reading consisted of both thinking and speaking, and was above all an act that

11 David Maroto and Joanna Zielińska, *Artist Novels*. (Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2014) p. 126

12 David Maroto and Joanna Zielińska, *Artist Novels*. (Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2014) p. 126

took place not in separation from the outside world, but at its centre, within the social group and under its surveillance.<sup>13</sup>

Yes, reading and writing seem like very solitary moments. Sitting behind my table, I convince myself I'm almost done. While I type I keep Silent. I fixate myself on the screen — see myself again in its reflection.

But no, we never write alone.

Whether the people around us are dead or alive, far away or nearby, we are influenced by them and we hopefully influence them as well. Perhaps we should try to steal as much as possible from each other; in any case, just let it happen. Instead of trying to protect what we think is rightfully ours.

We must, as Deleuze writes:

on the contrary, speak with, write with. With the world, with a part of the world, with people.<sup>14</sup>

As such, reading and writing aren't as solitary and private as I thought. But aren't there more shared ways of experiencing the book as well?

A book, read through someone else's voice reaches you through someone else's interpretation as well. Through tone of voice, stress or speed, or any other technique of narration, however subtle or dramatic; from merely reading out loud, or even turning it into, for instance, a play: perceiving these actions remain second-hand interpretations of the book itself.

These are some of the ways in which the book can be experienced by being performed.

And in fact, the way we use books is very much constructed.

## GAPS AND GUIDES

I somehow saw all these notions: of moving the daily, and the expansion of the space of the page towards the space where it's read, materialised in one particular type of book: the travel guide.

Which is quite a complex kind of book.

The travel guide, first of all, guides. But as much as it choreographs people around, as much as it is instructive, as much as it is a map, an inventory, a collection of things to do and see, filled with pictures, texts and itineraries, and through all of those, utilises the performative potential of the book; in the end, the travel guide is also a book that someone can simply 'go' through, with no other requirements at all.

It is someone else's experiences of a place turned into a book. And through this book, the place then becomes accessible for others to experience as well.

Accessible, first of all, through reading the book, and second of all, by taking it with you, and getting out!

Stored in the pocket of a jacket or sticking out of the back of a pair of pants, in your hands while you walk, as a map, in constant motion, walking and reading. Until you can hold it up, next to the place it describes.

And it is the gap between 'what you see (read?) and what you get' — when the book and the place don't correspond perfectly with each other, because the travel guide is outdated, or describes something that differs substantially from your own experience of it — yes, it is especially this gap that makes the travel guide particularly interesting.

The travel guide juxtaposes the space of the book against the space in front of you'.

This year, a lot of tourists came to Amsterdam to celebrate a national holiday: Kingsday. The dates in their travel guides were all outdated, though. Tourists would show up on the streets, wearing festive orange clothes, just a few days too late.

These tourists appeared in the Dutch newspapers as 'vergistoeristen'. The nickname resonated with everything I was interested in, with what I hope to encounter. Pictures that don't look anymore at all like the places they refer to, streets that don't exist anymore, maps that confuse rather than clarify.

*Vergistoerist*: what could be a proper English translation? *A mistaken tourist?* *A stumbling tourist?* *A tourist on a detour?* *A detourist?* None of them comes close enough.

Incidents on the scale of these particular tourists are rare, but there are also more subtle ones. These mistakes become interventions, shifts, that make us experience our daily life in a different way.

Most tourist guides show a very predictable and perhaps mediocre collection of particularities. Even though they try their hardest to be important; pointing out landmarks, the famous streets, the best restaurants.

But don't you become fascinated?

Sure. But I do find it much more important - and much harder - to look right in front of me, in the same manner.

Let's get back to the scene outside of my window instead. It's dark. I can see the lights across the highway. Let's return to the building, the elevator, the sixth floor; to the chairs that have been left behind around me.

Towards my table, my empty coffee cup; to two pencils, one pen, a glove, a crumpled receipt; and from there on; towards the page. And, at last, towards the traces I left behind.

The ideal travel guide might simply be someone else's daily routine.

## Bibliography

*Stijn Pommée Like a Letter Addressed By a Child*