[GROUNDINGS]

SOMEWHERE AND NOWHERE AT ALL

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[OCCASIONAL]
[GROUNDWORK]

Published in the summer of 2018, Otessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is about a young, beautiful and affluent unnamed woman who embarks on a year of hibernation in her Manhattan apartment. The rationale behind her decision is unclear. It takes a while to find the combination of prescription drugs to achieve the perfect level of unconsciousness; in the end, she settles on a drug named Infermitol, which causes her to black out for three-day stretches, waking only to eat, shower and briefly exercise, before taking another one. In this way, she does away with whole months. However, while the narrator's hibernation is certainly bold, uncompromising and dangerous, it is always in the aim of returning home. For her, the project is 'self preservational,' 'the opposite of suicide.'[1] Counter to expectations, then, the novel is an optimistic one. The ploy seems to come off, and she returns to life renewed — if perhaps only briefly — a few weeks before September 2001.

Now, it is difficult not to read Moshfegh's novel as an unlikely parable for events that unfolded not long after its publication, as many of us were pushed into a neither restful nor especially relaxing cocoon state. With the pandemic, we felt the dramatic emergence of power, as states the world over enacted measures to shape and dramatically restrict individual, previously wholly self-evident freedoms. In my lifetime at least, I have never witnessed anything even remotely similar: the particular luxury, I suppose, of growing up in a country where power does not much manifest in persecution or overt prohibition, but rather in a system where access and opportunities are allocated variously on the basis of sex, race and class. In 2018, the successful referendum to provide abortion services in Ireland marked a clear milestone in unraveling the state's power over women's bodies. Against this context, the restrictive gesture in response to the pandemic often looks like a kind of kitschy revenant, reminiscent of times when the state was both powerful and extremely interested in the lives of its subjects. Certainly, in a culture

1 Moshfegh, 2018, p. 7

of increasing permissiveness, there is something distinctly weird about being told what to do.

Perhaps, like me, you have drawn moments of strange pleasure from the experience. The pandemic, after all, has shown that large-scale collective acts can be realised, and not only when it comes to starting wars and destroying our environment; when I'm feeling hopeful, this offers some comfort in the face of the very-obviously-happening climate emergency. With the reappearance of the nation state, we might also sense that the uncontested power of the huge technological corporations that actually do determine our daily lives, might in fact be contested. However, despite these glimmers of possibility, I think it is uncontroversial to say that a lot of us often experienced this unexpected gesture of state power as something jarring and uncomfortable. Even if we agreed with the necessity of the measures being enacted, the gesture often felt strange and invasive. In response, at least on some level, we wanted to assert our autonomy and escape.

This desire for escape might have been fleeting or disavowed, suppressed through guilt, or undercut by consideration of the common good, but it is an entirely modern response. In his seminal essay 'What is Critique?' (1978) Michel Foucault described critique as an 'attitude' consisting in 'the art of not being governed or better, the art of not being governed like that and at that cost.'[2] Thus critique, which is utterly inseparable from modernity and Enlightenment thinking, describes a particular dance between freedom and power. Performed over and over again, critique represents a loosening, or a kind of unshackling, like an engine of unceasing escape. Through it, we slip from systems of power by criticising them and undermining their authority, as well as their right to keep us hemmed in.

So, this is all probably quite inevitable. Being told to stay put, we invariably yearn for freedom and begin to dream about being just

2 Foucault, 1978, p. 45

about anywhere else. The desire for escape is not limited to a physical sense — though this is very important — but also an intellectual sense, as a reaction to an external limitation, which, for whatever reason, does not feel entirely justified. For some, this desire to escape has transformed into a defence mechanism completely centred on refusal. With critics of the pandemic, most notably, this has meant a refusal of vaccination along with rejection of the dominant narrative of the pandemic being put forward around the world, opting instead for more fantastical hypotheses featuring 5G, Bill Gates and international child-trafficking rings. In resisting the sudden and overt visibility of power, the person chooses to escape into something like social death. Here, the need for intellectual freedom — or at least the semblance or ideal of it — takes precedence over the actual freedom to travel and gain access to certain kinds of space.

Our desire for escape, then, is as much an intellectual impulse as a biological one; as determined by an eminently modern need for experimentation and freedom as any inherent, biological drive towards individual autonomy or self-preservation. In wanting to escape, we set about resisting our sudden un-freedom. And, at this stage, critical thinking is intuitive; it resides in muscle memory, as an endlessly enacted, collectively authored escape act. My question is, what would it mean to refuse the terms of escape?

When there wasn't much reason to leave my apartment, I watched a lot of movies. An especially resonant one was *The Green Ray*, a 1986 comedy by the French New Wave director Éric Rohmer. The film centres on Delphine, a highly neurotic and dissatisfied Parisienne who cannot bear the fact of being stuck in the city, alone, for the summer holidays. When she joins her friend for a weekend beach party, however, Delphine's expectations are not met: being the only single person at the party, she feels out of place and unwilling to play the role expected of her. So, she returns home and embarks on another trip, this time to the Alps. Again, regrettably, reality does not align with the image she's created for it, and she turns on her

heels almost as soon as she gets there. Watching the film, we observe our anguished protagonist never really understand what we've known the whole way through: the problem is Delphine. Somehow, this made me more and more content to be on my couch. Being unable to travel, there was a nearly fatalistic comfort in watching her realise the utter futility of going elsewhere.

Now, at least for the time being, things are different. For those of us who are vaccinated, travel has all but returned to normal, and escape has again become a possibility. It started with a trickle, on Instagram, as we warily tested the social acceptability of disclosing our movements across the world. Now, when I open my feed, it seems all I see are travel photos: pristine white beaches and city landmarks, the lagoon in Venice, as well as artworks of all kinds, proxies for trips to exhibitions and biennales around the world. Again, a certain kind of body moves through international space with ease, and again, when I say "I really needed to escape" and book last minute flights to Majorca or Greece, others know what I mean. Of course, it's worth pointing out that the same transparency is not extended to people who actually need to escape — from war or genocide, for example, or the mounting evidence of climate breakdown. This kind of escape is almost always interrogated. It is something to be proven.

Being inseparable from international travel, now the artworld can in turn truly restart. The latest edition of Frieze London was a sellout; judging from my Instagram feed, it appeared like the communal resuscitation of the international art world. As I write, FIAC returns this coming weekend; staged in tandem is *Natures Mortes*, Anne Imhof's must-see exhibition at the nearby Palais de Tokyo. Next year, documenta 15, curated by ruangrupa,[3] as well as

3 A Jakarta-based artists collective curating according to the values of lumbung (Indonesian term for communal rice bar), as an artistic and economic model rooted in principles such as collectivity, communal resource sharing, and equal allocation (editor's note)

the Venice Biennale of Art, originally set to open earlier this year, will surely prompt the usual travelling, along with the dreaded FOMO for everyone unable to attend during the heady opening days. Of course, the artworld has its own particular economy; positioned, as Arthur Danto once put it, in 'something like the relationship in which the City of God Stands to the Earthly City.'[4] For many small commercial galleries, along with the artists that they represent, the pandemic has presented an existential threat. The desire to return to something approaching normality through participation in the global art trade is not really a question, but a condition of their survival.

During the most restrictive days of the pandemic, like Delphine, it was common to fantasise about being elsewhere. And for many years, the international art exhibition has been framed in almost holiday-terms. Or, perhaps more accurately, as a kind of secular, intellectual pilgrimage; and the more unlikely and remote, the better. Being able to access these events is the preserve of very few: art professionals, a smattering of harried and usually badly paid press, as well as a smaller group of moneyed initiates, who do not really exist anywhere at all. If they live anywhere, it is in the sky, moving restlessly from one event to the next, an unbroken chain of escape. According to Peter Osborne (2013), art and the biennale structure in particular have a privileged role within a 'global' or 'planetary' fiction, grounded on the affirmation of global equivalence brought about by globalisation. Art, he claims, is in fact an ideal protagonist in this — acting like a kind of 'passport'[5] implying universal access to connection, as well as escape.

Lately, we have also been treated to photographs of billionaires standing by rockets, tossing their cowboy hats up in the air after returning from risible trips into space. Here, it seems to me, is the language of escape writ large: space, the final frontier — an

4 Danto, 1964, p. 582
5 Osborne, 2013, p. 27

endless Panama where governmental control comes to a complete halt. In this context, escape represents both an avowed loss of faith, as well as a refusal of responsibility. Because, while they claim to be looking to space as a solution to humanity's woes, there is no way that eight billion people will ever be housed on Mars – the earth will burn long before that. Going to space, then, is really just to show the full scope of their means to escape, which is just another way of saying: the freedom to do exactly what they please. It is hard not to think of Facebook's recently announced 'Metaverse' in similar terms. While not expected to be realised for another ten to fifteen years, the Metaverse will be a virtual reality world accessible through the participants' physical movements in three-dimensional space. Through it, we will be able to enjoy a new world, the only, rather significant catch being that it will be designed and controlled by Facebook. Escape has never looked so unappealing.

Observing all this, I cannot but think of cosmism, the supremely out-there Russian school of thought most associated with Nikolai Fyodorov (1829-1903). For Fyodorov, the need to explore and colonise space was not founded on escape, but was actually an ethical demand, inseparable from what he termed 'The Common Task,' which was nothing less than the eradication of human mortality. Having made ourselves immortal, he famously claimed, the onus on us would be to resuscitate everyone who had ever lived. Hence, the need to go to space — there simply wasn't going to be enough room for everyone down here on Earth. This was not escapism but rather an act of escape founded in excessive, unlikely responsibility, not only to future generations, as in common appeals of today, but to all the ones that preceded ours.

Perhaps it was merely coincidental that a lot of immersive art was opening when the pandemic restrictions started to ease in summer 2021. Here in Berlin, I am thinking of two examples in particular: Yayoi Kusama's vast retrospective exhibition at the Gropius Bau, along with Jakob Kudsk Steensen's *Berl-Berl*, an

immersive installation exhibited in the cavernous, until recently deactivated space of the city's most iconic club, Berghain. Both were phenomenally popular, drawing visitors who may not usually go to see contemporary art (I intuited this from the considerable number of Tinder profiles that included a photo staged within one of Kusama's *Infinity Rooms*). Defeated by the online reservation system, which was almost immediately booked out, I pretended to be writing about the Kusama show just to be able to see it. When I finally went, I was predictably underwhelmed. Installed within the always-impressive gallery space, the individual immersive environments looked poky and much smaller than suggested in photographs. Far too self-contained, they seemed to me nowhere near immersive enough. On leaving *Berl-Berl*, by contrast, I was simply nostalgic for techno. It struck me as a cruel trick, during a global pandemic, that not even immersive art could help us to switch off or disengage; that, in its failure, it only brought us back to earth.

Of course, art has always offered moments of escape; the language of transcendence makes that clear. And, when I consider artworks that have influenced me, they all share in their ability to pull me out from daily life, at least momentarily. For those few seconds, or minutes, or hours, I am fixed in concentration and there is nothing else to think about. When I leave the gallery or museum and return to whatever it was I was doing beforehand, I am marked by them. This experience imparts an additional reference point, a new way of thinking about the world. But I don't think transcendence can be the end goal. The aim is to come back to life somehow changed. Not better, necessarily, just with more information than I previously had: information which, for whatever reason, feels worth holding on to. This is a rare thing: more a fact-finding mission than an escape plan.

As far as I see it, immersive art takes disengagement as its goal; whether this also involves encouraging us to refuse responsibility for the world being (nominally) exited depends, I

think, on the individual artwork, its display and its framing. For example, while it is fully habituated within the commercial artworld, the themes of Kusama's art— among them mental illness, trauma and most notably, desubjectivisation — sit uneasily within it. At the very least, the artworld would still much rather that an author take discrete form, rather than an exploded constellation of particles. Foreshadowed by the muscular Kusama-Gagosian brand, however, her immersive environments lose their existential charge. They allow us to momentarily escape, while forfeiting the more radical escape — that is, from selfhood — which her artworks are predicated on. It is hard not to suspect that this kind of escape would have been much more likely if the art could have been experienced on its own terms. Instead, the exhibition and the brand push in the opposite direction. They inhibit the possibility of escape.

Perhaps nowadays the only viable means of escape is within the system itself: to hunker down and stay alert to flashes of freedom that appear, briefly and infrequently, like shooting stars in the night sky. I am thinking in particular of Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020), another film that I and probably lots of other people watched alone during the pandemic, when we weren't really allowed to have guests. Because I didn't have the patience to wait until the film was shown in the cinemas, which were all closed, I watched it on an outdated medium-sized TV, gifted to me by my cousin and brought to life through a wonky HDMI cable connected to my laptop. Even as I watched the film, I sensed this was a misstep.

At its heart, the film seems to me about freedom and escape, and the winnowing possibilities for either within a cruel and perverse system that was catalysed rather than undone by the global financial crisis of 2008. Set in 2011, the film tells of Fern, a sixty-something year old woman who, after losing her husband, her job, and her hometown, which literally disappeared with the closure of the US Gypsum plant, sells what remains of her belongings and embarks on a nomadic life in a rackety van named

Vanguard and supported by casual, seasonal work. The film is a kind of counter-Western. However, while the visual language is still that of the sublime frontier, the territory being ceded is of an altogether different kind. Fern never possesses what she captures. Her gains are always temporary and provisional — brief moments of joy, collegiality and security before she moves back onto the road. Nonetheless, it is a kind of freedom. By the end of the film, it was impossible for me to see her simply as a victim of circumstance, but also as an unlikely beneficiary of it. The small TV screen was not adequate to the scope of her escape act.

I think it is worth pointing out that Fern lives in a notably analogue world – the recent past. By contrast now, some ten years later, escape has become that bit more difficult. With the tightly worn ubiquity of digital technologies, indeed, maybe we are never truly in a position to escape. Moving ceaselessly through online space, we instead leave trails everywhere; at the same time, our lives are ever-increasingly determined by a series of responses to both seen and unseen cues. In this context, the only possibility of escape rests on our ability to recognise and act in greater awareness of our own desires. More than anything, I think, this means acknowledging the need for freedom that cannot be satisfied through deeper imbrication in our current capitalist system, or even the accumulation of what we already have, by going elsewhere.

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Occasional Groundwork is an alliance of three European biennials EVA (Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art), GIBCA (Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Sweden), and LIAF (Lofoten International Art Festival, Norway) that are each concerned with re-proposing the model of the international art biennial. Seeking a rooted infrastructure for the production and dissemination of contemporary art, Occasional Groundwork serves as a peer group for thinking-through the existing and speculative frameworks of organisational practice.

Groundings is the first public initiative of Occasional Groundwork – a series of co-commissioned texts by writers, artists, curators, and academics, exploring themes of internationalism, sustainability, audience, and infrastructure within the context of the contemporary art biennial and the shift in conditions imposed by the ongoing pandemic.

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