

An Outdoor Living Room

I looked at the clock and from the clock to the people, from the people to the artist then back at the clock – a tic that became increasingly pronounced as the day wore on. Fidgety, empathetically nervous at the start of every performance, I oversaw everything, every detail; I consoled, shared doubts, helped improvise. Organizing *The Living Room XL* was like diving into a black hole. Because everything was new and only came together in that moment, it was practically impossible to anticipate what might need doing at any given second. The happening lasted twelve hours, yet it seemed as brief as the flight of a firework rocket. First the hissing ignition, then the slender arrow shooting upwards, and finally the spectacular explosion of sparks and colours. It went so fast that I caught myself looking more at the smoke the firework left in the air than at the actual spectacle. It's in the pungent smell of the slowly rising smoke that I write this testimony. That it's an impossible task, I'm well aware. As the event organizer I couldn't take in every performance in the way the audience could. So this testimony reads more like something recollected – because apart from anything else, *The Living Room XL* happened nearly six months ago. It's like the blackened and soggy remnant of the rocket. When I try to pick it up, it falls apart.

I was there when the artist stepped into the arena. In the kitchen that's doubling as backstage I see this one sweating, muttering invocations, all but crossing himself. In my office I see that one rehearsing, text in hand. A third chills with a couple of mates, having a beer, relaxed. Used to performing, he knows what he's doing. Calling for everyone's attention in a noisy and chaotic open-air café takes guts. You're appropriating a shared moment, demanding that everyone looks at you. When they do, when every eye is focused on you, a silence falls. I see the way this one wipes his clammy palms on his apron for the last time, lights a cigarette, and steps outside into the bright sunlight. I see the way that one stands in front of the mirror and waits for the music to start. Fourteen times I see artists seize their moment and begin. In the simplicity of the gestures – picking up an instrument, turning up the sound, making the first moves – I see the nervous energy, focused, targeted, an alertness propelling them on. They and only they know what's going to happen. The audience knows nothing.

That prefatory silence can be addictive. The artist stands there alone, abruptly aware that every gesture and word will be scrutinized. A hundred-headed entity sucks those words and gestures in, reckons them up, and ascribes meaning to them. A hundred different interpretations, prompted by details whose existence we'll never know of, nor realize that they influence the way the performance is received.

I see the way some watch, think, categorize. I see people hiding behind their cameras, others who can't sit still or leave their phone alone. And then I see someone who watches intently, watches and stores away what he sees. Processing is for later, once it's over.

This is the person I want to reach. In my mind's eye I see him go home, maybe open a beer, and mull over what he's seen. I hope that image revisits him now and then, perhaps when he takes his jacket out of the washing machine and notes with surprise that the splashes of colour from the performance haven't come out. Don't ask me how, but I see the way he thinks about this moment again in a year's time, when he takes the jacket from the wardrobe and discovers the yellow spots again.

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