Here Is Your Exhibition Text. It Is Blank.

Richard Parry

I met him in a café that no longer exists.

Not because it closed, but because everybody agreed it had to become something else.

Rooms are constantly becoming other rooms.

Warehouses become studios. Studios become galleries. Galleries become offices. Offices become cultural quarters. Cultural quarters become marketing. Marketing becomes heritage. Heritage becomes coffee.

By all accounts, the café boasted salvaged wooden panelling and countertops reclaimed from the socio-economic functions of yesteryear.

Somewhere in the room a jazz record was playing.

Not purposefully.

More as an annoying reference to Richard Parry than anything else.

Outside, the sky was the colour of donated pewter.

He was already sitting alone beside the window. Behind a precisely situated porcelain cup, saucer and clear glass of water. The coffee, black and darkly fragrant, lurked beneath whipped cream. The whipped cream demonstrated gentle ivory peaks and volume throughout.

He stood to introduce himself as having come from Vienna in 1938.

I introduced myself as having come from London in 2023.

"That's a long journey," he said.

"It wasn't meant to be."

We shook hands within a vague masquerade of inner-city ritual, as though the appropriated gesture could be performed for gain.

There was oil paint in the creases of his skin. Cadmium yellow.

Seeing our hands together, it seemed one pair had spent a lifetime making things and the other had just held onto things for photographs.

Ahead of me, a waiter meticulously set down a shaped wooden paddle, upon which he arranged three glass carafes containing espresso, warm milk and hot water respectively. Deconstruction.

The coffee was made from beans that had passed through the digestive tract of a bat.

There was already a silver sugar bowl on the table. Early twentieth century in the style of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Overrated. It contained various white cubes, which I assumed were sugar.

"What do you paint?" I asked.

"Most of them begin with images that already exist, and the painting becomes a way in which these things can continue to be something, rather than settle into a fixed interpretation."

He raised the cup to his lips and took a measured sip.

"I'm interested in painting as a way of keeping things moving.

In that sense the paintings are less concerned with expression than transmission. The viewer is part of that process, but not necessarily its destination, if you please."

At the next table a man finished converting twenty-five years of contemporary art into search-engine-optimised data. He gulped a dreg with the grim iconoclasm of a superstitious Puritan.

"What is he doing, junger Mann?" enquired the refugee.

"Working."

"On what?"

"Culture."

He nodded.

"We tried that."

For a while I watched the torrents of rain outside.

An empty crisp packet worried itself along the gutter.

The empty crisp packet looked like a fish.

"Why did you leave Vienna?" I asked.

He looked out of the window.

"People had begun explaining things too confidently."

I nodded.

It sounded familiar.

At another table some students were discussing how the author of several recent exhibition texts was, in fact, an artist of considerable significance in his own right, and not merely a supplier of interpretative materials for an older generation.

The refugee raised his hand towards them. It achieved a brief, trembling hover, then descended.

“Just like that.”

A trumpet emerged briefly from the jazz record, like a rat from a bin.

It sounded disappointed by the room and disappeared again.

“When I came to England,” said the refugee, “everybody seemed to think change was something that happened somewhere else.”

Outside, sandstone terraces darkened in the dreich, with quiet degrees of moral authority.

“We had buildings like that.”

“In Vienna?”

“Of course.”

He looked offended, as though I had asked whether Vienna had chairs.

“When I started,” he continued, “you had to give the surface permission to fail.”

“And now?”

“People seem disappointed when it doesn’t.”

His coffee had reached the point where the cream was surrendering to gravity. Mine had become a bitter accusation which I was reimagining as complexity.

“Do you like art?” I ejaculated with a sudden spiritual urgency.

The refugee looked disappointed.

“I was hoping we’d avoid that.”

“Avoid what?”

“Art.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“So, you like art.”

“No.”

“What do you mean no?”

“I like being an artist.”

“Being an artist that makes art?”

“Sometimes.”

“So, you like art.”

The refugee sighed.

Outside, the rain continued with the confidence of cultural workers standing in solidarity with Palestinian liberation from an OK institutional distance.

“Once you call it art,” he said, “people start explaining it.”

“What is it then?”

“Painting.”

“Exactly.”

For a while neither of us spoke.

Eventually he said:

“Do you know what painting reminds me of?”

“What?”

“Cities.”

“Why?”

“Everybody talks about them as though they’re one thing.”

“And they’re not.”

“Not in the way people mean.”

A museum director with cheeks as red as apples entered, carrying several tote bags and a generic expression of profound solidarity.

The refugee watched her being carefully seated, with eyes as big as saucers.

“What does she do?”

“She manages contradictions.”

“Professionally?”

“Yes.”

The refugee looked alarmed, like a rat in a bin as the bin was being tilted into a garbage compressor.

“What’s she like?”

“She’s liberal and insane.”

The refugee nodded.

“The traditional combination.”

Outside, the gloam thickened like some kind of haddock soup left alone in a bedsit.

A couple walked past loudly discussing the barriers to converting a local community centre into a sauna.

Imported olive trees stood in large black planters and swayed in agreement.

The refugee peered through the window at it all, his gaze finally settling on the building across the road.

“What was it before?”

“A pub.”

“And now?”

“A pub.”

He nodded.

“That’s how they get you.”

For a while he studied the trees.

“The trees,” he said eventually.

“What about them?”

“What are they for?”

“Politics.”

“I see.”

He carried on looking.

“You know, all the flat goblins eventually rise up.”

“Flat goblins?”

“The people who thought they were living in the future. Like pressed flowers in an album.”

Somewhere inside a steam wand screamed beneath milk.

It was allowed to continue.

The room grew warmer, and more sauna-like.

“People think memory is boxes,” he said.

“Isn’t it?”

“No.”

“What is it, then?”

“Pretending.”

Suddenly, the refugee produced an antique candlestick telephone from the folds of his three-piece suit and carefully placed it on the table, one hand around the stem, the other steadying its base.

He looked at it for some time.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Remembering.”

After a while he returned it.

“Exhibitions.”

“What’s an exhibition?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“Everything.”

The refugee smiled for the first time since we met. He looked happy. Like a rat in a bin that had been tipped into a garbage compressor, but survived the initial compacting process, and was now at liberty to enjoy the supernaturally high concentration of kitchen scraps etc. beneath.

Outside, an owl with the face of Brian Wilson alighted on one of the trees.

“You know what I miss?” the refugee asked.

“What?”

“Not knowing what things are.”

I looked at the owl.

The owl remained an owl.

The tree continued being a tree. Distinctions felt increasingly brittle.

“Ordinary things can spend their lives quietly becoming something else,” he said.

This struck me as important.

The trouble was that it also sounded ridiculous.

A warlock with the demeanour of competing omens crossed the room with white cups atop a silver platter. Shoulder height.

Instinctively, the refugee started to empty his pockets onto the table.

There were eleven white sugar cubes.

I recognised several of them immediately, in the way one remembers old paintings and their flashes of genesis.

One had occupied a former restaurant in Catford.

One had become luxury flats.

One was a dream away from a dream.

One was a former church-cum-homeware shop, subsidised by Russell Tovey podcasts.

The refugee arranged them carefully.

“You collect artist-run spaces?” I asked.

“There used to be twelve.”

“What happened?”

The refugee considered this carefully.

“History.”

He rearranged the white cubes.

First into the shape of a bird.

Then a tree.

Then a bell.

Then a bust of Joe Scotland OBE.

Eventually he stood.

“I should go.”

“Where?”

He looked genuinely puzzled.

“The Jeremy Glogan exhibition, I suppose.”

He moved towards the door, then stopped.

Outside, the city had acquired the temporary blue colour that cities acquire when they’re preparing to become succinct.

The refugee looked around the café one last time.

The tables.

The walls.

The record player.

The coffee cups.

The tote bags.

The annoying people.

The conversations about exhibitions that had not yet happened.

The exhibitions that had already happened but were still described as forthcoming.

The atmosphere of ambient uncertainty.

“One more thing,” he said.

“What?”

He upturned his palms.

“All this.”

“What about it?”

The refugee appeared surprised by the question, as though he had assumed the answer was obvious.

“Things don’t survive by remaining the same.”

The jazz record crackled.

Somewhere inside it a trumpet attempted optimism. Like a rat in a bin that had been tipped into a garbage compressor, but survived the compacting process, and was now at liberty to enjoy the supernaturally high concentration of kitchen scraps etc. but with a dawning sensation that this would be a direct consequence of curtailed freedom of movement and social isolation going forward.

“They survive by becoming something else before anybody notices.”

“That,” he said, “is usually how it happens.”

“What?”

“Everything.”

He then gave a small, formal incline of the head.

A recognition perhaps.

That we had occupied the same room for a while.

And that the room would become another room.

And left.