

# Dear X

Stuart Bailey

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Almost two months to the day after our meeting, here's my promised attempt to reconstruct our conversation. I'm going to start with this list of notes I made when I got back home, go through them individually and try to remember what we were talking about. I'm also half-borrowing from Daniel Spoerri's book *AN ANECDOTED TOPOGRAPHY OF CHANCE*. One morning in Paris, 1966, Spoerri made a map of the items on his breakfast table, described each object and how it came to end up there, then got other people to contribute: Topor sketched each object from memory, Emmet Williams annotated the original notes, and later the (French to English) translator added further annotations to the existing ones. The result is a branching series of stories and observations from a composite of sympathetic minds, all drawn from the original collection of mundane objects. This carried on over a few ever-expanding editions, and the form of the book mirrors the process perfectly, with ever-decreasing footnotes. So I'm going to follow suit and expand on each line on the above list in editorial smallprint.

### 3

#### Liter of Vin des Rochers†

bought on the Rue Mouffetard this morning from my regular wine dealer, who calls me the "gentleman with the deep voice" and says from time to time: "With what I have seen in this place, I could write a novel stretching from here to Place MAUBERT."†† The liter cost 1 franc and 65 centimes plus 30 centimes deposit, and with it I received a free chance on, among other things, an automobile.††† The bottle is still half full, and I am in the process of finishing it now. (Nos. 35, 28, 28a.)††††

#### AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL NOTE

† On the label is the following data: "11% / Vin des Rochers / Lines your stomach with velvet / I guarantee this wine is made from wholesome and dependably pure juice /



#### LITER OF VIN DES ROCHERS / 3

(illegible signature) / registered trademark / JULIE LEONELLI & Co."

#### AUTHOR'S ADDITIONAL NOTE

†† I erred. It wasn't the wine dealer who said "With what I've seen in this place I could write a novel stretching from here to Place MAUBERT." Tr. No. 1, but GEORGES SODINE, proprietor of Les Cinq Billards café at Place de la Contrescarpe (see No. 76). An American, JOE CHAPEAU, set me straight on this point. He is called JOE CHAPEAU because of the ditty Spanish cowboy hat he always wears, which probably serves him as a source of inspiration for the delicate romantic portraits he paints. Just this morning MONSIEUR GEORGES expanded the philosophical observation of one of his customers, CAMILLE, that "Life is a shit sandwich" with: "Yes, and we take a bite every day."

#### TRANSLATOR'S NOTE 1

From Place de la Contrescarpe, the ever more fashionable haunt of bohemians at the top of the Rue Mouffetard, that dingy but animated crooked street of markets and stalls, more picturesque than hygienic, to Place MAUBERT, called a "crosspool" by GRASQUE but today only a drab and banal annex to the more exotic quarters of which it forms the axis, is 44 miles: a pleasant downhill walk along the Rue DESCARTES past the Esperanto bookshop, the house where VOLTAIRE died, a Chinese grocery store, the rear enclosing walls of the Lycée MONTAIGNE, the backside of ST-ETIENNE-du-Mont (where RACINE is buried), across the Rue CLOUX (with remains of the medieval city walls), then down the Rue de la Montagne-STE-GENEVIEVE past the Polytechnic Institute, several lesbian bars and YVON's apartment.

#### AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL NOTE

††† "Vin des Rochers / free lottery / Series I, No. 712017 / Drawing Nov. 30, 1961."

#### AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL NOTE

†††† RAYMOND HAINS, after reading the manuscript, astonished by this reference to Vin des Rochers, one entire evening developed for my benefit a whole train of ideas that I jotted down on a dozen cards which I have since lost. All I can remember is that he started out with an analysis of an essay by ETIENNE, "PAUL CLAUDEL et le Vin des Rochers," to which

The COMPOSITE/COMPOST ISSUE: The word COMPOSITE has been buzzing around my head for a while.

One of the things I remember saying to you was 'I've been coming to the conclusion that graphic design doesn't exist', and you replying 'That's a good theory'. But what did I mean? I THINK I meant that graphic design only exists when other subjects exist first. It isn't an A PRIORI discipline, but a GHOST; both a grey area and a meeting point – a contradiction in terms – or a node made visible only by plotting it through the lines of connections. And that's exactly how I've come to start thinking of DDD, slowly becoming about everything BUT graphic design – towards a negative of what it originally was. And if the subject is a GHOST, then we're all GHOSTWRITERS: that sounds about right. Of course, all journals/magazines/fanzines are composites to some extent, but none seem quite so DEFINED by the idea as us. DB once pointed out that a graphic design magazine is one of those odd

occurrences of a form containing itself. Other examples might be a film about film, or a painting about painting – and examples of those exist, but they're exceptions too. We're a designed magazine about design, which implies that what we look like is half the point, and we're regularly told we don't 'look like a design magazine'. I think this just means leaning towards being visually sober rather than wild. It's not very conscious, but I suppose our approach is language-based, and any aesthetic comes from this angle, or through that lens. An An-aesthetic.

Wrong makes more sense: 'COMPOST' was a typing error. I don't usually reread emails before sending them, but last week I did, and was shocked at how many mistakes there were, then even more shocked at how the mis-spelt words were often more relevant than the correct ones. COMPOST is an example of that. BM was telling me about James Joyce's composite word JOCUSERIOUS – a term he coined to mean something funny which makes a serious point. Joyce himself was always upset at how critics focused on ULYSSES' serious virtuosity, but never mentioned the comedy. I think a lot of DDD is jocularious, a lot of our writers are jocularious, and I imagine a lot of its readers are too. The point is, in this instance COMPOST means the same as COMPOSITE, but is jocularious and therefore better.

Don't aim so hard: This is some kind of ZEN, related to that COMPOST – the idea that you come closest to making accurate work when not trying too hard, when the unconscious takes over, or at least when you're no longer conscious of the physical. During the period when we met, I was generally meeting a lot of new people, doing a lot of non-stop talking, and realising it was crystallising unformed ideas. Talking to think, to clarify and to remember. It seems stupidly obvious now, but I'd never thought about it before. Thinking aloud. Thinking a-visible. Yesterday I read something in Dutch about the difference between having something to say and something to write, which Tom Rummens agreed to translate for us:

Speaking People have something to say, but Writing People don't *just* have something to say: the writer, because he writes, has something *important* to say. The writer doesn't just say something, he also writes it down. He wants it to stay. He also wants it to be published, so he wants it to be read, usually by more than one person, preferably by everyone. So what the writer wants to say must be of some importance. The least we can say about a piece of literature is that it is has a subject. The dominant model for understanding literature – explicitly or implicitly – is the model of communication, whereby the person who speaks has a message for the person who is listening. In other words, literature is fundamentally an extension of ordinary language. Literature is language; language as we all know it, language that maybe asks a little more of our attention than ordinary language, language that is maybe a little more foolish or silly than ordinary language, language that therefore could be a little bit more difficult, but language nevertheless. And language is there to speak about something, to signify, to refer to a (real or imaginary) reality. (Patricia De Martelaere)

Laterally yours: Both this conversation and DDD in general are offerings of fragments for someone else to stick back together in whatever way makes most sense. Nothing so grand or pretentious as Deconstruction – more the necessary outcome of our happy failure to organise. Spoerri's project is similarly human-sized; the potential of that mundane breakfast table describes those ideas that can float in front of the eyes or sit at the back of the mind for years before being realised. Slow-buring lateral thinking. I wish I could remember the name of the author who, after his novels were criticised for not having enough punctuation, included a whole page full of full stops, commas and other assorted punctuation at the start of his next book. In New York I started wondering about the difference between Americans using "double" quotation marks as standard, as opposed to Europeans using 'single' ones, and whether that was related to the fact that Americans talk more in "quotes", in "irony". Then I started noticing it "everywhere", like a "disease". The ZAGATS restaurant reviews are the greatest example: "every" other "word" is "in" quotes. Then BM sent this "proposal":

**Quadruple quotes** (""") [kwä-'drü-pal 'kwOtz] n. archaic. punctuation marks used to enclose a word or phrase about which their user has nested skepticisms: 1. skepticism about some quality of the word or phrase contained by the device, and 2. skepticism about revealing the aforementioned skepticism to the reader, out of fear that the reader will think the author is a skeptic. (Brian McMullen)

Scaffolding: We were talking about the fact that we'd both reached some kind of proficiency with email as a writing medium and how we wished we could write so-called REAL texts (essays?) with the same ease and flow – to get over the block of the blank sheet of paper, or virgin Word document. Recently I've tried to fool myself into writing those real texts by typing directly into email software rather than word processing software, attempting to match the speed of thought. I think it works,

though it's difficult to observe your own psychology at work. In the film version of Godard's HISTOIRE(S) DU CINEMA, he films himself thinking lines of text on which he builds the film. The rhythm and speed of his thinking is emphasised by the staccato of the electronic typewriter, which renders a whole line at a time. It gives the impression of hearing his exact speed of thought: relaxed, poetic, in a dimly lit library, with a cigar. When you read a novel you're conscious of the physical object of the book for what, a few lines? paragraphs? pages? As your concentration sinks into the text the physical surroundings disappear, including the page. The informality of email seems to be a short-cut to this state. Eventually, you don't need the scaffolding anymore, it falls away, and you find you've written that real text after all. I've ended up suggesting this to other DDD contributors who, because they're often not writers by trade, are insecure about working outside their regular discipline, when that's usually exactly what makes their piece interesting in the first place. This is well described in the following excerpt. In the mid-1930s a group formed in London to carry out an 'anthropology of the people' – a social science called MASS OBSERVATION. The following statement was written by two of its founders, Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings:

## THEY SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

### MASS OBSERVATION AND SOCIAL NARRATIVE

*[The reports which are written for Mass Observation come largely from people whose lives are spent in a world whose behaviour, language, and viewpoint are far removed from academic science and literature. Sociologists and realistic novelists—including proletarian novelists—find it difficult if not impossible to describe the texture of this world. After reading hundreds of Mass Observation reports, we find that they tend to cover just those aspects of life which the others miss. Why is this? Because, we suggest, in these reports people are speaking in a language natural to them—their spelling, punctuation, etc., are their OWN—in spite of a uniform State education. This is hardly a “well of English undefiled” since into it continually flow more or less muddy streams from press, radio, advertising, film, and “literature”. But in actual social usage, all the jungle of words grow up together in Darwinian conflict until they establish their own ecology and functions. Contrast this functional value with the use of words by sensitive, stylistic writers. Each phrase is paralysed by fear of cliché. Yet each phrase must have a class or family resemblance to one of the known accents of literature. In reaction against this paralysis, there is a general wish among writers to be UNLIKE the intellectual, LIKE the masses. Much “proletarian fiction” is a product of this wish. But it is not enough for such fiction to be ABOUT proletarians, if they in their turn become a romantic fiction, nor even for it to be BY proletarians, if it is used by them as a means of escaping out of the proletariat.]*

*Mass Observation is among other things giving working-class and middle class people a chance to speak for themselves, about themselves. How little they are affected by the paralysis of language, even in their first attempts, may be judged from the extracts from Mass Observation reports which follow.]*

F for FAKE: This is a very fake email conversation (with the scaffolding still in place) precisely because it's consciously done, short-circuiting the benefit described above. You can only fool yourself so many times, anyway. Do you know the Orson Welles film F FOR FAKE? It's compulsory viewing for this issue. Welles plays on the idea of what's real or not in the film-making process – so you see, for example, the film set, the cameras, the assistants and himself performing conjuring tricks during his voice-over introduction. Then there are stories within stories within stories. The central subjects of the film are a painter who fakes the masters, and a writer who writes about famous fakers. Both of them, apparently by chance, live on Ibiza. Watching the film is like seeing a series of masks being removed. This is another example of a medium containing itself – a film about making a film. It also reminds me of O LUCKY MAN!, a very British Lindsay Anderson/Malcolm McDowell road movie from 1973, a modern-day ODYSSEY/ULYSSES which follows a young idealist's random drift around England. He ends up on Oxford street, where he notices a sign advertising an open film audition, walks in and gets chosen for a lead role – by the director Lindsay Anderson himself – at which point you realise all the other people in the audition are the other actors from the film, and that all have been playing about 3 different characters each (something your mind has just about managed to ignore for the entire film). It gets better: the audition scene is actually a restaging of the first time McDowell met Anderson, when he got the lead in the classic renegade schoolboy film IF..., to which O LUCKY MAN! is the sequel. So everything comes full circle, the whole process is revealed, and the film concludes with the director telling the actor to smile. McDowell's idealist initially refuses, then, after a long pause on his frowning face, is just about to break into a grin when the film cuts.

Re-reading + Winging it: I think we started talking about John Berger's WAYS OF SEEING, both admitting that we'd never actually read it fully, then deciding its importance is as much to do with what it stands for: the intimate collaboration between designer and writer, and the resulting symbiosis of design and writing, form and content. I recall you also saying that a girlfriend was a big fan of WAYS OF SEEING, so you had to pretend you knew it by heart, and had been vowing to read it properly ever since, because you might not be able to WING IT for much longer. The idea of winging it is very DDD. What are the conjugations of winging it? (I wing; We wang; They wung). At about the same time, MO had another new verb:

to ZETA-JONES something, meaning to have a trace of talent, but only actually get anywhere by being connected to the right people. He was using it in the sense of, say, getting into some club for free by knowing a friend of the owner: 'Hey, should we go Zeta-Jones that party...?' Anyway, I think a lot of our contributors feel that they're winging it by writing for us, but in the same way that the margin is usually the most interesting place to be, I think winging it is the most interesting state to be in. Trespassing, with all that implies.

Marbles / The not-looking: Why do we spend so much time quoting other people? Not just us, not just here, but the arts in general right now. References are everywhere, and it's not a criticism. Personally, I just can't help the feeling that somebody somewhere else, at some other point in time, has said it more accurately, with more inspiration, and that our job is to tune into these moments like long wave radio. Will we ever manage to start quoting ourselves? How will we know we said it in the first place? In the meantime, those marbles belonged to Buddy Glass, a JD Salinger character:

'Could you try not aiming so much?' he asked me, still standing there. 'If you hit him when you aim, it'll just be luck.' He was speaking, communicating, and yet not breaking the spell. I then broke it. Quite deliberately. 'How can it be *luck* if I *aim*?' I said back to him, not loud (despite the italics) but with rather more irritation in my voice than I was actually feeling. He didn't say anything for a moment but simply stood balanced on the curb, looking at me, I knew imperfectly, with love. 'Because it will be,' he said. 'You'll be *glad* if you hit the marble—Ira's marble—won't you? Won't you be *glad*? And if you're *glad* when you hit somebody's marble, then you sort of secretly didn't expect too much to do it. So there'd have to be some luck in it, there'd have to be slightly quite a lot of accident in it.'

The subtle alphabet: The morning before we met I'd been busy transferring the dialogue of Salinger's FRANNY AND ZOOEY into script form for another project. I must have read that book ten times, and thought I knew it inside out, but while ploughing through and retyping it I was shocked to discover that my mind had blanked out at least 50%. There were entire scenes, conversations, that I couldn't ever remember reading. In the same way you forget the physicality of a book – then the world – while reading, you can also forget the secondary detail of the text once you're in it. Then the words float around like background scenery. After re-reading/typing something so intimately, you discover the technique and structure as well as the content, like the sheer number of Manhattanese italics in a Salinger dialogue, without which the story would be much flatter and less convincing. All it takes is a few sloping characters. RG once made a screenprint of a spread from a novel which didn't exist. It implied a narrative before and after itself; a fake/ghost narrative. He had to make sure the viewer actually read the two pages rather than just looked at them, otherwise the work would be reduced to surface, without depth. The fragment of the story he initially wrote was a very dry and nondescript, but at the time we were listening repeatedly to a Jim O'Rourke track called GET A ROOM, about a dying man who picks up a girl to spend his last night with, then gets her in bed and finds he can't move as his body grows weaker and weaker. RG's text needed a hook with this kind of kick to draw the reader in – like the first paragraph of a novel, which in a way it was. The next morning he had a new version which now began with a composite of those song lyrics and his own text:

sight's getting dimmer. And my body's getting colder,  
and my mind's working slower. And I try to pull it out,  
but it starts to bleed again. And there is no one around.  
And as I lie there, camouflaged by the grass I imagine  
her making her way to the house. And it's then and only  
then, that I realise what the question could have been. It  
would have been easier in fewer words.

As my own mind becomes more and more cluttered and less able to handle ideas in anything other than this junkyard, composite manner, I am increasingly in awe of those who can really write, who have the conviction of purpose and clarity of mind to think a) This is what I want to say; and b) this is how I should write it. The ability to DESIGN A TEXT. Most of the time it's as WG Sebald writes in AUSTERLITZ:

Now and then a train  
of thought did succeed in emerging with wonderful  
clarity inside my head, but I knew even as it formed  
that I was in no position to record it, for as soon as  
I so much as picked up my pencil the endless pos-  
sibilities of language, to which I could once safely  
abandon myself, became a conglomeration of the  
most inane phrases. There was not an expression in  
the sentence but it proved to be a miserable crutch,  
not a word but it sounded false and hollow.



Difference in forms: I suppose this was following on, about the difference between the mechanics of a play and a novel – how you can't just make a straight transfer by, for example, pulling out all the dialogue, which is what I was doing with *FRANNY AND ZOOEY*. You have to forget everything you know and work within the conventions of the new medium, editing with a new sense of speed and attention span, considering the difference between private novel and a public performance. In China we saw ex-communist public newspaper vitrines on the street, with whole newspapers laid out for the public to read, and it was interesting to see this transfer of speed, of people stood reading long articles in the middle of busy streets. Perhaps newspapers have the facility to be both a book and a poster? Do you remember posterbooks in the 1980s, which were usually just collections of full-page photos of bands? These crossover forms (the third way) are always the most interesting. Godard again: 'THE PROBLEM IS: TO GET BACK TO ZERO'. Wim Wenders made a film called something like *ROOM 666* one year at Cannes, which involved him inviting a bunch of other directors to sit alone in front of a camera in a hotel room and answer a sheet of questions about film and television. Each one performed according to their public persona. So Godard lights a cigarette, reads the questions, then turns away from the camera, switches on the hotel room TV and watches tennis for half an hour. The viewer sees Godard's smoking profile accompanied by the soundtrack of the game. When he eventually turns back to the camera he announces – in all joculariousness – that the main difference between film and TV is that some people like watching small screens from close up, while others prefer watching big screens from far away. I heard this story at least third hand, so it could be apocryphal, but I like it too much to track it down.

Julie Burchill + ZEN: I'm not sure how we got from there to Julie Burchill, but the ZEN reference relates to a column she wrote for the *GUARDIAN* Saturday supplement magazine in which she described the bliss of stripping away all the sections of the heavyweight Sunday papers:

It's a good week this week—I shuck off a whole seven sections immediately. Binned, binned, binned! I'm cackling like a fiend now, and a great wave of cleanliness—purging even, if it didn't have such nasty laxative/bulimic connotations—sweeps over me.

I frown at the five sections I'm left with. Hmm... OK for now, but one day, when I'm no longer interested in *Travel*, *Arts*, *Style* or people's pointless opinions on the events of the week, then I'll have reached nirvana! Then I'll be pure.

It's that feeling of leaving high school and never again having to deal with the subjects you have no interest in. MB recently described something similar after being asked to write broad cultural roundups of the year (for those same weekend supplement magazines) and realising he was interested only in doing the opposite i.e. writing about very specific obsessions. He said most of these could be traced back to 1977, but I think he meant from the past forwards, as well as from the present backwards.

LA: I'm referring to RG's *LOOSE ASSOCIATIONS* lectures (there was one in *DDD6*) which joculariously point to a very human way of collecting and organising ideas – attempting to systemise something which isn't very systematic. I was talking about this with MK in relation to Joyce and *ULYSSES* again, which was founded on a number of underlying structures, primarily correspondences with Homer's *ODYSSEY* (each chapter in *ULYSSES* contains equivalent characters, locations and storylines), but also symbolically (each chapter has its own colour, organ and symbol, as well as a specific literary technique). I began trying to map this schema graphically, but soon realised it was a futile exercise as the structure often collapses: some chapters don't have a colour, some locations are not strictly geographical, some organs are less specific than others, times and locations are repeated etc. So you end up with an irritating sense of trying to impose order on something which fundamentally defies it. Graphic designers often do this. The Joyce critic Jeri Johnson describes *ULYSSES'* structure as being simultaneously present and absent. It was a curious project, trying to contain the uncontainable, but doomed to interesting failure. Another duality: the industry of Joyce scholarship is divided into two camps – those who consider the novel's structure central, and those who consider the narrative central. Johnson suggests that both camps spectacularly miss the fact that *ULYSSES'* genius lies precisely in the fact that it is *BOTH AT ONCE*, and they are fundamentally inseparable. Again, the composite is the whole point.

Hit from the side: This was how you described *DDD* to me: hitting from the side – *LATERALLY* – rather than head-on. Twice-a-year is a difficult rate to gauge ( $\text{DISTANCE} = \text{RATE} \times \text{TIME}$ ). The pieces have to have some kind of lasting value, so shouldn't be too time-conscious – ideally *OUT-OF-TIME*, which is why we don't really treat the past as "history". Something written fifty years ago might easily be as valid as something written today, and often more so. I recently read Richard Hamilton's *URBANE IMAGE* from 1963, which seemed completely relevant, despite being inextricably bound to pop. It wasn't really the subject matter I thought was so timeless, but how he *DESIGNED THE TEXT*. First there is a series of paragraphs which parody the pop language, for example:

She's built (37, 22, 36), sociable (show a record player and a couple of highballs), intelligent (use a record sleeve with Zen in the title), available through the Bell system (Princess handset) and has friendly eyes that come out green on Ektachrome.

followed by a glossary as long as the text itself, which explains all the pop jargon; then a visual glossary of tiny reference images. This peculiar triptych makes its point perfectly – the fluorescent, amphetamine form of the text encapsulating its content. Hamilton also wrote:

Impressionism looks like 1890, Cubism does not look like 1910, Surrealism looks like 1920, Tachism does not look like the 1950 environment. The reason for these differences is simple enough: those great styles of the past which strongly evoke the period of their birth portray objects and visual atmospheres specific to their time; those great styles which do not build in a date tag tend to avoid specific figuration or adopt appearances of other times or material which is 'classical' and therefore dateless.

Both our attempted timelessness and indirectness are tied to our refusal to theme DDD. But we're always quietly astounded by the connections between pieces which slowly reveal themselves as we're compiling each new issue. It often seems like the writers are deliberately cross-referencing, when the majority don't even know each other. Maybe we're all just interested in the same things at the same time; something in the water. As soon as we realise about those connections, however, we also reflexively try not to notice them, out of some obscure fear that acknowledgement will cause them to evaporate. In *ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE*, Robert M Pirsig writes: *You point to something as having Quality and the Quality tends to go away. Quality is what you see out of the corner of your eye.* I've started thinking of these denied themes as *SUNSPOTS*: burned onto the retina for a few seconds, but because you never look at the sun with the exact centre of your eye, you can never quite look at them directly, and if you try they skip off to the side. Like Joyce's schema, they're both there and not there. I wish we could capture the visual effect of sunspots for the cover – it seems attractively impossible. I remember two works that caught something of the effect. One was a modest Mondriaan painting of a castle in which the colours of the sky and building seemed to be inverted, creating a hallucinatory, impressionistic vision which you can imagine fading back the right way round any second. The other is another Hamilton piece, *I'M DREAMING OF A WHITE CHRISTMAS*, a negative of a scene from the film which he transferred into both a screenprint and a painting, and better still, a negative photograph of Hamilton stood in front of his own work – so that the double negative makes the original work positive again. Perhaps all we need is a negative version of Malcolm McDowell's grin on the cover, and to cut to another Sebald quote to end this.



losing myself in the small print of the footnotes to the works I was reading, in the books I found mentioned in those notes, then in the footnotes to those books in their own turn, and so escaping from factual, scholarly accounts to the strangest of details, in a kind of continual regression expressed in the form of my own marginal remarks and glosses, which increasingly diverged into the most varied and impenetrable of ramifications.