The Emperor’s New Oeuvre

Let’s meet at the entrance of the Albertina, where Bianca and I were presently employing our energy on standing in line without getting knocked over by the wind. Never have I encountered a more uncourteous wind. I’d certainly met with stronger drafts, drafts that pushed and pulled and lifted; but in doing that they acknowledged you; they either helped you or fought you. Viennese winds cut through you; icy and proud. We stood there powerless in its ignorance of us, until we were allowed to come in.

The Albertina has lots of famous paintings, much like the other museums we had been visiting. But it also had something else: contemporary art, the kind only art students pretend to “get”. The kind of art that aims to challenge the very idea of art; and does so by sucking terribly, flauntingly.

“What about it?”, says the orange blot in the middle of a canvas, threatening you with cherry-picked academic discourse.

Part of me wants to have a very serious aesthetic debate in this essay, just like Bianca and I did as we stared at a series of paintings which could have been mass commissioned as Hot Topic décor. The other part of me wants to simply show you what we are dealing with here, and hope this will be enough.

Uma imagem contendo atletismo, água, deitado, quarto

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**Image 1:** What looks like a prototype of a Harry Potter wand deteriorates from the centre. This was one of my favourite items in the exhibit given the infinite potential of that caption when discussing politics over text. Our hearts and minds fresh from the Brazilian Presidential Elections, this seemed like a fitting reaction image for any political news texted to us.

For instance, your friend could text you about Bolsonaro making fascist points, and all you would have to do is reply with this caption. It comes in extremely handy as a sociable meme.

But that is probably the problem. Those concepts are way too wide to actually move anyone; their memeability works against them. When you name a piece “*I, Crouching, Thinkin*g” you cannot expect we not mock how generic that is.

For that reason, the best title for a piece was by far “Two enamoured zucchinis with lonesome apricot”. It is exactly what you are thinking:

Uma imagem contendo no interior, gato, espelho, mesa

Descrição gerada automaticamente

**Image 2:** The lonesome apricot observes the Zucchinis thinking to himself, “will I ever break out of this glass cage and find someone who’ll love me as much as those two love each other?”

One of the zucchinis, noticing the apricot’s growing discontent, tells its lover: “Poor apricot, being stuck with us here and all”.

“What do you mean by stuck?”, the taller zucchini replies, looking around for the first time in eighteen years.

“I mean with the glass cage and all”, says the first one, realising its mate is actually stupid.

The second zucchini starts hyperventilating. It is extremely claustrophobic:

“I am a perishable piece grown in a field, made for the temporary pleasure of Italian vegans, why oh why must I be imprisoned in this strange limbo? What on earth has happened to me? Have you bewitched me? My skin has deteriorated, past its expiration date! Oh, how sad it is to live past one’s expiration date… The earthy delight of my species is wasted on me! And to think I was once a soulful succulent… What has become of us… What shall become of us? Forever conserved through a transparent wall. You tell me the apricot is lonely, to hell with it. Apricots aren’t prone to succulence; they are miserable desert seeds accustomed to being deserted themselves. But me, what will become of me?”

At this point, the smarter zucchini attempts to calm its partner down by explaining that their preservation made them the quintessential specimens, to be thought of as the platonic ideal of zucchinis and, along with the apricot, of the timeless tragedy of a love triangle.

“We’re not in a love triangle”, the apricot chimes in. “I hate you both! This is yet another instance of your superiority complex. I, in love with *you*? Spare me! Actually, kill me!”

“One cannot kill that which is past its expiration date. We are condemned to wander through the liminal space that is our cage, that is our life.”, says the zucchini who has just realised they are in a cage. “It is our fate to perish, to be devoured before our most unsavoury parts reach that stage of degradation which is so peaceful, the stage many a generation before us shared with the fruit and the flies and the gods that eat and digest us and ditch us back into our mother, Earth!”

“Great, now I have to put up with its identity crisis as well. Great job, zucchini.”, said the apricot. “I just need to be alone right now.”

The other zucchini sighed, while some new faces glared at the cage, looking as confused as they did:

“Come on”, it tells the other zucchini. “We’re supposed to be enamoured.”

They go back to looking like two zucchinis making out. They both wished they’d died twenty years ago, baked into a lasagne. The apricot, meditatively, looks out the glass window and wonders: am I really that lonesome?

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Though the flash about the zucchinis was heavily inspired by the title, the relation between the piece and the story was one of dialogue, as opposed to blatant plagiarism. The blatant plagiarism, I’m convinced, happened further down the hall.

A little backstory will do wonders here, though, so let’s travel back to my middle school days. That was when I first created a character by the name of Gwiddy. He was born already grownup on my English textbook, on the back of its back-cover.

Unlike Bianca, my talents do not lie on drawing. Gwiddy was a rudimentary doodle I managed not to perfect over the years. It’s a very simple thing to draw, so much that whenever I want to doodle I inevitably end up doodling my old friend.

At first he was simply a silly drawing, but my boredom got the best of me, and he became a silly character; a staple of my every notebook. Gwiddy the Elf, was a sled engineer for Santa Claus, though he was awfully underpaid. He hated reindeers because they got to ride the vehicle he had spent the year working on. His sister was a sledding champion, and he was jealous of her (that is, until her accident). Gwiddy was a regular on my Math notebook, in which he constantly popped up just to express his hatred of Math.

And it’s not like it was that much of a secret, either. He was silly, but that was exactly why I liked to snatch my friends’ textbooks and draw him on there, it was a game we played. Sneaky Gwiddy. A friend of mine even started drawing her own Gwiddy as a means of killing off boredom. This lasted all through high school.

After high school, I thought maybe it was time I retired the character. He had, after all, been complaining about the working conditions at Santa’s sled factory for years now – so much that I had at some point made a whole comic about his retirement while I was supposed to be paying attention to Physics class. In the end, he decided he was too young for that. Too many bored kids to entertain.

Anyway, I dug up my old textbooks so you could get an idea of my little buddy Gwiddy:

Texto preto sobre fundo branco

Descrição gerada automaticamente

**Image 3:** Here is my freshman Math textbook, by which I seem to have been thoroughly frustrated. Such circumstances were not unusual, though they were surely aggravated by the subject of the exercises featured on the pages, logarithms.

Gwiddy, ever so cheeky, can be seen by the exercises, reportedly “Tired of this shit”.

A further caption urges the reader to support Gwiddy in the fight against Shit.

My eventual descent into comedy really does shine through in this memento of my high school years.

I’m sure you are wondering, by now, what the fuck my Math-hating Santa’s elf has to do with anything. Well, Reader, without further ado, I present you with this piece:

Lousa branca com texto preto sobre fundo branco

Descrição gerada automaticamente

Is this a badly drawn German knockoff version of my beloved comic book character? I’m inclined to think so! Bianca was shocked by this artist’s audacity to copy my classic skit, but I understand the plagiarism. It is such a unique, profound idea, you can’t really blame people for being inspired by it. I just don’t know where he could have found it. Did I leave a loose paper leaf with a Gwiddy on it when I went to school in Germany?

What troubles me the most is that he is clearly taking a shit – and, as you may recall, Gwiddy is fiercely anti-shit. I also cannot read this handwriting, so for all I know he is endorsing shit, or worse – praising the working conditions at Santa’s workshop. What’s next, is he going to dissolve the union?

I just want you to know, I do not claim this elf.

My Gwiddy and this depraved version seem like the before and after of a temperance novel. Fine, I can resist it no longer; I’ll zoom in and decode the handwriting: *An der Schwur ziehen + solange die Musik spielt stehen bleiben*? Okay so, the easy part is the music that was playing. He stayed standing; or stood still as proper English would have it, as the music played. He opened a *Schwur*? Google tells me a *Schwur* is an oath. Does one open an oath in German? Pull or push an oath? Wouldn’t that mean he broke the oath? I think this sentence means that he took an oath to stand still while the music played? How deep of him. Could this be a Nietzsche reference? *And those who couldn’t hear the music deemed those who danced to it insane* or something like that. Is poor old decoy Gwiddy not one of Nietzsche’s Chosen Few? That’s just sad. You can hear the music, buddy. I have faith in you.

Oh no, but there’s more! Do you see the crossed off part of the caption? It says the exactly “stehen bleiben”, stood still. Except that it didn’t, because the artist moved it in the sentence! What a mindfuck! College paper translation: the presumed move of the fragment from one side of the sentence to the other indicates that it did not ~~stand still,~~ in fact, stand still, and is therefore a self-cancelling void. How very clever and ground-breaking! It certainly earns its spot in one of the most important collections in the world!

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Bianca and I sit in an empty room, apart from the emo paintings which could without a stretch have been reject alternative covers for a My Chemical Romance record in 2007. My roast game is so strong today. Although *Welcome to the Black Parade* is an objectively good song (especially the Postmodern Jukebox jazz cover) and no argument could ever disprove that.

We absolutely had this conversation in Portuguese, but for the sake of clarity I’ll dub us, and also because I cannot remember exactly what we said anyway, though it probably went like this:

“This is amazing, there isn’t one single redeeming piece of art here.”, I said, probably.

“That’s your opinion.”

“That’s also *your* opinion, isn’t it?”

I have probably told you this already, but part of what makes our friendship work is Bianca and mine’s love of arguing with each other, so do not be alarmed.

“Yes, but art doesn’t have to be beautiful.”

“I never said art should be beautiful, in fact it’s good if art is unsettling and uncomfortable, but everything here is just about shock value and trying to see what you can get away with.”

“Like the pig bowels.”, she sighed. She was referencing a sculpture made out of pig bowels for no apparent reason. Vegans everywhere are weeping.

“Saying what you’re making is art purely because it’s in the context of a museum is ridiculous. If you can’t appreciate it without reading the caption, then you’re making a point, not art. You shouldn’t have to explain what you were going for outside of the context of your work.”

“But some people probably do appreciate it and find it beautiful.”

“No, they think they like it because it’s in the context of a museum and they want to feel smart and cultured, like Dago[[1]](#footnote-1) with that movie. It’s just the Emperor’s New Groove.”

“You mean the Emperor’s New Clothes. The Emperor’s New Groove is the Disney movie.”

“Oh yeah. I love that movie. Artistically it is superior to everything in here.”

“It’s a good movie. But that’s not what this is about. Like, obviously this is so bad it’s funny but it can also be art. Art can be bad.”

“I mean there are some things that are art that are terrible and some things I like that aren’t art. Like I hate *The Great Gatsby* but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t deserve any respect. And the fact that I love Gossip Girl doesn’t make me oblivious to it being trash. I guess some people could look at this room and wish this were their wallpaper. But it’s still wallpaper.”

“Really ugly wallpaper.”, she agreed, “I think our definitions of art are different.”

“Art for me is transcendence. It’s whatever manages to break through the historical and geographical context of its production and actually manages to have us break through ours by moving us. For these people who made those things, it’s commentary. It’s purely ideological. And I just think that whenever ideology starts art dies.”

“But isn’t that its own ideology?”

“Oh, come on. This is such a gotcha argument. You can answer anything with it, it doesn’t make it right. If you choose to see – or not see – the world through an ideological lens everything can be seen through it. But I think maybe that’s why it’s so awful to do that?”

“But what you’re defending is that we ignore historical context in favour of our own interpretation.”

“No, not ignore. I just think that whatever art survives, does so because it had more to say than their context in which they were created. It’s that think Italo Calvino says; that every literary classic has its background noise, and that’s the context. But you can still read it and enjoy it as a text by itself. Because you are actually being transported outside of your time, and geography, and self. Otherwise why would we even want to be alive? If we can’t ever get out of ourselves?”

“I just think you have a really strict definition of art. Some things can transport you and make you feel transcendent that other people don’t necessarily agree with.”

“But I think we can safely say no one will ever feel transcendent regarding this.”, I say, in reference to the paintings. Bianca does give me that.

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And you know what’s funny? I don’t even remember much of what we saw upstairs with the Manets and Klimts and whatnots.

1. Our senior year Portuguese teacher, who claimed to have enjoyed the most pretentious film ever made, “The Great Beauty”. I told him he was only saying he enjoyed it because he wanted to sound deep along with everyone pretending they enjoyed it because they wanted to sound like they “got it” when in reality there was nothing to get. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)