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Nicholas Grünke was part of the fascinating world of fine art for 14 years, before becoming disillusioned and finally retreating from it all together. Now he looks back at this bizarre era of his life, and takes us with him. To the studios of the artists who string hundreds of bluebottles onto a thread for an installation. To the private rooms of the most decadent collectors who might, say, wear a parrot on their shoulders as an accessory to their Gucci suits. To the major art events like the Miami Basel Art Fair where there will soon be more pool and dinner parties than exhibitions ...



English sample translation, Chapter “Parrots and pirates”

Laeticia was waiting for me at the Palais de Tokyo in the 16th arrondissement. Every last seat in the café was taken. On the table in front of her was a bottle of red wine and two glasses.

Our last meeting had been two months ago in London. Since then we had communicated only by phone and email. I had already forgotten the slight kink at the top of her left ear, but not her emerald-green eyes. When I last saw her at her little show of video art in Chelsea, Laeticia had just finished her job as project curator at the Palais de Tokyo. I knew Sebastian, one of the artists in the exhibition, who introduced me to her. Theoretically this was when our collaboration was born. Laeticia had good connections with the gallery in Clermont Ferrand, so after much deliberation we had decided to hold the exhibition in Auvergne. The gallery there was able to provide us with an enormous space and, importantly, had no qualms about showing unknown artists.

I was starving, and the kitchen at the Palais de Tokyo had quite a good reputation. We took the last trays and stood in the queue. The food was displayed behind a glass pane on the counter. I hadn't been in France for a while and so gave in to culinary cliché, ordering the Quiche Lorraine. Young chefs in stained aprons served the food onto preheated plates. Laeticia chose the Hachis Parmentier. She wrinkled her nose after the first bite.

“Tastes funny.”

The layers of mashed potato and mincemeat did look unappetising. My quiche was also a disappointment. The only delicious part of the meal was the red wine, which helped to wash down the rest of the miserable food. I brought out the list of artists. The only one proving to be problematic had been recommended by Simon, the gallerist I had worked for in London. Every time Stephen Fall failed to pick up the phone, I couldn't help but think of the hint of mockery present in his work, *F**K*, at the ‘art sale’ exhibition. Simon had also neglected to mention that Stephen would be hitting the booze so hard.

“Stephen is the only one who hasn't confirmed he'll do the exhibition. But he won't answer my messages. The only sign of life is this...” I held up my iPhone with its shattered screen to Laeticia. A wasted Stephen was babbling into my mailbox, trying to say something in a fantasy language. The only comprehensible words were ‘black’ and ‘escape’, followed by a loud crash before the line went dead. End of message.

“What should I make of it?” she asked me.

“Nothing at all. His performances and works need the intoxication. Without it, they'd collapse like a house of cards. I'll call him again. It's going to be alright, I think.” I was trying to convey confidence, in spite of the doubt that was creeping in.

After brusque waiter cleared the table, I took the photocopies of the artworks from my leather bag and spread them out. The works, yet to be created, were in sketch form.

“What an old-school method! I do that on my Mac.”

“This is the only method that allows me to keep an overview and respond quickly to ideas.”

Based on the photocopies in front of us, we could select which pieces would be exhibited in which room. We evaluated how the contents of the pieces could work together, either complementing or countering one another.

“We should place Florenza and her performance in front of the Swede's elephant sculpture. Have you looked at the dimensions of his work yet?” Laeticia asked. We really could never have guessed at this moment that the Italian artist, Florenza, and the Swedish sculptor would come to hate each other to the core after a couple of days. I showed Laeticia the model drawing of the elephant with a television as a heart. “Huge, right? What about the wood and the pallets he ordered? Are we getting the budget for it?”

“Oh, I totally forgot to tell you. The gallery is covering it. It's already arranged.”

“That's great!”

“The projectors are there too.”

“That's even better.”

“But the best thing is,” Laetitia smoothed her brown hair out of her face and took a sip of wine, “that I found a private sponsor who will cover the travel and hotel expenses!” Her face lit up at this. “For everyone?!”

“For everyone! And Madame and Monsieur Roquebarnai have invited us to a vernissage at their house this weekend.”

“You are amazing!”

“Yes I am. Just feeling a bit nauseous. Let's have an espresso outside.”

A little later, wrapped in down jackets on the terrace, we smoked and gazed at the Tour Eiffel in front of us. The beautiful postcard motif was split with acoustic cracks from the tireless clamour of skateboards on the terraces below.

“How's the current exhibition here?” I asked Leticia, while two Japanese tourists, victory signs raised, were having their photo taken on the wall in front of the Parisian icon.

“Boring. All the big museums got so boring. The best shows in the last few years have not been in museums. They've been in a few galleries and nearly always at the big art fairs.”

Neither of us had visited the fair in Miami Beach at this point. Otherwise the emphasis would surely have been on *nearly always*.

“The museums need the high visitor numbers and the resulting income,” she continued, “and the masses, as usual, would rather go to see Picasso or Matisse for the thousandth time, than Santiago Sierra or Elmgreen and Dragset.”

“Actually, I have the feeling that it doesn't matter who's showing. People follow the name of the institution alone, and of course the promotional texts, where the upcoming artist always becomes the most important icon of the century,” I said.

“Yes, I think the term ‘art temple’ is valid when we see the disciples of art going on pilgrimage, their opinions manipulated and subverted by art magazines,” added Leticia, looking at her watch. “I need to go!”

She had an appointment at the Place de la Bastille, and I was more than happy to return to the flat. The fatigue from the flight and Cardiff were catching up with me.

“By the way, thanks for the awesome accommodation. I feel like Balzac 150 years ago in this overgrown alley, as if I too had to hide from the tax collector somewhere in a backyard. Although,” it occurred to me, “his shack was high above the roofs of Paris.”

“It's still an insider tip. My husband always billets his musicians there when they're in Paris. I'll go with you to the Oberkampf station. But shit, I am still nauseous.”

“Should we take a cab?”

“No, let's walk off the food with a stroll. It will surely be good for me. Then we can take the 9. It's faster anyway with the rush hour traffic.”

We went down the stone staircase and left the neoclassic art temple. We walked along the pools and the reliefs, past the graffiti-stained walls and the skaters, and then followed the Avenue de New York eastward. Though the trees were still barren and icy gusts of wind chased over the Seine, Paris was already breathing spring.

In the Metro station, a group drummed on their djembes as though in a trance, making the tunnel quake with complicated rhythms. It was exactly like my father had told me as a kid when he came back from his business trips to Paris. I remembered precisely his description of smell and music. It seemed like nothing might have changed since then. I imagined this group in a time lapse, endlessly maltreating the goatskins as the decades passed, their beards growing longer and ever-greier, eventually spreading out and out to fill the whole Metro station.

We hadn't been on the train long when I suddenly noticed that I was delivering a monologue to a silent Laetitia. She was ashen, staring into space.

“All good?”

“Mhmh”, she groaned, giving a little shake of her head. My attempt at encouragement raised only a dark look. It happened at the St Augustine station. Laetitia took my hand and dragged me out. The doors opened and masses of people poured forth. We were carried with the crowd. Left the platform. Searched for the next exit. *Sortie* to the right. But it was too late. Laetitia ran to the bin on the wall and puked in the most elegant way I have ever seen. Absurd as it sounds, it was almost aesthetic. A clean fountain hit the opening of the bin. Nothing missed. Not one drop. The stream of people flowed around us; nobody seemed to notice us. She cleaned her mouth with a handkerchief and we followed the *sortie* sign.

“Damn Palais de Tokyo. Good you chose the quiche!” She was already joking again as we climbed the stairs toward fresh air.

“Next time, we will meet in Le Flandrin. Promise!”

We continued slowly along the wide Boulevard to the next station.

The streets were overcrowded with thin, long-limbed women, their protruding cheekbones and dark ringed eyes reminding me of addicts. Clearly it was fashion week again, and the slaves of the fashion industry were gathering together from all over the world to show the newest collections on the catwalk. The pretentiousness of the bratty models was similar to that of the assistants in big galleries, who displayed unbelievable arrogance only because they were allowed to file the expenses of a *documenta* participant.

As I queued in front of the one and only cash machine for miles around, I watched the young men with plucked eyebrows and oversized black cardigans idle by. They were of course sporting the obligatory white sneakers and the half-shaved head with side-part. It was almost impossible to see the bankcard slot through the layers of stickers pasted to the cash machine. It couldn't be any different; a Big-Daddy-Gun sticker was next to a shining smiley-bulb label. No matter where I had been in the world over the past years, I always came across the works of this Eindhoven street artist. My recurrent encounters with these territorial markings and symbols in the urban wilderness made me think of our nomadic nature - it lent the far away some familiarity. As Blaise Pascal wrote in his *Pensées*, “Our nature lies in movement; complete calm is death.”

On the corner opposite the little market stand where I had been getting my lunch and relaxing from the set-up in the gallery for days now, two models in fur coats were illuminated by spotlights. The photo-shoot crew was bustling around them. As I waited for my crêpes I watched the photographer command and rearrange the models into different contortions and manoeuvres. Both women had impressive sand-coloured afros resembling lions' manes that they skilfully presented to the camera. I watched the fashion circus with amusement for a couple of minutes longer before returning to the gallery.

The installation was, so far, proceeding without any major problems. All the boxes had arrived intact and the two workers from the gallery were professionals. The few complicated handgrips were quickly explained and understood. After we had fixed the hanging system onto the ceiling, we installed piece after piece. We took single layers out of the prepared wooden boxes and hung them immediately on rigs attached to the ceiling, taking care not to rearrange or tangle anything within

the confusion of nylon threads and plastic shreds. Thus the taxidermied duck was already swimming in a sea of grey green plastic bags, and the hedgehog was lifting a floating black cube. The Hervé Bonnet gallery was located in an old villa in the 3rd arrondissement. The entire ground floor was used as an exhibition space, while the upper floors held the family's private chambers. Currently only one wing was inhabited by Hortense, the daughter of the house. Not so long ago, she had taken over the renowned gallery from her father and since then, as she had assured me over and over again in our emails, was striving to branch out in new directions. The exhibition opening was gearing up to be very exciting. Nobody knew how the long-established clientele of the gallery would react to Marie's bizarre animal world.

It was not easy to work with Hortense. As a curator she was extremely highly strung and refused to take any advice from either myself or her assistant, Edeline.

It was just past 2pm when I returned to the gallery after lunch.

"I want the glass boxes in the entrance hall. They are the most accessible pieces, and the easiest to sell," Hortense was saying.

"But that means we have to install both large works together in room F," answered Edeline irritably.

"They cancel out each other's vitality, Hortense!"

Hortense replied, even more irritated, "Edeline, yes, that is what it means. But I don't think they diminish each other."

"I'm sorry Hortense, but I agree with Edeline. The butterfly installation needs to be in the entrance hall. Actually, I think that even though we do want to sell the glass boxes, they don't represent the core of Marie's work!"

"You are both getting on my nerves!" Hortense ended the discussion and stormed off to her office on high heels that lifted her up to the two-metre mark, clearly offended.

Shortly after, a black Maserati Quattroporte drove into the courtyard making the pebbles crunch, and parked in front of the gallery. A chauffeur got out and opened the rear door for an older man in a pinstripe suit with combed back snow-white hair. His mighty belly stretched the marine blue double-breasted jacket. He saw us as we pressed our noses flat against the window and nonchalantly lifted his hand. Hortense had also noticed the arrival and rushed to the entrance. She pulled the door open and called from the steps, "Papa, Papa! What a delight!"

So this was the notorious Hervé Bonnet! Behind him, the chauffeur lifted the third titanium Rimowa suitcase out of the boot.

Edeline turned to me. "Now you are going to experience something," she said.

After Hortense had introduced me and I had expressed my admiration for Hervé's ornamental pocket handkerchief, she explained her idea for the entrance hall. With her father in the room she seemed utterly nervous and her pitch was strikingly high. She buzzed around him like a young girl seeking her father's affirmation. She had not even finished explaining her ideas for the layout of the exhibition previously outlined with such confidence to Edeline and me, when her father comprehensively destroyed the girlish dream. It was harsh and I would have preferred to leave the room and save Hortense the embarrassment.

Hervé Bonnet said, "I am from a time when dealing with art demanded courage. It was still a pure form of belief and it is unacceptable that you should prioritise sales over value in my gallery. Am I clear?"

"But..." she forced out. She trembled.

"No 'but'. The most representative work is going here and the boxes can be displayed somewhere in the back part of the exhibition. People should feel the essence of this art. Everyone who understands it will make the right decision, for the rest there are the boxes to buy."

He was obviously used to being in command. And it was abundantly clear that he still wasn't ready to hand over his life's work, his gallery. Hortense meekly obeyed, like a child, but her bright red

face showed her simmering shame and rage. I was astonished that Hervé knew exactly which installation was planned here. He knew the plans. Meanwhile the feeling crept over me that not only had he intentionally arrived early, but he was also the initiator of the 'new way', not his daughter. I had to show him the butterflies, which were still lined up in the wooden boxes.

"What a seductive blue. Wonderful. What are they called?"

"They are called *Morpho peleides* or The Emperor. It is the reflection of light on their millions of scales that makes them glimmer so blue, and not the pigments as one might think."

"I want you to build up the butterfly installation right here. It is going to be the highlight of the show. I can feel it! Tell me, when is the artist herself coming?"

"In a couple of days"

"Bien. In a world that focuses so much on capital, there is rarely room anymore for individual, difficult creations. We are losing our humanity. That is why this here is so important. Bonne soirée!" He shook my hand and was gone. I liked him!

Gare Saint-Lazare. I was early and had some time to explore the historically charged train station. A half egg, constructed from steel and glass, vaulted from the ground. The entrance of the Metro station reminded me of Fosters station in Canary Wharf. Everything seemed to be more and more alike, whether in art or in architecture. Inside the Saint-Lazare the noise resulting from construction of a new shopping mall was so loud that it chased me out again. I strolled around aimlessly. Looking at the back of the station the world famous photo that was taken there came to my mind. In it, a man leaps from a wooden ladder lying horizontal in the mud into a huge expanse of water. He is caught by the camera, floating, right before his immersion and the final meeting between himself and his mirrored image on the water surface. But the times of Henri Cartier-Bresson were long gone. Now, 100 million people were rushing through the station every year. On the staircase before me hip-hop boomed out of a ghettoblaster and grim faces full of cigarettes gazed at me. I turned around, preferring to wait for Laeticia outside the main entrance.

"How is the installation going?" she asked, once in the train.

"Good. I met Hervé Bonnet. Interesting."

"Yes, he is indeed. I've had the honour of meeting him a couple of times on opening nights and receptions. Poor Hortense!"

"You know of their relationship?"

"Who doesn't in Paris?! The art world is small and it is always burning for new intrigues and family catastrophes. Like in any other microcosmos, no?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Anyway he clearly has not handed over his gallery yet!"

"Nobody believed that Hortense would actually take over the gallery, or even can! It is not enough to simply be rich and to have studied art history."

Our host's villa was located behind a high wall, hidden from the outside world. Two staff opened the heavy wooden gates for us. The Roquebarnai family property stretched in a U-shape around a spacious inner courtyard, in which only the most expensive cars were parked. Laeticia did not know which generation of the noble Roquebarnai family we would be meeting. It didn't interest me anyway. More interesting to me was the fact that they collected and supported art. In the foyer where our jackets were taken, a curved white marble staircase with polished brass railings led upstairs. High above the staircase hung a huge painting covered with broken dishes. I assumed it was a real Julian Schnabel.

An elegant older lady wearing a vermillion silk scarf thrown over her shoulders welcomed us politely. The Marquise de Rouquebarnai wore a daring black gown and flamboyantly painted eyes, which, in their startling colours, reminded me of a bird.

"I hope you didn't have any trouble finding us?"

"Not at all, Marquise," replied Laetitia, in a noticeably respectful tone.

"Please, call me Valerie," said the Marquise, easing the conversation.

"It is beautiful here, Valerie." I tried immediately to address the Marquise informally and pointed to the painting: "This is not by any chance a Julian Schnabel?"

She nodded slightly.

"But we are here far too seldom to appreciate it enough!"

How could I have expected anything else from such a wealthy family? With a villa like this in the heart of Paris, naturally winters are spent in fairytale castles in the snow, and summers on the seas of the world.

A double door opened onto a spacious room. We passed under ceilings of burnished gold. It wasn't until we entered the hall and I let my gaze roam that I realised the full dimensions of the space. The table alone sat at least 30 people. A few guests were already seated. Particularly outstanding were the very old man and his neighbour sitting at the head of the table, conversing excitedly. The younger man had two thin blond strands of hair sticking out the back of his otherwise bald head. He looked like the little egret from an animal documentary I had watched the day before in my apartment. A waiter was pouring out Krug Grand Cuvée, an excellent start to the evening. A row of canvases bearing water-surface illustrations lined one wall of the hall. The oil paintings were by a Chinese artist whom Jean-Louis Roquebarnai was in the middle of raving about.

As Laetitia had told me, he was unmistakably the lord of the house. His voice carried across the room, filled with the importance of his own opinion.

"Finally we have a promising new shooting star in the Parisian art sky again!"

New 'shooting star' in the Parisian art sky?! Fuck that! Gerhart Richter had painted water in detailed perfection decades ago, and the piece along the wall was yet another example of 'we-just-make-it-again' artwork. But because it came from China, it was heralded as new. Ahhh! This tendency in contemporary art had annoyed me for years. Too often art from China that was actually quite trivial received excessive acclaim. The Chinese art market, constrained by a strict communist system, had for some time now offered precisely the flavour of exoticism that was needed to sell art. The restrictions imposed by the Chinese government on the artist, naturally, played to the advantage of the art speculators. One could interpret any art, even with quite poor content, as both brave and politically committed.

A man in his early forties with an eye patch had a grey parrot on his shoulder, seemingly colour-coordinated with his linen suit. Or was it the other way around? He was easily the most elegant and best looking pirate I had ever seen. The parrot was repeatedly calling out something incomprehensible in French. Neither could I understand what his master was saying to the Marquis, but by his body language it seemed as though the pirate might share my opinion of the water paintings. Grimly, he came to join the table. All of a sudden a terribly loud squawk came from the corner of the room - an answer to the indecipherable French of the grey parrot. Amidst all that was going on, I had overlooked the cage holding an Ara parrot, which was now flapping around behind the bars. Valerie had based her eye make-up on the Ara. Oh yes!

"Since Abhay died, that poor thing keeps going berserk!" commented the woman next to me, pointing with her gold-ringed fingers at the cage and the swirling feathers. Her short haircut accentuated her roman nose. Of course she was wearing bright red lipstick.

"Who is Abhay?"

"Abhay was Akuti's partner. The male Ara," she explained.

I looked at Laeticia, who only smiled amiably and shrugged her shoulders. Akuti slowly calmed down and continued on in a lecturing tone. I was amused as she mimicked the voice of the lady of the house, but when she imitated a heavy smoker's cough followed by spitting, it was simply uncanny.

Eventually, more guests took their seats at the table. A raven-haired copy of Lauren Bacall sat next to her partner, a man with a boxer's face, followed by gentlemen in smoking jackets, men in suits with pocket handkerchiefs, and women in haute couture whose opulent jewellery twinkled over the table. Then there was the group of invited artists who were recognisable by their deliberately shabby attire. One young fellow appeared especially daft in his old French farmer's leather jacket and gold-mirrored Mykita sunglasses. He must have been unbearably hot as the room temperature was set to accommodate the gowned ladies. At the other end of the colossal table, I could hear loud laughter but it was too far away to be part of our circle. Laeticia, who knew the Parisian art scene best, expounded further on the other art critics, curators, and collectors.

Without warning the lights were turned off, and we found ourselves in, what was for me, quite a pleasant darkness that eased the overstimulation. But my enjoyment wasn't shared. The babble of the crowd revealed their irritation. It stayed dark and gradually the hum of voices grew quieter. In the moment silence occurred, the whole surface of the tabletop became suddenly illuminated. A radiant starry sky grew brighter and brighter and spread out over the dinner table. It was overwhelming. Earlier, in the glare of the lights one couldn't see the hundreds or more likely thousands of small LEDs on the glossy, onyx black surface. The artists immediately started to examine the construction and the fellow in the leather farmer jacket disappeared under the table to get to the bottom of it. My own investigations led only to admiration of the perfection of the work. You could see neither the wiring nor how the LEDs were built into the tabletop. Countless waiters entered and began serving Château d'Yquem and foie gras, which was placed in front of us in small silver bowls, decorated with geese motifs. The amazement over the banquet table didn't abate.

I mentioned to Francois - or was it Bernard, Henry, or Guillaume? I was losing track of all of the names - that there were too many boring and unimportant artists from China who received too much praise.

"But think of Huang Yong Ping, who represented us in Venice in 1999," said whichever one of the four it was.

"I said many, not all. Of course not. Cai Guo-Qiang's wolves in the Guggenheim in Bilbao were fascinating, for example. Huang Yong Ping did good works as well, although I found his enlarged Duchamp bottle-rack with the doll arms in Münster unbelievably poor."

"It's worse that the arms were later manufactured in aluminium which then changes the character of the sculpture!" someone else threw in.

"His skinned elephant was more like a science exhibition. And that is more in line with the taste of the Roquebarnais," said someone else, and pointed at Jean-Louis and Valerie seated in front of the paintings.

"Why is that?" I asked curiously.

"They have a taxidermied polar bear in their kitchen!"

"Isn't that illegal?"

"My dear, what is illegal nowadays?"

The evening moved forward. The artists poured down the exceptional wine and champagne, while the grand ladies and gentlemen wallowed in the wild laughter of the "crazy-ones". Laeticia suggested that we join the Roquebarnais. The usual stuff followed: small talk, haha, and yes, how amazing everything is. The main thing for us was that they would finance the next exhibition. Though I liked Jean-Louis and Valerie, their taste in art was pretty terrible. I really wondered how the Julian Schnabel had ended up in their stairway. The host was again praising the fine and elegant brushwork of

the Chinese artist and receiving more encouragement from his guests. But when the woman wearing a flashy gold necklace with a big wooden chunk dangling from it said that “her paintings reflect the fragility of the inner soul in a tumultuous world”, I couldn't bear it anymore. In my mind I had to puke and knew the evening was done. Three things saved the last hours before the gathering dispersed. First, my telephone vibrated. Sophie had had an intuition and quoted Beckett:

“Fortunately, this is not a question of saying what has never been said, but to say again, as often as possible, in the most confined spaces, what has already been said. Otherwise one confuses the amateurs. Them before anyone.

I love Beckett. x”

I typed back; “I am standing with a pirate and parrots who are seriously discussing whether the Krug Clos du Mesnil from 1990 or the one from 2000 is better. Help. x.”

Next, at my request, Valerie showed Laetitia and me (everyone else had seen it already) the polar bear in the kitchen. I found it completely insane. There in the corner stood a polar bear with his mouth open bearing his tremendous teeth ready to fight, next to the oven with a showy Molteni emblem. What the fuck!?

“You have to touch the fur!” Valerie encouraged us.

Truly, it was unique.

“Like hard, thick straws. The air in it stores the heat,” Leticia said.

“Where do you buy a polar bear?” I asked, expecting an evasive answer, but Valerie didn't hesitate, “There is the world famous Deyrolle in the Rue du Bac. It is a real Parisian Institution. You should visit it. My husband and I donated money for the reconstruction of the collection after the awful fire. This is how we came to have Plume.”

Laetitia and I probably looked so astonished that Valerie smiled and immediately explained the name, “My niece named him after the film *The Little Polar Bear*.”

It got better and better.

The third and last highlight of the evening started when we entered the hall again. Nobody found out who, but someone had opened Akuti's cage. She swished like an explosion of colour through the room, bird screeches mixing with women yelling. Akuti didn't waste any time as she spread her shit over the table and launched her first attack against her rival, the grey parrot who had invaded her territory and was now sitting stupidly on the pirate's shoulder.

“Akuti, Akuti, Akuti!” screamed an overwrought Valerie through the hall.

The bordeaux-red gown of an agitated woman fluttered under the excited Ara and made her even wilder. Laugh lines dug themselves like gorges into the face of the ancient lady next to me. She was having a ripping good time observing the circus. The couple opposite had moved together and he had laid his arm protectively around her. Their faces reminded me of the portrait of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor taken by Richard Avedon. The photographer had dished up the lie to the dog lovers that his taxi had run over a dog on his way over, and then squeezed the trigger at just the right moment to capture their horror at the tragedy.

A couple of men tried heroically to catch the Ara but Akuti was skilful and continued to defecate unflinchingly on their smoking jackets. The pirate lost all my respect for his part, as he slashed out at Akuti like a girl trying to save his darling. In the end the parrot landed, of all places, on Laetitia's shoulder and settled there quietly. Tiny feathers were falling in slow motion to the ground. Laetitia sat rigid with shock, disgusted. Heated faces stared at her. Amazing. The only thing lacking was for the parrot to shriek “L'art pour l'art” after the performance, and to take a bow.

I met Marie on the morning of the big Bonnet gallery opening to go to the bizarre taxidermy shop on Rue du Bac. Since the night of the parrot, I could not get Valerie Roquebarnai's description of the Deyrolle out of my head. Of course Marie knew of the Deyrolle, but she said she had seen no reason to tell me about it. She wanted to come along with me to buy some bugs and butterflies. A couple of days before, I had googled the shop and had to laugh at the Google translated text on the homepage. Sentences like: 'These animals are real stars here and are in the best Parisian castings before in magazines or advertisements'

Deyrolle promised that no animals would be killed to be 'naturalised'. What could that mean? That all of the animals had come from a zoo or circus where they had died of disease or old age? And yet, the site stated that "Deyrolle may also carry Naturalization order. Do not hesitate to contact the shop!" So potentially, any vain arsehole could shoot a lion in Africa and Deyrolle would take care of importing and stuffing it? Hmm, fucked up.

We were obviously in Invader's hometown, a street artist living in Paris. If you looked for it while walking through the city, you could see his mosaics of tiny tiles everywhere. Aliens from the classic *Space Invaders* seemed to have slipped out of the Atari world to populate the walls of every arrondissement. Here too where I stood opposite Deyrolle looking at the old facade of a three-storey house, was an alien floating above me on the wall. The soot traces of the devastating fire were still visible on one window. The front display appeared more like an angler's store, and although the two stuffed bunnies in fishermen outfits were absurd enough, passing by one could never have guessed at the odd world up on the second floor. As we climbed the spiral staircase, we glimpsed tigers, leopards, lions, even a giraffe and a baby elephant. It was cramped and the showroom stretched across the whole length of the building. Birds in every imaginable manoeuvre of flight filled the shelves. Of course there was also a vast number of small local animals; rabbits, deer, foxes; and two badgers peering under a table. David Shrigley's cat, holding up a sign with the inscription 'I'm dead', would have fit in perfectly here.

On closer examination, I was surprised at how many badly taxidermied animals were on display. Marie didn't have an answer either. And there, in the second room, was a polar bear. A small one. Probably Plume's baby, slaughtered with its mother on an expedition. That would have explained the scar on his nose. His brown relations stood in the window and looked out on St. Germain. Marie was in paradise and in her element.

"Whenever I'm here, countless new installations come to mind. A pure fountain of ideas."

She went up purposefully to one of the staff and asked for a fire salamander and golden Christmas beetles.

"Christmas?" I enquired of Marie.

"Bugs from Australia that appear around Christmas time."

The bearded man could not produce a fire salamander, but took us into the room with vitrines and drawers wherever you looked. He pulled one open.

"Eh voilà, *Anoplognathus pallidicollis*. Which one will it be?"

Under the glass pane were beetles in all possible colours.

While Marie made a selection and the shop assistant took them carefully out, I admired the butterflies and other insects. Every drawer I opened contained dozens of them. I wasn't aware of how many species existed and this here was just a fraction. Happy with insects packed in boxes, we left Deyrolle.

Sadly in the end, Paris left us with a bitter aftertaste. Hortense didn't appear at all at the gallery opening. Hervé gave the speech and excused his daughter, who was supposedly ill and of course disconsolate.

Edeline and I knew better. And Edeline knew even more. She downed her champagne in a minute flat until her red high heels were on the verge of giving way. At her urging, I climbed over a golden cord and descended some old stone stairs into the vault. A fridge with an endless stock of champagne was around the corner. But someone had forgotten to switch off the light in the back room. I was curious. Countless exhibition catalogues filled the shelves. From Louise Bourgeois to Willem de Kooning, they had all shown at Hervé's. I noticed a few Cy Twombly paintings. I itched to scribble something on the canvas. But just when I had decided on my nickname, Edeline stumbled in, and proceeded to snort enough cocaine to wake up a horse.

"He is not even looking at me anymore and acts like nothing has happened!"

"Who?"

"Hervé. He should at least give me some..."

"Sorry Edeline, I don't want to know!" I interrupted her. I couldn't be bothered listening to yet another gallery liaison story ending in the broken heart of another young naive assistant, and went back upstairs.

The Morpho peleides were floating through the sky-blue plastic shreds, constantly buffeted by the draft created by the entering guests. Placing this installation in the entrance area of the exhibition had been the right decision. The initial scepticism changed quickly to gushing rapture. The pieces with the duck, fox, and squirrel inspired some members of the sophisticated Parisian audience to venture politically ambitious comments:

"The beauty of nature drowns in our throwaway society! Plastic should be forbidden."

Francois, Bernard, Henry or Guillaume - one of the four - was there and saluted me cordially.

"Now, what an exquisite drama that was at the Roquebarnais!" began his wife. She shook her head and smirked. I recognised her as the anorexic who ran screaming out of the room when Akuti took off. The classic Hermès chaîne d'ancre slid from her thin wrist down her emaciated forearm as she reached for a glass of champagne.

"Have you been to admire the works of Pierre Soulage in the Centre Pompidou? I love him. A friend of ours."

As a matter of fact I had visited the exhibition with Laetitia last week. We had dived into the depths of a world in black, which could not have been more complex and diverse. But it did not warrant a declaration of love for Pierre Soulage. So I just said, "Yes. And though I had been extremely sceptical, the works convinced and impressed me enormously."

"I know! His paintings of lines are simply masterly. You absolutely need to get to know him. Maybe we can host a dinner, Guillaume?" Finally I knew who her husband was out of the four!

Hervé Bonnet was being celebrated as the master of new discoveries and stood proudly with Marie on his arm in front of the press photographers. As always, the only ones to step out of line were Marie's Newcastle friends. The three were already too drunk to see straight when they entered. The two women in their tacky skirts and red wine-stained lips shrieked and messed about between the fragile installations. The Parisians, busy celebrating the mystery of beauty, were disturbed. Others, especially the artists among the guests, were enjoying the conceited chatter of the connoisseurs, being drowned out by vulgarity. It didn't take long before the fat princess of the trio lost her balance and crashed into the fox installation.

Her equally legless, clumsy husband in his UPS-brown suit tried to free her and her alice-band from the fishhooks and nylon threads. Marie, who had remained calm the whole time, finally freaked out

and commanded a decampment to the hotel. As a reward for my excellent work, I was given the privilege of carrying the other friend outside while she sung into my ears with her shrill voice. It was really awkward. Marie and I waited with the three idiots on the street for a taxi. For a farewell photo, the blonde friend with the unbearable voice had to lift her t-shirt to show everyone her tits. Then she turned around to the house wall and puked against a paper print of Albert Einstein with his daft 'Love is the answer' sign.

"I preferred the shitting parrot!" commented Laeticia on the misery when I returned to the gallery. Hervé introduced Marie and me to a couple that had just bought a vitrine, Edith and Marcel Sucé. His handshake was slack and felt like squeezing a dead fish. The Sucés were immediately effusive and wanted us to come with them to their flat to see some drawings and drink Château Mouton Rothschild. It would not be far. "Just between artists", as that is what they both claimed to be. Laeticia said goodbye and winked at me, apparently with the Sucés in mind.

Much later, while Edeline and Hervé were quarrelling between Cy and de Kooning in the vault, the vernissage started to wind down. It was time to leave. Marie and I accepted the Sucés' invitation, because it would be something different, and new was always good. Though perhaps also because they had bought a work.

"Make yourselves at home! Wine? Or the classic - a gin and tonic for the lady and gentleman from London?" asked Marcel, who was quite obviously high on cocaine.

"Due to my fond addiction, always a gin, please!"

"How about a gin gimlet? Because that is my addiction of the moment," joked Marcel. Edith came back barefoot with a bottle of wine and four glasses. Marie wanted to disappear to the toilet, but when she got up a tiny plastic bag felt out of her purse onto the carpet.

"Ah, wait a second!" Edith went and fetched a tray of silver utensils from the cherry tree wood cabinet and pushed them across table.

"This is how Louis XIV would have sniffed, if the stuff had existed then," I said, examining the silver pipe and spoons. I especially liked the hand-forged blade with its carved floral pattern. The mood was getting debauchorous, and all of us were glad that the obvious was finally handled obviously.

There was a remarkable collection of drawings in a Petersburg hanging on the wall. Too much for the room, but nobody was interested in it anymore anyway. Edith wanted to show me - and *only* me - her studio. At some point we came to be standing in an inner courtyard. It felt like I was in a Tim Burton movie. An enchanted shed stood in the middle of the wild garden. The rhododendron bushes, judging by their size, must have been many years old. The rusted hinges of the gates creaked spookily in the night. Edith's bony fingers grabbed my hand. The fluorescent lights flickered on to illuminate much more simplistic sculptures than I had expected - terrible imitations from Giacometti to Niki de Saint Phalle.

"I am working on a new series at the moment. You need to touch it."

She guided my hand over the moist clay. Tim Burton's great opening sequence was now being subverted and disrupted by cheap porn. The sculptures on the working bench reminded me of the Turner Prize exhibition of Rebecca Warren. Whether in the Tate Britain or here in the studio, I couldn't gain anything from that kind of art. On top of it, Edith started caressing my neck with her other hand. It was getting serious. Now I understood why we were here alone. I wondered if Marcel, with his chubby hands, was pulling the same thing on Marie upstairs, and I had to laugh. Unfortunately Edith took this as a sign of my consent and placed my clay-stained hand on her left silicon breast.

"You like that?"

She looked at me with cold, wide-open eyes.

"Sorry Edith, but you have misunderstood something," I gave the standard answer. Her attempt was just too blunt, neither the drugs nor the implants helped.

Awkward silence.

“I am going to work a bit in my studio. Go into the house first.” Edith said finally, and touched her sculptures.

Marie was standing in the living room. It seemed things hadn’t been any better or different for her. Marcel had vanished too. We looked at each other briefly and started to laugh hysterically. In this situation we understood one another splendidly.

What an absurd world we are striding through.

Luxury is silence, space and time.