

Notes on Traces
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Yesterday we arrived at the house in Argonne, France. Last year, around the same time, we were here as well. We were mostly indulging in full days of reading and recreational wood carving, with occasional trips to the local supermarket to resupply and some small excursions to explore the area.

When driving through the countryside of northeastern France, the region of the Meuse, Grand-Est, it is almost impossible to imagine that these lush forests and rolling hills were once the epicentre of one of the most atrocious battles of the First World War. On the hill of Douaumont, east of Verdun, the forest has reclaimed the battlefield, hiding scars under moss and undergrowth.

I clearly remember how an eerie chill crept down my spine when driving up this hill last year. The occasional clearings in the forest and carved-out patterns of small hills and ditches subtly hinted at what had once happened here, yet hadn't I known, I would probably have thought of them as natural markings. The gravity of it all first hit when we reached the top of the hill. A massive sandstone mausoleum, the Douaumont Ossuary, rose above the forest line, housing the remains of over 130,000 unidentified soldiers from both sides, gathered in the years after the Battle. The surrounding ground was covered by neat rows of more than 16,000 crosses and the Hindu and Muslim equivalents, marking the graves of those fortunate enough to have been identified.

It is ill advised to wander off the paths that have been cleared through this forest of death. Only what could immediately be seen has been gathered, and what was already buried remained as such. The ground is still littered with rusty bayonets, canisters of mustard gas, grenades, shells and bones.

An hour's drive to the West, stands the Gothic cathedral of Reims. Unlike the mausoleum, constructed between 1920 and 1932, the cathedral's construction took about a century. The one preserving absence, the other, asserting presence. Both stand

as tall markers, visible from afar, rising above the canopy, contrasting with the forest: under brushwood and blackthorn branches, the history is covered, buried and hidden.

It was in this cathedral that the kings of France were crowned, where Joan of Arc once stood. Its construction began in 1211, after fire destroyed the older church. Jean d'Orbais was the first architect, laying down the plan with its soaring nave and double ambulatory. After him came Jean-le-Loup, Gaucher de Reims, and Bernard de Soissons; their names inscribed in a labyrinth once set in the cathedral's floor, as if to acknowledge that no single vision could claim the whole.

The work was astonishingly efficient for its time: prefabricated stones were numbered and assembled like a puzzle, and new techniques of bar tracery were introduced, slender stone bars carved and fitted together like ribs to form patterns that held stained glass.

It's a lacework combining stone, light and geometry, both strong and delicate; rib vaults and flying buttresses carrying weight outward. The structure rose quickly (by 1241 the choir was already in use) but work on the decoration, the sculptures, and the towers continued for generations.

Standing before the west façade, with its sculpted kings, its biblical stories carved into stone, gargoyles, and its rose window like a slow explosion of glass, it is hard not to feel time compress. Curiously, the time elapsed since the First World War is roughly the same time span it took to erect this cathedral; in the time it took to complete the building, the wasteland of Verdun grew back into forest.

There is a strange abstraction in the timelessness of contemporary architectural renderings. These models project buildings as completed, framed by fully grown trees. In reality, the saplings remain fragile long after the concrete has aged. The cathedral in Reims is both plan and improvisation; built with a clear ideal, but also with space for change, for interruption, for generations to carry it forward. And maybe this strategy is what carries long-term plans to their finalisation: presenting them not as fixed blueprints, but as frameworks left open, carried across time by others, shaped by hands you will never meet.

It is telling that urban areas built on a single overarching vision are often referred to as "the projects." In Denmark, many such "new towns" were built during the 1960s

and '70s. They were guided by the belief that a good life could be designed from above—that people's behaviour could be reshaped simply by reshaping the conditions they lived under. Structuralist architects, supported by politicians, imagined that society itself could be engineered in concrete.

This belief is perhaps most starkly visible in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), where, during the same period, the Danish state erected concrete housing blocks as part of a modernisation campaign. Indigenous Inuit families were forcibly moved from small coastal settlements into these new buildings, in an effort to centralise and “streamline” the society. While the apartments offered amenities such as central heating and running water, complaints soon mounted. The housing did not accommodate daily life as it was actually lived: there was nowhere to store sleds or hunting tools, no space for drying meat or tanning hides, no room for dogs, no place to process the traditional foods of whale, seal, or reindeer.

The response from Danish authorities was blunt: these practices were considered obsolete, relics of a way of life bound to disappear.

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As we drove toward the Dutch-German border on our way to Denmark, we debated at which gas station our car had broken down twice in the past. Our memory faltered a little, so out of helplessness we simply crossed our fingers as we passed every plausible gas station, as if that would help us ward off a looming disaster.

In truth, the likelihood of a breakdown was no greater than before; chance cares little for sequence, and even though we knew that, we both felt a sense of relief when we passed the border without any malfunctions.

Once two accidents occur, they begin to feel like a pattern. The human mind is quick to weave its thread, to turn scattered moments into a story with rhythm and recurrence. And even though we have passed the same border several times without any problems, two breakdowns transform random misfortune into an ominous cycle; our fear bends reality into narrative, treating the accidents as if they are episodes in a plot, when in fact they are only drifting fragments, random.

Psychologists call this *apophenia*: our tendency to perceive connections and patterns in random or meaningless data. A rustle in the forest becomes an omen, a coincidence turns into a prophecy, a pair of breakdowns becomes a cursed border crossing. It is a survival instinct as much as a flaw, a way of over-preparing for threats that may never come. But it also shapes our art, our cities, our stories; whole systems of meaning spun from fragments.

Wittgenstein once compared language to a city: the old town with winding streets, houses patched with additions from different time-periods, surrounded by newer suburbs laid out in straighter lines. Our everyday speech belongs to the older quarters; irregular, layered, full of incomplete sentences and improvisations, shaped by habit and history, while more formal systems, like mathematics or coding, resemble the planned outskirts. Yet over time even the suburbs sprout detours, extensions, and unplanned paths, just as formal languages shift and evolve in practice. Neither the old town nor the suburbs are the outcome of a single master plan, and still we keep searching them for logic, rhythm, and coherence. It is this desire, to find a narrative thread running through the sprawl, that reveals as much about us as about the systems we move within. And perhaps this is why we so often mistake coincidence for causality or treat fragments as wholes, even if the map is never the territory, but an abstraction, a model of reality, and the patterns we trace are temporary.

Maybe this is what unsettles us: the recognition that causality is often unrecoverable. Systems degrade, evolve, and self-organise in ways we cannot predict. To live within them requires a kind of humility; to accept that our models, our fears, our little rituals of crossing fingers, are always partial and provisional. And yet there is also something deeply human in this impulse to narrate, to connect fragments into stories. It is not simply superstition, but a way of holding uncertainty in our hands, however clumsily.

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Cycling through the Dutch polders to the nearby train station on my grandfather's worn-out bike, which, despite its age and unusual appearance, still worked perfectly well (though the coaster brake was a drawback), I realised that what evoked homesickness the most, rekindled memories, associations and a sense of home, wasn't the sight of the meadow, the cormorant on the streetlamp, or the small, quaint brick

houses, but the smell. The smell of warm sheep's wool drifting from the pastures, the foul, musty smell of a stagnant ditch alongside a row of terraced houses, notes of warm grass, the faint saltiness of the sea air. While I waited for the train at the station, I even registered the scent of the shaded concrete sidewalk.

Two children sitting next to me were waiting for the same train, playing with plastic cars atop the light-grey concrete blocks. I was early; for once, I didn't have to rush. The children asked their father if the train was coming yet and then, shortly after, they asked again. They drove their little cars, chatted, then in a worried tone, asked if the train was actually coming. Their perception of time stretched out, creeping as slowly as the sun gaining ground on the sidewalks, narrowing our shaded, cool strip under the overhang.

Recently I heard about a type of microbe found deep in the ocean, buried in mud for possibly hundreds of millions of years. Scientists had drilled 76 meters below the seafloor in the South Pacific Gyre (one of the least life-rich regions on Earth) and retrieved sediment dating back 101.5 million years. To their astonishment, when these microbes were provided with nutrients in the lab, over 99% revived. These microbes were mostly aerobic organisms, even though they had persisted in sediment long deprived of oxygen. Their time under the ocean floor seemed an immensely stretched second of life, slowed down to the point of assumed impossibility. It is hard to relate to timescales stretching far beyond the blips of time we inhabit.

The children then asked when they had to change trains and how long that would take. The new game they'd come up with was to make the cars race down the blocks at high speed, until diving nose first onto the paved sidewalk. They asked their father who had won; apparently green won, though the criteria weren't entirely clear.

The organisms' quick revival suggested they weren't frozen in time, but perhaps hibernating with barely detectable metabolism: slumbering, waiting for something—for what?

In the distance, railway lines closed with a faint clink. The children jumped up quickly: finally the train must be coming. But it turned out to be the intercity train on the other side of the tracks. Wrong direction.

It is touching to consider that life could endure in near-total suspension, whispering through deep time. Our usual models, or the stories we tell to make sense of life and time, stumble when faced with organisms that do not follow the temporal or causal patterns we expect. Their existence interrupts the narrative logic we impose: we cannot trace their origin and cannot predict their trajectory; there is no clear beginning, middle, or end. Instead, their presence registers as a slow, persistent tremor, resonating across layers of sediment and vast stretches of time.

When I looked up, I noticed that the information on the display-board above the platform had changed: the train was cancelled.

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When driving, biking, traveling by train; going to places physically, we move linearly through time and space, circularly revisiting our memories, mentally navigating a constantly changing landscape.

The sculptures we present in this exhibition respond to an underlying infrastructure; a provisional baseline that allows each piece to enter into relation, rather than to emerge from a fixed idea or a predetermined vision. This framework invites our imagination to roam freely, to continuously incorporate new materials, revisit old forms, or test repetitions without expectation of closure.

The artworks themselves are fragmentary, creature-like, suggesting limbs or organs without fully becoming bodies. They weave their presence into slabs of stone, fragments of concrete, formed by traces of memory (uncertain whether lived or dreamed) interlaced with flowers, shards of glass, and other remnants. Their skeletons (metal rods and clamps borrowed from chemistry stands) impose a temporary order on this flux.

Arrangements are contingent; we have to adapt. We project a plan, yet cannot infer what is to come, merely based on what has passed; patterns cannot be tessellated into perpetuity, they are never fixed, never fully drawn. They are provisional, emergent, and reflect a human condition. To move through them is to negotiate continuity and

change, to inhabit both the linear and the circular, the remembered, the immediate, and the expected. Living within complexity means staying attentive, responsive, aware of the quiet ways memory and experience leave traces along our paths.