

A Note from After the Pandemic

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It's October 2028. Full moon, my partner wakes up at 3.30 in the morning, from a nightmare with zombies. I was awake half an hour ago, reading from *Capitalism is Schizophrenia*, the latest anthology The Guardian published and which I bought a couple of years back in an airport, before all flights were cancelled (sometimes I dream of air stewardesses showing me how to close my seat belt and I wonder if such a thing ever existed). He opens the window and the wind brings in a mix of fresh smells, of wet resin, lake mud, lavender (yes, this year we had lavender in full bloom in Autumn) and some fog, which perfume is always difficult to describe. It so happens that the other studios on the property are empty at the moment, it's very rare that such thing happens, usually even when the artists owning them are not there, some guests are around. It must be this big conference organised at the seaside, they all went there to have the last swim before the hurricanes of November. We don't mind enjoying some peaceful moments, the other members of the cooperative here helped us harvest the apples and the grapes throughout the last weeks, now there's little left to do in the garden and in the orchard. We don't dry the herbs anymore, because we have some pot with fresh ones in every corner of the kitchen. The oleanders and the geraniums don't need to be taken back inside anymore, the temperature at night doesn't drop below 7 degrees even in January. In fact we take advice from our friends in Crete on how to plant them directly in the ground, they are much more vigorous than in the pots.

After we conclude there are no zombies outside, we feed the cat and try to go back to sleep for a little longer. Tomorrow we have a long day. At 8 a.m. the kids from the village come to their Art History class and this time we have to deliver it, as the professor they usually have had his arm broken in an ambush at the subway. Then we have to take care the botanist in charge of the glasshouse passes on the complete instructions to her colleague who will replace her while she's going to help her daughter who just gave birth. This will probably take the entire day, we are mostly worried about *Aldrovanda vesiculosa*, which we are still trying to save from extinction, and about a few other fragile species that need precise



temperature, well, in fact we are worried all the time but we have to trust this new person knows what she's doing. The palm trees are doing fine though, they adapted well and a renowned specialist from the United Botanic Gardens of Europe (formerly employed by Kew Gardens) comes early next year to check on *Hyophorbe amaricaulis*, which secret of reproduction he managed to unveil and gave one specimen for our garden five years ago.

We should still go to Bucharest for our monthly visit, although we feel less and less this need. It takes us three hours by car for 30 km, whereas if they finished the railway they are planning, this journey could last 20 minutes. We can't use the electric car because the batteries are broken and the countries of the Lithium Triangle decided to stop all extractive economies and close all their mines, threatening those who attempt illegal mining with venomous snakes. The old cars are functioning with a mix of recycled kitchen oil, oxygenated water and liquid gas, and the fume they exhale is beyond description, the masks we are using when going to the city are bio-hazard after half a day. Public transport could be ok but it's not enough for the 5 million people cramping in a city prepared for maximum 2 million. The recent drought that decimated the crops in all the Southern region drove the people from those places to Bucharest, which is still the largest city in the country even if it's not the capital anymore (the capital moved to Constanta, which, as a port city and with air travel banned, has better trade position).






Luckily, the earthquake that everyone was fearing hit only with 6.3 degrees and not so much damage was taken in, generating instead a quickly implemented consolidation programme of all the old buildings still standing. If a bigger one comes, at least the city is more prepared. Yet, pollution is still devastating, the number of trees cut before 2020 could not be compensated for in such a short time and the ice age freeze in 2022 made people cut even the ailanthuses to heat themselves, after burning all the ikea furniture which was pretty useless in caloric terms.

In fact we don't know why we are taking this monthly trip to the city, the art exhibitions are mostly commercial, the few interesting artists who stayed there are blasé and are not very talkative, the museums are drowning in commercials, on the façades, in the exhibitions, in the catalogues, since the Ministry of Culture was dissolved, fusing with the High Ministry of Entertainment and Creative Industries, no state funding is available for the arts anymore, everyone is surviving doing petty jobs, visual artists are selling old Windows wallpapers, writers are haiku-ing FB posts for those too busy to compose their own, musicians are humming bird songs in shopping malls and so on. It's pretty depressing but we still have some friends there and we tell in some informal groups about our experience of relocating to the countryside as a cooperative rather than individuals.

There is still disbelief towards our approach, seven years after it started, mainly because retreat to the countryside was so much promoted as downshifting, as a comfortable individual life model for those who could afford working remotely. At most, it was seen as possible in the corporate co-working models, again, for those who could afford to



rent a desk in a fancy designed building in the middle of the forest. What we proposed was as radical as a sect was, but it lacked the religiousness. I remember those days, when we were trying to explain the difference between making a project and owning a project. As utopians and leftists, it was strange to have such an emphasis on private property, yet we knew for us it was the only way to achieve something in our lifetime, something that escaped the real-estate logic and the year-to-year project work, and something that could gain roots and grow over time, without the pressure of eviction, without the menace of extinction.

As we tell our story and it gets longer than planned, people in the audience are tempted to order some pizza so we can stay longer. We smile and take out of the rucksack vegetables we brought with us, some dough we had in the freezer and tomato juice we preserved less than a month ago. We ask our host institution to light the fire in the oven and invite everyone to bake the pizza with us. It will take approximately the same time or less as if we ordered it. Until it's ready we tell stories on how we share responsibilities – one of the deterrents when it comes to collective work. We tell about the joy of seeing trees and perennials grow from one year to the next, about possibilities to save plants that are endangered, about the luxury of starting the day with a breath of fresh air and a walk to the lake. Yet, we feel there is a barrier we can't trespass, people are still reticent: what about jobs, what about schools, what about ambulance and the market and the supermarket and the cinema and the library and the park and the pubs and the empty streets at night where you can scream, and the karaoke bars, and the fancy coffeeshops, and the museums and the apartment parties and the trams and the smell of asphalt and the unauthorized protest in the square and the sound of your neighbour repairing his apartment at 6 in the morning

and the florist at the corner and the sun falling down on the roofs of all this architectural variety? What about that amazing conference at the university which we couldn't attend anyway because we were at work in our corporate glass building, wherefrom we needed one hour to get to the school to pick up the kid and take him to the gym class, and then we needed one hour more to get to the math after-class, during which time we were listening to a podcast about resilient cities while pretending to drive from one traffic jam to the next, and by the



time we ended up in our two rooms apartment at the 3rd floor, facing the closed balcony of the neighbour in front, we were so tired, we ate the KFC food we picked on the way, it was already cold and disgusting but no energy for anything else, we opened the TV and crashed on the sofa. Yet, people are still reticent, there is a comfort in the city life, even if it exhausts



Sometimes nights feel lonely and eerie here. Yet nobody can save you from your night-mares and anxieties in the city either. When we look back at 2020, we are happy we took this decision at that moment, when this plan was still unthinkable. When we look now around us, we realise it was the best decision. The fir trees in the back of the garden and the sweet-scented apples on the shelves in the cellar, the people in the village with



whom we built a library and a cinema and a seed-bank, the artists who come here to read and work, the scientists who exchange notes with us on plants specimens, all these are proof that we took the right decision. If only the people who are mining on the Moon would stop blasting it in the middle of the night, so we could get some proper sleep...

