

Un petit mort

8 April 2009, Auckland

Dear Lisa,

I've been thinking a lot about sneezing lately. The other day I sneezed when I was in the car with my mum and my sister. My mum said, 'do you know that sneezing is the closest physical experience we have to death? Everything shuts down, for an instant.' Which was funny, because I'd always heard that sneezing was the closest physical experience to an orgasm: everything opens up for an instant. But not that funny I guess, since orgasm is a bit like death too. The French don't say *un petit mort* for nothing.

Thinking about sneezing got me back to thinking about your upcoming exhibition at Ramp Gallery – you've asked me to write something for it about your work. In fact, you've asked me to write something without even seeing the work firsthand. I've only seen the invitation – featuring you in a flurry of pure joy amidst a snowdrift. And I've seen some images in my mind's eye, when you described your intentions for the show to me.

So the piece I write won't be about your actual work, the work I'll get to see at the opening on Wednesday. It will be about a virtual work, a work produced between your words and my imagination, your work as it exists before it exists. (I can hear you chuckling now, and telling me that in that case my firsthand experience of the work has already begun...) Come to think of it, this virtual work will exist *after* your work too, since my writing will no doubt outlive the art you're planning to show.

First, I will write about the smaller room at Ramp. Its walls are papered entirely with Lisa Benson self-portraits: multiple, identical copies of your face on *unfixed* photographic paper. One image, yet each version is different – on different paper stock, with different tinges and blemishes, developing at a different pace as the light hits it. Unfixed photographs of you, breathing out, gradually expiring.

Your face reminds me of Julia Margaret Cameron's *Iago*, taken in 1867, with his long hair, downcast eyes and introspective air. Although Cameron, like you, revealed photography to be a trickster, she also preserved her subject's timeless beauty. You are, perhaps, more brave, for your portraits do not preserve you. Instead, this room full of slowly darkening Lisa Bensons appears as a performance of your mortality, a dance of little deaths, a stark admission of vulnerability and a plea to every visitor in the gallery to stay with you as you fade. To stay with you even when you are finally, utterly still. Can a human being ask anything more profound, more tender, more heartbreaking than this of another?

Right now, it feels like I've been invited to your funeral. It feels like you've asked me to come die with you.

But then I will write about Ramp's main gallery. In the centre of this room is a life-sized sculpture, also of you Lisa, carved entirely out of ice. Bright, clear, cold, glistening ice. Ice, which, like snow, melts when it gets too warm. Ice and snow, the elements of your beloved, elusive Antarctica. Ice

and snow, which you have photographed at night on Fox Glacier, and painted repetitively, obsessively, in the form of delicate watercolour snowflakes, each different from the last, each granted a life of its own, no matter how fleeting. Here, now, in this room, you have magicked Antarctica and its snow and ice to you, by *becoming* glacier, *becoming* snowflake. The visit must be short-lived, but for its duration you are snow angel, snow queen, ice maiden. And as you turn to water and trickle away, we, all your guests, watch you go, our body heat accelerating your demise. Only somehow this doesn't feel like death. It feels like transformation, like metamorphosis. Like ecstatic, crystalline life.

Yes, it's all terribly romantic. Until, as photo-Lisa darkens and fades and ice-Lisa drips and melts, you, flesh-and-blood Lisa, suddenly materialise next to me, posing daftly with your double, laughing at your own disappearing act. Ta-da! Still here! Still funny old clowning slapstick Lisa Benson. More magician than mortician. A grave Pierrot, mourning with us the death of this Lisa, then that Lisa, then that Lisa. A happy Houdini, pulling yet another Lisa out of the hat.

It's not just you of course. We're all clowns and conjurers, appearing and disappearing to ourselves and to each other every day. We're all losing ourselves and finding ourselves, dying and being born again, from moment to moment to moment. In faking your own death and asking us to the wake, I think you're inviting us to really feel with you the delight, the terror, the absurdity and the magic of this time-bound life. To attend, for an hour or three or as long as it lasts, to the funniness of being alive amidst so much death. To notice how photographic paper turns dark under the light, how ice turns to water in the warmth, how what sustains us is also killing us, and how it all approaches stillness – yet won't stand still. None of it's about you, even though you've put yourself everywhere. It's just that this stuff – this funny, sneezy, deathly, joyous stuff – is so *personal* that we can only engage with it *personally*. That's why I had to write this letter.

Oh, I almost forgot. There's something else in the big room at Ramp, something else to write about. A 360° perspex shelf mounted on the walls encircling the space, bearing three hundred and sixty little perspex credit cards. On the cards, the epitaph (in Bosnian): *NEMAM MIŠTA, SAMO IMAM VREMENA*. I DON'T HAVE NOTHING, I ONLY HAVE TIME. The text, cut out from the perspex like a stencil, casts patient little shadows on the walls.

And finally, I'll write about the party! About the people, their chatter and gossip and speculation, their animated voices. Hushed contemplation in the corners. Spilt wine, baba ganouj, coconut ice. Cheeky jokes and bad puns as the night wears on – you've made fair game of yourself after all. But you've framed a hell of a shindig for us too. A real ticking timebomb. Made sure we're together, to the end.

Sheesh, Lisa, I dunno if the real thing will be anything like I imagine it. I don't know if the piece I write will connect with your actual work. But somehow the happening you've just staged in my head takes me back to Fluxus (one of them probably *did* make an artwork from a drawn-out sneeze), and to Fluxus's precursor, Zen. You're all about the everyday too, even if you don't mind adding some dye to the water to help us see it. In fact, after the tragedy and the ecstasy and the absurdity I think you're leaving us with the same message as Zen Master Ikkyu:

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One day a man of the people said to Zen Master Ikkyu: "Master, will you please write for me some maxims of the highest wisdom?" Ikkyu immediately took his brush and wrote the word "Attention." "Is that all?" asked the man. "Will you not add something more?" Ikkyu then wrote twice running: "Attention. Attention." "Well," remarked the man rather irritably, "I really don't see much depth or subtlety in what you have just written." Then Ikkyu wrote the same word three times running: "Attention. Attention. Attention." Half angered, the man demanded: "What does that word 'Attention' mean anyway?" And Ikkyu answered gently: "Attention means attention."ⁱ

Hopefully it won't matter that I'll be writing my piece too early, without having seen your work. Like it won't matter that some people are too late, and are afraid they've missed out. Because your photo-drawings, and your ice sculptures, and your credit cards are also too early and too late. At the same time. Right? But I feel for those people all the same. I want them to know they haven't missed anything. That the happening is still happening. It's happening now in this letter. It's happening as the photos fade and the ice melts, while everyone's getting pissed and trying to pay attention. It's happening when all that's left is brown paper and cold water and timely little credit cards. We're all here together, passing the time, and it's a little sad, a little funny and a little beautiful. As beautiful as seeing everything shut down and open up simultaneously. As beautiful as seeing you disappear, Lisa, and then finding that you're with us still. *A-choo!* Bless you.

Cassandra xx

ⁱ Retold in Phillip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 11.