

Tympanic, not Panic:

A Melonpandemicogitation 2021

Kyoo Lee

Nowadays, as we are in the middle of “it,” all seem near and far, near and dear, with the fear and care we hear to share, “同病相憐 same malady, shared empathy.” Almost nowhere to be seen but only rendered visible, it is virtually everywhere, all around us without any one of us knowing for sure except belatedly: this PANdemicity panDEMICity pandemiCITY.

I. PANdemicity

The paper slept but the night in me woke up.
— Fanny Howe, “A Hymn”

PAN (from Greek, meaning “all, every, whole”) as in a panorama or a frying pan; curiously, there is also a Sinographic *Pan* 板 (a plate or board) as in *Teppanyaki* 鉄板焼き, a griddle pan or iron plate. And then of course, we must also remember this pan from “melonpan,” for example, of which I remain a fan: a sweetly domed melonesque bun originally from Japan, a bilingually combined trilingual consequentialization — a sort of alchemical naturalization — of the English “melon” and the Portuguese “*pan*,” bread. So which pan and whose pants?

With this homophonic panoramic symphony ringing in my ears, I find myself wondering why “panic” has also become part of tympanic

(*tympanum*, a type-drum-beat) and yet how the tympanum, the arched “middle ear,” comes to maintain its vibratory equilibrium so extraordinarily, since “tympanic” does not panic, thanks to the subtle absorbency, vibrancy and resiliency of the tympanic membrane which absorbs sound waves, as its umbo bends inward *and* outward, bending, not breaking ... not unlike this translingually condensed “pan” panning out flowingly while sheltering what comes into contact with it.

[...] We sleepwalked
 The line between panic and formulae, ...
 Watching ourselves at a distance, advantaged
 And airy as a man on a springboard
 Who keeps limbering up because the man cannot dive.
 — Seamus Heaney, *The Mud Vision*

True, “a poet cannot refuse language, choose another medium” (Rich 2).
 As Adrienne Rich goes on to point out:

But the poet can re-fuse the language given to him or her, bend and torque it into an instrument for connection instead of dominance and apartheid: toward what Edouard Glissant has wonderfully called “the poetics of relation.” (Rich 2)

Re-fuse the language without refusing it — so bend it, torque it, repurpose it, like you mean it: Could there be some kind of transformative insight gleaned from all this, this look, also into the etymological ecology of the *pandemic*? Some deeper psycho-cultural codes of it and its covival poethics? I am looking for some answers that, I hope, would make some sense.

To you too.



Dainobu W56th St., NYC, Fall 2021
Photo by Kyoo Lee

So here is how this pandemicogitation on “tympanic, not panic” started. It was the sighting of a slightly sliding stack of melonpan at my neighborhood grocery, Dainobu, on the 56th St., NYC. Feeling rather jolly, I even took a snap. When in transit, in Asia for instance, I used to pick up one of those yellowy mini-suns at 2 jetlagged AM at some 7-Eleven near a hotel I might not remember the name of upon check-out. Not shokupan but melon. Anpan? No.

A pack of melonpan transported, in turn, to my hotel room — or at least something similarly artificially sweetened and settled — seems to have been, for me, a sort of transitional object, also often “conveniently” available 24/7. Along with a couple of other some such transportation snacks that get cradled together in a pale plastic bag which I would carry unanxiously, knowing where I am going, I mean, returning, melonpan was one of familiar faces I think I would feel happy to see every now and then especially when on the move.

Sometimes I did not even eat that thing and would leave it behind, unopened, not because I forgot about my little childhood friend but because the sugary dome is increasingly too sweet for this progressively aging lady. Yet what has not changed is this near truism that if there's a 7-Eleven nearby, your home away from home cannot be far; nor is your temporary fridge which would be also near your bed.

This time around, however, for the first time in my life, without immediately realizing the private semiological gravity of it, I ended up and did enjoy buying a pack of melonpan *at* Dainobu 56th as well, which is positively not a 7-Eleven. More remarkably, all these years, I obviously never quite registered the constant presence of this melonscape at Dainobu. Now that I am mostly staying home these days, is the melonpan, too, going to enter my weekly breadbasket? Or (more likely, and it is a hint of psychotopological convolution that began to weird me out): is my apartment now a new hotel room? Cooped up here in this Big Apple with the average radius of my movements radically rescaled to eight to ten blocks, I now seem to have become practically a micro-traveler in midtown Manhattan, who would have to “plan” to walk downtown or uptown. Such is now part of a newly, amusingly emerging cartographic reality for me, still an avid long-distance traveler. Nowadays, I am rediscovering my own neighborhood, often astonished by its various old new and still odd details as if I were a sort of Benjaminian visitor, a shareholder turning into a sojourner.

“And the sadness of Darwinism [...] derived, I think,” says John Berger, “from the desolation of the distances involved” (Berger 46), and to that brilliant formula, I would add a tiny qualifier, “elastic,” i.e., an elastic desolation or even destination: the “distances” are then, more specifically, lost or gained. While I no longer cover the distances I used to travel, I am gradually gaining rather unlimited mileage, as it were. For example, there are now, I see, old new five footsteps between my

apartment door and the door of the elevator; the other day, while waiting for the elevator car to come up during a busy hour, lunch time, I saw the plate sign for the first time — as if, yes — with the floor number raised in braille on the side panel of the door, a sort of upper east side. And when I noticed the braille, I could not quite recall whether and how I had been actually “seeing” the number itself all these years of living in the building and using the elevator every day, up and down, in and out. Have all those years been lost? Or is it now being gained all over again, if not redeemed? Roland Barthes, mourning the loss of his mother, writes:

June 7, 1978

[...]

To begin: “All the time I lived with her — all my life — my mother never made *an observation* about me.”

- Maman never made *an observation* about me — Therefore I cannot endure them.
(Barthes 254)

To be fair, said elevator, though taking me and even elevating me all the time, is not my *maman*, yet I should have been at least a better friend, I feel. Anyway, you get the picture.

Another example: while, these days, I can’t entertain any dinner guests “chez Q,” who would use the same lift to see me greet them right in front, I am reminded that when I cook, I am inviting — involving — some of my olfactorily activated neighbors as my virtual guests as well as flies uninvited through an open window. That is easily 10+ more meters.

Cartography of ghosts
... And as a way to talk ...
of temporality
the topography of imagination,
this body whose entry into the articulation go history as rapturous becoming
& unbecoming,
greeted with violence,
i take permission to extend this grace
 (Oliver 47)

So, you, for one, might be never really (left) alone, wherever (you think) you are (isolated). Paradoxically enough, the pandemic world of collective hibernation is reintroducing us to a much more extensive, radically intricate, profound, porous panel we have been living on. A whole new world previously invisible to me seems to be re-entering my perceptual system, at times deepening and widening its attentional capacity and environmental awareness as well, even if only modestly. At some optimistic moments, I wonder how the elasticity of those psychophysical distances so “involved” could be something more than a Vitamin E for a saggy melancholic. Again, what matters is its phenomenological potency, vitality.



Kyoo Lee, *MelonTokyoMelonPan* 2021, 2021

Back in bed, my melonpan in sight, I am also thinking of Barthes et al again in bed, recalling this scene from his *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*:

Proxémie/Proxemics

Nighttime: I get into bed, I turn off the light, I lie back under the covers to go to sleep. But I need to blow my nose. I reach out in the dark and successfully locate the top drawer of my bedside table; I open the drawer and with the same assurance find the handkerchief on the right-hand side. I put it back and close the drawer again just as infallibly.

This is the kind of episode that enables us to formulate a notion of proxemics.

THE NOTION

Neologism coined by Edward Twitchell Hall (*The Hidden Dimension*, 1966; French translation in 1971). Proxemics = “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture”; dialectics of distance. For my part, I shall restrict my use of the word to the very localized space of the subject’s immediate surroundings: the familiar space [...] (Barthes 111)

How familiar should, or could, my world remain to myself? And which self? Barthes’ proxemic space is a private construct, and the zonal, grammatological specificity of each bioculturescape, our respective tiny everyday life zones, seems never self-same, inasmuch as it unfurls precisely and constantly through such elastic “dialectics of distance,” where elasticity meets porosity. Shall we dance, or how shall we — especially with ourselves, first?

Consider this collective act of “social distancing” performed every relentless day these days in the paradoxical bubble of social intimacy. The proxemic congealment of “we are all (apart) in this (apartment building) together,” at times dubiously concealed for the sake of populist optimism, should give one pause — precisely in these times of planetary *Epoché*, a bracketed phenomenological suspension, for such has indeed become part of this *pandemic* reality, unavoidable and undeniable, nearly endemic now. Disclosed in this collective predicament is a profound philopoetic truth about and need for forensic reckoning with the very inextricable ties between “I” and “we” via each and every one of “you,” the second per-son (per sound box), whose body is a speculative subject (subject & object) and is *not*. A defamiliarized world is a world to be refamiliarized, not just repeated or reconstructed.

II. pandemiCITY

I traveled to the page where scripture meets fiction.
The paper slept but the night in me woke up.
— Fanny Howe, “A Hymn”

Let me then also bring in another citizen of the Planet Earth, René Descartes, an early modern Euro-traveler I sometimes write with and about, who also had to rethink everything as part of his own philosophical homework. Once, in one of his ground-breaking somnambulist moments, he dreamt of a melon, a mobile mini-globe, and here I am, ruminating over and with a melonpan, a mini-epochal proxemic object with all of its radiating line pattern meant to simulate a “sunrise,” where sweet optimism lies rightly. The quotidian modernity of this micro-resonance or resolution, which would have interested modernologist Kon Waijiro 今和次郎 as well if a melonpan had been around in his time, remains telling especially at this extraordinary time in our human history in the making. The plasticity of those buns of mini-suns, those alluring, even nourishing mini-discs, blurs any bounded notions of the natural vs. the artificial. Note that

literalized alchemical ambiguation and consistency — again, its trans-modernity, its modernity in transit.

It is Winter 2021, already, and still many restaurants, another kind of home outside home, are forced to serve customers outside their premises and deliver elsewhere their food meant to be tabled inside the property each occupies. New York City is not an exception. Many, including even a born foodie like myself, hesitate to dine in, even if allowed to. It is as if the very premise, binarized axiomatic, of the inside-outside were being flipped, except perhaps the capitalist tautology such as “business is business (as usual),” on which many, especially small, business owners do vitally rely for survival. When the world we used to know or think we knew appears to remain upended or scrambled for over two years, not two weeks, some of us would begin to wonder whether Pan Πάν, the God of Nature, the Wild, Shepherds and Flocks, is not just out for lunch but has actually relocated elsewhere; is Pan gone forever? Off to some metaverse? Topsy-turviness, dynamized or schematized, is topsy-turviness none the less, and Descartes’ private *and* public quest for *my* and *our* clarity and certainty too, viewed in more psychocultural terms, could have been born reflexively as a counter-tautology, out of a desire for an “I,” an ontological fortress along with “we,” by extension, of all such self-owned individuals.

Now, turn around again and enter, this time, Roxy Paine’s diorama created in 2021, *Access Panel*, shown at Kasmin Gallery (*Normal Fault*, November 4, 2021–December 23, 2021). It is an exquisitely crafted and staged counter-spectacle, a fascinatingly layered allegory of the era of instafacade we are living through at the moment. Only one diorama shown in a slightly darkened transitory corner of the gallery, even missable in the midst of thirteen relief paintings dispersed in the dynamically partitioned elegant modernist space, this tomb recess-like innards of a panel flipped inside out and upside down would gaze right back at you, instantly intensifying your own *sense* of depth perceptions,



Roxy Paine, *Access Panel*, 2021, wood, epoxy, stainless steel, steel door, lacquer, oil paint, $46 \times 48 \times 22$ inches, $116.8 \times 121.9 \times 55.9$ cm. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York. Photo by Christopher Stach.

not just the perceptions per se; when interfaced, the piece would immediately and simultaneously be “bringing the viewer into a reflexive relation with their own vision and physical presence” (Kang in Paine 131).

The meticulous material management of fungal messiness itself at this double bakery of reality and fakery provides a fugal syntax for contemplative philopoetic experiences, and this spectrally perspicuous play on the viewer’s psychic reflexivity, in turn, amplifies boarded, borderline darkness: that gaping hole in and of the real in transition, a graying decay and ambiguously artificialized rejuvenation of it all, is right next to you, (among) us.

What can a diorama do? In the most obvious sense, it allows us to see. More conceptually speaking, it enables a mode of contemplation often associated with the development of critical

consciousness. Cartesian in a scientific sense, Kantian in an aesthetic sense, that can be said to define the project of philosophical modernity in broad terms. In museological and art historical terms, the diorama offers a view. (Anton in Paine 8)

The art that I've always found the most intriguing is always somehow contemplative. There's often a thread of misanthropy in it, but being misanthropic doesn't mean that you don't find humanity fascinating. (Paine 106)

How could a contemplative practice alter a view? How would a view alter one's sedimented viewpoints and statically framed ideas, perspectival habits included?

III. panDEMICity

Still, "I am (thinking)" as was M. Descartes. And we, modern people, have been extracting panelized access to egological ontology from "I am thinking," i.e., I am seeing — conscious of — myself thinking there. This quintessentially modern epistemological orientation is coextensive with the mini-me iPhonic culture today, to which capitalism is inextricably and irreversibly wired, as "I am" constantly prompted to capitalize on my infinitely quantifiable self also for the betterment and metaversal advancement of humanity on the marketplace.

Now the evolving we of "*demos*" (*da-*, *dai-*, "divided" into and from *demos* people) can and, I am saying, ought to do something more immeasurably generative or infinitely indivisible, seeing through things (and no-things) otherwise, bendingly, resonantly, vibrantly, delving further into paleontological zones, going under and and through and beyond its coverings, *epi* (in *epistemology*) ... a kind of *paleontological*, *epi-dermatological*, *epidemiological* holding of the crumbling world right in front of us, not some vaguely poeticized or

politically valorized “we” but the very complicated, textured relationship of apart-ness between “I” and “We” mediated by the tympanically divided (*da-*) and connected (*demos*) “you,” you in the middle of *departing* from me and *deriving* from us. Ongoing signs of planetary catastrophes would require such refreshed cartographic visions and tympanic telepathy, and such recultivated navigational sensibilities, distinct from Amazonian or cliff selfiers’ ambitions, would have to come from and be directed back toward the reawakening of some broader, deepened, riper senses of the “common sense” common to earthly beings:

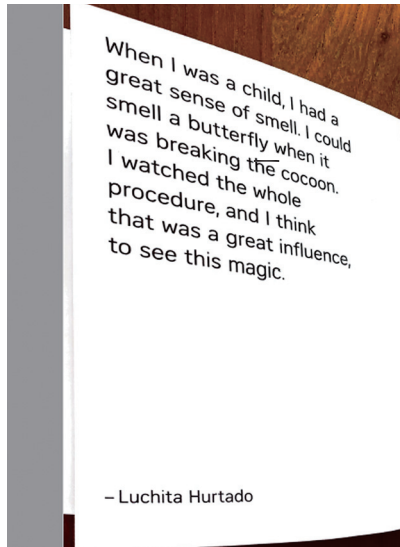
People everywhere — under very different conditions — are asking themselves — where are we? The question is historical not geographical. What are we living through? Where are we being taken? What have we lost? How to continue without a plausible vision of the future? Why have we lost any view of what is beyond a lifetime? (Berger 42)

Coffins in the crypt, an issue of waste management for some, including some ghostly animals whose *geist* some might fail to see or would consider ghastly will survive the human host that is also, of course, the fellow guest in a bigger scheme of things, are active archives where the dead and the living keep signaling to each other, whether we care to turn to them or not. Signs are everywhere as they have always been, and usually we just pass them, especially would-be semioticians, auto-exploitative semiocapitalists included.

Again, what we need to counter-cultivate is then not so much a more panoptical apparatus as a dioramic acuity, the heart-mind of Rosmarie Waldrop’s “gap gardener” receptive to alter-native ways of walking and working across places and planes lodged in poetic pauses:

Voices, planted on the page, do not ripen or bear fruit. Here

placement does not explain but cultivates the vacancy between them. The voices pause, start over. Gap gardening which, moved inward from the right margin, suspends time. (Waldrop 4)



Kyoo Lee, *Following Luchita Hurtado's I Live I Die I Will be Reborn* (Catalogue from Serpentine Gallery), 2021

How to live with the ambiguous in/outside us that would take us beyond the platformed “we, the people”: this question of, say, covival before and after and in the middle of survival, one would have to continue to ask, holding one another accountable, holding all the possible doors open synaesthetically, tympanically, in this panic-stricken world today.

I traveled to the page where scripture meets fiction.
The paper slept but the night in me woke up.
[...]
Eons of lily-building
emerged in that one flower.

Eons, eons. Pins
and wool, thread and needle,
all material
made of itself and circumstance.
— Fanny Howe, “A Hymn”

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Professor Misako Nemoto for her generous encouragement and friendship as always. Many and special thanks are also due to Liz Li at Kasmin Gallery for kindly assisting me as I prepare to put together this piece.

References

- Barthes, Roland, and Léger, Nathalie. *Mourning Diary*. United States, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.
- Barthes, Roland. *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*. United States, Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Berger, John. *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*. United Kingdom, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009.
- Berger, John. *What Time Is It?*. United Kingdom, New York Review Books, 2019.
- Oliver, Akilah. *A Toast in the House of Friends: Poems*. United States, Coffee House Press, 2009.
- Paine, Roxy. *Roxy Paine: the Dioramas*. Italy, Skira, 2021.
- Rich, Adrienne. *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems 1950–2001*. United States, W. W. Norton, 2002.
- Waldrop, Rosmarie. *Reluctant Gravities*. New York, New Directions Pub., 1999.