

# PARADOX & PAROXYSMS

## AN OPEN LETTER TO THE INSURANCE MAN: KAFKA IN THE PENAL COLONY

» carl peters

*"When one has no character one has to apply a method."*

- Jean-Baptiste Clamence

*cu•rate*

[Middle English *curat*, from Medieval Latin *crtus*, from Late Latin *cra*, spiritual charge, from Latin, *care*; see *cure*.]

*to whom it may concern—*

i wanted to say,

*The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony* is a critical autobiography in which you come to be a companion to Kafka—a true companionship. One is soon overwhelmed by the awesum intimacy of the show. Now, when something is this personal it cannot fail but be a prophecy of sorts (or eulogy—there is this melancholy aspect), which, precisely, is what the installation is: a depiction; an arrangement; a parable; an archive. What I read in the show does not exist, no longer exists. I know of no other way to respond than to write what I am writing, if I can do it, as a parable, an aphorism; more than anything—a fragment; an attempt to imitate this formal aspect; which seems closest to truth somehow, whatever that is (does it matter?), only because it is closest to (most intimate with) experience—my own; i kept imagining you

rooting through boxes and archives; the first book you showed from Klaus Mann that was in the trunk—I spent a moment there, I was moved by your gesture here, placing it there—I got the mathematics of that; the archive itself is an imaginary space, a space between what was and what is, utopic in that sense, which is intimate with the art of the lecture, which is what you do; which is what I've always wanted to do. To profess is to prophesize you see. The evangelical aspect is clear because it is sacred (to us). That is not arrogance. It's so simple, really; it's simply our profession. And it has more to do with a damaged self (Adorno) in search of itself still. This was you unpacking your library. This is you unpacking your suitcase. Broadbent there,<sup>1</sup> I wanted to introduce myself and shake his hand, but I'm shy.

I am drawn to K's aphorisms most of all; objects—beds & books, pictures & masks—maps—direct us to walls with aphorisms and quotations printed on them; these force us back to objects; they play on consciousness; the archival imagination at work; there are walls everywhere; I kept bumping into those. What happens when you take the book out of the book? What happens to the text when the page becomes a screen on a wall? How is this different,

<sup>1</sup> Ed Broadbent—well known political figure.

really, from coming to it in a book? It takes a great deal more courage, for one, to put it there on the wall for all to see if they look. One goes missing in a book. The reconstruction of the view looking out from an office window to Vancouver induces meditation; placed on a conference table inside this office is a will—your will, the curator of this installation, a document which is sealed, hidden away, until—well, the will is always after the fact. Its presence confirms my absence. And I needed (after bearing witness to that scene) to look for, once again, Klaus Mann. I needed to see it, the book, to know it—to see it there (this book), and to know (just perhaps?) that the missing can be *found*. Your will and this book are the two most poignant, most profound, texts in the show. The will itself is a paradoxical text. It represents presence before absence. I asked you once about survival, your survival, my own in the face of things: how did you survive; or, more precisely, how do you “survive survival?”—“the survival that I never survived” (Kaddish 112); I know the question’s been with you like a poltergeist; I need to know: how did you do it? Times have changed; and the installation makes it clear to me that what was poetics, open form, is now pedagogical dictatorship; “university with condition”—to paraphrase Derrida; times have changed; indeed, time has changed. I’m sending you my question again. What is left? To answer my own question: a procedure. One can’t stress enough the fact that *The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony* is shown in an art gallery in a university implicating us all who write on it—and within it.

*The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony* opened my eyes and conjured up inside me memories of my first exhibition—my MFA exhibition and show was ahead of its time, now I know, because that show was also a “book” up on the wall. What I am trying to say is that I have searched and searched and searched for work like this, and I have always felt a guilt in me—that I don’t paint the way others paint or draw. But what I am doing, I think, is what you have

accomplished with this show. Works of art communicate and then they don’t. They need us to explain them. Somehow the installation depicts what writing cannot; how many viewers—“volunteers”—realized that this room they entered, this installation they read was not an exit, but rather an entrance deeper and deeper into the maze, the ant-hill, (wherein, in fact, one is always in desperate need of insurance)? I know exactly what *The Insurance Man* is: tenured. That is precisely what makes him repugnant, amoral, a desperate character, “aesthetic.” The colony as procedure without person.

Here is the paradox: insurance creates necessity. Roland Barthes’ comments concerning a lover’s discourse defines precisely what the *Insurance Man* represents: its ethical centre is to be found in the archival imagination of the reader as witness; observation as protest:

*The necessity for this [installation] is to be found in the following consideration: that the lover’s discourse is today of an extreme solitude. This discourse is spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?), but warranted by no one; it is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences, techniques, arts). Once a*

*discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the ‘unreal,’ exiled from all gregariness, it has no recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an affirmation. That affirmation is, in short, the subject of the [installation] which begins here . . .*

This is the opposite of cages going in search of birds. This is the aforementioned author’s ideal of a *writing degree zero*.

In the installation, a number of beds, placed one on top of the other, reference this extreme soli-

tude—these are deathbeds. (One thinks uv Rauschenberg, Kienholz and Segal.) The viewer suddenly finds herself in attendance at a wake. Remember th will?

I choose to read *The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony* as a kind uv lover’s discourse, a discourse outside the rhetoric uv discourse; an aesthetic discourse; an aesthetic choice is a highly individual matter,” writes Joseph Brodsky, “and aesthetic experience is always a private one. Every new aesthetic reality makes one’s experience even more private; and this kind of privacy,” he concludes, “can in itself turn out to be, if not as guarantee, then a form of defense against enslavement” (260). *Kafka in the Penal Colony* may point to a once Utopic space, but that is all it can do. Utopic space is archival space “severed from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority”; for th *Insurance Man* discourse is a procedure—that’s th problem; “A cage goes in search of a bird.” Dare I *look* beyond my discourse? My colleague the insurance peddler? Language is th apparatus, and this is precisely what the exhibition, *The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony*, tells me. The curator uv this show, like all great lovers, wears his reading on his sleeve

*Th world / invented to end in a book, out there  
Try and reach him, good luck  
He is always booked*



*Austrian Recruits*. Photograph Reproduced with Permission of Klaus Wagenbach Verlag, Berlin.

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