

In the middle

Most people seem to be in the middle of something they somehow ended up in. What's happening's provocations propel us and drag on us. Sometimes an offbeat chanting wants things decided one way or the other (is it work or play, good or bad, up or down?) as if the diffuse environmentality of things is itself a threat or too much to handle. Some worry that any opening is also an opening for power that's always on the prowl for its next victim.

Everyone's got their stories lined up—litanies of injustice tangled in the crazy or the funny. My Santa Cruz shuttle driver started in with how he and his buddies got a rental house by showing up early and offering to do a major landscaping job and paint the whole place as part of their rent. They did it all in the first two months. He liked to work all the time; he got that from his father. His first job was flipping burgers at McDonald's but he burned his arm bad on the grease after only forty-two dollars' worth. He liked being a manager at a Ross Dress for Less until a customer spit in his mouth and hit customers with a shoe. One of the customers was so impressed with how he handled himself he gave him a job selling cars, which he liked until the new owners started whiting out commissions on his pay slips. Now he drives shuttle, Uber and Lyft, and he likes that too.

There are ways of being up for all this that no one really wants: splintering tunnels of how-to advice, ways of regulating yourself with mindfulness or drugs, or speed shifts to stay in sync with a quick-shifting tempo-participation. A life ecology bloats with remedial labors: the constant straightening up, the compulsion to grasp at straws, the need to retreat, the little jokes that mark social contact, the nested troubles multiplying, the resentments slowly accruing.

The social is a charge of free radicals that have to be carefully selected, like the guests at a dinner party, or sharply scheduled like the ten-minute mandatory time-out every hour at the swimming pool just to be safe. It's

an allegation paranoically aimed at you if you're the wrong color. It's an arraignment for those wearing really old shoes or sending out a vibe of defensiveness or judgment, even if it's accidental. The things that can make you or someone else the target of a war-mongering eye are so prolific and twisted that no list ever gets it.

Maybe there was a moment when all this became widespread. Thomas de Zengotita says the Kennedy assassination permanently tipped life into the surrealism of what just couldn't be true. Or people think modernism did something, or the industrialization of experience, or cognitive capitalism now, or the way media pull us into one little thing and then another. There's always talk of the fifties, or the thirties.

Meanwhile, back on the academic ranch, there was the time when social constructionists so locked onto the mediation of everything that *its* broken record became theirs, as if that was enough said. Humanist critique just keeps snapping at the world as if the whole point of being and thinking is just to catch it in a lie. As if some fixative of state power or normative fantasy could be the *only* problem and there's always something wrong with other people. Some of the things this view misses: all the extensions of ways of being touched, what it feels like to be carried along by something on the move, the widespread joking, the voicing, the dark wakefulness, the sonorousness, how managing a life vies with an unwitting ungluing, how things get started, how people try to bring things to an end, like the day, through things that slam or slide down their throats, why thought might become an add-on or take the form of a speed list, or why it matters that attention sometimes slows to a halt waiting for something to take shape.

We find speculative possibility not in dead matter or hypervalent structure but in rhythms interrupted, the shoot of an affect, trouble brewing in a posture.

(DE ZENGOTITA 2006; WAYS OF BEING UP FOR IT)