

NAO BUSTAMANTE

Unprofessional

A Postscript

I'm cleaning out my basement and I find a matchbox from a Chinatown Brasserie. That's the last time I saw you, José. We had dinner with Ela Troyano. It was fun. It was lovely. I think I was staying uptown somewhere but came down to meet you. Gone are the days when I would arrive in New York City at all hours and walk in your front door and crash on your couch. Sometimes the visit had been planned, sometimes not. Your door was usually open, but I also had a key. It was comforting to know that your place was there, that you were there. That in this wild big city, this country girl could count on you.

Later I found a couple more matchboxes from the same defunct restaurant. I hid them again. I like that feeling of finding these matchboxes once in a while and thinking, "Oh this is the matchbox from that night, our last night together . . ." Fufu (my long-term, dearly departed, poodle partner) and I walked you home after dinner. We passed the apartment building where Ana Mendieta tragically fell to her death. We both knew the spot. Just like you pointed out the window that Fred Herko jeté'd out of. I love all the art historical moments you shared with me and the way that you made your own space in these histories.

We attended a Marina Abramović performance where she was remaking a Joseph Beuys work. I was unimpressed and complained about her outfit looking too new. You remarked that you found the performance produced a kind of "productive boredom." A space to wander, mentally. I sometimes push off of memories like this into my own wanderings, without concern for the need to "be present." This cemented an idea that my eighth grade teacher, Mrs. Frye, tried to impart to me. She would often say, "To be bored is an insult to oneself."

I don't know how many matchboxes I have hidden around the house. That restaurant had wooden matches in a deep red colored box with a solid striking surface and a dragon insignia on the front and so I would always take a box when we'd eat there. The booths were comfy. Before it was Chinatown Brasserie, it was Fez; you had a book signing there for *Cruising Utopia*. I thought it was so clever that you picked a place with live koi fish, as there were koi on your book cover. Of course you might have picked that spot because it was walking distance from your house, as you considered everything north of 14th Street as "Upstate."

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I am now behaving like an old fool, hiding matchboxes around my house, and finding them occasionally and thinking of you, emotions spilling out of me. I don't know if it is because we talked about retirement and growing old together, or because you put my career on a different footing, or because it was so much fun sitting on the couch watching TV with you, going to shows with you, going out to eat with you . . . but I really miss you. Writing this has been so complex and draining.

Your death has been the most consequential death of my life. I try to remember your voice. The tenor of it. You had a kind of tone that could cut through space. I think you could have been a great singer but every time you tried to sing, your voice jumped to a falsetto. I remember once being in Lima, Peru, with you and we were at a gay discotheque where the queens were performing a remake of *The Wiz*. I caught a glimpse of you on the dance floor, doing a peculiar dance that was a kind of stepping back and forth while moving an arm up and turning your wrist, then raising the other arm and so on. We laughed about that for years, but your real dance was the way that you would stammer your feet in place while you picked up your papers and tapped them on the table to make them even and fidget with your glasses before you would launch into reading aloud a paper that you had recently written, often just before delivery. Your writing style, or rather your process of writing, was like a person who had a complex attention framework. I'd come into your house, and you'd welcome me, then turn back to your laptop computer, sitting at your rickety wooden desk right next to the air conditioner and looking out the window. Inevitably the TV would be on, maybe on the Food Network or a show about why women commit murder, and sometimes there would also be music playing and you'd talk with me and the dogs. You would create an environment that was a bit chaotic in order to concentrate your thoughts. I'd be in awe.

You would introduce me to people as your "object of study" and I would say, "Our relationship is very unprofessional." We had a schtick we'd perform for others. José, you truly had such a fecund wit and I loved listening to you go on. I was just another one of your audience members. ■

NAO BUSTAMANTE is a professor of art at the USC Roski School of Art and Design and an internationally known artist. Her most recent work, *The Wooden People*, had its world premiere in December 2021 at REDCAT in Los Angeles.