

Dean Kissick, *The Cosmic Artist*, written in response to *the engine* by Yuri Pattison at Douglas Hyde Gallery, May 2021



### The Cosmic Artist

When Roman poets had lain on grassy hillsides mixing their opium and wine, sleep-woozy together and plump, they'd told one another stories about the world and how things had come to be how they were, then watched those stories unfolding before them: like Sol, the Roman god, dragging the sun across the sky each morning from his chariot.

536 AD was the first Year Without Summer. A large volcano exploded somewhere in the tropics coughing black clouds of millions of tons of sulphur that blotted out the sun and refracted her rays back over the Milky Way, the rest of the cosmos as well, in broken rainbow shards; and by 626 AD, the Persians were at the gates of Constantinople.

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During the lockdown skies were clear. The sunsets unusually mild. The light atop One Canada Square flashed at 40bpm. Martin knew because he counted. One evening he noticed a square flashing white light on the peak of the tower, another light on a tower nearby, and that they were beating together. He watched them. Every few beats he widened his focus so that it took in more towers and more flashing lights, the whole landscape turning on and off in perfect time, falling asleep and waking again like an old lady outside a coffee shop at 40bpm. Canary Wharf was a clock. London, a clock. The sun and the moons were a clock. Everything a clock. He kept time with his small atomic clock, which was as accurate a clock as could be. He remembered when he'd first had the idea for the greatest artwork in history.

He'd been standing on the boardwalk on Newport Beach. The sunset was very beautiful like every evening in Los Angeles, and watching the sun sinking into the ocean, the blond surfers bobbing there, colours more bright than they should be, blood orange, plum, peach reflected in stiff peaks and white froth of waves, they looked like computer animations, he thought the whole scene rather unnatural.

None of this is supposed to look like this, he thought.

When Martin was a teenager, like the boys in the ocean, in the Seventies, the morning after he'd first taken acid he'd awoken and the sun had looked so bright outside his window, and the edges of the clouds too, like they were incandescent. Now the sky looked like that every day.

Watching that sunset, he'd thought about how it was only so bright from all the pollution, the sugary fluorescent smog gathered over the city and along the coastline, the smog from looping highways, glimmering red and white chains of cars coming down into the Valley and fires in surrounding hills, how the smog refracted the sunbeams making this great colourful light show in the sky. How the colours were brought out by the carbon dioxide, the sulphur dioxide, micro-particles, more pollutants in the air. How these gases he'd thought invisible had the most spectacular, grand phantasmagorical effects of all.

How could he do this himself, Martin wondered?

How could he save the world?

There was more than one solution to every problem. The more elegant a solution, the more beautiful it would be. In the donut shop, by the boardwalk, over coffee and a cruller, he'd imagined how he might fill the sky with aerosols. Had scribbled on his napkin. Earth could be cooled by sowing large blooms of sulphur dioxide over the sky; clouds of sulphate particles would scatter a couple per cent of the sunlight back into space; that would be enough to reverse warming; the colours would be unreal. Every sunset would be like Los Angeles.

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For the opening of his show, 5,000 of Martin's silver balloons were launched in formation from airfields worldwide. Like Warhol's balloons, he would say, only larger. His silver balloons would float up for miles, high above the air lanes and birds and spill their insides into the lower stratosphere. The following year, twice as many were released. The plan, for the end of the Twenties, was to have 100,000 silver balloons sailing over the clouds each year. There might be balloons sailing over you right now, so high you cannot see. Sometimes, looking up at the clouds, you may catch a glint of silver high above you.

Martin was an old man. His show filled the entire sky. He wasn't just saving the world, he'd say; he'd also invented a new kind of art, a new genre that had never been seen before, one larger, greater, more visionary and consequential than the Land Art of his youth: Sky Art. Solar Art. Cosmic Art. Deep rings of sulphur around the Earth. Painterly clouds refracting and dispersing the light. Patterns and structures of salvation in the sky. He felt like a painter, painting a heavenly sky. The sunset never ended. It ringed the Earth in a perfect circle. Earth spun backwards through it, slower every time. With each silver balloon the circular sunset grew higher and longer. A sunset in every colour over every rising sea. A sunset like the halo of a streetlamp when you're tired. When the sun touched the horizon and slid into the lap of the night there was, for a moment, from the right place, a sublime band of lemon around the world.

Earth's rotation was slowing but the clock in his pocket was not. The atomic clocks told time even more accurately than the movements of the planets. Time had to be slowed down now and again to adjust for these divergences. We have captured time, Martin thought. Time no longer came from the planets but from us. We're like the old gods dragging the sun from our fiery chariots. We spin the planets forwards when we need to slow down time. The colours in the sunset didn't come from the sun, they came from Martin. He controlled how much sunlight was allowed in from the heavens. How Earth's temperature rose and fell. Counting the lights on the towers, touching his clock in his pocket, watching the sunset on London from his window, Martin had a feeling, a sensation of playing reality like a synth, like a sequencer on his desktop, and suddenly felt himself up there in the sky with his silver balloons, there in the sky he gave colours to, the composer of a great swelling symphony in the clouds, in cirrus, cirrostratus, altocumulus, hung there from balloons like notes on the score of the day, like a god.

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Dean Kissick is New York Editor of Spike Art Magazine, for which he writes a monthly column titled "The Downward Spiral". He lives in West SoHo where he's writing the Great Cosmic Novel. He's recently written texts for Matt Copson's show at High Art, Paris, Gilbert & George's show at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Pieter Slagboom's forthcoming monograph, and Amalia Ulman's El Planeta film companion, published by Arcadia Missa, London.

Image by Yuri Pattison