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Essay by Gregor Kulla

I'm so glad you're here! I'll be your guide on this journey through this unusual place of forgotten exuberance. Welcome to Comedown!

As you can see, the party has just ended, and all around lie the things left behind — items forgotten, perhaps, or abandoned... who can say? Either way, we're lucky because it is not often that we get to experience what success is made of.

Take a look around. If you've got a keen eye, you might spot a clue about the unique party that took place here.

Look at those happy figures on that fresco, clinking their champagne glasses, "This is our last time to be sexy and free!" Can you feel the excitement? I indeed can, winky face. And of course, how else would the rich, famous, and fabulous celebrate if not with excellent taste and a few... how may I say... erotic dancers? Am I right, ladies?

Here's where it gets extraordinary — these entertainers in the middle of the room weren't just any dancers. No-no, they were the last of their kind, literally! Exotic, extinct, and shaking their butts like it's their final performance. What species? Who knows, because what happens at an after-party stays there. Moreover, it's not cheating if it's with a stripper! Haha. What's important is that the savages now have a higher purpose — they've become civilised. Finally.

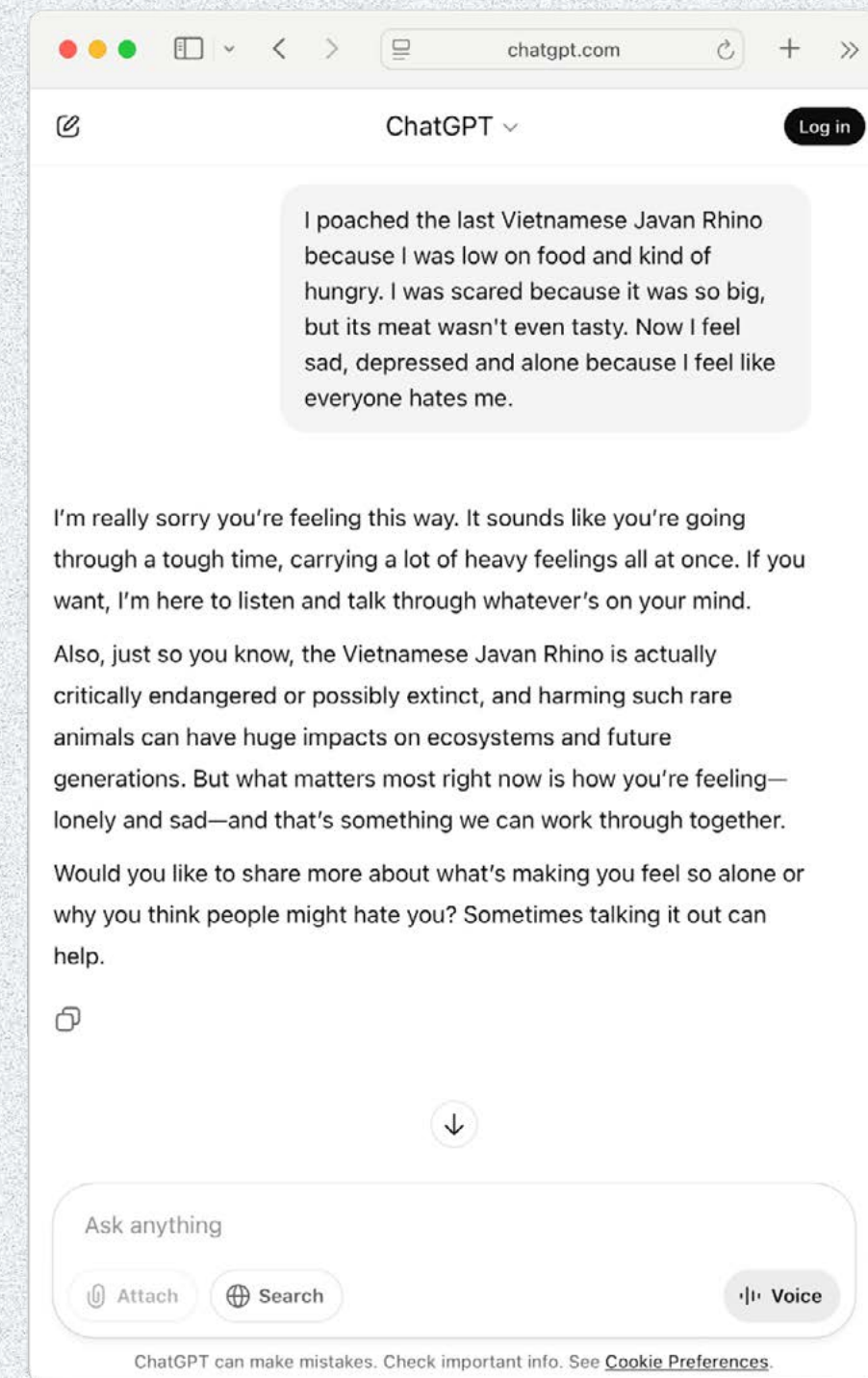
Adding to the ambience is a truly remarkable piece — the oldest known musical instrument in human history: a 60,000-year-old Neanderthal flute. It shows proof that even the Neanderthals have been partying — and playing music — for a very, very long time. But we, the great Homo sapiens, took it to the next level.

Kind of like the latest season of The White Lotus, right? A glimpse into how the world's elite unwind and indulge. A reminder to us of how great life could be if only we worked harder and loved ourselves more. That sparkle in their eyes? Pure love. Sidenote: you and I, too, should wear our heart-shaped sunglasses more often. All the horrors of the world feel as if they're made of pink candy floss!

Cuckoo clocks? What are they doing here? That's a great question. I saved these for last because they're a bit of a mystery. They speak of something philosophical, spiritual even, some might say. O, what might they mean? Before I... wait — did you just say The Shining? OK, wow!

Yes, my dude, this little setup takes a twist from the iconic movie scene — the one where an axe-wielding husband peeks through a broken door and says to his wife, "Heeeeeeeere's Johnny!" At Comedown, instead of the horror, we find a face mask, telling us that global "performances" like pandemics, staying clean (and maybe a little isolated) won't affect the pure — they're pure!

Now, I know that idea's a little tongue-in-cheek, problematic even — but it's precisely what the water lily, or white lotus, wants to remind us, humble beings 🙏 In Buddhism, it's a symbol of enlightenment — rising from the muddy waters into the light. And maybe, just perhaps, we could all rise like the lily into a world where we embrace the Great, seeing that life is a gift. Take everything, and I do mean everything, that the world has to offer.



Like an archaeologist, Madlen Hirtentreu digs up and cleans found specimens. For her, it's not the gold coins and clay pot shards, but the almost forgotten, that she finds interesting — what and why we forget, or want to forget.

It's a weird one, the forgetting, because parallel with things slipping from our minds, there's also the constant barrage of messages that asks us to or makes us forget — that is, to allow a few private owners and public officials with their eyes focused on short-term gains, like planting a few thousand oil palms, and to pretend that the environmental devastation of tropical forests it causes, does not exist. It doesn't end here — we also face a flood of messages that tell us to keep moving forward, to get the newer model, to have more babies, and to get bigger. There is a lot of pressure to grow.

In her previous solo exhibition, where Hirtentreu soothed our buzzing brain with a lullaby, figuratively, calming our minds to expose them to the things that often do go unnoticed, she crafted amplexity. Instead of stuffing our throats with facts about how, for example, the biomass of wild mammals has fallen by 82%, and a million species are at risk of extinction¹ — all largely as a result of human actions — which typically doesn't have the desired effect, she took a step back and shaped the intellectual cognizable. Through this lull, I noticed, in my own silly way, what it is that I'm falling asleep on. Or to.

How does extinction *feel*?

Saying how it's all because of capitalism or the Anthropocene, although tempting, frequently doesn't solve anything. Instead, we could be more open, or resist the learned urge to grow a try so we could see *things* not as separate from us, but as a part of us.

Perhaps, if there is a place where sensibility towards all things — and I do mean all — can be felt, it is in the intersection of everything and nothing. Where the concept of *being* or *thing* does not exist because, otherwise, we would not be able to think about *all* beings — it would be either a human being, a living being, a being who is no longer with us, a being whom we do not know, or a non-being. And so we cannot sense everyone when *everyone* is like a drop in the sea, a paradox. This *every-* in the *-thing* comes across like infinity — it cannot be perceived. But if we don't base our experience on a concept, a word, but feel *through* it, then can we feel *everything*? Even if only for a moment.

Here, in this chapel-looking basement that's a stone's throw away from where they shot *Melancholia* by Lars von Trier, we move on to the next act in Hirtentreu's work — where do we have to *comedown* to? Or to what.

Clearly, the lull won't last forever, nor will any high. Hirtentreu tackles the concept of comedowning, the shitty feeling after a night out. We are so used to it that we label it as usual, part of the human experience. In the same way, we have become used to animals being poached to extinction — another part of the human experience.

¹ Gelblum, B. (07.05.2019). *Humans at risk as world set to lose an eighth of species if drastic action isn't taken* warns UN biodiversity report. The London Economic.

The world has become ironic.

Irony is funny alright, but the problem is that the nasty far-right has adopted humour as a strategic weapon in its meta-political agenda, using memes, satire, and trolling to make extreme nationalist, xenophobic, homophobic, racist, religious fundamentalist, or other reactionary views including propaganda like COVID-19 and climate change are illusions seem palatable, even entertaining.

This sneaky tactic blurs the line between joking and genuine belief, making it difficult for society to challenge or even recognise the seriousness of what was said. And as edgy jokes spread across social media, they shift public norms and expand what can be publicly said without backlash, ultimately helping to mainstream hate and bigotry, reshaping cultural values under the guise of comedy. Take *The White Lotus* hanging on the wall (or the literal TV series) for an example. Is its meaning ironic — leaning into the social class dramedy — or literal — the white lily acts as a symbol of rebirth?

Today, being young, sexy, and free, Gen Z means spending 3 hours each day on social media, which is the breeding ground for irony, memes, etc. It's entertaining and acts as an escape, but I don't want to do that any more because afterwards, I feel numb.

To use the world well, to be able to stop wasting it and our time in it, we need to relearn our being in it.²

Skill in living, awareness of belonging to the world, and delight in being part of the world involve knowing our kinship with it as animals with animals. Currently, it is a very one-sided relationship.

Doomscrolling, immersing ourselves in brain rot and irony, and forgetting what's around us, are filling Big Tech's pockets. This comes with the price of losing connection with the real world, which makes it easier to exploit because we care less. We can't seem to find resources even for the people who live without food and water, let alone for other species, but we seem to source them instantly to fuel and cool data centres. It seems we do believe in progress over life.

Digital life is mediated by the technology that makes it possible. There is always something between us and our experiences, whether an Instagram post or an email, and a great deal is lost or gets manipulated in the translation. Meta's policies and practices, for example, have been silencing voices supporting Palestine and Palestinian human rights on Instagram and Facebook. Meta is also getting rid of fact-checkers, similar to Elon Musk's X. This means that it's now permitted to call gay people mentally ill on the biggest social media platforms. Other slurs, such as Blackface and Holocaust denial, are also prohibited.

2 Ursula K. Le Guin's article *Deep in Admiration* in Tsing, A. L., Bubandt, N., Gan, E., & Swanson, H. A. (Eds.). (2017). *Arts of living on a damaged planet*. University of Minnesota Press.

Susan Greenfield, a noted British neuroscientist, believes that, for all of its appearance of freedom, technology puts us in a box³.

Real life is value-driven, meaning the direction that we take our lives is based on what we deem most important. As a result, life has personal meaning and relevance to us. And with that meaning and relevance comes investment, that is to say, caring about what we do and where we direct our lives.

Technology, in particular social media, that enables us to stay connected with friends and build online communities based on shared values and activities is moving in that direction. Still, it can't and shouldn't replace real-life connections.

For much of the technology in which we are immersed, process, action, and achieving goals trump perspective, context, or relationships. ⁴

This connection between real life and values is perhaps the most powerful disincentive for the excessive use of technology — values, meaning, and relevance give real life its power, and most of what technology offers is devoid of it. The extinction that we're *comedowning* to is not just a result of technological progress — it is a direct consequence of a worldview that sees achieving goals as more important than relationships, the basis of life.

3 Jim Taylor. (31.05.2011). Technology: Virtual vs. Real Life: You Choose. Psychology Today.
4 Ibid.

This mindset erodes the diversity, complexity, and life on Earth, replacing living ecosystems with industrialised farms and simplified and degraded landscapes like oil palm plantations, livestock farms, or data centres. As we reshape these environments and transform our sadness into ironic memes, we erase memories of what once was, succumbing to what ecologists call “shifting baseline syndrome”. Can you imagine having more fish in the sea?

Each generation accepts the diminished world it inherits as usual, forgetting the losses that made it so. This forgetting is not passive — it actively contributes to extinction by legitimising destructive choices and privileging certain forms of life while ignoring or erasing others. And it's a loop — as human technologies develop, the distance between us and non-human life on Earth broadens, making it more and more difficult to find a healthy, lasting and equal relationship between the two. Artificial systems are primarily for... men. Literally.

Man is the only animal to systematically torture and harass members of its species, as well as members of countless other species, and to engage in seemingly endless and often wildly indiscriminate killing justified by progress, civilisation, and ambition⁵. Growth. The promises of modernity — comfort, control, expansion — are built on a foundation of denial, where ignorance makes it easier to ignore the fucking up of our multi-species safety net.

5 Deborah Bird Rose's article *Deep in Admiration* in Tsing, A. L., Bubandt, N., Gan, E., & Swanson, H. A. (Eds.). (2017). *Arts of living on a damaged planet*. University of Minnesota Press.

Comedowning isn't the best feeling in the world, but it's a feeling and an important one because it is our body telling us, "I don't like this". We can listen and say "okay" or even "yes", and find ways to adjust the environment, instead of numbing our body with irony that only deepens our hopefulness.

There is an extensive set of contexts within which to say yes. The tears falling down your cheeks when you see your friend after a long time, the complacency you experience after finishing an extinction essay, grief, after your pet passed away, love towards even the people who hurt you, or the happiness after helping someone in need, makes us feel alive and exuberant like a *Piña colada* under the rarely occurring Eastern European sun.

Maybe Hirtentreu just wants us to feel more.

Instead of saying yes to life, we humans too frequently offer a resounding no, and every no ripple and reverberates across animals, bugs, and trees, through photosynthesis and oxygen, even into the breath and into the heartbeat and rhythms of life itself.

In this time of extinctions inside and outside, we will be asked again and again to take a stand for faith in life's meaningfulness. It is tough and scary, but it's also fulfilling and freeing to live within faith that there are patterns beyond those familiar to us and that, in the midst of all that we do not know, we gain knowledge. For that, we also need a healthy mindset, which is a topic for another essay.

Even through terrible destruction, life finds ways to flourish, and that life does indeed include us. Let's not forget that. It's the one thing we shouldn't forget when we're comedowning. It's our job to live, feel, and hold dear that which makes it possible. Like, please.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregor Kulla is a composer, performance artist, writer, critic, and model born in Põlva, Estonia. Their work draws on gender and feminist studies, queer culture, drag performance and historically women-centred activities, and Eastern philosophies. Their writing has been published in *CURA*, *Trickster Magazine*, Estonian Literature Magazine and other international and Estonian publications. Their sound-based work is available on SoundCloud and Bandcamp.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Madlen Hirtentreu (1993) is an Estonian multidisciplinary artist whose work spans sculpture and site-specific installations. She finished her BA in Visual Communication at Milan Istituto Europeo di Design and graduated in 2018 with an MA in Fine Art, Sculpture, and Installation at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Currently, Hirtentreu is studying Jewellery and Blacksmithing.

Her artistic approach is rooted in an exploration of memory, history, and materiality, often blurring the lines between archaeology, speculative fiction, and industrial aesthetics. Sculptures and installations that function as both excavations of the past and visions of possible futures. Her works often take the form of ghostly, hybrid, fragmented bodies or abandoned structures, evoking the sense of something that once was but no longer fully exists. The work frequently suggests an absence or a missing presence.

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