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Letter to a Viewer: *How to Operate in a Green Room*
Luis de Jesus Los Angeles

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Dear Viewer:

I'm four stories up, tending to the makeshift rooftop garden I began planting during the pandemic. This little roof in Brooklyn – a sort of urban plateau in which I am totally exposed – is also the place where I feel most blissfully out of sight. The city-grizzled branches of an old tree touch the eastern edge of our roofline. I've lived here more than a decade and I struggle to remember the tree's variety. I am grateful for this tree that shades our bedroom from the full blast of July heat, but it remains unnamed.

We're not meant to be up here. There are no railings. Facing west, I watch construction workers piece together a new building that rises higher by day, blocking our view like a curtain pulled slowly but forever shut. Unlike that of the tree, the shade this structure casts is unwelcome. Two years after a pandemic period so quiet that birdsong dominated our neighborhood, my boyfriend and I count the construction sites that pound away on every side of our home. Will our landlord sell this building to one of those investment groups that slip fliers under the front door? These days my time on the roof is punctuated by the awful screeching sounds of augmented vehicle mufflers. I'm not sure if it's the sound of patriarchy unleashed, a cry for help, or both. At night these mechanical shrieks rise in volume as they pass under the grayish yellow of streetlamps. I may be jealous of those who permit themselves to scream in the dark.

For now this plot of roof offers a breeze and a patch of greens. My first effort, in the pandemic summer of 2020, was edible plants. A seed from a flowering herb must have blown from our roof to our sidewalk, so by that fall a mature basil plant sprouted from a crack in the cement next to our garbage bins. This summer we have tomatoes, which rise in a frenzy, bursting in inches of growth per June day, and celery, a cucumber vine, strawberries, and a lemon tree sporting one lonely lemon whose fattening is as slow as the tomatoes are fast. I've planted them all in the sort of 5-gallon buckets you find discarded on construction sites. My friend Peter gave me a blackberry bush, cut from the plants that have ambled across his rooftop for a decade. In no time they're drawing long lines in the heat, stretching their vines to encircle a defunct chimney.

In this aching heat the garden require vigilance. My boyfriend pops up from the stairs, hauling another container of water. Bumble bees arrive to drink up the first flowers. How do they find them on a lone roof in Brooklyn? Last summer the bees were partial to basil flowers, so this summer I planted an extra basil patch just for them. But they're fickle Brooklyn eaters, and they pass over my gesture of support in favor of cucumber flowers and anise hyssop. In a strange play on global politics, a variety of tomato called a *Russian Plum* attracts an infestation of white flies, and I move it into quarantine to live or die alone on the other side of the roof.

Small brown dots appear on our dill plant – swallowtail caterpillars that grow fast, bursting and fat and yellow-green in 10 days. They ignore me as I kneel to watch them wiggle and wave their antennae. Soon they strip the dill down to a few bare stems. But who are we to judge creatures that extract resources from their habitat until their habitat is gone?

Tending to my paintings in the studio prepared me to tend to plants. I work much of the time on the floor; in painting we speak of the first surface as "the ground." You gather the materials and ingredients and prepare an environment in which certain types of marks and stains take hold. I need to be present enough to notice the nuances: what needs further attention, what should be left alone, and what should be culled. Growth is a discipline of addition *and* subtraction. Sometimes a method seems so inhospitable to the environment of the studio that I should just let it die. But as with that part of me that tries to resuscitate a near-dead dill plant, I salvage something workable from methods at the brink. If I'm fully attuned to process and materials, to shapes and patterns, to color and mark, and with patience as my superpower, the parts begin to suggest a dynamic whole. It's best when I get out of my way. Un-selfing is long, slow work.

The studio is like the green room of the stage, the zone of preparation before presentation. I favor that space. I want the work to feel forever evolving and incomplete. A state of indeterminacy is a promise that things can get better, can evolve into something else; that things unseen will continue to emerge to the surface. I complain about the incessant change of our Brooklyn neighborhood, but I suspect it charges me more than it depletes me.

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I'm in Los Angeles. The endless expanse of brightness aligns with the industry of performing. The light feels nearly shadowless, as if cast by a ring lamp.

One night our shitty rental car makes a scraping noise on the freeway, and I feel the brakes on one tire go out. We hobble home in the rush of midnight traffic. The next day at the rental agency, they offer me a free upgrade to make up for the hassle, handing me the keys to a glistening white BMW, with a cream leather interior that smells gorgeous and a dashboard aglow with blue lights. On the way out of the agency I pull over three times as I struggle to interpret the electronics. As I merge onto the highway I can hardly believe the near silence of the car's interior: quiet is attainable but expensive. I zoom in and out of traffic, and it's suddenly exhilarating to perform a life which is not my own.

I open the sunroof and the world quickly returns. I want to make artworks that ride somewhere between the everyday and the extraordinary, between what's readily apparent and what's shaded from view, between presentation and construction: the surfaces and the seams.

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I'm back in New York. The rooftop garden has been tended, and I'm headed to my studio, which is located in one of the last fully operating industrial sections of Brooklyn, close to the harbor front. Driving there is like maneuvering through the inside of a pinball machine. On one block the pavement is so chewed up around former trolley tracks that it feels like the dirt roads I grew up navigating in the Pennsylvania countryside. An Amazon delivery warehouse sits next to an auto body shop, and at any moment a delivery driver might emerge from behind the hulk of a nearly demolished car. Across the street there is a halal live animal slaughter. Ducks flop in cages as butchers wearing tall rubber boots hurry in and out. Pedestrians, bikers, scooter drivers, all crisscross the streets; all looking down at their phones.

At a stop sign near a massage parlor, I look up at an apartment terrace teeming with flowers. It's not really a terrace as much as it is a makeshift outdoor space perched haphazardly over a refrigerator repair shop, whose work in progress – bits and pieces of metal appliances – spills onto the sidewalk.

The building is heavily worn, its siding stained and pieced together in a patchwork of textures and surfaces. Through the upstairs windows you can see stacks of household goods on the sill and curtains falling out of place.

The terrace is a riot of color. I always take an extra long pause at the stop sign to admire and clock their expanding garden. The impatient drivers behind me hit their horns as I track the abundance of flowers growing from makeshift wood boxes. Last summer there were flowering pink bushes, and, by early fall, towering sunflowers in bright yellow and brown. These flowers are like New York artists, finding their way in spaces not meant for them, bursting in color in the patched-together remnants of marginally usable spaces.

But at the end of this summer, I notice that the flowers are dried and spindly hulls. The stacks of household goods are gone from the windowsills, and the place has a quality of emptiness one learns to read as portent that the neighborhood is changing. In my sadness I imagine the apartment's inhabitants have found a bigger, more sustainable garden elsewhere, maybe a house with a big yard. I imagine an expanse of yard, rich with plantings. What is the inverse of a flower garden rising above a mess of dirt and noise and machinery? I imagine the inhabitants bringing a part of the city into the countryside – a rusted appliance used as a flower pot, a torn curtain blanketing a new planting – tending to what they've gained, and lost.