

WATER SHELTER FOOD AND FORM

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A shipping container is virtually indestructible, built to preserve the perishable or unstructured on a journey to where the contents will be consumed, crushed, incorporated, or dissolved. Then the container will make another trip.

On a hilltop in the Jura Mountains, in the middle of grazing fields and plowing fields, thirty empty shipping containers were delivered and arranged in an irregular circle, some filling in the middle and some stacked one atop the other, a few set sideways, bridging lower-level containers. A crane was used, many people in hard hats, a few with clipboards. Those with clipboards had the pleasure of seeing a sketch become three-dimensional steel and the worry that someone might literally be crushed for that pleasure.

The Jura Mountains are growing: as-yet-to-be eroded stone buds are solid proof for geologists that what used to be ocean floor is rising. The shipping containers feel as if they have either dropped from a disconcerting future or pushed up from the secretive past — a Mad Max version of Stonehenge. On the treeless hilltop, a place to run to or from.

In a day or two, people would climb the hill with boxes and cases, wire, speakers, and tool kits, and occupy the containers. A week after that, visitors would come to see what they'd made.

Hikers today will piss in caves and leave their snack wrappers; caves seem now, in other words, a place to hide bodily functions. Early humans may have used caves for safety, gathering, ritual, and seasonal sleeping. Prehistoric human rubbish heaps outside caves throughout the Jura hold hazelnuts, marmot and red deer bones, intentionally chipped stone. The stone was sometimes chipped for more than tools or weapons, as caves in the Jura have given up ivory carvings of mammoth, man-lion, and horse, line and expression visible still. Caves like those at Pech Merle, Lascaux, and Chauvet were painted with color that would last nearly 30,000 years and

counting. Art today requires climate control, insurance, restoration. Or it is deliberately transitory. Artists surround eleven islands with floating fabric for fourteen days or create outdoor murals with paper and wheatpaste.

One of the mysteries of art is that it seems to have dropped into the human mind fully formed. The figurines and the cave paintings are stunningly graceful. If humans had evolved an aesthetic ability, where were the fumbling early attempts, the toddler drawings, the mess of etchings on rocks? Of course, discoveries were made along the way: perspective, abstract subjects, conceptual art, the idea that one might call anything art and naming makes it so. But 33,000 years ago, humans already knew about occlusion, hiding animals in stomachs, behind rocks. And they knew about depicting expression and movement. The mammoth is all light and control; it is about to break into a canter. It may be one of the first instances in which form did not first answer to function.

The people who built pieces into the shipping containers were housed with volunteers in nearby villages. A fifteen-minute walk away, past a cow field and an orchard, a middle-aged Swiss couple hosted a couple from the States. It was not surprising that the house was extraordinarily neat. A few days into the week stay, the man's mother died. The Americans did not know what to say or how to make themselves smaller.

During the day, they sat on the hilltop in the now-bustling shipping container village and fastened fishing line to 1,000 wooden blocks and hung them from the ceiling of their allotted container. He built a wooden drop ceiling and fixed each fishing line to it with a staple gun. Each time like the report of a rifle — 1,000 blasts across the hills.

In the end, though, a delicate piece, nearly silent. Blow on the trigger and the agitators in the center knock a few blocks which knock their neighbors, the blocks rippling toward and away from you, as if a stone had been tossed in a still pond. Your breath made large and visible, and then subsiding.

Elsewhere, people were installing a light organ in a second-story

container, or fastening robotic mallets of every sort to the inside of a container, coaxing a percussive orchestra out of the steel walls, or setting up an interactive game with stackable tiles that, when added to the board, change the pitch and frequency of the projected sound. On the ceiling of one container was projected footage taken from the undercarriage of a big rig in motion. Speakers broadcast the heaving machinery of the truck, rush of air, whirl of rubber on tarmac, tiny pebbles spitting up and glancing off the camera. When the viewers entered, they were asked to lie back on the floor as the doors closed behind them; and when the doors reopened they staggered out clutching their heads or stomachs.

At night, past the slug-filled cow field and orchard, they tiptoed up the stairs, the rest of the house dark. But the man was likely not asleep. Strangers on the stair, his mother in the ground. The easiest thing to say is that art cannot help him.

They were filling their storage containers not so many kilometers from the home of a well-known maker of spectacles. A tinkerer on a large and small scale, interested in chains of reaction, in simultaneity, in using the cast offs of industry and entertainment to create yet more industry and entertainment, he once built an enormous, animate rubbish pile meant to put on a show and then self-destruct. It produced drawings, colored smoke, and layers of sound, but it did not destroy itself. A train ride away, through a valley known for a now largely defunct watch industry, there is a museum devoted to preserving the tinkerer's work. Push a button and the machines will creak and move for you, old from the day they were born.

The evening of the festival, visitors were, indeed, festive, arriving by train and bus and carload from cities and the villages in between. Ladies in fluttering dresses, men in colorful socks. It was a lark, a happening; here they were on a hilltop in the middle of nowhere! They had to climb up to it, as if being drawn, strings on their chests reeled in.

Many things were proffered at the top. Electronic instruments were wrangled by a Belgian family, the patriarch of which preferred to perform in the nude but conceded to be clothed on this night.

An elderly Frenchman in clogs conducted a washing machine orchestra with the help of his adoring troupe. Dancers wearing wings and amplified sirens climbed the hill like Valkyrie, moved through the containers, scaled them, broadcasting, what — music or alarm? They broadcast alertness. It was a call to something, though no one could have said what.

An hour or so into the evening, an answer came in the approach of black and sparking clouds. Soft bodies, altitude, metal — danger nearly as old as the hill itself. The people with clipboards herded people down the hill to a welcome tent and exchanged grim looks. The rain fell purple and thick, cut to ragged strips by lightning, for longer than they could have imagined. When it finished, the ground was oozing and streaming mud; it engulfed the shoes of the visitors and they went home.

The next day in a now-misting rain, clouds on their heads, the artists and crew and people with clipboards broke it down. Wood scraps into crates, electronics into rolling suitcases, instruments into padded boxes, a bin for everything that could not be salvaged. Then they were gone and the field would heal after several years.

But the night before, after the visitors left, people who had made this thing slogged back up to the empty alien village, and turned on the light organ again. The elderly Frenchman who conducted the washing machine orchestra brought out a fiddle and got the dancing started. People stomping and twirling in what quickly became ankle-deep mud. Flecks flew up to their faces and hair.

The music was not recorded as evidence or culture. It was a muscle twitching. Quotes surrounded nothing. The installation needed this joy and this privacy, just as the fiddle and folk dance needed the installation, the small crowd of virtual strangers with warehouse minds and twelve languages, the cows, the faded industrial valley, and mountains full of caves, hazelnuts, marmot bones, and inscrutable secrets.

The thirty-thousand-year-old mammoth in motion, the crate of wooden blocks for burning. It is always, always this: a moment in the context of forever.