Dear Friend vol 1
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DEAR FRIEND,

It's rather difficult to remember when there was proper daylight in Tallinn. I have been thinking of writing you, but it takes a while to gather attention, sit down, and reflect. We are currently in the middle of the fall semester aSSeSSments at EKA Graphic Design. It seems to take all energy and attention. Waking up has become terribly painful. Long days and silent evenings have become the norm.

Sitting on my sofa, I scroll through emails I miSSed during the day. EKA's newsletter in a fresh green uniform pops up — a reminder of a new era at the Academy with an actual building and a standardised visual identity. I turn to the advertised Open Lecture Series videos of the Department of Architecture and am thrilled to find a lecture by James Taylor-Foster, writer, architect, and curator at ArcDes. I planned on participating in his lecture, but miSSed it because I was in Tartu on a research trip with students. We were on a miSSion, an exciting project we are working on with the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design. Together we map graphic design in different collections all over Estonia. In Tartu, we combed through the repositories of the Estonian National Museum, collections of the Tartu Art Museum and Estonian Agricultural Museum and many others, with museum director Kai Lobjakas and profeSSor Ivar Sakk.

I got lost in my thought. "...desperately trying to keep you awake. That's the fundamental aim of any lecture, I think," explains James. He states that the job of a curator is like being a hunter-gatherer. It is actually quite terrifying how much is out there to conceptualise and write about design in Estonia. Mini steps were taken by my students who wrote about pieces like 1930s cigarette cases, late 1920s canned food labels, or a souvenir plastic bag from the 1980s that profeSSor Sakk himself designed as a young student for the Soviet Estonian Student Union. I remember James also speaking in September at a roundtable at the Istanbul Design Biennial that focused on the spaces of exception in education. When I heard he would be in Tallinn, I thought, wow, another opportunity to meet this charismatic thinker. Now I have him in my living room on a computer screen. It is a depreSSingly low-quality recording, though.

I pause James, eat one mandarin and then a second one on my old beige sofa. "I hope I have your attention...," James continues about attention shopping, attention currency that has become so commodifiable. Our alum Nathan Tulve created the AttentionBuddy, an interactive eSSay or smart home device designed to help people manage and understand the power of attention, as his graduation project. AttentionBuddy is a little orange triangle with wide eyes that pops up like the default Microsoft Office aSSistant Clippy (once upon a time), asking questions about your attention, and providing in-depth daily stats. Nathan's work was inspired by his own attention iSSues or the lack thereof in a social media and fast information-filled life. Nathan based his research and design around the idea that attention is a resource. James tries to see exhibitions as rooms and regimes of attention, and to find ways to present concepts that capture attention within an environment like the biennale, where no one has more than a few minutes of attention.

And suddenly we are inside the 15th Nordic Pavilion that James curated. I wonder if Estonia is Nordic. Estonia has no building in Venice on the biennial grounds. We make use of the existing. "Weak Monument", the Estonian Pavilion by Laura Linsi, Roland Reemaa, and Tadeáš Říha, at the 16th Venice Biennial, was built inside of a former Baroque church. In there, one encountered a contemporary but regular interlocking pavement on top of the marble floor. The same pavement can be found in front of my parents' house. And a large dull concrete wall rose just in front of the altar. The curators focused on the political-historical role of monuments in Estonia and elsewhere. I look at the grey installation covering the colourful ancient and see another metaphor. The rise and fall and the rise and fall... of cultures. How wonderfully distant is the Italian landscape from the Estonian?

A great addition to the low-quality recording are the neighbouring children upstairs. I suspect mixed activities, such as playing with a ball and jumping. We speculate that with the weight gain, their jumping has become noisier. There is no playground on the property of this apartment building. Nowhere to really loose this tremendous energy. My memories are sunny of my kindergarten playgrounds where we ran and played hide and seek in Pärnu — a Pärnu KEK project (built 1975–1978), with playgrounds designed by artist and designer Sirje Runge, where a landscape with different ground levels, metallic and wooden poles, pole structures, and stone walls and ceilings made up a building-like frame with sandy grounds. I never encountered anything like that later. The playground, now gone, haunts me. The stars are aligned, and I received news that the Estonian Museum of Architecture will organise an exhibition about kindergarten design.

My screen still lit. Too lazy to clean my sticky mandarin hands and preSS pause. James continues inside the Nordic pavilion and introduces a large-scale wooden amphitheater that filled the space between the floor and ceiling. This wooden structure let people go up and experience the building from a new standpoint inside the beams in the ceiling. The structure reminds me of Kaisa Sööt's work, who is planning the exhibition design for the art publisher Lugemik's ten-year anniversary exhibition opening late May at the Museum of Applied Art and Design. You are invited! For the exhibit and symposium, she thought of an enormous seating structure. It promises to be a festive anniversary with the many art book publishers around the world gathering this summer. My mind wanders... James is speaking about canopies that architect Sigurd Lewerentz designed. Why canopies in the north? Where is my attention? He finishes up with a thought that "exhibition is a space for attention." My attention is caught, and I preSS sleep.

SINCERELY,
SANDRA NUUT

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