✳✳ DEAR FRIEND,

I finally finished what I told you about—my doctoral thesis on design as writing. But much more than that happened, so much that I actually had to leave my most remarkable finding out of the thesis. It's rather personal and I want to share it with you, but where to start?

Like, did I ever tell you how I thought I hated Siri Hustvedt's novels? I just instinctively disliked them; they would trigger something that I failed to recognize. What frustrated me in particular was when Hustvedt describes completely fictional artworks by her imaginary artist characters, and yet she illustrates their most detailed features. The level of fabrication, fiction in fiction, vexes me, as it leaves me empty. Not to mention the description of dreams in fiction, don't get me started on that. I've been holding a grudge against descriptive writers throughout my adult life and have thrown books away in frustration. I couldn't find a reason for this. I shrugged it away, guessing it just wasn't my thing.

There were other clues, as well. A particular therapist was eager to use art therapy methods and sometimes put crayons in my hand. This always pained me: seriously, they give crayons to a designer and expect some primal expression? Trained to calculate and persuade by means of colour, form and texture, I was never able to drop that analytical armour. But more significantly: there was no colour in my mind, no mental image for my emotions. This became more evident when the same therapist wanted to do relaxation exercises where, guided by their voice, I was to walk on beaches and move through whatever spaces and landscapes. I didn't know how to tell them there was nothing, I was nowhere else than on my chair with my eyes closed. I felt like a failure. I was sure that I was just a control freak, unable to surrender to my own imagination.

I came across an article about aphantasia maybe three years ago. I passed it with a half-interested shrug: so that's a thing. Aphantasia is a feature where a person has no mental imagery, believed to be experienced by 3% of the population. A-phantasia: lack of fantasies. So there you have it. But I always considered myself so statistically average in my abilities, I never thought that had anything to do with me. It wasn't until I came across the same article a second time that I started reading it more closely, looking more closely, seeing—well, nothing but black. Previously, I had no words in my mind for not having images in my mind. Only now I realised that other people actually did.

Aphantasia. It feels overwhelming, and a little embarrassing, to say: it applies to me. I have lived 45 years of my life before realising how different my cognitive experience was compared to the statistically average person.

Do you have mental imagery? When I ask you to imagine a beach, do you see it? Is it a place you visited, or does it exist only in your imagination? And do you count sheep in order to trick yourself to sleep? I never understood that exercise when introduced to it as a child. I closed my eyes and looked for the sheep, but none ever came. I thought it was just some strange metaphor for counting: numbers as sheep. It never occurred to me I should literally see the sheep.

As I've realised I'm aphantasic, the shift in my reality is simultaneously non-existent and profound: everything is the same, but suddenly, I consider my mind, my imagination—this word I can never use neutrally again—from a new perspective, and re-evaluate the nature of my knowledge and the realm of my experience. So, nothing is the same. There is a world of mental imagery somewhere and I am not there and it is not in me.

Now it makes sense to me that I made a home out of text, writing, and typography. While reading, I cling to text and the materiality of language—the letters and spaces on the pages of the book. I never read visual descriptions of landscapes, people, or fictional works of art in order to construct them in my mind. Instead, I read to test the author's ability to write those into language, to encode them into strings of letters, to pursue in words what some fictional body perceives under their gaze. I tolerate descriptive language only if the language itself is carefully crafted, precise and eloquent.

I know you're already thinking this: my mind is not able to conjure a single image, still out of all professions I became a designer, professor and gatekeeper in visual communication design? You cannot miss the irony. All my life I told myself and others that I am a visual person, like when I used my "visual" memory in school exams—I was able to remember the location of the correct answer on the book page. But having read research on aphantasia I now understand this: a location is not an image. *What* and *where*, they are separate things, different realms in human cognition. I never had a mental image of the layout. Instead, I remembered what relations it consisted of. My mind works like a diagram, not a picture.

I used nine years of my life to slowly conduct a doctoral thesis about the material and diagrammatic aspects of text, trying to make sense of how language works spatially. I now realise I have unknowingly devoted my research to understanding the enigma of my own perception, why typography is so important for me. But now that I know what I know, I am less interested in my own experience than the implications this finding might have, and how I can take it forward. I have a feeling I am only beginning to understand the phenomena which Johanna Drucker has coined "visual epistemology" and "diagrammatic form". Because if *what* and *where* are different (although entangled) cognitive realms, might that have an impact on the way we do design?

And what is "visual", anyway? What if everything which we thought was just "visual" was something else too, all along?

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