

The Disintegration Loops

James Smart

I wanted to fall in love with Berlin.

With riding the U-bahn. Cycling in the park. Good graffiti. Kimchi and salmon sashimi at 5 A. M. Currywurst. Getting lost, drinking a bottle from the bottle shop. Coming up for air at club nights that went on for days. All that history so close to the surface.

In Berlin, things happened everywhere. Quietly and loudly. Slowly and then suddenly.

On the flight from London, an American in the next row said he was going to Europe because, "It's where the twentieth century happened."

This I noted. Sampled. He wasn't entirely wrong. He spoke loudly, allowing himself to become material.

He had a ritual where, every time he got on a plane, he would watch the scene in *Fight Club* where Edward Norton imagined his plane crashing. This too he announced to the cabin, grinning.

A stewardess asked him to take his seat.

You would watch a plane crash whilst on a plane, I imagined, because if you saw the worst thing that could happen, it would make it less likely to occur. Like when we say bad things come in threes, and so there couldn't possibly be a fourth. Like when you lose a loved one and decide that it is the last terrible thing that can happen to you for a while. That you are somehow immune from further suffering. How we forget that our grandparents often go in pairs, one shortly after the other.

When the American finally sat in his seat and found *Fight Club* on the in-flight entertainment system, he said to his neighbour, "I just really like this movie. Don't you just love this movie?"

the disintegration loops

william bazinski

William Bazinski

"dlp 1.1"

The Disintegration Loops

2002

2062 / Temporary
Residence

He looked around, excited to be himself.

I had a similar ritual to the man on the plane: I listened to the first volume of William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops* every day for a year so that my life wouldn't collapse. So that if it did, I could hold onto the belief that something beautiful might come from the ruins.

I wondered where the American would go after we landed in Berlin. I wondered whether he would see the Wall, the Eastside Gallery, Checkpoint Charlie. The Holocaust Memorial. Whether he would go further, to Buchenwald or Auschwitz, and then, whether he would go into the chambers. I wondered what he might hope for when seeing those things—everything the twentieth century had wrought—and what seeing them might prevent from happening in the future.

I sat with "dlp 1.1" on my headphones and waited to be fed.

"dlp 1.1" is the first track from William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops*. It is sixty-three minutes and thirty five seconds long. "dlp 1.1" is the sound of an army returning home under a banner of defeat. A dirge of horns. A scattering of drums. The song is the sound of smoke over Manhattan.

Over many repetitions, "dlp 1.1" drops notes. Phrases. Snatches of percussion. It subtly alters over the hour. Your relationship with it changes. Like how your opinion of a first date might sour between the beginning and end of a meal.

The Disintegration Loops started life on cassette. In the 1980s, Basinski composed a series of tape loops from processed samples. Fragments of nature and shortwave radio. Decades later, Basinski digitised the recordings and found that the tape had deteriorated to the point that it came apart and crumbled

in the deck. With every loop, the tape and sound decayed further. The track cracked with noise. Portions of the melody gave way to silence. Eventually, they faded into nothing.

Basinski finished digitising the tapes the morning of September 11th 2001. After two 767s crashed into the towers and they came down, Basinski sat on his roof in Brooklyn, capturing a video of the sun going down on a smoking Manhattan whilst listening to the completed loops. Together, these things become larger. They extend beyond the length of a single loop.

After our in-flight meal, a sad girl with glasses and brown hair in the seat next to me recommended three jazz bars in Berlin. She wrote them down in the back of a journal I bought for the trip. So far I had barely stretched the spine. I'd collected a few German words I enjoyed—Zugzwang, Treppenwitz, Kummerspek—and sketched strangers in biro.

When the girl asked me why Berlin, why now, how far I was going, how far I had come, she was sketching me. We never learned each other's names.

"This is the one," she said, writing down the name of a club in Kreuzberg. "This is the one you should go to if you go to no others. This one."

And I told the sad German girl I would go, even though I had already decided I would not.

I knew she was sad because I was sad. I recognised it in her pauses. In the nervous play of her hands. Her anxious glances to the floor.

On the bus from the airport, we sat across from one another and smiled, waiting for the end to rush up and meet us, for the moment to finally unravel.

I went to Berlin because I wanted to be the kind of person who went to Berlin. I wanted to be able to say I had been to Berlin, more than I actually wanted be there. This is a cycle I cannot

help but repeat: to ache for something
then find myself unable to live it.

I wanted to fall in love.

I fall in love every day, though only for a moment. With people. Things. With the idea of Berlin, but only for the duration of the flight. With Carlee, who had invited me to Berlin, between seeing and answering her phone calls. With the sad girl from the plane, though only in the moment when the bus pulled away from her stop and I watched her disappear. Those few short seconds. What I wanted was to fall in love for longer than that.

In Berlin, Carlee and I ate at nice restaurants and found ways to talk about our lives without going reel to reel. We both wore dark sunglasses. We lost each other in the Holocaust Memorial. When I lead the way on the bike, Carlee said that I had the seat too low. At the Eastside Gallery, we shared fries and a jug of beer, and walked along the Wall. The gallery is 1316 metres long. It is the longest unbroken stretch of the Wall that remains standing. The Wall divided Berlin for 10,316 days—it has now been gone for longer than it was ever here.

Like Basinski's loops, every composition decays and disappears. In the listening. In the living.

I wanted to fall.

For a long time. Let myself collapse. Reach zero. Be levelled.

Some days this means I cannot leave my bed. This is something I feel coming and all I can do is bunker. Let it roll over me. Pull me apart.

I stayed in an Airbnb in Kreuzberg with a yoga instructor called Yorda. The room I rented was the room of her young son, who was nowhere to be seen, though his traces were everywhere.

Little German phrases carved into the wood of his bed frame. Toys packed into corners. Even when I was alone in the flat, I was crushed in on top of myself. Wherever I stood, there seemed to be no room. The only shower in Yorda's flat was in the kitchen.

At night and in the mornings, it was quiet in the apartment, near silent; the hush like that of a song discovering itself. I listened to *The Disintegration* Loops and I wrote. I sent emails. I cooked. I googled galleries and museums and street art spots. I planned routes on Streetview and noted the journey time.

Over email, Carlee said we were just too similar and I agreed. Breakfast and lunch, I mostly ate alone. Dinner, I ate with Carlee or Yorda or alone, but in places so cramped it seemed like I was with other people.

I wandered Berlin with "dlp 1.1." The horns. The slow march to nowhere. I drank coffee. I went into boutique stores and bought nothing. Searched for public wifi. An app on my phone charted the distance I had traveled in kilometres.

In the U-bahn, the loop began to come apart. Stop by stop, "dlp 1.1" gave way to white space. It let the city in.

The thrum of the train engine and small talk in German became the sound of the song forgetting itself.

Basinski collected sounds and committed them to tape—the patience of a freezer, the panic of radio stations—that is how I thought of myself in Berlin.

The thing with memory is that the moment one is committed, it is already out of focus, disassembling. Over time they are used up, remade. Each of them in some way complicit with history, only showing its best side.

I wanted.

More than this. More than had been given to me. To want more than to simply settle.

My last week in Berlin, Carlee and I went to the Hamburger Bahnhof gallery, a former train station, and saw *Das Ende des 20 Jahrhunderts* by Joseph Beuys.

The English translation is "The End of the Twentieth Century".

Before we reached the room, me and Carlee goofed. We touched exhibits and tried to make each other laugh. We each tried to make the other see things differently. In the room with Beuys' work, we both fell quite silent.

Das Ende des 20 Jahrhunderts is a collection of thirty one conical basalt stones. They are each a couple of metres in length. They each have a hole bored into them at one end. In this hole is another, smaller rock, lined with clay and felt. They look like coffins. Bodies. They are placed around the room in configurations of twos and threes. They are placed in such a way that invites you to walk between them.

The beautiful and terrible thing about the work was that the materials Beuys used would not last forever. They would someday disintegrate. The clay would be the first to go. Then the felt. Finally, the stone. By then, we would all be long gone, though the same could be said for any work of art.

There was no set arrangement for the pieces. They were placed differently every time they were moved and redisplayed.

I wondered whether a random placement of the stones changed something about the work. Whether it added something or whether it took it away.

I like to think that when they are moved, some of the stones are dropped. Damaged. Chipped. That museum staff might happen on the shards, wrap them

up inside their clothing and take them home.

When I told Carlee that *The End of the Twentieth Century* made my chest ache, she waited a beat before saying it did nothing for her. She could take it or leave it.

I realised I was not in love with Berlin. Somewhere near the end of the trip, I decided that all cities were the same, just concrete and steel and rows of windows staring into one another.

The Disintegration Loops and *Das Ende des 20 Jahrhunderts* cause me to think more slowly, but less carefully. I think about everything that loss lets in. The meaning that silence permits.

Late at night in London, with "dlp 1.1," I think of Carlee drawing patterns in a sketchbook by the River Spree. I think of placing my hand on one of Beuy's stones and resisting the urge to roll it over. I think of the American on the plane. The sad girl and the jazz clubs I never went into. I think of Carlee passing on her bicycle to me, which had been given to her, which I then gave to some-one else. I think of rushing her onto the train. Watching her pull away. The aftermath. The debris. All these things coming together, to collapse in volumes.

I read that after the attacks, many Americans became paralysed. They would lie on the sofa all day, watching the news. The speculation doing laps. Waiting for the next terrible thing to happen. I know that if something so large had happened so close to me, I would be one of those immobilised people too.

I.

Me. A constructed thing. I wake up and am one person and when I go to sleep I am someone else.

I recently quit my job without replacing it. I am selling the house I

bought with the first woman I loved. I get up and go to sleep. I let things suggest themselves. I do yoga. I feel like so much white space. I drop phrases and notes. I remember and forget and I try to write everything down.

On the tenth anniversary of the attacks, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held a Remembering September 11 concert. A performance of "dlp 1.1" from *The Disintegration Loops* closed the show. For forty minutes, The Wordless Music Orchestra recreated the sound of the decaying loop. The falling apart. The grief, the ecstasy, the death of melody.

Prefacing the concert, one speaker said, "Our memory is the cornerstone of our ability to endure."

After the final notes of the performance had rung out, the conductor held the orchestra and the audience in silence for two minutes and fourteen seconds before finally accepting applause.