

THE COMMUNE

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The Commune.

Adelita Husni-Bey. *The institution will be run by a morally superior AI.* 2018. Chromogenic color print. 142 × 177 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea. © 2020 Adelita Husni-Bey

DAY 1

I swiped left on this guy from the third floor, and Mümma interjects through my aroma diffuser. Her voice muffled against the effleurage lavender, telling me I made the wrong decision. I make a lot of wrong decisions and I'm just glad she's there to catch me. Maybe I made the wrong decision because everything feels wrong today - they closed down the schools and our teachers are nowhere to be found. Yesterday, Mümma decided that we would all have to work in the hydroponic garden six feet away from another, in bodysuits and we were to stay in our balloon sleep tents at night. I snuck out anyways, to see Enzo from the fifth floor and we shared a balloon sleep tent together.

DAY 2

I had to get my temperature taken today before going into the garden, and it was a little higher than normal, so I was sent home. In my defense, I went to Enzo's again, and had to run to work because Enzo's balloon is so much farther from the garden than my balloon. I wish he would come here every once in a while, I always have to take all the risks. When I got back home, I was bombarded with Mümma's new questionnaire.

Who have you seen in the last two weeks?

Who have you worked with in the last two weeks?

Who have you talked to in the last two weeks?

Where have you been, besides home and work in the last two weeks?

I said I worked with Enzo, which wasn't a lie, but somehow Mümma was aware of all my indiscretions and had apparently slipped something called a Plan B in my protein shake yesterday. "*You'll thank me later.*" I wanted to know what Plan A was, but I just whispered "*thank you*" anyways, just for good measure. I felt myself turn red and hot, and Mümma immediately sprayed me with something astringent, updated my phone, and ordered me to my balloon sleep tent for two weeks. This wouldn't have been a big deal, had my roommate not gone back to her birth family's balloon. I wish Enzo would come over.

DAY 3

With nothing else to do, schools closed, barred from work for no other reason than my high temperature from *running*, I decided to never run again, but to also message the guy from the third floor. He was actually a cook, not a farmer, and I didn't really enjoy the potatoes from last week's dinner. But, he was cute enough and Enzo stopped answering my calls. I say hello, and I hear Mümma giggle. His name is Sardine, which is unfortunate, but I suppose it's fitting for his occupation. We watched the sunset together from our separate balloons, and it was almost romantic. Sardine was also hounded by Mümma and had no idea why- trapped in his balloon until further notice. I didn't know why we couldn't be trapped in our balloons together, but then again, I don't know Sardine very well, and he's not a very good cook anyways. My chest tightened and I felt the PVC from the balloon caving in. Mümma delivered me a tray of polenta, which is usually my favorite, but I couldn't smell or taste a thing. I eat on video chat with Sardine, bored out of my mind. I push my polenta back and forth, and began to kick my balloon,

hoping to set myself free. It didn't work, Mümma told me to stop, and so I started to watch the Sopranos, and I wondered if this is how people used to live.

DAY 6

It's been a couple of days since Mümma ordered me to stay home, but she has initiated a complete lockdown, with the exception of going to work. Everyone gets to go to work except for me, which is so unfair and I wonder if it's because I lied about Enzo. Is staying home and binge watching The Sopranos what Plan B is? I bet he's talking to other farmers now, but I take comfort in knowing that they're six feet away, and barred from seeing each other outside of work. I started to feel a little ill, and I tried to text Sardine that I had the plague, but for whatever reason, my phone wouldn't let me spell the word. Perhaps a phone error, Mümma has been acting so peculiar these days.

DAY 9

I gave up on Sardine and started swiping again. He wanted to get married so we could share the same balloon and I'm just not quite ready. It does seem like I'm not the only person alone in their balloon, which I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse. I'm getting a little scared, and I had a question about it and couldn't reach Professor Bezos. Rumor has it that he's escaped the colony with all our seedlings, but I don't believe a thing Cabbage Patch tweets. She's annoying and is always going on about how a pandemic is going to kill us all. I don't know what a pandemic is, and I have too much pride to ask her. I tried to ask Mümma once, and all she said was that it was none of my concern. Anyways, every time I try to reach someone to talk about being stuck in a balloon, the connection cuts off and I have to call them again. We all figured out a way to talk and type in code, so the system doesn't crash when we talk to each other. Mümma set me up with Drone, this guy who works on the custodial staff. I think he used to sneak into Enzo's balloon too, but I only suspected. Drone is nice, and he seems to just get me. I didn't even have to tell him anything, he just knew. Drone says he figured out Mümma's blind spots, and takes off his mask sometimes at work. He leaves me a bottle of hand sanitizer outside my balloon and I fantasize about sneaking up to his balloon.

DAY 15

I didn't have work today so I just laid around in my balloon. I can simply say I feel sad about the days passing. I am looking at my hand sanitizer from Drone and feel like... actually nothing. I think I'll ghost him for a few days. Everything feels like a false routine -- I'd go do my share of farming, eat, and the return to my hollow little balloon. I haven't been sleeping well either. Every night I'm glued to my device, swiping on the app, or going into wormholes of reaction videos to "Rain on Me." Some nights I'd rage to "how I'm feeling now" in my balloon.

I miss the sunlight and the warmth on my skin. With the new bodysuits, I barely feel human, and I can't even recognize other people's faces. It's still quite cold out, so Mümma deactivated the outdoor gardening activities, and the hydroponic system has been a great success. I am sure everyone will want to do outdoor work once it comes... With the new lockdown sanctions, we aren't even able to go out even for strolls.

I've been watching other people through the layers of wrinkled plastic, which turned them into blurry nude color figures moving around their bubbles. It's strange to feel so alone and artificially connected at the same time. I feel so distant from people, and the sense of community once so great feels empty in the Institution. It's cold, sterile, and precise. My direct neighbor was gone for almost two weeks. I'm not sure what happened but the days before they were here, they had a minor cough, so perhaps they were living somewhere else.

The infirmary had expanded with the new sanctions, taking over a portion of the alt-school on the 4th floor. We were not allowed to enter and entry was only permitted with special permissions. Why did we need a sudden expansion so quickly? Perhaps, another institution needed help with the flu season. It looked like something was going on in there - Mümma brought in a crew of new people who went through to the infirmary. I haven't seen them around anywhere else either, including on the app. I have the fear I'm doing too little if there is a crisis right now.

It did not occur to me how much I miss conversation, bantering and laughing with my friends in our free time. We'd make shit up and gossip about Mümma. We can't say much now, even through our phones which are limited. We've lived through crises, but the absence of regular interactions changes so much.

I wonder what Mümma has to say and perhaps it is possible to speak with her. I've heard that people have been able to speak privately with her now. There are so many things that don't make sense.

What am I contributing to?
What are we building?
Why must we be so distant to one another?
Why are people taking absence?
Where are the teachers?
Why have some people disappeared?
Why did we close the school?
Mumma if you hear me what is going on?

Day 16

Mumma called me in today. She explained there was a global pandemic going on -- it was a highly contagious airborne virus.

The teachers, disabled, and those with health conditions moved into a containment area in the infirmary and were working closely with Mumma to develop a vaccine. Their research was inconclusive so far but they were getting close to something. She showed me the virus itself:

I feel upset that we just weren't told about this.

Day 19

I spent the last few days with anxiety about the whole situation.
In fact, I haven't told anyone about what Mümma told me, about this pandemic and such.

Day 20

I realized those people who had gone to see Mümma also know this and they just chose not to say anything. It is my rightful duty to the Institution to remain silent and just do my job. Mümma is one of the most powerful minds in AI developed today and she knows.

I will just wait.

Day 28

It's hard to live with the distance with my family in such extreme circumstances. We pretend that everything is ok in here, but it is not. Mümma is operationally stripping us away from our identities. Or am I doing this to myself. I feel so passionate about how much we've accomplished so far and once the vaccine is available, we will be able to return to some sort of normal.

I watch everyday the people that I am with here. I wonder so many questions about their previous lives. Mümma doesn't have a previous life, it is not something programmed into her AI.

Who are we in a sea of many?

DAY 35

I'm scared to leave my balloon. I heard the bounce of the shriek echo against my balloon. I've lost track of time of the days with the curfew. Days are shorter but the light is longer.

Day 42

New Body.

I'm in my bubble and I'm closing my eyes and I'm thinking about you and I'm holding my face with my arms crossed.

I've been thinking about how I can touch myself, contort my body in new ways, so that my own touch can feel a little foreign to me for a moment. The faux foreign touch gives me just a tiny bit of comfort; I could pathetically pretend to be held in the privacy of my bubble all day if I could. If my body didn't have any purpose for labor-which it has to be in the commune-what if I dedicated my days into multiplying my body? What if I could split myself up, somehow exploiting my muscle memory, and become a bubble of my own? If my body could replicate the bubble, I wouldn't need you to hold me, scratch my back, or pop my pimple. I could become a self-serving ecosystem maybe.

The ideal feminine post-apocalyptic icon; independent, beautiful, mechanical, soft, and fake.

Let me backup because I'm afraid I'm starting to sound crazy. I don't *want* to become everything for myself. I know I can't be my own partner/best friend/mother, I need other people every day. Loneliness terrifies me and it always has. Mümma tries her best for me and I appreciate it all, I'm afraid she's sensing my loneliness. I mask my practices of contorting my body constantly as a form of yoga, but I don't think yoga makes people weep for hours afterward.

If we think about our bodies in a vacuum, would its design be what you want it to be?

I wish I had tentacles to wrap myself in; maybe I could have SUCH an abundance of tentacles that at some point I could choose which ones to feel disconnected to (so that, lets say, my back tentacles could be my bed) and which ones to feel connected to (I could use my arm-assigned tentacles to brush my teeth). Maybe my tentacles reserved for my loved ones could be elegantly long. I could be in my bubble, alone, and still scratch your back while you go to sleep from 3,025 miles away. Maybe some of my tentacles could be furry and disconnected to the rest of my nervous system, so they serve more like sedentary comfort objects. Essentially a pet, but a part of me forever, yet not exactly a part of *me*.

As soon as I finally decide to stop dream-designing my beautiful mutant body full of love, I hear people start to rustle about in their bubbles and start to get ready for the day.

I contemplate pretending to be sick so that I have an excuse to just lay in my bubble all day and keep daydreaming.

The most alive and active I've felt in ages is on the cold hard ground.

Day 43

I still want to be still, but still my anxiety makes me feel like it's about to make my body erupt at the seams. Still is a word I've been thinking about a lot lately. There's comfort in stillness but also frustration about immobility. "Movement" is a constant theme in my mind right now. I could run forever right now. Right now.

Mümma wouldn't understand any of this; she's so lucky. I want to be that all knowing and placeless and cold but not cold enough to be scary, warm but not warm enough to ever get too comfortable. Although I wouldn't say she's been getting warmer lately, her questions have been more human oriented lately.

In addition to the usual questions about my stats for the day she's also been asking me about who I've seen, what kind of workers I've been with, who have I been seeing congregating.

I don't understand why she'd care to know these things but I trust that it's for a good reason. Even if it isn't, I don't care enough to question it. I've resigned my human self, off into my imagination I go again weeeeeee

Day 44

I'm getting SO much better at this body contortion for comfort thing. Did you realize that if you numb your arm or leg by sitting on it for long enough, it feels just like another person to the other parts of your body? It's still not warm like you though, so I'm gonna keep experimenting.

Day 45

My tentacle daydream has been stuck with me since I thought about it a few days ago....could it be that I'm on to something? Yes, it's crazy, and sad, and would probably be very horrifying once visualized, but I have nothing to lose and I just want to talk/think more about the possibilities about that kind of life.

I knew my friends have been on that swiping app to talk to others in the commune so I hopped on there thinking maybe I could find someone to let me entertain them with my dreams—this is where I made a bit of a mistake.

The first girl I matched with seemed interested and let me go on about my new body ideas and why I wanted certain features.

-Yeah I could imagine that, but if everyone designed their own bodies, wouldn't we all be drastically different? Like you want tentacles, but I think I would be a sphere lol

-A sphere would be sick!! Imagine rolling...but yeah I guess we would all look super different, but we would probably be SO different that it doesn't even matter? kinda like how people say if everything means nothing then nothing means everything

-True, but I think that difference would just drive us apart, idk I like the idea though but maybe there should be some rules about how much you can change

-oh, yeah maybe...idk its not really what I had in mind but

We disconnected after that.

Day 46

I'm looking out from my bubble while doing my nightly stretches and I notice the distance more than before. Either I am losing my mind or the bubbles have been moving more and more apart from each other? I could've sworn we were closer before, but I'm sure Mümma would've notified us about a change like this. Maybe my eyes are too strained from having to help out in the lab today. It was weird for someone of my rank to have to be helping out there but I guess there were fewer lab organizers than needed, perhaps they have been mostly getting sick. Makes sense given their proximity to the hospital, but still the number of people I've seen missing doesn't quite add up.

I messaged that girl again to talk about this when I got back to my bubble but I could tell she got a little uncomfortable. It was hard to keep the conversation going after (and the awkward ending of last night) so I got back to swiping away, touching myself, and going to bed.

