AN INTERVIEW WITH AJ
ON THE TOPIC OF LOVE LETTERS

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INTRODUCED by
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The transcript has been edited for the purposes of concision and readability.

INTRODUCTION

The Love Letter, Expenditure, and Death

"The thermospasm is reality as undiluted chaos. It is where we all came from. The death-drive is the longing to return there... as a salmon would return upstream to perish at the origin. Thermospasm is howl, annihilating intensity, a peak of improbability. Energetic matter has a tendency [...] the current scientific sense of this movement is a perpetual degredation"

Nick Land, in *Thirst for Annihilation*

It is difficult to introduce AJ's interview, in no small part because he makes such a vast array of interesting points. There are so many things to be said about queer time, about the way love slips outward by our material traces, about facticity in photography... In an attempt however to grace all that in a gesture that's far too wide, I want to situate our conversation in the context of expenditure.

My (philosophical) concern with love was born out of a fundamental disagreement with Nick Land's theory of the death drive, which in his seminal 'Thirst for Annihilation' is raised to an entropic ontology divining the heat-death of the universe. Everything, by his account, is a process of expenditure. He quotes Bataille, saying "the sun is black", but makes him monstrous, continuing "the sun is nothing but death". As he looks to the sun he doesn't see warmth, or light, or life, but the wastage of all those things – an inevitable trajectory toward absolute zero. Disregarding any pretence of scientificity (as, I've been told, Land's references to science are certainly pretence), the resolute negativity of his system precludes any conception of energy or desire's being productive. To quite burying the lead, it is logics of negativity like these which result in the misunderstanding that love, and the amorous relationships sustained by it, are essentially operations of sacrifice or expenditure.

Sure, most do not see the death of love in their lover's eyes, but many uphold the logic of negativity when they announce "you have to put something in to get something out". Suddenly romance is a system of depts and balances, there is an economy of expenditure by which fidelity can be measured. In practical terms, it's the assumption that a love letter or gift is made more valuable through increased energetic or economic cost. Of course, we mustn't disregard the importance of effort; but we must also be careful not to conflate effort and expense. We are most inspired to make an effort when love and desire flows freely, that effort is experienced as the performance of acts of love rather than acts of service; not a task undertaken, nor a burden, nor work, *but free action*.

We must be careful not to presume the fallacy of expenditure, or let our relationships become transactional, or overly economical. As soon as effort becomes a measure of expense - as though our relationships are black holes sustained by sacrificial flows of desire – then love has set its course by the knotted tracks of the death drive (although I take issue with it's supposed inevitability, I don't disagree that these toxic binds are a virulent possibility). It's this logic which sets us up for disappointment when our beloved's efforts are free and generous, but fail to articulate themselves in the manner we expect. It is also this logic which de-sensitises us to those brief or happenstance, even accidental expressions of love which punctuate every-day life. In anticipation of expenditure, we are effectively blinded to the gesture; anticipating expenditure, our only measure of love is the toll it takes – love assumes its equivocation to pain. In anticipation of expenditure, *love is nothing but death*.

It might seem a little extravagant (or even dishonest) to connect AJ's praising the relative cheapness of a postage stamp, to statements as vast and dramatic as these. My aim here is not to suggest that AJ says all this (although, in a way, I suppose I am), rather that the logics proper to his thinking can be extrapolated such that they find resonance everywhere; personal values, interpersonal relationships, art practices... The point of archiving these conversations is to allow readers to run away with them; in amongst all their internal conflict and apparent contradiction, in the slights of hand and brief glimpses of something true, between and beyond all that is something like love's process – it's disjunct and productive nature, it's becoming forever more-than itself. So, thankyou AJ for allowing me to run away with you for the duration of this conversation, and for permitting me to run away with your thought in its wake. The discussion here, is truly one which refuses to be pinned down, resolve itself, or – in this literary sense – die.

AJ

What, to you, is a love letter? I think a love letter is just any written sign of affection for someone. Whether it's a long poem or a note that says, "Have a good day at work". I always think about when parents put notes in their kid's lunch boxes; that's a love letter. It doesn't need the word "love", or to be romantic... I think it's just about showing affection to someone in a permanent written form. When I went to University, my mum wrote me a postcard every few days. Just about her day. They never said anything revealing; "I walked the dog today, Mum", "Remember to refill your prescription, Mum"... She did it the whole way through. That, for me, is a love letter. It was her way of letting me know "I'm thinking of you. I miss you. Here's something I want to tell you". And the postcard - it's a picture of something that reminded her of me. Those are love letters. I've gotten other ones as well, for Valentine's or whatever, and that's fine... But the casualness of her, just, "I'm thinking of you. I've sent you this"... It's the purest form of a love letter, to me.

Could you discern between a letter which is a love letter, and one which is not? Or rather, could your mum send you a letter which isn't a love letter? Honestly, I think because I know she loves me, and cares for me... Even if it said, "X is overdue, Y is overdue – you can't come home for Christmas" [...] unless she actually said, "I don't love you, I don't care about you, you are not my son", I would still take it as some form of a love letter. Because especially with phones and social media, she could text me. She could send me a voice note right now. As soon as you're putting pen to paper, there is definitely a feeling of love there – even if the contents of the letter aren't filled with love. Showing the respect for the person to put time in and write something down, fold it, put it in an envelope, whatever... Putting in that effort goes to show some sort of respect, if not affection, even love – in most cases.

It's interesting you bring up effort, because it sounds as though part of the charm of what your mum did was in its being - or appearing - almost effortless? They were very effortless postcards in content. They were effortless on paper. But in reality, it meant she looked for a postcard; she found one, bought it, wrote it... She probably laughed about how boring whatever she wrote was, then wrote my address, then attached a stamp, and sent it to me. All that's just sending a postcard, which sounds like an effortless thing to do, but it means she took time out of her day. Also, I think, for her to write something simple, without saying "I really miss you, home is really weird. I can't believe you've grown up and left home..." The fact that she knew just writing something boring would be enough, I think that took effort. The self-restraint. Like, she didn't even fill the postcards. And, for me, if I have a piece of paper and I get three-quarters of the way down writing something, I'd think I might as well fill the page. But she chose not to do that. Or maybe she forced herself not to do that – which is pretty impressive considering she's a writer. She really could have filled it if she wanted to.

Why do you think she exercised that restraint? Me and my mum tell each other a lot, we're very open with each other. When I was growing up, she said "If you tell me, you'll never be in trouble - only if you lie". So I will always ask "How are you?", and she'll say "This is bad, this is bad, this is good" [...] I know that when I went to Uni, she was so scared that I wouldn't do well, and I was worried I'd make no friends... She was restrained because she knew I didn't need anything to stress me out. The only one I can think of that was longer than a couple lines was a postcard of Nantucket, and it said "Sylvia Plath often spent her summers in Nantucket. It features in a lot of her poems. Good thing she doesn't use rhyming couplets because Nantucket doesn't really rhyme with anything except 'And Fuck it', and that doesn't really suit her, Mum". That's the longest postcard I ever got. I also feel like... basically, she didn't have to mother me by writing these; she could just do something silly and fun. Which I think is important – especially in a parent-child relationship, you can just end up doing things for each other. You never get to enjoy the person.

When you write love letters, do you follow the same sentiment – of their becoming part of everyday life, their being serialised, even effortless? Every time I've written my partner a love letter, I haven't thought out what I need to say in my head – I've never planned it. I'll just write, and whatever comes out is what you're getting. I think love letters – if they're to be sincere – need to be very honest. And there've been times I've written something and gone, "Blah, blah, blah, don't know why I wrote that, that was so weird, anyways..." but then I continue... If I got a letter with loads of bits scribbled out, then it does seem like, "Why didn't you just rewrite it?". But then I'd ask, "What are you censoring about yourself?". Just write the first thing that comes to your head.

Do you think you'd be suspicious of a really well-written love letter? Yes, one hundred percent. The more you know someone, the less formal you tend to be in talking. I feel like that reflects in your writing as well. If I got a letter from my partner, and it was very formal, "Dear AJ, I love you, you are great, it was lovely seeing you the other day, see you soon, love you..." I'd think – is that it? It's like an email, or AI generated, or just standard. The more personalised and colloquial it is, the more it feels like its actually from another person – the person you love. Obviously, if I got a beautifully written and [personal] love letter from an anonymous stranger, I'd find it weird; but assuming it's from my partner, you know, "I know you, I love you, remember these fun things we did together..." I'd feel like, "I know this [person], I love this person". Instead of thinking you just googled how to write a love letter.

So, cliché is out? Well, I think to be cringe is to be free. So, if you want to write some real wishy-washy stuff, go ahead – if that's how [the love letter] appears in your mind. Not if it's something you've Googled or otherwise formulated to make you sound good.

Could somebody – well, I don't want to talk about people, I want to talk about you, so – when you're writing a love letter, it sounds like spontaneity and vulnerability are very important... Do you and [your partner] write each other love letters? We used to – when I lived in Cardiff and they lived in Brighton I would have to. I always accidentally took something when I went home, or I'd leave something by accident, and they'd have to send it to me. We used to write each other little, short things. And there'd be things I'd definitely make a point not to tell them [over text], just so that when they got it, it wasn't just the same old shit. You know, I'd write "I saw this the other day, thought of you; here's a movie we should see at some point". And then I'd send it instead of just texting it to

AJ

them, because I was texting them about a bunch of other stuff anyways. So, I wanted to give them something unseen in these love letters; but it was always very casual.

It sounds like this spontaneity requires some preparation...

Yeah, in a way. I'd finish my shift at work, there would have been a crazy customer, I have to tell [my partner]. I'd go home, write it, post it – they'd find out in a couple days. I think getting something in the post nowadays is such a rarity; getting a letter, rather than a bill or a TV license threat... You want to give them something exciting, even if it's just a story they haven't heard before.

When you're writing these letters, what are you writing with? Does that matter particularly?

I will try and make sure it's not just a scrap of paper and a scratchy biro, but quite often that's all I have to hand. So it'll just be some lined paper, a pen that isn't going to tun out of ink, usually just what I have lying around my room... But this has inspired me, I would so have a letter-writing pen; it's like I mean serious business, I'm pulling out the fountain pen-

But does that begin falling into...

Exactly – it's forced. Very Bridgerton, very quill and ink. Just write it down [...] I'm trying to do more with my hands, and I think having any type of barrier – not having the right pen to write a love letter – is going to stop me from doing it. So, no. I'll just use the pot of pens on my desk.

So in that sense, the materiality is quite important, but it's meaning comes from its being functional, or immanent to the urge to write?

I think it is an urge. Like what people say about ideas and writing them down. I try to practice the same sort of pouncing on everything. If I wanted to write a letter or a postcard or a note to someone, I have to just do it. I don't think [...]

Here's a slight change of subject... What you're saying about acting immediately upon ideas, does that approach apply in your photographic practice?

Yeah, I think... I'm mainly a documentary photographer. A lot of the principles of documentary photography used to be that it's the absolute truth. But over time, more and more people have said that documentary [photography] is not truth, it's someone's showing of the truth. So, whenever I think about a photograph, I think about if it were in a massive art gallery, what would I want people to take from it? I tend to pre-plan that, but I don't pre-plan shots. I just shot a gay cowboy night - it had line dancing, it was great – but I didn't go in thinking about anything more than bringing my camera. As soon as there's any real planning, any need, then it creates the opportunity to fail. So I just go and do it. Every time I think I need a certain headshot or portrait, I never get it – and I'm miserable because things didn't go to plan. That's also part of why I shoot in digital. With film, I'm a lot more sparing because it's so expensive; that means sometimes I end up missing things because I'm waiting for something better – and the better might never come.

It's like not having the right pen...

Exactly.

Digital photography is still accused of being sort of abstracted, but do you think there's an immanence to it in its being so pragmatic, so reactive...

I think about painters, and those that paint sunsets – they don't, or won't, paint only the best sunset of their life. They just look at one and think, "That's amazing, I want to paint that". So why would you wait for the best or the better thing if what's there, then, inspires you. If that's what makes you want to take a photograph, or to paint, or to write, why would you wait for something better? Because sod's law the better thing won't come, or someone will stand in front of it.

See, this seems to stand in conflict with what you were saying about pre-planning the audience's reception of a photograph – I wonder what degree of anticipation you're implying there?

Not that much. When I lost my job in February, I relied a lot on freelancing to make money, and I ended up photographing all these events. I absolutely hated them. I would give clients what they wanted. They'd ask for happy group pictures, they'd ask for this and that, and I'd do it and make sure they got what they asked for – which was never my own stuff. And they'd think it was great. The clients would love it, and I was miserable. It felt like I was just doing my job, like I was barely involved. So now I'm not doing that, I'm particular about what pictures I choose; if people agree with me, great. But if I take and choose photographs that no-one else ever wants to see? So be it. I think it's important – with the state of things – trying to earn money, trying to have a life, trying to do a job, to do things for the love of the game. I don't think too many people do that anymore [...] With photography, I'm doing it because I love it. I'm not doing it to try and get a better job. If I'm destined to work in hospitality and retail my whole life, that's fine. But I would like something that makes me feel alive...

Do you write love letters for the love of the game? Or are they for someone – yourself, the recipient?

I just write them because I want to show and tell people I care for them. That's it. Would I ever write one to a relative stranger? Or someone who didn't have interest in me? I don't know – but I have no issue showing my feelings... If I were to write a love letter to someone I was friends with, saying "I'm in love with you" and they didn't feel the same – that's okay, because at least they get the compliment of knowing that someone's in love with them [...] Genuinely! I've been able to be honest, everything's out in the open, and they've gotten a complement from someone. I've always tried to be straightforward with how I feel. I just refuse to be casual or nonchalant about feelings. They're so important. If something's angered you, be angry. If something's upset you, be upset. If you're in love with someone, be in love with them – tell them. Because, how sad would it be... I think all the time, especially with queer people, to have gotten to the end of your life, having been in love with someone for fifty years, never having told them, getting married to someone else, having kids, having done your own thing – when you die, that's all you're going to think about. Whereas if you tell them, even if nothing happens, at least it's out there...

Do you think queerness has informed your perspective on all this?

Being Trans means I have no choice other than being authentically myself. Every room I walk into, I'm vulnerable. I'm bearing my chest – excuse the pun. You have to make a choice; thinking about transitioning, you get to a point where you have to choose: me or them. And you choose you, and you transition. That sticks with you. it means you can't really choose to pretend anymore – you've removed your greatest pretence. When I was presenting as a girl, and being a girl, I was such a horrible person. I lied, I was very bitchy, I was very vindictive, and I didn't want to be... I still held all my same values - that you should tell people how you feel - but it was twisted. Then, when I transitioned, and I was happy, it suddenly realised there was this gentleness in me that no one was

aware of. [That means] I have to be very sincere, very straight-up, otherwise… I saw what being dishonest made me. So, the thought of someone else being like that, where I was… just tell someone you love them. Like, sometimes at work, a customer will blurt out as they're running off something like "Okay, thanks, love you, bye!". They just told you they love you. They didn't mean to, but they did; but they didn't mean to and you know what they mean…

Okay, so, that's very interesting… I wonder where you place this sincerity; if it's in semantics or in sentiment? The customer saying they love you, we know what they mean; where it's coming from… It's a slip, sure, maybe it expresses a certain fondness, but certainly not capital-L love. The words themselves are quite intense, but given context and a little grace… I suppose I'm wondering if grace and sincerity go hand in hand here? I'm wondering, whether it's in a love letter or any other form of confession, what's at stake is really the establishment of a common understanding; trust - no matter how brief, tenuous, or indeterminate. Which means, finally, in a roundabout way, I'm wondering if trust is really the most important part of all this?

Yeah, you need to be able to trust someone not to weaponize your words or [feelings] against you. Sure, you can tell someone you love them, and they don't feel the same and that's okay. But if they start telling everyone and making fun of you for it – that's a horrible thing to do. I feel like you do need to trust someone and think, "If all this went horribly wrong, would they turn it against me?". Obviously, you can't be going up to strangers acting sweet and confessing your love for them, fully meaning it. First because you don't know them, second because they'll think your insane – and you probably are…

You're someone, though, who seems to be willing to trust that others will understand you? Or give you grace and take things in the spirit you intend them?

Yeah.

Where do you think that comes from?

I think… I take people seriously […] I'd hate to be the boy that cried wolf […] I'd rather believe people. I want to be sincere and say how I feel. It's an AA thing, where you say your piece, and you can't control what other's think – I've said my bit, what everyone else does is up to them. I'll say what I mean, and if it's taken out of context, I'll back myself and explain it properly. If they still don't believe me, I can't control that.

Changing tact again, turning back… you said that you and your partner used to write love letters. Do you guys not write them so much now?

Yeah, I mean, we see each other a lot more now, and we're in an established relationship. There's not as much need for reassurance as there used to be. It was a kind of reassurance, like, "Look, I'm writing you this letter – I do like you…" Now, I know they love me. I know they like me, so it's not something we really need. But it would always be appreciated, and, you know, every now and then when they've been at mine and they've left whilst I'm at work, they'll leave me a little note saying, "I've tidied your room, love you, see you soon". It's not as much of a love letter as I used to get, but also, now I get to see them more than once a month. So, I'll take it. And I keep all of them; it's still a love letter – and they've made my bed. That's such a nice thing to do for someone; that's an act of love.

You know, you're making me realise that I should be more cautious not to over-burden the love letter. I keep talking about them in a way that implies their being necessarily distinct from any other act of love… The two main instances you've described where love letters have been exchanged, they've been because of distance, right? Is the love letter not so distinct, then, from any other act of love? Is it unique only insofar as it can travel – through space, and with its sentimental value, through time?

I think that's it […] When my partner was living in Brighton, and I was living in Cardiff, I'd think "What if I just got the train?". But then I'd spend £70, and they might be busy, or they might not want to see me because they want to spend some time by themselves – that's okay. In a way, it's very self-centred to assume that they would want to see me. Whereas a letter comes in the post, they know my handwriting, they see my return address – don't want to open it? Don't have to. It's harmless. It feels very active on the writing end, but receiving it is very passive. They can just leave it if they don't want to open it then and there. In romantic love especially, there are so many expectations that people put onto [their relationships], that it can lead them to act in ways they'd rather not. So, the passivity of just having a letter appear – you can choose to read it or not. Which is better than sending flowers just because it's Valentines Day. "People said I'd be a bad boyfriend if I didn't send you flowers – so here's some flowers".

[…] I've always struggled with the idea of sending flowers – they die after three days, and then it's like, I've spent £30 on something you have to water for three days; they're going to die, and then they'll take up room in your bin. Whereas a love letter, stamps aren't as cheap as they used to be but they're still cheap, and you can keep them forever if you want. But if you want to get rid of it, you can chuck it in the recycling like nothing.

Is the cheapness important then?

I don't think it always was, but in this economy… I think when people spend money, they expect something in return. Whereas posting a letter, that could be 10 minutes writing and £2.50 postage.

It grants you the opportunity to choose; you don't have to reply, you've not been sent a bouquet…

Exactly, you don't have to. It could have taken minutes – it could have taken hours, but it could have taken minutes. And I just think there's no expectation behind it. That's one of the ways I really feel love – not having expectations to act a certain way. For me, if someone got me something because they read somewhere that it'd be a good gift, I wouldn't appreciate it at all… If I had a headache and they got me a glass of water, lovely; if they got me a glass of water because somebody told them to – that's not an act of love. […] I had this friend who would always try to get everybody really good gifts, but it was only because she wanted to tell everyone what she got you. A lot of expectation and ego can be hidden behind acts otherwise perceived as kindness. But a love letter… A lot of people think they're cringe and wouldn't want to receive one. A lot of people think they're old fashioned, so there's already that vulnerability. Buying someone a really expensive gift, most people are going to be wowed; not wanting the gift is selfish…

Gradually drawing things to a close, I wanted to ask if there's anything else that's arisen from the

I thought about my first girlfriend. She was evil; physically and emotionally abusive, just a nasty girl. When I was leaving school, our year all gave each other letters. You'd

AJ

conversation that hasn't come up – that we haven't talked about?

write them to your friends, just as something to keep. I have this one from my friend, it said something like "You're great, I love being friends with you – I had a massive crush on you in year 10, even though you thought you were ugly". We're still friends now and we joke about it, but you know, it's out there, and it was such a sweet thing. Anyways, my ex-girlfriend wrote me this letter. I'd just broken up with her, finally, after trying for ages. The letter was along the lines of, "I didn't realise you're so damaged you can't see how great I am". And she gave it to me, and said "I cried writing it", it's very sincere... She described it in all the terms which would make a real love letter – sincerity, honesty, effort... I re-read it a couple years ago, and it used all the language of a love letter; "I valued our time together, I really miss you, I care about you"... But the actual content was so spiteful and full of hate... It's the only time I've ever gotten a love letter and thought, this isn't a love letter... this is Satan speaking...

God... Does that problematise your idea of what a love letter is?

I think in that instance, it was a case of her writing what she wanted to imagine had happened. In reality she was horrible to me; she was horrible to my family, she beat the shit out of me... But you can't write that in a love letter. It's a confession of evilness. I think she wrote that letter to reassure herself. If you're doing it for yourself, it's not an act of love. [...] It's manipulative.

There's no vulnerability.

When I first tried to come out to her as trans, I was 16, and she basically said, "If you do this, you'll have no friends. I'll break up with you and you'll have no life" [...] So I left it, because I believed her. Then, a year into my transition, she messaged me and said, "I know I handled that really badly, I'm really happy for you, I am so sorry". That was sincere, because it was vulnerable. If, in the letter, she'd said, "I was awful too, we had a horrible relationship, I wish you the best, please forgive me" – that's a love letter. It takes vulnerability to admit that. Whereas in the one she sent, there was no admitting anything.

So, you still have it?

Yes [...]

And you keep all your love letters?

Yes, I have every single postcard my mum sent me. I have boxes and boxes, and folders; all of them, because I'm sentimental. Even, it was one of my first weeks working here, and I was talking to a colleague about country music. I was really intimidated by her because she looked really cool; and I was talking to her about music and loving cowboys and stuff, and she printed out a piece of receipt paper and wrote me a list of songs. I kept that because, now we're good friends, but at the time I just thought – that's a really nice thing that someone's done for me at work. So I have – I have it all. Literally. At home, boxes and boxes; everywhere I've been, there is evidence of everyone who's ever given me something.

Do you ever look through it? Or do you just like having it?

Every now and then, but most of them I just like to have. I can imagine finding them in a few years and being really happy about it. I have every Christmas card my granny has ever sent me. She's been dying for three or four years but she still isn't dead. I'm literally doing a photography project called "Granny's Third Last-Christmas" because every year we've been like – we have to be nice to her... this is her last one... and she keeps going. But I keep all the birthday and Christmas cards she ever sends me just in case – then one day I'll look back. But I keep adding to the pile because she's not dying. She just won't die. Even before all this, I remember going to her house when I was 15. She was in hospital. I took loads of pictures of the house because I thought she was going to die, then they'd sell the house and I wouldn't be able to remember it. I'm 23. Her house looks exactly the same. She's still in it. She's not dead. But I kept all that, just in case. I like to remember people, and things, in inanimate and everyday mundane ways. Even if it's a note that someone's left me on a receipt, or a pin badge, or something stupid. I love it. So I have all of it.

Whenever you've talked to me about photography projects you want to do-

It's always about people and their things. Because that's what makes a person. Like, I always think about purple girls. Have you heard about this? You can tell what someone's favourite colour is because they'll tell you, but you don't need to ask if their favourite colour is purple because purple's the only colour a purple person wears. They'll have a purple kettle, a purple notebook, their shoes are purple, and everything – everything is purple. I think that's so sweet, having what you love outside of you; that's such a lovely way to live. [...] You have something you love, and you get to look at it all day. How nice is that? You've taken this love and put it outside. [...] That's clearly a theme of mine – how your inside feelings come out; whether it's a photo, or something that someone you love's given you...

AJ