
Jean-Yves Cendrey

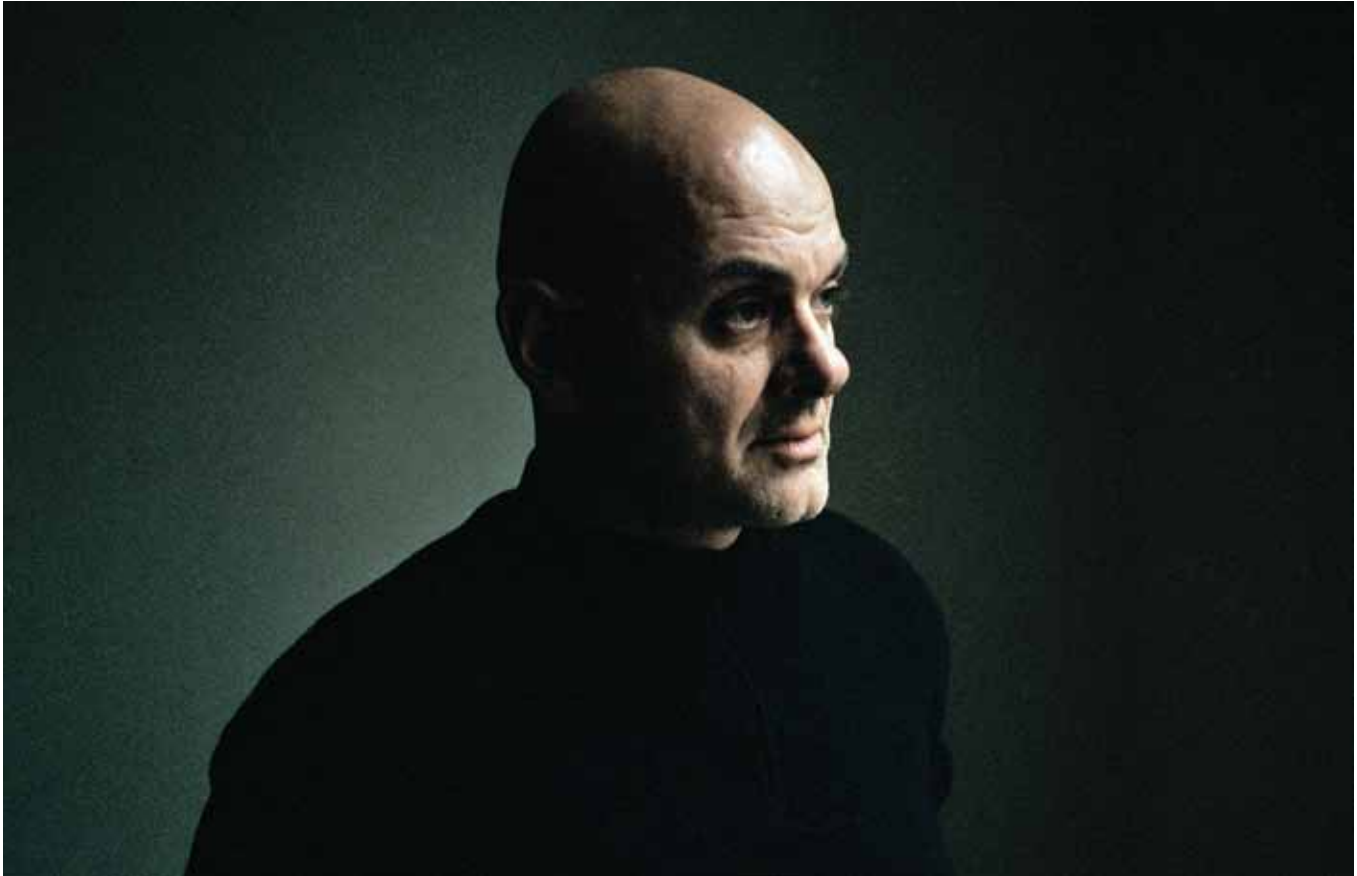
Honecker 21

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BIOGRAPHY Jean-Yves Cendrey was born in Nevers on September 11, 1957. He studied literature in Poitiers and subsequently enrolled in an art history program in Bordeaux. Over a ten-year period, he spent most of his time traveling, especially in southern Europe. In 1985, he met author Marie NDiaye. They married and settled for a while in La Rochelle, then resided successively in Paris (1988), Barcelona (1989), Rome (1990-1991) and Berlin (1993). The family returned to France in 1994 and took up residence in Cormeilles, a small town in the Auge region of Normandy, destined to become sadly famous. After spending a year on the Caribbean island of Marie-Galante (2000), they lived in the Gironde area from 2001 to 2006 before moving to Berlin where the family currently resides. Novelist Jean-Yves Cendrey has also authored works for stage, radio, and film.

PUBLICATIONS Recent works include: Published by Éditions de l'Olivier: *La maison ne fait plus crédit*, 2008; *Les Jouets vivants*, 2005, republished by Editions Points, 2007; *Une simple créature*, 2001. With other publishers: *Corps enseignant*, Gallimard, "Blanche" collection, 2007; *Puzzle: trois pièces* (co-authored with Marie NDiaye), Gallimard, "Blanche" collection, 2007; *Parties fines*, Mille et une Nuits, 2000 *Trou-Madame*, P.O.L, 1997.



Honecker 21, or twenty chapters in the life of an average Berliner, tells the story of an ordinary man trying to cope with problems he considers to be extraordinary, unique only to him. In reality, they are the common ills of our thriving society, somewhere between unbridled bureaucracy and jeering liberalism, employer tyranny and emotional indifference, the rampant pursuit of comfort, impulsive spending, and of course repeated visits to those humiliating places known as customer service departments ... Reminiscent of a unhappy, jealous and at times even spiteful Charlie Chaplin, Matthias Honecker makes us smile and even laugh precisely because of who he is: someone just like us, a brother who gives us a taste of our own here and now.

He had promised her he'd take care of it all himself, absolutely everything, and whatever else needed to be done: canceling their lease, making arrangements with their bank, city hall, the insurance company, the electric company, the gas company, the telephone company (it was time to look over the hard-to-read fine print on the back of the contracts—the stuff that gets you every time), and, of course, the endless details and tedium of their move.

It was anything but fun. On top of that, the notary was having problems with the Land Services office and was sending him a growing number of cryptic notices. And on top of that, the Corbusierhaus management trust was demanding advance payment on its unpleasantly steep fees. On top of that, the sellers announced that they wouldn't be able to remove their furniture by the scheduled date because of the Christmas holidays, which would have been a problem for the painter who was supposed to repaint the ceilings and walls white, but he had already cancelled. On top of that, since their landlord had found a tenant, it was imperative for them to vacate by the agreed date. And on top of that, choosing a mover was painful: their quotes were so exorbitant, the cubic footage estimates so unreliable and their services so hard to compare.

When, shortly before D-Day, Honecker phoned the mover they had finally selected to make sure he hadn't gone bankrupt or wasn't hovering between life and death on some hospital bed, the man asked if he had contacted the proper authorities to reserve parking in front of the building. Honecker hadn't, but promised to get on it immediately. Based on his experience with bureaucracy, however, the mover snickered, assuring him it would be a waste of time. He snickered again, asking Honecker where he was supposed to park

his truck since, as a man of principles, he would never think of blocking traffic. Honecker was offended by his lack of professionalism. After all, it was the mover's responsibility to inform him about the parking situation. The mover said he wasn't Honecker's mother and that, even though he was Albanian, he could show the Germans a thing or two about being well organized, demonstrating respect for public roadways and ensuring the safety of workers.

Honecker was discouraged by such ostentatious integrity. The final blow came when the mover ordered him to call back later to set up a new moving date because he didn't have his schedule in front of him. He told Honecker that it wouldn't be easy as he was heavily booked and couldn't understand why everyone wanted to move in the middle of the holiday season.

Fortunately, Honecker remembered that he had friends. And what's the first thing friends are good for? Moving, of course. Of the three he contacted, he managed to recruit two, not that they were overjoyed at the prospect of straining muscles and getting their fingers smashed on New Year's—but true friends know how to conceal their hostility, and these two fellows managed to do so reasonably well.

Moving on January first seemed like the best plan to him: the city would be empty and everyone would be getting over their partying from the night before. With the dawn of a new year, simply being among the living would suffice to make them happy. And surely they'd be more inclined to tolerance—even the neighbors awakened by falling bookcases and loud comings and goings.

Christmas stuffed itself with sausages and mulled wine, and then burst.

On December 30, Honecker came home from the office with a leaden stomach and a severe case of *aerophagia* due to acute stress. He had just learned that his boss was inviting him, along with a dozen executives from the office, to a “motivational dinner” on the evening of January 1st.

The boss sent out his invitation, a.k.a. injunction, at the last minute so as to better assess his staff's motivation, forcing them to change their plans and, he could only hope, obliging them to make sacrifices, particularly where family was concerned. This was especially true for those who might have presumed to think they were in charge of their own schedules during the holiday. More perverted still was the fact that he'd decided to hold the meeting at a hotel-restaurant in Świnoujście, a little Polish resort town on the Baltic. Although it was located virtually on the border, it was still over a two-hour drive from Berlin and hard to get to, forcing them to travel over winding and narrow roads through the marshland. The pretext for choosing the location was that the border post was going to be permanently closed on the night of the 31st, a marvelous symbol of how Europe was opening up.

It was so easy to blame it on Europe. The master was going to whistle up his dogs, making sure they obeyed, groveling and gathering around him at precisely 8 p.m. and dutifully listening to him before going to bed—because of course they were spending the night.

Up to that point, Honecker had viewed his move as a weightlifting event. Now it had also become a speed competition. Even if he were foolish enough to presume he might finish on time, he'd still be forced to leave Turid and their child in the middle of all the chaos—stack upon stack of depressing boxes, like so many mounds of mistakes.

When he gave her the bad news, his phrasing was so diplomatic and his aerophagia so incapacitating that at first she thought he'd decided to leave her for good but couldn't express himself clearly.

Wanting to appear reassuring as to the outcome of this daunting exploit, he tried so hard to hide his concern that his face became a mask of pain. He was sweating like a paunchy actor in a sleazy third-rate play who suddenly finds he's in trouble.

Turid started to cry, murmuring,
“It's horrible. Our lives have become totally insane.”

Late in the afternoon of the 31st, Honecker went to pick up the rental truck he had reserved and was given one that was substantially larger than what he had expected. He felt no pride behind the wheel of the cumbersome vehicle, which he nonetheless managed to wedge into a space not far from the ideal spot he'd naively hoped to get.

He spent the evening taking things apart, sorting and wrapping. He was as distressed by the sheer bulk of his possessions as by the number of items he could easily do without. True to his promise, he never asked for Turid's help. Not once. It would have come in especially handy when he was taking the bookcase apart, as evidenced by the falling bookshelves and the pathetic racket and swearing that so often punctuated the lone handyman's work.

Turid had sought refuge in their bed with their sleeping child. She only interrupted her reading—an activity which under the circumstances signified her outright disapproval—to ask for less “advertising,” which is what she called Honecker's all-too-noisy exertions.

Around eleven o'clock, the two friends who were supposed to help him lift the heavy items surprised him by actually showing up. An overindulgence in mulled wine had put them in high spirits. With reeking breath and eyes aglow, they felt the need to yell out the most nonsensical things imaginable. Honecker had no trouble persuading them that it would be better, given their condition, to start with the books rather than the china. They hadn't come to be useful, and they said so in no uncertain terms.

Actually, their plan was to drag their buddy Hony to Tiergarten, where every December 31st at midnight a huge crowd gathers around the Victory Column to set off fireworks in a surge of total anarchy.

And these party animals had come equipped! They had two backpacks loaded with fireworks they were determined to set off with their pal Hony, good old Hony. When he turned them down, their shouting became progressively louder.

Honecker remained adamant, asking Turid to reason with the two nut cases. She shrugged and said,

“The way things are going, you may as well go over there and waste your time with them. It won’t change a thing.”

Honecker was deeply wounded but didn’t react. In the meantime, one of the loudmouths was helping him on with his coat while the other wrapped his scarf around his neck. And so he gave in and went along. He didn’t bat an eye when he found out they were going by bike. He sheepishly unlocked his bike and got on it with a groan. Flanked by his guardian angels doubling as ball-breaking devils, he pedaled to the zoo and Landwehrkanal, his teeth clenched all the way. His vision was blurred by tears, the freezing drizzle, and thousands of reflections on the slippery pavement.

Families were waiting on every corner for their moment, impatiently tapping their feet amidst fireworks stuck in bottles. The kids all had lighters and were practicing throwing firecrackers. Honecker drove by them without flinching, a ghost of the year that was coming to a close, resigned to his fate. Let them go ahead and throw those flaming, uncivil, joyful little sticks at his wheels, there was no way he was going to swerve off the path. He didn’t jump when the firecrackers exploded behind him, depriving the little hellions of their anticipated pleasure. But they were in too much of a festive mood to feel disappointed and not burst out laughing.

He was totally out of sync with all the merriment.

He imagined himself in a year or two, not more than three in the best of cases, standing on a corner and tapping his foot, pretending he was having fun with his offspring. Remembering that he was a father made his legs go stiff. They were swelling painfully in the penetrating drizzle—the annoying visitor who had thrown his coat on him hadn’t gone so far as to button it up.

The night smells turned animal-like. A cow was bellowing in its pen. An elephant was hooting in its cage. *True. False. I don’t know.* Honecker didn’t know, didn’t want to know, knew all too well that one day he’d be there on the other side of the iron fence, separated from a group of melancholy hyenas by a concrete pit, from a pitiful gorilla by a thick glass wall. In his capacity as a father and educator, he would point to it, saying,

“Notice how much he looks like us.”

With his nose glued to the glass, the child would marvel at how riveting the boredom of living could be. He’d ask,

“Why isn’t he moving? Is he dead?”

His father would answer,

“That’s probably what he’s wondering about you.”

The child would pound on the glass with the palm of his hand, yelling,

“Hey! Hey! I’m not dead!”

He’d hear his father say,

“Come on, let’s go look at the fish. People find them lively.”

Honecker was always able to joke about his misfortune at not being able to stomach the spectacle of nature in a bottle.

He spotted a small gathering in front of him on the bank of the canal. Five or six people were standing near the commemorative plaque honoring the martyred Rosa Luxemburg. It was part of the handrail, tilting strangely toward the murky waters like an enormous washboard. Despite its simplicity, seeing it was always an emotional experience for him.

It marked the spot where it is believed Rosa’s body was thrown—or where her remains were found, he wasn’t quite sure anymore. He would tell the child that she died for her ideas, hoping that would make more of an impression on him than the zoo. He would say that her body had remained in the canal for months. The child would look at the garbage floating in the water, thrown from the sightseeing boats—french fry containers, soda cans, cigarette butts—and he would shudder. Or it would be hopeless trying to get someone so young interested in politics.

Hand in hand, they would continue to the underbrush where Karl Liebknecht was shot, and he would say,

“He too died for his ideas.”

The child would ask,

“Were they good ideas?”

Honecker would be at a loss for an answer. As a little boy, he had never really listened when his own father had tried to interest him in the Spartacist League founded by Karl and Rosa. He only remembered one thing: Rosa’s love of anemones.

He got off his bike and joined the group standing in front of her plaque. While he searched his mind for another reason to be a father, other than repeating the same mistakes, his two pals were starting to lose patience. They were worried because it was getting late, and there was still quite a distance to cover between the spot where Rosa had suffered and their incredibly insignificant destination. Propriety kept them from braying their discontent, and Honecker took delight in making them wait.

Even though they peddled like crazy after that, hoping to at least get a glimpse of the Victory Column at the far end of Fasanerie Allee, a thundering boom resounded before they arrived and joined in the commotion. The crowds were exploding with joy as they set off a burst of fireworks right next to a sea of ears already aching from the cold.

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Honecker 21