Learning from Athens (There and Elsewhere)

A correspondence - Part 2

by Laura Preston, Wystan Curnow

Published on 18.12.2017



This is the second part of a correspondence between Laura Preston and Wystan Curnow, reflecting on journeys and connections from Europe to the Antipodes, and documenta 14.

Read Part I here.

PART 2

WYSTAN CURNOW September 9, 2017

You'd have a pretty good idea of how the art of documenta's political moment rubs along with Rancière's aesthetics. I'd like to hear more about that.

Meanwhile let me take you back to your other South, thirty years back to the beginnings of Europe in my imaginary. To October 16–November 25, 1987. By this time Artspace, is a going concern. New Zealand's premier "alternative" space, had just opened in Auckland, in February. It has two venues: 101 Federal Street, on the westside of the CBD, and George Fraser Gallery, 25 Princes St., on the east. I am Chairman of the Board. And now I'm off to Europe

for the first time. Officially, to see about the presentation, distribution and collection of video in Europe's art museums, and the structures and programmes of contemporary art spaces there. Unofficially I'm agog, all eyes and ears. Wow, Europe. I've a week in New York on the way, and arrive in time for a big Bill Viola opening at MoMA, on October 16. I'm staying with Dieter Froese and he takes me along as his guest. Dieter's a friend, a pioneer video installation artist and knows everyone. He and his wife Kay Hinds run Dekart, an artists' postproduction house, out of their Lower East side loft, at 33 Chrystie St. At the opening he introduces me to Barbara London (legendary), and Christine van Assche, with whom I discuss my upcoming visit to Paris, where she's in charge of film and video at the Beaubourg. (And, I've just checked, she's still there, and she's on Facebook and we have 4 friends in common!)

It appears SoHo's centre of gravity has shifted 2-3 blocks to the east, away from West Broadway. Jaap Reitman's art bookstore has moved there from Spring. I drop in on John Weber at his gallery, who asks me if I'd like to see the Ad Reinhart he's got in his office, just $US 125,000. Oh, yeah? Spent the afternoon of the 20th with Lawrence Weiner at his place on Bleecker St. After strong coffee (Bustelo) we drink vegetable juice (carrot and beetroot) that he prepares for us with an old hand-operated juicer. Lawrence sells short lengths of language for between $15,000 and $40,000. You have to be impressed with this. He has a ring-bound book in which he keeps a list. It's a precarious existence, but at least the overheads are low. He's very generous with his advice and contacts in Europe. And so enthusiastic about my going there.



Nico's Cafe, Zattere, Venice 2015. Wystan Curnow.



Wystan Curnow outside the Doges Palace, Venice, November 1987. Image: Michael Volkerling.

WC (CONT) I fly into Paris, and head south from there, first to Lyon, then to Grenoble, through Italy, via Turin, and Venice to Switzerland: Basel and Berne, then on to Germany: Bonn, Cologne, Dusseldorf, Berlin, and finally to the Netherlands, Amsterdam. I find there are no "alternative" spaces of the Anglo-American kind in Europe. Different institutional histories, different art histories. But art and artists matter everywhere here, no doubt about that. Contemporary art spaces are on the rise, but based either on old models like kunstverein/kunsthalle or new, like the France's regional centres of contemporary art. I've a Eurail pass; I travel from city to city taking time on the train to gather thoughts and size up landscapes as I go. I carry a copy of *Arts Diary*. I've appointments and a list of questions: budget, staff, governance, curatorial ideas and so on. People are happy to tell me all.

Grenoble's Magasin had opened only eighteen months before my visit there, right about the time the French secret agents bombed Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior in Auckland harbour in an act of "state sponsored terrorism"—PM David Lange's words. It's much further from the station than I'd thought: 159 Berriat Cours, Marie Claude Jeune said. (She's on Facebook too.) It's raining (heavily), there's lightning, and I'm trudging along completely soaked. I need to take shelter in a café and to warm myself up with a cheese

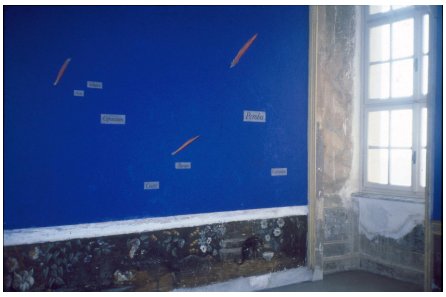
omelette and a Heineken. So I do that. At 152 I find myself in a square and it's not clear which way the numbers go. For moment I'm stymied. A railway line runs through it. Then I see the building with Le Magasin (The Store) on it, white letters on blue; 3,000 sq mm, 60 plus metres from floor to ceiling, it had originally been designed by Gustav Eiffel for the Paris Expo of 1900. Then it had been flat-packed and re-erected in Grenoble, and used for making pipes for hydro schemes in the Alps. The cavernous interior, more or less intact, invites the insinuation of in situ installations starting with Daniel Buren. A purpose-built white cube contains drawings by Beuys.

Jacques Guillot, Le Magasin's charismatic director has less English than I have French, so our halting conversation is conducted through his assistant Victoire Dubruel. He has a pathetic conspiracy theory about the Rainbow Warrior—it was an intentionally botched, secret-service rightwing conspiracy to discredit his Socialist boss, President Francois Mitterand. Victoire gives fulsome answers to all my questions and looks after me. After work the three of us go back to Jacques's house (or do they both live here?) for pre-dinner drinks. There's no art to be seen or books, dust clothes cover most of the furniture—why so spartan? My unspoken questions go unanswered, I have to move on.

In Lyon, I'd visited ELAC–Espace lyonnais d'art contemporain—an exhibition space usurping the waiting room of the city's main rail station which teems with art-lovers come rush hour, and in Turin, the Castello di Rivoli, where I go next. This is a made-over eighteenth-century Savoy dynasty palace. All three are eighties art places whose buildings have "previous form," architecturally speaking, form regarded as an asset. The once-grandly decorated rooms of the Castello have been partially restored, and are in open conversation with contemporary works from the collection which are showcased there. This is the foundation collection selected by Rudi Fuchs who was the director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. These incorporations of décor are new to me and distinctly European.

Paris Oct. 22nd; Lyons 27th, Marie-Claude Jeune, Thierry Raspail, Grenoble 28–29th, Victoire Dubruel, Turin (Castello di Rivoli), Nov. 3; Venice, to the Biennale office with QEII Arts Council boss

Michael Volkerling to pitch for NZ participation; Basel 4th; Cologne 13th; Bonn 16th; Berlin 20th; Cologne 23th; Amsterdam 25th, dinner with Marina Abramovic, meeting with Dorine Mignon at the Stedelijk Museum.



Lothar Baumgarten, *Yurupari – Stanza di Rheinsberg 1968-1984*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, 1987. Image: Wystan Curnow.



Dieter Froese, Director Dekart Studio, New York, October 1987. Image: Wystan Curnow.



Daniel Buren, *Diagonale pour un Lieu*, April 1986, Le Magasin, Grenoble. Image: Wystan Curnow.

LAURA PRESTON September 24, 2017

Are we making some kind of time map here Wystan? Travelling back and forth between 1987, 2007, and 2017. I'm inspired to rewind and share something of my own personal map in response. There is a sense of the return in doing this as I read in your review too. Return in my movements to certain places, and what a privilege!

The month of April etymologically means opening. In that month of 2007, I took a plane from Auckland to Rotterdam on the invitation of Nicolaus Schafhausen. We had met at Artspace and he sensed in me the calling for Europe, once again. The first time I had come to work here was in 1999, fresh from university, just twenty and full of ambition to make my University of Auckland degree in art history translate. I wanted to work in public institutions, I wanted to work in London initially—near to family in England. I got a job at the Camden Arts Centre, working the floor. The gallery rooms were full of light and sounds of activities intermittently coming from the workshop spaces downstairs. One show I remember looking at

closely at, hours upon hours, was a survey of Marlene Dumas, watercolour figures all smudged and violent. The year became 2000 and I volunteered at the Chisenhale, Darren Almond and video installation and Tomoko Takahashi's *Word Perhect* web project about corporate speak entering common language, and then later a job at the Pumphouse Gallery in the middle of Battersea Park, more video installation. Before Battersea, before really listening to Pink Floyd, before living south of the river, I travelled for three months across Europe mostly by Eurorail. I flew from London to Oslo, I didn't want to leave Paris, I went to Berlin when the site of Jewish memorial was still a contentious issue and the Volksbühne collapsing genre boundaries, I tasted Portugal and Barcelona, throughout seeking art spaces, allowing exhibitions to guide me into areas of Europe's city shadows and highlights.

April 2007 actually began in late March now that I recall. I arrived at Witte de With (I hear it is soon to be renamed) to support the curatorial work of the Isa Genzken Venice pavilion project. I was there to focus on the publication. I was there in an institution known for being an old school and where publishing was equal partners to exhibition production; Catherine David in the '90s is known to have closed its doors to finance a book but that may just be urban myth.

This was all before the crash. It was gloss covered Hatje Cantz and Vogue supplements. I didn't quite know at the time the flavour of glamour I was being wrapped up in, but I felt like I was missing content. But was I? Thinking back to Genzken's work it was also commentary on the very intoxication and self-reflection of the pre-crisis as much as it was an enactment of it. *Oil* was her title and her constellation inside the pavilion of sculptural mannequins and travel bags layered with material residue, reflective substrates, and paint, the pouring out of excesses, could be read as an unravelling of the politics of fear that were flaring and the war for liquid money all-too-familiar. How similar, how different in political sensibility was the work of Genzken to this year's German Pavilion in Venice, *Faust* by Anne Imhof, her critical distance from within and use of lived-with signifiers of contemporary identity, product and production?

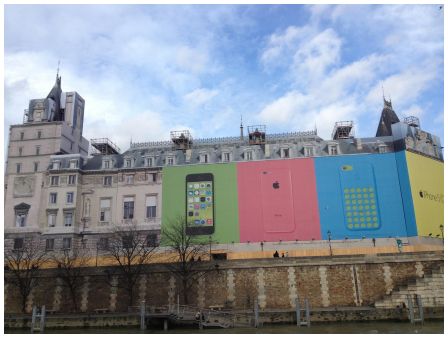
Despite an invitation to stay working in Rotterdam, I continued on and visited documenta 12 and there I found Brecht. I visited Paris and there I found Belleville, and in Berlin, I found the end of summer. 2012: Another return, this time to Portikus in Frankfurt, an exhibition and book with NZ artist Michael Stevenson; 2013–14: Back to Paris to work with May magazine; Curator-at-Large for the Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington, also later in Berlin; 2015: Sternberg Press, Berlin; April 2016–: documenta 14, Athens, a place I never expected I would go.



Isa Genzken, *Oil*, German Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2007. Image: Peter Salmon.



Isa Genzken, *Oil*, German Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2007. Image: Peter Salmon.



From the studio at Cité internationale des arts, Paris, 2013–14. Image: Laura Preston.



From the studio at Cité internationale des arts, Paris, 2013–14. Image: Laura Preston.

WC October 4, 2017

Earlier, Laura, you wrote of Senghor; my father, Allen, and he, were contemporaries, you know. And Bergson was important to him as well, from the late ’30s on. Your quote is about how “place: is a

language problem"—the subject crops up in a much later poem I'll come to in a moment. Anyway, just the other day I went to the Auckland University Press's launch of Terry Sturm's 700-page biography of him, *Simply by Sailing in a New Direction*, and his *Colle cted Poems*. A box set, a big event for our family; we all trooped off afterwards to the Ponsonby Food Hall for a celebratory dinner.

There was a symposium the next day. Having something to say had not been easy as up until this point I'd studiously avoided writing about his work; so, where to start, where to go? What eventuated I called "Venetian Correspondences," as it drew on letters of his to me from Venice in 1974 and 1978, and poems he had written about Venice and Italy. I can imagine Jacques Rancière writing around the two major poems, "Moro Assassinato" and "Organo Ad Libitum": making a far better fist of it than I. But because my father grew up on Lyttleton Harbour and then settled his own family on the shores of Waitemata's Shoal Bay, because, evidently islanders, natives of seashores and beachheads, have a specific affinity with Venice, I followed him there, pursuing this larger correspondence and its moment. He had written to me of his second visit: "I decide that merely being in Venice a month before the tourist hordes descend is a respectable occupation, by no means an indulgent idleness." But, as we discover in the opening section of "Moro Assassinato," Venice changes.

It's a spring morning in early April—etymologically, as you say …—when the traveller seats himself down at a table outside Nico's café on the Zattere fondamente on the Dorsoduro side of the Guidecca canal. Nice and all though it is to be there, with the sun shining on Venice's tiara of proud towers—these being Byron's words. Nice as it is to be back at his Pensione, La Calcina (the lime store) and to walk past the Gesuati Church and the pizzeria on the way to his old café for coffee and the morning paper. But nice is not enough. Today he really wants to know what's happened with the Red Brigade's abduction of five-times Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, and given his hardly fit-for-purpose Italian, reading the paper's a hard ask. Not just that. Sitting by the sea, with this news of the "lengthening anguish of Eleanora, La Signora Moro now into the fifth week of her unwidowed widowhood," Venice has changed. He is, as he imagines she is, 'here and not here.' "Venice, that vision of harmony and power, beauty and freedom," he wrote to me about,

that moment has gone, emotionally “obliterated,” as by a Karekare dumper, and globalised. “All seas are one sea.” “One obliteration/ of last year’s Adriatic, / yesterday’s Pacific, / the eyes are all one eye. / Paratohi rock, the bell-tower / of San Giorgio recompose / the mixture’s moment.” The traveller is glad to be back in Venice, but his “indulgent idleness” has suffered a severe setback. Or rather a necessary correction. Here is Karekare and Venice, Athens and Kassel, Berlin and Auckland all subject to recomposition, not the least in the moment of the poem’s mixture.



Paratohi rock from Karekare beach, New Zealand. Image by Verena Segert from *Neuseelandbilder*.



San Giorgio di Maggiore from the Zattere, Venice. Image: Wystan Curnow.

LP October 14, 2017

I have woken early. I’m on the road. Greetings from Vienna! Are you and Sue still coming here in January? To trace Bernard? I visited just for two days on my way back from Athens to connect with the art academy’s administration as I am to write my PhD now that it is post-documenta. I also had dinner with Peter Shand from Elam School of Fine Arts, in one of the city’s brightly lit cafés. We recalled sharing Luke Willis Thompson’s work in New York together: his insights are both factual and loyal, a careful relay of the reference points of a practice that is so layered yet delivered so incisively.

I’m travelling back to Berlin, part of the day in one city, another in the other. It seems to be a pattern of mine?! It’s early, tossing up the city’s night meeting day. These edges. The city as a living fabric brings me back to Thompson and the NY encounter with his work, a collaborative writing project, almost three winters ago now. The texts were walks taken through the city guided by Thompson’s

collaborators, black, queer, with their backs turned and only occasionally glancing back, tracing events of racial violence. Their title: *Eventually they introduced me to the people I immediately recognised as those who would take me out anyway.* It was not a following piece, it escaped that overt aggression, but the work knew of such art histories; just as you have written Wystan on Vito Acconci and his relation to the pretext. But for sure Adrian Piper was present, and this is where my interest in the work's relations in art-historical terms lie. Piper's performances from 1969–70 are conceptual but also sculptural in that vein of minimalism and its expanded form for having relationship to conflating object/subject relations through presenting her black female body as artwork; I'm speaking of the *Catalysis* series here, think "Wet Paint," and *Street works Streettracks*, a meditation and looping of a street circuit in New York. She is a philosopher too.

The walk I took with Peter Shand and artist Kate Newby through the snow that day left us at the foot of what we later learned was James Baldwin's old residence. Baldwin who wrote *Another Country* (1962) and later to Angela Y. Davis in prison. The image of Thompson's collaborative piece, walking as we did through that filmic city, could be said to be so available and yet there is no one image for it; it was like tracking within a field of images that goes beyond visibility and into the world and its histories, framed in this case by racial profiling and state violence, unspeakable, not to be reinscribed, just traced, *the snow that day*, pitching the image's accessibility against loss, and the economies that work silently alongside both states. The both and the others.

I will drink a coffee soon, almost like those found in Venice. To you and the family, best from the 14th,
Laura

Note from the editor: minor modifications were made to this text in October 2020.

Biographies



Laura Preston is an art writer and editor from Aotearoa New Zealand, who lives in Berlin. Among other projects, she is writing her doctorate with Sabeth Buchmann at the Institute of Art Theory and Cultural Studies, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. An associate editor of documenta 14, she lived in Athens from spring 2016 to autumn 2017. Her role as the inaugural curator-at-large for the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Victoria University of Wellington from 2013–15 followed on from her time as in-house curator from 2008–12. In 2012, Preston was a guest curator at Portikus, Frankfurt am Main. Her edited books include the ongoing series *Next Spring: An Occasional Series of Reviews* (Atlas Projectos, Berlin / Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, 2014–).



Wystan Curnow (b.1939, Christchurch). A widely published art critic and poet, he is based in Auckland where he is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Auckland. In 2014, his selected art writings, *The Critic's Part*, was published by the Adam Art Gallery, Wellington and the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. He has co-edited *The Long Dream of Waking*, a collection of new writings on Len Lye which appeared this year from the University of Canterbury Press.

creative nz
Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa