Learning from Athens (There and Elsewhere)

A correspondence - Part 1

by Laura Preston, Wystan Curnow

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For over a year, Laura Preston was based in Athens to work as associate editor of documenta 14 publications, including South as a State of Mind *released in four issues. We invited the art writer and editor to contribute to Contemporary HUM, to share and reflect on this experience and beyond. In turn, Preston extended the invitation to fellow New Zealander and distinguished art critic, curator and poet Wystan Curnow to reflect on their imagined and lived experiences of Europe coming from their other south.*

What results is a correspondence that draws connections between Europe and the Antipodes, traversing other continents and time periods. The two writers' memories and snapshots of journeys through the art world extend from 1987 to 2007 and 2017.

PART 1

LAURA PRESTON May 3, 2017

Dear Wystan,

Are you coming to Europe this summer? It would be wonderful to see you here. I will be at the documenta opening in Kassel but then return to Athens for the rest of the project. Perhaps you know,

perhaps not, that I am working as an associate editor of this fourteenth edition. Many experiences, insights, thoughts to share with you. May I do so in person?

WYSTAN CURNOW May 12, 2017

Dear Laura,

I'm so pleased to know you're editing for documenta. That's wonderful! Unfortunately, I won't be in Kassel for the opening this time but thanks for thinking of my being there. I was in Europe most of January: shows to see in Paris> Bregenz> Munich> Karlsruhe> Paris — and hope to return there within the next twelve months. I visited Vienna with my son Ben in 2013; and ever since Sue and I have talked of spending some time there.

Otherwise, my time this year has been and continues to be taken up with Colin McCahon. Robert Leonard and I have a show at City Gallery Wellington called “On Going Out with the Tide,” to do with his paintings on Māori themes and subjects, which runs through July. I’ve been reading Thomas Crow’s *NO IDOLS: The Missing Theology of Art*. He calls it a polemic, for good enough reason. Chapters on Chardin, Rothko, McCahon (what thuh!?), Smithson, and Turrell. I’m now busy writing on McCahon’s so-called early religious work, and Crow’s take is decisive and encouraging. My essay is called, “Colin McCahon, Salvation Army Aesthete.” Along the way I’ve come across a famous New Zealand philosopher: A. N. Prior. He invented “tense logic.” In the late 1930s, he ran a philosophy discussion group in Dunedin and, after taking up the chair that had just been vacated by Karl Popper at Canterbury University College, in 1946, he reinstated it in Christchurch. McCahon took part in both groups. Prior went on to teach at Oxford in the 1960s. They make an unlikely pair (logic and prophecy!?)

Meanwhile, do please email me some of those experiences, insights, thoughts you have to share.



LP June 21, 2017

Vienna is where I am enrolled for study Wystan. I'm sure when you and Sue get there you will take in a café or two; the lights are always particularly bright. Good for reading. Food and sustenance. Today I picked up the collection of writings by Souleymane Bachir Diagne, which I'm looking forward to getting into, when time allows. The chapters read as follows: exile, rhythms, connaissance, convergence, mixture. The title, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude*. The book is published by a small imprint Seagull Books, based in Kolkata. It has made its way to Athens. You likely know that Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) was a Senegalese poet and philosopher, who in 1960 also became the first president of the Republic of Senegal. I read that in the book, "Diagne takes a unique approach to reading Senghor's influential works, taking as the starting point for his analysis Henri Bergson's idea that in order to understand philosophers one must find the initial intuition from which every aspect of their work develops." Diagne argues that Senghor's intuition is that art from Africa is a philosophy. I go to Bergson's preface of *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* from February 1888; Data of Consciousness was his doctoral thesis and introduction to his work on duration:

> We necessarily express ourselves by means of words and we usually think in terms of space. That is to say, language requires us to establish between our ideas the same sharp and precise distinctions, the same discontinuity, as between material objects. This assimilation of thought to things is useful in practical life and necessary in most of the sciences. But it may be asked whether the insurmountable difficulties presented by certain philosophical problems do not arise from our placing side by side in space phenomena which do not occupy space, and whether, by merely getting rid of the clumsy symbols round which we are fighting, we might not bring the fight to an end. When an illegitimate translation of the unextended into the extended, of quality into quantity, has introduced contradiction into the very heart of the question, contradiction must, of course, recur in the answer. The problem which I have chosen is one which is common to metaphysics and psychology, the problem of free will. What I attempt to prove is that all discussion between the determinists and their opponents implies a previous confusion of *duration* [my emphasis] with extensity, of succession with simultaneity, of quality with quantity.

Senghor's poem "Prayer to Masks" was republished in the second guest issue of *South as a State of Mind*, the documenta 14 journal that we are nesting within for four issues. *Masks! Oh Masks! / Black mask, red mask, you black and white masks, / Rectangular mask through whom the spirit breathes, / I greet you in silence!* The magazine *South* was established by Athenian curator Marina Fokidis in the hot summer of 2012. It began as a playful, and seriously so, take on the directionals that determine understandings of Europe. As guest editors, we have been making *South* a hybrid forum of texts and issues, from many souths, related to language itself. And since working on the project, Europe has become a place where its stitches are becoming all the more visible: Brexit. That happened last summer when poet, editor-in-chief, and friend Quinn Latimer and I were in Kassel for her writing workshop at the fine arts school. We walked the avenues of trees in Karlsaue Park in disbelief; Trump came later. The threat of rising fascism is

always there, teetering on the edge, palpably so in Germany, in its memorials, hinterlands, its silences.

Aotearoa New Zealand is my other south. I carry it in my gestures, my accent, my perspective on meeting both and others. This multiculturalism stays with me—literally. William Hsu is visiting next week. Jon Bywater was here last. And Paula Booker is with me this month to work with the documenta 14 education team as part of her master's studies at the University of British Columbia. I think about your work and how you invest in a certain subject as McCahon, yet offer new readings on familiar territory—your latest piece has a great title! For me the territory keeps shifting. Perhaps this is leading to the problem of identity politics. But for now, I'd like to know how you imagine this place of Europe?



South as a State of Mind [*documenta 14 #2 and #4*] covers and page spreads. Edited by Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk, 300 × 230 mm. Read it online: www.documenta14.de/en/south/. Image: Laura Preston.



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WC June 29, 2017

Glad you like the McCahon essay title, actually we have poet James K. Baxter to thank for it. Finding new things to say on familiar subjects always surprises, and gratifies me.

You ask me about my imagination of Europe. Such a good question. You must have been there longer than I have already and your experience of it must be so different, I'd like to hear your own answers. I got to Europe so late in the piece. I think I became enamoured of Europe as my disenchantment with the United States began to take hold. For most of the 1970s I'd been in and out

of New York. I was there, at The Kitchen in fact, on the night of Reagan's election in January 1981, and remember thinking: this is some sort of an ending. Before then I was just not interested. Unlike most of my New Zealand contemporaries I had little interest in the UK which I first visited in 1983. My first experience of Europe came four years later, I was 48! But since the early 1990s, I've visited there more or less every year. It's amazing. Unthinkable in my father's generation. And I still get to the US, well New York mainly, every two to three years. I'm a kind of Europhile, even though all I have besides English is some crappy French. Most of my visits have been brief, finger food really, which is partly why I need to keep going back.

So I was late to discover Vienna—2013. Ben and I were there just a few days but they did whet the appetite. Later that year, I discovered Thomas Bernhard. I don't read many novels, which to say Bernhard's my kind of novelist. Roger Horrocks, who is an omnivorous reader and always passing stuff on to me, lent me WITTGENSTEIN'S NEPHEW, which is "about" said Bernhard and said Wittgenstein who are hospitalized at the time, B for lung disease and W for madness, in different wings of the same institution.

At the time, I was about to start on a course of radiation treatment at Auckland Hospital which was going to last six weeks, daily except for weekends, and this sounded just the sort of reading matter I needed. Over the course of my treatment I read three more: FROST, THE WOODCUTTERS, and YES, A NOVEL. Somehow the relentless misanthropy and pessimism of these books were a wonderful tonic, especially the middle two. I felt cut adrift; THE WOODCUTTERS, a virtuoso assault on Viennese culture, was music to my ears. The NZ imagination forbids such treason. So I had this routine, every day immediately following my treatment I would "repair" as they say to the Columbus Cafe near the hospital entrance, and read my Bernhard over coffee and write in my journal. A quiet turmoil—cellular, psychological, semiological—enveloped these Bernhard sessions, so far distant from Athens and the kind of tumult that is and has been your day-to-day place of work. And from Vienna. When I return I'll bring my copy of THE WOODCUTTERS with me, and see how I get on rereading it, in situ.



Colin McCahon: On Going Out with the Tide, City Gallery Wellington, curated by Wystan Curnow and Robert Leonard, 2017.



Opening of *Salon der Angst*, Kunsthalle Wien, curated by Nicolaus Schafhausen, 2013. Image: Wystan Curnow.

LP July 2, 2017

Here, in Athens Wystan, it's getting hot, sweltering, blindingly so. The debate on the exhibition is also heating up. And in this small room, on the third floor of a modernist apartment building, set on a corner of the old liberal, anarchist neighbourhood of Exarcheia, the weight of content meets tailored lines. The exhibition has now ended in this city. The time just came and went like some kind of sounding. Perhaps that's what happens when you are in the middle of things, it's difficult to locate. I'm not sure if I know "Europe" any better than you, Wystan, but I do live my every day in its city of Athens for now, employed by and paying my taxes to Germany, but also without the language. When you move to a place to work on an exhibition project, I wonder how different it is to playing your part in a theater production? documenta 14 was in some form such a production, "a theater and its double." I live in Athens as much as I work here, the day-to-day and the spontaneous evenings, seeing to the logistics and giving space for the prophecy of friendship. We are biased here in Athens, for us it is as though the show has already happened, but it does continue, the second act only opened in Kassel last month; in the city where it is seen to be in its proper place. And that debate around our exploitation of place certainly does: documenta coming to Greece is just another form of colonialism it has been said, an exoticisation of poverty, also; just as it has been said that Germany's occupation never actually left. There has been a lot of discussion pitched towards the meta. And this is important. But my philosophy with the exhibition, developed at Artspace in Auckland, is to encounter the work first as the way into beginning a critical dialogue. In the *Daybook*, for

example, we emphasised the participating artist's work—each submitted imagery and an image and text to develop an alternative timeline in the book—and writers were commissioned for their familiarity with the practice or its concerns. Writing in the *Reader* was loosely based on the personal and the memoir situated in place to form an anthology of resistant positions to the Western status quo alongside select seminal texts well-known, revised, or put forth to enter the record; the book as double to the exhibition's collation of works.

We are now working on the final guest issue of *South as a State of Mind*—wasn't I just writing to you about issue two? I've been reading Angela Y. Davis because the issue has two working terms "violence and offering." I'm interested in Davis's activism as an academic, as a writer, as a woman who experienced state violence and imprisonment and chose to write about it. She speaks of the importance of meeting racism and knowing its necessity to the current economic regime. In doing so, there is a means of unlocking fascism, she says; that rising separatist force that we keep witnessing in Europe in various forms and sites since documenta 14 in-the-making.



Vivian Suter, *Nisyros*, 2016, seventeen canvases, installation view, Filopappou Hill, Pikionis Paths and Pavilion, Athens, *documenta 14*. Image: Stathis Mamalakis.



[clockwise from top left] Elisabeth Wild, *Untitled* (2016), collage, 20.5 × 20 cm; *Untitled* (2016), collage, 31 × 26 cm; *Untitled* (2016), collage, 24.5 × 20 cm; *Untitled* (2016), collage, 24.5 × 19.5 cm, Elisabeth Wild and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City.

LP (CONT) This fourteenth edition is an ensemble of artworks that defy easy classification, in part reflective of the exhibition situation. There are great tensions involved in working across Kassel and Athens, between the wealthy, military manufacturing, centralised and contained city of Europe's powerhouse and this city where the backwash, the economic and humanitarian crises play out visibly in the streets. Humanity and its lost ideals are so palpably drawn in both places and the exhibition offers some meditation on this loss and also what remains to be reassembled. In Athens, I have experienced a generosity and a kindness like no other, but there are also limits. And we are working within the bounds of the art world with its privilege and ideals, while being bounded by the roles we play: who do I speak for, who do I speak with? I think this is why I have gravitated to art publishing, it is seemingly more direct, collective, and distributed in its politics as discourse. But it's also not that too. It's also fiction. And equally literature is direct and even more so for the contradiction of not being a factual recording of events. If there is aspect of "learning to unlearn" from my recent days it is acknowledging the possibility for a politics of rhythm, felt in form, and beyond commodity value (still just possible), which can be encountered in the object, moving or still, a mask, the painting hung out in the elements, a collage, a text, a music composition, the spaces in the poem. documenta 14 is multifaceted in the artworks it shows and sounds, and as layered as its organisational structure. I am really reading Rancière again: *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004).

Part II: Continue reading the correspondence here.

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.

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