On Louise Stevenson's 'Someplace Else'

by Chris Holdaway

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Louise Stevenson, *Someplace Else*, 2021 (detail of front cover). Image courtesy of Katie Kerr and the artist.



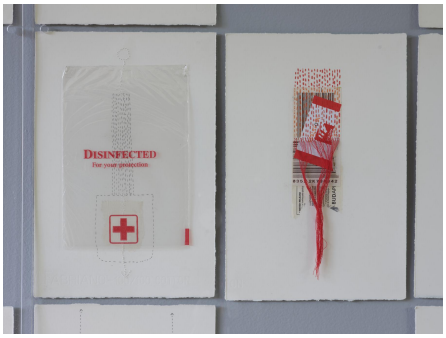
Louise Stevenson, *Someplace Else*, 2021 (inside pages). Image courtesy of Katie Kerr and the artist.



Louise Stevenson, *Someplace Else*, 2021 (detail of inside pages). Image courtesy of Katie Kerr and the artist.



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Louise Stevenson, *Someplace Else* (installation detail), Te Tuhi Project Wall, 2021. Works on paper, 2000-2019, found materials, mixed media, commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Sam Hartnett. Image courtesy of the artist.

Someplace Else *is a new book of mixed-media works from multi-disciplinary artist Louise Stevenson traversing her now decades-long relationship with Hungary. Through found objects and written narrative chronicling multiple trips from 1991 to 2019, this document follows the artist developing a practice to try and make sense of how another culture can over years become an inextricable and yet perplexing part of your own. First as an exchange student, then as a young adult, and later still with a young family, Stevenson grapples with the complex and often dark history of the nation she has married into; gothic beauty colliding with the fall of communism and the frightening pace of change under turn-of-the-millennium globalisation.*

Designed by Katie Kerr, and elaborately bound by Nadene Irving at Design Bind, Someplace Else *continues Stevenson's exploration of the book as a particular form for bringing art into the world.*

Someplace Else (2021)—a lavish handbound artist's book by Louise Stevenson concerning her decades of drifting repeatedly between Aotearoa New Zealand and Hungary—is a particularly vivid example of something many of us have probably thought about doing: a collection of the scintillating ephemera of travel preserved to look back on as we might a photo album. I know in the past I've kept ticket stubs from flights and trains and shows, art gallery floorplans, even novel food wrappers, with the idea of making a scrapbook as a narrative aide for posterity. *Someplace Else* contains and embodies this compulsion to deal with memory via material things, but goes forth with a much deeper vision than what is suggested by mere hobbyist scrapbooking. The kinds of items mentioned above are all here, but pressed between the pages like strange flowers in a physical manifestation of Pope's famous adage: "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd."[01]

Among these tokens is a written tale illustrating how global wandering as a subject for this artist's work arises from simple facts of biography. Stevenson describes herself as part of a generation of New Zealanders who simply wanted to go "overseas"—anywhere would do. There is nothing particularly special about this story, nor even about Hungary as a destination for the author, but this banality lends the story that unfolds a kind of inevitability. At first as an exchange student in Budapest, she discovers: "I especially like being a foreigner, and realise it was the condition I grew up in, as an expatriate in the Solomon Islands." Over the course of multiple trips to a changing Hungary, we see these feelings about drawing breath on foreign lands become significantly more complex. Stevenson has dealt extensively in other series with her formative years in colonised places—such as *Transparencies* (2015–ongoing) investigating her father's role as an architect for the British colonial service in Nigeria and the Solomon Islands—and her present work continues to examine how the confluence of personal and national history presents a jumping-off point for experiencing a wider world.

It's worth highlighting the importance of the Solomon Islands in theories of Pacific migration out of Asia, being the point at which the archipelago of South East Asia and Oceania ends, and the distances between bodies of land become suddenly more vast and demanding of incredible feats of sea-faring. Beyond the Solomon

Islands, the Austronesian languages become increasingly diverse, believed to be correlated with longer periods of language development in each place before making the next big leap.[02] At the beginning of *Someplace Else*—half the globe between Aotearoa and Budapest—Stevenson makes much of what turns of phrase between languages can reveal about the psyche, such as New Zealand English talking about "overseas" while landlocked Hungarians speak of "overland".



Louise Stevenson, *Someplace Else*, 2021 (detail of front cover). Image courtesy of Katie Kerr and the artist.



Louise Stevenson, *Someplace Else*, 2021 (front cover). Image courtesy of Katie Kerr and the artist.

Someplace Else greets us as though through an airport departure lounge: a window is cut into the rich red cover, its flap stitched open in mimicry of those analogue flipboards that used to display flight times, revealing the title on raw earthy card behind. The handmade quality of the book is on display from the outset, giving an appropriate sense of the materiality to come within. The light perforation across the cover asks us to consider tearing it like a ticket instead of opening to read it as a book, and the exposed spine reveals the stitching and glue in a way that is both bound together and vulnerable in its openness to the world.

Dipping inside, the first thing you're likely to notice is the varied sizes and materials of the pages that house the different aspects of this work. The written narrative chronicling several trips to Hungary threads through the book on tall narrow leaves of brown manilla card, like pamphlets you might pick up from a visitors' centre; a bundle of transparent paper sees the ephemera of transient events such as concert and transport tickets bleed through one another; while the full A4 size pages signal intricate collages and assemblages, about which more in a minute. The

narrative presented is not especially unique: travel, fall in love, return home, reprise the journey—but each time something is different—whether personal or world-historical. Yet in the sparse scenes of meeting in cafes and pubs, or meandering through exhibitions, there is a sense of holding back—bordering on secrecy—and letting the assorted artefacts do most of the talking. If you allow yourself to be swept up in cracking the codes of a mystifying foreign language, and the strange schematics that blend physical objects with intuitive sketching, *Someplace Else* can have the feel of a dossier that might be mislaid on the train in an international spy thriller.



Louise Stevenson, *Someplace Else*, 2021 (inside pages). Image courtesy of Katie Kerr and the artist.



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Louise Stevenson, *Someplace Else*, 2021 (back cover). Image courtesy of Katie Kerr and the artist.

The bulk of *Someplace Else* is devoted to collages and assemblages that Stevenson pointedly calls “drawings”, which she has been producing since returning to New Zealand in 2000 after her second stay in Hungary. Seemingly inconsequential items are collected during her numerous trips to and from Hungary and affixed to a sheet of paper, often by stitching with thread. A non-exhaustive list of these core objects: more tickets, postage stamps, museum

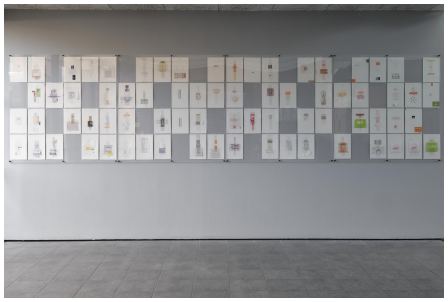
admission, baggage tags, a flattened Lufthansa branded paper cup, chocolate wrappers. The treatment of these objects is generally playful, such as the contrast between the organic texture of wandering loops of thread and the stark uniform geometry of a card from the Bauhaus centenary exhibit at the Ludwig Museum. A sketch is built around the items, with pencil lines often cohering into freehand grids, serving both to "anchor elements to the solidity of the page" and reflect the loose and contingent provenance of the "little scraps slipped into pockets and wallets and bags."[03]

In spite of their turbulent abstraction, two potentially related configurations surface repeatedly for me throughout the drawings: layouts of aircraft and basilicas. The variegated pencil grids seem to indicate both seats on a plane and the locations of pillars in a church, while the often cruciform arrangements of ephemera and sketch lines manifest as either fuselage and wings or nave and transept. The core items serve as sites for possible communion with a world otherwise being moved through too quickly; the book now something of a reliquary, the flickering sketch markings and visible routes of stitching the traces of some form of genuflection. In the story of her first arrival in Budapest, Stevenson notes with wide antipodean eyes the neo-gothic buildings: such as the parliament house on the banks of the Danube. While it's possible that the forms of the drawings arise mostly from the technical desire to build out from the centre of the page (Stevenson has no such religious inclinations), I'm choosing to believe that the plane/church duality is more than incidental, and instead responds to the gothic spirit of Hungary, reflecting the narrative's tension between "overseas" and "overland" through two symbols of flight and foundation.

First arriving in Budapest in 1991, only a few years after the fall of communism, and the opening of Hungary's borders to the West, the author experiences the novelty of opening her apartment windows at different angles: swinging wide or tilting open from the top. There is, at first, a sense that the full extent of the country's post-Communist transformation had yet to take place. Of course there are the descriptions of "severe concrete blocks" with ill-fitting doors and loose handles that play on our collective imagination about the qualities of Soviet life. More interesting to me is the way

that, during her first trip, a McDonalds is still able to be a place of intrigue in the urban environment, somewhere to meet. On subsequent journeys, the proliferation of consumerist brands such as IKEA and H&M appear to drown out her former interest in "social realist statues" and other non-privatised places. In *Ghosts of My Life* Mark Fisher laments how the "replicated sameness" of the "Starbucks environment" has essentially replaced public space, but in a way that is "both reassuring and oddly disorienting".[04] While the objects woven into Stevenson's drawings are vague and generic—e.g. the Lufthansa paper cup—they achieve a conflicting level of particularity in the care and slowness taken over them in this new life. This runs against the grain of the written story, which sees the early wide-eyed wonder of adolescence replaced with frantic metro trips to marginal jobs later in adult life; the Kiwi student who just wanted to go anywhere now confronting, as an English tutor, young Hungarians desperate to flee the former Soviet bloc. Later still, she will take the children of her Hungarian marriage back to the fatherland in the middle of the 2015 European migration crisis, and hear about the corruption that builds football stadiums with child poverty funds.

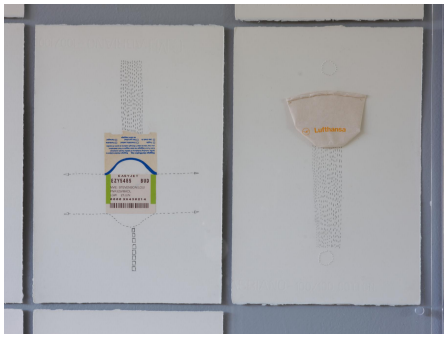
On the last page, Stevenson wonders "if in the everyday minutiae of this travel ephemera there are prescient indicators of the future?" There is certainly something oddly talismanic about the catalogue of change *Someplace Else* presents. In the first section of ephemera on transparent pages, a 90s ticket for the Sikló cable car at Budapest castle looks very much like a modest postage stamp. In a drawing towards the end of the book, a 2005 admission for the same attraction returns in a lavish full-colour version. The hand-punched tickets of yesteryear transforming into the QR codes of the future.



Louise Stevenson, *Someplace Else*, 2021 (installation view), Te Tuhi Project Wall, 2021. Works on paper, 2000-2019, found materials, mixed media, commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Sam Hartnett. Image courtesy of the artist.



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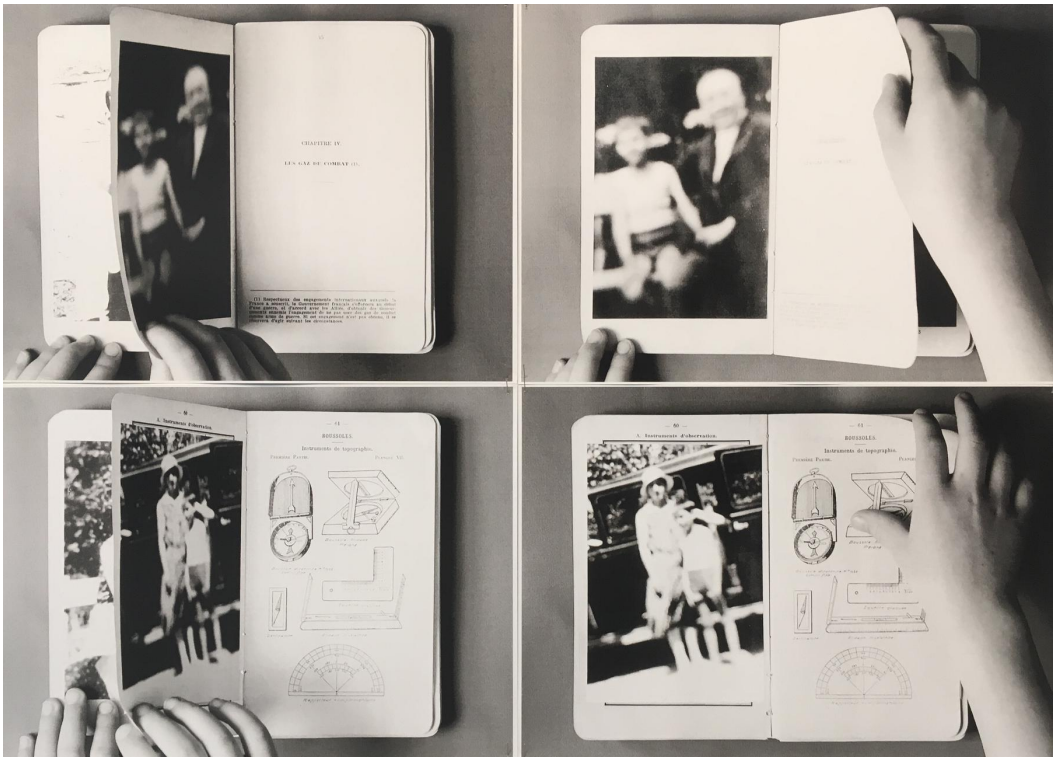
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While the drawings of *Someplace Else* have been exhibited in the gallery as well as in these pages (Te Tuhi Project Wall, 2021), there is a sense in which—like the photobooks of late New Zealand photographer Harvey Benge—the tangled narrative questions of these works come most to the fore through the hand-held sequence of the book form. Benge similarly maintained a commitment to the book in his career, not as documents after-the-fact, but as fundamental to his art existing at all. With over 70 titles, including long-term relationships with major international publishers such as Dewi Lewis and Kehrer Verlag, as well as starting his own imprint FAQEDITIONS, the photobook was Benge's medium as

much if not more so than the gallery exhibition, and it is clear that his sequences of photographs were almost always produced with this end in mind. Also like Stevenson, international movement was a central fact of Benge's life and art; known as he was for splitting his time between Auckland and Paris, attending art book fairs the world over, and making work that was often defined by going to other places (e.g. his iconic portraits of Harajuku girls in Tokyo). His art was and is one without borders.

In particular, his early book *Aide Memoire* (Onestar Press, 2000) bears a passing resemblance to *Someplace Else* that I've been unable to ignore. It too is a document of documents; its dual subject is a 1930s manual for French infantry officers, and a series of old photographs of a family seaside trip, both found by Benge in Paris. The grainy and often poorly focused photos of a toy yacht, and a boy in early 20th Century swimwear are slipped into the tattered manual, partially covering some figures, but also appearing alongside diagrams of weapons, tanks and gas masks in wistfully disturbing juxtaposition. But *Aide Memoire* is not a blankly academic reproduction of these combined artefacts, and features the hands of Benge's daughter turning each page, sometimes at a point of rest with the book lying peacefully open, at others caught mid-turn, just as we can see the traces of Stevenson's hand movements in the erratic sketching and wandering stitches. Like *Someplace Else*, the book form becomes an investigation into how memory is acted out through otherwise incidental objects and ephemera, that only require being turned over and handled again to leap back to life through new relations scarcely imaginable at the time.

There's a double edged sword here. On the one hand it's perhaps comforting to be reminded of how our memories can inhere in material items that may outlive us; yet it's also disturbing to think how easily so much of the world is lost forever. A bundle of anonymous photographs languishing in a French antique shop until a strange artist from New Zealand picks them up. A section in *Someplace Else* titled 'Forgotten Visit - 1995' laments that nothing was collected and no drawings produced, as if the trip never quite existed in the first place.



Contemporary collage and assemblage is often associated with the alienation of postmodernism; the anarchic juxtaposition of anything and everything, a reaction to the often frightening multiplicity of the world, and the sense of perpetual dislocation within it. Although not entirely outside this realm, Stevenson's varied drawings actually strike me as remarkably *comforting* despite how *erratic* they may first appear—the care taken in methods of assembly such as hand-stitching, the pencil lines folding through and around the contours of objects mitigating some of the world's otherwise frantic edge. Where collage might act as the great and impersonal leveller, Stevenson's treatment of the items collected here instead allows them to reflect deeply personal stories and reactions to the material facts of civilisation.

Nothing is simple at the crossroads of Central Europe, piled on top of the ages of the Huns, Tatar invasions, Ottoman occupation, the Austro-Hungarian empire, Soviet adjacency, breakneck privatisation, and post-industrial recession. How could someone from so young a nation as Aotearoa New Zealand hope to grapple with the deep and often dark history of so ancient and gothic a place as Hungary? Stevenson's life has clearly been one of coming to terms with this loaded cultural landscape, now an inseparable but incomplete part of her own. *Someplace Else* documents in detail

the movement from the exoticism of youthful travel, to forging a family from these wildly divergent lineages, and having to explain it not only to her children, but also to herself. What makes the book interesting is its quiet confidence in motion; going somewhere, for nothing so great as a grand *purpose* that makes everything automatically good and right, but moving on and through the world with neither cold rationality nor hot-headed spectacle, in a way that is absolutely real.

Footnotes

01. Alexander Pope, *An Essay On Criticism* (1771).

02. See for example Ross Clark, *Aspects of Proto-Polynesian Syntax* (Te Reo Monographs, 1976).

03. Louise Stevenson, 'Forgotten Visit, 1995' in *Someplace Else* (Louise Stevenson, 2021).

04. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (Zero Books, 2014), p. 137.

Biographies



Louise Stevenson is a multi-disciplinary artist born in Honiara, Solomon Islands, and based in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her projects range across drawing, photography, moving-image, painting, book-making and sometimes writing.

Curious about travel, fluid global situations and narratives, Louise responds to colonial / post-colonial and trans-national contexts relevant to contemporary culture-making. Modernist architecture of the colonial era in the tropics is a particular research focus, informed by a family archive of photographic and film material. She has published papers on tropical modern architecture in the Pacific and presented at conferences in New Zealand and Australia.

Louise holds a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of Auckland and was a senior lecturer at the Manukau School of Visual Arts and a professional teaching fellow at the University of Auckland. She established the community based arts business ArtSpark, sharing a vision for contemporary art-making.



Chris Holdaway is a poet and bookmaker from Aotearoa New Zealand. He is the author of *Gorse Poems* (Titus Books, 2021) and directs the poetry publishing house Compound Press.

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