Passing Torches

by Barbara Sirieix, Caterina Riva

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Tahi Moore, video stills from *Paranoid Structures* and *Not Self Help*, 2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Les Limbes exhibition view, curated by Caterina Riva, 2016, La Galerie, contemporary art center, Noisy-le-Sec/ Paris. Photo: Pierre Antoine.



Tahi Moore, video stills from *Paranoid Structures* and *Not Self Help*, 2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.



the blue-grey wall exhibition view, 2015, The Physics Room, Christchurch. Photo courtesy of Barbara Sirieix and The Physics Room.

Barbara Sirieix is a writer and curator based in Paris. In 2015, she was in residence at The Physics Room in Christchurch where she curated the exhibition the blue-grey wall. *Caterina Riva is a writer and curator based in Italy, and from 2011 to 2014 she was the Director of Artspace Aotearoa in Auckland.*

In this conversation, Sirieix and Riva reflect on their time spent working in Aotearoa and the work of New Zealand artists they continued to work with and exhibit on return to Europe, how curatorial and writing practices can engage with political convictions and effect meaningful change, and the challenges of being far from home during times of political turmoil.

BARBARA SIRIEIX Tuesday, November 8, 2016

Hi Caterina, I hope you are well!

I see that our deadline is coming up soon so I will start here with my first question/contribution.

We first got in touch in summer 2015 when I was about to go to New Zealand, for a residency and to curate a show at The Physics Room in Christchurch. You had recently returned to Europe after spending three years as the Director of Artspace in Auckland (from 2011 to 2014). Our exchanges felt like passing torches somehow, as I had just completed a residency at La Galerie, in Noisy-le-Sec (Paris) and you were preparing to start one there in the following months, which would culminate in the exhibition 'Les Limbes'.

As I had never been in the Pacific before, I had decided to deal with New Zealand through my own projections and fantasies of the island(s) to formulate the concept for the exhibition, titled 'the blue-grey wall.' You, on the other hand, drew from the memories you collected in New Zealand and your project dealt with the experience of your return and the realisation that your perspective had changed.

Could you tell me a bit more about your return to Europe and how it was reflected in the exhibition project 'Les Limbes' that you curated for La Galerie in Noisy-le-Sec?

CATERINA RIVA 2016-11-10 10:32 GMT+01:00

Yes, it was funny how we exchanged positions, drawing an 'x' on the globe via our carbon footprint plane journeys. For me, the residency and show at La Galerie were an attempt to try to work with some of the nuances and enlarged sensibility that I developed when in New Zealand, but that were internalised only when returning to my home turf of Europe and Italy.

'Les Limbes' was built with five artists, some of whom I am familiar with from my time down under (Tahi Moore and Alicia Frankovich), and the rest chosen because artworks of theirs I saw upon my return really did something for me, at a visceral more than intellectual level (this has been the case for works by Flora Hauser, Renato Leotta, Felix Melia). The next challenge was to work on a joined effort with individuals I didn't know and to concoct a project that was mindful of an audience and was not erasing the social context of Noisy-le-Sec.

In the accompanying text I wrote, I keep talking about reversed perspectives and constantly changing one's viewpoint; maybe as opposed to having a colonial eye and a western imprint. Rather than a hard logical truth that could be written in a manifesto-like shape, I am interested in a softer, more emotional and affective approach to things.

You and I also bonded over your thoughts and feelings being in Australia when the Paris attacks happened in November 2015, and how you were still trying to deal with something that you hadn't lived first-hand, but that was affecting you deeply. Back in Paris, you helped me navigate what was happening between April and May 2016 too: the social unrest, strikes and the emergence of the public assembly called *Nuit Debout*.[01] Can you tell me a bit more about your writing on and around some of these events?



Les Limbes exhibition view, curated by Caterina Riva, 2016, La Galerie, contemporary art center, Noisy-le-Sec/ Paris. Photo: Pierre Antoine.



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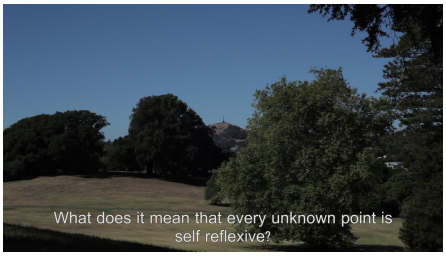
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Laura Preston, a New Zealand born curator and writer based in Europe, had invited me to write on the work of New Zealand artist William Hsu for the publication *Paris, May 16*. I started the text when I came back to Paris, a few days after the November attacks. There was something quite obvious that emerged in the process; the displacement and delayed trauma I experienced shaped the very particular way I approached his work at this time, and the somewhat 'affective' research I conducted on Hsu's history as an immigrant fleeting Chiang Kaï-sheck dictatorship as a child. In his work, there is a very sensitive approach to the relation between political events and memory.

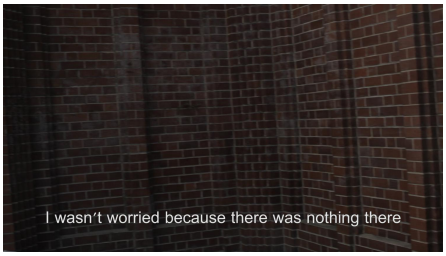
The text probably came out of a necessity to express emotions but also concerns about 'the state of emergency' that the French government implemented after the attacks, which has been renewed this summer after the attack in Nice. Within exceptional circumstances, the state of emergency dispositions, created in the ‘50s in the context of the Algerian War, grants greater power to the executive branch of the State, in some cases overriding the power of Justice for instance. The army is not involved so it's not 'martial law', nevertheless it is a prolonged period of non-democratic governance. This brought a new reality to Paris, one where children see machine guns on a daily basis as the military strolls down the streets.

This summer while I was in Berlin, I also tried to render my impressions of the post-Brexit, Nice and Bavaria attacks in another text commission, and reflect my concern as to the responsibility of the curator in relation to the approach taken by New York-based collective DIS in curating the 9th Berlin Biennale, titled 'The Present in Drag'. Their biennial presented the advanced conditions of gentrification and commodification of memory in the German Capital, yet they didn’t outline the most important: the symptoms of the growing erosion of 'Europe'—the post-WWII project established to avoid the return of fascism in the European region. This is visible in the alarming poll scores achieved by extremist and conservative parties all over Europe (Marine Le Pen in France for instance) and in the US, as we saw a few days ago with the election of Donald Trump. The current political contexts of Hungary, Slovakia and Poland, who joined the European Union in 2004, are also concerning.

You and I had several discussions about our concerns regarding the ways conservatism and populism affect our work as art professionals, and the necessity we felt to engage with that in our work. I feel that you have a strong sense of political engagement. How do you relate this in your work?



Tahi Moore, video stills from *Paranoid Structures* and *Not Self Help*, 2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.



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CR 2016-11-13 17:17 GMT+01:00

The news has not been kind to the world this week; today marks one year after the Paris attacks and a strong earthquake has hit close to the South Island of New Zealand, there is a tsunami warning for all the East Coast region of the country.

I wish my political engagement could have real impact on the communities I encounter and interact with. I gave up a while ago any art/curation manifesto; positions that are only engaged on the surface. I have learnt that change comes little by little and is an attitude rather than a revolution. It's about how you work with others, how you give chances to people and how that hopefully generates a beneficial ripple effect. For me lately the struggle has been advocating (equal) opportunities for women. I have just come back from a research trip to Dublin: in Ireland abortion is still illegal and a woman can face criminal charges and end up in jail.

You recently collaborated with Emilie Renard (Director of La Galerie Noisy-le-Sec) on a show presented at the project space Occidental Temporary near Paris (11 September - 20 November 2016)—can you tell me more about the idea behind the show and also about the process you used with Emilie?

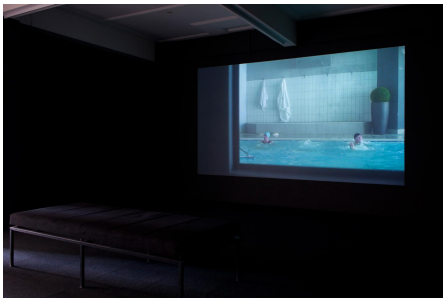
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Yes it was a strange thing to see these events take place. I remember when I got to Christchurch in 2015, how the devastation caused by the 2011 earthquakes was already covered up by new urban plans and yet still quite significant when you got to talk to people. This was also why for my project at The Physics Room I decided to use fantasy as I knew I wouldn't have any concrete knowledge before I got there; a post-traumatic context is a difficult thing to grasp.

I agree with you on the importance of engaging with one's convictions in the way we work with people. I also believe in strategies more than in literal content when it comes to curating or writing, especially with my feminist concerns. The project 'Œil de Lynx & Tête de Bois' curated with Emilie Renard at Occidental Temporary is a good example.

We started with the specificity of the space, working with its duality as both the set of the film of Neil Beloufa and the white cube constructed adjacently. From this starting point, we used the French film by Jacques Rivette *Celine and Julie go boating* (1974) as a sort of reference-script, because it reflected our condition—two women working together and the process of improvisation and co-writing with the artists we invited to be part of the project. Something I interpret as a form of resistance against infrastructures. We built the exhibition as a sort of non-linear scenario with the artists. The project featured 14 artists from both sexes, a very wide range of age and origin. Many worked *in situ* (Martine Aballéa, France Valliccioni, Celine Vaché-Olivieri, Jagna Ciuchta) or from a distance (David Horvitz, Jiri Kovanda, Marie-Michelle Deschamps). We had a lot of fun doing it, which I think is also very important!

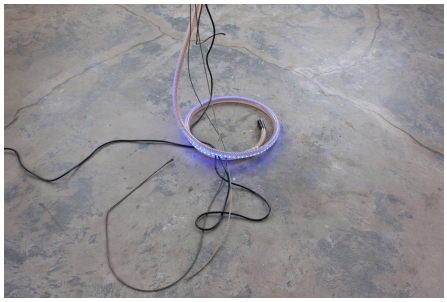
Maybe you could tell me a bit about what's coming up next for you?



the blue-grey wall exhibition view, 2015, The Physics Room, Christchurch. Photo courtesy of Barbara Sirieix and The Physics Room.



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CR 2016-11-18 15:10 GMT+01:00

Funny you mention fun, I think it is a very important part of the equation but I also think more and more that the fun is taken out of the professionalised art world as it has come to be. I have been writing a bit lately, which I enjoy immensely as a thinking tool, but I have also been compiling job applications (enough with the freelancing for me!). It is a terrible and alienating exercise, especially because in most instances you are totally isolated in the process and if you are not selected—the case 98% of times—there is no feedback available and you feel a sense of defeat that usually prevents you even from talking to people about it, hence increasing the sense of alienation, frustration and stagnation.

I increasingly feel the need to re-invent the wheel: since as it is, it is not possible to continue. Art has always been a place of dissent, not of complacency, and I look forward to what we will collectively be able to do to change things; especially in a social, political, financial landscape that is so worrying as well as dysfunctional. I am going to start to talk more openly about problems I encounter and maybe my CV will soon be made up not only of the successes but also the rejections, the interviews and the things that didn't lead to job positions but that required a lot of emotional labour.

I hope this is not too much of a glum way to finish this piece. I will forward you and Pauline some video stills from Tahi Moore's works to illustrate our conversation. Tahi is an artist I met while I lived in Auckland, I have worked with him many times now. I look up to him and I am always amazed at the way he manages to weave together complex thoughts. I look forward to continuing the conversation with him and you too, Barbara.

Footnotes

01. *Nuit Debout* was a public assembly that started on 31 March 2016 which occupied Place de la République in Paris and then many other squares in other French cities, bringing together students, unemployed, migrants, workers and people to protest against the proposed labour law (referred to as *El Khomri* or *Loi travail*).

Biographies



Alicia Frankovich (b.1980, Tauranga, Aotearoa New Zealand) lives and works in Melbourne. She has formerly been based in Berlin and Canberra. Frankovich has a BVA in sculpture from AUT, Auckland (2002) and an MFA from Monash University (2016). Frankovich is one of the leading Aotearoa artists of her generation, known for her performances, sculptures, videos, and her enquiry into exhibition situations, that engage viewers within exhibition formats.

She has been short-listed for the Kunstpreis der Böttcherstraße, in Bremen Germany, 2018 and the Walters Prize, New Zealand, 2012. She has presented solo and two-person exhibitions and performances at Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf (2017), Gebert Stiftung für Kultur, Rapperswil, Switzerland (2015), Kunstverein Hildesheim (2013) and at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin (2011). Her group exhibitions and performances include: *Transcorporeal Metabolisms:* The 12th Performance Project of LISTE Art Fair, Basel (2016), *12th Swiss Sculpture Exhibition: Le Mouvement: Performing the City*, Biel/Bienne, Switzerland, *Framed Movements*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2014), and *The Real Thing?*: Nouvelles Vagues: Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2013). In 2016 Frankovich was a Creative New Zealand resident at the ISCP New York.



Tahi Moore (b. 1972, Auckland, NZ) graduated with a BFA from Elam School of Fine Art in 2005. His work and performance have been exhibited extensively within New Zealand and Australia at both artist-run projects and major institutions.

Recent exhibitions include: *War against the self*, Gambia Castle, Auckland; Y3k Gallery, Melbourne; *Vaccum Idle Adjust*, Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington; *Various Failures*, Gambia Castle, Auckland; and *Late Night TV,* Square2, City Gallery, Wellington.

Recent performances include: *Nothing was going on, it was boring anyway, Moment Making*, Artspace, Auckland; *News Is Also On Television* (with Simon Denny), Michael Lett, Auckland; *A movie that isn't really good, but is o.k.* (with Simon Denny), *54321: Artists Projects*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland and *Mostly Harmless*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.



Barbara Sirieix is a writer and curator based in Paris. In fall 2015, she was in residency at The Physics Room in Christchurch, New Zealand where she curated the exhibition 'the blue-grey wall'. Also in 2015, at La Galerie, contemporary art centre in Noisy-le-Sec, France, she published with Dent-De-Leone her first book *24 ter rue de la pierre feuillère*, following a writing residency.



Caterina Riva is a curator and writer based in Italy. She was Director of Artspace New Zealand between 2011 and 2014 and lived in Auckland.

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