Permanent Migration

by Signe Rose

Published on 06.02.2020



Signe Rose is an artist with roots in both New Zealand and Austria. Her letter to sculptor Martyn Reynolds reflects on their life in Vienna since the couple moved from Auckland in 2010, living between cultural paradigms and considering the changing audiences for their art practices.

Dear Martyn,

I know my sporadic, melancholy musings about moving back to New Zealand upset you. So let me explain. I wish to express to you how much I love our life here. Behind my homesickness, which is coursing through me because of all the family visiting us at the moment, and who are about to leave again, there is a great sense of peace and gratitude for the life we have built together here in Vienna. We came here in search of big dreams, and already, on many levels it feels like those dreams have come true. Here we are, settled 'overseas'. That realisation stirs up a restlessness that makes me scramble for another big dream, like a dog with a bone looking at his reflection in the mirror. But it's just a distraction. A way to avoid living in the gratitude of the present.



Martyn Reynolds, *Black Hook Cherokee* (2019), cast, anodized aluminium, UV print. Exhibited at Norma Redpath and Martyn Reynolds at Sydney, Sydney, 2019. Photo courtesy of Conor O'Shea.



Signe Rose, *New Fan* (2018), kinetic sculpture made of boiled leather, silver leaf, disco ball motor. Exhibition view of *Anti-aging in the Middle Ages*, Signe Rose and Louise Sartor at Galerie der Stadt Schwaz, Tyrol. Photo Courtesy of Galerie der Stadt Schwaz, Verena Nagl.



Signe Rose, *Baba Yaga* (2018), boiled leather, jewelry findings, silver plated wire. *Exhibition view of Anti-aging in the Middle Ages*, Signe Rose and Louise Sartor at Galerie der Stadt Schwaz, Tyrol. Photo Courtesy of Galerie der Stadt Schwaz, Verena Nagl.

I sense my own resistance to integrate more fully into Viennese/ European society, out of fear that I will lose something of myself. Not trusting that it can be more and both, rather than one cancelling the other out. I fear that I won't be able to teach my children the names of the local trees and insects here, that they will grow up as disconnected to their environment as I was, raised in New Zealand by foreign parents. But if I cannot teach them these things it is because I am too lazy to learn them myself. I admire your curiosity for European politics and appreciate you keeping me informed about it. I read the local community newspaper and we exchange stories about the European Union and Meidling.[01] You read Thomas Bernhard to try to untangle the Viennese mentality, while I wrestle with the German language, maintaining a playful insistence that it can be fun and beautiful despite all its rules and so many native speakers having a cultural cringe about the way it is evolving through migration.

But I fear the waning of my connection to New Zealand. Auckland is a river that we stepped out of years ago. Any thought of keeping up with that context is at best delusional, which our brief stints

there serve to remind us. Everything we have picked up abroad threatens our belonging: we don't anxiously bookend everything we say with "sorry" anymore (are we sorry about that? nah); the slang we use has aged conspicuously; and my Birkenstocks out me as foreign. Like that drunk stranger on K Road who thought you were German... was it because of your hairstyle? And who was it that asked you if you still consider yourself a "New Zealand artist"? Wtf? As though the cultural slate is wiped clean by a few years abroad? Was the culture there always so tenuous? And how about that kitsch, overplayed kiwiana in the picture books our parents send for the kids? Was it like this when we were growing up or is this a new development? "You can't get anything published here unless it has a kiwi as a main character," Sophia told me.[02] Was it always so patriotic? Are we not allowed to participate anymore unless we're drinking kombucha, and getting wrist tattoos or whatever? The conformity always got to me, I remember. But my bitterness stems from fear. From the threat of exclusion.



Detail of mixed media installation from *Eine verlässliche Quelle / A Reliable Source*, Signe Rose's graduation show at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 2017. Photo: Signe Rose.



New Zealand artists in the Austrian alps: Signe Rose and Martyn Reynolds with their daughter Maud on a summer trip to the city of Schwaz, for the opening of Signe Rose's exhibition Anti-aging in the Middle Ages at Galerie der Stadt Schwaz, Tyrol, 2018. Photo: Muriel Jakowitsch.

How can we avoid being permanent tourists wherever we might be? *One of the reasons why compulsive photo-taking has become a tourist*

cliché is that framing the world with a viewfinder — that is, reducing its complexity to a few visual cues — is a ritual of comfort in places that feel threateningly unfamiliar. In seeking an "authentic" vision of a once-isolated culture, we don't want to deal with the ragged edges of actual authenticity; instead, we seek vestiges of a romanticized authenticity that exists primarily in our own imagination.[03] Like the ritual of new parents desperately photographing their still unfamiliar babies. They look so comfortingly harmless onscreen.

As travellers, as immigrants, we are eternal students. We savour newness like our favourite food. The taste lingers on our tongue. I worry that migration means fully submerging oneself in otherness until we recognise it more readily than what was previously the norm. An 'exotic fantasy' has become home, and in an unsettling twist, the original 'back home' has become an exotic fantasy. I catch myself reminiscing about the natural, untouched beauty of 'the island', the increased distance allowing colonial fantasies and touristic tropes to penetrate and replace my real memories. And even a favourite food, if eaten every day, inspires a desire for something new. So where to next? Are we predestined for permanent migration?



Practising yoga in the Seoul Incheon airport lounge during one of many long haul flights from Vienna to Auckland, 2017. Often carting along a suitcase full of artwork, these trips serve both as family catch ups as well as professional affairs for both artists. Photo: Martyn Reynolds.



Martyn Reynolds, *assemblage in abandoned Soviet hospital*, Pleven, Bulgaria, 2016. Photo courtesy of Martyn Reynolds.

But what about the children? In the TV series *Louie*[04], the title character's ex-wife Janet, mother of their two very blonde, very white children is played by Jamaican actress Susan Kelechi Watson. The fact that the race discrepancy is never explained rings true to the frequent disregard of continuity in the show.[05] At one point, Louie's girlfriend says "Those kids can't come from that

woman," to which Louie vaguely responds that Janet is biracial. Despite our best efforts (remember Ruth Buchanan in Berlin encouraging her toddler to say "milk" with a New Zealand accent?) kids always belong to a different culture to their parents, and only imitate their dialects temporarily. The liberal politics of integration try really hard to be inclusive. 'Integration' means embracing the new generation in the hopes that, with suffering and estrangement from their parents, the children grow up to be culturally curious rather than bitterly rootless. Ok, so they are bilingual, but how many local dialects can they do convincingly? Who is bi-local? Multi-local? For you and I, our fragile roots were not as deep in the earth as they were for our little sisters. Unlike them, we still remember a time before we learned our New Zealand accents.[06] We were cultural hybrids long before we could read or write.



Signe Rose, *Gösser Chandelier* (2014) [detail], beer can, Coca cola bottle, chain, jewellery findings, diamantes. Shown at *Iconocityclasm*, Iconicity Building, Auckland, 2014.



Sculpture production at the artist's mother's home in the Coromandel bush during a trip to New Zealand in 2016. The finished work, *Bondage Jewel*, was presented in *Overseas BF*, a show curated by Signe Rose that brought together works by European artists and New Zealand expat artists with local practitioners at Glove Box, Auckland, 2016. Photo: Signe Rose.



Signe Rose, *Nicki* (2015), kinetic sculpture made of snakeskin, chain, pearls, energy drink can, disco ball motor. Exhibition view of *Sometimes my way is more important than the truth*, Signe Rose and Louise Sartor at Tonus, Paris.

And then we have our art-making processes, that I affectionately call "cargo cult", reclaiming the problematic term to reflect the

Eurocentric viewpoint we're up against. We collect trash that washes up on our islands; fashion fetishes to catch the political dreams of the tourists, or are they locals? It's hard to tell them apart. It's all a bit too trashy for Vienna, and it was always a bit too fetishistic for Auckland. Neither claims us as their own, and like a rejected lover I pretend that it means less to me than it really does. My constant companion is that niggling fear: Is it time to move on? Time for a bigger dream, again? It's not the art-making itself that dissatisfies so much as the lack of nuanced understanding from the audience when you're continually typecast as foreign. Like all my beautifully translated English sentences in publications and press releases that will probably never be read by a native Anglophone... The continual search for more scope, for plurality rather than either/or.

And where are we not tourists? Home is where my antibodies are most attuned; where the pollen doesn't irritate my eyes; where the mosquitoes don't like my blood. Home is where I get all the in-jokes; where my level of politeness is appropriate; where I know exactly what is expected of me. So it's nowhere. So I'll throw out the idea of home, and accept the temporary peace of right now. It feels perfect right now. Every place is full of pros and cons but our adventure continues. Let the ragged authenticity of it catch up to us again.

xxxx

Footnotes

01. An international and working class district in Vienna where we have resided for several years.

02. A friend who works in children's publishing in New Zealand.

03. Rolf Potts, Cannibal Habits of the Common Tourist (2013).

04. TV series (2010–2015) loosely based on the life of comedian Louis C.K.

05. Creator Louis C.K. has stated that he is not concerned with continuity and changes characters at will to fit the episode's story. In previous episodes, Louie's ex-wife was played by a white actress but only her hands were visible. In response to this, C.K. said on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*: "If the character works for the show, I don't care about the race." He continued: "When a black woman tells you to get a job, it's just... more" (IMDB)

06. Both of us arrived in New Zealand as preschoolers, having picked up accents from our birth places, Vienna and Philadelphia respectively.



Signe Rose is an artist based in Vienna. Her work uses discarded waste as raw material, which she then adorns with gold leaf, pearl, quartz and jewellery elements. Rose seeks in her work a new, plural identity which is critical at the same time as embracing, ambivalent but in no way apathetic and strives to channel from a simultaneously contemporary and ancient source. Her elegant sculptures combine visual seduction and unapologetic contradiction.

Her work was recently exhibited at Treignac Projet, France, Galerie der Stadt Schwaz, in the Vienna Biennale at MAK, and Adam Art Gallery in Wellington, New Zealand. In 2016 she was a finalist in the Dagmar Chobot Sculpture Prize in Vienna.

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