

A TEXT, A WORKING WEEK

Alex Davidson & Laura Preston

Thursday, Laura Preston (LP): I am sitting at a little wooden desk in an apartment in Turin, Italy. The desk is positioned just so. It fits the dimensions of the window frame, also wooden but painted white, which opens with a latch, inwards. The cool air is sharp today. From this small desk with an outlook to a communal square—shaped as a circle—I can see that the trees are losing their golden leaves and so I can see through them and to the other side of the street. We have often spoken about this: the decision of location and how best to work from a place you are getting familiar with. I have been living on the continent almost five years now. It hasn't always been easy adapting, though my body now understands the seasonal changes—when to start wearing a coat. I am here in Turin to represent the documenta 14 guest issues of the Athens-based magazine *South as a State of Mind*. I have come to this city with my colleague Michelangelo to give a talk at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo about the status of the south. I never imagined working out of Greece. Indeed, this is an unlikely proposition considering the economic situation of this nation-state. The rising taxes and austerity measures are only increasing the unemployment rates. The country further pressured by the number of people fleeing Syria, finding first-stop refuge in a state where they are welcomed but by those who can't really support them. And yet the European Union continues to let Greece swallow the humanitarian crisis, which has economic implications too.

It's not so surprising, I guess, that I continue to work for Germany as I did after Artspace, after Auckland, while being based in Rotterdam, at the Witte de With. I worked then on the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Another project that worked at a distance and over, literal and figurative, borders—it is, however, to Germany that I now pay my taxes.

There is a real interest in documenta 14 reframing the institution it has become and the expectations of its working processes by positioning the exhibition across the two cities of Kassel, its home, and Athens, its site of learning. It's a sharply political move binding the project to these two sites, these two poles of Europe. It shows up the clash of cultural coordinates and economic inequalities. And as the exhibition takes form, I can see more

and more of how the project speaks to these realities through multiple visual takes on realism and figuration, and the nonvisual, voice and listening, and further, the inadequacies and potential of language to articulate these lived issues—as the guest issues of *South as a State of Mind* is already doing.

Thursday, Alex Davidson (AD): A desk is a good place to begin. At this moment while I'm at work at a gallery in London, the desk I sit at is large and has a bright-green Formica top, designed by Jean Prouvé. It rests on a polished concrete floor, and I sit on one of Prouvé's yellow chairs. Most of his work took place during the 1920s, '30s and '40s, prior to and during WWII, and he was commissioned for many government projects, like mass-produced furniture for public institutions such as schools and hospitals. He also designed modular housing for Jewish refugees after the war. Light, wooden and demountable, they are elegant and now fashionable Modernist structures, a long way from the tents in Calais—the point between France and Britain—that are now being brutally and rapidly cleared by government orders.

Coming from a psychoanalytic position, Jacqueline Rose, who teaches in the programme in which I am enrolled for my Masters at Birkbeck, says that it is important to know yourself well enough before you can attempt to know the 'other'. Although this sentiment seems vague when I write it here, I found this quite useful in thinking about my own family history, a big part of which is Jewish immigrants fleeing difficult conditions in Lithuania prior to the German occupation. I shudder at the fact that we're now in a time when there are more refugees in the world than ever before, and yet, as you say, Europe—and my chosen home of Britain—forces the pressure to borders elsewhere. I am really looking forward to seeing how documenta takes form.



Alex, London, 7 December 2016.

That history is part of the reason I was curious to go to Vilnius, Lithuania, after working in the same role you had at Artspace, Auckland. I spent most of 2014 there, initially at Rupert, a residency programme for artists and curators, which is on the edge of the city with a forest on one side. Although it was a very strange, disorienting period, filled with long stretches of what seemed at the time to be total torpor, in hindsight it was one of the most useful experiences I've had in terms of questioning what productivity is for myself and recalibrating my own values and desires.

Friday, LP: To give you a bit of back story, *South as a State of Mind* was initiated by the Kunsthalle in Athens and came from thinking about directionals—placing the Athens contemporary art community on the map and into northern circulation. It also offered a space for the Kunsthalle over the winter months as heating in Athens is just too expensive to keep such a large building running and so the space was forced to close temporarily. The magazine became the site for the programme instead. The main article of the second issue is a good example of the content produced in those early days. The article focused on a project by German artist Martin Kippenberger, MOMAS, which took place on the Greek island of Syros every summer from 1992 to 1996. The MOMAS project was a residency for artists. Every year a regular group of friends formed the basis for the residency. They gathered in the foundation of a building half completed—a contemporary ruin, their own kind of Parthenon—to produce an exhibition. The social emphasis of Kippenberger's endeavour, the working with givens and the enfolding of north and south relations that this projects tells, echoed the ethos of the journal in its initial formation.

At the talk today we discussed what it means to be a guest and to be a host and what legacies these roles may leave, without promise, and mostly in relation to thinking about the workings of language and translation. We talked about the terms south and north and the connotations given to them in Europe—the Mediterranean as opposed to the North Sea—and the importance of being attuned to the specificities of place. I felt self-consciously from the South Pacific with my accent, a soft New Zealand intonation, reading passages from the editors' letters written by Quinn and Adam. For the first issue the editorial focuses on the notions of dispossession and displacement, the more elusive tropes of silence and masks for the second, and in the most recent, hunger. These concepts are brought into stark relief through uncompromising writing, and at that moment of reading, through a voice that provided yet another coordinate for the notion of the south—my cultural garment of time. As the editors of *documenta 14*, language is recognised as a subject and a space in which to think through the colonising aspect of languaging subjects, claiming by naming, and the possibility of giving voice to those little known by the Western canon—making visible through words that also, I hope, keep an aspect of the subject unknowable too.

Saturday, AD: It was so nice to hear more about the editing work on which your last few months have been focused. When we first began writing to each other in 2014, in preparation for the workshop in Riga, Latvia, for which I invited you to speak, you were pursuing questions about writing and in particular, naming and claiming as an action with agency and consequence beyond its immediate function. These effects seem most clear in relation to colonialism, as you wrote just now. In Riga you gave a wonderful talk about the possibility of criticism as a parallel form to artistic production. It was performed as a kind of choreography of voices, in conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *Reassemblage* (1982), which screened next to and around you as you spoke. *Reassemblage*, a quasi-anthropological documentary, is filmed in Senegal with a skeptical eye that doubles back on its own looking, performing so playfully the questions and critiques of the neutral and authoritative voice of ethnographic filmmaking that were raised in the 1980s. For me, in the somewhat strange period of what was framed as a writing workshop in the foreign city of Riga, this film you chose was also a model for thinking about art criticism as a kind of empathetic activity, where one's own position and the foreign object of one's attention are constantly kind of jostling with each other in an attempt to be closer, or further apart. To questions of what criticism is, and can be, especially in relation to place and culture, you have been committed for some years, with your work on the editorial team at Sternberg Press and then afterwards in *Next Spring*—your journal about the function and form of critical writing in relation to geography, as you moved between the Netherlands, Germany and now Greece.



Laura, Athens, 14 August, 2016.

The clocks went back last week here, so it's dark now at 4.30pm. It's the final day of our exhibition at Modern Art, *Feral Neighbours*, by Sanya Kantarovsky, whose paintings tell surreal tales about characters and places from his childhood home of Moscow. It is as though these paintings come straight from the dreamlike recesses of the mind, where comedy and high drama meet, and where those frequent moments of awkwardness or embarrassment, irritation or anxiety morph and magnify into whimsical characters and situations in their own right. When he spoke to a group of visitors recently, the artist said the central trauma of his life was emigrating from Russia to the USA at the age of ten, and learning how to speak again, finding his voice again in New York, or in your terms—remaking from scratch his own cultural garment of time. That stuck with me.

Sunday, LP: Alex, you write so eloquently. I write this morning from the café. The cappuccino strong and necessary. Mic and I will make the journey back to Athens shortly. My writing today may be different for not being at the desk and before the window but instead within this hustle and bustle, the coffee machine loud and the small dogs scampering like in that painting by Balla, which Mic reminds me is indicative of Italian Futurism, painted pre-World War I at the same time as Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* in 1912. Those Futurists, all interested in the speed of line upon the canvas plane and the future of the Italian nation-state. They collided with, informed, and were influenced by the currents of French cubism.

One aspect of our conversation while walking these streets, forming our own city, has been the topic of writing art criticism. I spoke of how I think what contributes best is when the writer conveys a close reading of the material form and the processes of its making and expands from there, and Mic continued, that writing is best enacted as a movement between subject and object, and importantly acknowledges context, sociopolitical or otherwise. I appreciate that you listen to the artist, quote and describe, you can almost see those *Feral Neighbour* figures painted as though floating on a background that is difficult to get a grasp of—the affects of migration.

That time we shared in Riga was special, significant too. You brought together a group of artists and curators to think through approaches to art writing attentive to context. I was inspired by how you organised the situation to involve us as a kind of body and to begin the discussion by firstly getting a sense of the place. We began by moving from one point of the city to another, making a line from west to east, walking to a lake to watch a performance of someone swimming towards us from a distance; you could say this was another kind of writing.

Monday, AD: I would love to hear those discussions about how art criticism is written with your colleagues. I was thinking about the title of the publication that this exchange is

going towards, *A Year of Conscious Practice*. To me it throws up a number of questions about what criticality is and how does one's practice be conscious, or critical? For sure, there are so many different registers of criticality, and they manifest in such a range of different facets of life. I suppose it is one of the main questions of our time—is criticality possible? Adorno was asking these questions in the 1950s, even, I suppose, so our time is not unique. Perhaps this question of the expressions of criticality is similar to those you are asking in your work with writing and art criticism.

You asked what I am researching at the moment, but I would not call my current work research. I work in a commercial gallery, which absorbs most of my time. I enjoy the chance to think with my colleagues about the programme, the context we work within—as geographically dispersed as it may be—and most of all to support the work of artists. I am excited about helping to develop a project with Susan Cianciolo next year. She is a very critical artist, although I imagine she might be ambivalent about calling herself that. Her background is in fashion, but she always eschewed the expected formats in which fashion tended to be presented. She worked collaboratively with her friends, performance artists, musicians; her runway shows were often housed in abandoned spaces. The title of her collections between 1995 and 2001 was called *Run*, but her work, under this umbrella title, took many different forms, including a restaurant, films and gatherings of people. For her, the meaning of the term 'collection', in relation to her work, is at once a collection each season, as it is used in the fashion world, but also an assembling or collection of people.

Tuesday, LP: This morning I'm not sure what to write but will trust where these lines will take us. I'm just in from a run across Athenian boulevards and across to the park, where the pavements are marble too; as well as a rough sand accompanied by scruffy, wind-battered Cypress trees. I'm breathless. It's been a while and so I'm out of practice. Like writing; I want to make it a more regular routine. It's the U.S. elections today. The battle of a lesser of two evils my American colleagues say. Although Trump's narrow mindedness is certainly frightening, I understand that Clinton's stance on foreign policy is also short-sighted, for the situation in Syria specifically, which also means Greece, and so Europe. Julian Borger and Oliver Milman at *The Guardian* write, 'there has arguably not been a U.S. presidential election with so much at stake for the rest of the world since the Second World War'.¹ That will mean something tomorrow. Big changes cementing only prejudice and fear with the Calais Jungle dismantling and the realisation of Brexit looming.

I read an essay by François Meltzer, 'The Hands of Simone Weil', last night. Weil, he notes, took leave from her studies in 1934/35 to experience firsthand the life of the factory worker, considering that manual work is the prerequisite for attention—allowing for the union of action and thought. He writes:

Weil shares modernism's rebellion against commodification. But she is for rationalization, for the notion of objective truth, and does not hold Adorno's belief that modernism's retreat from work and exchange leads to a retrieval of art. On the contrary, Weil critiques modernism on the grounds that modern life makes the mind and body strangers to one another so that 'spirituality of labor' is lost. The 'three monsters of contemporary civilisation', she argues, have become 'money, mechanization, algebra': the unconscious has taken over.²

I was driving the freeway with artist Philip Zach in his new home of Los Angeles in February. We had just seen a show of Susan Cianciolo. I called the work 'feminine' and he got upset with me for using that term, that is was too limiting. He was right and right for pushing me to qualify why I had used it, to be more conscious. It was a good form of critique. And so I answer more succinctly here: Her work is a world of her own constructed femininity. A world of one woman. A hand of action and a hand of thought. Certainly she composes a kind of bohemian fashion aesthetic knowingly. The work also feels like a seduction of surfaces; coming to name it feminine. She caused us to debate, as did the heat and the traffic.

I agree that differing forms of critique are important to any system. I don't buy those who think of criticism as cynicism. Though I do think it can be done more intelligently than a straight negation and certainly without promoting an agenda; you can be critical and aware of the circumstances that determine a situation, the specifics of context and of history. I feel at home with my colleagues on documenta 14 for these reasons.

Wednesday, AD: I don't know what to write. Today, Donald Trump is the president of the USA. I want to shut off from language and media. Aside from a few things, I can't find much I want to see or read.

Wednesday, LP: It's unbelievable. Brexit, now Trump. Dark times. I understand that you don't have any words. I don't know what to say either but that now, more than ever, it is critical to use words and to voice opinion.

Thursday, AD: I am writing to you from the plane, sipping a whisky, which has become the way I survive my fear of flying. Heading east, outside it has turned from afternoon to night in the space of an hour.

I'm on my way to Vilnius to spend some time in the city in which I used to live and to see friends and colleagues there. See the old streets now covered in snow. I guess I will see how people in the Baltics feel about what has happened. When I lived there a few years ago there was a strong sense of dread that Russia might invade again. Perhaps not imminently, but at a time when defences are down. Many of my older friends grew up

in the Soviet Union, knowing fascism first hand. This region is now left in a very vulnerable position.

Last night, at our local, Luke and I talked about how to respond to the news that Trump is the president of the USA and to the huge defeat it means for all of our friends, our family who have fought for a world that is less patriarchal, less white supremacist and basically less stupid and short sighted about the ecological catastrophe. People say that if the predicted conflict between Russia and the eastern states of the European Union does not transpire, then the war that will take place will be in around fifteen years time, when climate change forces huge populations to migrate from parts of the world that are no longer survivable. My theory is that Trump is not a climate sceptic at all, in fact he accepts all too well what will happen, but knows that it will happen to others and not him. So, his plan is to begin the fortification of the borders surrounding his home country, in preparation for the catastrophe that will take place in the not-so-distant future.

We laughed bitterly at how insufficient calls for *more* self-reflection and self-critique (which only reach the left) are. Instead we need to be bolder. We wondered how we could do this on an ordinary level. We half joked that we could start to dress differently, wearing our position in a visible way, to signal that we—like many others around us—are not part of this new world of right wing neo-fascism that appears to be dawning on us. I do think fashion, as well as stimulating mass-scale kinds of consumption and manufacturing, is also a crucial expression of disidentification, of asserting a position of difference on a very immediate, visible level. Before it is captured and sucked into becoming vehicles for multi-national corporate and capital interests, it can, in its most radical corners of production, inhabit a very uncomfortable place; one that can be useful politically.

I am glad to hear that you feel at home with your colleagues, that is something very hard to find, and so valuable and fruitful when it does happen. It does sound like a dream team! It has certainly been a working week, but made much more worthy with this correspondence with you.

Laura Preston is currently associate editor for documenta 14. She was curator-at-large for the Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington from 2013 to 2015, and in 2012, guest curator at Portikus, Frankfurt am Main.

Alex Davidson lives in London and works at Stuart Shave/Modern Art as the coordinator. Before that she worked as the assistant curator of Simon Denny's *Secret Power* at the 2015 Venice Biennale, after a year working as a freelance curator, editor and writer in Vilnius, Lithuania.

- 1 Julian Borger and Oliver Milman, 'Clinton, Trump and Foreign Policy: Global Conflicts Await the Next President', *The Guardian*, 7 November 2016.

- 2 François Meltzer, 'The Hands of Simone Weil', *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 611–28.