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Interview with Laure Prouvost

interviewer:**Alice Hatrick**
(<http://www.thewhitereview.org/contributor-bio/alice-hatrick/>)**ONLINE
EXCLUSIVE**

September 2014

LAURE PROUVOST BEGINS TO TELL US ABOUT SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED
this reviewing. She woke up with four vegetables on her duvet (a tomato, a carrot, a lemon and an onion) and four corresponding holes in the ceiling of her bedroom. The vegetables must have fallen from the sky in the night, she concludes, even though they are the kind that grows out of the ground. Perhaps they were a gift from a higher power, a sign that her missing grandfather, a conceptual artist and friend of Kurt Schwitters, is still alive? He started digging a hole that would reach from his house in North London all the way to Africa, but he has disappeared, leaving his wife to grow fat (apparently she eats crisps all the time). The rooms in her grandparents' house are covered in mud, absolutely covered in mud. There is mud everywhere, she says – it covers the walls and the floor and the furniture. A priest has told her the vegetables probably dropped from a plane or something. Vegetables dropping from a plane seems more implausible than a sign from god, even to a priest. 'Gracious goodness me!' said Chicken-licken, 'the sky must have fallen; I must go and tell the King.'

Prouvost has been invited by Wysing Arts Centre to stage a performance Lansdowne House, situated in the Cambridgeshire countryside, to around seventy people seated on the kind of gold chairs you might find at a wedding reception (there is a marquee outside). She speaks into a microphone, breathy and close – she is confessing after all. And then she

starts shouting – ‘Grandfather! Grandfather!’ Her face is red and her hair is all over the place, aping the actions of a woman in the story she is telling who regularly strips naked and jumps out of a plane with a rope tied around her ankles. The woman has been calling for Prouvost’s lost grandfather too, even though, as she has just told us, he is lost deep underground. She asks that we find our own way to help look for him.

Prouvost makes videos, but also performances and installations of objects, drawings, printed matter, screens and texts. The stories she tells, like the one about her grandfather, might sound made up, but they are as real as any other. For her Turner Prize installation, ‘Wantee’ (2013), the viewer entered the artwork to be immersed, seduced, and in this encounter, made aware of their selves in relation to her narrative. Her ‘real’ grandfather might not be a conceptual artist, but John Latham, for whom Prouvost worked as an assistant before his death in 2006, certainly was.

There are small panels on the walls of the Wysing exhibition *Hey, I’m Mr Poetic*, which are more suited to interior space, mimicking gallery text panels. The signs gesture to themselves as signs; they impacting on objects around them: DON’T LOOK UP; IDEALLY THIS SIGN WOULD BE DEEPER; IDEALLY THIS SIGN WOULD NOT LET YOU GO; IDEALLY HERE WOULD BE SOMETHING UNDISCRIBABLE. The un- in undiscribly, although grammatically incorrect, implies that something has been reversed, like the un- in undone. Unraveled, the word somehow means more as it makes less sense. When Prouvost speaks or writes it’s as if a third language is created out of the two she has learnt – English and French. But her work is not just about the seduction of language and ways in which to undermine, devour or misuse it. The image, the object, the screen and the body collude in a seduction of the senses. There is a larger sign in the grounds at Wysing, a sprawling complex of buildings erected when the centre was founded, gallery space, pottery, residency accommodation (a sixteenth-century farmhouse) and new artists’ studios. It’s a permanent leftover from Prouvost’s time residency with Francesco Pedraglio as *The Department of Wrong Answers* in 2011. The scale of the sign refers to construction signs or street signs, the kind you find in the urban or rural landscape. It reads ‘NONE IS IN THE DEPARTMENT / FOR PASSION, WE ARE ALL / HERE OUT OF NECESSITY / IT’S THE PROCEDURE / YOU SHUT UP AND DIG’. Prouvost’s grandfather is not the only one digging.

I emailed her some questions.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Your grandfather is a conceptual artist,

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— I have been invited a lot lately to let people know

lost underground?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Your recent performance at Lansdowne House built upon previous work, most notably an installation ‘Wantee’ supported by Tate and Grizedale Arts in a hut in Coniston, a village in the Lake District, part of *Schwitters in Britain* at Tate Britain in 2013. Have you wanted to make work about his predicament for a long time?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— How often do you work in collaboration? ‘Wantee’ included objects made by potters and community groups, for example. Is it important that other people are implicated in the story and its telling?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— On your website is a video which plays every time you go back to home. There are children in the video, and they’re talking about a man who tried to dig a hole from his house in North London to Africa – a conceptual artist, a friend of Kurt Schwitters. Who are these children?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— This also allows you to incorporate different ways of telling stories into the work, like the way children tell stories as a series of details, and they’ll go back to an event in their story to add in extra details even though the narrative has progressed. Is this kind of collaboration a way of dispersing the

what is happening to my grandfather. He disappeared in 1988 digging his conceptual tunnel. He has since reappeared but disappeared again a few month ago. Since I was born in 1959 it has always be about my grandfather, and trying to know where he was.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— It was just so close to me. Sometimes it takes time to see it. I am so old now.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— It depends on what you find. I love collaborating with people from the past who are not dead yet. I found various film scripts in the tobacco factory where my granddad lived in Mozambique. I have to sail back there in his little boat but I need to get the sail fixed... It has a drawing with my naked grandma on it, and she thinks it is too risky.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— They are my grandchildren. They want to be implicated, they want to help find their great granddad. We are planning to build a big visitor centre wherever he arrives, so we are looking for funding.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— All the media have been interested and got some facts wrong, but I guess you can’t control everything. My grandchildren, they know. They have been down the tunnel a few weeks ago in 2012. There is a lot of footage from my gran and his friends John, Bruce Nauman and Kurt... In 2020 we hope to build a big visitor centre when granddad comes out. There will be

re-telling and interpretation of a story, in a way, to extend your own memory?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— What happens when people from ‘public’ history, artists like Kurt Schwitters, are implicated in a ‘personal’ story, such as the one you tell about your grandfather?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Works such as ‘The Wanderer’ or ‘Wantee’ are articulated as videos, performances and installations. It seems to me that the work is led by your preoccupation with a story or narrative arc, and the pieces you show, screen or perform are bits that happen to fall off at a particular stage in your interest. Maybe your installations as a build-up of residue, like the mud in your grandparent’s house?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— I’ve heard you say in interviews that you’re bad at English and bad at French. I like the word bad here. You might be technically bad (like bad at grammar), but you are also bad as in naughty.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Do you think your voice has more authority as you gain more success as an artist?

Q

tea slings into a big lake and a big tea pot for grandma and above all a studio reconstruction with all of granddad’s sculptures.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— It’s all the same. We are part of our brain and our brain makes connections. Kurt could see my grandfather and him had a lot in common, especially when they decided to make one last work together in 1994.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— Yes, they are the little bits left from the hours of footage we would have if we filmed everything, exactly like the little bit of mud granddad brings back home every evening.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— Ha yes I guess I am lazy and bad, but I like that sometimes I use wrong words and I make my own understanding like last week when she fell in the butter.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— In 1963 I actually got a present from my uncle and left it somewhere in the house without opening it because I wasn’t very fond of him. When I was 15 he died falling off the stairs in the European Commission where he worked as a translator, and I found the present in my parents’ wardrobe. Since then I film. I think my camera is more authoritarian. With my voice I try to be soft and tell people where to go. It’s a tool like any over. My granddad brutes to paint bums... but you’re right, it’s more personal.

A

THE WHITE REVIEW

— In works such as your signs or the Whitechapel installation last year you have explored the directive or persuasive power of words and images to tell people how to think and feel. (“This bird is inside your mouth,” she says in ‘Before, Before...’ (2011)) Do you want the viewer to feel anxious about this, or at least self-aware, maybe aware of their own body?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— The pointing finger that appears in your videos directs the viewer’s attention to something, but then your voice says ‘don’t look at this’. Are you interested in how the body and the voice contradict each other?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— How did you explore the theme of ‘wrong answers’ during your time at Wysing, and how did you work as a ‘department’? It sounds like it must have been dysfunctional in order to operate.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Why do you use signs in your work – to play with ideas of voice, direction and information?

Q

LAURE PROUVOST

— What I love most is the wind blowing on my neck and hair, it’s like the best sound you can feel. Reading wind, making the wind as you read, contributing to make the wind. A lot comes from my granddad’s paintings. He started painting bums in the middle of last cemetery. He asked his wife to pose. He thought it was the most conceptual shape. I also like darkness and everything that happens in the dark, abstract colour shapes etc. A bit like when you put your hands in front of your eyes when they are closed and move them around.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— Yes but now I have moved on. The trains are so fast. There is always a new image coming.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— I did not choose it but if they think it’s where we belong fine we just did what the authority told us to do: you shut up and dig.

A

LAURE PROUVOST

— It’s a continuation of my granddad’s work. I want to keep it alive, follow his visions. There are so many facts and stories that are forgotten, and I want to improve it, the studio, the minimalist paintings... Trends come and go. My grandma says his paintings are really out of date now. After he had reappeared in 1999, he realised that love is the centre of the world... He would have done anything for Wantee. She pushed him to go deeper in history and dig the tunnel and question how far society can control traces of a person. Being half-Irish half French, my granddad always felt misunderstood, and misunderstandings are something he used to expand his imagination.

A

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Signs and screens demand you read or watch them and follow their directions or let them inform your behaviour: their authority is based on their status as signs. Do you enjoy dismantling that authority, or re-deploying it for more cerebral or sensory directives?

Q

LAURE PROUVOST

— They just pretend to be self conscious objects. These were not my ideas – more my mum’s. Sometime she tries to influence.

A

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Does it annoy you when people call the stories you tell through video, installation and performance ‘fictions’?

Q

LAURE PROUVOST

— Yes.

A

THE WHITE REVIEW

— What are you working on – I think it’s a video that will make people feel rich? – How are you going to do that?

LAURE PROUVOST

— Ha, its made. you just need to look at it in a loop. and you might feel richer in the tunnel of images.

Laure Prouvost was in residency at Wysing Arts Centre in 2011. Five artists have been selected, following an open call process, to be in-residence at Wysing for six weeks during November to December 2014: Olivier Castel; Julia Crabtree and William Evans; Jesse Darling; Alice Theobald. For further details visit www.wysingartscentre.org.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Laure Prouvost is a French artist living and working in London. She was the winner of the 2013 Turner Prize.

Alice Hattrick is a writer and producer based in London. She co-produces *CAR*, a podcast about art and ideas.

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