

Art

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INCONVERSATION

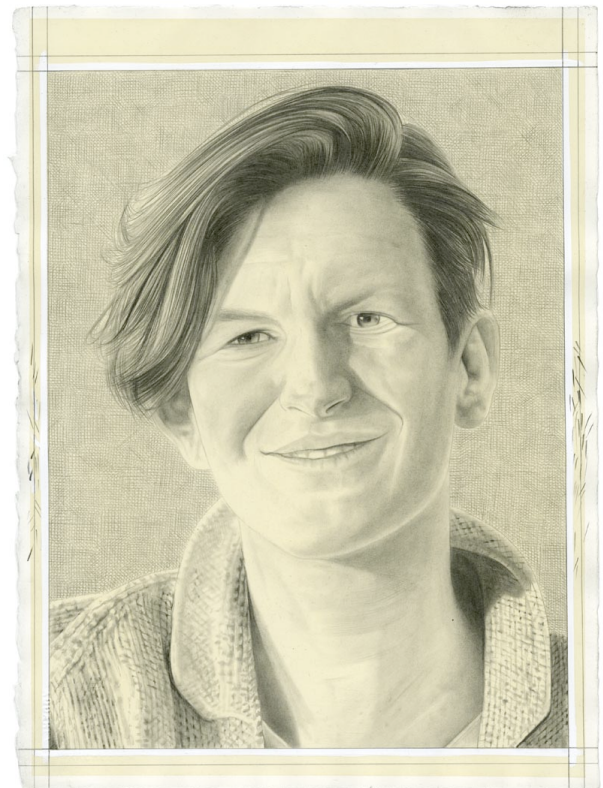
IDEALLY THIS INTERVIEW WOULD ANSWER ALL OF YOUR QUESTIONS

LAURE PROUVOST with Jarrett Earnest

A charming sphinx, Laure Prouvost plays with being a French artist in her chosen English context, whispering broken riddles in a heavy accent. Her videos seamlessly blend fiction and truth, objects, images, and sound into large, ramshackle Rococo realities. Last December she was the surprise winner of Britain's prestigious Turner Prize for her installation "Wantee"(2013), a video-diorama about her grandfather, a friend of Kurt Schwitters, disappearing down a hole he was digging to Africa. For her first solo-exhibition in the U.S. she created *For Forgetting*, with its central film "How to Make Money Religiously" (2014) in the New Museum's Lobby Gallery. She sat down with Jarrett Earnest to discuss religion, misreading, and *trompe l'oeil* sensations.

Jarrett Earnest (Rail): I'm interested in the construction you use: "Ideally, *this* would be like *that*." What is the distance between the ideal experience and what is actually going on that interests you?

Laure Prouvost: Well, there is a lot of distance because reality is never what we dream; it can surprise you in a good or bad way, but you always wish you had more or better—people have that desire for everything to be better. These pieces are asking the viewer to make the work, so if there is a sign on a wall saying, "Ideally this wall would be pushed five meters further," you have to use your imagination to see the space differently. I think it's very much that imagination can give us what we want, creating images in our mind. You don't need a real fireplace, you can just imagine it. I like that I don't have to create an image, everyone creates their own image and you live with your own vision of the space. I really like that as an artist I lose



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

control and just instead hint at a few things, so that everyone can have their own take.

Rail: In your installation at the New Museum *For Forgetting* (2014) the bench is very close to the screen in the projection room so you can barely take it in, and also the rate of the editing is just too fast to really see. What are you dealing with structurally, with these barely graspable things?

Prouvost: A lot of the videos have a physicality to them, they become sour, or they taste of metal—you don't leave with just images but a physical sense. I love it if someone says, "Your films stink!" For me this one is very metallic, hard, about this clash of too much information. We are constantly taking things in, your memory can catch on one image but someone else might remember a different one. My idea of the very fast edits are to create the sensation of *always almost*, of missing at the same time that we want to grab and connect.

Rail: I appreciate the idea that we are constantly bombarded by all kinds of sensations and that we have filters that are socially constructed to make sense of it. In the installations those social filters are deconstructed, or reconstructed—showing other ways of taking experiences in.

Prouvost: In some ways it's my most serious work. The subject—forgetting—is existentialist almost. It is about existence through memory and through power, asking, "What do we own?" How do memory and possession make us? Here money is a very vague abstract subject, although it is part of everyone's life, of course. Then there is the power of owning an image: maybe you don't need to own this big flat, you can just look at it and feel it belongs to you; as if each thing you look at belongs to you. You feel the sun on your skin—it belongs to you. So this piece is also asking: What is an image and what is really there? I had an object scanned and printed and then placed the image right next to the object, so there is constantly a questioning, questioning the sensation of the "image" and the "real object."

Rail: Which has to do with the history of collage, with Picasso's *trompe l'oeil* textures right next to newspapers and chair caning.

Prouvost: With collage I play very much with *trompe l'oeil*—a *trompe l'oeil* of sensation. If you feel sad, it's just a sound and image being projected, how can that make you feel sad? It's an image controlling your emotions, it's a *trompe l'oeil* you. It gets quite interesting when it is manipulative.

Rail: So much of your work seems blatantly manipulative, coercive, telling you what to do, but it is not clear what those things are that you are being told to do.

Prouvost: Exactly. People ask: What is she trying to say? Where is she taking me to? I don't want to give any answers because I think there are no answers, which is why I make things that don't end—looping, repetitions, each slightly different with each reiteration. The power of humans living together is very organic, and there are all these people with masks and you are very aware of them.

You don't know what they are doing but you feel this power that keeps us working, cleaning the table, doing our job, and who tells us to do that?

Rail: Coming to talk to you today, I kept having the thought that ideally this interview would answer all my questions, but we do not live in an ideal world, so what can this interview actually do?

Prouvost: Ideally, you will understand every word she says. Ideally, I would be articulate, but I'm not articulate.

Rail: You use a lot of religious imagery and language, especially the idea of the relic and also the title of this film *How to Make Money Religiously*. What attracts you to religion as a strategy for art making?

Prouvost: My mother is a strong Catholic believer and I grew up with that belief, which I found hard to grasp. My mom is passionate about it, which I totally admire, and it becomes beautiful like anything that comes from true passion—she believes in it. For me that is totally surreal. How can you believe in miracles? At the same time millions of people do. It's a huge part of us, the need to hold onto something that tells us why we are here and that keeps us from feeling anxiety. It comes with a whole moral system guiding how we live and how we communicate. I like the surreality of it. So in my art I can say, "Believe me, these vegetables fell from the sky onto my bed this morning—it's true." Or, "This morning I found this fork in my shoes but I didn't put it there, I'm sure some special energy did it!" Then I could exhibit the object with the text, pretending even more that it's true.



Laure Prouvost, "Wantee" production still, 2013. Courtesy the artist and MOTINTERNATIONAL, London and Brussels.

Rail: I love the video on your website of children emotionally retelling the story you made up about your grandfather disappearing down a hole for your piece "Wantee" (2013). You want to believe them.

Prouvost: I loved them. Right after the Turner Prize, I told these kids: "This afternoon you are going to be the grandchildren of my grandfather who is lost in a tunnel and it's very sad," and they asked, "Do we have to be in someone else's body?" I said, "Yes, exactly—do that!" They were so into it and almost started believing their story in a totally unselfconscious way. Even for the best actors, it is so hard to get to that level of unselfconsciousness. I like the idea of how a child might stop on a tiny detail and tell you a whole narrative around that and not so much the big picture of the story, and I quite like the child's perspective of not being able to take responsibility for the world.

Rail: The immersive qualities of your installations, and the textures of it, make me think of the Rococo. Like the Fragonard room at the Frick Collection.

Prouvost: My grandfather has a copy of Fragonard and he always says “Laure—forget contemporary art! This Fragonard is proper art. Look at this lovely curve! Get some curves in there!” Also the idea of taste: What is good taste? The art world tries to tell you what is good taste or bad taste, but it’s up to you. I think a lot of “Wantee” is about *misgetting* the art world, or *misgetting* art by making it useful or questioning the idea of taste in general. My badly made abstract paintings are playing on that in the collage.

Rail: You are French and have chosen to live in England, and so much of your work seems to depend on being a stranger in the world, on a kind of foreignness, not being a native of culture and getting it wrong—

Prouvost: You’ve got it right. Even being in New York, it’s such a key thing. I’ve lived in London 15 years and I’m really welcomed and they’ve helped me grow and I’m grateful, but at the same time I am remote enough that I am not too taken by the politics, so I get less distracted or frustrated by the way things are done. In France I am annoyed by people’s attitudes because I understand the subtlety too much. It’s great to be a foreigner, an outsider, to have some distance from where you are and where you are from, but what you see might be clichéd because of it. When I went to Biella, Italy to make “Swallow” (2013) I was very much playing on the cliché of going somewhere and seeing just what you want, like a tourist—the beautiful landscapes and not the motorways. I am interested in how the mind edits what we see and what we want to see.

Rail: A lot of your videos use whispering. What is special about whispering as a mode?

Prouvost: Whispering is something you do with your lover. It’s private, it’s a secret between you and me and no one else. It has a power of being personal.

Rail: Of course it’s in a public space with someone you’ve never met on a video: the least personal thing you could imagine.

Prouvost: It’s just not right!

Rail: On your website you have two quotes, one from Alain Robbe-Grillet:

For, far from neglecting him, the author of today proclaims his absolute need of the reader’s cooperation, an active, conscious, creative assistance. What he asks of him is no longer to receive ready-made a world completed, full, closed upon itself, but on the contrary to participate in a creation, to invent in his turn the work—and the world—and thus to learn to invent his own life.

The other is from Paul Maltby:

[Donald Barthleme’s work] responds to epistemological uncertainty by exempting itself from the obligation to ‘know’ the world or

reflect
social



meanings and instead, makes a virtue of simply 'being,' existing as an art-object, as a reality in its own right.

The way these relate to your work seems clear, and it also seems like literature is on your mind.

Prouvost: I'm not a great reader and I don't read huge amounts but I like questioning language and questioning narrative. I think the film industry is getting more literal. What I like about words is that they are so questionable. I struggled as a child with very bad French and English. Each word can have so many meanings depending on where it is. Many times in my films I use the same image in different places and that change of context completely changes what it says. It's same with words. They are used constantly but it's nice if we can question them a bit. I like Italo Calvino's early texts where he is talking straight to you, I'm sure that influenced me.



Laure Prouvost, *For Forgetting*, 2014 (still). Installation and video. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and MOTINTERNATIONAL, London and Brussels.

Rail: I like your use of the simple masks, just crude painted faces on a piece of paper wrapped around a head. What interests you in the mask as an object, or an idea?

Prouvost: It's something I did some years ago when I was very lonely in my studio. I called the masks "priests" and was playing with hiding behind a preaching mode. I would never show my face in my films. You could hear my voice but never see my face. I think it leaves more space in the imagination of the viewer if you have to imagine someone's face—the voice just gives you hints of a person. We are controlled by our education and many other elements, but we don't know the faces of who controls us. In "Monologue" (2009) I cut my head off in the camera frame. It was this idea of imagining—putting a face on—what you can't see.

Rail: In *For Forgetting* there are art historical references: "The King of Spain give you a Braque" for instance—is making art one way of making money religiously?

Prouvost: People buy art because it gives them a certain position. I'm not cynical about that. I think it's actually beautiful because buying art is also a way to help creativity—if people buy art then the artist can carry on. There is a bit of cynicism in that art gives you a certain status in

society, but also, hopefully, it is still questioning the world we live in. The part of the video with the Braque painting is humorous because I say that my grandma will use it as a tray: “Great, what am I going to do with another painting—I’m so bored of it, I’ll use it as a tray.” Jeff Koons’s eggs will be used as a sink because your sink is broken. How we can make use of art? It’s, again, about missing the point that art is actually quite useful as a reflective tool. It’s nice to have “characters” because it’s not “me”; I’d never do that—it’s *my grandparents*. I’d never use that Braque painting as a tray, but my grandma, she’s a bit weird!

Rail: The Lobby Gallery in the New Museum is so problematic and everyone I’ve talked to agrees that your installation is one of the best solutions. How did you approach working in that space?

Prouvost: I knew it was very long fish tank. You have to feel you are being observed as a viewer and that people are outside looking at you. Usually my installations work with the space itself—*Swallow* I really made for the Whitechapel—for the black box. So I had to figure out how to use that fish tank feeling. The tent in the middle breaks the space.

Rail: Well it’s an impossible space in that it has to visually deal with a bookshop and cafe and the street all at the same time so it’s more like a storefront window.

Prouvost: I thought it needed to be a shop, or since it’s the “Lobby Gallery,” maybe it should be a coat check—I’m offering that possibility. It’s fighting against many elements.

Rail: Because your works seem to be about fighting with people’s expectations, how are you navigating the increasing expectations of you as an artist?

Prouvost: You think it would get easier when you get more opportunity but it gets harder. At the same time, each time you make a new piece you have to enjoy it and totally forget any expectations, you have to lose yourself and I love that part, the moment of letting go, trying and inventing.

Rail: It seems that people aren’t just interested in whether what you are doing now is as strong as what you did before; they also ask if your work looks like what it is supposed to look like.

Prouvost: Yeah! You have also an identity and people want you to do something they’ve seen from you that they already liked. I quite like to upset it a little bit. I can’t really help but to make something new, even if each time I do a new one I say never again because it can be a struggle to bring it together. But also I get bored of work I have done and want to make a new piece, like *For Forgetting*.

Rail: Because your work is so much about the opportunities of misreading or misunderstanding, are there things that people have misunderstood about your work that horrify you, or do you see it all as welcome?

Prouvost: Yes, many times, quite a lot recently—they get my name wrong and call me “Laurie” and I’m not controlling it, this fictional “me” is out there and I’m not controlling it. It’s the representation the world makes of you, I quite like to give the wrong date of birth: “I was born in ’65; I was born in ’52,” and I think I need to play with this even more. It’s nice when they’re slippages, unless it’s very negative about my work, then it hurts. Sometimes critics seem to make comparisons with other artists based on gender, nationality, or the medium I work in—it’s a bit frustrating but you have to let go and can’t control this, you lose control and let other views represent you. It’s also nice that there are many different understandings of one person or one artwork.

Rail: All of your objects have that kind of slippage, where it looks like a wall but it’s actually a roll of printed canvas tacked onto two-by-fours, or it looks like a gargoyle but is a crummy hand-made one. They are saying “I’m a real thing” when it is clearly not a real thing.

Prouvost: Well there are no real gargoyles anyway! And the bags are designer fakes that say: “I’m a *real* bag. No, I’m fake. No, I’m real!”

Rail: What is interesting to you in that push and pull between fiction and non-fiction?

Prouvost: It’s very connected to images. They are fighting for their existence, that they could be as real as the real stuff. It’s a complex thing. The history of representation lives in memory, and that is how we keep it; if you keep the past you have to question yourself and your reality—everything is a part of it.

Rail: What parts of this piece came from New York?

Prouvost: I got a bit of the collage material, some of the bags here. The cigarettes I smoked here. Mostly for the video I shot a lot walking and I saw that guy dressed like the Statue of Liberty on the street holding a sign to bring you to a Liberty Tax place. It was perfect for the subject of the video. The idea of the chase is, “You’re gonna catch it. You’re going to own everything!” So that worked perfectly in New York, which is for me mechanical, fast—it makes noise.

Rail: Your pieces “Wantee” and “The Artist” reminded me of Paul McCarthy’s fool character.

Prouvost: I think my work is less cynical, almost.

Rail: That’s sweet!

Prouvost: In “The Artist,” the artist is this conceptual guy and he doesn’t really get it, he’s not conceptual! The artist gets it wrong and uses the wrong words and there are some treacherous

aspects to the work. I like what McCarthy does, it's fun and brave and I think mine is more domestic and less ridiculous. I just "mis-get" it. I'm sure I'm influenced—I've seen his work and I like it, but I think maybe what I am doing is less sharp. My characters are lost in what they say—that has its own charms I hope.

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