

Laura Preston is Someone You Don't Know

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This text was presented by Ammirati at the opening of Encore, an exhibition organized by Helena Papadopoulos on the occasion of the publication of Always Starts with an Encounter: Wols—Eileen Quinlan (Radio Athènes and Sequence Press, 2019), at Miguel Abreu Gallery, October 30, 2019.

When Helena asked me to read tonight, the invitation seemed almost spur of the moment. We were sitting around post-dinner in Athens about a month ago. Probably we were outdoors, since the weather was perfectly autumnal when I was visiting. Probably someone at the table was smoking, possibly everyone. Probably there was an empty bottle of wine or two. We were gossiping variously and catching up and talking about art—a familiar kind of night, the kind I'd loved while living in Athens and something I'd missed.

Helena mentioned that she'd next be in New York around Halloween for a book launch, for a show she'd done in Athens with Eileen and Wols. Two of my closest friends from Athens had written for the book, another even older friend had designed it, and I've always liked Eileen's work. I told her I'd definitely be there for the event. She responded with that look of surprise that comes over someone's face when they have an idea. Then she asked if I'd like to read myself at the launch—asking if I'd read from the book, reading the portions that my friend Laura had written, because Laura wouldn't be able to make it herself. I said yes, of course.

It was already on the walk home from dinner that I also immediately started thinking, with a shameful degree of self-interest, that there might be some way to turn the situation further to my advantage. Like everyone else in 2019, I'm a narcissist, if a relatively quiet one. And so I swiftly proposed to Helena the idea of reading something of my own. It would be in keeping with the book's theme of encounter across time and space. It would be about friendship, and contingency, and about my friend Laura, who couldn't make it to New York for the event. It would be in her honor. I always think that people are too rarely appreciated in public in heartfelt ways. It made sense for the themes of the book; it also just seemed like something I'd do. I'm prone to indirection, somewhat guarded, committed perhaps a little unhealthily to the idea that intimacy only can take place across a distance. It made sense that I'd deliver a public profession of fondness for a friend only when the friend wasn't there.

Two years had passed since I'd last seen Laura. We'd worked together closely as editors in Athens for documenta in 2016–17—literally closely, crammed together at adjacent desks in the corner room of some converted old apartment in Exarchia, sharing the space with one, two, and for a very short time three other people. Laura and I could literally stretch out and yank each other by the hair without standing up from our chairs. That dramatic step was rarely necessary, though I'm sure she wanted to do that or worse on more than one occasion. I'm actually pretty amiable to be around in an office, or so I've gathered over the years. I pick up your documents from the printer, I work late when necessary, I offer impeccable dating advice. I buy snacks. But I can be arrogant as well—acting like I'm some kind of literary genius when all I did was steal some magazine's password for the Chicago Manual of Style online. And working on documenta was a high-pressure situation. We were putting together the world's greatest art exhibition, with an ambitious portfolio of books to make. I'm sure that over the months Laura grew exasperated with me in many ways, for my mooniness, my vulgarity. I was in fact a pretty sad person when I lived in Athens. I had escaped New York a year after my mother had died and only a few months after my relationship collapsed. One of the curatorial assistants on the show told me that it seemed like I had a cloud hanging over me. It was all a bit claustrophobic. From the window in our office I could see the laundry drying on the balcony of my own apartment. The team socialized together seemingly every other night en masse, in the fishbowl manner that effects itself in groups working on big projects. In the balmy afternoons, when the sun reached a certain slant over the Orthodox church across the street, its orange tree plopping fruit onto the sidewalk, I'm sure Laura resented the stink of the alcohol I would sweat out more or less daily. I'm sure she resented the mere being around someone else that a close relationship of any sort ultimately creates.

So: for the book launch, I'd deliver a tribute to Laura. It would be a kind of belated, kind of perverse thank-you for her putting up with me. As I sat down to write, however, I found that I could barely describe Laura in terms that felt at all adequate. The dry facts of her passport and CV seemed to be just as incisive as anything I found myself able to say. What had Laura escaped for her to be in Greece? I never got to know. I tend to behave like a mirror toward other people, and Laura is restrained, discreet, so I never asked. The things I did learn about her past I didn't feel comfortable sharing with a crowd of strangers. I found it impossible to communicate her essence—how easy it was to spend time with her, despite how much of that we did; how important she was to me as a friend in dark moments and clear-skied ones; how good a person she was to sit next to at a dinner, when she would inevitably after a few drinks find some reason to elbow me in the ribs as punctuation for something fatuous someone had said or some wisecrack she or I had left unspoken. Precisely because we worked together so closely, Laura and I had

approached each other with a measure of reserve. This reserve was the foundation of our friendship; it both made it possible and set its limits. Which made me a little sad.

Laura has an elusively Anglophone accent. She's from New Zealand, it turns out, though her way of speaking has been buffeted over years of residence in European countries, spin washed and left on the line without ironing. I once introduced someone to her and later they asked, "Are you sure she's *really* from New Zealand?" It was a good joke, except they weren't joking. They had fixated on something ambiguous in Laura's presentation; she was almost too prepared, too consistent. Over the months I amused myself by imagining alternate histories for her. Maybe she was a reformed Scottish junkie—she seemed to have relatives there. Maybe she was actually Austrian—she was doing a PhD in Vienna, and Austrians always seem to have something to cover up. Had she dated Peter Jackson? Who knew?

In the end, what I've retained most about Laura is her voice. I definitely won't attempt to mimic it—I'm terrible at impressions—and I won't attempt to describe it either. Someone's voice is so intrinsic to their way of being, intimately connected to their breath and life, that to impose a vocabulary of vowels and diphthongs, or even something as familiar as an analogy to musical instruments—a voice like a flute, like a clarinet—would be the imposition of a lexicon that only something more intersubjective, imprecise could capture.

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In the texts that Laura wrote for this book we're here to celebrate tonight, she did something a little strange. She wrote a series of vignettes that take the form of an index. An index is, of course, a mechanical, abstracting device that one applies to a finished written work, and Laura filled that form with a musing, affective content. In 2019, this experiment isn't shocking. What is a little odd, though, is that she addressed her writing to Eileen. Here, from the very first entry, titled "Atmosphere": "One timeframe and then another: Wols in the late 1930s, you, Eileen Quinlan, today.... There are many similarities between you both, for example, when you make those photographs that look like pulled meat but are actually bodies behind smoke and mirrors, there is a resemblance to those of the bloody organ he placed on a tablecloth."

In *Cruel Optimism*—a book that's already, surprisingly, ten years old—Lauren Berlant discusses this manner of address, apostrophe, in which a performance of speaking to an absent person takes place. Berlant describes it like so: "The present moment is made possible by a fantasy of you, laden with the *X* qualities I can project onto you, given your convenient absence." This sounds in a sense bad, false, self-interested. But Berlant argues

that the projection and falsification of apostrophe, the distance it codifies in a relation, produces a vitalizing moment that “permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space as others, the objects of desire who make you possible.” This self-projection, this attempt to commune with the other, requires a kind of negation of the other. But it also requires a negation of one’s own boundaries. Intersubjectivity is impossible, yes, but its attempt can produce a kind of learning and self-revision. Even through a flawed device like apostrophe, its practice can bring us closer to other people. What we can aim for in these suspensions of ourselves is “a letting in of the Other’s being without any claim to knowledge of what the intimate Other is like.”

In her Index, Laura writes with an implicit belief in a kind of projective magic: “Between props and setups and the optics, the image holds a temperature, almost a scent and the sound of respiration.” Laura is talking about, I think, a kind of transmutation, an ability to convey presence and even life through a work of art or a communicative gesture. The image holds a human warmth, breath. I’m engaging in a kind of necessary suspension of disbelief, a hope for magic, in my talk here tonight.

In the spirit of happy discoveries and welcome contingencies, like those that enable us to encounter those people we end up caring about, I’d like to end with a few words on Giorgio Agamben’s essay “The Friend.” If you’ve read “The Friend,” you probably came across it incidentally. You picked up the American edition of *What Is an Apparatus?* because you wanted to read either the title essay or “What Is the Contemporary?” But there, in between the two of them, was “The Friend,” giving the book a little breathing space. The essay is an open-ended philological excursion without too much riding on it. In one vivid section, Agamben describes a seventeenth-century painting by Giovanni Serodine of Saint Paul and Saint Peter being led to their martyrdom. Agamben writes, “What renders this painting genuinely incomparable is that Serodine has depicted the two apostles so close to each other (their foreheads are almost stuck together) that there is no way they can see one another.... They look at each other without recognizing one another.” He goes on, “This painting has always seemed to me to be a perfect allegory of friendship. What is a friendship other than a proximity that resist both representation and conceptualization?”

As it happens, I actually just saw Laura for the first time since the year we spent together in Athens. It was for one night only, when I was passing through Berlin on my way back to New York after a few weeks away. The following is from an email she wrote me after my visit:

Dearest Domenick,

Thank you for your touching message from the sky before landing in New York. How have your days been since?

I am thinking about Athens particularly this morning, Saturday, and how often a clarinetist came calling on market day. It has indeed been some time in between, but that night in Berlin where we ended up drinking too much and finding ourselves in various bars had a familiarity. I think the people one lives with or works with intensely stay in that way you can always pick up from where you left off. I look forward to the next time. It will unfortunately not be this October in New York as my studies keep me here for now, but I would really like to visit soon, next year.

Wishing you good times meanwhile.

With love,

Laura