

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Laure Prouvost** is currently based in the Croatian desert. In 2002, she received her BFA from Central St. Martins, London and studied towards her MFA at Goldsmiths College, (that she did not finish) London. She also took part in the LUX Associate Programme. She opened a couple of travel agencies with her uncle deep travel ink, a few tea rooms to fond raise for for her lost grandad search and has been deep down in Deep See Blue for the past year. Since 2017, she is co-administrator of *The Aube's cure Parle Ment*.

**Jonas Staal** engages the relation between art, propaganda and democracy. He is the founder of the artistic and political organizations *New World Summit* (2012–ongoing) and *New Unions* (2016–ongoing). With BAK in Utrecht he cofounded the *New World Academy* (2013–16), and he is currently directing the utopian training camp *Training for the Future* (2018–ongoing) at the Ruhrtriennale in Germany. His most recent book is *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2019). Since 2017, he is co-administrator of *The Aube's cure Parle Ment*.

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**Panasonic**



**Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art**  
1286 Bloor Street West, Toronto ON M6H 1N9 Canada  
(one block east of Lansdowne TTC Station)  
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**Gallery Hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 11AM – 6 PM**  
**Tours every Saturday at 2PM – Free, all welcome**

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Cover image: Laure Prouvost and Jonas Staal, *Obscure Union, Study*, 2019. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy the artist.

Interior images, L-R: Laure Prouvost, video still *Lick in the past*, 2016. HD video, 8m 25s. Courtesy the artist.

Laure Prouvost and Jonas Staal, *Obscure Union, Study*, 2019. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy the artist.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

**SESSION: Desire x Politics**  
Sunday 26 January 2020, 12-3PM

*In Desire x Politics: Solve for x, where x is the variable prised open between the bodies of politics and the bodies of desire.*

Over the past eight months, a nine-person working group led by Yaniya Lee and Fan Wu has been navigating the problematics of desire x politics, reading and writing to unravel this equation's many entanglements. In this SESSION, members of the group share new writing composed over the course of their study and lead exploratory discussions through a participatory workshop. Participants will read, write and perform together an interrogation of desire x politics that identifies how these two modes converge, diverge, enable and interrupt each other.

For registration, RSVP to Aamna Muzaffar at aamna@mercerunion.org, or by calling 416.536.1519

**Yaniya Lee** is a Toronto-based writer and editor interested in the ethics of aesthetics. She was a founding collective member of *MICE Magazine* and is a member of the Emilia-Amalia Working Group. Lee currently works as Features Editor at *Canadian Art* magazine.

**Fan Wu** is a nomadic art writer, poet and workshop facilitator. You can find his writing online at *baest journal*, *MICE Magazine*, and *Koffler Digital*.

**SESSION** is a project modeling itself after an incubator that invites cultural practitioners to engage with questions emerging out of a given exhibition.

SESSION is made possible with Leading Support from TD Bank Group



**SPACE: Erdem Taşdelen | Vicissitudes: Act Two**  
7 December 2019– 22 February 2020

**SPACE** invites one artist to produce a yearlong series of images for a public-facing billboard located on the east façade of Mercer Union. Erdem Taşdelen's *Vicissitudes: Act Two* (2019) is the second edition in a series of four billboard images commissioned by Mercer Union. An accompanying text written by Jaclyn Bruneau can be found on the next page.

**Erdem Taşdelen** is a Turkish-Canadian artist who lives and works in Toronto. His work has been shown in numerous exhibitions internationally and across Canada, most recently at venues including Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen (2019); VOX Centre de l'image contemporaine, Montreal (2018); Pera Museum, Istanbul; Or Gallery, Vancouver (2017); Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg (2016). Taşdelen has been awarded the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize in Visual Arts by the Canada Council for the Arts (2016), the Charles Pachter Prize for Emerging Artists by the Hnatyshyn Foundation (2014), and was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award in 2019.

**Jaclyn Bruneau** is a writer, critic and the Editor of *C Magazine*. She is a member of the Board of Directors at Images Festival, and is currently underway on an inconspicuous, yearlong publishing project in the online classifieds with Natasha Chaykowski and Untitled Art Society called *please, teach me to swim*.

## Two Women

I know it's late afternoon when—as if realizing within a dream that I've been dreaming—I notice the moody murmurs of a saxophone at my window. The player is known to appear now and then in front of the Italian restaurant just down and across the street, well-loved for its homemade burrata, richly liquored tiramisu and Lambrusco by the glass. The breathless Harlem Nocturne has a Pavlovian effect on my hunger, so, as if on cue, I throw on a coat and wander down the stairs.

A few steps on to the main drag, I spot a tall, plain-looking woman with long grey-blonde hair moving with purpose down the sidewalk. I lock eyes with her by accident, and lazily look away, pretending to take special interest in the sky. Suddenly, she's two feet in front of me, at a full stop. With a trembling hand, she raises some papers to an appropriate reading distance, and replaces her glasses to her face from their dangling place around her neck. Clearing her throat, she begins to read:

"I'm aware that you have been spending time with my husband. I understand that you think this is okay. My husband and I are married. Our marital contract precludes—"

Puzzled, I mutter, "You've got the wrong girl," and continue walking, setting my eyes on the warm, busy interior of the Italian spot. She angles herself toward my departure and continues much more loudly now:

"Our marital contract precludes extramarital affairs. Though he, too, is aware of this, he has a weak moral code, and with age, has become increasingly indolent about his once-held principles. The 4am arrivals, the taking of phone calls outside in the dead of winter, the maniacally cheerful greetings after prolonged absences—"

"Who's your husband?" I interject, indulging her, having grown increasingly intrigued by the performance.

"[REDACTED]," she says.

A pause for 3-4 full seconds.

"I wasn't aware that [REDACTED] is married..." I say, curiously.

"Wrong! Cut!" says a teenage boy sitting on a concrete bench with headphones around his neck and a 2L bottle of Pepsi at his side. He's holding a similar stack of papers, with a pencil elegantly poised in his hand. "The line is: 'I wasn't aware that [REDACTED] is STILL married.' And coldly—say it coldly."

I furrow my brow, suddenly feeling the heat of an inexplicable second sun at my back. Holding my hand to my forehead, I turn around to find a spotlight, towering from atop a tripod. At its base stands a boy, freckled and clad in an oversized Friends U Can't Trust t-shirt, with one foot on a skateboard and a light meter in his hand. A few feet away, a boy in a hoodie hunched over the mixing console resting on his lap, gingerly adjusts a few knobs.

"Do you want to have a drink?" I ask the wife.

"Let's not pretend we share some special bond."

"Have a drink with me or don't, but let's not go on about it."

A smile creeps across her face, she starts to laugh, and then we both laugh.

—Jaclyn Bruneau

**Author's note:** Erdem Taşdelen's billboard is the first thing I encounter outside of my apartment building, immediately east of Mercer Union.

**Postscript:** the last three lines of this text are a nod to the young woman who kisses a man she hadn't known was married, and the wife of that man, in *La Notte* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1961). The scene referenced here depicts their first private moment—in the former's bedroom, after a bout of rain during a party at her wealthy father's home—and ends with the young woman blow-drying the wife's hair.



Twelve artists contributed time and money toward the Wednesday opening of the Mercer Union gallery.

# New Mercer Union gallery founded by and for artists invites L'Obscure Union



**Laure Prouvost & Jonas Staal:  
Obscure Union**

**Inauguration in Toronto: Friday 6 December 2019, 7PM**  
**Ongoing assembly: 7 December 2019 – 22 February 2020**



### Post-human coalitions

Laure Prouvost and Jonas Staal had their first collaboration in 2017, a co-configured parliament of the Obscure that was a symphony of two unique artists delving together into new territories. While seemingly different, their artistic practices share a common axon: both artists have been known for proposing immersive environments that, rather than offering a virtual or technically pristine simulation of reality, actively employ the imaginary to implicate audiences in other worlds and forms of living. Their practice—respective and collaborative—offers imaginaries for new worlds yet to come.

One of the characteristic elements of Prouvost’s practice is her employment of non-human entities as equal partners and protagonists in both moving image works and sculptural installations. Prouvost’s mastery in unhinging the innate connections made between language and image—tapping at times into surrealist ideas of the “image as vehicle”—display the correlation between the conscious and the unconscious. Recently, the artist has begun introducing new forms to her lexicon: small sculptures of mobile phones, “lcd-screen headed” humanoid figures made out of iron, animals (octopuses, doves, fish), embroidery and weaving, carpets, quilts and egg shells, comprised her installation at the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019. They are all parts of a Prouvostian universe that draws from her deepest and most fragmented subconscious memories. Although her work has rarely been discussed through a direct socio-political position, Prouvost’s projects truly embody the central tenets of post-humanist theory: a break from the Anthropocene with a shift towards multi-species alliance that recognizes equalities and kinship between humans and other forms of life. The protagonists in Prouvost’s work—plants, animals, undefined entities that inhabit machinery, or objects that speak—are recognized as equal partners, vital elements in directing and formulating a narrative. In the world of Prouvost, they are given life.

Staal delivers large-scale projects that propose the redistribution of power through form and the performance of power itself, particularly through the realm of politics. The artist’s focus towards breaking open the power structures that govern us is evident in his long-term project *The New World Summit* (2012-current), a political and artistic organization that constructs parliaments for blacklisted organizations<sup>1</sup> from all over the globe, gathering them in

architectural and sculptural installations to imagine alternative forms of governance. The creation of an otherwise composed political tableau-vivant thus re-forms the classic architecture of politics (the parliament) and proposes a new structure, which the artist names “assemblism.”<sup>2</sup> His long engagement with questions related to propaganda and their relationship to art are gathered in his newest book, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2019). His propaganda for another future is elaborated in an alternative underground biosphere titled *Interplanetary Species Society* (2019) presented in collaboration with Public Art Agency in Sweden. In the installation, humans stand side by side with plants and fossils of extinct ammonites in their quest for a future comradeship. They demand a new world: one of comradeship in deep time, one that unionizes human and non-human alliances that together will break from the hierarchical present of evolutionary science.

The references from which both artists draw to produce their propositions individually are various and manifold, but what is critical to better understand this co-authored work is to focus on two basic axons of their practices that meet in this joint proposition. Firstly, their construction of an alternate reality that scrutinizes prevailing understandings of form, identity and subjectivity, thus consummating a new glossary with which to understand the world. Secondly, their orientation towards the construction of a politics for a post-human future, one that is equally determined and governed by human and non-human entities. The artists thus ask with this work: How can we re-think the self and our relationship to everything non-human?

One possible way forward is to build on the legacies of French philosopher Michel Foucault and his writings on biopower (the social and political powers that control people’s lives), on which philosophers like Achille Mbembe have elaborated to describe the regime of necropolitics. This latter term describes the use of social and political power to dictate how some people might live and how some must not by analyzing how “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death”<sup>3</sup> forces bodies to remain in a state of exception and precariousness, exemplified in histories of slavery, colonization and the contemporary treatment of refugees.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary humans—particularly in Western societies—are now more than ever before alienated from the misfortunes of others, especially those who are in far away countries. Stories of war and destruction pass quickly in front of our eyes through social media or news feeds leaving us unfazed. But the psychological drive for success embedded in neoliberal subjectivities further alienates them from those who are less affluent and fortunate, and those that do not belong to the same class as them. A dependent or vulnerable human is seen as a failure, thus encouraging the corrosion of any system that challenges the inequities they face. When it comes to other-than-humans, they are used as trophies for our Instagram feeds: pedigree puppies and cats that operate as commodities, or—in the case of plant life—just decor in our living space. Objects are fetishized, and provide some sort of “proof” of social standing, but due to commodification are replaced speedily with new more advanced versions, rendering their life-span very short.

Though breaking down the necropolitical agenda of governments the world over has become a popular topic of discussion among theorists, philosophers and politicians, we seem to lack a concrete proposal for a new position on subjectivity, one that introduces epistemologies that remind us of our affinities with other-than-human ecologies of life. Theorists such as Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway have highlighted ways in which we can redefine subjectivity by resisting the power structures that govern our current understanding of the self and the relation of the self with others (humans and non-humans). I will point to Braidotti’s writings on the concept of cosmopolitanism and how to strip it from its neoliberal legacies by employing the concept of the self in relation to not only others and their bodies, but other species as well. These concepts are all entailed in the world of Prouvost-Staal: in their *Obscure Union* there are gates to be passed, controls that are conducted by unseen powers that remain opaque, obscure, and yet undefined. You are greeted and once inside, you are witness to the ongoing congregation of an other-than-human practice of unionization where we encounter what Braidotti calls the “displacement of anthropocentrism and the recognition of trans-species solidarity.”<sup>5</sup> You are slowly drawn to the warmth in the centre of this site of assembly; you are directed and enclosed by signs and flags; you can sit on body parts. What Prouvost and Staal,

the co-administrators of this union, propose through their joint endeavour is that we abandon the comfort zone of categorization through species with a view to reconsider the relation between bodies-objects-materiality and what they are capable of: within material space, in the space of our imaginary, and in the domain of the obscure. Accepting that we need to find a new framework to describe not only our scientific affinities with other-than-human species, but also our social post-anthropocentric shift in what Braidotti describes “as an act of unfolding of the self onto the world and the enfolding within of the world - a becoming world that goes beyond the superficial planetary flows of global capital.”<sup>6</sup>

This proposition is embodied in *Obscure Union*: octopuses merge with body parts scattered in the space; neo-constructivist signs acknowledge the political subjectivities of more-than-human comrades; suddenly, there is agency everywhere. The artists are mere administrators. It is a proposition building on a previous legacy of artistic practice: declaring the object as comrade, the idea developed by Russian Constructivists such as Lyubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova and Alexander Rodchenko. Working in post-revolutionary conditions during a period of rapid social change, these artist-engineers examined strategies for leveraging artistic practice to aid in the building of an egalitarian society. As shown in Christina Kiaer’s study of constructivism, *Imagine No Possessions*,<sup>7</sup> rather than trying to dispel the power of the object, the Constructivists decided to de-commodify, to unleash the agency of the revolutionary object as a co-creator of a new world. This approach was possibly given its fullest and most complete expression through the writings of Boris Arvatov, who argued that rethinking one’s relation to commodities and objects was part of the overall transformation of everyday life.<sup>8</sup> Rejecting the passivity of objects and thinking of them instead as co-workers enables new modes of kinship that alter the relation between human and object alike.

This is the foundation of the new world—the new union—in which one encounters the work of Prouvost-Staal. Their carefully crafted realm affirms a sense of belonging, that is redefined by an attachment and connection to an alternate terrestrial ecology, in which life is understood as one to be lived in equally defined comradeship through multi-species coalition.

—iLiana Fokianaki

- 1 A blacklist is a list of persons or organizations that are penalized because they are believed to engage in unlawful or unethical activity; many are labeled as terrorist organizations. Inclusion on a blacklist can affect an individual’s ability to travel, have a bank account, be part of a political party, among others.
- 2 Jonas Staal, “Assemblism,” *e-flux Journal* 80 (March 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism/>
- 3 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019): 42.
- 4 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.
- 5 Rosi Braidotti, “Becoming-world,” in *After Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Rosi Braidotti, Patrick Hanafin, Bolette B. Blaagaard (Routledge, 2013).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005).
- 8 For an English translation of Abratov’s texts on “the socialist object,” see Christina Kiaer, “Boris Abratov’s Socialist Objects,” *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 105-118.

**iLiana Fokianaki** is a curator, writer and educator based in Athens and Rotterdam. Her research focuses on the formations of power that manifest under the influence of geopolitics, national identity and cultural and anthropological histories. In 2013 she founded State of Concept Athens, the first non-profit institution of its kind in Athens. Fokianaki is also co-founder of Future Climates, a platform that researches viable futures for small-scale cultural organizations. She has curated exhibitions for KADIST Foundation, Paris/San Fransisco; La Colonie, Paris; and National Gallery of Prague; she has upcoming curatorial projects for Witte de With Center of contemporary Art, Rotterdam; e-flux, New York; and Vanabbe Museum, Eindhoven. Fokianaki holds an MA in Art Criticism from City University London. Her PhD research focuses on economy, identity, and politics.

### PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

**FORUM: Jonas Staal**  
Tuesday 3 December 2019, 6PM

**Propaganda Art in the 21st Century |** Lecture and Canadian Book Launch

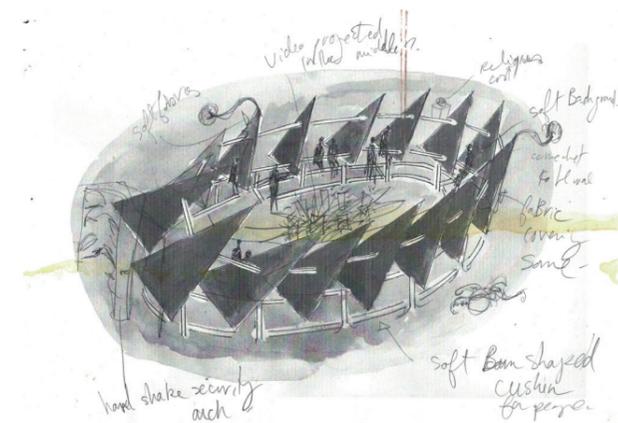
Fake news, alternative facts and the post-truth era: these terms are presented to us as part of a rise of elected authoritarian and alt-right regimes the world over. But democracies were never free from propaganda; the first modern propaganda bureau was founded by the United Kingdom, and propaganda has been widely employed by western democracies in the current War on Terror. The very idea that democracy was ever free from propaganda might itself be one of the most successful propaganda narratives told.

In his new book, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2019), artist Jonas Staal argues that, creating new realities through propaganda is not a practice exclusively deployed by oppressive regimes; on the contrary, popular mass movements and stateless insurgencies propagate new egalitarian counter-realities into being as well. In this lecture Staal examines the role of art and culture in this contemporary propaganda struggle to ask: how might new realities be imagined, visualized, staged and performed into being?

**FORUM** is Mercer Union’s an ongoing series of talks, lectures, interviews, screenings and performances. Free as always.

This lecture is presented in partnership with the **MVS Proseminar** at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design located at the University of Toronto—Main Hall, 1 Spadina Crescent.

Copies of the book *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2019) are made available by **Art Metropole**.



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