

Book Review

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40 nights / 40 DAYS from the lockdown

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Introduction

40 nights / 40 DAYS from the lockdown is a series of 40 postcards with small montage texts by John Higgins and watercolour paintings by Hanien Conradie inspired by photographs in old issues of *National Geographic* magazines.¹ The texts are assemblages of fragments sourced from news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, and from books in Higgins's own library: an offcut from a conversation between Elizabeth Warren and Dr Anthony Fauci (for example), jostles with a phrase from John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* on a postcard with a painting of a waterfall (Postcard 29). Through these surprising juxtapositions – between word and image, between one textual snippet and another, between the painting and the photograph that inspired it – the reader-viewer is teased into drawing possible connections, searching for sources, and in the process creating new associations, gaining different perspectives. The postcards seem to be a kind of open letter, but dislodged from my usual habit of reading in a continuous linear sequence, I feel a pang of sympathy for the fearful reader in Jacques Derrida's (1987:4) *The post card*, the reader 'in a hurry to be determined, decided upon deciding', wishing 'to know in advance what to expect ... to expect what has happened ... to expect (oneself)'. Where do I stand? Although the postcards are not explicitly addressed to me, I seem to be the receiver of these "messages", obliged to respond, but how?

The "address" on each card indicates a point of departure, rather than a destination: it gives detailed reference to the photograph that inspired Conradie's painting, which in turn is replicated, in miniature, and placed in the corner where we would expect to

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find a postage stamp. The cards engage us at a chiasmatic intersection of the verbal and the visual, recto and verso, medium and message, origin and destination, challenging any received ideas we may have had about “correspondence” – with all the multivalency of this word in play.

The messages on the postcards embody the “montage-thinking” that Higgins writes about elsewhere. Montage, for Higgins (2021), is not simply an aesthetic genre, but a motivated social intervention with historical, theoretical, and political ramifications. On the one hand, there is a certain violence and a coercive element to montage: objects, images, and texts torn from their original contexts and reassembled in a new environment compel the viewer or reader to experience a differently determined field of associations. On the other hand, certain montage practices rely on the active engagement of the viewer or reader to create new meanings, despite – or rather because of – the intervals, gaps, and fissures between the fragments in the work itself. In all these different montage practices, though, the aim is ‘to challenge, defamiliarize and deconstruct habitual forms of understanding and interpretation, either with implicit or explicit political goals’ (Higgins 2021:4). The reader of *40 nights / 40 DAYS from the lockdown* experiences these challenging, defamiliarising effects from the very first postcard, which reads,

owing to the perfect
clearness
of the upper air
this is going
to go away
without a vaccine

While this text is likely, first of all, to generate thoughts about the pandemic and the confines of lockdown regulations, the opening phrase may well give the reader pause with its slightly anachronistic cadence. Even so, without necessarily knowing that the phrase comes from Volume I of John Ruskin’s *Modern painters* (first published in 1843), the reader might also feel the sudden urge to look outside to the “upper air”, to imagine a different time, and a different perspective.

Once we appreciate that we are playing the language game of montage, the search for sources takes the reader far afield – perhaps even further than Higgins and Conradie themselves could anticipate. A search for sources of ‘recognition is not proof’ (Postcard 30) leads me to several legal hearings and case studies, to Richard Bassed’s (2015) article on forensic odontology, and to Thomas Nail’s *Being and motion* (2019). Within the context of lockdown curfews especially, the opening sentences of Nail’s (2019:1) book quaintly seem to come from another era, ‘[w]e live in an age of movement. More than at any other time in history, people and things move longer distances, more

frequently, and faster than ever before ... every major domain of human activity has become increasingly defined by motion'. Google searches on other word sequences lead me to even more distant sources: 'mixed and indistinguishable' (Postcard 11) prompts me to make the effort to read an article on machine learning – 'NCGNN: Node-level Capsule Graph Neural Network' – and I realise that Higgins himself is surely not in full command of the diverse routes of the language fragments that have found their way into his postcard messages. I am reminded of Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986:69) observation that no one is the first speaker, disturbing the 'eternal silence of the universe'; in order to be understood, and even to generate new ideas, speakers are obliged to use recognisable words, that is to say, words and phrases that have been used before.

The full sentence from *Modern painters* (1890:185) (part of which is grafted on to Postcard 1) reads, 'I have often seen the snowy summit of a mountain look nearer than its base owing to the perfect clearness of the upper air'. It appears in the chapter, '[o]f truth of space: first as dependent on the focus of the eye', which speaks about focal distances, different perspectives, the quality of the light, objects of attention ... my mind wanders to faraway places ... and I look again at the images on the postcards.

Conradie's watercolours amplify these mental images of spaciousness. This has partly to do with the natural settings depicted in the paintings – wildernesses and ocean depths that often dwarf a single human subject, that 'evoke the Sublime' as Conradie puts it in her preface (Conradie & Higgins 2020:2). But the viewer's vertiginous sensation of distance also has to do with a distinctive stylistic feature of the paintings themselves. Taken as a series, the pictures radiate a predominantly blue light. 'The world is blue at its edges and in its depths' writes Rebecca Solnit (2005:29) in *A field guide to getting lost*; it is the colour 'at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away'. But once we are in the midst of those far-off blue mountains, they are no longer blue; 'distance ceases to be distance and to be blue when we arrive in it. The far becomes near and they are not the same place' (Solnit 2005:35). Thus, for Solnit (2005:29), the 'blue of distance' is the colour of desire, the colour of solitude, 'the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go'. Conradie's watercolours, one painted every day during 40 days of lockdown confinement, depict a yearning for travel; hence, the artist's journey is also one of exploring 'uncharted inner depths' (Conradie & Higgins 2020:3). The paintings are of distant worlds as much as they are images of an inner landscape.

Taken as a whole, these postcards resonate with the reader-viewer; we become co-creators of inner worlds we recognise in ourselves. The overriding experience of *40 nights / 40 DAYS* – made possible by philosophers, writers, photographers, archaeologists, explorers, scientists, journalists, and artists from distant reaches in space and time – is one of affective proximity.

Notes

1. *40 nights / 40 DAYS from the lockdown* first appeared online as part of a group exhibition at the Everard Read Gallery in Cape Town (June 2020). It is also available as an artbook, see: www.hanienconradie.co.za

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