

Galerie Imane Farès

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James Webb
Texts / Press

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Spaces hits trifecta with three strong fall shows 'headlined' by Sarah Kabot's 'NYT 2015'

By Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer | Posted November 25, 2018 at 06:05 AM | Updated November 25, 2018 at 09:01 AM

Also on view at Spaces is "It's Not What It Looks Like," a series of six restrained and minimal installations by South African artist James Webb, that provoke unsettling meditations on science, religion, politics and psychology.

One piece, "Infinite yearning met with a finite world," consists solely of small loudspeaker mounted into a gallery wall. It plays an amplified recording of individual heartbeats of a mother and her unborn child in a way that makes a gallery wall vibrate like an architectural womb.



"Wanderer Above The Sea of Fog," by James Webb. Photo: Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

Webb's piece certainly evokes America's bitter debate over abortion rights, but it doesn't take a position. It simply goads a viewer – or listener in this case – into considering how technology provides stunningly immediate access into life's most intimate processes.

In an equally provocative manner, Webb embeds a loudspeaker inside a mass-produced statue of the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus, which turns its back to viewers and faces toward an adjacent wall.

As if in communication with another world, the statue vibrates with an amplified recording of electromagnetic static produced by the Aurora Borealis. In other words, a figure of mercy and compassion emanates beeps and chirps of solar energy smashing into the roof of Earth's atmosphere.



"I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (A comet is coming), by James Webb. Three texts written on soluble paper, dissolved in water and presented in three glass decanters. Photo: Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

To some, the work may evoke battles between science and faith that have been going on for centuries. For others, it may speak of the connection between religion and mysteries of the larger universe around us. Webb leaves it up to us to decide, but his piece, entitled "Wanderer Above The Sea of Fog," certainly flings such questions at his audience.



CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Rev. Jennie Barrington listens to recorded prayers. The interim minister at Second Unitarian Church of Chicago contributed to the installation.

SONGS, CHANTS AND PRAYER

South African artist brings his religious sound project to the Art Institute

By STEVE JOHNSON | Chicago Tribune

When James Webb finished university in his native South Africa, he had credentials in drama and comparative literature.

"Well," he recalls his father telling him, "you could be a televangelist."

Instead, Webb, now 43, has traveled the globe incorporating religion into his vocation in a different sort of way.

His "Prayer" project, which just began its 10th iteration at the Art Institute of Chicago, is an installation that records the sounds of humans at worship across a region and then brings those sounds together via an array of speakers mounted on a red carpet.

To hear the various soundtracks, gallery visitors must remove their shoes to be on the rug and, for fullest detail, bend over or kneel close to one of the speakers in a posture strikingly similar to prayer.

"This physical action is a reference to supplication and genuflection, and an important performative and participatory aspect of the installation," he has said.

Or, as he put it to museumgoers in Chicago, "I'm a believer in Duchamp's idea that the audience completes the work."

The noises visitors will hear in the Chicago piece range from a choir singing the gospel standard "Precious Lord" to devotees in Chicago's Hare Krishna temple delivering



Artist James Webb believes "the audience completes the work," evident in his "Prayer" exhibit.

that sect's trademark devotional chant. But it could be any of hundreds of other recordings, too, more than nine hours of it playing in loops that Webb combines for variety but without editing his recordings.

"The spare though colorful installation has the austerity of a work of Minimal Art and the enveloping richness of a choral concert," the museum says about this work.

Turn to Prayer, Page 3

Speakers play gospel music, devotionals and Hare Krishna chants

Prayer, from Page 1

together scores of the 250 people he had recorded in seven weeks of schlepping his recording equipment, with the help of a local assistant, from temple to mosque to spiritual center to church. "Many individuals all creating something together"

Indeed, there's a remark the conceptual artist likes to cite about "Prayer," which began in 2000 in Cape Town, in part as a response to South Africa's extreme polarization at the time, and is having its first American appearance in Chicago.

"One participant very sweetly referred to it as 'the sound of God's answering machine,'" the artist said.

If that is the case, the deity has many messages to sift through. "It allows for the visitor to encounter the unknown. There's no menu here," Webb said.

Kneel down and these are some of the fragments in English alone that you might hear:

"Perfect wisdom ... no obstacles"

"Also young boys shall pour wondrous wines for thee."

"Wisdom thou art."

"They would remember that we are not alone, that we are stronger together."

"It's actually exciting to pull the different religions together," said Darnetta Jones, a singer whose voice can be heard delivering "Precious Lord" somewhere amid the speaker arrays, if you happen to be there at the right moment. "It takes you out of the box of the normal that we're used to."

Jones and other vocalists had come together the previous Sunday at First United Methodist

Church in the Loop to be recorded by Webb.

"It's an interfaith piece when we really need to be brought together" said Adrian Dunn, Jones' choir director. And it celebrates, he said, "vocality. ... Honestly, it's amazing just to have a vocally focused project."

"It's not tricky," said Lou Mallozzi, an assistant professor in the sound department at the School of the Art Institute, who was watching people move about on the carpet. "It's an extremely generous sort of work. There doesn't seem to be an ideological position in the piece."

"It's really beautiful. It's brilliant, too," said Subala Dasa, ashrama director of Chicago's International Society of Krishna Consciousness. "You can't sort of go to what you know. You have to expose yourself. And you have to get close."

Although much of what you might hear is devotional and derived from texts, there are moments in his recordings, too, Webb said, in which people are referencing the gun violence in Chicago or their gratitude over being helped in a battle with additions. The version of "Precious Lord" is Dunn's arrangement, developed as a tribute to Trayvon Martin.

"It goes from the liturgical to the very personal," Webb said. And you can read the piece as religious or you can read it in more of a social context. To the artist, "the major theme of this project is hospitality."

The project did not arise out of Webb's own religious practice. He is a "respectful agnostic," he said, who began "Prayer" when, as a 24-year-old advertising copywriter in the late 1990s, in a nation



CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Visitors who want to listen to the recordings are invited to remove their shoes and bend over or kneel close to one of the speakers in a posture that mimics prayer.

just out of Apartheid, he was looking for ways to connect the disparate threads of his homeland — and to get to places he wouldn't be able to go.

"It began as a question: What would it be like to listen to all the prayers of a city simultaneously?" Webb explained.

He was inspired in part by Carl Sagan's Golden Record, sent into space as a representation of Earth's many voices, but also by the avant-garde producer and musician Brian Eno's "Music for Airports."

The artist emphasizes the participatory nature. "It's about the people who said, 'Yes,'" he explained, who invited him in to hear their prayers. He always gives a copy of his recordings to the people he records, for them to use as they wish. He sees the opening event as a part of the piece itself.

"Yes, it is an artwork, but I want it to have a life beyond the

gallery," he said. And he was struck, he said, by a participant "who felt the entire work was an act of prayer in itself."

It has certainly struck a chord in the art community. Since first mounting it in 2000 in Cape Town, Webb has been invited to execute "Prayer" nine other times, always with recordings made locally. The Art Institute is the biggest and, again, the first in the United States.

"It is without a doubt the highlight of my career," he said. Seeing "Prayer" was a highlight, too, for one of the visitors, especially on the day she saw it. Rebecca Ridemour, a theater artist from Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, spent a long time hunched over one of the speakers.

She was there merely by happenstance, she said. It was Thursday, the night the Art Institute is open late.

But on the train ride to the

Loop, she had been thinking so much about the suffering in the city, she said, that she actually missed her stop.

When she got to the museum and into the "Prayer" gallery, she was moved by the range of voices, the cracking as some people spoke, the passion they brought to it.

She also was struck by a common thread she heard amid all the faith practices on display, all the different expressions of those practices.

"It's very moving, the way people pray for totality and the peace of the world," she said. "It boils down to the same prayer."

"James Webb: Prayer" continues through Dec. 31 in Gallery 188 at the Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Ave., 312-443-3600 or www.artic.edu

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REVIEWS

The sound artist making a call for resilience

Clelia Coussonnet

12 JANUARY 2017



All that is unknown (2016), James Webb. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès. Photo © Maha Kays

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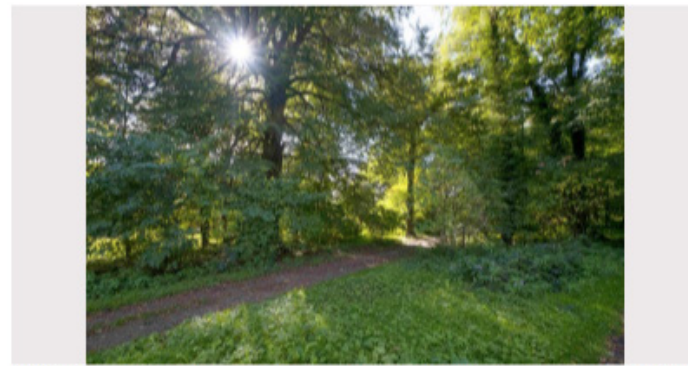
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Entering the Galerie Imane Farès, invigorated by brisk winter air, I encounter a comforting scene. Kilim rugs, surrounded by four standing speakers, welcome the visitor into the minimalist universe of James Webb. The South African conceptual sound artist currently has an exhibition of four sound pieces at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, following which he will begin a residency where he will create a site-specific installation or an alternative audio-guide – but before that, he has his first solo show in Paris, which is where we meet. 'Hope is a good swimmer' poetically explores themes of 'inner transformation and hope as an action,' the artist explains. For him, this starts with giving the body over to the experience of sound in space, since 'space suggests choreography, even just in the way we move through an exhibition,' stresses Webb.



We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far (Yorkshire Sculpture Park; 2012), James Webb. Courtesy the artist, blank projects, Galerie Imane Farès and YSP. Photo © Jonty Wilde

The first work in the show, *Al Madat* (2014), is a recording of a Sufi *dhikr* chanted by recovering drug addicts at the Sultan Bahu Rehab Centre in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town – a former township during Apartheid. 'Via special vocal and breathing techniques, this religious recitation of God's names generates trance-like effects and recalls our initial divine connection,' explains Webb. The artist has created a space in which visitors can remove their shoes and take time to reflect. Amid the rugs, absorbed by the invocation's rhythm, one can sense the back and forth movements of the swinging bodies and the resilience of these individuals. Sustained by the power of collective healing, during their treatment the patients 'cross stormy seas; there is a [sense of] passage,' continues Webb, who feels transformed by his work at this social project. The piece has additional layers of meaning for the artist: it connects to Cape Town's history, and to the introduction of Islam in South Africa by Mardykens and Malay slaves in the 1600s.



I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (December 2016) (2016), James Webb. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès. Photo © Maha Kays

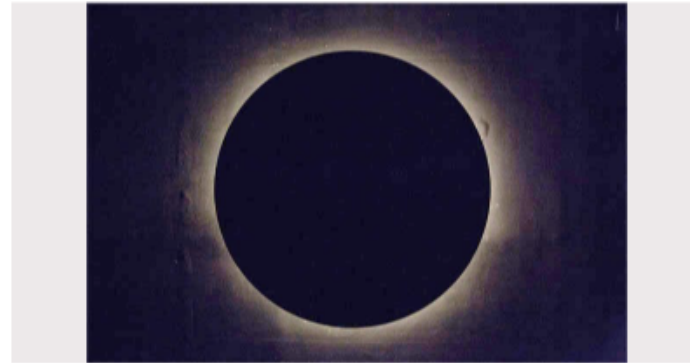
In a hallway, *I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds* (2016), the only installation without sound, presents 10 vials on a shelf. Floating inside, resembling clouds, are texts written on soluble paper and dissolved. For Webb, the 'water becomes a tool of transmutation; like a magic spell; after drinking, the texts activate the body from within, as drugs, potions or poisons.' The original texts include 'Fragments d'un discours amoureux' by Roland Barthes, Maya Angelou's poem 'Still I rise' and the lyrics of 'Disintegration' by The Cure. 'Instead of experiencing the text with the eye or ear, the words return to the mouth.' Here, the transformation is an intimate – literally interior – experience beyond language, one that implies swallowing what we hold dear and want to carry with us.

In the next room, tenuous heartbeats phase in and out from two facing speakers. *All that is Unknown* (2016) is 'an impossible call and response between two persons,' suggests Webb. 'Our ignorance of what these sonar signals are creates an unspoken tension. They could be lovers, enemies or friends.' If you stand right by the speakers, you can feel their pulse as you would if you put your hands on a person's chest. The piece subtly refers to the magic of life, to all we cannot understand about it, and to the impossibility of crossing the gulf between ourselves and others. 'It connects to the idea of the Johari window in psychology. Imagine a grid where A and B are our conscious selves, and C and D our unconscious selves. I am interested in how [the conscious and] subconscious meet.'



All that is unknown (2016), James Webb. Courtesy the artist, blank projects, Galerie Imane Farès and YSP. Photo © Jonty Wilde

Downstairs, a black-painted room houses the directional sound installation *Threnody* (2016) where vocalist Zami Mdingi sings Paul McCartney's line for The Beatles song 'Helter Skelter' backwards. The work refers to how Charles Manson associated the band's music with excerpts from the Bible to create his own mythology based on racial confrontational, leading his followers to commit killings in 1969. 'What I want to achieve with such a reversing is to undo all the mad things, to retrace Helter Skelter and get a negative of it,' Webb explains. '*Threnody* is the opposite of Manson and of that Beatles' white-bread, white man, cock rock'. The resulting piece is a mesmerising physical performance, 'a strange, difficult melody where the voice itself becomes an object.' With the help of ethnomusicologist Cara Stacey, Mdingi and Webb transcribed the lyrics in a phonetic Xhosa framework. 'There is a sadness, longing and anger in the new version. It is a lament.' The installation itself evokes a solar eclipse (it is painted black, and the large black speaker is partially lit by a low light from behind, to resemble the moon crossing the sun), suggesting the spiritual power of mourning and of transcending death. When I ask him if his work is a comment on current racial tensions in South Africa or the USA, he replies that the audience can unpick, interpret and complete his artworks at will.



Threnody (2016), James Webb. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès. Photo © Maha Kays

This show definitely requires the viewer to be an active participant, seeking out a direct, physical, experience of the works. Webb appeals to our intuition and unconscious, pushing us to reflect on how we transcend hardships, especially in turbulent times.

'Hope is a good swimmer' is a reaction to and a challenge to the world we live in, and the anguish of so much of today's news. 'We pass through dangerous crossroads. What is hope? Hope is an attitude, not a wish,' the artist argues. 'Hope is the possibility of accepting, or understanding, our world and its uncertainties. It is not about the future, but about the present and now.' This sounds like a call for resilience, to resort to our inner strength and keep moving despite it all.

'Hope is a good swimmer' is at [Galerie Imane Farès](#), Paris, France, until 11 February 2017.

'We Listen to the Future' is at [Yorkshire Sculpture Park](#), Wakefield, UK, until 11 March 2017.

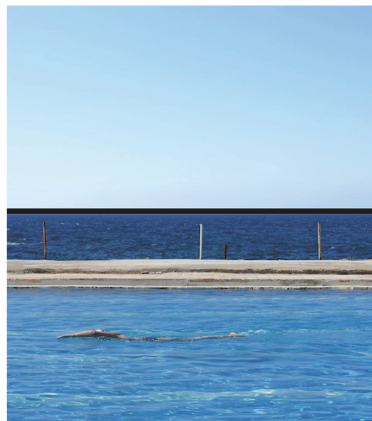
ARTAFRICA



Sharjah Biennial 13 – Expanding Waves

13th July 2017 /

ART AFRICA, issue 08



Nesrine Khodr, *Extended Sea*, 2017. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

In this year's Sharjah Biennial, commissioned by Hoor Al Qasimi, President and Director of Sharjah Art Foundation and curated by Christine Tohme, the ambition is all the more wide-ranging. The curatorial framework is departing from the concept of 'tamawuj,' the Arabic word describing the movement of waves, fluctuation and undulating appearance. As we can read in the curatorial statement in the accompanying guide book, "Tamawuj proposes a structure of care and cultivation as well as a mode of working by processes of contamination, where spillage and the introduction of new elements result in the formation of compounds, altering the original balance into a series of interventions ... We tried to think of Tamawuj not only as a cyclical repetition of the same gesture, but as a reciprocal act of exchange, where various nodes of the biennial both draw from and flow into

one another." These considerations have then effected the structure of the biennial where the extensive programme includes not only the central event between March and June 2017 in Sharjah, but exhibitions in Beirut in October 2017, off-site projects in Dakar, Istanbul, Ramallah and Beirut, as well as year-long educational, research and publication platforms. Hence the investigation of the elements that the curator identified, and with which and through which the biennial is aiming to analyse the interactions – water, crops, earth and the culinary – are truly expanding the original venue, and connecting the distant cities.

The exhibited works investigate the interconnections between the elements of the framework, sometimes even connecting the biennial venues themselves too, for example by having works of the same artist in different locations. The 'waves' of the main theme could appear in direct and indirect ways too. Roy Samaha's video work titled *Residue* (2017) is composed of a series of GIFs created on the artist's journey along the Mediterranean shores surveying the experience of migration and its connection to image and memory. The overlapping of personal and definitely corporeal experience and its connection to the concepts of mobility and distance in a wider perspective characterises the 12-hour video work of Nesrine Khodr, where we can see the artist swimming back and forth in an open-air pool for most of the duration of the long video, covering about nine kilometres, though physically not reaching anywhere. Apart from the water waves, we can mention the audio waves of a particularly poetic work of James Webb: on the opposite ends of a long and narrow exhibition space two audio speakers play the sound of a human heartbeat in a subtle volume, so that while walking along the corridor, one reaches a point where it completely disappears, then increases again. The experiment of audibility and materiality of the heartbeat becomes more serious and poignant when considering the fragility of the original – though recorded – sources of the sound. In the biennial that attempts to describe and question our contemporary condition, Webb's minimal though suggestive work can be put in parallel with the intention of the curator when writing: "I want this biennial to channel our thinking, to help it flow in parallel to and within constraints rather than outside or against them. Tamawuj is not meant as a demarcation, but as the undulation of the many lines we tread, simultaneously and together, while things fluctuate around us."

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James Webb, *All that is unknown*, 2016. Audio, infinite. Installation view, Sharjah Biennial 13, 2017. Courtesy of Blank Projects, Cape Town and Galerie Imane Fares, Paris and the artist. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation.

SHARJAH

13^e Biennale d'art contemporain

Divers lieux / Octobre 2016 - octobre 2017

Un minuscule planétarium abandonné, aux façades couvertes de mosaïque bleue, est coincé entre une voie rapide, des villas neuves, de vieux gratte-ciel et un terrain vague. Avant sa destruction imminente, il accueille une pièce sonore de Natascha Sadr Haghghighian et Ashkan Sepahvand : des enregistrements recueillis dans diverses mines et lieux d'extraction d'énergie. Que préservons-nous ? Que détruisons-nous ? C'est dans cette œuvre discrète que pourrait résider l'idée générale de cette nouvelle édition de la biennale de Sharjah.

Il est toujours intéressant de voir cet événement, qui se tient au moment de la foire Art Dubai. Cet émirat est paradoxalement conservateur et très concerné par l'art en raison des convictions de l'émir et de l'une de ses filles, la princesse Hoor Al Qasimi. On y découvre des artistes rarement vus en Europe, venus d'Afrique du Sud, de Turquie, du Liban (en grand nombre cette année), mais aussi d'Inde ou de Corée. Beaucoup d'œuvres sont produites pour l'occasion, et toujours présentées avec grand soin dans des espaces dont le nombre augmente chaque fois, des cours de la vieille ville reconstituée aux abords de la plage Al Hamriyah.

Mais cette édition, dont le commissariat est assuré par Christine Thome, fondatrice et directrice du centre d'art Ashkal Alwan à Beyrouth, soulève d'emblée la question de son format. Un peu comme pour la Documenta, qui se tient ce printemps à Athènes et à Cassel, la Biennale de Sharjah se déroule en plusieurs volets sur un an : un programme éducatif à Sharjah ; une plateforme digitale intitulée *chip-ship* qui rassemble des recherches faites par les différents « interlocuteurs » sur les sujets ciblés par la Biennale – et dont on comprend non sans perplexité qu'elle n'est ouverte qu'à quatre-vingts personnes ayant contribué à sa préparation ; un colloque à Dakar, mené par Kader Attia sur le thème de l'eau ; l'exposition de Sharjah qui porte aussi sur l'eau, désignée comme l'Acte I, et, encore à venir, un projet à Istanbul sur le thème de la moisson, un autre à Ramallah sur la terre, et un dernier à Beyrouth sur la cuisine, qui sera accompagné de deux autres expositions, l'Acte II.

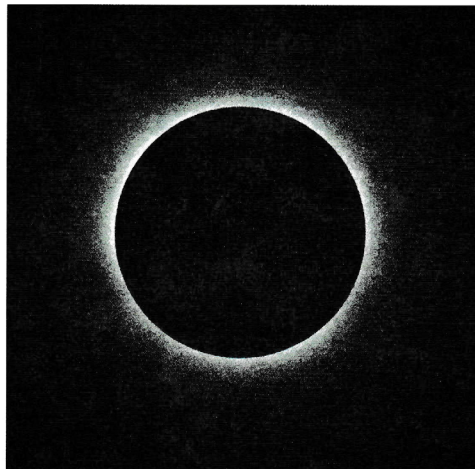
Cette énumération est aussi fastidieuse que l'exercice impossible qui consisterait à faire le tour de ces lieux. De cela, les organisateurs ont pleinement conscience. Mais alors, à qui s'adresse cette biennale qui évoque tant la transmission ? Quel sens cela a-t-il de ne pas attraper que quelques

brises ? Qu'est-ce qu'une biennale qui ne peut être vue ? On pourrait imaginer qu'il s'agit là d'un organisme vivant, de la tentative de donner à voir la méthode de travail d'un groupe de personnes installées dans différentes parties du monde. Par un fragment, on pourrait en saisir l'essence. Encore faudrait-il pour cela cerner le thème de ces recherches.

Or celui-ci est plutôt flou. *Tamawuj* est un mot arabe qui désigne selon le dictionnaire le mouvement des vagues ; des gonflements et des fluctuations ; des formes ondulantes. Au premier abord, le sujet semblait formidable : une réflexion sur l'écologie qui aurait examiné la manière dont les fonctionnements de la nature reflètent ceux des sociétés humaines dans notre monde hyperconnecté. Seulement le propos n'est jamais vraiment développé, du moins dans l'exposition de Sharjah, même si un certain nombre d'œuvres se distinguent qui semblent s'en approcher, mais de la façon la plus vague, ou la plus littérale. Peut-être faut-il alors seulement se laisser porter au fil de ces œuvres sans chercher l'ordre qui les réunit.

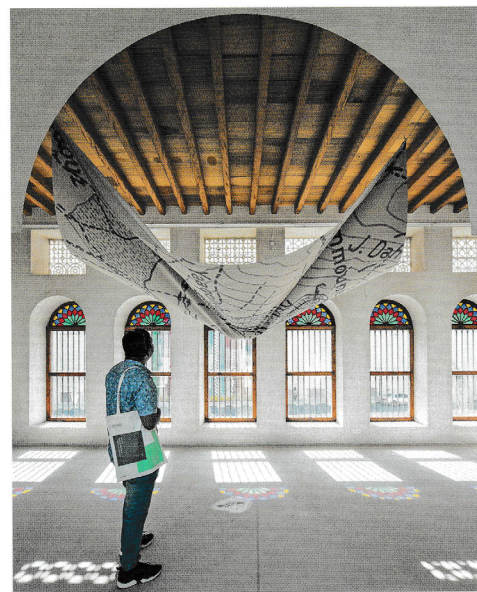
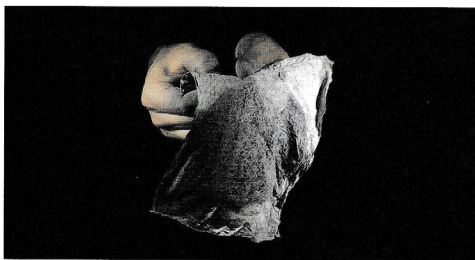
Nombreux sont d'abord les récits aquatiques. Dans l'une des cours de maisons traditionnelles, dont les murs de pierre portent des empreintes de coquillages, Mario García Torres diffuse des histoires de rivières lues et chantées, depuis une cabane de roseaux où il a rassemblé de petites peintures de paysages, et des cartes postales de crues de la Seine en 1910. Plus politique, Stéphanie Saadé fait le portrait d'un lac disparu, sur la faille du Levant, dont les eaux se sont taries lorsqu'elles ont été détournées du Liban par Israël pour irriguer la région. De l'eau coule du plafond dans une toile suspendue sur laquelle est imprimée une carte géographique de 1938 ; et les cerne dessinés par ces gouttes sur le sol évoquent la forme fantomatique de ce lac. Les traditions et la modernité s'affrontent dans la vidéo en double écran du Sud-Africain Uriel Orlow : un acteur joue le rôle d'un guérisseur noir accusé en 1940 de mêler l'usage des plantes traditionnelles à celui de la médecine occi-

Ci-dessus/above : James Webb. « *Threnody* ». 2016. Audio recordings, 2 min 59 secondes
Ci-contre/right : Ismail Bahri. « *Revers* ». 2016. Vidéo HD mono canal. (Court. l'artiste, Incorporated), Les Ateliers de Rennes, La Criée).
HD single-channel video, 45 minutes



dentale. L'œuvre la plus politique, assurément la plus violente, est probablement la pièce sonore de Lawrence Abu Hamdan qui donne à entendre les bruits d'une prison syrienne et le poids du silence qui y règne par la contrainte. Des paysages naturels, de la région ou d'ailleurs, ont servi d'inspiration à plusieurs artistes comme le brésilien Tonico Lemos Auad qui présente un jardin de plantes médicinales du désert dans des formes octogonales imbriquées les unes dans les autres comme des molécules, et inspirées de l'architecture locale. Ce sont le plus souvent des paysages mentaux, comme chez Baris Dogrusöz, né en Turquie, et installé à Beyrouth après avoir grandi en France. De loin, son œuvre qui se compose de grandes impressions sur papier fixées au mur, donne l'impression de bandes mono-

chromes colorées ; de près, il s'agit d'une histoire personnelle et politique de la Turquie à travers les cartes géographiques vues sur des chaînes de télévision depuis le coup d'État du 12 septembre 1980 jusqu'à 1994, vision de l'exil, à la fois publique et intime. La question des migrations est un des axes récurrents de la biennale, au sens propre comme au sens figuré, par exemple avec le collectif Futurefarmers qui montre des graines coulant de l'intérieur du mât d'un bateau. De façon plus abstraite, sur la Calligraphy Square, Ismail Bahri montre la fragilité des images dans une vidéo simple et belle : il froisse et défroisse en boucle une page de magazine. La matière colorée passe du papier sur ses doigts, usée en poudre blanche. Dans un autre quartier, de part et d'autre d'un immense couloir



Stéphanie Saadé. « *Portrait of a Lake* ». 2017. Épreuve sur tissu, eau, ficelles. 280 x 480 cm. (Court. l'artiste, Sharjah Art Foundation, galerie Anne Barrault).
Print on natural fabric, water, strings

voûté qui longe la cour d'une maison, le Sud-Africain James Webb a accroché une pièce très forte : deux haut-parleurs qui diffusent le son de deux cœurs humains ; l'un s'atténue jusqu'à disparaître lorsqu'on se rapproche de l'autre. Ce sont peut-être aussi ces mouvements-là de la vie qu'évoque le mot *Tamawuj*.

Anaël Pigat

A minuscule abandoned planetarium, its walls covered with blue mosaics, is stuck between an expressway, newly constructed houses, old skyscrapers and an empty lot. On the eve of its own destruction, it houses a sound piece by Natascha Sadr Haghghighian and Ashkan Sepahvand, recordings made in various mines and energy extraction sites. What do we preserve? What do we destroy? This understated work can be taken to exemplify the general idea

behind this new edition of the Sharjah biennial. It's always interesting to attend this show, held at the same times as the Art Dubai fair. Paradoxically, Sharjah is a conservative emirate, but the ruler and one of his daughters, Princess Hoor Al Qasimi, are known for their strong belief in the importance of the arts. The biennial offers the opportunity to see work by artists rarely on view in Europe, from South Africa, Turkey, Lebanon (abundant this year), India and South Korea. Many works are produced for the occasion, and they are always well displayed in spaces whose number grows with each edition, from the reconstituted old town courtyards to the Al Hamriya beach. The format of this year's show, curated by Christine Thome, founder and director of the Ashkal Alwan art center in Beirut, turns out to be problematic straight away. Somewhat like Documenta, to be held this spring in Athens as well as Cassel, the Sharjah Biennial unfolds through a series of events over the course of a year, including an educational program in Sharjah ; a digital platform called « chip-ship » bringing together contributions by the various « interlocutors » about the biennial's target subjects (oddly enough, open only to the eighty people involved in this year's preparations) ; a symposium in Dakar, led by Kader Attia, about water ; the exhibition itself in Sharjah, also water-themed, called Act I ; and, still to come, a project in Istanbul whose theme is the harvest, another in Ramallah about land, and a third in Beirut on cuisine, accompanied by two more exhibitions, jointly called Act II.

If this list seems long, imagine visiting every one of these locations. The biennial's organizers, of course, know that. But who is the intended audience for this biennial, so clearly concerned with the transmission of knowledge? What is the meaning of the fact that we can only snatch bits and pieces of it? What is a biennial that can't be seen? We can imagine that it is a living organism, an attempt to show the work method of a group of people living in different parts of the world. Perhaps we can grasp the essence of the ensemble by scrutinizing a fragment. But if that's the case, we need a clearer idea of what these endeavors are about.

That's exactly what we don't have. The Arabic word *Tamawuj*, according to the dictionary, means the movement of waves, swelling and fluctuations, undulations. At first the subject seems terrific—perhaps this is a reflection on ecology examining how nature's functioning is similar to the workings of human societies in this hyperlinked world. Except that this idea is never really developed, at least in the Sharjah exhibition. Even if some of the works seem to be going in that direction, the approach is either too vague or too literal. Maybe the best thing is just to go with the flow of the artworks without troubling ourselves about what overarching idea brings them together.

There is an awful lot of stuff about water. In a courtyard of a traditional home whose walls bear the imprint of shellfish, Mario García Torres gives us songs and spoken narratives about rivers. His little reed hut is full of small landscape paintings and postcards of the famous Seine flood of 1910. A more political piece by Stéphanie Saadé is a portrait of a lake located on the Levantine fault line that disappeared when its waters were redirec-

ted away from Lebanon to irrigate Israeli crops. Water drips from the ceiling onto a suspended canvas on which a 1938 map is printed ; the rings created by the drops on the floor sketch the ghost of a lake. Tradition and modernity clash in a double-screen video by the South African Uriel Orlow : an actor plays the role of a black healer accused in 1940 of mixing the use of traditional medicinal plants with Western medicine. Probably the most political and certainly the most violent work is the sound piece by Lawrence Abu Hamdan [2]. It conveys the sounds of a Syrian prison and the enforced silence that reigns there.

Natural landscapes in the region and elsewhere have inspired many artists such as the Brazilian Tonico Lemos Auad, who presents a garden of medicinal desert plants arranged into interlocking octagonal shapes that look like molecules, inspired by local architecture. More often the landscapes are mental, as in the work of Baris Dogrusöz, born in Turkey and now living in Beirut after having grown up in France. From a distance, his large impressions on paper attached to the wall seem to be monochrome stripes, but up close they tell a personal and political story about Turkey by means of geographic maps broadcast over TV channels from the coup d'état of September 12, 1980 until 1994. The result is a vision of exile that is both public and personal.

The question of migration is a recurring axis of this biennial, literally as well as figuratively. For example, a piece by the Futurefarmers collective shows seeds flowing out of the mast of a boat. More abstractly, at the Calligraphy Square, Ismail Bahri demonstrates the fragility of images in a simple, lovely looped video where he crumples and uncrumples a page from a magazine. The colored ink from the paper turns into a white powder on his fingers. In another part of the city, from one end to the other of an immense vaulted corridor alongside a courtyard, the South African James Webb has hung a very powerful piece : two loudspeakers broadcast the sound of two human hearts, each fading away to silence as you approach the other. Perhaps this kind of movement in life is also implied by the word *Tamawuj*.

Translation, L-S Torgoff

▲ Palais de Tokyo. Photo: Ernest Michel. © James Webb. *Untitled (with the sound of its own making)*, 2016. Photo: Kjetil Nordand. Courtesy of the artist, blank projects, and Galerie Imane Farès. ©. *Territories and Fictions*. Thinking a New Way of the World. Courtesy of Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.



Tino Sehgal
PALAIS DE TOKYO,
PARIS
12 OCTOBER - 18 DECEMBER

In the context of its "carte blanche" series of solo artist exhibitions, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, has given Tino Sehgal the entire run of its 13,000 sq m space. Complexifying his usual practice in response to the challenge posed, Sehgal invited a number of other contemporary artists to join the project. The result is an interaction so discreet that you could amble through the exhibition without realising that it was in fact a collaborative venture.

There are several possible entrances to the exhibition, which means that the chronology of the unfolding events can be different each time. This multiplicity is compounded by the fact that the individual's experience will vary significantly depending on the actors who decide to interact with you. It's the kind of show that is ultimately kaleidoscopic: no two viewings are the same.

All the entrances are initially hidden from view by an oversized pink bead curtain that viewers are asked to part, and then they meet the first actor. They are greeted with a question that they are free to leave as a statement because the phrasing of it is accompanied by semi-balletic gestures. If viewers choose to go straight under the Daniel Buren-coloured dot ceiling, they will then come across a small group of child actors. One of them awaits to offer up another existential question and engage members of the public in conversation until a teenage actor picks up the thread, leading on to an adult, and finally an elderly actor.

Afterwards, observers are guided down the well of a staircase, and released into a wider space where a human stampede erupts. As this abates, the actors gradually revert to slow motion.

Erik Martiny

James Webb:
We Listen for the Future
YSP, WAKEFIELD
1 OCTOBER - 26 FEBRUARY

South African sound artist James Webb (b. 1975) breaks the tranquility of the 18th century chapel at YSP with regulated drumming in his new installation. *Untitled (with the sound of its own making)* is both concordant and discordant with the maintenance of equanimity. Transgressions of expected rhythmic patterns speak deeply of aural and bodily disquiet, yet the reverberations – felt bodily and throughout the architecture – suggest harmony between the impermanence of such established institutions and the primal and religious rituals they aspire to venerate.

The migration of peoples is also an important subject for Webb. Outside YSP's Chapel visitors can find *There's no place called home* in which the call of a non-native birds are situated in the Yorkshire landscape. It is interesting that Webb includes songs from these animals as they are perhaps the only species that consciously cross geo-political borders, yet do so here only in spirit and at the hands of the artist. In this way, he has forced their voices into a different culture.

The artist is philosophically concerned with the thinking of Duchamp, such that the work of art is completed by the viewer. The attitudes possessed by the audience does then alters the piece. As such, an offering such as this is both highly topical and potentially challenging. A visitor who has mainstream attitudes towards migration might reconsider lazy-minded mores if encouraged without judgement. The figurative doctrine between the regulated drumming (of hands on doors) at the chapel and associated spiritual disquiet speaks of an appeal to higher civility.

Daniel Potts

Territories and Fictions.
Thinking a New Way of the World
MUSEO REINA SOFÍA, MADRID
25 OCTOBER - 13 MARCH

In its new exhibition, Museo Reina Sofía takes a head-on approach to the current state of political and social affairs. The economic crisis, the uncertain future of the European project, the alarming rise of nationalism and populism all seem to point, to some degree, towards a dramatic change in the global paradigm. Museum director Manuel Borja-Villel and curators Cristina Cámara, Beatriz Herráez, Lola Hinojosa and Rosario Peiró present us with the role art has played in the many years leading up to this unsettling situation.

The show brings together a large array of artists whose works illustrate the curators' main premise: the "covert dictatorship" exercised by neoliberalism on a global scale. The exhibition presents different ways through which art has opposed the development of this dominating political and economic force, of this "new way of the world", a term taken by the curators from French thinkers Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot. Globalisation lies at the core of the exhibition's concerns, and informs the rest of the areas discussed: the colonial character of Modernity, financial speculation, consumerism, gentrification.

As the curators maintain, art's role in this context is problematic. On the one hand, the system claims to accept cultural and artistic expression which lies outside the norm; on the other, it aims to absorb and thus neutralise it. It is capitalism's cannibalising nature that the artists here, such as Zoe Leonard, Allan Sekula or Antoni Muntadas, try to resist. To what extent their works avoid cannibalisation and, at the same time, continue to function as art remains for the viewer to decide.

Rubén Cervantes Garrido



All the Unseen Things

James Webb

James Webb is a South African artist based in Cape Town. His work, framed in large-scale installations in galleries and museums, or as unannounced interventions in public spaces, often makes use of ellipsis, displacement and détournement to explore the nature of belief and the dynamics of communication in our contemporary world. Webb's practice employs a variety of media including audio, installation and text, referencing aspects of the conceptualist and minimalist traditions, as well as his academic studies in advertising, comparative religion and theatre.

Webb has presented his work around the world at major institutions and exhibitions, including Wanås Konst in Sweden, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK, the 13th Biennial of Sharjah (2017), 12th Bienal de la Habana (2015), 55th Biennale di Venezia (2013), the 2009 Melbourne International Arts Festival and the 8th Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon (2007).

theotherjameswebb.com

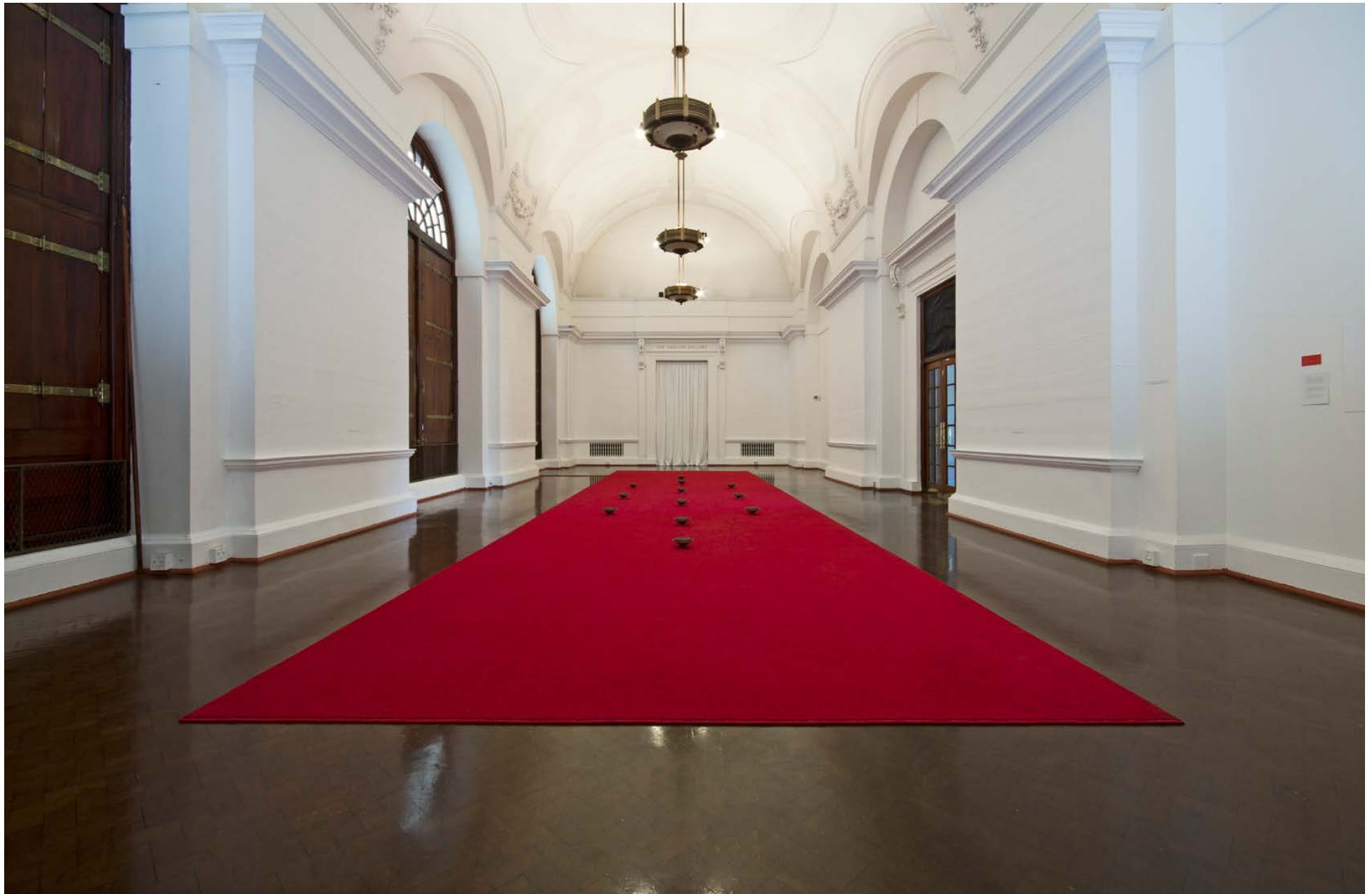
Introduction

This text is a consideration of the unseen things: the processes behind the ongoing artworks *Prayer* (1999, ongoing) and *There's No Place Called Home* (2004, ongoing). Both projects are iterative and made afresh in new locations, and could be described as site-responsive, audio installation pieces with relational concerns. Both use minimal visual elements, basic audio playback systems, and are augmented by the context of the specific site to suggest various poetic and political readings.

The thematics of these artworks include, but are not limited to, religion, society, and multiculturalism (*Prayer*), and the materiality of field recordings, environmental contingency, and migration (*There's No Place Called Home*). *Prayer* started as a reaction to the still very segregated, post-Apartheid cityscape of my hometown Cape Town, and *There's No Place Called Home* to the northern winter that I found myself in on one of my first trips overseas to Kitakyushu, Japan. Over the last decade, I have seen both artworks be exhibited widely and garner new audiences and theoretical interpretations from the different circumstances they have been shown in. Out of all my formal projects over 18-years these two have travelled the most and show signs of being able to be personalised by local audiences, allowing the works to develop relationally and socially in ways that would have been hard to plan or to do on my own. Herewith are some notes on the creative processes and challenges of each project.

Audience member at *Prayer*, Johannesburg, 2012.
Image by Anthea Pokroy.





Installation view of *Prayer*, Johannesburg, 2012. Image by Anthea Pokroy.

Prayer

Prayer is a multi-channel audio installation comprising sound recordings of vocal worship collected from as many religious communities as possible found in the host city where the piece is exhibited. The artwork originally began with the question of what would it be like to listen to all the multi-faith prayers of a city together? With religion playing such a strong role in historical and

St. Mary the Less, recording location for *Prayer*, Johannesburg, 2012.



contemporary society and politics, influencing everything from culture and law to fashion and diets, I believe it is an important subject for artistic engagement. As I am based in Cape Town and the project requires local involvement, the process begins with me working with the inviting art institution through an assistant there. Researching and contacting the groups can take up to two months before recording starts. The idea is to get as much participation as possible, and to get an in-depth insight into the religious and spiritual life of the city.

I have a degree in Religious Studies from the University of Cape Town, and this has proved a solid base for the theoretical preparation of the project. Google is a good start, but input from regional interfaith initiatives and university religious studies and theological programs is a great help in finding out about what faiths are represented in the city, and how to contact them. The process is exhaustive, starting with looking for all religions that might be present there, and there is—in my experience—always much more than expected. Depending on the location, these have included most schools of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism. The search expands by looking for denominations, offshoots and reform movements, as well as so-called minority group faiths such as Mandaean, Yarsanism, and Zoroastrianism, and pre-Christian, traditional religious practices and new age groups. All of the faiths are further looked for in terms of community and location,

for example the Vietnamese Catholic and Buddhist communities of Malmö.

 Thuy Hoa Thiên Liên, Song To Guanyin – Prayer (Malmö)

Searching continues in civic organisations such as prisons, hospital multi-faith centres, and other community organisations, for example the Mission to Seafarers church ministering to visiting sailors at the Cape Town harbour (*Prayer*, Cape Town, 2000). Remarkable sacred spaces, such as the Johannesburg Shree Siva Subramaniam Temple in Melrose, a safe place where Nelson Mandela purportedly hid during numerous Apartheid-era raids, are approached to develop the symbolic geographical and architectural elements contained in the concept of the artwork.

 Guru Shanmuga Sivam – Prayer (Johannesburg)

Lastly, well known individuals associated with local faith are contacted directly, for example Imam Abdul Wahid Pedersen, a noteworthy Danish Imam who was the first Muslim leader to conduct Friday sermons in Danish in 1997 (*Prayer*, København, 2010).

It would be good to mention here that I am not just looking to record and include spiritual leaders; all religious people are welcome to participate in this artwork. It's useful to start the research with leaders and organisations, so as to reach out

Shree Siva Subramaniam Temple
in Johannesburg.





Sri Devi Karumariamman Seva Sungam, recording location for *Prayer*, Johannesburg 2012.

to the greater community through their established networks and congregations. All participants are seen as equal, and their assistance and contribution greatly appreciated and respected. In this regard, more solitary and hermetic practices such as neo-pagan shamanism are proactively looked for as they can be harder to find compared to the statistically larger community-based religious traditions. I specifically look for a gender balance in the participants, and in cases such as Stockholm, Malmö, and Johannesburg – the 3 largest versions of the piece – have found it with ease. For ethical

reasons pertaining to representation and agency, no under-18s are recorded.

 *Jaya Radhe Jaya Krishna – Prayer* (Stockholm)

Contact is made by the inviting museum where the installation will be presented, enabling the faith groups to identify an institution and a local person with the project. This adds to the credibility of the initiative, and also enables the museum to establish networks in and around the city; networks that can remain after the installation has opened and that could lead to new initiatives. Email works well, but nothing beats a phone call to establish rapport, and to give immediate answers to the questions and concerns someone might have. This is followed by an email or letter with detailed information on the intentions and practicalities of artwork, as well as references to other people within that faith that have taken part in *Prayer* in the preceding iterations.

Understandably, some people are initially skeptical about the project. Themes of religion and contemporary art in today's Western society can trigger controversial references such as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) or some of the installations of Damien Hirst and Banksy. Whereas I think the devotional and conceptual implications of Serrano's artwork are often misunderstood, *Prayer* needs to be contextualised carefully and generously at all times.

Even terms like "sound art," a category I don't readily identify with, must be unpacked for clear understanding in the process of this



Shree Laxmi Narayan Mandir, recording location for *Prayer*, Birmingham 2011.

piece. Thanks to existing networks formed from earlier versions of *Prayer*, new participants can also be found and invited to participate through mutual contacts. The contribution from the Eckankar community in 6 of the manifestations of *Prayer* is thanks to Niels-Jul Yrvin and the other Bergen members whose support and encouragement in the 2010 edition led to interest and involvement from Eckists in other cities.

 Birmingham Eckankar – Prayer (Birmingham)

In a different way, the Sultan Bahu Centre, a Sufi mosque in Mayfair, Johannesburg, very kindly approached local churches and the Sri Sathya Sai Centre in the neighbourhood on my behalf. Here my and the museum's job is greatly aided by people who understand and are enthusiastic enough about the initiative and its multi-faith aims to promote it to others. It's a fascinating and very rewarding process, and the links made in the research tend to generate more and

more links, and these become valuable participatory partners and contacts for the museum and the people involved. A very wide net is thrown, and we strive to be highly inclusive, and operate on a very significant level. For art institutions and museums wanting to broaden their community awareness and outreach, the process of producing *Prayer* is a powerful way to do this. On average over the last 9 iterations of the piece, more than 100 multilingual prayers are recorded from an average of 65 different faiths in each host city. The current exhibition of *Prayer (Stockholm)*¹ exhibited at Historiska Museet comprises 155 recordings from 172 people, totalling just over 7-hours of working footage.

The recording period can take between 3 to 5 weeks. 3 weeks is an absolute minimum, and would only be possible if we were very organised and schedule 5+ recording sessions a day. 4 to 5-weeks is more realistic, and would really make for some exciting results as the project tends to gather more attention and interest as the recording process goes on. At the arranged meeting, a brochure is used to show the new participants the previous versions of the installation, particularly what it looks like and explaining how audience members access the artwork. Transparent communication is vital as the artwork is engaging with spiritual, personal and cultural views and representation, and as I am a visitor to that city and this is a project that I wish to have continue in many more

¹ For details see exhibition notices on page 57.



Saint Nicholas the Enlightener of Japan Orthodox Christian Church, recording location for *Prayer*, Johannesburg 2012.

instances, my intentions and credentials need to be crystal clear and accessible.

I conduct all the recordings myself, with the museum assistant present, often to help with bilingual translations in the case of the 4 Scandinavian editions, and as well to have a representative of the art institution there. Normally the recordings are private, in as much as they are not sonic documentations of congregational services, but are specifically arranged sessions—one-on-one—where worship can be attended to properly with every care and attention. The sessions take place at a location that is convenient to the person being recorded, and often is their place of worship which allows for the acoustics of the holy space and its significance to be present in the piece. There a suitable recording spot is found

Trinity Methodist, recording location for *Prayer*, Birmingham, 2011.



based on the comfort of the participant as well as sonic factors such as acoustics, activity within the premises, and external traffic. The microphones are set up, and a volume check is done. We then compose ourselves, I roll tape, and the prayer can start at their convenience.

The conclusion of the recording is always quiet and introspective in so much as a returning from somewhere else and reorientation in our day to day reality. There are a few moments after the prayer concludes where the participant and I are silent, and in some cases quite emotional. Thereafter we talk about the project and other issues pertaining to the themes here, and if I am lucky I get to stay for tea and a tour of the place of worship. These pre and post-recording interactions are in many ways as important as the recordings themselves, and go a great way towards creating a fellowship between the art institution and faith community, as well as between artist and participant.

The material recorded falls under the general term of 'vocal worship,' and this term is left to be interpreted by the participants. No one style of prayer is privileged over another, and all forms of spoken prayers—formal, extemporaneous, liturgical, and personal, are recorded. Chants, hymns, nasheeds, nigun, and mantras are recorded too, as well as readings and recitations. In the case of organisations such as the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) who pray in silence, a reading is recorded, for example texts by George Fox read by members of the Woodbrooke Quaker Study

Centre for *Prayer* (Birmingham) in 2011. The languages, accents, and sonic forms of the prayers often differ, as does the subject matter, but are all marked with a deep sense of sincerity. No musical instruments are used other than the voice. In any edition of *Prayer*, there could several interpretations of 'vocal worship' within just one instance, for example members of a mosque could offer recitations, dua, na'at (poetic hymn), and an Adhan (call to prayer) as in the case of the Stockholm Mosque (*Prayer, Stockholm*, 2016).

 **Marrakchi Abdelaziz performing the Adhan – Prayer (Stockholm)**

The adhan recorded there is an important social document as it is an internal call to prayer since Stockholm only has one public adhan broadcast only for Jumu'ah prayers (Friday noon) at Fittja Grand Mosque in Botkyrka, which incidentally has the tallest minaret in Europe.²

There is no time limit, and some prayers like The Lord's Prayer are under a minute, while a Nasheed or Dhikr can last up to 20-minutes. No contribution is superfluous, and I use all the recordings made in the process, and everyone signs a release form confirming their understanding of the artwork, and certifying that their contribution can be used as part of the installation and its archived documentation. I specifically state in the contract the the recordings made will not be remixed or taken out of context of the

² Find and article about the tallest minaret in Europe at hurriyetdailynews.com

project, nor will they be used by any third party. The recordings are shared with the participants in digital and CD form, with them free to publish their recording at will. Technically, I employ a Røde NT3G for clear and direct voice takes, plus a bespoke SASS unit designed by Alex Bozas housing 2 AT4022s for a full stereo array which is excellent for prayer groups and choirs.

 **Mar Yousif Syrisk katolska kyrkas kör i Södertälje – Prayer (Stockholm)**

The prayers are used in full, with the top of the recording starting at the beginning of the prayer, and extraneous bits pre- and post- the recording removed. Light EQ is used to roll off low frequency rumble from passing cars. No further editing or transformation is done.

The presentation of the recordings is the next step. The artwork consists of a refined red carpet (4 x 16m) with 12 circular, black speaker cones arranged in a grid-like formation placed thereon. The audio wires run underneath the carpet to a series of standard amplifiers and unsynchronised, solid state, media players: basic technology, perfectly satisfactory for museum purposes in terms of reliability and ease of use.

The carpet acts as a frame and a plinth, signifying a designate artistic space. At any given time, all the speakers play at once, and each speaker transmits a separate and unsynchronised



Kneeling audience member at *Prayer*, Johannesburg, 2012. Image by A Pokroy.

prayer recording from a unique selection of the recorded material particular to that speaker. In other words, each speaker has its own selection of prayers played sequentially, resulting in an ever-changing, polyphonous sound environment. I normally explain this to participants as each speaker having its own unique “playlist” of prayers, and to listen to the entire piece would mean spending time at each speaker as the day progresses.

In looking for a way for the audience to choreographically participate in the piece, I elected to have the speakers placed directly on the carpet. I also decided to have the audience remove their shoes before stepping onto the carpet—an act that denotes reverence and hygiene in many cultures. More so, the haptic effect is one of comfort: feet touching soft material. Once inside the work, they may wander around the installation freely, able to move between the different simultaneous playback creating their own mix of the voices emanating from the speakers, or they can kneel down to listen to individual prayers broadcast sequentially from any single speaker.

This act of kneeling references genuflection, and can also be considered as supplication: a further mark of respect with the listener moving in close to attend to the words of the prayer. This experience of focused listening to a single recording is always kept within in the context of the multi-faith intentions of the work as the other recordings can still be heard at the same time in the periphery coming from the other speakers. The conceptual implications in this spatialised, multi-channel technique is that the one can be heard in relation to the many, and depending on where you are standing, vice versa. The visual and technical set up, amount of speakers, or logistical conditions of *Prayer* do not change with each version, only the local recordings do.

The prayers are not announced in the speakers, nor are the speakers labeled in any way. This is to have the listener approach

each speaker with an open mind as to what they will hear. There will be some recordings in a language that each listener can understand, and others that the listener might not recognise. The experience of *Prayer's* audio has been fondly described as the sound of (their) "God's answering machine" by several participants. Two text panels are mounted on the gallery walls to credit the people and organisations that participated in the artwork, and to offer curatorial and contextual, but not interpretive, information on the piece. The minimal visual form, as well as the text panels, provides a space where the audience can have a non-prescriptive experience with the artwork and to consider its related themes.

Visually, the installation is exhibited in its own space away from other artworks so as to create an encompassing and focused experience. I have received requests to present the work outdoors or in smaller spaces, but I have to refuse these. The work needs to be in a dedicated gallery where it can be broadcast at the correct volume, with enough physical room for the artwork to look and sound like it should, and not be interrupted or taken out of its specific artistic context. The venue cannot have existing religious or political signs or affiliations to affect the interpretation of *Prayer*. The only instance that this rule was altered was for the *History Unfolds* exhibition curated by Helene Larsson Pousette for Historiska Museet, the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm. Here *Prayer* was placed in a gallery to be in dialogue with the historical Catholic artefacts collected by the museum.



Audience member at *Prayer*, Stockholm, 2016. Image by Katarina Nimmervoll.

This unique situation was curated to show the difference between how religion and art was expressed and displayed in the past—that being predominately a visual and monotheistic spectacle—to how it could be presented now as a sonic, multicultural, and interfaith relational experience. The symbolism of the multi-faith prayers being exhibited at the Swedish History Museum, and thus seen as being part of Swedish heritage, is very significant in the context of

dialogues as to what constitutes Swedish culture, as well as the monotheistic and “exotic” curatorial gaze of the past. The importance of these issues was further addressed by the curatorial team by creating a series of talks and tours of the museum’s collection given by invited participants of *Prayer* responding to the museum’s objects through the lens of their religious perspectives. Two special highlights were Phramahaboonthin Taosiri, a monk from the Värmdö Buddharam Temple administering a blessing on the famous “Helgö Buddha,” a bronze statue of the Buddha dated to 6th century Kashmir that was found in a Viking grave in Birka, west of Stockholm, and Imam Mahmoud Khalfi of the Stockholm Mosque identifying and translating a hidden piece of Islamic calligraphy, disguised as a floral decoration, on a medieval Christian altar piece.

To honour the process of making the artwork, the recorded participants are invited to a special vernissage before the show is open to the general public and press. This is a very interesting and important part of the project as it is a kind of socio-physical manifestation of the theme of the work: the religions of that city being together in one space; a situation that does not occur very often. Here the participants can hear their recordings in action as well as listen to the other prayers that constitute the installation. Furthermore, the participants can meet each other, and the museum can officially take on its role as custodian of the prayers shared. I believe that this kind of event can also work towards celebrating and including the participants of a project as audience

members for the artwork, as opposed to the work being only viewed by regular museum audiences and critics.

Looking back at the progression of the work, it’s interesting to note that the earliest version started in 1999, before 11 September 2001 and its divisive religious and political implications. Over the years I have noticed new interpretations of the artwork relating to contemporary issues. Whereas the concept and technique of *Prayer* remains the same in each instance, the locality, contemporary politics, and current concerns can refresh the work every time, and provide new challenges and solutions. As time goes on, I feel that the previous versions become a bit like time capsules containing the concerns and hopes from the period each edition was produced. There is also a sense of the changing religious demographics of the city. Sadly, two of the Rabbis that participated in the original Cape Town edition, Rabbi David Hoffmann, and Rabbi Elihu Jacob Steinhorn, have both passed away since the exhibition. The same of Qari Yusuf Noorbhai, a venerable Koranic teacher considered one of the finest reciters in South Africa, died in 2016 with his contribution to *Prayer* (Johannesburg) in 2012 being the last recital recording he made.

 Hafez Yusuf Noorbhai – *Prayer* Johannesburg 2012

These events now give a historical perspective to the recordings and the artwork, and the memory of the late Rabbi Hoffmann, Rabbi Steinhorn, and Qari Noorbhai live on through the project whenever it is shown.

My intentions with this piece are to initiate an open-ended situation whereby the city can be investigated through the make up its religious movements and the many subjects that links to. For me the techniques used in the production of the piece and the display allow for themes of identity, migration, history, and communication to make themselves present and be questioned. In bringing all the faiths into one space, the audience is accessing a socio-political space: visitors are confronted by statements of belief, as well as the diversity of community, culture and philosophy present in the city they are in. The audience is in a position to listen and consider other people's points of view, and draw their own conclusions, maps and connections through the geography that the recordings create; a process that is as important to the artwork as its exhibition itself.

There's No Place Called Home

Somewhat of a sibling to *Prayer*, *There's No Place Called Home* shares some of its concerns with site-specificity, hospitality,



There's No Place Called Home at Folkets Park Malmö, Sweden, 2016. Image by Ricard Estay.

and plurality, but is articulated through the media and subject of birdsong. This piece involves audio speakers hidden in trees and used to broadcast recordings of birds not found in that location, for example calls of a Taiwan Yuhina (*Yuhina brunneiceps*), endemic to the island of Taiwan, relayed from the Folketspark in Malmö (*There's No Place Called Home* (Folketspark, 2016)). The piece is exhibited in outdoor public spaces, such as parks, sculpture gardens, and in some cases

There's No Place Called Home in Kitakyushu, Japan, 2004.



remote, rural locations. The incongruous audio is unannounced and unadvertised, and is staged as a hack into nature.

Conceptually, I found my way to this artwork when I was an artist in residence at the Center for Contemporary Art in Kitakyushu, Japan, in 2004. Faced with my first experience of a northern hemisphere winter, and a curiosity towards the common use of loudspeakers in Japanese public space for advertising and municipal purposes, I started thinking about matters pertaining to displacement and exoticism, as well as ways to both reuse and activate field recordings. Growing up in the Western Cape province of South Africa with its plentiful avifauna, I was always attracted to the biological as well as cultural significance of birds. With their ability to fly and the projected agency that suggests, as well as their extraordinary vocal abilities, birds have captured the imagination of humans for ages.

Aware that bird vocalisations are some of the most recorded sounds on the planet, generally for conservation and categorisation purposes, I was soon became interested in the very politics of the vocalisations. What we might take as being melodic and musical, with received cultural associations of relaxation like a kind of natural Muzak, is in fact a series of mating calls, identity displays, and the staking of territory. As Jacques Attali points out in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977), birdsong is “inscribed from the start within the panoply of power.” I was further influenced by wanting to warp and challenge the often frowned



There's No Place Called Home in Bergen, 2015. Image by Bjørn Mortenson.

upon ornithological practice of sonic “baiting” wherein an audio recording of a local birdcall is sounded in the vicinity where that species might hear it and respond, with the hope of it making its visual presence known. This led me to think of broadcasting audio recordings of birdcalls as a form of sonic graffiti.

I sought to subvert these techniques and use foreign birds in a local environment as an absurd version of returning the sound to nature, but also as a means of defamiliarising the landscape, and interrogating certain human themes through the metaphor of birds. It's a simple image: the local broadcasting of a song of

a foreign bird, but I believe it is a deceptively simple idea, and has multiple interpretations. With the introduction of the vocalisations of a foreigner, the artwork seeks to symbolically turn the various sites into meeting points for strangers, hosts and guests, and position the intervention site as a space of both refuge and invasion.

The image can be likened to a worst possible Lonely Hearts Column where the recording of a foreign bird will not be recognised or responded to by the local birds. Or perhaps the foreign bird is interpreted by the human audience as the symbol of an invader. In this instance I am reminded of the curious story of Hirō Onoda, the

Japanese soldier who didn't realise that World War 2 had ended and continued 'defending' or occupying the Philippine island of Lubang. This is another potential view of the artwork—the lone vigilante out there—this solitary bird waiting it out, looking after its annexed turf.

Since 2004, over the course of this artwork's lifespan, analyses relating to the so-called migration crisis, ecological contingency and the Anthropocene, and auguries—the traditional notion that the activity of birds can be construed as omens—have come into play depending on the context of the site and the issues of the day. As Brandon LaBelle writes of the project's Norwegian edition in 2015 (*There's No Place Called Home*, Bergen), "The narrative remains mysterious, and yet unmistakably present: somewhere something happened – which delivered this foreigner to Bergen" (Labelle 2015).

Looking back at it now, I can also link the artwork to the history of cinema. The 1938 film, *Tarzan and the Green Goddess* (directed by Edward Kull) is set in Guatemala and, along with some rather out of place african animals seen in cut aways, contains the calls of a Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo Novaeguineae*) used to signify the dark and mysterious jungle, with all its psychological and racist, colonial connotations. Kookaburras are not found in Guatemala; they are only found in Australia and New Guinea, and even though the tale is a fantasy, it is interesting to note the use of such a sound in this context.

In each edition of this project I research the local birds to try and make sure that there will not be song that will be too similar to the current species there so as to affect the birds. Where possible I consult conservationists or organisations such as the Bird Protection League (Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux) in France (*There's No Place Called Home*, Jardin da la Psalette, 2016). Birds are extremely clever and would be able to detect the presence of an actual other bird through sight, movement, smell, as well as

There's No Place Called Home in Guangzhou, China 2005.





There's No Place Called Home, installation: speaker in tree is hidden from view.

sound, and the playback of unidentifiable, incongruous bird sounds would be as irrelevant as cellphone and other sounds within those frequencies and phrases. This is a sonic trap for human audiences, not the local birds.

The project has been undertaken as an illegal intervention in public space as well as an arranged public art exhibition. Similarly, the work has been shown for as little as a few hours to permanent versions in Amman, Johannesburg, and Reims that run daily. The practical processes towards this piece begin with the choice of tree and bird for each installation. I look for large, leafy trees that can hide and support the weight of a speaker, and offer a way to run an audio cable to wherever I can safely store the technology for the artwork in a space that won't be a visual distraction from the tree and the experience of the audio. The choice of bird is a more complex affair as it involves the type of species, its various sounds and vocal techniques, and both the name and symbolic, literary, and cultural references pertaining to that bird, as well as the recorded species's own habits such as its diet, mating, and nesting.

These factors influence the reading of the image, for example in the 2005 edition staged along the Pearl River in Guangzhou (*There's No Place Called Home*, Guangzhou), I used the harsh shriek-like calls of a Fiscal Shrike (*Lanius collaris*), a carnivorous species known for impaling its prey on thorns and barbed wire so as to dry the meat out. For the context of the installation, I selected this bird for what would be interpreted as a violent culinary practice. Another aspect of the process is the sourcing of the bird sounds. Where possible I record them myself, but the expertise and experience of established bird recordists and ornithologists is always sought. Here I have been lucky to have recordings given to me, or used through Creative Commons licences, and in some instances rented

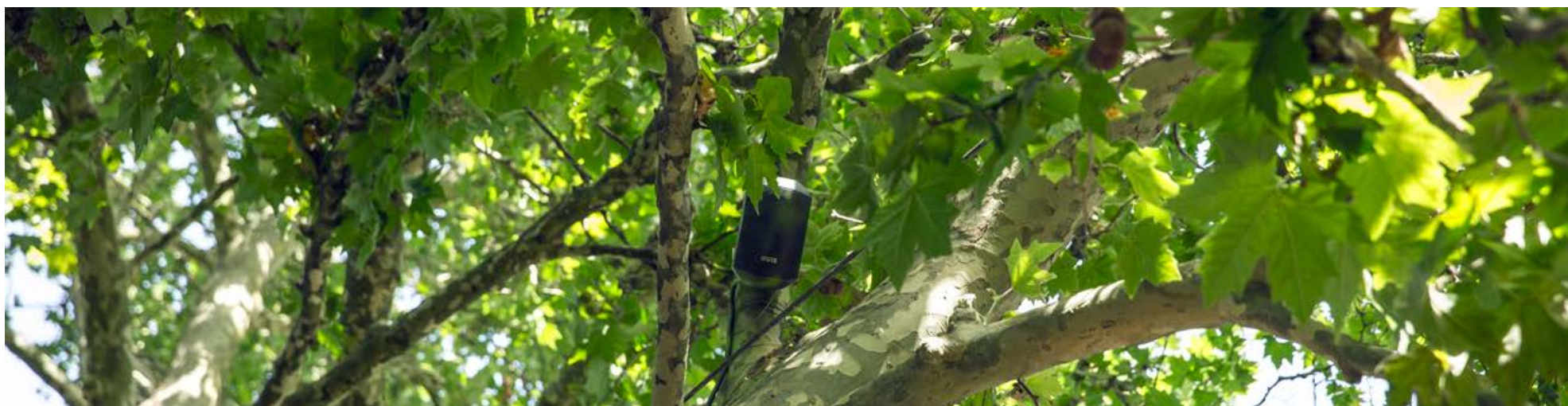
or bought. The recordist is credited in the exhibition's contextual information, for example Fintan O'Brien's recording of a Melodious Blackbird (*Dives dives*), recorded in Belize, and broadcast from the trees of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2016 (*There's No Place Called Home* (YSP)).

The piece is often monophonic—keeping with the economy of means in the idea—but multichannel versions have been made with the effect being that of many birds being heard in the area, like a large scale occupation of the site by a foreign species. Very little audio treatment is done to the recordings, other than noise reduction and EQ to bring a sense of dynamics to the sound. The recordings are sometimes edited for length to not make the piece appear too repetitive, and to have gaps of silence between various calls. The intention here is to make the audio appear as lifelike as possible, and the recordings are played at a level that would

seem “realistic.” My wish is that the recording hides in plain sight. Mixing on site with the speakers installed is one of the best pieces of advice I can give to installation artists, and this is vital for an artwork like this. Factors such as traffic and water noise from streams and rivers, as well as the way wind sounds through the trees based on the size of the leaves, can all affect the aural reception of the work.

Like with *Prayer*, I use simple, domestic technology: weatherproof, passive speakers and an amplifier, and for formal exhibitions I use an electricity timer to have the installation run autonomously. Camouflage netting, as found in hunting shops and military surplus stores, is used to disguise the speaker into the foliage. Whereas the concealing of the sound source references the acousmatic tradition, the reception of the audio is meant to appear to be unmistakably that of a bird, and more so that the bird is actually

There's No Place Called Home, installation: speaker in tree is hidden from view.



there in the tree. The location of the artwork is not disclosed, but in the case of formal exhibitions, mention is made of the general area that the work can be found. For those audience members who understand that there is a Gang-Gang Cockatoo (*Callocephalon fimbriatum*) somewhere in the vicinity, but might not know the specific call, every bird sound in the locale becomes loaded and suspect.

I think of both projects as being contextual and experiential, and therefore their documentation is challenging. I find writing about the pieces helps in distilling the ideas and translating them into a communicative form for a current and future audience to access. I try to tone the writing to be explanatory without being interpretive, wanting to allow the reader to personalise the piece for themselves.

Photographs are mandatory, especially in a contemporary art situation where these projects circulate through catalogues, Instagram feeds, critical reviews, and theoretical journals. The audio components are, strangely enough, the hardest part to transmit to a secondary audience. *Prayer's* multi-channel features don't document very well even in binaural recording, and *There's No Place Called Home's* dislocated birdsongs hide even deeper in field recordings of the intervention. For *Prayer* I make extracts of the individual prayers available online to be listened to with textual and photographic references. With *There's No Place Called Home* I feel that the secondary audience can research the birdsong themselves

as to give them the audio would be too revealing for the artwork's spirit of concealment. What makes site-specific sound work so appealing is that you and the audience need to be there.

By being restaged each time, both projects serve as strategies to engage with people, locations, and the dynamics of that moment in time; all of which pose new challenges. *Prayer*, with its confluence of local voices brought together, and *There's No Place Called Home* with its sonic lure being presented outdoors in public space, make both artworks contingent, and thus each exhibition and iteration becomes a further chapter in their process and development.

Exhibition notices

- *Prayer (Stockholm)* runs at Historiska, Stockholm, until 16 November 2017.
- *There's No Place Called Home (New Orleans)* is exhibited on "The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp," the 4th Prospect Triennial of New Orleans, curated by Trevor Schoonmaker, opening on 18 November and running until 25 February 2018.

Acknowledgments *Prayer*

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Albin Hillervik, Anna Douglas, Anna Morris, Anthea Buys, Elisabeth Millqvist, Gemma Thomas, Harun Morrison, Helene Larsson Pousette, IASPIS, Jigisha Patel, Maiken Vibe Bauer, Mattias Givell, Matti Sumari, Monique Mossefinn, Edi Muka, Neil Walker, Nicola Lowery, Laura McDermott, Pauline Theart, Ruth Gamble, Susanna Zidén, and Zayd Minty for their assistance in the networking and creation of

this project. And most of all, a very special thank you to the people who have shared their prayers through being recorded.

Prayer has been exhibited at One City Many, Cultures, Cape Town (2000), Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town (2004), Huddersfield Art Gallery, Huddersfield (2008), Lakeside Arts Centre, Nottingham (2010), Stiftelsen 3,14, Bergen (2010), My World Images, Copenhagen (2010), Fierce Festival, Birmingham (2011), Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg (2012), Wanås Konst, Hässleholm (2015), Malmö Leende, Malmö (2016), and Historiska, Stockholm (2016).

There's No Place Called Home has been exhibited in various locations including Kitakyushu (2004), Guangzhou (2005), Johannesburg (2006), Marrakech (2009), Amman (2011), London (2012), Havana (2015), the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (2016), and Riga (2017).

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Hope is a good swimmer

James Webb

Exposition du 8 décembre 2016 au 11 février 2017



Al Madat, 2014,
Courtesy de l'artiste et Galerie Imane Farès

La Galerie Imane Farès présente *Hope is a good swimmer*, la première exposition personnelle de James Webb.

L'été dernier, James Webb présentait *La Syzygie* dans l'intégralité des espaces publics du Théâtre Graslin à Nantes¹. En souhaitant « sonder l'âme du bâtiment », l'artiste a créé un parcours sonore composé de sons enregistrés dans l'édifice - accords des instruments, répétitions des chanteurs, silence nocturne - et d'entretiens réalisés avec des experts² livrant leur point de vue sur l'architecture du lieu. Ce scénario aux multiples visages révèle chez James Webb la volonté de transmettre et transcender l'héritage d'un patrimoine afin d'assembler les fragments d'une histoire qui s'évapore comme un rêve.

On reconnaît dans les situations et les images composées par James Webb une écriture avec laquelle le voyage est une immersion faite d'ellipses et de déplacements. Parfois étranges, ces œuvres se posent comme des énigmes qu'il faut tenter de décrypter. Dans sa pratique, le son est à l'identique d'un corps avec lequel les traditions, les croyances et leurs modes de communication caractérisent un enjeu majeur pour comprendre les clés d'une société. L'aventure se poursuit pour le visiteur car l'œuvre est habitée par sa présence. En effet, Webb encourage le public à s'abandonner dans l'épaisseur du son et de ses vibrations afin de percevoir la frontière sensible entre le réel et l'imaginaire.



All that is unknown, 2016
Courtesy de l'artiste et Galerie Imane Farès

Artiste incontournable de la scène sud-africaine, James Webb questionne nos processus de pensées et le raisonnement social et identitaire de l'individu. *Hope is a good swimmer* résonne comme un état de conscience à chercher dans l'ici et maintenant. Dans cet horizon que l'on fantasme ou que l'on vit, la transmission d'une culture, le mouvement collectif et le soulèvement spirituel conditionnent l'être humain et façonnent les murs d'une société.

Créée en 2014, *Al Madat* est composée de quatre tapis et de l'enregistrement d'un *dhikr* soufi, chanté par les patients du Centre de désintoxication Sultan Bahu de Westridge³ (Capetown). Le *dhikr*, littéralement « souvenir », est une récitation islamique où des noms sacrés sont chantés. Ici, la répétition des mots se déploie avec frénésie parmi les voix d'un groupe de soixante personnes. Proche de l'invocation, *Al Madat*⁴ constitue l'appel d'un mouvement

collectif luttant contre l'addiction à travers un passage à l'acte orienté vers la religion. Le contexte d'*Al Madat* expose le besoin d'échapper au réel et à la violence vécue au quotidien. À la lisière de la catharsis et du tragique, cette fresque sonore peint un chœur⁵ qui se métamorphose pendant la séance, arguant les mêmes mots et les mêmes gestes. Ainsi, la religion et ses rites ouvrent un espace-temps dans lequel Dieu incarne le remède pour être délivré.

Si l'on se tourne vers *All That is Unknown*, le temps se meut face à la caresse d'un échange entre les battements de deux cœurs qui se font face. Diffusés avec deux haut-parleurs à intervalles réguliers, les battements de cœurs communiquent sans se voir, suggérant la complicité entre deux corps toujours présents mais l'œil ne les voit pas. Amoureux, ennemis ou étrangers, ils sondent un mystère qui nous échappe.

L'humour accompagne souvent le travail de James Webb. Dans une vidéo datée de 2005, intitulée *Saturday night can be the loneliest place on earth*, un plan fixe présente le parking de stationnement public d'un parc d'attraction situé à Kitakyushu au Japon. Le paysage de ce samedi soir totalement vide ne laisse présager aucune foule dans les allées du parc. Seule la musique diffusée par le haut parleur vient animer l'endroit. Créé en 1990 par Nippon Steel sur le modèle du parc américain, Space World appartient à ces lieux de loisirs qui cherchent à développer le tourisme avec des attractions phénoménales nourries de science-fiction.

Dans cet univers de désolation, moins excitant qu'une aire d'autoroute au cœur du Nevada, une

transmission ionosphérique de huit secondes vient perturber la musique et le système sonore du parking. Dans cette œuvre titrée avec ironie, le samedi soir peut devenir un désert de solitude sauf pour ceux qui, présents et conscients, pourraient recevoir un message des confins de l'espace.

Derrière le regard de l'artiste, on reconnaît la posture du chercheur. James Webb fouille et se documente mais peu d'éléments factuels apparaissent dans l'ensemble de ses pièces. L'essentiel est de transmettre un processus d'écriture qui se réinvente avec le spectateur. Il découvre une histoire sous un autre regard, il déambule dans un lieu avec une autre musique.

Dans *Threnody* (2016), le voyage est un souffle qui se vit de l'intérieur réveillant les traces, les souvenirs et notre mémoire. La voix dans *Helker Skelter* (The Beatles, 1968) a été isolée puis inversée afin d'être donnée à chanter à Zami Mdingi⁶. Diffusée dans un haut-parleur en référence au Cercle noir de Kazimir Malevitch (1915), la voix bascule vers le changement et transcende une musique qui devient plus spirituelle, un réveil plus proche de la conjuration et de la glossolalie.

James Webb oriente notre réflexion sur la notion d'espoir à travers notre relation au temps, au spirituel et à l'autre. La perception des éléments se précise, le quotidien révèle d'autres couleurs et des sons inattendus se détachent. Il s'agit ici d'une confession intime qui s'adresse à chacun d'entre nous sur le passage kinesthésique à éprouver dans un espace en haute tension avec le son.

Hope is a good swimmer se présente comme une traversée poétique. L'exposition est écrite comme une odyssée où malgré les naufrages et les tempêtes, le nageur continue d'approcher une mer moins agitée. James Webb nous montre que l'espoir est plus qu'une image ou un sentiment. L'espoir devient ce guide qui nous accompagne avec sa respiration et ses muscles vers l'horizon.

1 Cette pièce a été présentée au Théâtre Graslin dans le cadre du Voyage à Nantes, 17 juillet-28 août, 2016.

2 Dans le cadre de ce projet James Webb a interviewé un architecte, un médium et un psychologue.

3 Commenté par Shalek Davids, en 2005, ce centre de désintoxication est un organisme à but non lucratif traitant la toxicomanie et plus principalement, l'hépatite et la méningoencéphalite, dans les quartiers de Mitchell's Plain, et Bonteheuwel.

4 Capetown. Le centre, fonctionne en offrant un programme, journalier entrecroisé sur six semaines. Sultan BAHU (1628-1651) était un érudit, islamique, poète et un saint soufi, fondateur de l'ordre soufi Sawani Qadiri.

5 *Al Madat* se traduit par « aide ».

6 Une référence au Chorois présent dans la tragédie antique.

7 Zami Mdingi est auteure, compositrice et interprète sud-africaine, basée à Cape Town.



Al Madat, 2014.
Courtesy de l'artiste et Galerie Imane Farès

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2 Dans le cadre de ce projet, James Webb a interviewé un architecte, un astrologue, un historien, un restaurateur, un médium et un psychologue.
3 Commencé par Shalek Davids, en 2005, ce centre de désintoxication est, un organisme à but non lucratif traitant, la toxicomanie et plus particulièrement, l'héroïne et la méthamphétamine, dans les quartiers de Mitchell's Plain, et Bonteheuwel à Capetown. Le centre, fonctionnant en offrant un programme, journalier intensif sur six semaines, Sultan BAHU (1628 - 1691) était un érudit, islamique, poète et un saint soufi, fondateur, de Fodre soufi Sawari Qadir.
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Galerie Imane Farès presents, *Hope is a good swimmer*, James Webb's latest solo exhibition, comprising new works displayed for the first time in France.

Last summer, James Webb presented *La Syzygie* throughout the public areas of the Théâtre Graslin in Nantes'. Hoping to "probe the building's soul," Webb created a sonic itinerary composed of sounds recorded everywhere in the building (instruments being tuned, singers rehearsing, nocturnal silence...) and interviews with experts¹ offering their point of view on the venue's architecture. This scenario, with its multiples faces, reveals James Webb's desire to both transmit and transcend a given site's heritage. By doing so, he assembles the fragments of an evaporating history, as if it were a dream.

Webb's situations and images, reveal a form of writing where travel is seen as an immersion filled with ellipses and displacements. These occasionally strange works arise like enigmas, demanding to be decrypted. In his practice, sound acts like a body with which traditions and beliefs, as well as their modes of communication, define the keys to understanding a society. This adventure continues for the audience, since the work is inhabited by their presence. Indeed, Webb encourages the public to surrender to the thickness of sound and its vibrations as a means to breaking through the sensory border between reality and the imaginary.

This significant South African artist questions our thought processes, our identity as individuals, and our rationale as social beings. *Hope is a good swimmer* resounds like a state of consciousness that can only be found in the here and now. In this horizon

– be it fantasy or the reality in which we live – the transmission of culture, of a collective movement, and of spiritual uprising... all these things condition human beings and shape the structure of a society.

Created in 2014, *Al Madat* is composed of four Karachi carpets and a recording of a Sufi dhikr chanted by patients at the Sultan Bahu Rehab Centre in Westridge² (Cape Town). A dhikr (literally, "remembrance") is an Islamic recitation where sacred names are chanted. In this case, the repeated words are energetically charged among the sixty men making up the group. Not unlike an invocation, *Al Madat*³ is the call of a collective movement to fight addiction and take religious action. The context of *Al Madat* exposes the need to transcend from the harsh reality and violence of everyday life. At the limit of catharsis and tragedy, this sonic immersion features a chorus⁴ transforming throughout a recital as the individual members constantly assert the same words and gestures. Here, religion and its rites open up a space-time where God becomes deliverance.

If we turn to *All that is unknown*, time flies to the caressing exchange of two hearts beating across a room from one another. Played over two speakers at regular intervals, the heartbeats communicate without seeing each other, suggesting a bond between two bodies that are always present yet unseen by the eye. Whether they are lovers, enemies, or strangers, they delve into a mystery that escapes us. Humour often accompanies James Webb's work. In a video dating back to 2005, entitled *Saturday Night Can Be the Loneliest Place on Earth*, a static camera films the empty parking lot of a Japanese

theme park in Kitakyushu. The only life to be found here comes from the music drifting out of the parking lot PA system. Created in 1990 by Nippon Steel, and emulating the template of an American theme park, Space World belongs to that brand of recreational venue that has attempted to develop tourism with phenomenal, sci-fi inspired rides.

In this desolate universe – which looks less exciting than a rest stop on a highway in Nevada – an eight-second long ionospheric transmission disrupts the music playing out of the parking lot PA system. With its ironic title, Saturday night is shown to be a potential desert of solitude, but for those who are present and aware they might be able to receive a message from the outer limits of space.

Through the artist's approach, we can also feel the presence of a seeker and researcher. James Webb excavates and gathers up material, but conclusive elements are not readily offered. The most important aspect is the creation of a creative environment, which allows the spectator to respond. They discover a given history with a new perspective; discovering new spaces with an alternative soundtrack. Here and now, the body follows closely a sound, perhaps a word, or just a noise, to be finally projected into the infinite unknown.

In *Threnody* (2016), the journey takes the form of a breath experienced from the inside, reawakening traces, lost thoughts, and our memory. The vocal track of Helter Skelter (The Beatles, 1968) was isolated, reversed, and then given to singer Zami Mdingi⁶ to perform. Played from a circular, black speaker – which also acts as a reference to Kazimir

Malevich's 1915 work, *Black Circle* – the voice changes and transcends into an increasingly spiritual form of music, then morphs into a hymn, before finally resembling a conjuration, or someone speaking in tongues.

James Webb invites us to reflect upon the notion of hope through our relationship to time, to all things spiritual, and to the Other. Our perception of different elements begins to take shape, and everyday life reveals other colours, while unexpected sounds shift to the foreground. This can feel like an intimate

engagement, addressed to each of us, within a kinaesthetic journey, experienced in a space that is highly charged with sound.

Hope is a good swimmer serves as a spirited crossing. It presents itself as an odyssey where despite all the shipwrecks and sea changes, the swimmer continues throughout. James Webb shows us that hope is the guide, the breath, the muscles moving together, the determination to meet the horizon.



Saturday Night Can Be The Loneliest Place On Earth, 2004.
Courtesy de l'artiste et Galerie Imane Farès

Mehdi Brit, 2016

1 This piece was presented at the Théâtre Graslin as part of Voyage à Nantes (2016), 1st July to 28 August 2016.
2 As part of this project, James Webb interviewed an architect, a psychologist, a historian, a stage manager, a psychologist and a medium.
3 Started by Shalek Davids in 2005, the Sultan Bahu Centre is a non-profit organisation in the field of substance abuse – mainly heroin and methamphetamine (sk) – in both Mitchell's Plain and Bonteheuwel in Cape Town. The centre operates as a

drug treatment facility in lower socio-economic communities, offering a six-week intensive day programme with continual care thereafter.
Sultan Bahu (1628 - 1691) was an Islamic scholar, poet and Sufi saint, founder of the Sawari Qadir Sufi Order.
4 *Al Madat* can be translated to "Help".
5 A chorus in the context of Ancient Greek tragedy.
6 Zami Mdingi is an author, composer and vocalist from South Africa, based in Cape Town.

James Webb

BLANK PROJECTS

113-115 Sir Lowry Rd, Woodstock

January 29–March 5

Although principally a sonic experience, James Webb's exhibition "Ecstatic Interference" affirms the importance of physical objects in the public staging of his sound pieces. Composed of three discrete sound installations, the exhibition features a sixteen-foot-wide, ten-foot tall stack of fifteen speakers that occupies the first room; two eight-inch-wide speakers hung on facing walls of the two adjoining display areas; and a circular hyperdirectional wall speaker measuring more than three feet in diameter suspended on a wall in the rear exhibition space. All of these industrial objects are black and made from materials that Donald Judd identified as having an "obdurate identity," and because of their understood purpose as transmitters of sound, one doesn't really consider their physical aesthetic qualities, largely due to the perplexed listening they prompt.

Untitled (With the Sound of Its Own Making) (all works cited, 2016), which plays on the large stack of speakers, is an eighteen-minute recording of nine percussionists poly-rhythmically drumming on wood and steel doors. The work demands and entreats as much as it appeals to the logic of syncopation, and it is powered by a grid of twelve solar panels stationed on the gallery's roof for the duration of the show. *All That Is Unknown* plays the sound of two hearts beating from two speakers barely within earshot of each other. The hyperdirectional speaker used for *Threnody* projects the voice of jazz vocalist Zami Mdingi singing The Beatles' 1968 song "Helter Skelter" in reverse—Webb likens its hectic audio to a blues spiritual, although Japanese acid rock is also a fair comparison. These works are bound by the artist's interest in presenting human-made sounds—songs, chants, glossolalic outbursts—in nonfigurative environments that end up inviting a visual encounter as much as an aural experience.



James Webb, *Untitled (With the Sound of Its Own Making)*, 2016, multichannel audio, loudspeakers, 10 x 16 x 3'.

— Sean O'Toole

JAMES WEBB

À l'écoute du monde

Par Camille Moulouquet
 Crédits photos : Bjorn Mortensen courtesy James Webb, Galerie Imane Farès.



James Webb est né en 1975 à Kimberley en Afrique du Sud. Aujourd'hui il vit et travaille à Cape Town et fait figure de pionnier dans son pays en matière d'art sonore. Il intervient dans les galeries comme dans les espaces publics et parvient à détourner le spectateur pour le rendre avant tout auditeur.

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L'artiste raconte qu'aussi loin qu'il puisse se souvenir son intérêt pour le son. Il a commencé avec un lecteur de cassette gagné par son père dans un tournoi de golf.

« Lorsque j'écoute à nouveau ces cassettes, je suis saisi par ma manière de parler lorsque j'avais 4 ans et touché par la jeune voix de mon père. Je traitais le magnétophone comme un être sensible, je m'adressais à lui par son nom et lui posait des questions. » Et puis plus tard, les mixtapes de son adolescence participent aussi à sa prédilection pour le médium sonore.

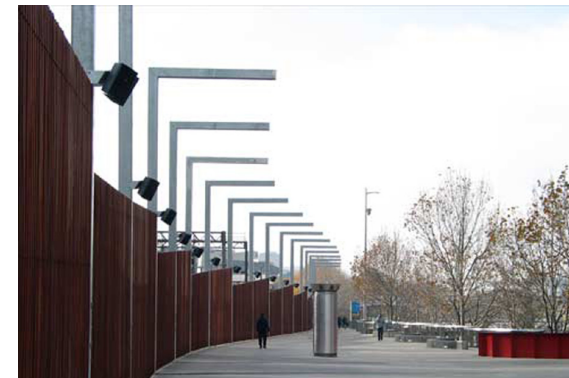
Ce rapport physique au son, à la machine est très présent dans son travail.

Tout se passe comme si le son devient tangible aussi bien dans ses installations que dans ses compositions. Il y a des enceintes, des appareils, des branchements et des fils ostensibles, le son et son appareillage s'imbriquent pour créer une œuvre.

Son œuvre « Prayer » qui date de 2012, exprime particulièrement bien la manière dont le canal et le son s'équilibrent dans son travail. Cette installation diffuse simultanément, les enregistrements des prières de toutes les religions présentes dans la ville où elle est exposée. Des haut-parleurs sont disposés sur un tapis et le public peut se promener librement à travers l'installation. L'écoute se fait à la fois de la polyphonie des voix de tous les haut-parleurs en même temps et aussi individuellement en se mettant à genoux pour écouter une prière en particulier.

James Webb explique que « le projet est créé in situ chaque fois, et les prières sont recueillies auprès de tous les différents groupes religieux opérant dans la ville hôte. » James Webb aime rapprocher, voire juxtaposer des mondes éloignés ou qui s'ignorent délibérément. Cette manière de réunir des

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temporalités, des lieux, des esprits, caractérise on travail dont le son en est le principal vecteur. L'immatérialité qui lui est propre doit certainement permettre ces rencontres, ces glissements.

Cette disposition de brouiller le spectateur est présente aussi dans son installation « *There's no place called home* » qu'il a présenté à Dresde en 2015 et dont il a initié l'itinérance en 2004. Il place par exemple dans un parc japonais des enregistrements de sons d'oiseaux enregistrés en Afrique du Sud.

Il glisse ainsi imperceptiblement l'impossible dans le « vrai monde » et déconterance d'un coup notre perception du monde.

James Webb théâtralise en quelque sorte

le son à l'aide de champs très différents aussi bien littéraires que cinématographiques ou encore dans un de ses derniers travaux, la voyance. Ce travail, montré au Palais de Tokyo en 2011 par Rahma Khazam dans le cadre de « répondeur », met en scène la voix d'un acteur aux intonations d'Orson Welles qui délivre les mots recueillis « de profonds » par le voyant. On boit les paroles d'un Orson Welles autoritaire et cynique, plus vrai que nature !

Les incohérences spatio-temporelles de James Webb se jouent du réel et créent ce moment d'incertitude qui fait que d'un seul coup, tout est dans tout ...

On ne sait plus à quel saint se vouer, ni

dans quel état on erre et si les morts sont vivants.



SPIRITUAL RESONANCES

**Call to prayer, sacred chants et glossolalia
in sound-based practices**

Celia Coussonnet



James Webb, *Al Madat*, 2014. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Imane Farès (Paris) and blank projects (Cape Town). Photo by Kyle Morland

Considered one of the most accomplished expressions of devotion and fervour, holy sounds accompany believers from all faiths in their spirituality. From Buddhism, Christianity or Islam to Judaism, including syncretic rituals and pagan cults, sound is a key element to transmit divine teachings and transcend the earthly world. Vocalisations, instruments, melodies or even body clapping create a language and soundscape unique to every religion.

Yet, beyond their invitational aspect, these rhythms can be misused. Under the guise of pious discourses, they may serve as demagogic channels. Taking root in the mind as an integral part of daily spiritual practice, they might contribute to internalising doctrines without engaging the individuals' critical analysis.

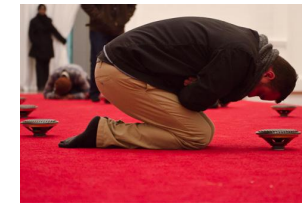
African and Middle-Eastern artists capture these ephemeral and evocative tones. They mention the dangers implied by the duplicity of language; the constructed nature of belief as well as its genuine expression. Still, their acoustic researches do not concentrate on religion *per se* but rather use this motif as an entrance point. Through intense sensorial sound installations collating and blending raw field recordings, they reflect broader contemporary issues by interweaving complex social layers to the competing narratives coexisting within the sacred. The sound tightly placed in the exhibition space is activated by the viewer's body as a parallel to the aural occupation and circulation of religion in public space.

Plural to Singular Streams

Growing up during Apartheid, James Webb (South Africa) saw *how racial and geographic divisions impacted religion and*

society. He developed an interest in tracing *what people believe in and how they practice*. Studying systems of faith brought in anthropology: *what is sacred, what is the relation to culture?* Along that, hearing discussions about religious extremism was another clincher to start a long-term exploration of expressions of belief through a sonic lens.

In this, since 2000, he has been expanding a multi-channel sound installation conceived as a site-specific experience highlighting religious pluralism. Relying on worship sung by spiritual communities from the host city¹, *Prayer* changes according to the urban context where it is broadcasted. The work consists in a red carpet and 12 disseminated floor-based speakers simultaneously emitting the recorded praises.



James Webb, *Prayer*, 2002-ongoing. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Imane Farès (Paris) and blank projects (Cape Town)

The result is powerful as the prayers are accumulated and looped in an everlasting flow. The audience can stroll; get dazzled by the *polyphony of voices* or decide to hear one of them distinctly by kneeling down in front of a speaker. Viewers are part of an acoustic

¹ Such as Cape Town (ZA), Copenhagen (DK), Huddersfield (UK), Johannesburg (ZA) or lately Malmö (SE) in *Barriers, Contemporary South Africa* at Wanås Konst. May 17-Nov.1, 2015

choreography; their choice to listen and their movement of descent can be seen as acts of humility and openness. *Prayer* is a transcultural



endeavour building bridges between *different communities and art institutions*; and *identifying the meeting points of various faiths*.

**Sounds Cells (Friday) Magdi Mostafa,
Courtesy the artist 2009-2012.**

Conversely, Magdi Mostafa (Egypt) questions religious rigidity and partiality in his multi-channel sound installation *Sound Cells (Friday)* (2009-2012). 50 dismantled speakers on a minaret-like structure transmit an abstract Friday's sermon -sampled from two-month recordings in Ardellewa, Cairo- interspersed by old washing machines' humming intensified by microphones.

The discomfort felt incites to interrogate the function of both the oration and the devices, which are a metaphor of the never-ending household chores devoted to women -while men go to the mosque. In his speech, if the imam describes the value of women as procreative vessels^[1](reproductive subjects divested of their bodies), he also explains they are not responsible for the baby sex. Mostafa evidences the role of religion in producing morals and in maintaining established social consensus based on patriarchy and stiff gender relations

Sonic Memories

Recordings of a specific place hint to its history as much as they question the portability of such charged sound reproductions. They reveal geographical and political stratum. *Al Madat* (2014) by James Webb, for instance, subtly and poetically refers to demographics and ancient religious migration routes. In this project, he recorded a Sufi *dhikr*: a traditional Islamic recitation, where holy names are chanted with special breathing techniques, often creating



still from *A Night in Beirut, 8''*, Sirine Fattouh, Courtesy the artist 2008

trance-like effects. Four standing speakers surround Karachi rugs creating a space for taking shoes off and being inside the textured space shaped by those powerful voices and breaths.

Al Madat is only one of several *dhikr* recorded by Webb with patients from the Sultan Bahu Rehab Centre run by a Sufi mosque. This recitation which means 'help' and implores the assistance of the Prophet and Sufi saints specific to Cape Town particularly touched him. *Dhikr* is used as a curative tool in this context. The drug rehabilitation centre is based in Mitchell's Plain which was a township during Apartheid, erected after the destruction of places like District 6. The area is predominantly of Cape Malay and Cape coloured descent. Webb explains 'Islam and Sufi practices came to the city from South East Asia with the Mardykens and Malay slaves from Mid. 1600. Religion was a powerful tool for slaves during

that time as it metaphorically helped them break free from their shackles'.

Rituals' repeated rhythms, pulses or gestures pervade memory. In a sober documentary style, the video *A Night in Beirut* (2008) by Sirine Fattouh (Lebanon) follows closely a figure dressed in white, playing the drum and singing. This man is Beirut's last *El Tabbal*² as his sons will not pick up the torch. One of the time markers of Ramadan, each night he crosses the city to wake people up for morning prayer before the sun rises and the



Call to Prayer – Morse. Younes Baba-Ali Courtesy the artist and Arte Contemporanea (BE) 2011

fasting starts again.

This mysterious nocturnal scene evokes the artist's childhood when, during Lebanese civil war, hearing this spectral voice scared her. In this poignant imaginary space, Fattouh touches on nostalgia by using sonic memories strongly associated with the trauma of war. For her, *El Tabbal* becomes a symbol of all the landmarks, traditions and memories vertiginously disappearing in her country: 'all vanishes so fast that we even forget it existed'. She activates concealed narratives making us twitch as the drumhead whose echo we hear long after.

²This disappearing tradition bears the name of *Boutbila*. *El Tabbal* were men from low-income families who had the responsibility to announce the daily beginning of the fasting during the month of Ramadan, in their neighbourhood. Nowadays, their call is heard only exceptionally.

Peripheries of Language

Spirituality meets humans' quest for meaning. The uncertainty and metaphysical anxieties linked to existence push to find sense in an immaterial dimension going beyond the 'word'. Ironically, Younes Baba-Ali (Morocco) confronts the viewer with a megaphone broadcasting five times a day the call to prayer, *Adhan*, in Morse code. Erasing verbal communication, he presents the call as a universal emergency alarm signal. At first, the audience has no idea what the code stands for. It generates a feeling of alert as its wave keeps on reverberating.

Of Moroccan origins but raised in France, Baba-Ali contemplates cross-cultural ties and his relationship to two cultures and educations. *Call to Prayer* (2011) was conceived when the artist first visited Brussels, a third culture space, as a way to rediscover his community (mostly North African expatriate Muslims) in a new context. The series of Morse on-off tones is ambiguous because it sounds common. Using dual language, the artist 'questions the relation of a migrant with his religion when he is disconnected from his context and his culture of origins'. He looks into education and context and how customs and behaviours inherited through it are linked to an ancestral religious practice whilst *the bond with spirituality is lost and absent*. While never provoking directly, his proposal changes according to the exhibition's environment: when in Morocco the high-pitched beat was perceived as a warning against the dangers of proselytism

Combining four speakers with neon light, *Aleph* (2010) by James Webb presents a phenomenon rarely sounded out in contemporary art: glossolalia. It is a continuous out



Aleph. James Webb Courtesy the artist, Galerie Imane Farès (Paris) and blank projects (Cape Town) 2010.

pouring praise in an unidentified idiom seeming real. Often mumbling a sequence of syllables, the speaker cannot be understood or deciphered. In the region of Stellenbosch, Webb recorded young Pentecostal Afrikaans women 'speaking in tongues'. The atypical rhythm pouring forth elicits a visceral and mesmerizing feeling. Such a flow of unusual words slips out of ordinary definitions on language. The singers abandon themselves in this space at the periphery of sense where their expression is neither constrained nor judged. They believe they are the custodians of angels' language - opening up a channel between themselves and the person they are praying to.

For Webb, *Aleph* has a cousin in *Al Madat*. Both relate to 'a specific city and context; include demographic enquiries and formally rely on powerful methods of spiritual work using intense breathing and vocal skills'. For the vocalists, *dhikr* and glossolalia are com-

munication techniques going both inwards and outwards. Yet, from the outside view, these practices are often misunderstood. Sharing and disclosing those recitations in an exhibition space enable the audience to learn more. The viewer can interpret and complete the work.

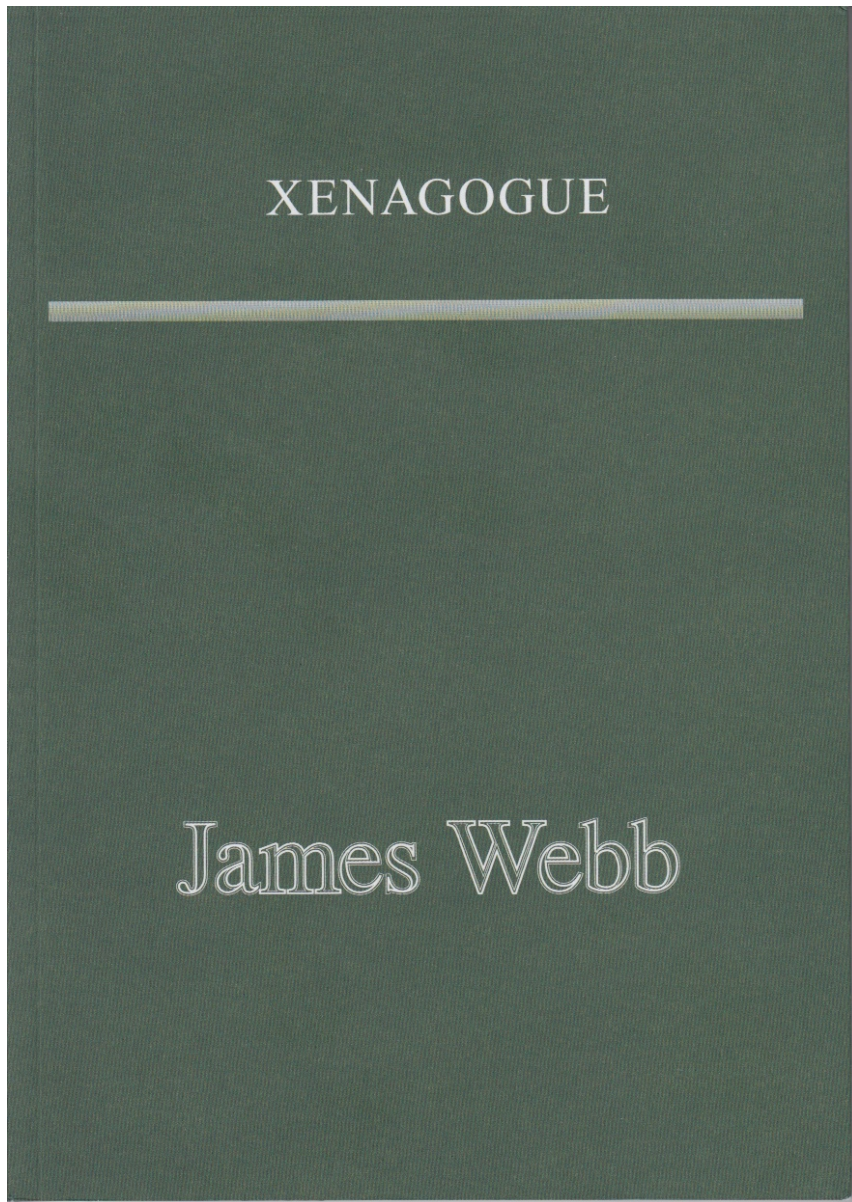
The aural presence of acoustic installations based on analysing sounds mediating divine presence reveals the spatiality and secrecy of sound. While musing on the visible and invisible realms, artists' remixes of sacred tunes also work as doors to historical, psychological and social issues such as conservatism and morals; migration and multiculturalism; memory and loss; subconscious and awareness.

Preconceptions as suggestive music can mislead us. To avoid deceit, listening carefully and being attentive to what we cannot see becomes a shared collective responsibility.

Soundtrack

James Webb, [Aleph](#) (2010)
James Webb, [Al Madat](#) (2014)
James Webb, [Prayer](#) (2002-ongoing)
Magdi Mostafa, [Sound Cells \(Friday\)](#) (2002-2012)
Sirine Fattouh, [A Night in Beirut](#) (2008)
Younes Baba-Ali, [Call to Prayer – Morse](#) (2011)

Clelia Coussonnet is an independent curator and art writer. Since 2012, she has been conducting interviews with artists and curators and publishing reviews. She contributes to Afrikadaa, Another Africa, Diptyk, IAM or Ibraaz.



Xenagogue, Hordaland Kunstsenter, 2015

Brandon LaBelle - 2015

The Precarious Body – James Webb's «Xenagogue»

There appears that creeping feeling of loss, of transience and fragility, and which is given points of reference and contact through an array of resonances, vibrations, echoes – joys and ecstasies, the abandoned. From the slow diffusion of a voice as it teeters on the edge of madness, or that voice – an unforgettable voice – that reverberates, alone and without, through the halls of a closed down building, to the flickering of a light, which drums out silently a message in Morse code to the city around, there is that creeping feeling of loss, which persists. And which becomes tenacious, mischievous, transgressive.

The works of James Webb circulate around a complex mixture of emotional and affective states; of longing and despair, of the ecstatic and of hopefulness, states of bodies and minds that move throughout his practice to raise questions of individuality and community, belonging and displacement, fragmentation and recuperation. Webb consistently and methodically captures a multitude of figures and forms – *bodies*, and especially voices of contemporary existence at their most tenuous. Yet what he reveals, through acts of recording and of transmitting, is how such tenuousness is often so profound. Subsequently, that feeling of loss becomes operative, captured as a moment of suspense in which anything can still happen and from which new meanings are possible.

The works of James Webb lead us closer to those who search for faith: faith in themselves and in others, faith in spirits or what may still be found within the folds of history, and importantly, faith in the very act of hearing, sensing, becoming. Through acts of fieldwork, documentary capture, fictions and stagings, translations, and interpretations, Webb asks us to perceive those edges where noise and silence, appearance and disappearance, fragmentation and renewal meet. We may suddenly hear the song of a bird far from home, or the signals that announce the possibility of impending disaster, and maybe even a woman's voice remembering her own youth captured in song. We may hear these things, and in doing so we also hear the very conditions of dislocation and displacement, longing. Contemporary existence at its most tenuous, and the figures that persevere and that search, especially.

The pervasive and ultimately defining conditions of dislocation and displacement are certainly part of the legacy of our modern culture; without the mass movement of peoples from continent to continent, modernity would somehow not be very modern. And this modernity continues today, though within the geopolitical dynamics of financial capitalism, and the steady unstoppable flood of related wars, which sees an intensification of the expelled and the dispossessed, those without. As a recent United Nations report indicates, the movements of refugees and asylum seekers today must be seen as indicators of a “world in crisis.”

Such displacement is mirrored by a more affluent or privileged sense of mobility central to contemporary global life in which flexible labor and networked culture affords, if not requires, that one be everywhere. In this sense, the world in crisis is to be seen less as an exceptional state, and more as a new reality. A reality that, in turn, seems to demand greater critical engagement.

In Berlin, for example, this can be seen through a number of initiatives and grass roots movements, one in particular, on the topic of ‘re-communalization’. In support of affordable housing, re-communalization has become a platform for lobbying for new local housing policy, which immigrant communities, in particular, are susceptible to. The precarity of one's home, and that sense of impending displacement, becomes a deep thread, and one that has ignited neighbourhood discussions and demonstrations as well as forms of urgent occupation. From refugees taking over an abandoned school in Kreuzberg to the construction of a shelter on Kottbusser Tor, now known under the broader heading of Kotti & Co., displacement and dislocation are issues – or states of living – which drive new types of civic mindfulness, as well as produce a new geopolitical sensibility: new forms of vocalization and of listening.

It is such audible intensities that I equally detect in Webb's works, and which tune us to the precarity of those bodies that move, flee, search, and that produce openings for survival as well as unlikely joy. The displaced, the dislocated, and the migratory, the hopeful and the tenacious. These, I would suggest, underpin Webb's activities: of seeking out specific voices found in cities around the world. These voices are in themselves moving; whether lifted up by a belief in the beyond, or broken down by the weight of the world, I cannot turn away from such voices and their expressions. They are textured by intensity, and a sense of withdrawal as well as surprising energy; they edge up on a threshold where the world may disappear, or come crashing in all the more. Webb captures these voices as found within so many hidden rooms, behind the scenes, in situations of private gathering – his is a practice focused on the overlooked and the underheard, or rather, the never heard before: a secret voice. And yet which is deeply present, increasingly, within contemporary life. The displaced, the dislocated, and the migratory. Or, simply, the precarious.

The works prepared and produced for his exhibition at Hordaland Kunstsenter (HKS) deliver a thoughtful assembly of such voices. A version of the artist's ongoing work *There's No Place Called Home* (2004 -) installed outside the art centre in a nearby tree, already welcomes us into this assembly, though here we may be surprised by what we hear – not human voices, but rather the song of a bird, yet a bird that specifically does not belong. Here, Webb mischievously dislocates any environmentally stable view by smuggling into our soundscape a bird out of place.

Through such acoustical sleight-of-hand, Webb gently brings into question the order of this place, shifting the borders of inclusion and exclusion to allow for another possible territory of relation.

This bird we might appreciate as a type of migrant: did this small creature get lost along the way, perhaps? Or might this bird have needed to make a desperate escape from a war-torn locale? Or simply got distracted by the song of another? The narrative remains mysterious, and yet unmistakably present: somewhere something happened – which delivered this foreigner to Bergen.

The displaced and the dislocated, the migrant and also, the foreigner: such are the figures – or trajectories of engagement – that circulate through Webb's practice, and which appear at HKS, assembled to form frictions of belonging and discord, as well as surprising melody and uplifting togetherness. The displaced bird we hear just outside finds an echo within, in the work *Al Madat* (2014). Installed as a central piece within the gallery, *Al Madat* appears as a set of four standing loudspeakers, and complemented with carpets placed on the floor where visitors are invited to sit surrounded by the speakers. In this sense, we enter a scene; we take up a position – we attend to the voices soon to come. *Al Madat* is essentially a recording Webb made at a drug rehabilitation centre in Cape Town. Affiliated with the Sultan Bahu Centre in Johannesburg, the rehab centre assists recovering addicts. As part of their program, groups are led in dhikr chants, traditional chants employing special breathing techniques and focused on the repetition of short phrases of devotion. Webb recorded one such session at the rehab centre, in this case, a group of patients whose collective vocalization calls to the Prophet Mohammed for help.

Supplicating and surrendering, the heavy guttural vocalization builds into a deep block of sound – we can almost feel the weight of the bodies, as they heave themselves into this vertiginous process. Carried along, in the current of chant. The absence of the face and of any visual reference that might open a view onto who these bodies are specifically – how clearly we rely upon visual signs when entering into identity –, such vacancy, such withdrawal only acts to intensify the presence of these voices. Voices searching, gathering together to find strength and that channel themselves toward divination, on the way toward another journey. I would say these voices negotiate their own physicality, the bodies that anchor them to terrestrial struggles, in need of help, and that lose themselves (or find themselves) in the collective intensity of this euphoric moment.

Between *There's no place called home* and *Al Madat* there hovers the question of displacement, of the migrant and the foreign, the beyond, yet also the physical and the metaphysical, and where and how one may find new passion. In leaving behind the familiar and the local, that space of belonging, migration is fundamentally an act of projection, flight, a trajectory whose endpoint is by nature suspended, unclear, beyond. One is always imagining the possibility of what may come, whether for good or bad, hopeful or desolate. In this sense, I'm interested to consider Webb's voices as hovering between hope and despair, emplacement and transience; they in fact reveal to us this state of in-betweenness, a becoming-other. A being-on-the-way. With and without, at the same instant.

This finds additional expression in the two new works presented: *Imaginary Appetites* and *This is my voice but these are not my words* (both 2015). The first immerses us in a delirious flow of noise, with small radios constantly panning through frequencies, and amplified within a small thicket of Delicious Monster plants that loom around us. Suddenly, as we enter the building we are lost in this maze of static, of fragments and constant movement, of murmuring voices and interrupting signals, in which our senses are captured, disoriented. This disorientation finds a parallel in *This is my voice...*, a piece located in the dark cellar of the gallery. Here, we leave behind the dizzying field of monster plants and their radiophonic excess; we leave behind the chanting vocalizations that fill the gallery with breath, lung, and a force of collective oral intensity. Instead, we enter a condensed and hallucinatory space of articulation: a single voice reading over texts written by invited artists, which describe specific images provided by Webb. Images of the uncanny and the strange, of excess and the unlikely, images that unsettle our gaze with a poetics of the grotesque. Yet, these texts produced in response do not merely describe. Rather they meditate, associating these images with a range of speculations – in short, they digress, they search, and in so doing lead the voice, this single voice, into an arena of shifting meanings, translations, fragments. Narratives of becoming that ultimately suffuse the darkness with a surprising glow.

Both these works locate us further within territories of precarious vocalization, of transmission and dislocation, ecstasy and even madness – the edges where silence and noise, appearance and disappearance, fragmentation and renewal, meet. Whether lost in a garden of scattered messages, or immersed within a darkness full of unhinged significations, we become foreigners to ourselves.

Such a view finds resonance in the theme of the xenagogue itself, to which the exhibition is dedicated – this figure of the guide, the one who leads the way, who traverses and travels, and who takes flight; who is familiar with the unfamiliar. The xenagogue is a type of beacon from which others find direction. In this regard it is a figure of loss, and also of hope. The xenagogue might not necessarily know the exact pathway, or even all that may lie in wait along the way; instead, the xenagogue only knows the experience of having been elsewhere. It is a figure of transience, the very embodiment of the migrant, who in the midst of a continual displacement fights for a new form of belonging. In other words, it is the one who already knows that displacement and dislocation are central to contemporary existence, and form the project of global identity. What we hear in James Webb's exhibition is such existence as it tries to vocalize, recorded and amplified through four materializations of foreign sound, to remind us of the precarious, rich and tenacious bodies that we are.

James Webb

par/by Cécile Bourne-Farrell

James Webb explore la nature même de la croyance dans une dynamique de transmission innovante tout en faisant appel à notre capacité d'émerveillement. Pour cela il utilise tant l'humour que le détournement de technologies les plus courantes et développe de façon stratégique son vocabulaire artistique en fonction des situations où il est amené à travailler. James Webb a participé à la 6^{ème} Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, à la 3^{ème} biennale de Marrakech, ainsi qu'à la dernière Biennale de Venise. Il est intervenu au Domaine de Pommeroy, au Palais de Tokyo avec une pièce téléphonique¹, ainsi qu'à la galerie Imane Farès pour le projet « *No Limit* » en 2012. Au cours de différentes résidences comme, celle notamment de Darat al Funun² à Amman, il a réalisé plusieurs œuvres publiques. Sa dernière commande est un guide audio pour un cimetière à Stockholm³. Depuis plusieurs années, il constitue une archive sonore d'incantations interconfessionnelles dans le monde entier et se meut entre langues et croyances en réponse à son enfance marquée par l'apogée et fin de l'Apartheid.

Pluridisciplinaire, James Webb privilégie les formes les plus immatérielles comme le son, la lumière ou la connectivité en modifiant la fonctionnalité ou la réceptivité des lieux où il intervient, comme ici avec l'œuvre « *Spectre* ». Que ce soit à la Johannesburg Art Gallery où il a été invité dans l'ensemble de l'institution ou dans un parc au Japon « *il peut théâtraliser la lumière et le son, jusqu'à ce qu'ils évoquent aussi leurs propres dysfonctionnements* », souligne Sean O'Toole un des premiers critiques d'Afrique du Sud à écrire sur son travail. James Webb associe avec aisance la fiction avec le théâtre, jusqu'à nous amener à penser que même si apparemment un espace paraît avoir une fonction propre, tout est réversible. Comme il le souligne: « *Je suis fasciné par la dynamique de la croyance, pas seulement au sens religieux et social, mais aussi au niveau de son histoire artistique et économique. Je n'ai jamais étudié l'art ou la musique, à la place, j'ai fait des études de Théâtre, Religions Comparées et Copyright. Ces trois sujets, associés à mon appétit pour le cinéma et la musique expérimentale, sont les clés de ma pratique artistique* ».

L'œuvre vidéo intitulée « *Le Marché Oriental* », a consisté à inviter un Imam⁴ à chanter l'appel à la prière dans ce qui reste d'un bâtiment datant de l'époque de l'Apartheid transformé en marché, dit Oriental Plaza, avant sa destruction et transformation en appartements de luxe. Cette œuvre d'une courte durée place le spectateur à l'intérieur de cet espace voué à destruction, baigné dans une douceur parfaite et inquiétante, celle ici de la résistance qui résonne de toutes les injustices imposées et subies. La personne qui récite l'Adhan n'est jamais divulguée, l'absence a outrepassé le quotidien dont ces images en mouvement presque diaphanes apportent une dimension spirituelle avant l'éradication de toute trace de cette période sombre de l'Afrique du Sud.

James Webb parle de son intérêt pour la croyance qui a plus à voir avec « *notre position dans l'univers et comment on choisit de donner un certain pouvoir aux choses ou non* ». C'est ce qui me permet d'introduire ici le travail « *Know Thy Worth* » qui parle de la valeur qu'on veut se donner à soi-même. Cet ancien adage replace de façon quelque peu cynique l'idée du capitalisme et comment on s'auto valorise. Cet aphorisme grec « *Connais-toi toi-même* » ornait l'entrée de l'oracle de Delphes qui était le domaine de la Pythie, la prêtresse, qu'on consultait derrière un voile. Ici compris comme une référence à la soustraction de la représentation, une voix désincarnée dont les associations ésotériques sont toujours très prisées. Ce Modus Operandi spécifiquement calligraphié⁵ évoque l'idée de la finance et de l'estime de soi, une métaphore spéculative comme pour nous amener à être dans un état de veille et de réceptivité particulière et permanente.

1. <https://soundcloud.com/theotherjameswebb>
2. <http://www.daratalfunun.org/>
3. Le cimetière de Skogskyrkogården à Stockholm : www.letmelosemyself.com
4. Sheikh Mogamat Moerat de la mosquée du quartier de Six Zeenatu Islam Majid
5. La calligraphie de cette œuvre a été réalisée par Mohammed Abu Aziz, un des calligraphes les plus réputés de Jordanie.

James Webb explores the nature of belief through dynamic and innovative modes of transmission, all the while summoning the viewer's capacity for wonder. In order to achieve this, he employs humour, diverts the usage of common technologies, and strategically develops his artistic vocabulary in accordance with each situation he works in.

James Webb has participated in the 9th Lyon Biennale, the 3rd Marrakech Biennale, as well as in the recent Venice Biennale. He has presented projects at Domaine Pommeroy, a telephonic intervention¹ at the Palais de Tokyo, and took part in the exhibition « *No Limit* » at Galerie Imane Farès in 2012. During various residencies (like at the Darat al Funun² in Amman), he has worked on projects in the public sphere. His latest commission was an audio guide for a cemetery in Stockholm³. For several years, he has been compiling a worldwide audio archive of interfaith prayers. Significantly he works between languages and beliefs in a response to his childhood, which was marked by the height and the end of apartheid.

In a multidisciplinary way, James Webb focuses on the most intangible of forms such as sound, light and connectivity by modifying the function or the reception of the place where he is asked to intervene, rather like in the artwork exhibited here called *Spectre*. According

to Sean O'Toole, one of the first South African critics to write about his work: « *He can make light and sound theatrical to the point that they also evoke their own dysfunctions*." It is with great ease that James Webb merges fiction and theatre, to the extent that we start to believe that even if a space seems to have a specific function, everything is reversible. As Webb underlines: « *I am fascinated by the dynamics of belief, not just in a religious, theatrical and social way, but also in an art historical and economic way. I never studied art or music at university. Instead, I read for degrees in Drama and Comparative Religion. I also obtained a diploma in Copywriting. These three subjects, along with an appetite for cinema and experimental music, are keys to my contemporary art practice*."

The video entitled *Le Marché Oriental* involved inviting an Imam⁴ to sing the call to prayer in the remains of an Apartheid-era building that functioned as a segregated market called The Oriental Plaza before its demolition and transformation into luxury apartments. This artwork places the viewer inside the place which is destined for destruction, bathed as it is in a perfect but worrying tranquillity, which is that of the resistance echoing all the imposed and suffered injustices. The person reciting the Adhan is never revealed, the absence transcends daily reality giving these moving

images a spiritual dimension prior to the erasure of any trace of this dark period in South Africa.

James Webb says: « *My interest in religious belief has to do with how we articulate our position in the universe, how we choose to give certain things power* ». This is how I would introduce *Know Thy Worth*, a work that relates to the value we bestow on ourselves. Somewhat cynically, this ancient saying reviews the concept of capitalism and self-evaluation. The Greek aphorism « *Know Thyself* » decorated the entrance to the oracle in Delphi, where the priestess Pythia officiated behind a veil, understood here as reference to the subtraction from representation, a disembodied voice whose esoteric associations are still so praised. This specially hand-written⁵ modus operandi evokes finance and self-worth, a speculative metaphor to encourage a particularly vigilant and receptive state.

1. <https://soundcloud.com/theotherjameswebb>
2. <http://www.daratalfunun.org/>
3. The cemetery of Skogskyrkogården in Stockholm: www.letmelosemyself.com
4. Sheikh Mogamat Moerat of the mosque of Six Zeenatu Islam Majid
5. This calligraphy was made by Mohammed Abu Aziz, one of the most renowned calligraphists of Jordan.



James Webb, *Know Thy Worth (Connais ta valeur)*, 2014. Sculpture en aluminium laqué noir. Dimensions variables. Édition de 5 + 2 EA

'Finally, there's something to look at.' The barbed remark came from a blue-rinsed coif lurking in a corner of the Johannesburg Art Gallery's basement. Its wearer, now staring at a slowly-turning mirrorball, had just been relieved of the chore of pondering James Webb's untitled light intervention at the south entrance to the gallery, a work which presents viewers with an unusual challenge. Visible beyond the gallery's grounds, the ancient hanging light flickers on and off by night and beams a secret morse code message to the residents of Joubert Park's sea of highrise apartments. Nowhere in the gallery is a decoded version of the message presented. The utterance exists as a pure cipher, forcing viewers to apply their knowledge of morse code or else struggle with its inscrutability.

Webb's work was met with more confusion than delight during a recent morning walkabout of the group exhibition Relfex/Reflexion, on which the piece features. Though his rimy critic was treated to a daytime, close-up viewing, as well as a rare revelation of the secret message, the lack of visual candor in the work positioned it as something wholly foreign to the realm of art. Though extreme, her position reflects an assumption still endemic in the South African art world today, namely that art will always defer to the visual. The value of paintings trumps that of performances, just as tangible themes are preferable to profound thoughts. This is the context in which James Webb, like his lonely light, beats out a companionless path as a conceptual artist.

He has been saved from obscurity, though, by his unassailable productivity and a growing international presence, not to mention an enviable dose of charm and wit. Reflex/Reflexion is one of three exhibitions on which Webb features in his first major sortie into the Johannesburg art scene. Having opened his first solo exhibition in Johannesburg at the ABSA Gallery at 6.15 on November 10, he went on to open his second one at GoetheOnMain at 7.30pm on the same day.

In a rather dilatory fulfillment of his contract with ABSA after winning the ABSA l'Atelier competition in 2008, Webb curated Terms of Surrender, an exhibition of already-existing and new works that collectively

form a kind of requiem for lost power. In a work titled Ost an elderly former citizen of the German Democratic Republic sings the East German anthem in a quavering voice. In another, Untitled (19th April), we hear a recording of the autopsy report of David Koresh, the leader of an American religious group called the Branch Davidians. As if in a farewell to Koresh and his apostles, the gallery is adorned with Ikebana, a type of traditional Japanese flower arrangement historically used in offerings to the souls of the dead. By now having succumbed to their own short lifespans, Webb's special Ikebana arrangements were made by Derry Ralph – a member of the little known organisation Oriental Arts South Africa – using only alien plants and weeds wrested from pavements in the northern suburbs.

Each of these works represents the last gasp of a dying empire, and Webb's concoction of this project for ABSA is not without a measure of tragic wit. The ABSA gallery, which has more the atmosphere of a cheap funeral parlour than a respectable art institution, is desolate on any given day. ABSA staff perhaps glance in occasionally on their way to the lurid cafeteria, and thanks to a front-desk security rigmarole reminiscent of apartheid's pass system, the place is exceptionally unwelcoming to the public.

At face value, Aleph, Webb's project at GoetheonMain, offers some relief after Terms of Surrender's dark gaze. Aleph is an installation of sound recordings of women praying in 'tongues', a practice of glossolalia which pentecostal christians believe to be a powerful heavenly language. The work comprises eight recordings of prayers, all playing simultaneously and at equal volume, through wall-mounted speakers. Supplementing these recordings are eight short texts transcribing dream narratives which Webb's subjects believe to have spiritual significance. Heard from a small distance, the prayers blend together in the echoey room, undulating in volume and rhythm. The effect is overwhelmingly oceanic, an appropriate comparison given the recurrent symbolism of water in the accompanying dream narratives.

Close up, the earnestness of the individual prayers can be touching, embarrassing or seductive, depending on one's own feelings towards pentecostal Christianity. Though an atheist himself, Webb's position on this religious act is not critical. 'For a religious person, I would like this installation to be a religious experience,' he says. 'My interest in religious belief has to do with how we articulate our position in the universe, how we choose to give certain things power'.

As with many of Webb's works, Aleph centers on an act of hermetic communication. Like the untitled light work at the JAG, the prayers in Aleph are secret messages uttered in a coded language. Both morse code and tongues are languages in which interpretation requires a special skill, either endowed by heaven or acquired through practice. However, many believers see the interpretation of tongues as superfluous. It serves its purpose as a mode of intrapersonal communication. It is the ultimate act of solipsism. And in this light, paradoxically, Aleph seems to testify to the estrangement of the world from a god figure.

In a vastly underrated book called *The Space of Literature*, French theorist Maurice Blanchot seemed to foresee the work of Webb and his choirs of lone cries. Discussing the relationship between art and culture, he writes: 'Art was once the language of the gods; it seems, the gods having disappeared, that art remains the language in which their absence speaks.' Behind the weeded gardens, interrupted lights, codes, curiosities and cadavers Webb has left Johannesburg after his whirlwind visit, there is one resoundingly clear feeling: the dull grey comfort of a godless epiphany.

**Terms of Surrender* runs at the ABSA Gallery until November 26 at 4pm, and *Aleph* runs at GoetheonMain until December 16. ABSA Gallery: 011 350 5793. GoetheonMain: 011 442 3232.

ArtBio of the month

BY RENEE HOLLEMAN

WWW.ARTTHROB.CO.ZA/ARTBIO/JAMES-WEBB-BY-RENEE-HOLLEMAN, JUNE 2010

Introduction

One of the most iconic artists in South Africa today, James Webb has established a terrain quite apart from that of his contemporaries. Often described as a 'pioneer', his innovative focus on sound as a distinctive medium has done much to expand the vocabulary of artistic practice locally, while quietly and steadily garnering attention on the international stage. This emphasis, combined with a strategic conceptualism, humour and a ready sense of wonder has evolved into a sensibility that seeks to engage both site and audience with an evocative mix of the tangible and intangible, seen and unseen.

Although Webb has been an active producer for some time now, not only as an artist, but as a musician and occasional curator, his reputation has grown substantially in the last few years. Since winning the Absa L'Atelier Award in 2008 he has been on a span of residencies, also exhibiting extensively around the globe. This Artbio is an update, and largely looks at James Webb's production since 2004. For further information visit www.theotherjameswebb.com

Webb has connected and collaborated with various luminary figures in the avant garde music and experimental sound scene including Brendon Busy, James Sey, Brian Eno, Francisco Lopez, Holger Czukay, Otomo Yoshihide.

Modus Operandi

Webb's work ranges from subtle interventions and elegantly refined installations to public participatory events. Often these arise from an intense concern with the politics of a site, and a desire to open that site up to a different set of associations. Employing sound in variety of a ways Webb creates imaginative spaces that overlap with the physical space in which the work is presented.

Above all things perhaps, Webb is a consummate collector. His avid curiosity and keen approach to sourcing and gathering sounds and noises has been likened by one writer to that of an intrepid nineteenth

century naturalist. Accordingly, he gathers the thuds, whistles and hums of ordinary things that barely warrant a second thought, to those so largely unheard that for the most part they can be hardly said to exist. These are by no means just incidental sounds either. The blast of the Noonday Gun that resounds daily across the Cape Town city bowl, and which Webb captured from twelve different locations for 'Listening to the world today', 2004, is certainly not unusual to the accustomed city inhabitant. It still however has the power to surprise. In contrast, the curious range of clicks, clangs and drone of underground machinery that constitute 'The Black Passage', Webb's recording of the ascent and descent of the empty elevator cage of South Africa's South Deep mine; the deepest twin-shaft goldmine in the world, are alien and unsettling despite not being particularly remarkable in themselves.

The process of collecting extends into a studio practice that involves intense research, and the constant editing and re-arranging of material in relation to the process of production and final presentation of the work. In presentation Webb is undoubtedly an elegant minimalist. With all his work one has a sense of the effort put into suggesting or conveying an idea in the most refined manner, an almost conceptual slight of hand, where it is the mere flick of the wrist that reveals the magic card. This is not without due attention to the other features of the work.

"There are definite sensory elements to all my projects, even though some are merely suggested and are there for the audience to interpret. A work like "Prayer" has a tactile part in that the audience kneels down in front of the floor-based speakers to properly hear the words therein. This physical action is a reference to supplication and genuflection; and an important performative and participatory aspect of the installation."

"Furthermore, my audio works are never just about audio." explains Webb. "There are many thematic and conceptual intentions at work. "The Black Passage" is not just about mining. Yes, the work is an audio recording of an elevator descending the shaft of the world's deepest goldmine, but this is also a symbol. The reason I chose such a lyrical and Lynchian title was to open the image up to themes of transcendence, mythic journeys and liminal states. It's also a pun on "back passage" which opens the metaphor up significantly."

To say that Webb cultivates a practice of sound, as is often asserted, is perhaps only correct in as much as his is really a practice of listening. Listening not just to hear, but in a way that tends to shift one's attention away from the work alone to incorporate the environment in which it is situated, and to open up alternative spaces for thinking. 'Autohagiography', 2007, is perhaps Webb's most extraordinary combination of sound, text and spatial dislocation. A recording of the artist under hypnosis recounting his

past life experiences played from a speaker set into the headrest of a chaise longue, it expands both the temporal and physical frame of everyday experience in disturbingly elastic ways. This shift then registers as an amplification of sorts; your life, but slightly louder, maybe clearer, and is something which governs both his audio and non-audio works. Previously Webb has described 'listening and doing nothing' as both a working methodology and a creative act, and one that I would suggest he endeavors to allow his audience to experience themselves. Audience, as always, is a crucial consideration in his work. "My projects have many audiences, some of which are incidental, and not all of them might approach the work in terms of an art framework. "There's No Place Called Home" could be said to have four audiences: the birds that have a new and foreign birdcall in their territory, the people who hear the call in the public space but do not know that it is an intervention, the gallery audience who are privy to the artwork but not the actual experience of the intervention, and myself, the artist, who conducts the affair. This project also has a distinctly visual experience. When you hear the birdcalls, you mentally see birds." 'There's No Place Called Home', 2005, was first installed in Japan with South African summer birds broadcast in winter trees during Webb's residency in Kitakyushu. It has subsequently been installed all over the world, each time slightly and wryly adjusted to the context and region in which it is exhibited. It is this degree of curiosity, subtle perspicacity, and attention to detail that are the hallmarks of James Webb's practice.

Artists Statement

'I am fascinated by the dynamics of belief, not just in a religious, theatrical and social way, but also in an art historical and economic way. I never studied art or music at university. Instead, I read for degrees in Drama and Comparative Religion. I also obtained a diploma in Copywriting. These three subjects, along with an appetite for cinema and experimental music, are keys to my contemporary art practice.

Derren Brown, Dorothy Parker, Delia Derbyshire, Orson Welles, Spike Milligan: these are some of my references.'

'The realm of sight is broken down into all manner of media and traditions. Sound's very different cultural activities are herded into the same kraal and broken down to their lowest common denominator. In order for it to be an effective material, one must understand its nature, history and language, and this goes far beyond an interest in the scientific and demonstrative elements of the medium and its reduced function as music/entertainment, into the realms of its emotional associations, cultural uses and political implications.' From an interview with Rahma Khazam, 'Ghosts and Spectres – For a broader approach to Sound Art', 2009

What others have said

"In Webb's work sound is often used as a kind of avatar, to bring together a concern with mystical or deeply buried psychological experience, physical contextual meaning and ephemeral aesthetics." Minnette Vári, "Currencies of change," .ZA Giovane Arte Dal Sudafrica catalogue, Palazzo delle Papesse, 2008

"James Webb is lonely ... Lonely not as a cliché of artistic being, of being bitter, broke and unacknowledged; rather, lonely as a form of practice, of ritual, lonely as an effervescence, a defining cause ..." Sean O'Toole. "A sweet and tender hooligan" in The history of a decade that has not yet been named, Catalogue to the Lyon Biennale, 2007

"James Webb is usually hailed as its principal South African pioneer and exponent (of Sound Art), however the artist demonstrates such nonchalant mastery of conceptual strategies, that his work transcends all rubrics." Lloyd Pollak, "Enter The Sonic Magician," SA Art Times, May 2007

"...Acts such as these are also riffs on the irony and bittersweet absurdity of everyday life, reflecting Webb's characteristic dark humour. ...Webb is a master of the poetic environmental intervention, the hack as haiku; most of all, his is that most South African form, the prank, but made zen, reduced to its littlest intuitive moment. ...Webb plants the seeds of implosion, the event that creates beautiful confusion and makes the unhomey homely – but homely for aliens, amusement park lonely souls, and lost and caged birds." Julian Jonker – "Haunted Weather," Art South Africa, Volume 4 Issue 3, Autumn 2006

"...And that's the real power of Webb's work. It is playful and cheeky and damn funny, but it's also deeply and squeamishly personal. It deals with his alienation, dispossession, perversion and isolation. It's a soliloquy highlighting the import of the apparently insignificant. Allowing us to contemplate the magic of the ordinary, as well as to comprehend the ordinariness of the seemingly profound. This inversion, along with the inventiveness of his trickster antics, make his work endlessly provocative – at once irksome and inviting, silly yet seductive, witty and whimsical, teasing and teaching us to appreciate the intimate yet elusive phenomena that is life." Stacy Hardy – "That Subliminal Kid," Art South Africa, Volume 4 Issue 3, Autumn 2006

"...Sad and beautiful... ...undeniably elegant..." Linda Stupart – "Best of 2005," <http://www.artthrob.com>

co.za/06feb/news/bestof.html February 2006

“James Webb is another artist from Cape Town whose work can be understood as a productive interplay with spatial and geographic determinations, though in a completely distinct way. His success story might be unique, yet for artists feeling underexposed or disconnected it can stand as an example of an artist who, while struggling with local conditions, remains true to his intentions and gets recognition from his peers.” Thomas Boutoux – Flash Art International n° 225 July – September 2002

Currently

James Webb is having a busy year. Presently he is an artist-in-residence at USF, Bergen and is gearing up for a large show at Gallery Stiftelsen 3,14. These series of projects are co-commissioned by BEK (Bergen Center for Electronic Arts). He is also preparing for a solo show in June in the UK at Nottingham's Djanogly Gallery where he will be presenting 'Autohagiography' and a city-specific version of 'Prayer'. In May, Webb will be taking part in 'No Soul For Sale – A Festival of Independents' at the Tate Modern, an exhibition that brings together respected not-for-profit centers, alternative institutions, artists' collectives and independent enterprises from around the world. In June he opens his solo show at the Djanogly Gallery, and also sees him exhibit in Berlin on 'Ampersand, Daimler Contemporary' with 'Untitled' and a new work titled 'Love Conquers All'. At the same time he will be exhibiting on 'Istanbul, Athens, Marrakech, Palermo, Catania' at the Riso Museo d'Arte Contemporanea della Sicilia, Palermo, with photographic documentation of 'There's No Place Called Home'.

Before that

Webb's first exhibition this year, a solo show at Blank projects, titled 'One day, all of this will be yours,' linked together a variety of site-specific and multi media projects produced over the last nine years. The show included works from his 2004/2005 residency in Japan, projects conducted in Cape Town, and early works like 'Know thy worth', 2001, translated into arabic as 'E'raf Qeematak' and written over the Blank projects gallery sign. This was linked to 'Le Marché Oriental', a short film with a sound track recording of Sheik Mogamat Moerat from the District Six Zeenatul Islam Majid mosque singing the adaan (call to prayer) in the old abandoned Oriental Plaza, prior to its demolition in 2008. Both made reference to the proximity of the gallery to District Six and the rehabilitation and gentrification of the Woodstock environ.

2009 saw Webb producing a public installation at Melbourne International Arts Festival consisting of

a multi lingual public service announcement broadcast from a series of speakers along a walkway at Northbank on the Yarra River, declaring, "Ladies and Gentlemen, your attention please. You are reminded that everything is fine." Both authoritative and authentic sounding the announcements conveyed both a sense of calm familiarity and mistrust. Webb worked with a group of Melbourne teenagers in a series of workshops to conceptualise the work. Webb was also included on the 3rd Arts in Marrakech biennale, curated by Abdellah Karroum where he presented 'Le Marché Oriental'. The piece further won second place at the Documentary Film Makers' Association's "Home Town" short film competition at the 2009 Encounters Film Festival.

And before that

In 2008 Webb staged a site-specific intervention at the Museo Reina Sofia, Spain's National Museum of Art, which houses an extensive collection of twentieth century masters, the most famous being Picasso's 'Guernica'. Webb invited staff of the museum to scream at the piece, and in so doing 'raise issues around contemporary history, the horror of war, the function of art and 'Guernica's' status as an art icon.'

In the same year he presented a lecture at 'Call & Response' a series of events including performances, panels and discussions hosted by Candice Breitz at MUDAM Luxembourg. This was aimed at exploring the interactive logic of call-and-response (a key musical idea in oral cultures) and reflecting on strategies of artistic appropriation and creative recycling.

In 2007 Webb was invited to participate in the 9th Biennale de Lyon, 'The 00's – The History of a Decade That Has Not Yet Been Named', curated by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Stephanie Moisdon & Thierry Raspail, where he exhibited 'The Black Passage'.

Prior to this he collaborated with Francisco Lopez on a one night event in Cape Town titled 'September 1st'. 75 people were invited to the event, but were told nothing about what they would experience. They were collected from their homes individually, asked to sign an indemnity form, sworn to secrecy, blindfolded, and taken in silence through the city by car to an undisclosed location where they were led through a series of lifts and passages to a room. Here they were treated to a sound concert by Francisco Lopez whereafter they were collected from their chairs, led back to the waiting vehicles and returned to their homes. The blindfold was then removed and no mention was made of the event.

And even before that

Winter 2006 saw Webb taking occupancy of Blank Projects at their previous location in the Bo-Kaap in Cape Town, with a subtle intervention into the bare gallery space. The press release stated of 'Untitled': «While the gallerists are away for six weeks, the empty space will be haunted by faulty electricity resulting in the gallery lights flickering in Morse code. The unspoken message, known only to the artist, will glimmer continuously, though is best viewed at night through the space's shop front window.» The piece was subsequently shown at the Durban Art Gallery, 2006, Nirox Sculpture Park, 2007 and Bergen Kunsthall, 2009.

In 2005 Webb returned from an 8-month residency at CCA Kitakyushu, Japan. The trip marked a distinct shift in his practice and a development of his concerns, and also allowed him to engage with other professional experimental sound practitioners. Key works produced during this time were 'There's No Place Called Home', 'Homme Alone' and 'Saturday Night Can Be The Loneliest Place on Earth'. In the latter, the artist hacked into the public address system of 'Space World', a space age theme park that had seen better days, interrupting the muzak with a broadcast of ionospheric transmissions (impulsive signals emitted by lightning strokes relayed live using a VLF receiver) allowing it to receive an actual message from outer space.

Next Up

In September, Webb will take part in 'Images Of My World,' a multi-city Danish arts festival, where he will be presenting a new installation and citywide interventions as well as collaborating with Francisco Lopez on a special project for the city. His second solo show in the UK at MAC Birmingham also opens in September where he will be exhibiting 'The Black Passage' as well as 'Untitled (9th August)' and a series of brand new works in a variety of media.

South African audiences can look forward to another new piece that Webb is in the process of creating – a contemporary South African version of Orson Welles's radio artwork, 'The War Of The Worlds.' He writes "It will fuse my interests in politics, magick and frenzy, and be a very exciting opportunity to properly create an artwork for radio in the context of post-1994 South Africa."

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