

James Webb

Portfolio

Imane Farès

41 rue Mazarine, 75006 Paris
+ 33 (0)1 46 33 13 13 – contact@imanefares.com
www.imanefares.com

Works courtesy of the artist, Imane Farès, Paris and blank projects, Cape Town.

James Webb is an artist, known for his site-specific interventions and installations. His practice often involves sound, found objects, and text, invoking references to literature, cinema, and the conceptualist traditions. By shifting objects, techniques, and forms beyond their original contexts and introducing them to different environments, Webb creates new spaces of tension. These spaces bind Webb's background in religion, theatre, and advertising, offering poetic inquiries into the economies of belief and dynamics of communication in our contemporary world.

As Brandon LaBelle writes, "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."
(Xenagogue, edited by Anthea Buys, published by HKS, 2015.)

Webb has had solo exhibitions at, amongst others, blank projects (South Africa, 2020, 2016, 2014, 2010, 2006), Winnipeg Art Gallery (Canada, 2019), Imane Farès Gallery (France, 2019, 2016), the Art Institute of Chicago (USA, 2018), SPACES, Cleveland (USA, 2018), Norrtälje Konsthall (Sweden, 2018, 2016 and 2019), Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield (UK, 2016), Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen (Norway, 2015), CentroCentro, Madrid (Spain, 2013), Johannesburg Art Gallery (South Africa, 2012), and mac Birmingham (UK, 2010).

Major group exhibitions include the Islamic Arts Biennale (2023), the Mona Foma Festival (2023), the 16th and 8th Lyon Biennale (2022, 2007), the 14th Curitiba International Biennial (2019), the 13th Dakar Biennial (2018), the 4th Prospect Triennial in New Orleans (2017), documenta 14 (2017), the 13th Sharjah Biennial (2017), 12th Havana Biennale (2015), 55th Venice Biennale (2013), and the 3rd Marrakech Biennale (2009). Other notable group shows include those at spaces such as A4 Art foundation, Cape Town; Wanås Konst and Historiska, Sweden, MAXXI, Rome, Darat al Funun, Jordan, Théâtre Graslin, Nantes and Tate Modern, London.

Webb's work has been acquired for numerous public and private collections such as The Smithsonian Institution, KADIST Foundation, Museo Nazionale Delle Arti del XXI Secolo, and the MAC Val.

His projects have been the subject of the two monographs, "..." (blank projects, 2020), and "Xenagogue" (Hordaland Kunstsenter, 2015).

His first exhibition at Imane Farès, Nous, with Nina Esber, was held in 2015.



James Webb, 2016 © Pieter Hugo

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*A Series of personal
questions
addressed to*
2016 - ongoing

In this series of works in progress, the artist presents oral questions to selected inanimate objects inanimate objects that he has selected, as if they were beings capable of answering.

The installation takes the form of a setting in scene of the object in question, for example an ancient Roman coin an ancient Roman coin, and a loudspeaker installed above the place where the public is ideally ideally located in relation to the object on display. The loudspeaker broadcasts a series of questions written especially for the chosen object and addressed to it.

No answer is written, given or suggested. The work suggests that each object is more than the sum of its parts and what it represents, and that each object would have had its own set of particular experiences. The form of the address seeks to honor the object and to create a space for it to communicate in its own way.

The questions - and the internal answers projected by the public - serve moreover to complexify the work, to transform the standard conditions of exhibition and to open up new interpretations parallel histories and conceptual possibilities.

Existing versions:

- *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to the City of Lyon as it Stands Now*, 2022
- *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to the macLYON*, 2022
- *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to a Japanese travelling cloak*, 2022
- *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to a Chewa Mask*, 2021
- *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to 5 litres of Nigerian crude oil*, 2020
- *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to the Red Sea*, 2020
- *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to a Roman Coin*, 2019
- *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to a Set of Rochrasch plates*, 2018

A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to the City of Lyon as it Stands Now, 2022

Sound installation, 3 channels, speaker, audio,

Voice : Sylvaine Strike.

Duration : 01:31:23

Bilingual french/english

→ [Sound extract](#)



Commissioned for the 16th edition of the Biennale de Lyon, 'manifesto of fragility', courtyard of the Musée des Beaux-Arts, © Blaise Adilon'

Imane Farès

41 rue Mazarine, 75006 Paris

+ 33 (0)1 46 33 13 13 – contact@imanefares.com

www.imanefares.com

James Webb, *A series of personal questions addressed to the Museum of Contemporary Art Lyon*, Vue d'exposition au Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, *manifesto of fragility*, 2022. Photo : Blaise Adilon.

Duration : 01:04:24

Bilingual french/english

Voice : Sylvaine Strike

→ [Sound extract](#)



Imane Farès

41 rue Mazarine, 75006 Paris
+ 33 (0)1 46 33 13 13 – contact@imanefares.com
www.imanefares.com

*A series of personal questions addressed to
the Museum of Contemporary Art Lyon*

2022

Duration : 01:04:24

Bilingual french/english

Voice : Sylvaine Strike

[→ Sound extract](#)

Specially created for the 16th Biennale of Lyon, the artist engaged the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon as an interview subject. The museum was established in 1984, and first situated within the Palais Saint-Pierre with Thierry Raspail as its director. In December 1995, a new building, designed by Renzo Piano, was inaugurated. Built as a 6,000m² space with moveable exhibition walls and artworks placed outside and around the building, the museum has lived an extraordinary life: from hosting the 22nd G7 summit to numerous iterations of the Biennale de Lyon. Now under the direction of Isabelle Bertolotti, it flourishes as an agora facilitating exhibitions, events, and discussions about contemporary art and its future possibilities. Through this artwork, the museum has been approached so as to ask of its memories, feelings, and ideas as to what it has seen, heard, and revealed; the questions seek to stir its thoughts in a form of institutional analysis.

The artwork is staged with audio speakers installed in the foyer of the building addressing the space.

[→ Sound extract](#)

Selected questions (from a list of 125)

What are we to think of a museum whose entrance is prefigured by a labyrinth?

How would you like to be looked at?

How would you like to be inhabited?

What lies buried beneath you?

Who were the people that assembled you? Where are they now? When did you last see them?

What subjects are off limits between us?

Where do you think the art world is being selective about what it criticises?

Who else needs to be recognised in these spaces?

When people speak about "decoloniality," what does that mean to you?

How can we make your spaces part of the life of every person in this city?

What occurs in your rooms when they are empty of human witnesses?

What else could your spaces be used for?

What do the artworks inside you want to do with their lives?

What can't you offer your audiences?

What or who does contemporary art serve?

What will you have us do with images that no longer serve their purpose?

What invisible labour is being ignored here?

How can we find validation that does not involve hierarchies, oppression, and comparison? What do you make of the objects around you? What have they told you about how they would like to be engaged with?

James Webb, *A series of personal questions addressed to a Theriac urn formerly used in the Hôtel-Dieu, manifesto of fragility*, 2022.

Photo : Blaise Adilon.

Duration :00:49:27

Bilingual french/english

Voice : Sylvaine Strike

→ [Sound extract](#)



*A series of personal questions addressed to a
Theriac urn formerly used in the Hôtel-Dieu,
2022*

Duration : 00:49:27

Bilingual french/english

Voice : Sylvaine Strike

→ [Sound extract](#)

Here, a voice poses questions to a 17th century Theriac urn formerly used in the Hôtel-Dieu. Theriac, an ancient medicine, was made with a concoction of plants and minerals, notably mixed with snake and opium. It was used as a general remedy and vaccine throughout Europe and other parts of the world for almost 18 centuries, before being struck off the codex of French medicine in 1908. Theriac was manufactured in the Hôtel-Dieu in Lyon, and this very urn, on loan from the Musée des Hospices Civils, was the main storage vessel for the medicine prepared and dispensed in the hospital. The questions probe themes of wellness, cures, and plagues, as well as medical history and the evolution of medicines and placebos; all relating to the city of Lyon.

The artwork is staged with the Theriac urn on display and presented with the voice of the questioner.

Selected questions (from a list of 93)

- What stories did the stones, seeds, plants, and flesh used to create Theriac tell you? How did they regard you?
- How far had your Theriac come from Nero's time, when its potency was increased through the addition of a viper's flesh?
- In your experience, what was the perfect recipe for Theriac?
- What can you tell us about the people who were forced to take poison in order to test what you were there to cure?
- If a snake contains its own antidote, as your Apothecaries believed, what might humans contain that could cure us?
- What do you contain that might cure you?
- Looking back, what lessons from the plagues have we failed to learn?
- What do you think we should have done during our last pandemic?
- What lessons in humility would you like to share with modern medicine?
- What would you offer as an antidote to hubris?
- How do you feel now that the weight of medical science has been lifted from you?
- How has it come about that the human subject experiences their need as a wound, their desire as an insufficiency?
- What role should the patient have in their own recovery?
- What would you prescribe to treat the poison of racism?
- When, if at all, did you doubt what you had to hold?
- What did you bring to the curative process?
- Opium was one of the key ingredients in your Theriac. Opium is now considered a dangerous, addictive drug and is illegal. What do you think about this?
- What alternatives were there to the medicine you dispensed?
- If a panacea is not possible, what are the alternatives?
- Your medicine, Theriac, was in use throughout Europe and other parts of the world for almost 2 millennia. What did it feel like when it was finally struck from the Codex of French medicine in 1908?
- What part of the medicine remains inside you?
- What are contemporary sceptics not understanding about your legacy?

*A series of personal questions addressed to
a Chewa mask made in the image of Elvis Presley, and
loaned from a private collection*
2018/2021

Chewa mask, wood and metal pedestal
182 cm (height)
Duration: around 30 min.
Unique

Coll. National Museum of African Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington D-C

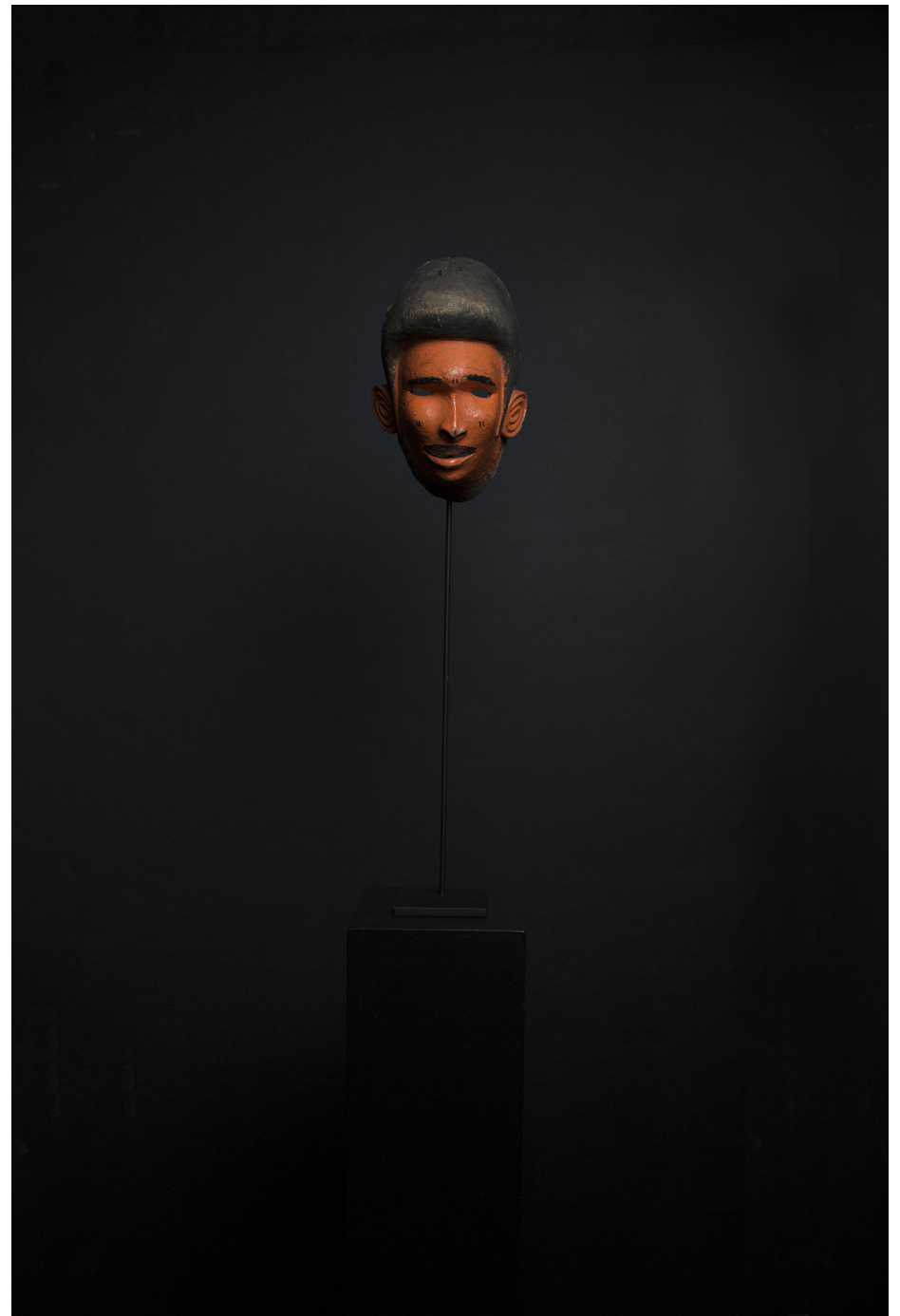


Photo © Taryn Diab

*A Series of personal questions addressed to
5 litres of Nigerian crude oil*

2020

Crude oil, glass box, speaker, audio

Duration: 25 min 04 sec

Voice: Brendon Daniels

Edition of 1 + 1 AP

Ed. 1/1: Scheryn Art Collection, Cape Town

→ [Sound extract](#)



James Webb, *A Series of personal questions addressed to 5 litres of Nigerian crude oil*, exhibition view, *What Fresh Hell is This*, blank projects, 2020.

*A Series of personal questions
addressed to a Roman Coin*
2019

Silver Denarius minted in Rome in 70AD, speaker,
amplifier, media player, audio
1,7 cm diam. (coin)
145 x 30 x 30 cm (display case)
Duration: 29 min 59 sec
Unique
Voice: Sylvaine Strike

→ [Sound extract](#)

Selected questions:

What are your memories of the earth's crust? Of
the rock? Of the ore?
What recollections do you have from the time
before you were marked with another's face?
In your heyday, what kind of lifestyle did you grow
accustom to?
Which exchange felt right?
You were bought on eBay for the equivalent of 18
takeaway cappuccinos at Dubai airport; how does
this make you feel?
What can you tell us about the now extinct
Silphium plant that was "worth its weight in
Denarii" for its extraordinary powers?
What advice can you give to the Euro?
What happened when you were not enough?



A Series of personal questions addressed to a photograph marked F Freiberg 1859 in the Foto Muuseum of Tallinn
2017

A photograph marked F Freiberg 1859, vitrine, speaker, amplifier, media player, audio

Variable dimensions

Unique



James Webb, *A Series of personal questions addressed to a photograph marked F Freiberg 1859 in the Foto Muuseum of Tallinn*,

Exhibition view, Drain d'images, Foto Muuseum de Tallinn, 2017. Photo : Sofia Ekström.

A Series of personal questions addressed to a set of Rorschach psychodiagnostic plates

2018

Set of Rorschach Psychodiagnostic plates, speaker, amplifier, media player, audio

10 plates: 17.7 x 24.5 cm (each)

Box: 25.5 x 19 cm)

Installation: 18 x 273 cm and 26.7 x 19 cm

Duration: 30 min 39 sec

Voice: Cedric Leherle

Unique

Private Collection, Canada

→ [Sound extract](#)



Prayer 2000 - ongoing

Recordings, carpet, 12 speakers, assorted wires, audio; 1600 x 400 cm
Infinite duration.

Prayer is an ongoing project, remade around the world since its first presentation in Cape Town in 2000. The work consists of recordings of prayer from individuals who belong to dozens of faiths and spiritual affinities in the host city. Listeners are invited to remove their shoes and walk the length of the carpet, composing their own arrangement of voices as they go, or to kneel or otherwise themselves next to a speaker to listen more closely to particular prayers.

An experimental musician and visual artist with a degree in comparative religion, Webb initiated *Prayer* in Cape Town five years after his country ended its practice of apartheid. The word apartheid means segregation; Webb has created a work that emphatically brings people together. Prayers articulate a basic wish for communion and often serve to solidify a community of faith in a place of worship. By deliberately gathering prayers from a variety of neighborhoods and spiritual practices and naming each of the participants and congregations, Webb aims to join together inhabitants of his host city.

Existing versions:

- Cape Town (2002)
- Huddersfield (2008) at the Huddersfield Art gallery
- Bergen (2010) upon the invitation of BEK – Bergen Centre for Electronic Arts
- Nottingham (2010) at the Djanogly Art Gallery, University of Nottingham
- København (2010)
- Birmingham (2011) produced for the Fierce Festival at the Old Library, curated by Anna Douglas, Laura McDermott and Harun Morrison, co-directors of We Are Fierce
- Johannesburg (2012) produced for “MMXII,” James Webb’s ‘metrospective’ survey show at the Johannesburg Art Gallery
- Malmö (2015) commissioned and produced by Wanås konst
- Stockholm (2016) curated by Helene Pousette Larson for History Unfolds at Historiska
- Chicago (2018) commissioned and produced by The Art Institute of Chicago

Prayer (all 10 versions)

Exhibition view at A4 Arts Foundation, 2022. Photo : A4 Arts Foundation



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41 rue Mazarine, 75006 Paris
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www.imanefares.com

Prayer (Johannesburg)

Photo : Anthea Pokroy



Prayer (Chicago)

Photo : Art Institute Chicago



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There's no place called home

2004 - ongoing

There is no place called home is an ongoing series of site-specific public audio interventions involving sound recordings of foreign bird song broadcasted from loudspeakers concealed in local trees. It uses a contrasting and mixed audio soundtrack to appear as “real” and “lifelike” as possible.

In his 2015 conversation with Anthea Buys, Webb described *There's No Place Called Home* as abounding with “symbolic messages for someone to decipher”. The artist particularised on some of these messages: the work explores themes of loneliness and entreaty, also mobility and belonging in our immigrant-conscious present. Webb further elaborated on *There's No Place Called Home*: “And then there's the mythological idea of birds being the messengers between the earth and heaven, agents of the air, the ears of the gods”. He was expanding on a formative occupation: human belief or faith. “In Ancient Rome and many older traditional societies, there are customs of augury – or predicting the future — through the observation of birds.”

—Sean O'Toole

Around fifty versions of this piece have been made.

A few examples: Bad Homburg, New Orleans, Riga, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, MacVal (Vitry-sur-Seine), Udine, Malmö, Nantes, Bergen, etc.

A "retrospective" of the work was presented in 2021 as part of *The Normal*, a group exhibition at the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh. Alongside a new commissioned piece that was presented in the Royal Botanical Garden, the gallery displayed the titles and contexts of the more-than-fifty versions (see next page)

There's no place called home
Exhibition view, The Normal, Talbot Rice Gallery, 2020.



There's no place called home (New Orleans)

Photo : Sofia Ekstrom



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There's no place called home (Edinburgh)

Photo : Sally Jubb



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*I do not live in this
world alone, but in a
thousand worlds*
2016 - ongoing

I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds is presented as a series of glass vials, each containing the liquid remains of a poetic or philosophical text written on soluble paper that has been dissolved in water. Through this process the ink stains the water, and the water converts the paper to a thin, soft pulp, allowing for the initial page of writing to become an opaque, liquid solution.

The artwork, and its medium of transformation, references medicines, potions, psycho-active drugs, and poisons. Taking the form of liquid, the ideas and images contained in the text have the agency to seep, stain, and spill. Furthermore, by being preserved in water, it gives the text the possibility of entering the body through the mouth, unlike the way a text normally enters through the eye or the ear. The dissolved words suggests the possibility to be contained by the body, with the drinker able to possess and embody it, allowing it to influence from the inside.

These transmuted texts, or 'drowned anthologies', oppose the idea of the permanence of the written record - whether on paper or in stone - and their transitory nature allows them the potential to shift and undergo subtle changes over time, so that the artwork is in a constant state of flux.

The title of the series is a quotation from the poet John Keats's letter to George and Georgina Keats where he wrote "I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds..." (25 October 1818).

Each version of this artwork is unique in an evolving series.

I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (18 openings to another world)

2021

[17 texts](#) written on soluble paper, dissolved in water, and presented in 17 glass vials (found objects)

Various dimensions

Unique



James Webb, *I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (18 openings to another world)*, Borås Kunstmuseum for the Borås Art Biennial. Photo © Hendrik Zeitler

I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (Dreams of Franz Kafka)

2018

[30 dreams](#) excerpted from Franz Kafka's Diaries written on soluble paper, dissolved in water, and presented in 30 glass vials (found objects)

Various dimensions

Unique



James Webb, *I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (Dreams of Franz Kafka)*, exhibition view, *Choose the Universe*, Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, 2019. Photo: Tadzio

I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (Love is Lethal)

2019

[Carol Ann Duffy's poem Valentine \(1993\)](#), written with ink on soluble paper, dissolved in water, and presented in a single glass vial (found object)
Unique



I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (Solve, Dissolve, Revolve)

2019

[Bertolt Brecht's poem *The Solution \(Die Lösung, 1953\)*](#) written with ink on soluble paper, dissolved in water, and presented in a single glass vial (found object)

Plinth painted black, 110 x 22 x 18 cm

Unique



I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (13 Views of the Moon)

2018

13 texts written on soluble paper, dissolved in water, and presented in 13 glass vials (found objects)

Various dimensions

Unique



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I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds

2016

10 texts (by Maya Angelou, Ingrid Jonker, Roland Barthes, Yukio Mishima, Reinaldo Arenas, William S. Burroughs, Tomas Tranströmer, Samuel Beckett, Dorothy Parker and The Cure) written on soluble paper, dissolved in water, and presented in 10 glass vials (found objects)

Various dimensions

Unique



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*There is a light that
never goes out*
2010 - ongoing

There is a light that never goes out is an ongoing series of neon text works in which the title of the 1986 song by The Smiths is translated into selected languages including Arabic, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Mandarin, Mixe, Sesotho, and Tupi Guarani.

Fabricated in neon, the evocative lyric is transformed from its musical reference into a visual sign that conjures open-ended cultural and site-specific associations.

The original version of the artwork was produced in Arabic for the façade of Dar Khalid at the Darat al Funun in Amman, Jordan in 2010.

There is a light that never goes out (Arabic)

2010

89 x 394 cm. Edition of 5 + 2 AP. Ed. 1 AP, Fondazione MAXXI, Roma



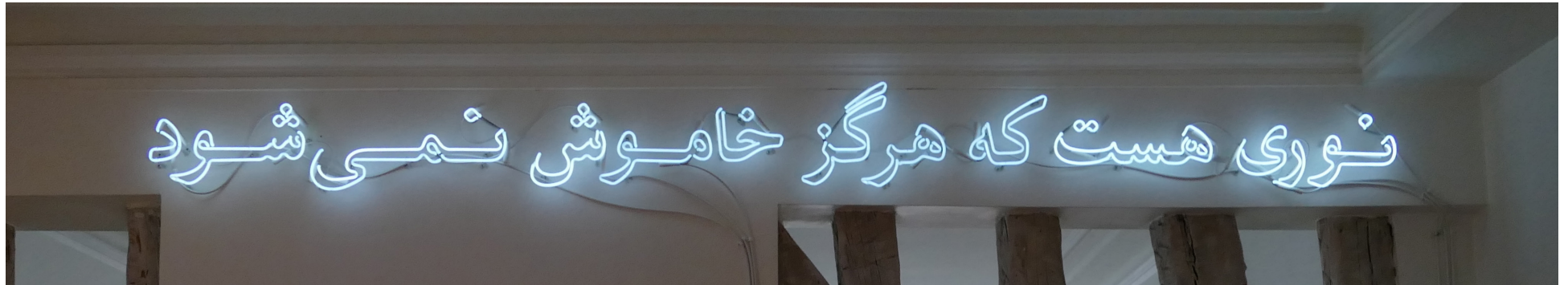
Imane Farès

41 rue Mazarine, 75006 Paris

+ 33 (0)1 46 33 13 13 – contact@imanefares.com

www.imanefares.com

There is a light that never goes out (Farsi)
2020



There Is a Light That Never Goes Out (Sesotho)

2016

Installation view: Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg, 2016. Photo: Michael Tymbios



There Is a Light That Never Goes Out (Mandarin)

2014

Installation view: blank projects



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www.imanefares.com

As Yet Untitled

2021

Commissioned for the Sculpture Garden of the Norval Foundation, *As Yet Untitled* is a site-specific sound installation. The artwork will gradually unfold until 2023.

→ [Information here](#)

As Yet Untitled's physical presence is inconspicuous, with a utilitarian visual language reminiscent of scientific apparatus and municipal infrastructure. The sounds are produced in response to the astronomical phenomena taking place in the skies above the Foundation, controlled by software which has been specifically programmed for this purpose. Sound waves swell into brief crescendos, in sync with the rise, culmination, and setting of the sun, moon, planets, star clusters, and galaxies. (...)

Webb subverts the scientific and cultural associations commonly assigned to celestial bodies in the West and its former colonies, laying bare the constructed nature of our relationship with space, which we take for granted. *As Yet Untitled* makes its audience conscious of their specific location in time and space. This awareness extends beyond the expanse of space, to the minutiae of the garden's flora and fauna. The installation offers an immersive and meditative experience: the sway of the reeds in the wind, the clicking of the leopard toads, the trickle of rainwater into the vlei, are all caught in the sonic web of the work.



Nothing here does not hear you 2021

Commissioned by the national arts festival
in South Africa for the 1820 Settler's
Monument in Makhandla.

"Nothing here does not hear you" is a site specific, sound installation created from research made into the space formerly known as the 1820 Settler's Monument in Makhandla. The process began when a group of individuals were invited to take a walk through the building and its environs to talk about the situation. The guests included historians, cultural workers, political activists, and sangomas, as well as members of the building's maintenance and technical staff.

All the interviewees spoke in different ways of blockages, barriers, clots, stuck places, and obstacles. The building, and the land in particular, was spoken of as an energy that needs to be listened and attended to: the Monument has to be rethought, opened up, and become many monuments.

The recorded interviews were shared with a writer who developed a series of texts that could, when spoken, work as blessings. These ideas form a manifesto of spiritual intent: an opening of channels, a putting to rest the uneasiness, a calling for creativity and wisdom, and a token of gratitude for lessons learnt and lessons to come. (...)



*There is a voice other than the one
you are hearing*

2020

Brushed aluminium

90 cm diameter

Edition of 1 + 1 AP

A remake of a symbol seen in a house of worship.
The artist was in Sweden conducting recordings
for his ongoing Prayer installation when he
chanced on this symbol at the entrance to
a religious space. Later, on enquiring into its
meaning with the priest, he was informed that it
was a broken clock.



This is where I leave you

2020

Glass, wood, found objects

Various dimensions

Unique

Found objects serving as placeholders in a retelling of the story of the Nossa Senhora dos Milagros shipwreck encased in vitrines made of fluted glass.

The 1686 shipwreck of the Nossa Senhora dos Milagros along the Cape Agulhas coast was an important moment in the history of religion in South Africa. Amongst the many people on board were three French Catholic priests from the court of King Louis XIV sent to South East Asia to, among other things, study the astronomy of the region. Also on board were a group of Siamese Buddhist monks and an ambassador to King Narai the Great en route to Portugal as guests to Don Pedro II. This accident brought Catholicism and Buddhism into contact with the recently colonised, Lutheran Cape: a twist of fate that would have bizarre and poetic consequences.

James Webb, *This is where I leave you*, Installation view, *What Fresh Hell is This*, blank projects, 2020.



This is where I leave you

2020

Glass, wood, found objects

Various dimensions

Unique

The effect of the fluted glass on our view of the objects appears to fragment and divide them; the static pieces look to be vibrating, or even radiating. The glass becomes a lens as well as a veil that disconnects, obscures and mystifies: the unity of the recognised form remains out of reach. The choice of found objects relates to how the artist imagines and reimagines the scenario of the story: the objects are sites for projection and interpretation, and are here presented as being in a shimmering state.



This is where I leave you (Mary of shipwrecks. Terms of surrender)

2020

Wrought-iron Madonna statue, vitrine, plinth

156 x 30 x 30 cm

Unique



This is where I leave you (Crown of fishes)

2020

Coral, vitrine, plinth

142 x 35 x 35 cm

Unique

Untitled (duet with one singer missing)

2020

Site-specific sound installation

9 min

Edition of 3 + 1 AP

Untitled (duet with one singer missing) takes Olivier Messiaen's duet, "La mort du nombre," and presents it with just one singer. The reduction of the original piece creates a situation where the soprano's part is primary, and the reading of the song's dialectical lyrics becomes altered due to the absence of those of the tenor. The literary, conceptual, and melodic relationships contained in the original are here cut away so as to place focus on one element - a single piece of the puzzle - and to consider what new connections it makes in situ. The intervention, part of a developing body of transformed duets, also creates a series of pauses, gaps, and silences in the performance of the song which allows for the artwork to emerge and disappear in the exhibition environment. The artwork was curated by Helén Hedensjö, and features the soprano voice of Hanna Fritzson.

James Webb, *Untitled (duet with one singer missing)*, 2020, Konst i Ån, Norrtälje, 2020. Photo : James Webb



The Repetition Compulsion

2019

Audio guide, 11 min. 38 sec.

Commissioned for the group show

Audiosphere: Sound Experimentation 1980-2020, a sound only, headphone-based group exhibition curated by Francisco López and exhibited on the third floor of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

This associative audio guide wonders what the gallery spaces on the third floor of the Reina Sofía museum in Madrid still remember about all the exhibitions they have hosted since their opening in the early 1990s. The venue has been the site of groundbreaking and historical presentations by emerging artists as well as celebrated veterans, but if the rooms had a residual memory, what would they want to talk about?

The artist invited the playwright Louis Viljoen to work through the archive of press releases pertaining to the third floor, and to create a compendium of writing connecting to themes of memory, psychological transference, and Situationist practices such as the *dérive*. In short, a guide to the space developed from all the exhibitions that have taken place there. Featuring the artist's voice, and presented as a polyphonic composition, the audio guide places the audience in an encounter with a fantastical impression of the building's own past.



Friends of friends

2018

Framed Miró silkscreen, planter with plastic plants

208 x 108 x 85 cm (installation)

70 x 50 cm (framed silkscreen)

Unique

In *Friends of friends*, a Joan Miró silkscreen is hung on the wall and partially concealed by an arrangement of artificial plants. Each a reproduction of an original, both were found in the Sweet Lorain thrift store in Cleveland, Ohio while the artist was on residence at the SPACES gallery.

Investigating concepts pertaining to community as well as disorientation, and sensing a chemistry between the two objects, the artist sought to initiate a “blind date” by bringing them together in an ambiguous manner. The title refers to the occasionally tenuous connection between people who are linked only by a mutual friend.

Installation view: Choose the Universe, Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, 2019. Photo : Tadzio



Invisibilia

2018

Plaster statue, transducer speaker,
amplifier, media player, audio

123 x 31 x 26 cm (sculpture)

40 x 40 x 40 cm (plinth)

duration: 59 min 21 sec (looped)

Unique

In *Invisibilia*, a statue of the Madonna and Child vibrates to the recorded electromagnetism of the Aurora Borealis. Found by the artist in an antique store during a residency in Cleveland, Ohio, the remarkable statue's faded and damaged condition spoke strongly to its spiritual and social message. In placing the statue facing the wall – like a Zen meditation pose – the work reveals a sense of privacy and intimacy; the protection of a mother guarding her child. A transducer speaker is placed on the chest of the Madonna in the same bodily location as the heart depicted on Jesus's chest. Through this speaker, the sound activates the materiality of the sculpture, turning the plaster statue into a resonating chamber. This combination of ionospheric transmissions and the weathered statue of the Madonna and Child call to mind ideas of resilience and gentleness, and humility in the face of endless mystery.

Installation view: Choose the Universe, Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, 2019. Photo : Tadzio



*The Dreamer in Me Meets the
Dreamer in You*

2018

Site-specific sound installation

Duration: 30 min

Edition of 3 + 1 AP

The view from the rooftop deck of the Norrtälje Konsthall was the conceptual point of departure for this artwork. Researching the history of the site, and learning of new plans for the city, the artist invited the playwright, Louis Viljoen, to script a series of 26 texts that could suggest what might be occurring behind the curtains of the neighbouring apartments, in the city, and in the dreams of its inhabitants. The audio was recorded by Josefin Ljungman and presented on speakers and headphones on the roof of the building where the audience could survey the city and listen to the associative commentary.

James Webb, The Dreamer in Me Meets the Dreamer in You, 2018, Installation view: Norrtälje Konsthall, 2018



What fresh hell is this

2018

5-channel audio (looped)

Various durations

Edition of 3 + 2 AP

→ [Sound extract](#)

What fresh hell is this is a suite of vocal interruptions and internal monologues. It comprises bursts of laughter, bruxism, repetitive speaking, whispered chanting, and the incessant shouting of the phrase "You are procrastinating!" The piece plays randomly, and interrupts and disappears unexpectedly throughout the run of the exhibition.

Voices: Sesane Bonet Sealy, Roxanne de Freitas, Linda Makgabutlane, Renier Nolte, Tazmé Pillay, Aidan Scott, Puleng Stewart, Mia Thom, and Juliana Venter.

Three Dreams Of The Sinking World

2015-2018

Multi-channel video and sound installation

Durations: 6 min 49 sec, 2 min 13 sec, 3 min 54 sec

looped, 50 min (audio)

Edition of 3 + 1 AP

→ [Video extract n°1](#)

→ [Vdeo extract n°2](#)

→ [Video extract n°3](#)

→ [Sound extract](#)

Three Dreams Of The Sinking World is a filmic meditation on the former Carlton Hotel in downtown Johannesburg. An icon of wealth and luxury when it was built in the 1960s, and a symbol of Johannesburg's modern global aspirations during the height of Apartheid, the hotel was never financially successful and was finally closed in the 1990s. The building remains closed, in a state of suspension, while the city around it has changed. The artwork consists of a sound installation and a five channel film installation of footage taken inside the hotel in 2015 and 2018. For the artwork's Johannesburg debut at POOL, commissioned narrative responses were recorded and voiced by Lindiwe Matshikiza and relayed via radio headphones in the exhibition space. These responses were realised by poet, Khanya Mashabela; scholar and critic, Athi Mongezeleli Joja; and curator and writer, Mika Conradie. These pieces allow for an expanded reading of the Carlton Hotel, awaking the suspended character, history and psychology of the building through narrative, personal accounts and political theory.

Artist's statement:

"The elements that make up this artwork began as formal studies of movement in the space: cameras tracing the way light falls in the former hotel, and microphones positioned to record the sonic vibrations of the city as filtered through the shell of the abandoned building.

The artwork, through its conceptual and socio-political concerns as well as its roots in the spatial psychology of Johannesburg, echo my earlier *The Black Passage* (2006) which is a recording of the empty elevator cage descending and ascending the South Deep mine, one of the deepest goldmines in the world. I have a half remembered quote from Stephen Hobbs talking about Johannesburg being the tallest city in the world as it starts from the bottom of the goldmine and goes up to the top of the Carlton Tower. This idea has always intrigued and scared me. I think that *3 Dreams Of The Sinking World* and *The Black Passage* are partly inspired by this notion of depth and its many physical and spiritual associations.

The title is a perversion of the Japanese term "ukiyo" meaning "floating world" which describes a land of luxury and sensual pleasures buoyed by economic boom as depicted in the works of the Edo period (1615-1868)."

James Webb, Three Dreams Of The Sinking World , 2015-2018, Installation views, POOL, Johannesburg, 2019. Photo : Anthea Pokroy



The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters

2017

Sound installation

Basler drum, transducer speaker, audio

48 x 44 cm (diameter)

Variable duration

Unique

Produced while the artist was on residency at Atelier Mondial in Basel, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* involves an old marching snare drum that vibrates to the recorded sound of the artist sleeping. Known as a Basler Trommel, the drum is traditionally used in the city's annual carnival, the Basler Fasnacht. By attaching a transducer speaker to the skin of the drum, the audio causes a vibration that activates the snare ropes attached to the bottom of the drumhead causing the instrument to resound. The results of the amplified recordings of breath being played through the drum produce a thunderous cacophony suggestive of the appropriated title from Francisco Goya's 18th-century etching.

James Webb, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, 2017, Installation view: Atelier Mondial, Basel, 2017



Tundmatu

2017

Sound installation

Various durations

Unique

→ [Sound extract](#)

The Fotomuuseum of Tallinn has in its possession a collection of photographs donated over the years by local people. These images - weddings and funerals, formal portraits and incidental shots - remain anonymous and unaccounted for. They are referred to as “Tundmatu” (translated from Estonian as “unknown”), and their museological status as historical documents worthy of preservation is questionable.

The artist invited the playwright Louis Viljoen to collaborate on sifting through the unidentified photographs to look for connections, narratives, and stories that they might suggest. Using the pictures as visual cues, a series of short texts were created for actors to voice. The recordings were broadcast from a speaker system in the empty cellar of the museum, a 700-year old space that has previously served at different times as a prison, public lavatory, and homeless shelter.

Commissioned writer: Louis Viljoen

Voices: Inga Saruland, Henrik Kalmet



All that is unknown

2016

Dual monophonic sound installation,
speakers, media players, assorted wires,
audio

Variable dimensions

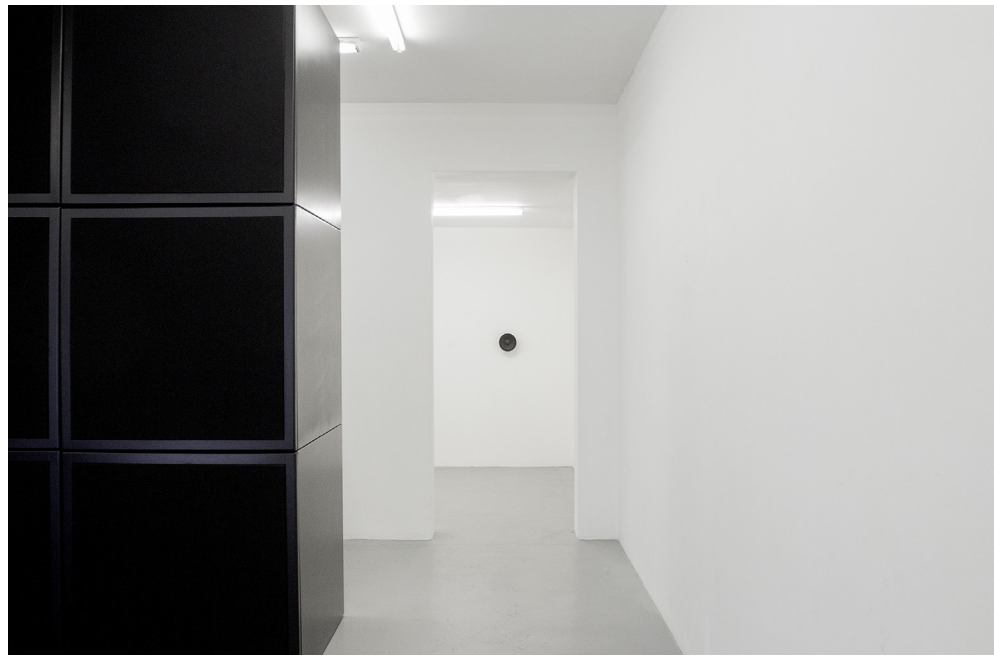
Duration infinite

Edition of 3 + 1 AP

Ed. 1/3: Museu Oscar Niemeyer, Curitiba

→ [Sound extract](#)

In *All That Is Unknown*, a stereo array of speakers pulsate with audio recordings of two individual human heartbeats; one per speaker. The naked speaker cones face each other but are separated by the dimensions of the room. Referencing signs of life, the pair throb incessantly at the threshold of audibility within the general ambience of the exhibition site; their rhythms phasing in and out with each other like a hushed call and response. The audio is only accessible to the audience by listening closely or by touching the speakers to register the vibrations therein.



Installation views: Ecstatic Interference, blank projects, 2016. Photo : Kyle Morland

All that is unknown

2016

Dual monophonic sound installation,
speakers, media players, assorted wires,
audio

Variable dimensions

Duration infinite

Edition of 3 + 1 AP

Exhibitions:

- *Open Borders*, 14th Bienal of Curitiba, Brazil 2019-2020);
- *Tamawuj*, 13th Sharjah Biennale (2017);
- *We listen for the future*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK (2016);
- *Hope is a good swimmer*, Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, France (2016);
- *Ecstatic Interference*, blank projects, Cape Town, South Africa (2016).



James Webb, *All that is unknown*, 2016, Installation views, Sharjah Biennial 13, 2017.

La Syzygie

2016

Multi-dimensional reading of the Théâtre
Graslin

In 2016, Webb was commissioned to respond to the Théâtre Graslin, an 18th-century opera house in the French city of Nantes. Temporarily unnerved by the scale and history of the site, Webb describes himself staring at the façade, asking himself, “What do you see?” What he saw was eight muses standing atop the line of columns; the ninth was missing. And so, his quest was defined.

Webb chose to honour the invitation by acting as arch-medium, summoning the actual politicians, artists, designers and imagined ghosts of patrons who have left their spectral traces in the building’s fabric. One example is the gesamtkunstwerk spirit of the architect Mathurin Cruey, whose vision for both this building and the city that hosts it means the structure is sited and sighted: if you stand on the stage and look out across the auditorium, with all the doors open, you have a clear sightline to the square beyond. The auditorium echoes the shape of the square and telescopes its conceptual lines of site to the Royal Gardens, then the Loire River, then the sea and, finally, the stars. Of the four séances Webb arranged as part of his reading of the structure, two – one with Cruey and another with artist Hippolyte Bertaux, who is responsible for the painted dome and trompe-l’oeil cloak of god Momus that swoops across the lip of the cupola in silken sheet metal – allude to the personal mythologies they invested in their creative schemas.



Commissioned for the 2016 Le Voyage à Nantes festival.

La Syzygie

2016

Multi-dimensional reading of the Théâtre
Graslin

Commissioned for the 2016 Le Voyage à
Nantes festival



Imane Farès

41 rue Mazarine, 75006 Paris
+ 33 (0)1 46 33 13 13 – contact@imanefares.com
www.imanefares.com

Threnody

2016

Monophonic sound installation, Audio Spotlight 24i

Holosonic speaker, audio

100 cm (diam.)

duration: 2 min 59 sec

Edition of 3 + 1 AP

Ed. 1/3: Art Institute of Chicago

→ [Sound extract](#)

In *Threnody*, Paul McCartney's vocal take for the song "Helter Skelter" (The Beatles, 1968) was isolated and then reversed so as to create a backwards speech adrift from its proto-heavy metal musical accompaniment. This sonic artefact was scrutinised and used as the guide track for the vocalist Zami Mdingi to emulate. The artist worked with Mdingi, and ethnomusicologist, Cara Stacey, to transcribe the inverted melodies and lyrics – occasionally reimagining the new words in an isiXhosa framework for Mdingi to phonetically articulate and sing live. The recorded result unveiled itself as a glossolalic lamentation, quite different from the tumultuousness suggested in the "forwards" version and in stark contrast to the original's racist associations infused by Charles Manson.

The artwork is staged to reference a solar eclipse visually with the audio broadcast from speakers concealed behind a back-lit, black circle in a darkened room.



James Webb, *Threnody*, Installation view at blank projects, Cape Town, 2016;



James Webb, *Threnody*, Installation view, *Hope is a good swimmer*, Imane Farès, Paris, 2017

Untitled (with the sound of its own making)

2016

Multi-channel sound installation: custom-built speaker boxes, speakers, media player, solar panels, assorted wires, audio.
300 x 500 x 100 cm

Duration: 18 min 13 sec

Edition of 2 + 1 AP

→ [Sound extract](#)

In *Untitled (with the sound of its own making)*, a solar-powered, multi-channel loudspeaker system broadcasts audio recordings of hands beating on doors. The artist worked with various drummers who used their hands to activate doors as a sonic material, conceptually evoking images of access, escape, and agency. The audio is housed in a monolithic loudspeaker stack made up of fifteen black cubes, and is solar-powered to allow the artwork to run constantly and be independent from the municipal grid. The title alludes to Robert Morris's seminal *Box with the Sound of its own Making* (1961), and is here reconsidered as an undefined state with the sound of its own becoming.

Participating drummers: Adrian Langeveld, Barry van Zyl, Bronwen Clacherty, Caitlin Mkhasibe, Jason Jardim, Ross Campbell, Thokozani Mhlambi, and William Mosima.
Speaker box design and construction: Brett Netherton (Cape Town) and Nobby Stephens (Wakefield).

Installation view: Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, 2016. Photo : Jonty Wilde



Xenagogue

2015

Pictured: *This is my voice, but these are not my words* [centre], and *Imaginary Appetites* [left and right]

Two writers were individually given the same private dossier of visual images pertaining to the site, and asked to respond to them with a series of associative, literary “visions” for an actor to voice.

The whispered voice is broadcast from a hyper-directional speaker in a darkened cellar underneath a gallery that’s only accessible through a trapdoor. The directionality of the speaker means that for it to be audible it requires a surface for the sound to make contact with. In this case it is the bodies of the audience, and the recorded voice appears to be right in front of them, emerging from the blackness.

Commissioned writers: Amy Jephta, Louis Viljoen. Voice: Rebecca Makin-Taylor

James Webb, *Xenagogue*, Installation view: Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen, 2015. Photo : Bjørn Mortensen



Xenagogue
2015
Imaginary Appetites

In *Imaginary Appetites*, seven small radios were modified so as to never settle on any station but instead scan continuously through the electromagnetic sphere. These machines were placed in and around two large *Monstera deliciosa* plants that were formerly used as decorations in the permanent display of Chinese artefacts at the KODE Museums of Bergen. The plants had been witnesses to the 2010 and 2013 robberies of items from the China Collection exhibit donated to the museum by Johan Wilhelm Normann Menthe.

During the robbery, the CCTV footage did not manage to capture the faces of the robbers, but, based on the recorded footage, it is clear that the plants were in close proximity to the perpetrators. The artwork's title is a quotation from Karl Marx's 1844 text "Human Requirements and Division of Labour Under the Rule of Private Property".

James Webb, *Imaginary Appetites*, *Xenagogue*, 2015, Installation view at Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen, 2015.
Photo : Bjørn Mortensen



(...) Visions of the Afterlife

2015

Sound installation, astronomical timer

Variable duration — activated daily at the sun's apex.

The number (...) of visions depends on the duration of the exhibition (in days)
Edition of 3 + 1 AP

Theories on what occurs after death were collected by the artist through interviews and social media and then compiled as a list recorded by a voice actor. In the installation, a single, individual "vision" of the afterlife is broadcast daily from a speaker in the gallery. The piece is controlled by an astronomical clock so that each broadcast occurs at the precise moment that the sun is directly above the site.



Know Thy Worth

2014

Black aluminum and steel threaded
rods

46,4 x 151,5 x 3 cm

Edition of 5 + 1 AP



Al Madat

2014

Four monitor speakers, black tripods; four
Karachi carpets, DVD player, audio
700 x 700 cm (carpets)
Duration: 16 min 32 sec

Edition of 3 + 1 AP

Ed. 1/3: A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town

Ed. 2/3: Rennie Museum, Vancouver

Ed. 3/3: Private collection, Canada

→ [Sound extract](#)

Al Madat comprises a recording of a Sufi dhikr undertaken by patients at the Sultan Bahu Rehab Centre in Westridge, Mitchells Plain. Dhikr (literally, “remembrance”) is a traditional Islamic recitation in which sacred names are chanted with special breathing techniques, often creating trance-like effects. This practice was brought to the Cape with the Malay slaves, and is now used by the rehabilitation centre as an augmentation to the curative process.

“Al Madat,” the specific dhikr used for this installation, translates as “help,” and is here used to implore the Prophet for assistance. This project grew out of *Prayer* when the Sultan Bahu Centre invited the artist to record the dhikrs of their rehabilitation centre in the Cape.

James Webb, *Al Madat*, Installation view at Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen, 2015. Photo : Bjørn Mortensen



Children of the Revolution

2013

Variable dimensions

Duration: 2 min 45 sec

Commissioned for Imaginary Fact,
the South African pavilion at the 2013
Biennale di Venezia.

Unique

James Webb, *Children of the Revolution*, Installation view, blank projects, Cape Town, 2014. Photo : Kyle Morland

Children of the Revolution takes the form of an isiXhosa protest song inspired by T.Rex's eponymous glam rock anthem. Plucked from its Eurocentric 1972 context, the reworked piece's lyrics remain in English but the instrumental parts are here sung with new isiXhosa words in a commentary on the song itself.

The track was created with choir leader Bongani Magatyana and a Nyanga-based choir, using Tonic sol-fa to transcribe and reimagine the original song. The audio was then presented in bespoke speaker cabinets visually quoting the Intonarumori noise-generating machines of the Italian Futurist, Luigi Russolo.

The artwork features the voices of Aviwe Kalipha, Babalwa Mrwetyana, Linda Thole, Lindelwa Siqwepu, Marompo Runeli, Paul Petros, Simthembile Lugotyo, Siyabulela Qwabe, Thembulethu Bolo, and Ziyanda Siqwepu.



Untitled (9th August)

2005-2010

50 Cards, ink

Variable dimensions. Edition of 3 + 1 AP

The title/label cards that contextualize the exhibits in the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, Japan, documenting and memorializing the events of the 9th of August 1945 were copied by the artist and presented together, displaced from the relevant original objects.



Mushroom cloud photographed
from a U.S. bomber

Scorched stones from a shrine garden

Shadows left by the heat rays

Hand bones and glass

Steel helmet with the remains of a skull

Work uniform and combat hat

Aleph

2010

Light and sound installation: fluorescent lights, CD players, speakers, assorted wires, audio

Variable dimensions; infinite duration

Edition of 3 + 1 AP

→ [Sound extract](#)

Aleph is a multi-channel sound and light installation exploring the phenomenon of glossolalia through a series of intimate recordings of young Afrikaans women speaking in tongues. Created as an offshoot study for *Prayer*, the artwork evokes the idea of a liminal space in which these linguistically abstruse but very personal and spiritual expressions can be experienced by the public. As the speakers are displayed together on the wall (interspersed by fluorescent lights) with each voice broadcast from an individual speaker, visitors can approach separate speakers and listen to the individual voices or, by standing back, hear all the voices at once.



Photo : Anthea Pokroy

Le Marché Oriental

2009

HD Video, color, sound

Duration: 3 min

Edition of 5 + 2 AP

Edition 1/5: Darat al Funun, Amman

Edition 3/5: Iziko South African National
Gallery, Cape Town

Edition 4/5: Tate, London

Edition 5/5: A4 Arts Museum, Cape
Town

Edition 2 AP: University of South Africa

Le Marché Oriental films a two-minute intervention inside Cape Town's disused Oriental Plaza, an Apartheid-era shopping mall designed to control the trading opportunities of disenfranchised Islamic communities with links to District Six.

On the fourth day of Ramadan, 2008, Sheikh Mogamat Moerat of the Zeenatul Islam Majid mosque next door to the plaza was invited to sing the Adhan (call to prayer) inside the empty remains of the building a few weeks prior to its demolition to make way for luxury apartments.

James Webb, Installation view of *Le Marché Oriental*, 2009, Installation view. Photo : Anthea Pokroy



Scream (Guernica)

2008

Sound installation: signed certificate, CD
player, speakers, assorted wires, audio
42 x 33 cm

Duration: 10 sec (in loop, with "silence" in-
between each playback not shorter than
2-minutes or longer than 20-minutes)

Unique

An intervention at the Reina Sofia,
Spain's national gallery, where members
of the museum's staff were invited to
scream at Pablo Picasso's Guernica.
Because the rights to the painting's
image are owned by the Picasso family,
the artist was not allowed to document
the project visually. The artwork is
presented as a spacious installation in
a white cube with the signed certificate
of permission from the Reina Sofia on
display and audio recordings of the
screams broadcast from concealed
speakers.

James Webb, *Scream (Guernica)*, Installation view at *MMXII*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2012. Photo : Anthea Pokroy



Scream (Guernica)

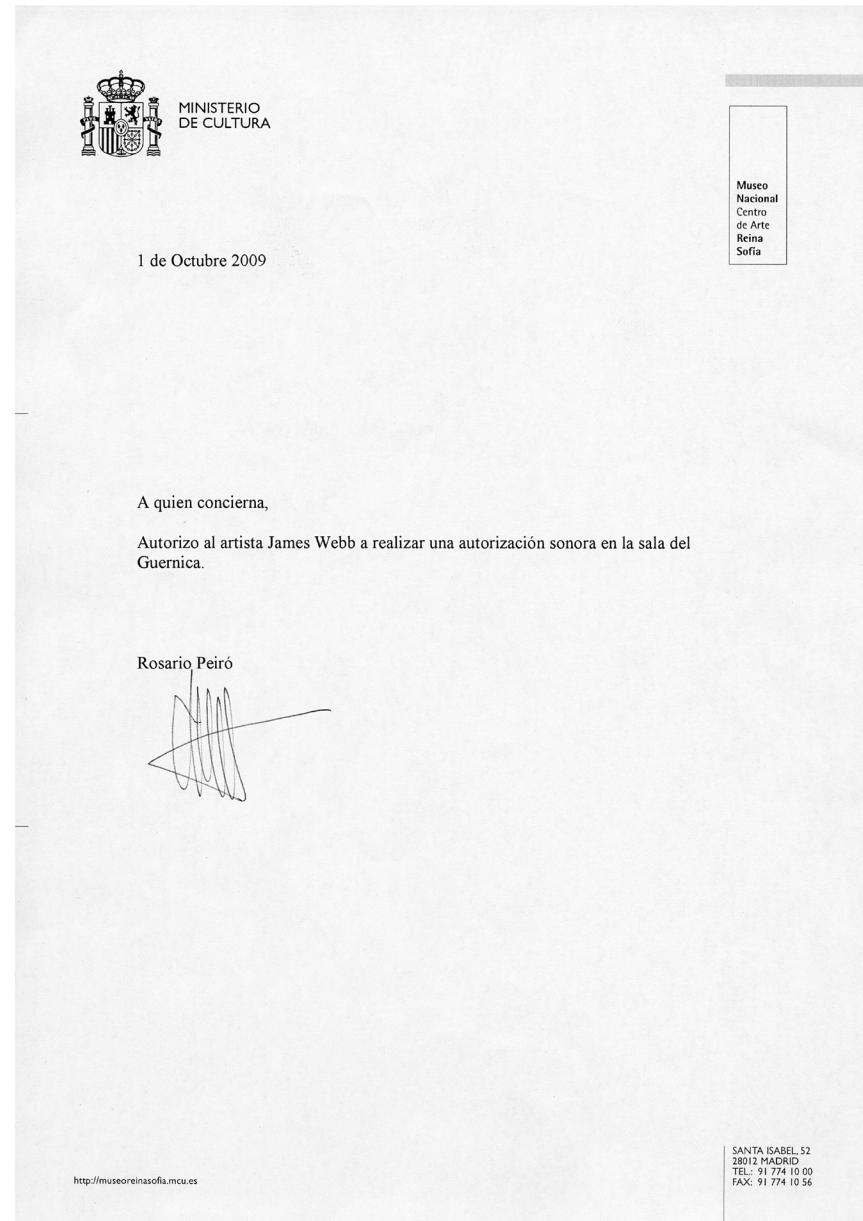
2008

Sound installation: signed certificate,
CD player, speakers, assorted wires,
audio

42 x 33 cm

Duration: 10 sec (in loop, with "silence"
in-between each playback not
shorter than 2-minutes or longer
than 20-minutes)

Unique



Autohagiography

2007

Sound installation: chaise longue, CD
player, speakers, assorted wires, audio
73 x 180 x 65 cm

Duration: 39 min 47 sec

Edition of 3 + 1 AP

→ [Sound extract](#)

Over a two-year period, the artist visited various hypnotists and recorded the sessions of himself under hypnosis. Scenes that seem to reference childhood events, significant meetings, war, and old age – sometimes absurd and at other times strikingly personal – surface in the softly spoken accounts. The recordings were mixed and edited into an audio collage and broadcast from a pair of speakers sewn into the headrest of a black, leather chaise longue.

Excerpt from the transcript of the artist's hypnosis session from *Autohagiography*:

It's nighttime again, but we are in a very different place: much hotter.

I sense we could be in some kind of Middle Eastern area.

Our army is at war.

And we're quite down on numbers...

Tomorrow we go into battle again.

I am sitting with some other people but may as well be alone as we're all quite quiet; I think we have sustained many losses, and no doubt tomorrow we will do so again.

James Webb, *Autohagiography*, 2007, Installation view at *MMXII*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2012



The Black Passage

2006

Sound installation: purpose-built tunnel, CD player, speakers, assorted wires, halogen light, black velvet curtaining, audio

200 x 200 x 2400 cm

Duration: 11 min 11 sec

Ediiton of 3 + 1 AP

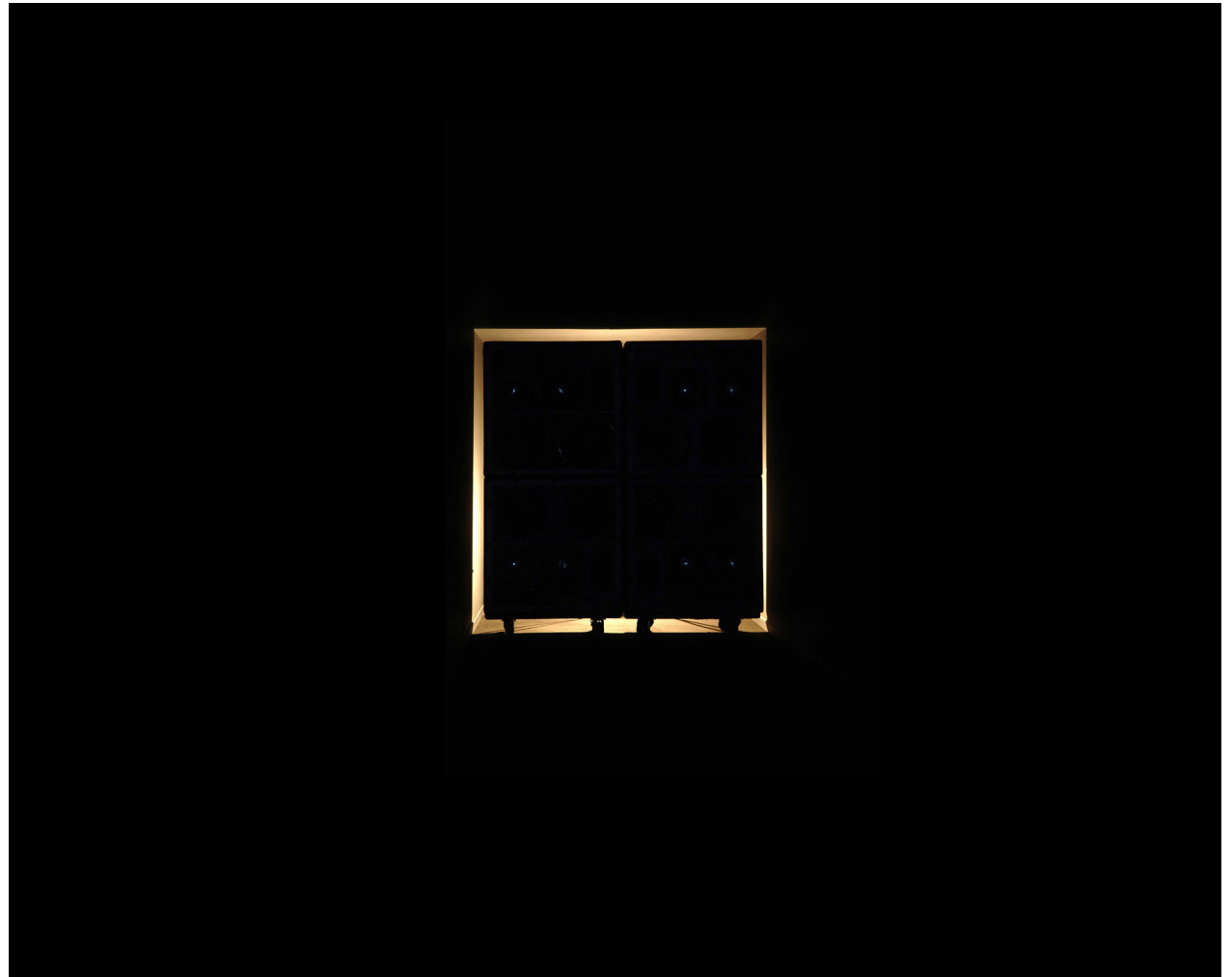
Ed. 1/3, Johannesburg Art Gallery

While his interest in obscure and vanished myths and religions may seem curious, they actually play a central role in his work. This observation is particularly evident in his sound installation, *The Black Passage* which replays the real sound of an elevator shaft going underground, recorded in a gold mine near Johannesburg. The work, which serves as an interrogation of male heroic passage myths, is significant, particularly in the way it stands out from existing portraits of the mining industry (as a social fact) in South African art.

The literality of the latter often intended to play the role of a consciousness cutter. Webb's practice typically avoids literality, often requiring the public to be fully engaged. Hearing, more than sight, is posited as the critical faculty best suited to the entrance of the liminal artistic spaces he constructs. These evoke a transitional sensory level, an intermediate zone where things are barely perceptible. Like the atrophied worlds of Samuel Beckett's plays and novels, they are places where nothing seems to happen.

— Sean O'Toole

James Webb, *The Black Passage*, 2006, Installation view at Biennale de Lyon, 00's, histoire d'une décennie qui n'est pas encore nommée, 2007. Photo : Blaise Adilon.



The Black Passage

