

Voice: How can I describe what I've never heard before?

...

James Webb

Voice: Something that does not exist.

...
James Webb

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Following spread: *Xenagogue*, installation view at Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen, 2015

Voice: How far will you go to be safe?

Voice: I will step out of this world and into another.



Shadow Signals	
Kathryn Smith	11
...	33
Resonance and Reverberation	
Looking Back on the Art of James Webb	
Sandra Klopper	67
...	83
The Sensory Complex	
Hearing the bird calls and auguries in James Webb's work	
Sean O'Toole	107
...	119
Résumé	141
Contributors	147
Footnotes	149
Credits	150
Acknowledgements	151



Shadow Signals

Kathryn Smith



Found image from *Tundmatu*, 2017

Previous:
Raoul Charles Verlet's late 19th-century bronze *La Douleur d'Orphee*,¹ illuminated by reflected light from LCD monitors.
MMXII installation detail, Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2012. Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery.

What do you see?

A low-contrast, black and white snapshot cast with a pervasive softness; some camera-shake in low-light; a cheap lens. A postcard in landscape format.

A young girl of perhaps eight or ten standing in a living room dominated by fields of pattern and a substantial mid-century radio, on top of which some indistinct objects lie and a deer figurine stands proud.

She inhabits the right third of the image, pushing right up against its surface. She is held between the topmost flower in a garland that arcs across her head and the skirt of her pale sleeveless dress, its papery creases falling from the gathered waist bracketed by the crooks of her elbows and down beyond the frame.

A half-smile plays across her face; in its lunar expanse her eyes are two dark points, looking straight into the lens.

She clasps her hands in a classic gesture of offering – presentation? display? – holding a small woven basket of flowers that sprays shapes and shadows across her left shoulder where a motif – a butterfly? – seems to hover.

There is a curious play of shadows here, so fugitive they seem to be hiding even from themselves.

Light falls from the top-left, the spectral whiteness of her body offset by her taller shadow-self cast against the chain-patterned drapes that frame her. Another soft-edged shadow bisects the radio and its deer. Are we looking into this room from a threshold? The patterns foreshorten the depth of the room. The fabric screen of the radio cabinet is a memory of cinema and an augury of television, its lateral dials and row of square buttons crafting the cabinet into a lickerish monster.

Does the speaker cabinet play? What music or voices surround this girl? I see spring, an Easter festival perhaps. Or a wedding. Yet the fugitive greyness is the equivalent of a shiver produced by a cool breeze on bare arms, not quite warm enough for yellow sun.

But wait.

Found image from *Tundmatu*, 2017

Here is another image, the same insipid grey, the same diamond-print wallpaper. Portrait orientation now, a young girl stands elevated in a room, low light and slow shutter rendering details duplicitous and fugitive. Compositionally dead-centre, something hovers around her head and cascades around her ears. She appears to stand on a sofa, a cushion near her left foot and a ghost of one to her right. Stains or shadows occupy the bottom left; the fragment of a round table covered in a cloth juts into frame at bottom left. A painting can be seen behind her left shoulder, the dark silhouette of a figure – human? animal? – in a wooded landscape.

Her dress with its motifs dotting the skirt is short, its hem grazing her upper thighs. Her legs are bare and exposed, and she is cut off at the ankles. Her arms hang down at her sides, angling slightly out at the elbows and bracketing the slight flare of her skirt. The fingers on her left hand pinch the handle of a tiny woven basket filled with flowers. In this image, she wears a black, bandit-style mask with crudely-cut eye slits.

It is clearly the same girl, but the effect now is less spring than sinister. A sudden shift from light to dark, a slip into the illicit from an archetype of girl-child innocence to misplaced erotica.

The kind of image that makes us question the intentions of the unseen image-maker.

Tender
Unconscious
Nascent
Desiring
Masks
Apparitions... Anxieties... Alignments
Threatening
*Unknowns*²

Through this pairing of scenes in which similar elements conspire to evoke desire and discomfort, we enter the affective realm of James Webb. It is a realm that demands that we attend to the effects, labour and transformative potential of voices, and the rich spectrum of utterances, tones, languages and materialities they embody.

Talking to Things

A long-time recorder of the external world, James Webb has been talking to things lately. He has been asking questions of *inter alia*, silenced bells and abandoned photographs,³ two kinds of things associated with religious and secular ritual, the continuing bonds of kith and kinship, designed to call out over time and distance, eliciting our attention.

The sounds these things make may not be immediately audible, the bodies that produce them not obviously visible. Surrogate objects and architectures may be summoned as host vessels. Talking to things is close in spirit to talking *through* and *with* things. Ventriloquism, demonstration. Teaching and performing. Voice as illusion. The trick is in listening to what might be said in return. Trees in a given city might (secretly) host recordings of non-native birds; neither Webb nor the birds call these places ‘home’ and so *There’s No Place Called Home*, which began with Webb smuggling the recorded call of a Cape Robin into a tree in Kitakyushu (Japan) in 2004. This gesture has since been redesigned for several cities around the world and asks us to consider our politics of belonging and the gesture (implicit reciprocity) of playing host. Human and non-human voices have likewise been introduced into – and broadcast from – natural or man-made structures, expressed as lyrical neon

*This is my voice, but these are not my words*, 2015

things objects

*There’s No Place Called Home* (Kitakyushu), 2004



sign-sculptures (*There is a light that never goes out*), parsed into architectonic sound-images or transcribed, dissolved and stored in bottles.

Webb's artistic career is synchronous with the millennial turn. *Prayer* (2000) is the early work that has seen his combined training in copywriting, theatre and comparative religious studies inform a future methodology: *Prayer* has become a vehicle that enables him to establish transcultural conversations and record intimate expressions of faith in countries across the world. It has become emblematic of his desire to identify and engage the meshworks of difference and recognition, and to deploy these as the materials with which he crafts his multisensory encounters.

For in Webb's praxis, artworks function to stage an encounter, even when those within its ambit are unaware of anything out of the ordinary taking place. *The Autumn Project* (2005) is another indicative case of artwork-as-method, in which Webb balanced secrecy and absolute availability. Unannounced as anything other than an extraordinarily willing social partner, he accepted every invitation he received within a three-month period. To date, the only records of the project are an exhibition title-card and a YouTube clip of Brian Eno giving a lecture in which he mentions this work by "a friend in South Africa." Not bad for an invisible project, you might think, and the symmetry with Eno's own *Oblique Strategies*, developed exactly 30 years prior in the year of Webb's birth, is particularly satisfying.

Webb's interests embrace the occult, the arcane and the literary, equally alert to the techniques and legacies of Conceptualism and Minimalism as he is to the ethics of reciprocity and the affordances of invisibility. For him, the Brazilian theatre-maker Augusto Boal's (1931–2009) Theatre of the Oppressed and 'invisible theatre' is an enduring consideration. Webb's process is one of close attendance, mimicry, adding and subtracting and eventual distillation. He does not identify as a 'sound artist', and he rejects the idea of a 'viewer' in favour of the 'reader', clearly signalling his desire for active engagement and affective (perhaps even transformative) encounters. So, with these coordinates in place, a space is opened to consider several pathways through Webb's oeuvre that demonstrate his methods, which parallel my own interests: the interaction between voice and face, language and space, and death and time. In Webb's work, these operate not as a set of binaries in dialectical tension but as conditions of possibility articulated by his particular approach to architectonics, psychogeography and the acousmatic.

There is a light that never goes out
(isiZulu), 2015

Lefebvre ~ Ingold

16



Prayer (Stockholm), 2016

For this reader, these interests come together in *La Syzygie* (2016), an ambitious exercise in architectural literacy that produced a constellation of layered, evocative and playful sonic interventions that gesture to the secret life of a French opera house and its investments.

A syzygy is an alignment; it speaks of connections, correspondences and conjunctions, often made in opposition, with particular reference to language and space. In poetry, syzygy describes alliteration of the middle parts of words; in astronomy, an eclipse is a type of syzygy, which in turn may provide astrologers with vatic clues.

So, here I will attempt an alignment of selected works produced to date that demonstrate how gestures and experiments have become methodologies⁵ that enable Webb to work ambitiously across open systems of his own design, in which discrete works exude the quiet assurance of recognising their place in the mix.

Something appeared to be lying there in the slippages and ruptures of the otherwise seemingly smooth epistemological surfaces of this scientific rationality that threatened to reveal a gulf of ambivalence and unreason, if only my curiosities could be made to speak.⁴

Correspondence, whether with people or with other things, is a labour of love, of giving back what we owe to the human and non-human beings with which and with whom we share our world, for our own existence and formation.⁶

17

Setting Intentions

Nothing in Webb's oeuvre is entirely accidental or left completely to chance; each work represents an intense entanglement of activities, often involving close collaboration with members of a specific community, writers, performers and technical specialists. If chance plays a role here, you can be sure it is only permitted a limited agency within a tight set of conditions – what his collaborators bring to the conversation, for example. In *La Syzygie*, these collaborators included an architect, an astrologer, a theatre historian, the theatre's own technical director, a psychic and a psychologist, as well as writer Louis Viljoen, whose interpretation of Webb's interactions with his 'readers' shaped the work in essential ways.

As in all productive magic, an intention needs to be consciously set; 'open-season' games of fate have no desired effect or end in disaster.

Might we think about Webb's solo takeover of the Johannesburg Art Gallery – his 'metrospective' survey titled for the year of its presentation, *MMXII* (2012) – as a dress rehearsal for the French event? With Webb describing his Johannesburg sojourn as "a psychoanalysis of the building," I don't think it's too wild an idea.

Within the intensely elegant design of *MMXII*, in which Webb set up conversations between his work and others gleaned from the JAG's extensive but largely hidden collections,⁷ two works are particularly useful to consider as shadow signals. *Scream* (2008) sets the coordinates for the 'sound-image' that is his signature, in which the architectonic and acousmatic are key features. A protracted negotiation with Madrid's Reina Sofia museum allowed Webb to record their staff screaming at Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) – for what else is the correct response to such a canonical work of Western art history that remains so painfully apposite in today's maelstrom of global political violence? – but denied him permission to document the action in front of the painting. In presentation, the framed letter of permission hangs in an otherwise empty gallery, with hidden speakers broadcasting vocalised anguish. We cannot see the bodies that make these sounds, yet something of the architecture of the gallery in which they were recorded (hard marble floors) is brought into the JAG's more modest realm. Unlike other forms of direct action, a scream doesn't 'stick', but it certainly commands attention. As the first sound we make exiting the bodies of our mothers, it is probably the first time we hear ourselves.⁸

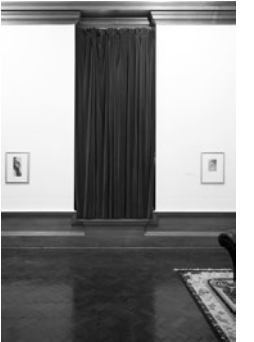
18



Scream, 2008

iconoclasm

Kathryn Smith



Untitled, 2012

In a gallery in which a window was veiled with blue velvet curtain, Webb installed a recording of a young woman coughing. The work makes a wry reference to Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi, whose visions may have been aided by a hallucinogenic gas present in the temple in which she resided (hence the coughing). But one cannot help also thinking of the Wizard of Oz, which parses the lessons learned from the uses of veils within Greek mythology as devices that both focus the attention and reveal illusions⁹ into popular entertainment.

Literally meaning 'an invisible sound source', the concept of the acousmatic was retooled by Pierre Schaeffer in the 1960s to describe the nature of electronic music, particularly where compositions are produced within machines, or sample sources are not revealed. Without an obvious body or instrument as origin, sounds are reduced to the realm of hearing alone. To withhold something is simultaneously to set up a lure; coupled with the non-verbal utterances of coughing and screaming and you have the basic ingredients for the project of psychoanalysis (next is laughter). But you also have set the parameters for the intense imagistic potential of the aural.

Mouths became more than entrances.¹⁰

19

In Webb's work, internal and external architectures assume both a curatorial and compositional significance. Photographic documentation of his work possesses a signature sparseness; objects or structures are isolated in largely unpeopled spaces. If we recognise 'architectonic' as describing the structural features of works of art and literature, the idea meaningfully extends into his sound-images, installations and surreptitious interventions, regardless of scale. It also provides a link to psychogeography, that under-utilised method proposed by Guy Debord as central to the intellectual and creative ambitions of the Situationist International in Paris, and which Merlin Coverley has described as engaging both architectural and archaeological desires in its uncovering of affective registers of space.

At the time of its first presentation (incidentally also at the JAG in 2006), I described Webb's *The Black Passage* – a quintessential early example of a sound-image – as producing an affective "thickening of space," its overall effect "a stunning interpretation of a vertical experience laid out horizontally."¹¹ A gut-wrenching piece, a pitch-black corridor led me down towards a wall of speakers emitting the screeching mechanical descent of



The Black Passage, 2006

Process still from *Threnody*, 2016

20

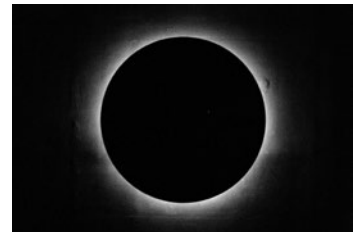
Process still from *Children of the Revolution*, 2013

Johannesburg's deepest mine shaft: Eurydice abandoned by Orpheus. My enduring memory is that of inhabiting death's violent imaginary, of threat given a form. But also darkly ecstatic.

Webb produced what I think of as its logical (if geometrically opposite) companion exactly a decade later: *Threnody* (2016) presents isiXhosa singer Zami Mdingi vocalising a phonetic interpretation of The Beatles' *Helter Skelter* played in reverse. The song is all throat and gut, pushed to an extreme by the technique which has the singer producing sounds by inhaling her own vocal power.

The choice of song enfolds two opposing forces of the revolutionary 1960s: the wholesome, feel-good pop culture mega-celebrity of the Fab Four from Liverpool in the first instance, and then its infamous association with the celebrity Tate-LaBianca murders in 1969 Los Angeles, orchestrated by musician-manqué Charles Manson. In his racist paranoid insanity, Manson interpreted The Beatles' pop lyrics as prophesy of a racial reckoning that it was his duty to avert, with cowardly and tragic consequences. For Webb, rearranging it as an unearthly lamentation is an opportunity for historical redress, a correction in two parts; undoing – eclipsing – both associations and presenting us with an aural exorcism, an incantation of a state of nascency. Webb first exhibited *Threnody* as a stark black circle – the speaker broadcasting the voice – within an even starker white gallery. The reference to Kazimir Malevich's *Black Circle* (1915) is on record. Bullet-hole, black hole; its effect is utterly unforgiving. In its later Paris showing, Webb presented it as a literal eclipse, the circular speaker backlit against a dark ground. This critical reconsideration of form allows the ethics of the work to flex their muscles, as Mdingi's voice transports us through a darkness peripherally lit.

Threnody sits in an arrangement with other works within Webb's oeuvre that I think of as an object-oriented architectonics. Its companion in perverted-pop-culture is *Children of the Revolution* (2013), in which Webb, with the help of a Nyanga choir, reconfigures T-Rex's anthem as an isiXhosa protest song presented on an arrangement of speakers modelled after Luigi Russolo's Intonarumori noise-generating machines. And *The Black Passage*, with which this discussion began, is the formal precedent of *Untitled (with the sound of its own making)* (2016). This more recent work responds in implicit and explicit ways to the wave of social protests across South Africa that began in 2015, focused on the campuses of higher education institutions and spilling

*Threnody*, 2016

21

*Children of the Revolution*, 2013*Untitled (with the sound of its own making)*, 2016

outwards.¹² In its shadow, it is difficult not to read *The Black Passage* as an augury of the Marikana massacre in 2012.

Each of these works are forceful formal assertions, tempered by a sensitivity to the affordances of masculine and feminine energies embodied in the voices and sounds Webb records, and the structural supports he designs for them. These works enact, in different ways, the simultaneous alignment (collapse) of the vertical and horizontal, the political and the cultural, the public and the intimate experienced as fearful symmetries, that is a defining feature of psychogeography. It is here we might locate the animating spirit of *La Syzygie*.

La Syzygie

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 Crucy, 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 Crucy and another with artist Hippolyte Bertaux, who is responsible for the painted dome and *trompe-l’oeuil* 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.¹³



La Syzygie, 2016

Medium: Where will she take us?

Crucy: To the nine corners.

Medium: Where is that?

Voice: Careful.

Bertaux: They are signposts and clues.

Voice: To where she lies?

Bertaux: Yes.

Voice: And where is that?

Bertaux: If I knew, I would not have painted it. I would have brought her home.

[...]

Voice: Why is he laughing?

Bertaux: Wouldn't you?

Voice: Why would I laugh?

Bertaux: You would laugh if you knew the journey will never end.

Renovation is a relatively short piece (3'30") in which a female voice personifies the process of architectural reconstruction after a fire destroyed the theatre in 1796, only eight years after its inauguration. It was reopened in 1811.

They began to hide my flaws: my creaks and echoes, my drips and cracks, the colour of my history and my place in the past. They replaced my tears with an electric hum and made light from my dark corners. My river no longer seeps into the carpet and my roots no longer breach the walls. They placed iron in my throat to curb my fiery breath. But I boil still and breathe through the wide eyes of children. Dropped notes and heavenly choruses are my manifestation. I am the pause at the end of a song, the moment before ecstasy is realised.

In *Liszt Comes*, susurrating voices reminisce about a performance by Franz Liszt, the fetching young pianist and arguably the first rock star of classical music, for whom the term ‘lisztomania’ exists. The dialogue evokes the rabid consumption of desire, a veritable miasma of pheromones in which a husband devours his wife’s dress; a priest and a widow are seen tasting the decorative scheme of the theatre (a surrogate for the body of the performer?); a silver gown, sans its owner, slithers towards the stage; a red substance drips from the ceiling; black liquid boils up from the orchestra pit and an orgiastic commingling of bodies, music, light and shadow plays out. The mental image it conjures is pure Stanley Kubrick.

Voice: What about me?
 Voice: We are the result...
 Voice: Of him playing...
 Voice: Of her smiling.

In *The Possessed Wife of a Theatre Patron*, the women enthralled to Liszt seem to have become the building themselves, capable of consuming those within and embedding their remains in the masonry.

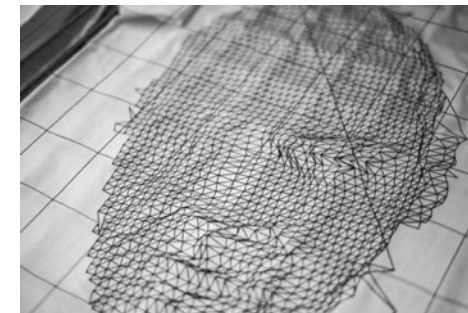
WOMAN: You are sitting in me. I have allowed you in.
 MAN: We are in the theatre.
 WOMAN: That is what I have made you believe.
 MAN: What part of you are we in now?
 WOMAN: My voice.
 MAN: Your mouth? Your throat?
 WOMAN: You are already swallowed. And soon I will digest you.
 MAN: What will you do with us then?
 WOMAN: What I did with the others.
 MAN: What did you do to the others?
 WOMAN: I made history from their flesh. Echoes from their bones. And fire from their lives.

These impressionistic interventions play in the round as multi-channel compositions whilst guests are seated in the auditorium. To arrive there, however, one would need to run the gauntlet of the acerbic banter of *L'esprit de l'escalier*, an imagined dialogue between the statues of tragedian Pierre Corneille (1606-1684) and comedian Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, 1622-1673) situated on either side of an internal staircase. 'L'esprit d'escalier' is a French expression used in English, but is apparently relatively unknown in France. Translated as 'staircase wit' (but also evoking the anima of the staircase itself) it refers to the witty comeback that arrives too late in one's mind when one has left a conversation and is already halfway up the stairs.

The whispered dialogue between 'Coco' and 'Momo' references their opposing interests. Technically, the use of hyper-directional Acouspade speakers has the effect of ventriloquism or 'throwing' the voice: the statues are made to speak by projecting sound towards them, which is then returned as the sound 'breaks' on the object's surface. And, of course, Crucy's

surrounding urban design scheme echoes the respective positions of each statue: the streets running alongside each side of the theatre are named Rue Corneille and Rue Molière, respectively. On Corneille's side, there is an arthouse cinema. On the more popular Molière's, a burger joint.

The narratives that *La Syzygie* has discovered and accrued around its making could fill a book-length manuscript with apophenic levels of occult conspiracy. It's worth engaging Webb on the topic for these stories alone. But despite the months of research, scriptwriting, recording and stage-crafting, what *La Syzygie* represents is a coalescing of spirit and intention that gets to the heart of Webb's interest in voice, space and embodiment; the psychological *situation* encountering an architectural *event*. Here, a building becomes a body, a lens, a monument, a laboratory. It recalls the genius of the Enlightenment polymaths who figured they could just as well design architectural structures on a scale that would allow them to undertake physics experiments and other observational projects on a grand scale.¹⁴ In their hands, buildings were scientific instruments – the double oculi of the new St. Paul's Cathedral designed by Hooke and Wren echoes the structure of a microscope. The charting of stars and the perfecting of clocks established maritime exploration and conspired to give rich European nations the edge in the 'discovery' and control of the world's natural resources. These stories are part of the fabric of this theatre, which was designed by an architect from a family of shipbuilders and is most likely a ship in disguise.



ElectricDeluxe_Speedf_Zeefdruk_12.
 Found image.

In blending archival retrieval, oral history and professional consultation with classical and personal mythology, *La Syzygie* represents a methodological resumé for Webb: "*La Syzygie* was imagined as a historical echo (distorted and amplified by the acoustics of the theatre, of course), as well as a séance, a series of confessions, a somniloquy, a drunken ramble," he explains.¹⁵ Its close attention to the minutiae of detail is where, as we know, the devil makes home.

Concealed Faces

Can we think of Webb's crafting of spaces between silence and speech as related in some way to the theatrical device of prosopopoeia – endowing abstractions with personhood, or investing absent, imagined or 'dead' things with a voice? It is contiguous with his interests in the oracular.

Voice: Who do you seek?

Medium: The one with the answers.

Voice: What question do you ask?

Medium: Is it a palace, a monument, a tribute? Is it a tomb?

Thomas Keenan has made a provocative link between prosopopoeia and the function of the expert witness in forensic matters, whose job it is to get things to tell us what happened.¹⁶ In *Imaginary Appetites* (2015), exhibited as part of *Xenagogue* at the Hordaland Kunstsenter in Norway, Webb arranged two delicious monster plants in a gallery with radios nestled between their leaves, aerials shooting assertively upwards as the plants' tendrils snaked lazily across the floor. The radios were programmed to scan continuously between stations, never settling on any one channel. Once part of the permanent display of Chinese artefacts at KODE Museums of Bergen, the plants were witnesses to two robberies of objects from this collection in 2010 and 2013, respectively. Plants are most certainly sentient things, responding to light, voice, moisture and ambience, and undergoing changes accordingly, for better or worse. Now, they were in a witness protection programme of Webb's design, with new jobs, in a new home.¹⁷ The plants framed an open trapdoor in the gallery floor, leading down to a sound piece installed in the basement below. Designed for Holosonic speakers, *This is my voice, but these are not my words* 'breaks' against the bodies of exhibition visitors in complete darkness.

Prosopography – to write the face – is the description of physical appearance. The etymology of the word (Greek: *prosōpon*) is intimately attached to the face as an embodiment of personhood. The face is the place from which voices emanate. When the face is unseen, absent or dysfunctional in some way, we are unable to read facial expression as the primary space of interaction (hence, *interface*). While we may not be able to read an accompanying facial expression, voices embody arousal, and therefore have the potential to induce affect. Working with voice alone eliminates a primary aspect of human interaction and therefore relationality, but this does not

mean intimacy is necessarily sacrificed. Notwithstanding correlations between voice perception and attractiveness, people without the ability to use their faces 'normally' may rejoice in radio, as no other bodily expression may be relied upon for visual cues as to how the performance should be read.

Seldom does Webb let us see the faces that produce the voice. Working acousmatically, he disembodies the voice and makes objects speak instead. Amplifying voices or instruments with speakers is the first level of acousmatic mediation; scheduling has recently become a second, introducing an explicit element of time into how and when a work may be experienced, controlled by astronomical (solar, lunar and planetary) clocks. With his direct address to objects – silenced bells, a photograph with an obliterated face – Webb collapses the acousmatic divide. As "the most human of effects," interiority is also the most architectural, Mladen Dolar writes.¹⁸ "Silence works as the efficient support which endows the few chosen words with their proper weight."¹⁹

By interviewing objects, Webb demonstrates a foundation of new materialist thinking, which is concerned with the power of non-human agency. Not exactly animistic, we can think of it as an ecology of interaction between ourselves and the world we inhabit: things act on us as much as we believe we are acting on them. Embracing technology as a means to an embodied end, the hardware that records the material Webb uses to craft his sound-images mimics human anatomy; the devices themselves speak of a bodily presence. There are many concepts that address the idea that inanimate objects possess a life, from Marcel Mauss's "sympathetic magic" to Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter". But the Polynesian/Austronesian concept of *mana*, closely linked with taboo, seems the most appropriate here. Described as a generalised or impersonal supernatural force or power that is concentrated in objects or persons, *mana* can be transmitted or inherited. As a concept, it describes certain techniques Webb uses, but also the capabilities of the technology he employs: focused speakers throw sound towards objects that provide a surface that sends the sound back to us, the listeners; transducers cause objects to vibrate by the force of sound in the drum that 'plays itself', animated by the sound of Webb's snoring.²⁰

After all this, it seems inappropriate to subject Webb's project, heterogeneous in both heart and mind, to so much writing. As David L. Martin suggests,



Imaginary Appetites, 2015

following the radical librarian Georges Bataille, the act of writing, of describing, sits in opposition to heterogeneity. Instead, it functions like the gaze of the Medusa, “turning curiosity to stone.” The desire to exclude the heterogeneous from discourse (that is to say, scientific knowledge) is, in Bataille’s view, “a general condition of knowledge.”²¹ Violence, excess, delirium and madness are elements of heterogeneity that surface when the laws of homogenous society are broken. Martin reminds us of Heidegger’s caution, that “every effort of knowledge production is necessarily accompanied by a simultaneous and unavoidable act of concealment. In this manner, the production of knowledge is, from the very outset, but one side of a coin; the flipside of which consists of a process of masking and unknowing.”²²

So much of our modern and contemporary concerns have come to rest on the scopic regime of vision; this is the regime of empirical, positivist science and most art, with roots in the Enlightenment project. It is our primary representational register that is used to celebrate, but also to denigrate, the human experience. Language is what we summon to describe the things we have seen; it often falls short of the task but, in this failure, it starts to construct myths.

Is working with sound an act of resistance then? Webb’s practice relies on reciprocal relationality but opens up the practice of socially-engaged ways of working to other intimacies without broad political claims. He is not a guide to the familiar, but a canny stranger who sets himself adrift, discarding a prescribed map or set of co-ordinates, shaping his findings accordingly and offering them up to us.

Webb’s works embody the co-ordinates to reimagine the journeys of their making, sometimes plainly, sometimes in a more occulted fashion. Transference and countertransference exist as essential processes between analyst and analysand and, so it is here, in the space Webb crafts between desire and sublimation, aesthetic restraint and baroque drama, a shoring up of the self and then unexpected intimacy. Our language about sound is still fairly limited, yet we recognise the performative speech of the law and also that of magicians. Webb operates in the interstices, seeking the clarity of a post-hypnotic state. If he is unnerved by art’s commodification of art, he recognises the affordances of its spaces – the gallery, the museum – as dedicated to its display, staging and reception. This is a benefit, an expression

of an intention of what should take place here. Encounter, receive, interact and accept all the contingencies and discomforts that come with any interpersonal exchange. Yes, getting nothing out of it is a possibility. You owe each other nothing at all, but you have shown up, which surely contains the kernel of interest, of attention?

I want to cut out my tongue and let you hold onto it for me
Because without my skull to amplify my sounds, it might get boring.
I’ve got the wit of the staircase with atomic clock precision
And the phases of the moon directing all of my decisions, like this.²³

Presenting the spirit of a process or work creates space for discursive wandering. Benjamin said, *I have nothing to say; only show.*²⁴

MAN: The show has not yet begun.

WOMAN: It began centuries ago. You are only seeing it now.

WOMAN: I will not abide by your laws.

MAN: Who do you obey?

WOMAN: The darkness that sits behind the sun.

MAN: The devil?

WOMAN: The critic.

Listen for the smile in the silences.

Notes

- 1 Trans. Orpheus's Pain. c.1880. Accession number JAGS105.
- 2 *tundmatu* Estonian for 'unknown'. The word is used to label boxes of photographs donated to the Fotomuuseum of Tallinn by the city's citizens. Some of these images, among them the two included here, informed the script for *Tundmatu* (2017) by Louis Viljoen, conceptualised and directed by Webb for the group exhibition *Image Drain* curated by Anthea Buys for the 4th Tallinn biennale of photography.
- 3 *A series of personal questions addressed to a set of medieval church bells in the Swedish History Museum* (2016), and *A series of personal questions posed to a photograph marked "F. Freiberg. 1859" in the Foto Muuseum of Tallinn* (2017).
- 4 David L. Martin. 2011. *Curious Visions of Modernity: Enchantment, Magic, and the Sacred*. Cambridge, Mass/London: MIT Press. xiv.
- 5 I say 'methodology' with the ghost of Tim Ingold (2016: 10) berating me (in a stage whisper) that method is nothing but an affective armour designed to protect the notional 'objectivity' of inquiry, shielding the researcher "from direct sensory contact with materials." What Ingold is doing, of course, is trying to reclaim the values of wonder, respect, commitment to curiosity and gratitude (in a word, *love*) that he recognises has been stripped from the contemporary scientific project and which we need to reclaim through art. He is appealing to the spirit of 'Goethean science', dismissed by the technocrats of innovation, that "they should spend time with the objects of their attention, observe closely and with all their senses, draw what they observed, and endeavour to reach a level of mutual involvement or coupling, in perception and action, such that observer and observed become all but indistinguishable." The (re)searcher's own presence is "an essential prerequisite for learning from what the world has to offer us", *not* "a source of observer bias to be reduced at all cost." Instead of regarding art and science as divorced projects forced to live apart, as if under restraining orders, restoring each to their proper place as complementary methods of inquiry into the mechanisms and investments of life itself is an ethical and political imperative. This is to insist on recognising the connectivity between ourselves and our world that permits us temporary tenancy. See Ingold, T. 2016. 'From science to art and back again: The pendulum of an anthropologist'. ANUAC, 5(1):5-23. ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-2237.
- 6 *ibid.*, 10.
- 7 Works included a neo-classical sculpture of Orpheus, Japanese ukiyo-e prints (c.17thc-19thc), a Nelson Mukhuba (1925-1987) sculpture and a painting by Edouard Manet (1832-1883), as well as others that Webb requested but did not exhibit. Despite not being on display, his somewhat passive aggressive action ensured the work would remain on-site during the exhibition; it could not be loaned out. In some ways, this recalls the theft of the Mona Lisa by Vincenzo Peruggia on 21 August 1911. Peruggia kept the painting in his room, hidden in a cupboard or under the bed, just happy in the knowledge that he possessed it. See Leader, D. 2002. *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops Us from Seeing*. London: Faber and Faber.
- 8 Webb attempted to donate an edition of the work to the Reina Sofia (in the form of a digital file and a copy of their original letter of permission), but the institution politely refused, citing storage problems.
- 9 Pythagorus and Aristotle taught from behind a curtain, so that the students wouldn't focus on their faces but rather on their words. Many things can be said about the contest between artists Zeuxis and Parrhasios (the primal male artist ego-fest), but the real lesson is against the lure and seduction of illusionism. See Leader, op.cit.
- 10 Cole, J. 1998. *About Face*. Cambridge MA/London: The MIT Press. 44.
- 11 *MTN New Contemporaries*. 2006. Reviewed for Art South Africa magazine. Available: <http://artafricamagazine.org/mtn-new-contemporaries-2/>.
- 12 Exhibited with *Threnody* on Webb's solo exhibition 'Ecstatic Interference' (blank projects, 2016), it is presented as an architectural monolith of 15 speaker cabinets each measuring one cubic metre, stacked 3 x 5 and powered with solar energy, broadcasting the sounds of hands beating on doors. Harnessing the sun's energy to enable this work to function is a considered move in a context where resources like electricity are unevenly distributed, expensive and increasingly scarce and unreliable, and of course, sets up a consideration of the effects (and affects) of the moon as embodied in *Threnody*.
- 13 The other two séances were with Jean-Louis Graslin, the tax collector-owner of the building after whom the theatre is named, and one of the people involved in the theatre's construction.
- 14 Jardine, L. 2000. *Ingenious Pursuits: Building the Scientific Revolution*. London: Abacus.
- 15 Webb, James "Re: Some thoughts and some questions." Message to Kathryn Smith. 31 December 2017. Email.
- 16 Keenan, T. 2014. 'Getting the dead to tell me what happened: Justice, prosopopoeia and forensic afterlives.' In Forensic Architecture (ed.). 2014. *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*. Berlin: Sternberg.
- 17 More recently, Lawrence Abu Hamdan has demonstrated the notional forensic potential of object-witnesses, including plants, in his *Convention of Tiny Movements* (2017). Available: <http://lawrenceabuhamdan.com/new-page/>.
- 18 Dolar, M. 2006. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge MA/London: The MIT Press. 10.
- 19 Dolar, 154.
- 20 *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. 2017. Basler drum, transducer speaker, audio.
- 21 Martin, xvi.
- 22 Martin, 193, note 3.
- 23 White, J. 2014. 'That Black Bat Licorice'. *Lazaretto*. Third Man Records/XL/Columbia.
- 24 Martin, ix.

Prayer, 2000 (ongoing)

Prayer is a multi-channel sound installation comprising recordings of vocal worship from individuals who belong to the various faith and spiritual affinities in the city where the piece is exhibited.

All the prayers collected in the process are included in the artwork, and the recordings are broadcast simultaneously from twelve floor-based speakers on a red carpet. Each speaker transmits its own separate selection of prayers, arranged consecutively and looped, so that when all speakers play at the same time an ever-changing sound environment is created.

The audience may wander freely through the installation experiencing the polyphony of voices from all the speakers at once, or alternatively, kneel down to listen to individual prayers broadcast from any particular speaker.

All participants receive copies of their own recordings, and are credited in the gallery text. Furthermore, all contributors are invited to a special vernissage of the artwork to celebrate the process and to meet each other.

First exhibited in Cape Town in 2000, each iteration of the artwork is created in situ. The collaborating religions have included, but are not limited to, most denominations of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, as well as traditional and new spiritual movements. At the time of publication, 10 city-specific versions of *Prayer* have been produced and include Chicago, Johannesburg, and Stockholm.



ii

iii



Above and opposite:
Prayer (Johannesburg), installation views at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2012





A series of personal questions, 2016 (ongoing)

In this ongoing series, the artist poses spoken questions to selected inanimate objects as if they were sentient beings able to respond. The artwork proposes that each object is more than the sum of its parts and what it represents, and that each object would have had its own unique set of experiences.

The installation takes the form of the presentation of the particular item, e.g. an antique Roman coin, and an audio speaker installed above where the audience would ideally be situated in relation to the object on display. The audio speaker broadcasts a series of questions written specifically for, and addressed to that object. Each question is left hanging, unanswered for 10-seconds before the next question is posed. The effect is that the audience can look to the object for information, and possibly answer the questions internally themselves.

The dynamics of the piece place the artist and audience in a position to learn from the object. The form of address seeks to honour the object and create a space for it to communicate in its own way. The questions – and the projected, internal answers of the audience – furthermore serve to complicate the piece, transforming the standard conditions of display, and opening up new interpretations, parallel histories, and conceptual possibilities.

Previous spread and above: *A series of personal questions addressed to a set of Rorschach Psychodiagnostic plates*, found plate and installation view respectively at Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, 2019

Opposite: *A series of personal questions addressed to a Chewa mask from a private collection*, installation view at Norrtälje Konsthall, 2018





40



A series of personal questions addressed to a Roman coin, obverse and reverse details, 2019

The following are a series of personal questions addressed to a Silver Denarius minted in Rome in 70CE during the reign of the Emperor Vespasian.

I address the coin directly..

To whom am I speaking?

How would you like to be addressed?

What part of the earth are you from?

What were you worth when you first circulated?

What recollections do you have from the time before you were marked with another's face?

What part of you remains buried in the earth?

Whose stories do you tell?

How many times have you brought good luck?

How do you feel about both sides of you having the power to determine fate?

When did you last buy a day's labour?

Which exchange felt right?

Who and what are you hiding?

Whose message did you deliver?

What did you hear of the Emperor Nero's reign?

What can you tell us about the destruction of Beit HaMikdash, the Sanctified House, otherwise known as The Second Temple, in the Roman year of 823, the year you were minted?

What do you make of the world today?

What have you learnt over the past 2-millennia?

How do you differentiate yourself from others?

How else could your history have been written?

What struggles of power have you been at the centre of?

Whose secrets have you kept?

How much silence have you paid for?

What immaterial things did you make happen?

What do you hold sacred?

What reparations have you been part of?

Whose unfulfilled dreams have you felt the weight of?

What is the price of blood?

41

Excerpt from A series of personal questions addressed to a Roman coin, 2019



Threnody, 2016



iv

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.

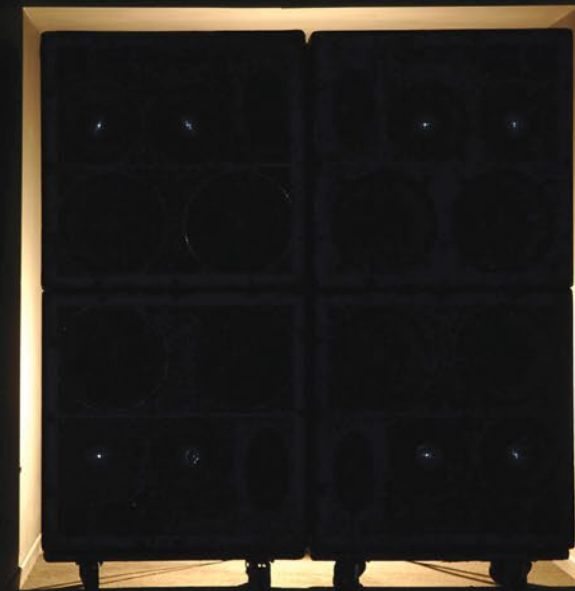


The Black Passage, 2006

In *The Black Passage*, a sound recording of the empty elevator cage descending into and ascending out of the South Deep gold mine is broadcast from a wall of speakers installed at the end of a narrow, 20m black tunnel. Visitors enter the long, confined space and are drawn towards the frame of golden light emitted from a location behind the speakers at the rear of the tunnel. The sound is diffused at high volume and can be experienced as both an auditory and a physical sensation. The scenography of the square of black speakers framed with light is a reference to Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915).

The South Deep mine is located south-west of Johannesburg, and at the time of recording was the deepest twin-shaft gold mine in the world.

Opposite: *The Black Passage*, installation view at 9th Biennale of Lyon, 2007







Children of the Revolution, 2013

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 Lugoty, Siyabulela Qwabe, Thembulethu Bolo, and Ziyanda Siqwepu.

The audio component of this installation was created for the exhibition *Imaginary Fact*, the South African pavilion at the 2013 Biennale di Venezia.



vi

Opposite: Process still from *Children of the Revolution, 2013*
 Above: *Children of the Revolution, installation view detail at blank projects, Cape Town, 2014*
 Previous spread: *Children of the Revolution, installation view at blank projects, Cape Town, 2014*



Untitled (with the sound of its own making), 2016

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 Mkhlasibe, Jason Jardim, Ross Campbell, Thokozani Mhlambi, and William Mosima.

Speaker box design and construction: Brett Netherton (Cape Town) and Nobby Stephens (Wakefield).



vii

Above: *Untitled (with the sound of its own making)*, installation view at blank projects, Cape Town, 2016

Opposite: *Untitled (with the sound of its own making)*, installation view at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, 2016





The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, 2017

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.

The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, installation view at Atelier Mondial, Basel, 2017



Invisibilia, 2018

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.

Invisibilia, installation view at SPACES, Cleveland, 2018

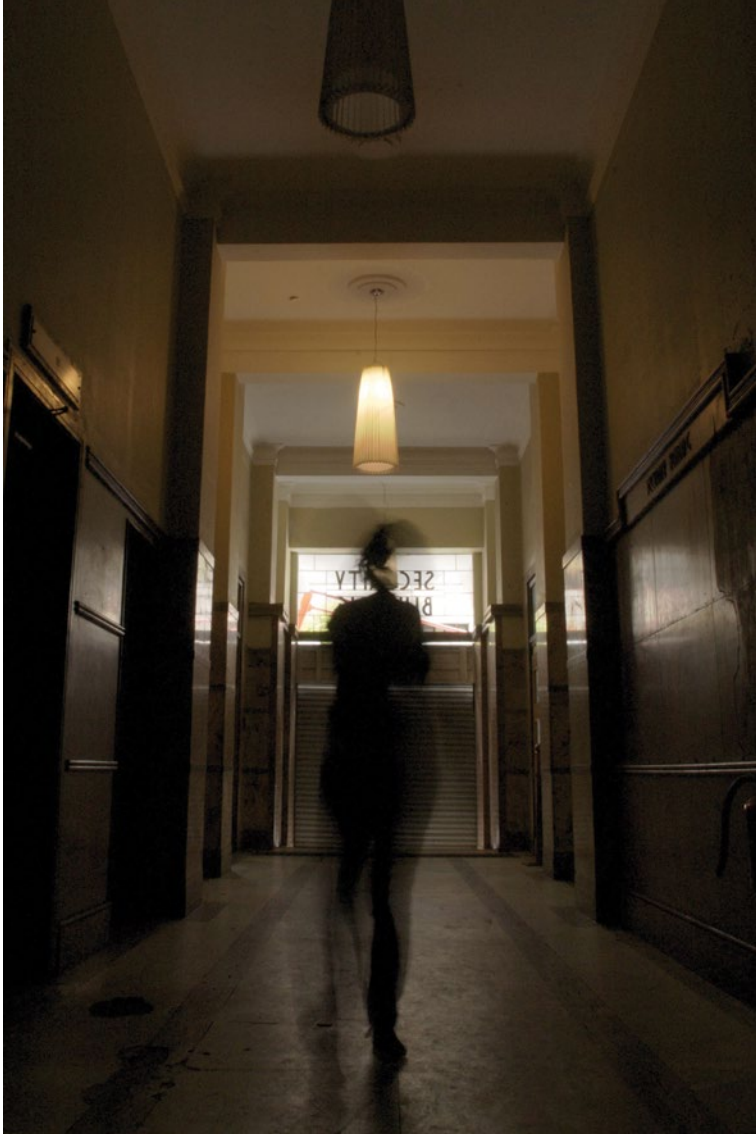


Friends of friends, 2018

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.

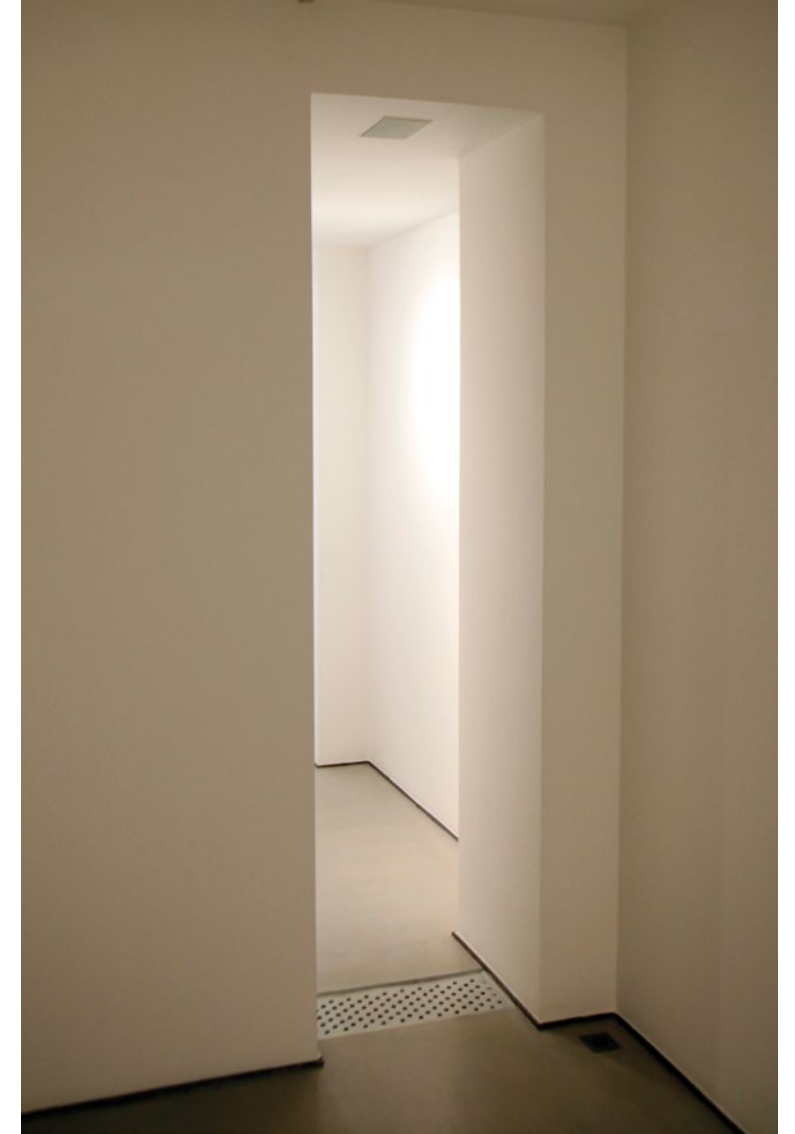
Above: *Friends of friends*, installation view at SPACES, Cleveland 2018
Opposite: *Friends of friends*, installation view at Galerie Imane Farès, 2019



Black Light District, 2010

For *Black Light District*, the electrical lighting of a space is connected to a motion sensor so that when visitors walk under an overhead light, the light switches off. The artwork allows for visitors to always walk in darkness. The title is a homage to the one time alias for the 1996 incarnation of the English band, Coil.

Black Light District, installation view at Cloak & Dagger, Johannesburg, 2010



Visions of the afterlife, 2007 (ongoing)

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.

Visions of the afterlife, installation view at Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, 2015

Hello. I am here and grateful to you for allowing this to take place. I have been trying to contact you. The two of us are twins, we have a connection.

What I have to say to you is if you work with confidence, people will trust you unconditionally. You need to make your audience think that you know everything. This is the secret to creating illusions. This is the way I did it.

The general public doesn't have the capacity to understand your work. You are too refined. You need to say things in a profound way. People don't understand if you say it nicely. If you want someone to leave you alone, you have to tell them, "bugger off." If you have self-confidence you can make your voice count. If you stand back, you will never be able to do it.

I must say that I think you don't sell yourself enough. I made things happen because of my arrogance. I was bombastic. I pissed off a lot of people. And I am happy I did it.

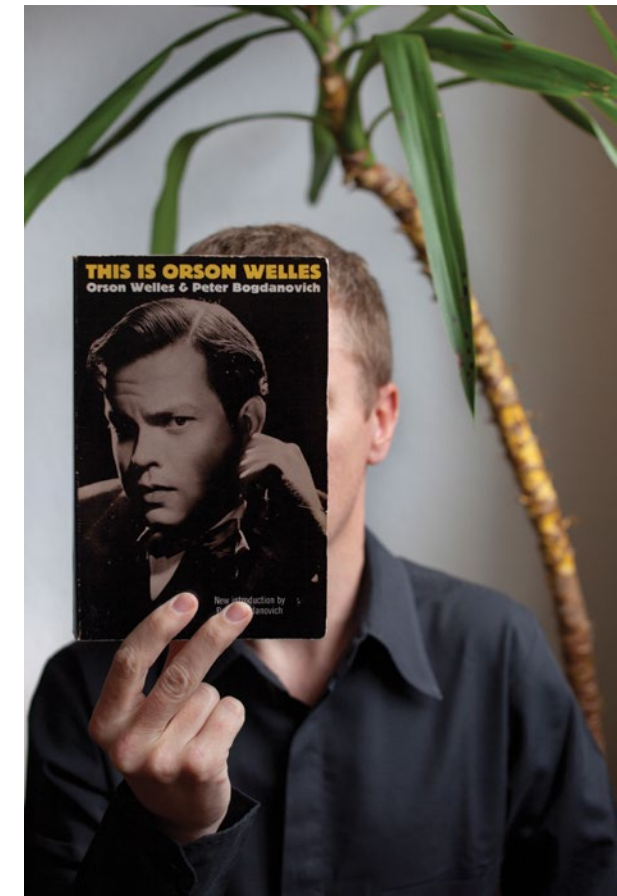
In every life there are predators and victims. You need to become a predator. I want you to think of yourself as a gladiator.

I didn't give a damn about what people thought. I was rude and it worked. I tried everything, and I don't suggest you need to do the same. Just continue to do things, your things. Listen to yourself. And write. Never stop writing. You should be writing a book. Writing will be the teaching of your ideas. People will treat you differently. Everything will start changing for you. Just don't invest money.

Your own voice is exceptionally strong. You should try film: you will be financially successful in three years.

I will be working closely with you; I have been and will continue to do so.

Call me if you need me.



Telephone Voice, 2011

In *Telephone Voice*, the artist approached a clairvoyant to contact Orson Welles so that he could interview him. The resulting interview was transcribed into the first person and recorded by a voice actor. Conceptually, the deceased American auteur directs the clairvoyant and through her the actor, who in turn influences the listener. The title refers to a style of telephonic enunciation often used to convey not only clarity but also a sense of status.

The artwork was curated by Rahma Khazam and commissioned for the Palais de Tokyo's *Répondeur*, a monthly, curated show where artists make works for the museum's answering machine.

Voice actor: Adrian Galley



L'AN 1788
LE 13^{ME} DU MOIS DE
LOUIS XVI
LE BIENFAISANT
CE MONUMENT EST
LE DON DE
LOUIS JEAN BAPTISTE
DE BOURBON
DUC DE FERTÉ
GOUVERNEUR
LE COMTE DE TROISSANDS
LE DUC DE CERES
DE BRANDEBOURG
GOUVERNEUR DE
CHATEAUBRIANT
DE BERTRAND
DE MOLLEVILLE

FOURLORS MAIRE
PIERRE RICHARD
FERVANCHERE
CHEVINS
UX DUC DE MAIRIE
RIES GERBIER
ODINDESTANTES
NEGESLIN
UMAR DE RIEUX
DES URBAIN MESLE
HURDU ROY SINDIC
HILLADRE HENRY
JUD DUTLEISS
LES DESSINS
KIN CRUCY ARCHITECTE
VER DENANTES





La Syzygie, 2016

For *Le voyage à Nantes* festival, the artist invited selected local specialists to visit the Théâtre Graslin, a resplendent 18th-century opera house, and read the space through the lens of their own respective disciplines. The specialists included an architect, astrologer, historian, psychic, psychologist, and the theatre's technical director. Each brought their own points of view, questions, and expertise to the building, translating the space into a series of spoken observations. These, as well as other cartographic, literary, and photographic research were shared with the playwright Louis Viljoen, who was commissioned to write a script for actors to voice.

Referencing conditions and techniques of séance, exorcism, and psychoanalysis, the recorded voices were diffused along with other sonic elements and lighting sequences in and around the theatre. The audience was seated in the auditorium where the space was transformed into a psycho-architectural environment of events, dreams, and histories, both fictitious and factual, and all suggested by the magnificent building itself.

The invited specialists included Xavier Fouquet, architect; Bernard Duchatelle, astrologer; Christine Gross, historian; Stéphane Barbreau, psychic; Daniel Dumoulin, psychologist; and Régis Vasseur, technical director of the Théâtre Graslin.

Voice actors: Mélodie Abad, Olivier Birene, Maxime Deluc, Didier Moestus, Nadege Sanz, Marie Roux, and Jean Pierre Whitfield.

Operatic aria sung by Athenkosi Hoyi and Xolane Marman.

Franz Liszt's "Wilde Jag" performed by Coila-Leah Enderstein.

Above: Site view at the Théâtre Graslin auditorium, Nantes
Previous spread: The façade of the Théâtre Graslin, Nantes

Opposite: Hippolyte Berteaux's painting on the ceiling of the Théâtre Graslin auditorium



The Ninth Of Eight, 2016

A loudspeaker attached to the front gates of the Théâtre Graslin broadcasts the question "Ce que vous voyez?" ("What do you see?") onto the Place Graslin public square intermittently throughout the day.

The piece was made as part of the artist's *La Syzygie* project and connects to the genesis of his investigation into the Théâtre Graslin when he noticed that there were only eight of the nine Muses of Greek mythology depicted on the façade of the building. This artwork returns the question to the site where the artist began the process.

Voice actor: Mélodie Abad

The Ninth Of Eight, installation view at the Théâtre Graslin, Nantes, 2016



L'esprit de l'escalier, 2016

Flanking the foyer staircase of the Théâtre Graslin are statues of the French playwrights Pierre Corneille (1606–1684) and Jean-Baptiste "Molière" Poquelin (1622–1673). They were sculpted by Dominique Molknecht in 1829.

As part of *La Syzygie*, the artist wanted to consider what kind of conversation would be occurring between these two sculptures that have sat next to each other for over 187 years. To this end, the South African playwright Louis Viljoen was invited to script a conversation between the famous tragedian and comedian. The whispered script was recorded by Olivier Birene and Maxime Deluc and broadcast onto the statues using hyper-directional speakers so as to give the illusion of the sculpted figures actually speaking.

Above: *L'esprit de l'escalier*, installation view at the Théâtre Graslin, 2016
Following: Process still from *Ost*, Berlin, 2009



Resonance and Reverberation

Looking Back on the Art of James Webb

Sandra Klopper

James Webb is meticulously attentive to the role of contextual considerations – location, space, time of day (or night), the barely perceptible traces of historical events – in shaping viewers’ responses to his art. Sometimes insistently loud and disruptive, at others elusively wistful, his works encourage engagement, allowing audiences to participate actively in (re)imagining the layered worlds they evoke. Partly for this reason, his practice invites comparison with the principles of ‘resonance’ and ‘wonder’ that Greenblatt identified as critical to the experience of contemporary museum visitors. Proclaiming that agency is virtually inescapable, Greenblatt argues that when audiences form connections and formulate questions, they activate the power of the displayed object to reach out “beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which – as metaphor or more simply, as metonymy – it may be taken by the viewer to stand.” As with sound, these objects echo or reverberate; their unique voices induce wonder and, in the process, command “an exalted attention.”¹

69



Prayer (Chicago), 2018



There is a light that never goes out (Arabic), 2010

70

Prayer is one of many works in which Webb relies on the active participation of his audience. Undoubtedly his most widely acclaimed intervention, ten different versions have been installed since 2000 in Cape Town, Huddersfield, Bergen, Nottingham, Copenhagen, Birmingham, Johannesburg, Malmö and Stockholm, with the latest at the Art Institute in Chicago in 2018. A multi-channel installation of recordings of prayer and vocal worship from different religions closely associated with the cities in which the work is located, *Prayer* requires the viewer to move from one speaker to another to engage a polyphony of voices in an ever-changing sound environment that, in most cases, includes denominations of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism, as well as traditional and new religious. While, like some of Webb's works, *Prayer* brings to mind Hellerman's 1983 assertion that "hearing is another form of seeing",² in many of his subsequent installations the artist invites his audience to complete the work. Obvious examples include *All That Is Unknown* (2016), an infinite audio loop of two heartbeats pulsating from different



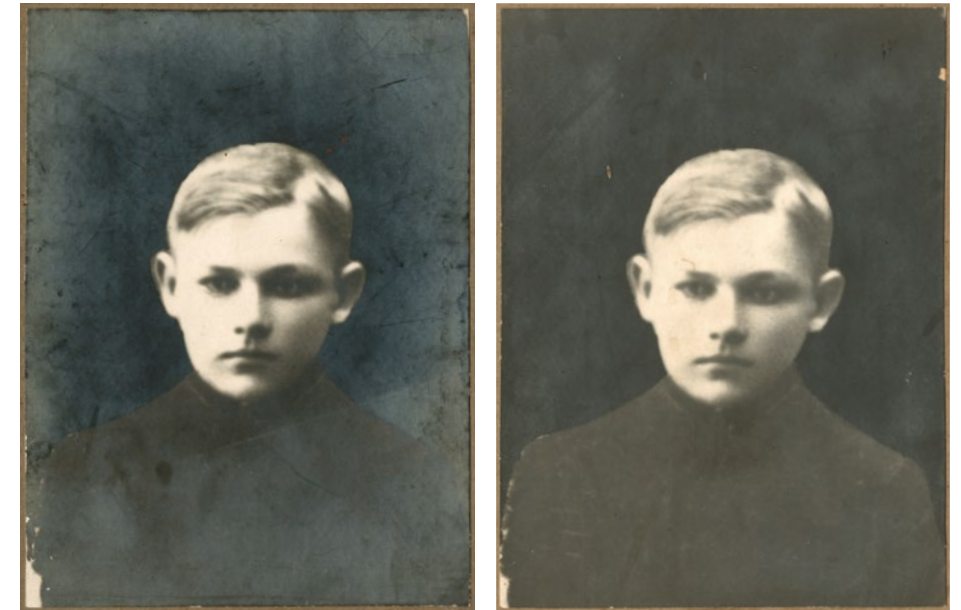
All That Is Unknown, 2016

71

ends of the same room, and *There is a light that never goes out*, arguably one of the artist's most evocative works to date. A neon sign that was originally translated into Arabic before being acquired by the Khalid Shoman Foundation in Amman in 2010, *There is a light that never goes out* has since appeared in other languages including, most recently, isiXhosa. Beginning with the intervention of the translator, these site-specific neon signs encourage multiple associations, thereby unleashing an open-ended loop of ideas and possible interpretations, much like the song by the English rock band, The Smiths, that stimulated the production of this work, in which guitarist Johnny Marr and singer Morrissey deliberately included ambiguous musical allusions to the Rolling Stones and the Velvet Underground. Importantly, installations such as *Prayer* and *There is a light that never goes out* – reinvented by the artist and reframed by new audiences with every additional commission – gradually take on a life of their own.



There is a light that never goes out (isiXhosa), 2017



Found images from *Tundmatu*, 2017

While the importance of nurturing productive dialogues between the viewer and the artwork is a foundational principle for Webb, so too is his concern to hone other connections between disparate communities, distant locations, the animate and inanimate, the past and the present, image and text, the spoken and the written word. Even so, he repeatedly reminds his audience that these links may be falteringly tenuous, simultaneously concealing and revealing the barely visible traces of another time, another place, another creative impulse, analogous to the *pentimenti* (sing. *pentimento*) that sometimes emerge through subsequent layers of paint applied to the surface of a painting. Derived from the Italian verb, *pentirsi*, meaning to repent, the term *pentimento* eloquently captures the complex, often ambivalent interplay between loss and renewal in much of Webb's work.

Tundmatu (2017), translated as 'unknown', is in some ways the clearest example of this impulse. Focusing on family photographs in the Fotomuseum of Tallinn, Estonia that have become dislocated from their historical roots, Webb's work initiates a multivocal dialogue with what Edwards and Hart aptly refer to as "discarded objects", photographs that have been moved from the private to the public domain, leaving "gossamer traces" from the past that are subject to reinterpretation with the passage of time.³ In *Tundmatu*, the artist invited the playwright Louis Viljoen to assist him in identifying connections and stories that the photographs might suggest, culminating in the narration of texts broadcast from a speaker system in the cellar of the museum, now an empty space that over time had served as a prison, a public lavatory and a homeless shelter. Effectively overlaying the photographs with tangential human accretions echoing through the 700 year old cellar, the narrator refers at one point to a mother's realisation that her daughter's metamorphosis has opened up an unbridgeable chasm between them: "This is the last time they could be human together."



A series of personal questions addressed to a photograph marked "F. Freiberg. 1859", 2017



L'esprit de l'escalier, 2016

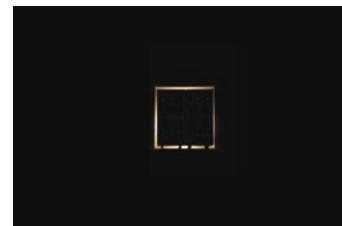
74

In a related intervention titled *A series of personal questions addressed to a photograph marked "F. Freiberg. 1859"*, Webb addresses a damaged ambrotype that in the 1960s was rubbed with alcohol, transforming the ephemeral record of the sitter's humanity into distorted traces from a lost world. Traces from the past also emerge in *Untitled (9th August)* (2005). This work consists of 75 text cards that were copied from the deceptively simple, matter-of-fact labels used to guide visitors through the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, which was established to memorialise the destruction of the city through displays of detritus from the cataclysmic 1945 event: mangled artefacts melted beyond recognition, a tattered garment ripped across the back as though slashed repeatedly with a sharp knife, a clock that stopped ticking as the bomb was dropped, just after 11am. Rather than guiding the viewer's response to the residual vestiges of the devastating explosion, Webb's texts embrace a new imaginary dislodged from the trauma of a particular time and place, but forever shaped by its historical reverberations.



Untitled (9th August), 2005

75



The Black Passage, 2006

In other works such as *L'esprit de l'escalier* (2016), *There's No Place Called Home* (2004–ongoing) and *The Black Passage* (2006), efforts to establish unimaginable connections across time, but also space, ultimately serve to underline the poignant fragility of all communication. In the former piece, which was included in *La Syzygie* (2016), Webb's multi-layered intervention at the Théâtre Graslin in Nantes that involved contributions by an architect, an astrologer, a theatre historian, the technical director of this 18th-century opera house, a psychic and a psychologist, his ongoing collaboration with the playwright Louis Viljoen culminated in the production of a script documenting an imaginary conversation between Dominique Molknecht's statues of Corneille and Molière, which flank the staircase in the theatre's foyer. Mute and inanimate for close to 200 years, the sculptures engage in a barely audible, whispered interaction that is peppered by squabbling insults. Although apparently affirming the potential for communication to cement the links that bind them, their encounter repeatedly threatens to break down after



There's No Place Called Home (Guangzhou), 2005



There's No Place Called Home (Great Wall), 2005



I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (Les Fleurs du mal), 2017

76

Molière sets the tone early on by telling Corneille that he could “fart as a form of conversation. That’s all you’re worth.” Each hears but ultimately fails to listen to the other. In *There’s No Place Called Home*, Webb’s multiple installations of foreign bird calls and songs broadcast from speakers hidden in local trees, this gap between hearing and listening masks the displacement of the sounds filtering through the trees and, in doing so, supports the illusions of connection and continuity. When in 2006 Webb installed *The Black Passage* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, his recording of the jarringly cacophonous descent of the empty elevator cage at South Deep, one of the world’s deepest mines, the audience was plunged into darkness. Abruptly robbed of sensory experiences that are generally taken for granted, space and time gradually dissolved, leaving the audience disoriented. Mindful of the dislocation from the world that miners are subjected to as they descend into the bowels of the earth, the artist compares their experience to tracking “the path of Orpheus into the underworld”. But unlike Orpheus, they may never return, forever in danger of ‘fall to ground’ incidents involving tunnel roofs and walls suddenly crumbling onto the miners.

77

When satellite communication was finally universally accepted in 1997, a reporter for the *Independent* noted that after midnight on 31st December, no-one would be listening for Morse code messages any more.⁴ In his multi-referential work, titled *I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds* (2016), Webb transcribed texts on soluble paper, before dissolving them and placing them in glass bottles, among them the final Morse communication broadcast by the French navy at the end of 1997: “Calling all. This is our last cry before our eternal silence.” Other texts included six banned poems from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) and an ellipsis used in the Apollo 12 onboard voice transcription to designate “those portions of the communication that could not be described because of garbling.” Like messages tucked into bottles before being thrown into the sea in the unlikely hope that they might wash up on distant shores, Webb’s work seems at first to suggest that some chasms are simply too vast to bridge. Yet as the title of this work implies, solitude has its own rewards, unleashing creative energies through personal reflection. A quote from a letter Keats wrote to his brother and sister-in-law in 1818, the poet went on to say “No sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed around me, and serve my Spirit the office which is equivalent to a King’s bodyguard [...] I melt into the air with a voluptuousness so delicate that I am content to be alone.”⁵

Process still from *Telephone Voice*, 2011

78

Acutely conscious of the importance of communication with oneself, Webb is also intrigued by the notion of the artist as trickster, a solitary but mischievous figure who repeatedly disrupts expectations, confusing distinctions by crossing boundaries, including those between the living and the dead. In *Telephone Voice* (2011), Webb used a clairvoyant to contact arch trickster, Orson Welles, whose 1938 broadcast of HG Wells' science fiction novel, *The War of the Worlds*, documented the advance of Martians wielding deadly heat-rays on New York City. Long believed to have led to mass panic, the supposed impact of Welles' broadcast remained part of modern folklore for many decades. Like Welles, Webb confronts people with a seemingly difficult conundrum, requiring his audience to suspend disbelief. But as the late 16th-century origins of the word suggest, 'conundrum' was initially a term of abuse for a crank or pedant, later coming to denote a whim or fancy, but also a pun. More often than not, contemporary conundrums are riddles asked for amusement.

*Scream*, 2008

79

When Welles 'speaks' to Webb, he flatters the artist, asserting that they are twins who share the secret ability to create illusions. Perhaps in an effort to seek respite from the trickster's painful awareness of the inevitability of change and loss, in works like *Telephone Voice* Webb appears playful, light, at ease with the idea of mocking himself as a trickster-fool who refuses to take anything seriously.⁶ Usually, however, it is the trickster's deep attachment to conjuring the mysterious echoes of tenuous traces from some other time or place that reverberate through his works, surfacing most hauntingly in pieces like *Ost* (2009), in which a woman records a moving rendition of the DDR anthem in the old DDR radio station, and *Scream*, Webb's 2008 intervention at Spain's National Gallery where he invited members of staff to scream at *Guernica* (1937), Picasso's harrowing response to the tragic aerial bombing of the Basque town during the Spanish Civil War.

Notes

- 1 Greenblatt, Stephen, 1990 'Resonance and Wonder', *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 43(4), 11-34: 19-20.
- 2 See Hellerman, William, and Don Goddard, 1983 Catalogue for "Sound/Art" at The Sculpture Centre, New York City, May: 1-30.
- 3 Edwards, Elizabeth and Hart, Janis 2004, 'Displaced materiality in the library and art museum'. In Edwards, E. and Hart, J (eds.), *Photographs, Objects, Histories. The Materiality of Images*. London: Routledge, 65-83.
- 4 Cusick, James, 1997 'Coastguards send their last messages in Morse code', 31 December. www.independent.co.uk/.../coastguards-send-their-last-messages-in-morse-code-1291195.html.
- 5 Keats, John, *The Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends*, 73. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/keats/john/letters/letter34.html>.
- 6 See, for example, Jung, Carl Gustav, 1969 'On the psychology of the trickster-figure'. In Jung, C.G. et al (eds.), *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9, (Part 1). Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 255-272.



Signed certificate of permission from the Reina Sofia museum from *Scream*, 2008



There's No Place Called Home, 2004 (ongoing)

There's No Place Called Home is a recurring, worldwide intervention in which audio recordings of specific foreign bird calls are broadcast from speakers concealed in local trees, e.g. the songs of a Sichuan bush warbler (*Locustella chengi*), native to central China, broadcast from a tree in Riga, Latvia.

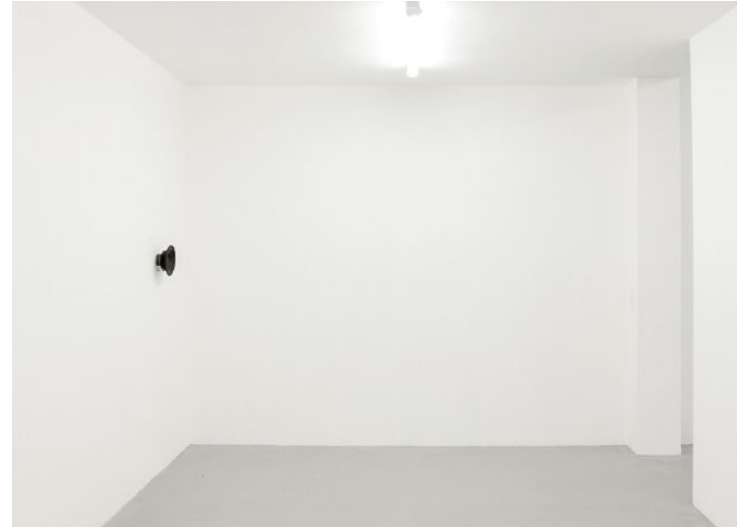
Like a field recording 'returned' to or hacked into nature, or a cuckoo's egg laid in the nest of another bird species, the audio is mixed to seem as 'real' or 'natural' as possible.

Birdsong is one of the most recorded sounds in the world, and as bird vocalisations are generally employed to mark territory and attract mates, the thematics of this artwork key into issues of power, freedom, hospitality, and migration.

The artwork generates meaning out of displacement, using alien and exotic elements to illuminate the social, cultural, and political interactions endemic to the installation site. Questions pertaining to loneliness, exoticism, ecological contingency, and magic are also explored in the work.

To date, over 40 versions of this intervention have been undertaken on 6 continents.

Above: *There's No Place Called Home* (New Orleans), 2017
Songs of a Japanese Robin broadcast from speakers concealed in trees in New Orleans
Opposite: *There's No Place Called Home* (Bergen), 2015
Calls of a Canyon Wren broadcast from a speaker concealed in a tree in Bergen



All That Is Unknown, 2016

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.

Above: *All That Is Unknown*, installation views at blank projects, Cape Town, 2016
Opposite: *All That Is Unknown*, installation view at 13th Biennial of Sharjah, 2017

Le Marché Oriental, 2009

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.

Opposite:

Le Marché Oriental, installation view at blank projects, Cape Town, 2010



Al Madat, 2014

Al Madat comprises a recording of a Sufi dhikr undertaken by patients at the Sultan Bahu Rehab Centre in Westridge, Mitchells Plain, played from speakers mounted on tripods surrounding and projecting onto an arrangement of four carpets.

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.

Started by Shafiek Davids in 2005, the Sultan Bahu Rehab Centre is a non-profit organisation dedicated to treating substance abuse – mainly heroin and methamphetamine – in both Mitchells Plain and Bonteheuwel, South Africa.

Sultan Bahu (1628–1691) was an Islamic scholar, poet, and Sufi saint, founder of the Sawari Qadiri Sufi Order.



Al Madat, installation view at blank projects, Cape Town, 2014



Imaginary Appetites, 2015

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".



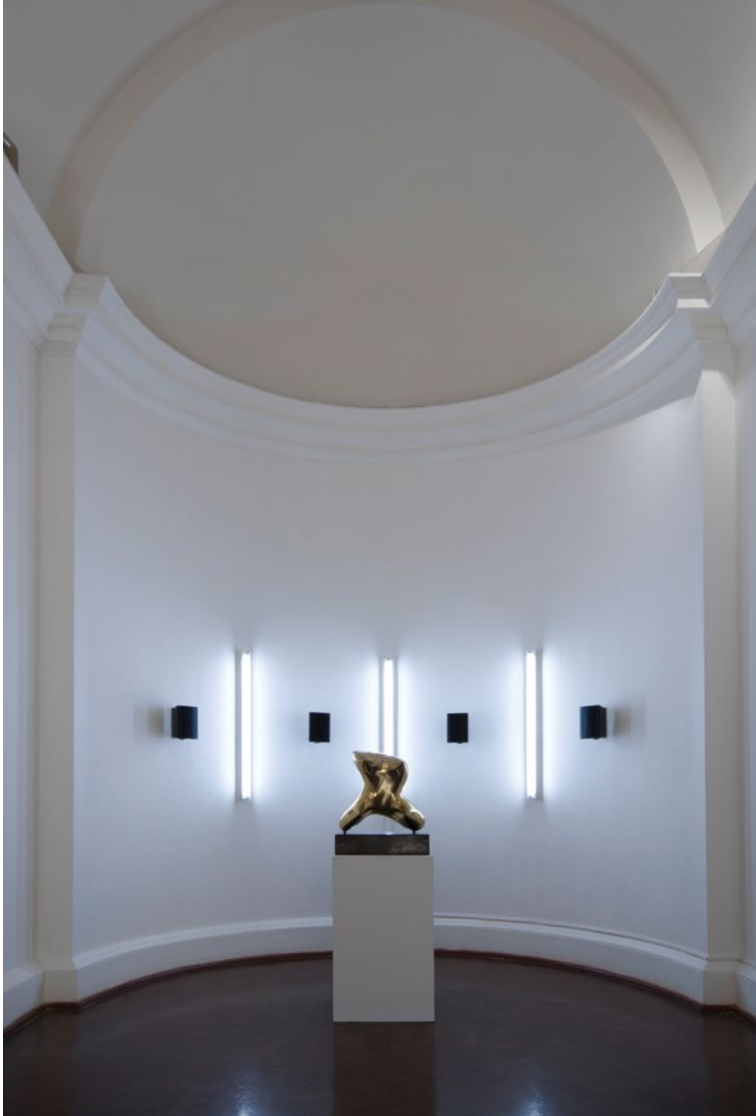
There is a light that never goes out, 2010 (ongoing)

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. 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. Subsequent versions have included isiXhosa, isiZulu, Mandarin, Mixe, Sesotho, and Tupi Guarani translations.



Above:
There is a light that never goes out (Mandarin), installation view at blank projects, Cape Town, 2014
There is a light that never goes out (Sesotho), installation view at Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg, 2016

Above:
There is a light that never goes out (Arabic), installation view at Dar Khalid, Darat al Funun, Amman, 2010



Aleph, 2010

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.

Aleph, installation view at Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2012
 Foreground: Henry Moore, *Pointed Torso*, 1969. Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery

Untitled, 2006

This untitled and unadvertised intervention comprises an electrical light programmed to flash an undisclosed message in Morse code. The artwork is nocturnal and unaccredited. The decoded text is not revealed to the viewing public.



Let Me Lose Myself, 2013

The artist invited a group of people to send him their thoughts on the theme of uncertainty to create an audio guide for the Skogskyrkogården (woodland cemetery), a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Stockholm, Sweden. The submissions included diary entries, mathematical formulae, photographs, intimate text messages, weather forecasts, literary quotations, audio recordings, and scenes from films. The poet and playwright Genna Gardini was then commissioned to spend time with these ideas and to be influenced by them. Gardini collated and adapted the material and wrote a text that would become the underlying script for the piece. Actress Josefin Ljungman recorded the text, directed by the artist, and the audio was arranged and mixed for headphones. The audio guide can be downloaded for free at www.letmelosemyself.com. As is the nature of the theme, there are no further instructions or prescribed path for listeners to walk along.

The project was curated by Bettina Schultz of CC Seven for the ongoing project *Let Me Lose Myself* that takes the form of audioguides to the Skogskyrkogården.

Let Me Lose Myself, site view at the Skogskyrkogården, Stockholm, 2013

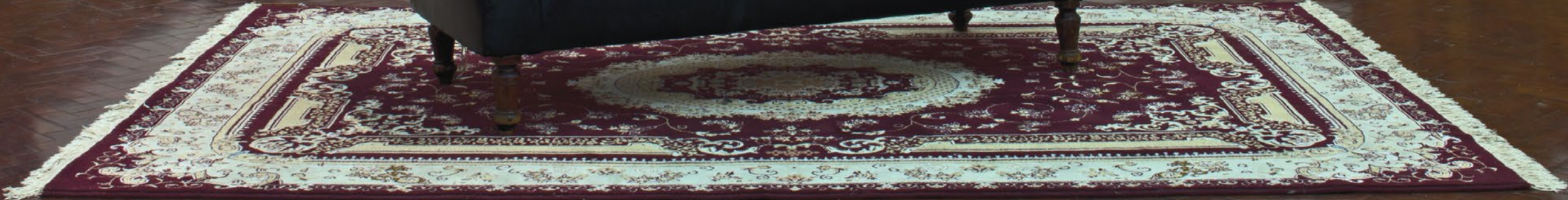


Title Unknown, 2015

Using hydrophonic recordings of Weddell seals (*Leptonychotes weddellii*), including Douglas Quin's seminal *Antarctica* (1998) album as a sonic basis, the artist worked with ethnomusicologist Cara Stacey to imagine these sounds for a human voice to articulate. The singer Juliana Venter was commissioned to perform the studied field recordings so as to create a library of animalistic vocal expressions. The results are an eerie and visceral compendium of shrieks, grunts, and hisses; vocalisations attempting to imitate a fellow mammal. The artwork is solar powered and connected to a specialised astronomical clock that schedules the piece so that it will only play when the moon is in the sky above the installation site.

The artwork has been presented underneath a wooden deck overlooking the lake at Wanås Konst, Sweden, and in the stairwells of the former Faculty of Biology of the University of Latvia.

Title Unknown, site view at Wanås Konst, Hässleholm, 2015



It's nightttime 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.

Autohagiography, 2007

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.

Above: Excerpt from the transcript of the artist's hypnosis session from *Autohagiography*, 2007
Previous spread: *Autohagiography*, installation view at Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2012



You, the collector, 2011

You, the collector comprises a watermark text on paper reading, "Once all multiples in this edition have been destroyed by fire, each collector will be relieved of a single painful memory. Exhibition or storage will bring grave misfortune to you, the collector."

Commissioned by ArtThrob, and editioned by Genevieve Wood, the artwork was made in an edition of 25 to help raise money for the magazine.

You, the collector (framed), 2011



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 a series of selected texts presented by the artist as philosophical medicines and poetic potions. Each work is exhibited as an installation of glass vials, with every vial containing the liquid residue of a text that has been transcribed with ink on soluble paper and dissolved in water. Committed to water, the text gains the possibility of entering the body through the mouth, in the style of a psychoactive drug or elixir. In this way, the words can be subsumed by the body, with the drinker able to possess and embody it, and be influenced from the inside. Dissolved, the ideas and images contained in the text have the agency to seep, stain, and spill.

Above: *I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (Solve, dissolve, revolve)*, 2019 ^{xi}
 Opposite: *I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (13 Views of the Moon)*, 2019 ^{xii}





The Sensory Complex

Hearing the bird calls and auguries in James Webb's work

Sean O'Toole

Previous:
There's No Place Called Home (Regent's Park), 2012



There's No Place Called Home (Dresden), 2015



There's No Place Called Home (South Africa), 2004



There's No Place Called Home (Japan), 2004

108

In July 2015, James Webb staged an iteration of his public intervention, *There's No Place Called Home* (2004–ongoing), along Brühl's Terrace, a stepped garden overlooking the Elbe River in the German city of Dresden. As is his modus operandi whenever he presents this serial work, Webb broadcasts a carefully selected foreign bird call – here, the distinctive sizzling, rattling and chirping of Cape weaver birds, a species endemic to the artist's native South Africa – from speakers concealed in local trees. There was nothing discordant or spectacular about this unannounced and unaccredited intervention, which coincided with the ninth instalment of OSTRALE, a local art festival founded in 2007. “I am very aware of the sounds of the environment, and the idea of integrating a new sound into the space,” Webb told curator Anthea

Buyts in 2015 about his method of adapting the pre-recorded sounds of alien bird calls into a public environment¹. His sound mixing is delicately done so as to try to make the call or song – even that of an Australian gang-gang cockatoo broadcast from an oak tree in Udine, Italy in 2017 – appear as lifelike and natural as possible, as if the bird was really there.

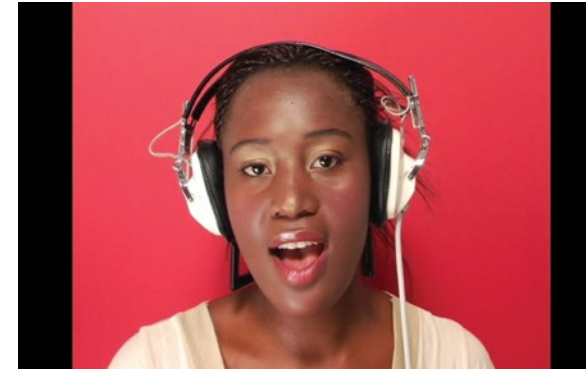
Subtlety and immateriality are pivotal to the staging of *There's No Place Called Home*, a work developed and first presented – uninvited and unannounced – in trees in Kitakyushu, Japan, during the winter of 2004. And yet, to the perceptive ear at least, something would have been off about the sizzling avian calls drifting across Brühl's Terrace. I like to think that Rosa Luxemburg, the incisive Marxist thinker and peace activist who in 1898 briefly edited *Sächsische*

109

Arbeiterzeitung (“Saxon Workers’ Newspaper”), a defunct Dresden broadsheet, would have intuited strangeness, maybe even falsity, in the calls. “Only to the rude ear of one who is quite indifferent does the song of a bird seem always the same,” wrote Luxemburg in a letter from Wronke Fortress. “Those who love birds and beasts, those who have a sympathetic understanding, can perceive great diversity of expression, and can recognise a complete language”.²

In July 1916, Luxemburg was imprisoned for her role in agitating against Germany's involvement in World War I. During her subsequent two-year incarceration, first in Wronke and later in Breslau Prison, she luxuriously and profoundly wrote about songbirds in letters to Sophie Liebknecht. One statement in particular, written shortly after her transfer to Breslau, resonates: “For me the

song of the birds is inseparable from their life as a whole; it is the whole that interests me, rather than any detached detail”.³ I invoke the memory of Luxemburg and her acute awareness of European songbirds for a reason. It has nothing to do with ornithology, although I will discuss the significance of Webb's interest in birds and their recorded calls later. Rather, what is of interest is the relationship between *There's No Place Called Home*, a seemingly immaterial work comprised of a media player and concealed speaker, and a larger whole: Webb's sound-aware practice. In this essay, I argue that sound, far from being the dominant medium of his practice, forms part of a constellation of material and immaterial media used to invite interaction, deliver information and expand perception.

Promotional still for *Wa*, 2003Stills from *There Are Far Too Few Friday Nights Left In The World*, 2004
In collaboration with Matthew Kalil

In the main, Webb's early work pivoted around the investigation, recording and staging of sound-based projects, sometimes for the purposes of cultivating sonic mischief, but often in the pursuit of aural – as opposed to visual or textual – knowledge. *Wa* (2003) is a good example of the former. The work is a 15-minute action that involved Elizabeth Han, a Korean friend of the artist, posing as the fictional Japanese noise-artist *Wa* and playing a sound collage scored by Webb at YDESIRE, an inter-media exhibition and party held over one night at Cape Town's Castle of Good Hope in 2003. However, it was during this formative period of urban exploration and acoustic enquiry that Webb also produced the first iteration of *Prayer* (2000–ongoing), a visually spare multi-channel installation based on recordings of prayer and vocal worship

representing various faiths in Cape Town. Similar to *There's No Place Called Home*, this absorbing serial work, which requires engagement at floor-level, deploys anthropological and journalistic techniques in service of artistic ends.

The auditory focus of Webb's early works saw him lauded as a “sonic artist” (by musician Mira Calix, aka Chantal Passamonte) and described as a “pioneer of sound art in South Africa” (by new-media scholar Carine Zaayman).⁴ The early privileging of the immaterial, in particular sound, in explaining and authorising Webb's practice (including by me) tended to overlook the fact that works like *There's No Place Called Home*, *Prayer*, *Wa* and *There Are Far Too Few Friday Nights Left In The World* (2004), a five-channel video installation showing five South African women of different races singing along to Brenda Fassie's

hit song “Weekend Special” (1983), all had a material basis. Right from the outset, Webb's output encompassed diverse media. It knitted installation, photographic documentation, videography and performance into sensory-rich experiences that, nonetheless, tended to evoke, embrace or simply purport some form of absence.

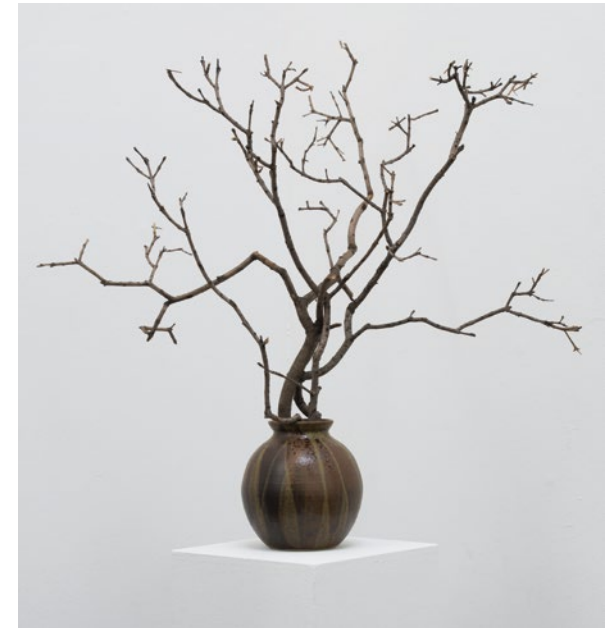
Immateriality is a sensory value rather than a fact, at least in the discourse of art. Already in 1973, five years after the publication of her influential essay (with John Chandler) on “art as idea and art as action”⁵, two dominant trends in US art at the time, Lucy R. Lippard acknowledged that dematerialisation is “an inaccurate term, that a piece of paper or a photograph is as much an object [as works made of other media]”.⁶ Trained in theatre

and comparative religion, not art, Webb's early works synthesised his various personal preoccupations. He was partial to pop music, a space of fungible identities and humour; it still informs the seditious undertow of his artistic work. His evolving practice also explored notions and methods of religious and secular faith, and expressed an understanding of the evanescence of myth, magic and the occult – all practices defined by their own material cultures and all framed by instances of immateriality and belief beyond matter.

Literature and the terse seductiveness of text mattered too, although it really only achieved fuller agency and visual prominence around the time of his gorgeous survey show, *MMXII* (2012), at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG). The exhibition, which profitably coincided with



There's No Place Called Home (Giverny), installation view at Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2012



Entitled, 2012

112

a museum intervention by Stephen Hobbs, gathered many of Webb's early pieces, including *Prayer*. It also included *Untitled (9th August)* (2005), a textual work composed of 75 captions copied by the artist from title cards contextualising the exhibits in the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, Japan. "A boy who suffered severe burns all over his back," read one card, the absence of a visual referent in JAG amplifying the stated trauma. *MMXII* also featured two instalments of *There's No Place Called Home*. One comprised of a sound piece replaying calls of a white-bellied drongo, native to Sri Lanka, within the trees outside the museum. The other was a curatorial intervention involving the display of Claude Monet's description of white and yellow blooms, *Le Printemps* (Spring, 1875), flanked by four Ukiyo-e prints of birds drawn from the museum's permanent collection.

Webb's upbringing on Thelema – a Stellenbosch wine farm named after a fictional abbey mentioned in novels written by the French monk François Rabelais – also played a role in refining his artistic sensibilities. Among other things, it made him aware of trees, silence and birds. Thelema neighbours Simonsberg Mountain, a detached massif and conservancy area that is home to more than 60 bird species. I am interested in how this proximity infiltrated his consciousness. In his 2015 conversation with Anthea Buys, Webb described *There's No Place Called Home* as abounding with "symbolic messages for someone to decipher".⁷ 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. (Since 2010, Webb has further

figured his interest in the idea of the stranger through *Entitled*, a series of elegant ikebana arrangements using weeds, alien vegetation and invasive plants.)

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".⁸ 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."⁹ Luxemburg was aware of this rich mythology. "My mother, who considered that Schiller and the Bible were the supreme sources of wisdom, was firmly convinced that King Solomon understood the language of birds," she wrote from prison.

113

As an adolescent, Luxemburg had scoffed at her mother's beliefs. Later, though, in Wronke prison, she conceded, "I too can understand the language of birds and beasts. Not, of course, as if they were using articulate speech, but I understand the most varied shades of meaning and of feeling conveyed by their tones".¹⁰

Luxemburg's consciousness of birds encompassed an ecological awareness, something I also identify at play in Webb's *There's No Place Called Home*. Another of Luxemburg's letters to Sophie Liebkecht is helpful in parsing this 'message' in Webb's work. "Yesterday I was reading about the reasons for the disappearance of song birds in Germany," wrote Luxemburg. "The spread of scientific forestry, horticulture and agriculture, have cut them off from their nesting places and their food supply." The insight pained



There's No Place Called Home (Joubert Park), 2006



There's No Place Called Home (Joubert Park), 2006

114

Luxemburg. In the same letter, she writes: “I was not thinking so much about the loss of pleasure for human beings, but I was so much distressed at the idea of the stealthy and inexorable destruction of these defenceless little creatures”.¹¹

Novelist Jonathan Franzen has fastidiously researched and reported on the mechanisms of this seemingly unstoppable annihilation. “Every spring, some five billion birds come flooding up from Africa to breed in Eurasia, and every year as many as a billion are killed deliberately by humans, most notably on the migratory flyways of the Mediterranean,” reported Franzen in 2010.¹² His reportage makes clear the role of mobility in animal life, and also presents evidence on the role of electronic sound in frustrating it. “As [Eurasia’s] waters are fished clean by trawlers with sonar and efficient nets, its skies are

vacuumed clean of migrants by the extremely effective technology of birdsong recordings.” This method of “hacking into nature,”¹³ to borrow an expression used by Webb, enables hunters to bait birds through pre-recorded calls. “Even in provincial villages, Albanian hunters now have MP3s of duck calls on their cell phones and iPods,” told Franzen in another despatch from 2013.¹⁴ In Egypt, he found that hunters use playback technology to hunt quail and capture entire flocks of ducks at night.

There's No Place Called Home does not explicitly pose itself as an activist piece, but if we are to probe the full spectrum of symbolic ‘messages’ it contains, an ecological consciousness is unavoidable. It is inescapable because of the very technology now deployed to thwart avian mobility and decimate once-thriving populations

of migratory birds. The earliest known bird recording is of the white-rumped shama, a small passerine songbird native to the Indian subcontinent. The recording was made using an Edison wax cylinder in 1889 in Frankfurt by broadcaster and sound recordist Ludwig Koch, a pioneer in the field of animal recordings. Koch set about attempting to make a collection of wild bird recordings in 1905. Later, in 1929, he was the first person to record the call of a wild bird in Africa, a superb glossy starling on the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro. When he immigrated to Britain in 1936, the Nazis destroyed his early recordings as retribution. Bird calls can be seditious. Koch once recounted how a Berliner’s bullfinch sang *The Internationale*, a left-wing anthem; the owner was jailed and his bird executed.¹⁵

All this morbidity, which is real and enduring, recalls a line from *Fear and the Monkey* (1978), a Ouija board poem ‘arranged’ by William S. Burroughs in his New York loft: “Wanderers cling to their fading home.”¹⁶ The line evokes the fragile perch of songbirds in an epoch defined by widespread and irreversible human impact on the Earth’s geology and ecosystems. I was unaware of the line until I read the caption for *I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds* (2016–ongoing), Webb’s new serial work that incorporates Burroughs’ lines into its stained materiality. This fascinating work is entirely sculptural in form; but for its silence, it has no aural qualities. Webb’s interests in immateriality, literature, wry humour and esoteric thinking all converge in this work, which literally visualises dematerialisation. *I do not live in this world alone...*

115



I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (Signal to Noise), 2017

116

presents viewers with the ink-stained residue of various texts written on soluble paper and dissolved in water. Displayed in identical glass vials, the dematerialised texts encompass various sources, geographies, time periods and even modes of address.

As is Webb's predilection, many of the dissolved texts are literary; among others, they quote Maya Angelou, Charles Baudelaire, Samuel Beckett, Ingrid Jonker, Yukio Mishima, Sufi mystic Rumi and Dorothy Parker. A 2017 iteration, *I do not live in this world alone... (Signal to noise)*, is made up of three vials of dissolved texts: one contains a poem written by Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera, another the ellipsis used to designate garbled communication in the Apollo 12 voice transcriptions, and a third, the final Morse

code message broadcast by the French navy in 1997. New satellite technology had replaced the need for an antiquated 19th-century technology developed by American painter and inventor Samuel Morse, in which letters are represented by combinations of long and short light or sound signals. "Calling all," went the French navy's final message. "This is our last cry before our eternal silence."¹⁷ The finality claimed in this message is also the real augury of *There's No Place Called Home*, Webb's auratic work replaying the calls of disembodied birds far away from home. To loosely improvise on Luxemburg and Webb's words, only the deaf ear will miss this strident message in the recorded bird calls.

Notes

- 1 Anthea Buys. 2015. 'Interview: James Webb and Anthea Buys' in *Xenagogue*, Anthea Buys (ed). Bergen: Hordaland Kunstsenter. 53.
- 2 Rosa Luxemburg. 23 May 1917. Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke: www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1917/05/23.htm
- 3 Rosa Luxemburg. 2 August 1917. Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Breslau: www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1917/08/02.htm
- 4 See Carine Zaayman. 2004. James Webb: Artbio, *Artthrob.co.za*, August 2004: <https://artthrob.co.za/04aug/artbio.html>
- 5 Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler. 1968/1997. 'The Dematerialization of Art', in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. London: University of California Press. 43.
- 6 Ibid. 5.
- 7 Buys. op.cit. 48.
- 8 Ibid. 47.
- 9 Ibid. 48.
- 10 Rosa Luxemburg. 23 May 1917. op.cit.
- 11 Rosa Luxemburg. 2 May 1917. Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke: www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1917/05/02.htm
- 12 Jonathan Franzen. 2010. 'Emptying the Skies', *The New Yorker*, 19 July 2010: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/07/26/emptying-the-skies; see also Jonathan Franzen. 2018. *The End of the End of the Earth*. London: 4th Estate. 35-40, 77-96.
- 13 Anthea Buys. op.cit. 48.
- 14 Jonathan Franzen. 2013. 'Last Song for Migrating Birds', *National Geographic*, July 2013: www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2013/07/songbird-migration/
- 15 See Sean Street. 2009. 'Ludwig Koch and the Music of Nature', BBC Radio 4, April 2009: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00jn4m2
- 16 William S. Burroughs. 1998. 'Fear and the Monkey', *Poems for the Millennium*, Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris (eds). London: University of California Press. 365.
- 17 See Jonathan Oatis. 1998. 'Maritime Morse code slips gradually under the waves', *Los Angeles Times*. 16 August 1998: www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-aug-16-mn-13607-story.html

117



If you were here last night you would have seen the lady in the window across the street. She dreams of floating through the window into the cold night where no one would see her but she could visit everyone and see the lights become tiny as she rises above the city. As she bids them all farewell, they wave to her in their sleep and she can see how happy they are just as she disappears into the sky to rejoin the stars.

121

The dreamer in me meets the dreamer in you, 2018

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.

Above: Excerpt from the script for *The dreamer in me meets the dreamer in you*, written by Louis Viljoen, 2018
Opposite: Site view of the rooftop deck of the Norrtälje Konsthall

She hid in the greenhouse and enveloped herself in the overgrown foliage that had taken over the room. The boy had told her not to go near the plants, but to her that only meant he would not look for her there. It was the perfect plan, she thought. She would finally beat him at hide and seek. How could she know what lived in the shadow of the immense plants and how hungry it was?



This is my voice, but these are not my words, 2015

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



She was warned to never go into the woods alone. What they didn't know, what only she knew, was that she was never alone in the woods. Her companion emerged from behind trees and under rocks and together they spoke of the wonder of the reaping that was to come. Such glorious things can only be whispered into the wind and swept out into the world. When it returned to her in the twilight of her life, she welcomed the feeling of dread. She learnt never to fear the things she could not know.

Tundmatu, 2017

125



The Fotomuseum 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

Left and opposite: Found images from *Tundmatu*, 2017
Above: Excerpt from the script for *Tundmatu*, written by Louis Viljoen, 2017

Like it, but can't afford it, 1999

Small, yellow, circular stickers, similar to the gallery standard of red stickers marking a work being sold, were disseminated at a citywide art event. The yellow stickers denoted 'Like it, but can't afford it,' and were for the public to place next to works that they appreciated but were unable to purchase. The galleries were not aware of the intention behind the stickers as no permission was sought from the art event, and the action was temporary, uninvited, and unannounced.

The intervention, which could be thought of as a prototype to the social media "Like" function, was created in collaboration with artists Jo O'Connor, Ryan Johnson, and Mark Coleman.



Saturday Night Can Be The Loneliest Place On Earth, 2005

"Kitakyushu is trying hard to attract tourists, with the development of the much-touted Space World (built in collaboration with NASA, but at times sadly resembling an early Star Trek set)..." Lonely Planet Japan, 7th Edition, 2000.

Space World (スペースワールド) is a theme park in Yahata Higashi ward, Kitakyushu, Japan. It was built in 1990 by Nippon Steel when the company was downsizing its steel plant in the ward. Space World offers themed rides and attractions that attempt to portray the fascination of the "final frontier," but dwindling audience figures give the park a more desolate atmosphere.

Saturday Night Can Be The Loneliest Place On Earth involves an 8-second hack into the Space World parking lot's public address system, interrupting their Muzak with ionospheric transmissions (impulsive signals emitted by lightning strokes relayed live using a VLF receiver) so that Space World could, on a lonely Saturday night, receive an actual message from outer space.

As we gather here today on the edge of our new world, would you believe that we are closely watched by more than God's eyes? There is an intelligence scrutinising and studying every one of us, and this is not God, my brothers and sisters, but something as mortal as you and I. God knows these eyes as well, for he looks down all things. The almighty has been telling us that we are not alone and He urges us to turn our gaze upwards and practice our ears to hear the slightest deviation in the sound of the world.

We are complacent in our busy lives as we travel to and fro over this small blue planet, just as microbes in a drop of water go about their multiplication without a care for our observation of them. For too long have we assumed that we are alone, or worse, assumed that if we are not alone, surely we are superior to those who share our universe. It is in our complacency that we have allowed these observers to become travellers who cross the gulf of space to enter our world, this world they so envy and put into effect their plans against us. This is the great disillusionment we have not yet suffered. But we will suffer. God guarantees this. Cast your minds towards a world, as red as ours is blue, as seemingly complicated as ours, but driven by fury at our capacity to sustain life. But such is our vanity that we think ourselves untouchable by not only God's wrath, but also the blood vengeance of those light-years away from our tranquillity. We are merely at the beginning of our humanity, and we think ourselves immortal, but these observers know what God knows: that we are on the brink of extinction if we do not change our ways and see the truth that lies so clearly in front of us. And before we judge those we cannot fathom, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought. We think ourselves gods when we trample the earth and put our thumb on those less fortunate.

A great red rain is coming to do the same to us and by the time we realise what is occurring, it will be too late to seek out God and ask his forgiveness. Find God in the truth of things, and God will guide you through it. A world of safety and tranquillity is merely prologue. Let us pray...

The War of the Worlds, 2017

The War of the Worlds is a polyphonic radio play in which a group of anonymous ear witnesses recount their experiences of what happened on the night the voice in the radio announced the end of days. Was it a case of "fake news" or a glitch in reality that revealed an incredible truth? All that remains are oral testimonies of fear, survival, and strange beauty. Taking Orson Welles's 1938 broadcast of "The War of the Worlds" as a starting point to rethink history and current media, as well as the electromagnetic field, this artwork becomes a vehicle for transmitting fugitive voices to be received and sheltered by the radio listener.

This artwork was commissioned for documenta 14's public radio show "Every Time A Ear di Soun" curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and co-curated by Marcus Gammel. Script by Louis Viljoen, engineered by Dave Langemann, and featuring the voices of Emily Child, Brendon Daniels, Owen Manamela-Mogane, Dawid Minnaar, Denise Newman, and Lesoko Seabe.



***Supernature*, 2018**

Supernature imagines to what, over the centuries, the trees on the 18th-century Yorkshire Sculpture Park estate have been privy; what secrets they've overheard, and what they might say if they were given the chance.

The process of making the artwork had the artist invite local specialists to walk around various areas of the Park and read the site through the lens of their own disciplines. These included an arborist, art historian, folklorist, gardener, historian, psychic, psychologist, and private detective.

Using the findings, along with extensive research into the history and myths of the site, a series of writings by the playwright, Louis Viljoen, was commissioned to give life to the trees and fantasise about how they might interact with each other.

Supernature, site views at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, 2018

Trees do not settle differences swiftly. We are grudge holders to the very last. Just ask the autumn wind with its face full of leaves.

In seeking to bring the estate's secrets to the surface, the artwork is structured to appear as intermittent, whispered conversations between the trees, broadcast from six individual solar-powered speaker systems hidden in the woods.

Voice actors: Natalie Bellingham, Claire-Marie Seddon
The invited specialists included Richard Flowerday, Andrew Bowman-Shaw, Steve Jones, John Ledger, Claire Midwood, Hester Reeve, Alex Bridger, Andrea Freeman, Gray Davies, and a Private Detective who chose to remain anonymous.

Excerpt from the script for *Supernature*, written by Louis Viljoen, 2018

The Autumn Project, 2005

The Autumn Project was an unadvertised intervention in which the artist accepted all invitations over a three-month period. These invitations were all honoured, with the first invitation scheduled on a particular day and time taking precedence and invitations that couldn't be met, rescheduled. The artwork was never documented in any way other than the concept being presented as text or spoken word after the fact.

The Conversation, 2010

For the duration of this artwork, the artist is available to go for walks with members of the public. These walks are conducted one-on-one in an area agreed upon by both parties and should last at least one hour. The project arose while the artist was on residency at USF in Bergen, Norway, as a means of getting to know the city and its inhabitants. The work is not documented, and all conversations remain private.

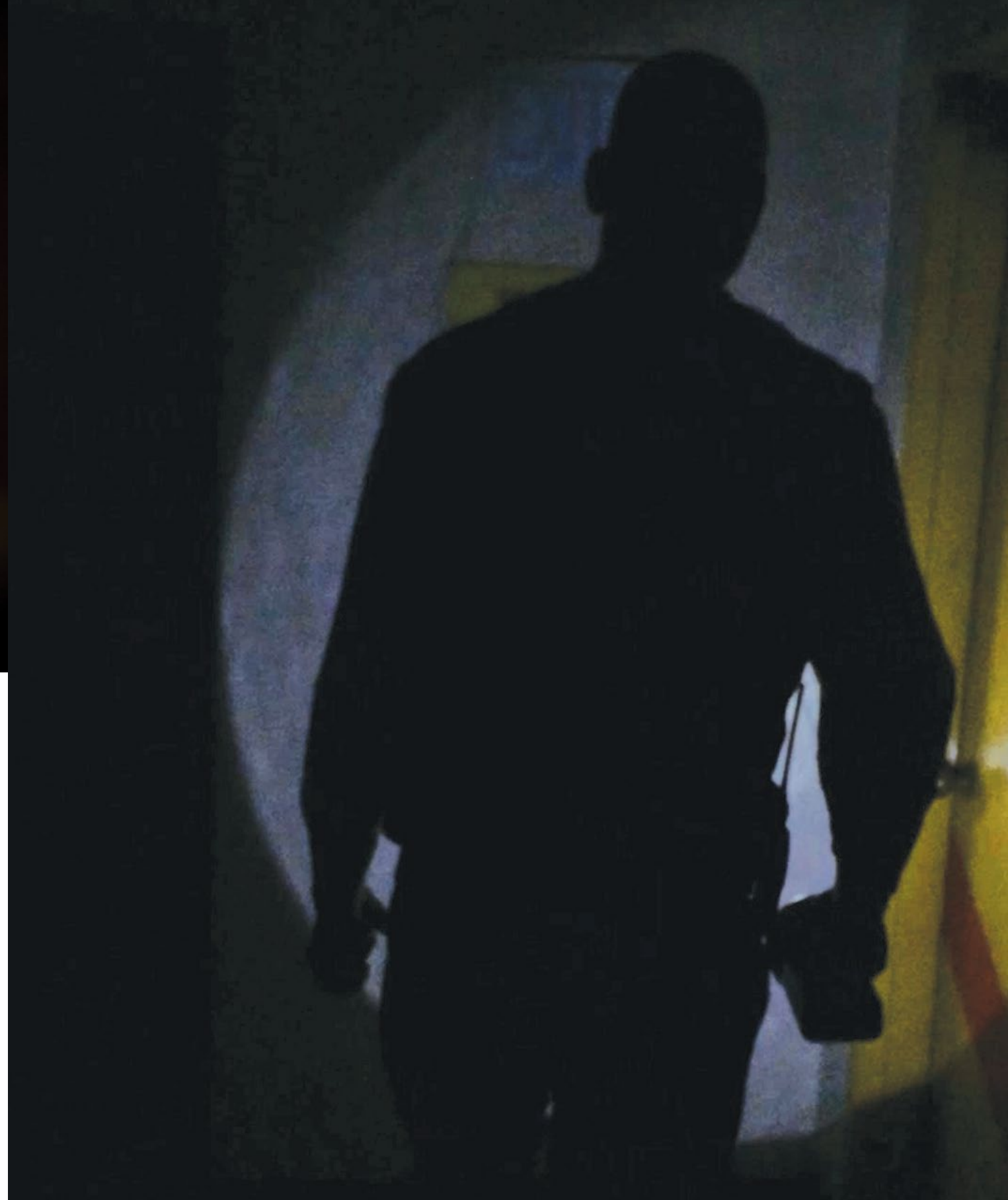


Three Dreams Of The Sinking World, 2018

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.

Above and opposite: Video stills of *Three Dreams Of The Sinking World*
Following spread: Video still of *Three Dreams Of The Sinking World*, installation at POOL, Johannesburg, 2019







Scream, 2008

Scream comprises an intervention at the Reina Sofía, Spain's national gallery, where members of the museum's staff were invited to scream at Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Because the Picasso family own the rights to the painting's image, the artist was not allowed to document the action with photography or video.

The artwork is presented as a spacious installation in a white cube with the signed certificate of permission from the Reina Sofía on display and audio recordings of the screams broadcast from concealed speakers.

Scream, installation view at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2012

What Fresh Hell Is This, 2018

What Fresh Hell Is This is a suite of vocal interruptions and internal monologues. Created as a multi-channel sound installation, the artwork comprises bursts of laughter, bruxism, repetitive speaking, whispered chanting, and the incessant shouting of the phrase "You are procrastinating!" The sounds are played randomly so as to serve as unexpected interferences in the space.

The piece features the voices of Sesanē Bonet Sealy, Roxanne de Freitas, Linda Makgabutlane, Renier Nolte, Tazmé Pillay, Aidan Scott, Puleng Stewart, Mia Thom, and Juliana Venter.



A series of personal questions addressed to a photograph marked "F. Freiberg. 1859", 2017

Biography

1975 Born in Kimberley, South Africa

Education

1999 Diploma (Copywriting), The Red & Yellow School, Cape Town, South Africa
 1996 B.A. (Drama & Comparative Religion), University of Cape Town, South Africa

Selected Solo Exhibitions

* Indicates accompanying catalogue

2020 *What Fresh Hell Is This*, blank projects, Cape Town, South Africa

2019 *Choose The Universe*, Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, France *
Three Dreams Of The Sinking World, POOL, Johannesburg, South Africa
James Webb: Prayer, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Canada

2018 *James Webb: Prayer*, The Art Institute of Chicago, USA
The dreamer in me meets the dreamer in you, Norrtälje Konsthall, Norrtälje, Sweden
It's Not What It Looks Like, SPACES, Cleveland, USA

2016 *Ecstatic Interference*, blank projects, Cape Town, South Africa
We Listen For The Future, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, UK
Hope Is A Good Swimmer, Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, France *

2015 *Xenagogue*, Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen, Norway *

2014 *The Two Insomnias*, blank projects, Cape Town, South Africa

2013 *Audiopolis*, CentroCentro, Madrid, Spain

2012 *MMXII*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

2010 *One day, all of this will be yours*, blank projects, Cape Town, South Africa
Untitled States, mac Birmingham, UK
Terms Of Surrender, ABSA Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
Aleph, Goethe On Main, Johannesburg, South Africa
Prayer, Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham, UK

2008 *Prayer*, Huddersfield Art Gallery, Huddersfield, UK

2006 *Untitled*, blank projects, Cape Town, South Africa

2002 *Phonosynthesizer*, US Art Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Selected Group Exhibitions

* Indicates accompanying catalogue

2020 *Reverb: Sound into Art*, Hayward Gallery, London, UK *
Audiosphere. Experimental Social Audio, Pre- and Post-Internet,
 Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain *

2019 *Open Borders*, 14th Curitiba International Biennial of Contemporary Art,
 Museu Oscar Niemeyer, Curitiba, Brazil
Blickachsen 12, Bad Homburg vor der Höhe, Germany *
Persona grata?, Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Paris, France

2018 *Truth is black, write over it with mirage's light*, Darat al Funun, Amman, Jordan
African Metropolis, MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome, Italy
The Red Hour, 13th Biennial of Dakar, Dakar, Senegal
Common Ground, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, UK

2017 *The Lotus in spite of the Swamp*, 4th Prospect Triennial, New Orleans, USA *
Tamawuj, Biennial of Sharjah, Sharjah, UAE
Every Time A Ear Di Soun, documenta 14 radio
Tous, des sang mêles, Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Paris, France
Image Drain, 4th Tallinn Photo Month Biennale, Tallinn Art Hall, Tallinn, Estonia
Afriques Capitales, La Villette, Paris, France
Home is so fucking complicated, Galerie Nathalie Halgand, Vienna, Austria
BECOMING AN APRICOT, An Apple, A Crow, A Tree, A Cockroach, A Glacier, A Plant, A Mushroom, A Shell, A bird, Algae, Survival Kit 9, Riga, Latvia

2016 *History Unfolds*, Historiska Museet, Stockholm, Sweden *
Malmös Leende, Malmö, Sweden
Le Voyage à Nantes, Nantes, France
A Place In Time, Nirox Foundation, Johannesburg, South Africa

2015 *Between the idea and the experience*, 12th Bienal de la Habana, Havana, Cuba *
Barriers, Wanås Konst, Hässleholm, Sweden *
Nous نحن, Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, France

2014 *Frestas, Trienal of Sorocaba*, Sorocaba, Brazil
New Biennale of Art and Architecture Fittja, Botkyrka Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden
Bleu Brut - Experience Pommery 12, Vranken Pommery, Reims, France *

2013 *Imaginary Fact*, South African Pavilion, 55th La Biennale di Venezia, Italy *
Between The Lines, former Tagesspiegel Building, Berlin, Germany
No Limit 2, Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, France *

2012 *Experience Pommery 10*, Vranken Pommery, Reims, France *
In Other Words: the black market of translation, NGBK, Berlin, Germany *
When Form Becomes Attitude, blank projects, Cape Town, South Africa

- 2011 *Experience Pommery 9*, Vranken Pommery, Reims, France *
Fierce Festival, various venues, Birmingham, UK
Neither Man, Nor Stone, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2010 *Sentences On The Banks and other activities*, Darat al Funun, Amman, Jordan
Article Biennale, various venues, Stavanger, Norway
Istanbul, Athens, Marrakech, Palermo, Catania, Riso Museo d'Arte
 Contemporanea della Sicilia, Palermo, Italy
Contemporary Artists From South Africa, Stiftelsen 314, Bergen, Norway *
Ampersand, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin, Germany *
Printemps des Poètes, Salon de lecture, Musée du quai Branly, Paris, France
- 144 2009 *3rd Arts In Marrakech Biennale*, Museum of Marrakech, Morocco *
L'effacement des traces, Musée d'histoire contemporaine, Paris, France *
Melbourne International Arts Festival, Melbourne, Australia *
Open Frame, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia
Happy House, Kunst im Tunnel, Düsseldorf, Germany
- 2008 *za. Giovane arte dal Sud Africa*, Palazzo delle Papesse Centro Arte Contemporanea,
 Siena, Italy *
Delusions Of Grandeur, Unit B, San Antonio, Texas, USA
Home Bound, Stiftung Kunst:Raum Sylt Quelle, Sylt, Germany *
- 2007 *9th Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon*, Lyon, France *
(In)visible Sounds (with Brandon LaBelle), Netherlands Media Institute, Amsterdam,
 Netherlands
- 2006 *MTN New Contemporaries*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 2005 *Incidental Amplifications*, various venues, Melbourne, Australia
CCA Kitakyushu Open Studio, Kitakyushu, Japan *
- 2004 *Typhoon*, Maeda Gallery, Kitakyushu, Japan
Listening to The World Today, BBC World Service
A Decade Of Democracy, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South
 Africa *

Selected residencies

- 2018 SWAP, SPACES, Cleveland, USA
 2017 Atelier Mondial, Basel, Switzerland
 2016 IASPIS, Stockholm, Sweden
 2011 Darat al Funun, Amman, Jordan
 2010 USF, Bergen, Norway
 2009 Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, France
 2004 CCA Kitakyushu, Kitakyushu, Japan

Selected Public Collections

- Tate Modern, London, UK
 The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA
 MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome, Italy
 MAC VAL Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Paris, France
 FRAC Champagne Ardenne, Reims, France
 Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, Germany
 Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
 The Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
 The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Selected Private Collections & Foundations

- Khalid Shoman Foundation, Amman, Jordan
 Rennie Museum, Vancouver, Canada
 A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town, South Africa
 Vranken Pommery Monopole, Reims, France

Professor Sandra Klopper, University of Cape Town, has written extensively on the art of traditionalist communities in southern Africa, on African fashion, textiles and beadwork, on various aspects of South African youth culture, on the expressive culture of other marginalised groups, including the urban homeless, and the art of several contemporary South African artists. Most recently, she produced a monograph on the South African artist, Irma Stern, titled *Are You Still Alive? Irma Stern's Life and Art Through her Letters to Richard and Freda Feldmans, 1934-1966*.

Sean O'Toole is an author, critic, journalist and editor based in Cape Town. His essays, cultural journalism and reviews have appeared in numerous books, newspapers and magazines, including Artforum, Frieze, Harvard Design Magazine and Tate Etc. He is the founding editor with Tau Tavengwa of *CityScapes*, a bi-annual magazine project of the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town. He has published one book of fiction, *The Marquis of Mooikloof and Other Stories* (2006), and edited two volumes of essays, *über(W)unden: Art in Troubled Times* (2012) and *African Futures* (2016), both with Lien Heidenreich-Seleme.

Kathryn Smith works at the interface of contemporary visual art and forensic human identification. Her practice evidences a critical and poetic relationship with the forensic imaginary and related processes of truth-making through remediation. She has a special interest in archivalism, curatorship, co-authorship and interdisciplinary collaboration as method and practice.

Louis Viljoen is a Cape Town based playwright and director. He has written and produced numerous plays including, *The Bile Boys*, *The Frontiersmen*, *The Verbalists*, *Champ*, *Porno 88*, *The Kingmakers*, *The Pervert Laura*, *Oh Baby*, *I'm A Wild One*, *The Emissary*, *The Eulogists*, *The Demon Bride*, and *The Hucksters*. He is one of the creators (along with playwrights, Nicholas Spagnoletti and Jon Keevy) of the successful short-play initiative *Anthology* which has had four successful seasons at The Alexander Bar's Upstairs Theatre.



I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds (Dreams of Franz Kafka)
Installation detail at Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, 2019

- i Selected dialogue from the script of *The War of the Worlds*, 2017, written by Louis Viljoen.
- ii *Prayer (Cape Town)* process still, Zolani Centre, Nyanga, South Africa, 2013. Photograph by Elly Clarke.
- iii *Prayer (Stockholm)* process still, Buddhas Light International Association, Stockholm, Sweden, 2016.
- iv *Threnody* process still of Zami Mdingi, 2016. Photograph by Jonx Pillemer.
- v Behind-the-scenes view of *The Black Passage* at mac Birmingham, 2010. Photograph by Simon Hadley.
- vi Record cover of T.Rex single. Photograph by Elly Clarke.
- vii *Untitled (with the sound of its own making)*: behind-the-scenes view of solar panels at blank projects, 2016.
- viii Selected dialogue from the script of *L'Esprit de Escalier*, 2016, written by Louis Viljoen.
- ix CCTV footage of robbery of KODE Museums of Bergen, 2013.
- x Tattoo of the artwork worn by Nahla Tabbaa, 2014.
- xi 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.
- xii 13 texts pertaining to the moon written with ink on soluble paper, dissolved in water, and presented in 13 glass vials. Clockwise from the top: "On a night of the full moon" by Audre Lorde; (Extract from) *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino; "Nocturne" by Edith Södergran; (Extract from) *The Years* by Virginia Woolf; 15 September, 1976, diary entry by Andrei Tarkovsky; "I Watched the Moon Around the House" by Emily Dickinson; (Extract from) *On dreams* by Sigmund Freud; "The moon and the yew tree" by Sylvia Plath; Alternative, unused moon landing speech by Richard Nixon; (Extract from) *Total Eclipses of the Sun* by Mabel Loomis Todd; "Whitey On The Moon" by Gil Scott-Heron; (Extract from) *In Praise of Shadows* by Junichiro Tanizaki; "Moonset" by Carl Sandburg.

Images

Art Institute of Chicago: 70
 Blaise Adilon: 19, 45, 75
 Frank Berglund: 22, 63
 Damien Bruneau: 72
 Anthea Buys: 56
 Elly Clarke: 34, 48, 49
 Sofia Ekström: 85
 Fotomuuseum of Tallinn: 12, 14, 73, 74, 124, 125, 140
 Paul Grose: 74, 89, 110
 Simon Hadley: 44
 Pieter Hugo: 59
 Maha Kays: 21, 42, 70, 87
 Norrtälje Konsthall: 120
 Karel Koplímets: 79
 Timothy Mason: 57
 Rustin McCann: 53, 55
 Ayumi Minemura: 66
 Bjørn Mortensen: 6, 7, 15, 26, 84, 92, 123
 Katarina Zimmervoll: 16
 Jonx Pillemer: 20, 43
 Anthea Pokroy: 10, 18, 19, 34, 35, 96, 100, 112, 113, 136, 136, 137, 138
 Bernard Renoux: 62
 Mikhael Subotzky: 114, 115
 Nahla Tabbaa: 95
 Michael Tymbios: 94
 Adrienne van Eeden-Wharton: 109
 Jonty Wilde: 51, 130
 Tadzio: 38, 40, 54, 148, 152

Artworks

All artworks courtesy of blank projects and Galerie Imane Farès

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