

**James Webb One day, all of this will be yours Blank  
Projects By Dr Ruth Simbao Published in Arthro, February 2010**

In South Africa, James Webb is typically referred to as a sound artist, but in his exhibition, *One day, all of this will be yours*, Webb at times deliberately hides sound. In fact, there is much that he shrewdly conceals.

In his recurring, worldwide sound intervention, *There's no place called home*, recordings of foreign birdcalls are placed in various local trees (in Japan, China and South Africa) in a gesture of sonic subversion akin to 'avian graffiti'. The artwork is not the sound, though. The artwork is the hidden sound—sound firstly hidden away in trees unbeknownst to most except perhaps the birds (expanding the 'audience' into the animal world), and sound secondly hidden from the gallery goer. The work is simply the photograph and text—the concept—and the concept is about the 'not-there'.

The theme of 'not-there' runs throughout the show. The birdcall series began when Webb did a residency in Kokura, spending eight months away from home. Not only was he 'not-there' (not home, yet not fully integrated in an unfamiliar Japanese city), but he was also 'not meant to be from there'—as a blonde-haired man he was not, from a Japanese perspective, meant to be from the Africa many Japanese imagined. Further, Kokura is a place that was saved by being 'not there', for it was the original target for the nuclear bomb that hit Nagasaki in 1945, but due to clouds and smoke it was not clearly visible and the 'Fat Man' exploded elsewhere.

Two of the other works in this series play with the myths and fears of current Sino-African relations. Webb placed the sounds of South African carnivorous birds in a tree in Guangzhou, China. Alluding to the culinary myths of China (and stereotypes about which animal flesh is deemed appropriate to eat), the calls are of birds that hang their prey up to dry, producing flesh reminiscent of biltong so loved by many South Africans.

Two panoramic photographs of Joubert Park reveal the artist's cunning ability to provide social commentary with an astonishing frugality that coaxes the viewer to see what is not overtly there.

The texts below the photographs read, 'Calls of non-migratory Nigerian birds in Johannesburg trees' and 'Calls of restricted-range Chinese birds in Johannesburg trees'. Subtly opening up a panoply of meaning, the birds, signifiers of change, draw parallels to human conditions of (forced) movement in an age not only of globalisation and transnationalism, but also of global warming, in which weather patterns fundamentally shift the migratory patterns of birds. Through reference to endemic birds, Webb questions the notions of origins and belonging that seep into xenophobic talk. While xenophobia in Johannesburg is typically aimed at Nigerians, growing irrational fears of a new Chinese imperialism and global economic domination create fresh waves of imposed estrangement.

Linking to the piece set in Kokura (the place that was not seen), *Untitled (9th August)* resourcefully, yet dramatically, reveals the devastating 'not-thereness' in the aftermath of the detonation of the atomic bomb. Raising museological questions about the presence of objects in relation to meaning, Webb displays nothing more than the texts found in the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum. Texts such as 'Melted rosary', 'Steel helmet with the remains of a skull' and 'Pocket watch exposed to the bombing' are extracted from the exhibition cards that contextualised the virtually unrecognisable relics in the Nagasaki museum. While the original objects and photographs in the Atomic Bomb Museum documented the effects of the USA's act of erasure, Webb uses the complete absence of image (and sound) to raise questions about the tensions of documentation itself. In doing so, he highlights the instability of 'thingness' at the heart of conceptual art, as well as the impossibility of repetition in relation to performance art. While conceptual art allows for the 'not-thereness' of the 'thing', performance art completes itself through disappearance.

The video *September 1st* pushes the complexities of documentation in relation to conceptual art and performance art even further, as it documents a performance of 'non-performers' in a 'not-there' space. Seventy-five blindfolded participants were taken to a concert by Spanish sound artist Francisco Lopez, but they were never given any information (not even after the fact) about where they were or what they heard, and they were never told that they were, indeed, performing 'art'. This raises interesting questions about conscious performance versus inadvertent performance; intentional versus accidental presence or absence.

The three-minute video projection *Le Marché Oriental*, pays homage to the 'not-there' through a haunting elegy sung in the form of the Adhan (call to prayer). The powerful voice of Sheik Mogamat Moerat from the District Six Zeenatul Islam Majid mosque captures the now-lost acoustic of the Oriental Plaza that was demolished in 2008. This Apartheid-era shopping mall, which was designed to control Indian trade, has given way to The Six—luxury apartments that, through a process of gentrification, erase the past character of Woodstock. Evoking the saying, 'Prayer is better than sleep', *Le Marché Oriental* reminds one that 'District Sixers' refused to slumber and their activism resulted in an ongoing legacy. Without the fire of anti-Apartheid activism, the gentrification of Woodstock is sleepily allowing the absurdity of commercialism to take over from the absurdity of Apartheid. As the viewer stands 'inside' the video (which takes on the whole room as its own space), she becomes part of the gentrification process too. It is fitting, though, that this artists' run project space, Blank Projects, stands across the road from established commercial galleries that forecast the nation's artworld, turning this into a show about the 'not-there' of the artworld too. The title of the exhibition, *One day, all of this will be yours* (a saying usually associated with the inheritance of land), reveals the fact that absence (the intermittent removal of image or sound), can be turned into a kind of redistribution, for the concepts can be 'owned' without money changing hands.

Significantly Webb's play with absence is too sharp-witted to be sentimental, for rather than playing up a nostalgic longing to 'return home' (*nostos*) or lamenting the fact that there is no place *like* home, he induces us into realising that there simply is no place that we can uncomplicatedly call home. While concept can be redistributed and 'place' can be relocated, Webb's intervention at the threshold to the exhibition ('E'rat Qeematak' written in Arabic script across the Blank Projects logo above the door) is a reminder to 'Know thy worth'. Looking out onto the Woodstock street, this sign speaks to the commercialisation of the artworld as much as to the gentrification of an historically tumultuous place.

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