

## THE TACET MARK AS BLACKNESS

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### Abstract

James Webb's 2012 performance *The World Will Listen* gestures towards a blackness of 'zero of flow,' updating the historical avant garde's 'zero of form,' both in terms of the electronic media used and the history of communities that have been historically figured as unformed and unmediated.

Keywords: 4'33"; James Webb; John Cage; South Africa; African art; sound art; electronic art; Eskom

The July 2012 performance of Webb's *The World Will Listen* was performed at a sound art opening at the Bag Factory gallery in Johannesburg. For four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the power to the gallery was cut off at the main breaker, which rendered the space completely black. The performance was unannounced and unexpected and the visitors' immediate collective assumption was that the gallery was experiencing a rolling blackout, which is common during Johannesburg winters. All of the sound works, the noise and talking in the gallery stopped for a moment—both sound and sight were suspended. In an electronic media exhibition with around twenty-five artworks, some of which were very loud, the sudden cut was a shock. A short few seconds later, order returned as the majority of the gallery goes lit up their mobile phones to help them navigate out of the front doors and onto the sidewalks, still casually chatting and drinking wine. *The World Will Listen* alluded to John Cage's 4'33" first performed in 1952, the so-called "silent work" in which a performer is instructed to sit with a particular musical instrument in front of an audience and remain silent for a given length of time.

It seems to me that the gesture of *The World Will Listen* refers not only to the iconic work of John Cage, but also to a history of metaphors that have circulated around technology in the development of electronic art and the industrialization of Africa. In South Africa, the history of electronic art must be examined in terms of how the nation was electrified in the first place, which was mainly by the mining industry. The purposeful suspension of services by the apartheid government resulted in a silencing—through a lack of connectivity to the

flow of commerce, information, and political identity—specific sectors of the population deemed primitive.

However, Webb's work has not trafficked in explicit signs and symbols of politics. He carefully crafts his artworks to hover between conceptual art, sound art, and visual art at the edges of their disclosing meaning or even information. The undercover rogue quality of the breaker cut in *The World Will Listen* is found in many of Webb's works, including *Spectre*, performed in September 2011 at the First National Bank Johannesburg Art Fair. Webb commissioned a volunteer to walk through the fair carrying a powerful mobile phone jammer with a 20m radius that also disrupted credit card transaction signals. Another ongoing work, also unannounced, *Untitled* (2006-) (performed most recently at the Johannesburg Art Gallery) is a programmed light that flashes Morse code message, undisclosed to which the public pay little if any attention. In regards to all of these works, critic Julian Jonker writes that "[Webb's work] is that most South African form, the prank, but made zen, reduced to its littlest intuitive moment" [1]. It is fitting that his work *The World Will Listen* reworked one of the most famous spoofs of art history, John Cage's silent piano performance.

I want to narrow my discussion to two main aspects of John Cage's 4'33" which have special relevance to Webb's *The World Will Listen*. The first is the qualitatively different method of notating music once it is understood as signal and noise—and electronically reproducible. Cage experimented with many versions of music notation, especially when composing 4'33", in order to understand a new electronic territory of sound. Liz Kotz argues that Cagean philosophy is "partly the result of changes in material support and medium," and 4'33" is "part of a perverse turn to language that occurs in reaction to the electronic inscription of sound..." [2] Kotz argues that Cage only arrived at 4'33" after his experimentation with magnetic tape recording. Cage saw in sound, as it was mapped onto a tape, a whole new type of inscription that

was entirely mediated and really electrified. In other words, the map of sound was no longer the musical notation or rationalist musical staff, but something much more direct and non-visual: the magnetic tape could only register as a field of positive or negative charges. That is, sound is the index of fluctuating electrical flow, a reversal of the figure ground relationship of art that Cage attempted with 4'33".

The second and related aspect of Cage's work I want to relate to Webb's *The World Will Listen* is conceptual art's use of instructions and, at times, aggressive commands. Over the years, Cage wrote many different notations and verbal instruction for this and other performances. Kotz sees this as arising from the influence that music and sound art had on the visual arts in the 1960s, with the "deep structural transformations" in sound phenomena. I would make a more general statement, however, as it relates to the nature of electronic media. The set of instructions embedded in electrical language is the basis of the protocological language of data processing and electricity itself, the sets of commands by which electronic machines operate.

In the 1952 typewritten score of Cage's 4'33", the work is written as a series of instructions that are simple, that is, deskilled. Before detailing the instructions for the performance of the piece, the score is divided up into three

Fig. 1. James Webb, web documentation of *The World Will Listen*, 2005. (© James Webb)



THE WORLD WILL LISTEN | 2005

A 4-minute 33-second power failure instigated at a gallery opening.

Medium: Electricity  
Dimensions: Variable  
Duration: 04:33  
Date: 2005

sections indicated by the roman numerals I, II, II. Underneath each symbol is typed out “TACET,” indicating a three-part composition linked together by a total rest by the performer. “Tacet” has a relationship to the “rest” mark on scores, the rest usually noted by a thick black line that indicates a temporary silence on the part of one of many instrumentalists. When that instrument has no remaining parts in the composition, the score is marked “tacet.” There is no longer a visual representation of silence or rest, only the linguistic command to rest. While most agree that 4’33” was an experiment in framing sound, silence, or even experience, Kotz argues that the various scores and textual instructions for the piece indicate a relationship with language and instruction that arose from a “failure of his efforts and precision and control” [3].

If we take these two innovations of Cage’s work and examine them in relation to James Webb’s *The World Will Listen*, a few things emerge as to Webb’s departure from the iconic 4’33”. The first is in the title *The World Will Listen*, which can be read as not a set of instructions or a form of “language activated” in Liz Kotz’s words, but rather a veiled threat that matches the provocation of the power cut. It matches the command language of conceptual art and information processing and its veiled relationship to politics. That is, much more than just a spoof or a turning back of the performative onus onto the audience, *The World Will Listen* instead worked with the aspect of 4’33” that forced an experience of duration, this time overlaid with a longer history of modernization in South Africa. This history of industrial modernism has resulted in infrastructural shortcomings that are so routine that the first assumption of a blackout is that they should be ascribed to the power company and/or the government that are seen by the public as having malevolent intent. In fact, that title is only an afterthought of the piece, as the audience would not have any way of knowing that the piece existed unless they came across documentation after the fact. The command of *The World Will Listen* originates from an unknown, menacing agent.

Second, unlike Cage’s 4’33”, *The World Will Listen* lists electricity as its medium, both a material and a phenomenon. Webb raises electricity to the level of signification in the face of its

absence, in the moment of blackness in the gallery. Both works attempt the impossible: to code a deterritorialized flow in a way that will both preserve it, while still making it meaningful, or perhaps just perceptible. However in terms of contemporary Johannesburg, this notion of electronic art as failure occurs within a lived reality of infrastructural failure and a chaotic mixture of signification practices of all types. Those moments of failure, silence, and noise are represented as a power relationship that shifts constantly. Sarah Nuttall’s and Liz McGregor’s collection of literature called *Load Shedding: writing on and over the edge of South Africa* describe “load shedding,” another term for rolling blackouts, as both a material and psychological experience [4]. The types of puns and plays on words, where “load shedding” is a sensibility as well as a technical term, are common in art from post-revolution states where political promises have been emptied out by the multiplication of infrastructural disparities and cold calculation of profit.

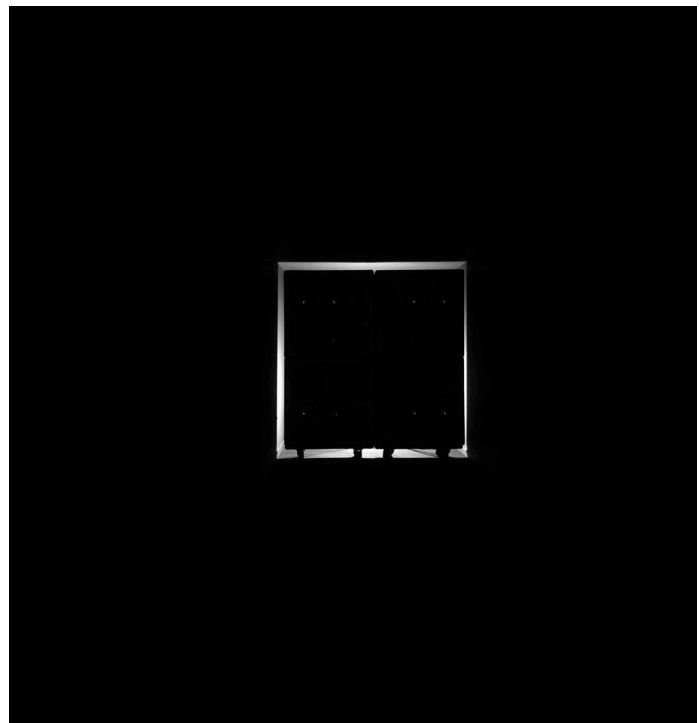
Thus the third departure from 4’33” in *The World Will Listen* is in its oblique, secondary linking between the deterritorialized flow of electricity and the history of “black” Africa. As William Pietz argues in his article “The Phonograph in Africa,” “New machine technologies ... discovered a vast new intentional space, as yet unterritorialized, which

capitalism colonized with as much eagerness and anxiety as it colonized the geographical world” [5]. There are many examples of the conflation of Africa with the schizo flows of electronic technology, both labor and communication devices. What can be said overall, again to quote Pietz, is that “there is no message except the all-consuming passion and labor to fill up all possible lines and routes within the new non-territorial space of technological communications.” A typical example in South Africa is a story recounted by electricity historian and African National Congress activist Renfrew Christie, one that circulated in the

diamond-mining town of Kimberley, that “raw natives flocked from far afield to see the magic of all the street lanterns lighting up simultaneously, with no man near them. Groups gathered in the streets after sunset and acclaimed ‘Tagati!’” [6]. That is, the native’s supposed reaction to the electrical light reassured the mining officials of their superstitious belief in the deterritorialized primitive, and the amorphous nature of natives and electricity both—materials waiting to be harnessed. This statement by white officials characterizes the primitivism of media development that continued into the period of the information economy of colonialism of the late twentieth century.

The Bag Factory gallery, where the *World Will Listen* was performed in 2012, is in the Fordsburg district of Johannesburg, a location that was caught in the crossfire of the processes of electrification and industrialization in the early twentieth century. The introduction of large-scale electrification in South Africa was one of the precipitating factors that led to a major mining strike, as the mechanization of drilling and earth removal would require less white semi-skilled and supervisory jobs. Just a half a block from the Bag Factory, in March of 1922, the government of General Smuts performed an aerial bombardment of Fordsburg Square that resulted in thousands of casualties and arrests. This silencing of protest and

Fig. 2. James Webb, *The Black Passage*, 2006. (© James Webb)



collectivity haunts *The World Will Listen*.

Today, the power industry is often referred to sardonically as an “Africa problem,” communicating the weariness of incompetence by those running the country and its operations. But to assume that it is only incompetence is to overlook Eskom Power’s careful calculations over the years of power output and profit. In the years following the 1994 elections, Eskom has adapted to the changing conditions of the country—a different production of territory has obtained compared to the physical spatial occupation of the early days of electrification. Eskom is caught between competing goals to extend the grid to underserved communities, as was its mandate after the 1994 elections, and to maintain a stable profit flow to investors. The future of basic services is now one that is flexible and fundamentally insecure. [7]

We can then examine the impossibility of the work’s proposition of the neutrality of blackness, silence, and noise and its philosophical precedents in Cage, Warhol, and even anti-pictorial art of the early twentieth century. In the most overtly political of Webb’s work, *The Black Passage* (2006), the reference to mining and mechanization is fed back into the media object itself, as well as its localized metaphors such as the black box. *The Black Passage* consists of a dark 20 metre long narrow tunnel, at the end of which is hung a black curtain framed with golden back lighting. A looping eleven-minute audio recording of an elevator descending into and ascending out of the shaft of the famous South Deep mine in South Africa plays loudly in the dark passage, its amplification indicating a power relationship between recorded sound and its output into the environment.

The curtain, according to Webb, references Malevich’s 1915 painting the *Black Square* in its blackness, absence, and iconicity [8]. Webb explains that the darkness of the tunnel is mythical, even otherworldly, while it also refers to the black laboring bodies taken down into the mine. But in eschewing visual referents to the miners, which Webb believes is voyeuristic, the audience instead experiences a deafening mediated version of the elevator’s noise. Art critic Sean O’Toole writes about *The Black Passage* that it is “[a]n absence meditating on an ephemeral sound presence, this invisible sound sculpture

is also a black nothing” [9]. He goes on to cite the early modernist aspiration of many European artists to achieve blackness in their work, declaring blackness the “soul” of the modern age. After revolution, in other words, blackness is anarchy.

*The Black Passage* is therefore not a reference to, but really an index of labor conditions in South Africa and elsewhere, a stripped down recording of one of the great engineering feats of industrialism. The sound’s transference from the ground to the recorded version is amplified through large speakers, connecting to the sensory-engineered spaces of early sound and video art that so puzzled Cage as he thought through the materialism of sound in relation to its textual representation. *The Black Passage* recodes the empty space of capitalism, its holes and dead spaces, with the pure sound of machines: elevator and amplifier. This mine is now an overdetermined symbol, particularly after Steve McQueen’s 2002 film *Western Deep*. The same elevator is depicted in jarring juxtapositions of light and dark, sound and silence, to elicit experience in the audience engineered by sound and moving image. Unlike *Black Passage*, *Western Deep* ends with a subtle but unmistakable visual representation of oppression in the figure of the miner’s black body. Webb’s piece tests that boundary of a pure sound without visual referent. In other words, the Orpheus he evokes might descend and even ascend, but there is no poetic salvation somewhere outside of the sound of the mechanization; he leaves the outside of the work undefined.

In this sense, *The World Will Listen* operates in a contemporary art field entirely overcoded, especially when it appears in “Africa.” Webb implicates himself, if not Cage, in the arbitrary power relationship of command language and the inevitability of its turn to signification and allusion. That is, if Cage desired in part to silence the canned four-minute sound products of Muzak that endlessly flowed out the speakers in department store elevators, Webb calls up a different elevator altogether, the elevator that penetrates the underworld before materials arrive at department stores transformed into polished products. In *The World Will Listen* and *Black Passage*, Malevich’s zero of form is attempted as “zero of flow,” while gesturing towards that proposition’s ultimate impossibility.

As with the tacet mark and its use of blackness to indicate pause, still the proposition stands as Liz Kotz suggests for Cage’s notation, that he “[moved] toward an indeterminate relationship between score and performance in which the musical notation ceases to be a system of representation and instead becomes a proposal for action” [10]. *The World Will Listen* presses the parameters of this gesture, inverting the conditions of performance from an expectant public to an unexpectant public, which then reverts to a jaded, expectant public that is conditioned by the discontents of politics and the enduring conditions of apartheid-era modernization. In that mode of modern industrialization, artists do not have to do much work to uncover electronic art and its base material electricity as operating by codes and commands. It was rather obviously delivered according to who had been designated “without” electricity, those unformed and unmediated “black” Africans. In that, they must work rather at redirecting that overcoding, to resist the near immediate desire to read pause as failure.

#### References and Notes:

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7. See Leonard Gentle, “Eskom to Eskom: From racial Keynesian capitalism to neo-liberalism (1910-1994) in David A. McDonald, ed., *Electric Capitalism: Recolonising Africa on the Power Grid* (London: Earthscan, 2009).
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9. Sean O’Toole, “Black Landscape: An Argument in Three Parts” *Art South Africa* 9, no. 1 (September 2010).
10. Kotz [2], 17.