

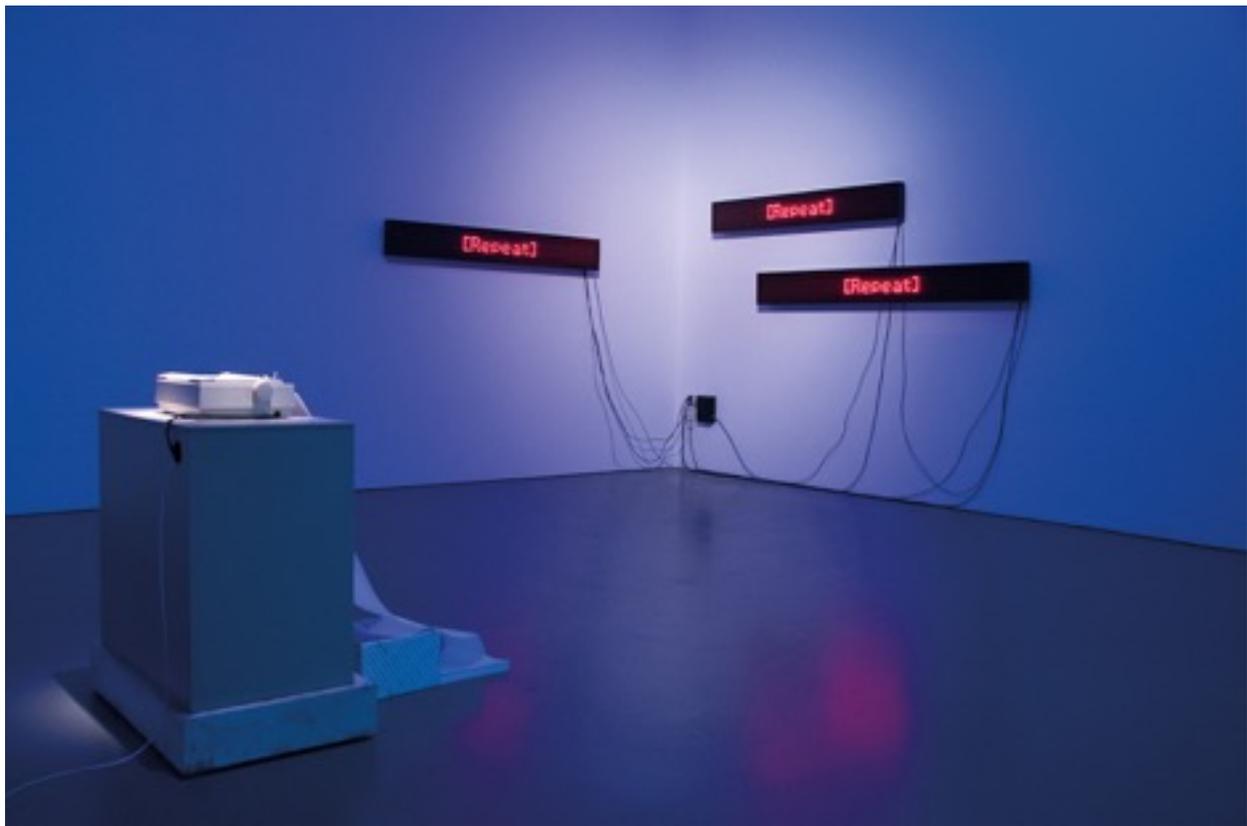
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The Ten Murders of Josephine installation view at Witte de With Center for
Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2017

Photo: Sara Hamadeh



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CONVERSATIONS Mousse 60

The Testimonial

Subject: Rana Hamadeh

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Rana Hamadeh in conversation with Carolina Rito

The Ten Murders of Josephine (2017) is the most recent longitudinal project initiated by Rana Hamadeh. The operatic project is structured through several evolving iterations, which over-write and trouble one another, proposing a particular dramaturgy of labor and research processes that commence with the present exhibition at Witte de With. Preceded by a bi-weekly study group inviting an assembly of readers

from different fields, the exhibition will be followed by a theatrical production, a publication, and a film. After six years of Alien Encounters (Hamadeh's previous long-term project), evolving around the genre of legal spectacle, and Hamadeh's earlier claims regarding "justice as the measure to which one can access theater;" The Ten Murders of Josephine explores the constitutive conditions of testimony vis-à-vis the notion of "testimonial subjecthood."

MILANO ART BULLETIN

Fb: milanoartbulletin

CAROLINA RITO: After Alien Encounters, the current show at Witte de With is the first iteration of your new longitudinal project, The Ten Murders of Josephine. As it happened with Alien Encounters, the new project is meant to revolve around (and provoke) a set of questions and preoccupations, staged through various iterations, i.e. a bi-weekly study group, the current exhibition, an opera, a publication, and a film. What are the initial drivers of this new long-term project?

RANA HAMADEH: What constitutes a "project," for me, is the labor involved in breaching—betraying—the very epistemological grounds from which my theoretical/aesthetic concerns stem. And

what constitutes a “new” project is the shift from one epistemological plane to another—even while still working with the same set of concerns. This new plane starts a new journey of what I’d like to call “epistemological treachery.” This is the most precise summary of the way I work—or at least, the way I desire to think of my work. The new-ness that *The Ten Murders of Josephine* claims for itself is both in the continuation of *Alien Encounters* and in the launch of a new theoretical and formal ground. Even though this emergent project inherits the full genealogy of terms developed throughout the six-year course of *Alien Encounters* (including, among others, terms like immunity, hygiene, contagion, infection, justice, theatre, etc...), and even though it faithfully follows the thread of claims around justice and its institutions, *The Ten Murders of Josephine* moves towards a new set of questions. It reiterates these terms and claims upon a radically different theoretical and formal ground, which not only allows for engendering a critique of legal subjecthood (as under *Alien Encounters*), but rather allows for an unforgiving—or better to say, “provincialization”—of the institution of the subject altogether.

CR: Both *Alien Encounters* and *The Ten Murders of Josephine* share a preoccupation with the mechanisms of the law and how these mechanisms inform and institutionalize the legal subject, and—one could also add—how these mechanisms inform the very conception of subjectivity. However, in the new project, you enter a new space of inquiry based on the “testimonial subject” and the aural sphere embedded in it. Contrary to the valid speech of the testimony (the one that is heard as coherent speech under the predicaments of the law), the testimonial subject gestures towards the absence and the materiality (in absence) of the voice of the testimony. As in the Zong massacre, the voice of those murdered comes about, in its silence, through violent legal speech. How do the massacre and the *Gregson vs.*

Gilbert insurance case (1783) become foundational for the notion of the testimonial subject in your work?

RH: The necessity to provincialize citizenship led to the notion of the testimonial, which became central to the project. The Ten Murders of Josephine asks primarily what it means to constitute oneself as a testimonial subject, not only outside the bounds of the court of law but, even further, in place of the legal subject. (Please note that the word “subject” here is used very much under protest and erasure, and it is important that it is always crossed out). Throughout the project, I explore the constitutive conditions of testimony vis-à-vis the notion of testimonial subjecthood, proposing a radical distinction between the two. I understand the notion of “testimony” as a form of rational utterance that is necessarily tied to the workings of a tribunal. To be able to testify in court and have one’s testimony rendered valid, one needs to subscribe to the language of the law; to constitute oneself as a respondent to the law’s ordinary call, so that it passes through its narrow bandwidth. That is to say that in court, the plaintiff is always participating—or made to participate—in an “unjust” translation act. This is the translation of the singular experience into a generic sign—a wound-turned-scar—under a given set of always-already-determined linguistic codes. My activation of the testimonial, by contrast, makes a radical cut with the notion of valid speech. It attunes to all that is irrational, unspoken and unspeakable, unmarked and unmarkable. The testimonial points to an erased archive of (colonial/racial/patriarchal/corporate/state-sponsored, etc.) erasure, a violence never attended to, which materializes—phonetically—as a monument to absent speech. One of my main cues is the foundational Gregson vs. Gilbert insurance case of 1783: the only surviving record of the massacre in which the captain of the Zong slave ship ordered the drowning of 150 African slaves in order to claim insurance over the ship’s loss of “cargo.” During the case, the owners of the Zong ship came up against their insurers, who disputed whether or not the

murder was a genuine act of jettison or a fraud. For me, this benchmark case does not only point to the horrific jurisprudential logic of the slavery system, but, even further, continues to inform and underpin our current legal understandings of valid speech. The only audible, and thereby valid, testimony that can be accessed through the document is that which is written in the murderer's voice and in the voice of the legal system that had legitimated the murder.

CR: The tensions between sound/silence, voice/speech, and legality/illegality presented in your work are not of a binary nature. They are rather in a dialectical tension. What I mean is that when you look at the legal document, you don't search only for what is written, but what the text obscures and evades, silences and oppresses. In other words, legality cannot be inscribed without informing what is illegal. In that way, both polarities inform one another, or, better said, imply and implicate one another. How to make sense of the testimonial voice in its absence?

RH: What the notion of the testimonial points to here is the erased archive of horror that subsists within the documental voice. This archive of horror shall not be understood as the trace of the massacre, but rather as the fragmentary, unspoken, and unspeakable phonic materiality that is captured and trapped within the trace—that subsists because of and despite of that trace. I treat the Gregson vs. Gilbert document in the exhibition as a primary document that defines the notion of documentality as a whole. I claim that the legal subject/citizen is always constituted through the documental voice, which by necessity is the voice of the murderer. To ask what it means to emerge as testimonial subjects is an invitation to rethink the ontology of the subject beyond the validity of voice—beyond the coherency of the speech that had remained, but probably through witnessing/acknowledging (collectively) our incapacity to witness all that had been erased.

CR: The sound piece that moves from one room to the other—and which accumulates sounds, resonances, and voices happening in the exhibition space, mixing and amplifying them as part of the main sequence—choreographs the navigation of the visitor through the exhibition space. At the same time, visual elements are reduced to their minimum, operating most of the time as signifiers of the listening session, e.g. seats, speakers, organ, score. Sound is not new to your work, but it assumes a stronger prominence in this exhibition. Could you talk about the aural space of the exhibition in troubling the law's call and/or the institutions of citizenship?

RH: In the exhibition, a machine translates the composition and the live interferences into a sonic logic that undoes the logic of the preceding part of the composition; then live restructuring of the composition is interrupted by a telephone that rings. When picked up, the phone channels the composition into its horn, turning the sound into a secret between the single responder to the call and the telephone. Yet the responder to the telephone can speak into the telephone and their speech would be amplified and processed in the other rooms of the exhibition, not only disrupting the composition, but also translating the voice into text that disrupts the libretto that runs on LED character displays. These disruptions then trigger a printer to print out the source code of the exhibition's system, for the visitors to take, alongside my commentary. The ambition of *The Ten Murders of Josephine* is to play the imagined role of the naughty phone operator who chooses to meddle with the nature of the law's call: its voice, its reception and its course—a project that, once again, first and foremost casts doubt upon the very constitution of the legal subject, and secondly, upon the institution of citizenship from which the legal subject operates. The project of cutting that call short, of occupying the line with some improvised on-hold message, of mixing up the extension, of receiving the call as a prank, or of returning the call “later” (borrowing Avital Ronell's

sensibility), operates as the epistemological treachery that I see my work enabling. Regarding the institution of citizenship, it is important to say that I am as disenchanted with the question of the invention of the revolutionary subject as I am disenchanted and utterly uninterested in the constitution of any new form of citizenship. The latter happens to be quite a concern today within the art field. In my view, modern citizenship cannot be thought of in isolation to the question of debt. And debt being the constant obligation of oneself to the law's call, a payment that is always-already-enforced by the law, before one is even born. The problem increases when there is no way of considering the validity of debt outside the history and institution of the document, of the written bond. Therefore, the law's call or command cannot be dissociated from notions of property, inheritance, the continuing histories of enslavement, land ownership, labor, spectacle, etc... It is a spiral of interdependent institutions and concepts, where you cannot claim to break one without the necessity of breaking its accomplices and doppelgangers.

CR: I wanted to finally ask you about the operatic nature of the project. The project follows a particular dramaturgy of research and labor processes that overwrite and complicate one another, not only culminating in an opera on stage, but being operatic in their very negotiation of the performative, the spectacular, lived experience, and their institutional carriages. Could you explain how the project is operatic in its method?

RH: The relationship between justice and theatre has always played an important role in my work. During *Alien Encounters*, I argued that "justice is the degree to which one can access the dramatic means of representation; the measure to which one can access theatre." In that way, spectacle is at the core of the questions around testimony vs. the testimonial. The conversations around the constitution of the testimonial subject are preceded by a meta-question: how to exorcise performance from the demand to perform (a question I bring from the film *Bamboozled*, directed

by Spike Lee). The exhibition (and the future iterations) thereby is not only determined by the theoretical labor that has been collectively put together throughout the study group, nor is it only the bits and pieces of the narrative that inspire the thinking process, but the ways by which the rooms and their live processes disrupt one another, creating a complex organism of incomplete translations, fragmented cacophonous bursts, an affective mix of tenses, present, past, and future. The title of the project also indicates another reference. Josephine, loosely based on Franz Kafka's mouse songstress, can be understood as a structuring agent of the different registers of voice alongside the question of valid speech. Josephine's singing—or a "mere whistling," common to all the mouse folk—is "not so much a performance of songs as much as it is an assembly of people." In Kafka's story, the mouse folk do not congregate around Josephine with the purpose of witnessing her singing as much as with the purpose of witnessing their own congregation around her singing, their own witnessing of her inaudible, insignificant, and at times, invalid, voice. The opera becomes itself the monumentalization-by-proxy of how we constitute ourselves as subjects/citizens, by dramatizing the means by which we become an audience, constitute ourselves as spectators, as addressees.

Rana Hamadeh is a visual and performance artist based in The Netherlands. Drawing on a curatorial approach within her artistic practice, she develops longstanding projects that think through the infrastructures of justice, militarism, histories of sanitation and theatre. Her work stems from an extended investigation into specific concepts and terms, treating the field of theory as fiction. She has presented her solo works at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2017; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane 2016; The Showroom, London, 2016; Nottingham Contemporary, 2015; Western Front, Vancouver, 2015; and Kiosk, Ghent, 2014. Her group exhibitions include The Moscow Biennial, 2015, The New Museum, New York, 2014; e-flux, New York, 2014, The 8th Liverpool Biennial, 2014 and the Wattis Institute (2014). Hamadeh's work is currently shortlisted for the Prix de Rome for visual arts in The Netherlands.

Carolina Rito is the Head of Public Programmes and Research at Nottingham Contemporary and Research Fellow in the Institute for Contemporary History at Nova University of Lisbon. Rito holds a PhD in Curatorial/Knowledge in the Visual Cultures Department at Goldsmiths University of London. Her research and curatorial practice delve into “the curatorial,” as an inter-disciplinary and aesthetic investigative practice, able to open up the field of exhibition-making and historical legacies to a new arena of knowledge production, located in the intersection of visual cultures, contemporary art and critical theory. More specifically, her work examines the modulation of historical legacies in contemporary discourses and affects, through its silenced continuities, such as the post-revolutionary affects in contemporary Portugal.

Originally published on [Mousse 60](#)