

Excerpt from Exhibition Guide.

The Ten Murders of Josephine

Rana Hamadeh

SECOND FLOOR

The Ten Murders of Josephine is an Opera project by artist Rana Hamadeh structured through several evolving iterations, which over-write and trouble one another and propose several research processes and a particular dramaturgy of labor that commence with the current exhibition on view at Witte de With and will be followed by a theatrical production, a publication, and a film.

Inherited from the genre of legal spectacle, and from the artist's earlier claims regarding "justice as the measure to which one can access theater," *The Ten Murders of Josephine* explores the conditions of testimony vis-à-vis the notion of 'testimonial subjecthood'; Hamadeh proposes a distinction between the two. While she understands the notion of 'testimony' as a form of rational utterance that is necessarily tied to the workings of a tribunal, her activation of the 'testimonial' 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 – phonically – as a monument to absent speech. *How can this phonic materiality of absent speech become the organizing principle of subjecthood?* Hamadeh asks. What would it require to constitute oneself, or to emerge, thus, as a testimonial subject? And what would it mean 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?

Operatic in its form and continuously shifting mediational and aesthetic registers, the exhibition lends itself as a method for disentangling Hamadeh's questions concerning how the phonic relates to notions of 'valid speech', property, labor, legality, governmentality, documentality, o/aurality, and theater. Drawing broadly on historian Saidiya Hartman and poets NourbeSe Philip and Fred Moten's writings, Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, Kafka's *Josephine*, Quranic exegesis and Arabic prosody, among other interlocutors, the project suggests the testimonial as a catalyst that sets up the conditions for vacating our legally constituted bodies; a medium for provincializing citizenship.

One of Hamadeh's cues is the *Gregson vs. Gilbert* legal case of 1783, the only surviving record of the massacre in which the captain of the Zong slave ship ordered the drowning of 133 enslaved Africans in order to claim insurance over the ship's loss of 'cargo'. During the case, the owners of the Zong came up against their insurers, disputing whether or not the drowning of the slaves was a 'genuine act of jettison or a fraud'. For Hamadeh, this benchmark case does not only point to the blood-chilling jurisprudential logic of the slavery system, but, further, continues to inform and underpin our current legal understanding of 'valid speech'; for, the only audible 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. The materiality of the

testimonial, thus, for Hamadeh, points to the archive of horror that subsists within the documental voice – not *as* a trace of the massacre, but *within* and *despite* the trace. How does Josephine, who is loosely based on Kafka's mouse songstress, then fit into an engagement with historical cases such as the Gregson vs. Gilbert and the Zong massacre? Here, Josephine can be understood as a structuring agent of the different registers of the voice. Hamadeh engages multiple readings of Josephine-as-voice in the present – a voice with a name, race, and a probable gender. Josephine is variously read as the voice of revolution; the voice of the law; an ultrasonic vociferation that strives to be marked yet continuously fails to be; or as the operator of power's call. Josephine's singing – or is it 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'. But what logics structure this assembly? Josephine, approached as event and character, broaches the project's questioning of the documental voice vs. the phonic materiality of the testimonial. Conceived as the factory and assembly line for the Opera, the exhibition can be approached as a breathing, morphing sonic 'encampment' at Witte de With that continuously unsettles the boundaries of performance, spectacle, and lived experience. Cacophonous, enveloping, and affective, this encampment leads a life of its own. Constituted of a system of interplaying sonic zones, fragmentary tenses, spaces, events, and characters emerge and disintegrate across a forty-minute looping score. This score is continuously interrupted by the live processing of the audience's speech within the spaces of the exhibition; the live interpretations of machines and their translational interferences; the daily migrations and displacements of objects across different rooms carried out by Witte de With's staff-turned-actors; performers' public rehearsal; and the ongoing production of props and scenographic objects for the consequent theatrical production. The libretto itself becomes increasingly linguistically incomprehensible as it moves towards intensification. Through a growing physical affect, the listener becomes progressively fragmented, disintegrating as a rational subject with a capacity to witness the narrative's events. Through the exhibition, and a constant process of over-writing intrinsic to Hamadeh's practice, the resulting Opera undertakes an exploration of the labor of stage-craft, or 'the theater of theater', looping back into Josephine's own diminutive performance as the catalyst for both witnessing and assembly. Via this unnerving condition of total fragmentation, a new form of address is provoked, a movement staged not to mourn the incapacity to constitute ourselves as an assembly, but to experience the process of its loss.

Premiere Performances

14 and 15 December 2017 Theater Rotterdam, Scho