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The Hafis-Goethe-Denkmal and Cultural Sounds? as Artistic Responses to Goethe's Divan: Between Close Reading and Cultural Politics

Running title: Artistic Responses to Goethe's *Divan*

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Abstract

This paper examines two works of contemporary art, a sculpture-cum-civic monument and a sound installation, which respond to Goethe's *Divan*. The discussion combines a critical review of the political climate within which the works were conceived with original interviews with the artists to offer close analysis of the works. I evaluate the relative impact that the *Divan* and scholarship on it had upon the two works. I further ask whether the artists and their sponsors felt compelled to downplay more contentious themes found in that legacy, given the ideal of intercivilizational dialogue so prominent in the discourses of German-Iranian cultural diplomacy. The paper offsets this critical reading, however, by highlighting the quite sophisticated treatments of occidental-oriental relations achieved by both works within their respective media.

Keywords

sculpture; memorial; sound art; response; cultural politics; non-binary; Weimar; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; *Divan*; Hafez

In a quiet corner of the Beethovenplatz in Weimar stands the *Hafis-Goethe-Denkmal*. Conceived and realized by sculptors Ernst Thevis and Fabian Rabsch and dedicated in 2000, the piece takes the form of two large chairs cut from stone and set to face each other, as if to

imply an encounter or meeting of sorts.¹ As the name implies, the encounter the sculptors had in mind was the one Johann Wolfgang von Goethe imagined between himself and Hafez, as presented in his *West-östlicher Divan* (1819). Whilst it does not mark the geographical or cultural centre of Weimar and does not enjoy the highest visitor numbers, the monument has nonetheless become a recognized piece of civic architecture in the city and the focus of numerous cultural events as well as continuing artistic responses. Indeed, later generations of artists have continued exploring East-West relations by responding to the physical form and location of the monument.² One of the most fascinating of these responses was an immersive sound composition and installation called *Cultural Sounds?* by sound artists Martin Recker and Paul Hauptmeier (Hochschule für Musik Franz Liszt, Weimar), which involved two large banks of loudspeakers being erected alongside the monument and a cycle of playback performances held there each night as part of a summer festival during 2016.³

This paper uses the examples of the monument and the sound installation to discuss the ongoing reception of Goethe's *Divan* and its legacy within the contemporary arts. In delivering its own close readings of the monument and the sound installation, the paper locates the two works within overlapping though distinct contexts — the work's ongoing academic reception and its position within wider cultural and political discourses. The discussion turns first to the scholarly reception of the *Divan*, highlighting the at times contested debates that arise around the cycle, and then surveys how the work is conceived and presented within the discourses of contemporary cultural politics, both in Germany and further afield. An analysis of the two

¹ See Fabian Rabsch's sketches and photographs for the *Denkmal* on his website:

<<http://www.raum204.de/fabian-rabsch/oeffentl/goethe.htm>> [accessed 3 August 2020].

² See, for instance, the installation *In einem Boot*, presented by Pirusan Mahboob and Stefan Kratsch in and around the monument, on the 'Hafez Gedenktag', Weimar, 2014:

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IVkVGR2yqQ>> [accessed 3 August 2020].

³ See the project description on the 'Genius Loci' festival website: <<https://www.genius-loci-weimar.org/en/audio-competition/location/>> [accessed 3 August 2020].

contemporary artworks then critically accesses if and how both traditional academic discourse and the political context of artistic production influenced the artists and their works. It draws upon original interviews conducted with the artists and dovetails their comments with original analysis. Here the key concern will be to ask whether the *Divan*'s contemporary political and non-academic cultural reception has exerted what might be called a 'simplifying' or 'sanitizing' influence over the *Divan* and its treatment of the culture of the so-called Orient, and whether those influences have, in turn, left their imprint on the monument and sound installation. In other words, is there, within contemporary art, some glossing over of the more culturally and politically contentious aspects of Goethe's cycle and its themes, or do the works find their own novel responses to the poems and the complex questions they raise?

Artistic Coordinates: Between Scholarly Reading and Cultural Diplomacy

There is a venerable tradition of historically contextualized, philological discussion of the *Divan*, whether in the form of Hendrik Birus's meticulously commentated historical critical edition or Katharina Mommsen's painstaking reconstruction of Goethe's voracious reading across a wide corpus of oriental texts, including pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, the Qur'an, the poetry of Hafez, and of the impact this reading had on the form and content of Goethe's work.⁴ The cycle has, however, featured in the arena of post-colonial debate, a trend triggered by Edward Said's politically charged reading in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). Defining orientalism as a soft colonial, cultural practice by which European writers and artists reduced oriental cultures to the exoticized or demonized Other of the West, Said appeared to recognize in Goethe a more literary, scholarly form of orientalism that was distinct from the Anglo-

⁴ See: FA, III, and Katharina Mommsen, *Goethe and the Poets of Arabia*, trans. by Michael M. Metzger (Rochester: Camden House, 2014).

French colonial experience, but exerted a similar ‘intellectual authority over the Orient’.⁵ Even Said, though, came to modulate his position, and his later writing posits the *Divan* as a self-consciously modern literary text and Goethe, in turn, as a less crudely proprietorial writer and more of a creative interpreter of and intermediary between distinct cultural standpoints.⁶

Scholarly debates of the last two decades have continued to re-evaluate the *Divan* through a series of ever more refined lenses, finding aesthetically and politically more complex models of Goethe’s treatment of the Orient. Andrea Polaschegg’s historically grounded and theoretically nuanced study found distinct processes at work in the *Divan* — both Goethe’s drive to ‘know’ the Orient as an object of hermeneutic endeavour, and his analogous though distinct drive to co-opt it to function within processes of (occidental) identity formation. The context for these processes is a constructed, idealized Orient-as-nexus that allows the poetic subject to ‘participate’ in a fictional Orient within which there can be an imaginary overcoming of East-West binaries.⁷ Hamid Tafazoli has not only contended that the work envisages a non-hierarchical, ‘heterotopic’ relationship between Goethe’s Germany and medieval Persia, but also suggested that this takes place in an idealized ‘Textort’, a self-reflexively fictional and thus modern representation of the Orient.⁸ Anil Bhatti read the *Divan* as a self-conscious literary experiment by which the author sought to position himself between the two poles of Orient and Occident and overcome the very binary structures of ‘self’ and ‘Other’ upon which

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 19.

⁶ See Matthias Zach, “‘... without losing sight of the whole’: Said and Goethe”, in *Postcolonial Poetics: Genre and Form*, ed. by Patrick Crowley and Jane Hiddleston, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 35–48.

⁷ Andrea Polaschegg, *Der andere Orientalismus: Regeln deutsch-morgenländischer Imagination im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), esp. pp. 39–59.

⁸ Hamid Tafazoli, ‘Heterotopie als Entwurf poetischer Raumgestaltung’, in *External Space – Co-Space – Internal Space: Heterotopia in Culture and Society*, ed. by Hamid Tafazoli and Richard T. Gray (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2012), pp. 35–59.

models of interpersonal and intercultural dialogue are based.⁹ Conversely, though, scholars such as Yomb May have attempted to reset the post-colonial clock. Critiquing Goethe's poems for being structured as a 'Western monologue delivered at a passive Orient', May saw Goethe propounding notions of oriental passivity and found his attempts to induct a German readership into matters oriental in his *Noten und Abhandlungen* to be marred by racialized stereotypes and subtle backtracking on his oft-cited respect for Islam.¹⁰

Even this briefest of surveys shows a divergence of scholarly opinion on the *Divan*. On the one hand, the work appears to represent a soft variant of orientalism, offering imaginary forays into the Orient of the past that still constitute a form of control and appropriation of it. On other hand, Goethe's work can also read as a modern, self-reflexive experiment in writing about one culture from the perspective of another, which showcases the power of fiction to construct perspectives and identities that overcome binary intercultural relationships. The value of *Divan* scholarship lies, arguably, in its diverse and contested nature and in the contribution those debates can make to contemporary discussions on the relationship between the Muslim and Western worlds.

Yet outside academic contexts, in the world of the contemporary arts, in culturally inclined journalism, and in political discourse, there exists another, arguably hazier view of Goethe and the *Divan*. Often, in such contexts, there is neither close reading of Goethe's poems nor engagement with scholarship, and the discussions hold the poems up for exemplifying uniformly harmonious visions of East-West encounter, intercultural dialogue, and cultural co-

⁹ Anil Bhatti, "...zwischen zwei Welten schwebend...": Zu Goethes Fremdheitsexperiment im "West-östlichen Divan", in *Goethe: Neue Ansichten*, ed. by Hans-Jörg Knobloch and Helmut Koopmann (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann), pp. 103–21.

¹⁰ Yomb May, 'Goethe, Islam, and the Orient: The Impetus for and Mode of Cultural Encounter in the *West-östlicher Divan*', in *Encounters with Islam in German Literature and Culture*, ed. by James Hodkinson and Jeffery Morrison (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), pp. 89–107.

production.¹¹ Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, for example, co-founded with Edward Said in 1999, was designed to bring together young musicians from mutually antagonistic cultural and political backgrounds (Palestine and Israel) to perform music from a canon located culturally beyond their binary conflict (the Austro-German classical tradition) and located physically in the neutral territory of Barcelona. The musical and political successes of Barenboim's project aside, in naming his project in this way the conductor has effectively relied upon the *Divan* serving as an ideal emblem of East-West interaction within the sphere of the arts.

Barenboim is not alone in doing this. The aura of culturally and politically harmonious associations surrounding Goethe's *Divan* has also been accessed within political discourses of twenty-first century international diplomacy, and particular views of Goethe's poems have subsequently fed back into the world of the arts. Indeed, the *Hafez-Goethe Monument* was arguably directly caught up in one such cycle and was coloured by it during its inception and dedication. In 2000 the liberal reforming Iranian president Mohammad Khatami (served 1997–2005) made a state visit to Germany. The visit and the very public dialogue between Khatami and the German President Johannes Rau at the monument's dedication ceremony marked a high point in a period of détente in Iranian-German political and cultural relations and was the result of focussed diplomatic efforts between the two countries.¹²

¹¹ See the following examples from international online media: Paola Garcia, 'Goethe's Love for Islam', *Morocco World News*, 15 December 2015 <<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2015/12/175213/goethes-love-for-islam/>> [accessed 3 August 2020], and radio: 'Goethe and the West-Eastern Divan: Episode 1', *Twenty Minutes*, BBC Radio 3, 21 July 2012 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b0110drs>> [accessed 3 August 2020].

¹² In an attempt to counter the antagonistic and dichotomous theory of the 'clash of civilizations' that American sociologist Samuel P. Huntington saw to be growing between Islam and the West, Khatami presented an alternative 'dialogue of civilizations' model, and in response the UN designated the following year, 2001, as the 'Year of Dialogue among Civilizations'. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). On the UN's 'Year of Dialogue among Civilizations' see Seyed Mohammad Khatami, 'Dialogue among Civilizations: Contexts and Perspectives', *UN*

The dedication ceremony of the *Hafez-Goethe Monument* involved a keynote speech by Khatami and a subsequent podium discussion with Rau and guest academics, including the Oriental Studies professor Josef van Ess and liberal Catholic theologian Professor Hans Küng.¹³ Khatami's speech outlined his own theory of inter-civilizational dialogue, describing it as a 'Suche nach einem mitfühlenden und vertrauensvollen Kontakt' between cultures. This theory did not, however, merely promote a feel-good psychology of collective, intercultural connections. Dialogue involved its own 'Logik des Sprechens und des Hörens' and was a two-way process applicable to all participants, potentially transformative and, ideally, served to adjust culturally hegemonic outlooks on all sides. For all of its decentring tendencies, though, inter-civilizational dialogue did not have to mean that 'die Kulturen assimiliert, aufgelöst und ihre Vielfalt und Unterschiede aufgehoben werden können', so this form of dialogue was not concerned with the flattening out of cultural difference.

The podium discussion that followed was not without slightly fractious exchanges between the speakers, especially between Khatami and Küng, with the latter challenging the former on such issues as the perceived lack of a European-style Enlightenment in Islamic history. Of interest here, though, are neither the relative successes and failures of Khatami's diplomatic project, nor the extent to which his diplomacy managed to face up to tensions within contemporary East-West politics. More telling is the way in which he, as a senior Shia cleric and head of state on a closely-watched, international diplomatic mission, used Hafez, Goethe,

Chronicle, 3 (2012) <<https://unchronicle.un.org/article/dialogue-among-civilizations-contexts-and-perspectives>>.

¹³ For Khatami's speech and the podium discussion in full see: 'Weimarer Gespräch von Bundespräsident Johannes Rau und dem Präsidenten der Islamischen Republik Iran, Seyed Mohammad Chatami im Schloss Weimar', *Der Bundespräsident* [official website]

<https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Johannes-Rau/Reden/2000/07/20000712_Rede.html>

[accessed 18 August 2020]. The following quotations are taken from this website.

and their writing for purposes of cultural diplomacy in his speech, and what this context permitted him to say — and not to say.

Hafez is presented as an iconic figure, a ‘Symbol des iranischen Denkens’ whose ‘Wahrnehmung’ and ‘Gefühl’ in fact ‘widerspiegeln das Übersinnliche an unserer Kultur’, and make him the ‘Meister des Verborgenen’. In recasting Hafez predominantly as a poet of spirit and intellect, Khatami’s speech seeks to withhold from its audience a number of contentious themes so prevalent in the poet’s work, including his love of wine and his shameless exploration of sexuality. For all of his veneration of Hafez as a mystic in the ‘Buch Hafis’, Goethe’s poetic persona emulates many of his Persian counterpart’s appetites throughout his *Divan*.¹⁴ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Khatami is also selective in his use of Goethe. The first edition of the *Divan* in 1819 is cited as a ‘Wendepunkt’ in European–oriental relations, by which Goethe moved beyond binaries of physical and cultural geography to cultivate intercultural dialogue with a significant, other intellectual and cultural pole in the world of letters. Yet there are further aspects of Goethe’s poems that would arguably weigh against Khatami’s cause, for the *Divan* is also well known for its passing criticisms of Islam. There is, for example, Goethe’s albeit subtle reproach of what he saw as the misogynistic aspects of the faith. The ‘Buch des Paradieses’ acknowledges a particular Islamic orthodoxy by which only four women are named explicitly as having achieved paradise, though in the poem ‘Auserwählte Frauen’ Goethe offers an alternative formulation, writing ‘Doch wir wissen nur von vieren / Die all dort schon eingetroffen’ (FA, III/1, p. 130). The poem’s voice remarks that only four women were known to have been blessed with entry into paradise, a formulation which leaves open the possibility that others, unknown in scripture, may have followed: in the event, Goethe replaces the first woman traditionally named as the first of the four to attain

¹⁴ See W. Daniel Wilson, *Goethe Männer Knaben: Ansichten zur ‘Homosexualität’*, trans. by Angela Steidele (Berlin: Insel, 2012).

paradise, the Pharaoh's wife Ahia, with Suleika, a virtuous Muslim woman, though one who was never traditionally granted such an afterlife according to Islamic canon.¹⁵ In celebrating Suleika in this way, Goethe finds subtle strategies for restructuring what he saw as Islam's patriarchal vision of paradise.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly there is no mention of this or similar instances by Khatami. Nor is there any mention of more obviously uncomfortable moments in the *Noten und Abhandlungen* where, amidst often eulogizing comments on the richness of Islamic history, culture, and science, Goethe also engages in broad-brush stroke, negative stereotyping of oriental cultures, including Indian culture, Judaism, and Islam, the latter of which, he explained to his Western readership, never released its followers from 'einer dumpfen Beschränktheit' (FA, III/1, p. 164).

At least as important as the 'detail' of Goethe's *Divan*, for Khatami, appears to be what he discerns as the ongoing spirit of cultural openness embodied by the cycle and transmitted to later generations of writers. He cites the Pakistani poet Allama Mohammed Iqbal, especially his Persian-language work *Payam-i-Mashriq (Message from the East)* (1923). Iqbal's work presented itself as a direct response to Goethe's *Divan* and cited and honoured a pantheon of Western writers and thinkers from an Eastern perspective; it can be seen as the fruit of a continuing tradition of intercivilizational dialogue. Within this apparent tradition of mutually respectful interaction, Khatami discerns a desire, common to Hafez, Goethe, and Iqbal, to look beyond fixed, binary ideas on the absolute otherness of any one culture when viewed from the

¹⁵ Mommsen makes sustained reference to Goethe's critique of misogyny in Islam (*Goethe and the Poets of Arabia*, pp. 174–97).

¹⁶ Mommsen also pursues further the significance of Goethe securing Suleika's place in Paradise, connecting this to the role he creates for her as a female beloved and poetess in the 'Buch Suleika' (*Goethe and the Poets of Arabia*, pp. 185–88). In the podium discussion following Khatami's speech, Küng challenged Khatami on the issue of the Islamic world's ongoing treatment of women.

perspective of another.¹⁷ The shared mindset is, he contends, further connected by an emphasis on the divine origin of all humanity prevalent in Hafez, Goethe, Iqbal and like-minded literary figures. Goethe's perspective is exemplified through reference to a poem entitled 'Zum Divan', which is not actually part of the *Divan* itself. This poem seems to locate a notion of human cultural diversity, of self and Other, within an inseparable occidental-oriental unity:

Wer sich selbst und andre kennt
Wird auch hier erkennen:
Orient und Occident
Sind nicht mehr zu trennen.
(‘Nachlass-Stücke’, FA, III/1, p. 614)

For purposes of this discussion, the main issue arising from Khatami's speech is not so much that it projects politically motivated readings onto a text that shows little evidence of such attitudes, but rather its hermeneutic selectivity. For all of its intellectual sophistication, the speech looks away from issues that might be seen to complicate a frictionless performance of intercultural dialogue — many of which, such as gender and sexuality, have been explored in great depth within scholarship.¹⁸ Instead, Khatami refers tangentially to a poem that is not from the *Divan* itself, within an analysis that gives little or no room to those aspects of Hafez's and Goethe's writing that might have proven difficult for him personally as well as politically, and been more likely to upset any number of diplomatic apple carts.

The *Hafez-Goethe Monument* was produced in 2000 as a physical memorial to Goethe's treatment of Hafez and to the *Divan* generally. In the event, it also involved creative input from

¹⁷ Khatami said: ‘Solange wir die anderen menschlichen Wesen als “absolut anders” sehen und sie als materielle Objekte betrachten, können wir nicht zu einer Erkenntnis mit Verstand — die im Bereich der menschlichen Erkenntnis liegt — gelangen.’

¹⁸ On homosexuality in Goethe's *Divan* see again W. Daniel Wilson, *Goethe Männer Knaben*, pp. 204–63. There has been frank and open discussion of gay sexuality in the work of Hafez for decades. As only one example, see Stephen O. Murray, ‘Corporealizing Medieval Persian and Turkish Tropes’, in *Islamic Homosexualities*, ed. by Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (New York: NYU Press, 1997), pp. 132–41.

and effectively co-curation by Rau and Khatami and, as such, also serves in part as a memorial to their short-lived diplomatic project. Within the coordinates both of the politically charged and contested academic reception of the *Divan* and the markedly selective use of the text within the cultural and political diplomacy of the early twenty-first century, we can see a field of tension within which contemporary artistic responses to Goethe can be productively located.¹⁹ Accordingly, a series of more specific critical questions arise: to what extent do the artists considered engage in ‘close readings’ of Goethe’s work and its scholarship and how, if at all, do insights gained from such research inform their work as artists? Conversely, do the cultural and political contexts within which these works were produced, including the commissions and remits given to the artists, colour the vision of East-West relations they find in Goethe’s work, shape the way in which they respond to it, and dictate the themes they feel able to touch upon? Do the artists experience a pull toward the idealized aura surrounding the *Divan*, rather than its more complex and contested corpus? Or do these questions represent a series of false binaries in themselves and neglect the extent to which artists, working with a degree of autonomy in their own media, find their own ways to respond to and refresh the agenda surrounding the *Divan*?

Memorialized Relations: The *Hafis-Goethe-Denkmal* in Weimar

The monument has received tangential treatment in scholarship to date, and a close and sustained reading is perhaps overdue.²⁰ The two chairs are situated atop a plinth sporting

¹⁹ See transcripts of the speeches held and papers given at the dedication ceremony in *GJb*, 117 (2000), 13–25.

²⁰ Jeffrey Einboden gives a brief but informative treatment of the monument in his introduction: Jeffrey Einboden, *Islam and Romanticism: Muslim Currents from Goethe to Emerson* (London: Oneworld, 2014), pp. 1–5. Katharina Mommsen offers a closer critical evaluation, placing emphasis on the monument’s dedication ceremony and giving attention to its citation of literary sources in her foreword ‘Gedanken über ein Mahnmal zur Völkerverständigung und kulturellen Toleranz in Weimar’, in *Neue Beiträge zur Germanistik*, ‘International Edition: Doitsu Bungaku’ by the Japanische Gesellschaft für Germanistik, 1.109 (2002), 13–23.

arabesque patterns in embossed bronze that serve as a reimagining in metal of a Persian rug connecting the two chairs. Whilst the two ‘seats’, that is the surfaces of each chair that face the other, are cut smooth and show clear lines of definition, the outward-facing surface of each chair has, by contrast, been left rougher, in a way that implies some kind of natural state. The hard edges can be imagined as interlocking in a way that would re-establish some kind of organic whole. The plinth also has set into it several plaques, each bearing embossed bronze inscriptions of verses taken from the two poets’ works, including a ghazal by Hafez in the original Farsi, which is set between the chairs, and stanzas in German by Goethe, which flank both ends of the plinth (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: The *Hafis-Goethe-Denkmal*, Weimar. Private photo.

In a recent interview, Rabsch elaborated on the history and artistic journey that led to the monument’s construction and dedication in 2000.²¹ The sculptors’ commission was won as

²¹ From an interview with Fabian Rabsch, conducted by the author, 20 September 2019.

part of a competition conceived and run by the *Goethe-Gesellschaft*, supported by local Hafez enthusiasts and financed by UNESCO. The remit was quite simple and open-ended: to create an outdoor *Hafez-Goethe Monument* for Weimar. In formulating their competitive pitch, both sculptors engaged in a process of conceptualizing over several months. That process involved them reading widely within the *Divan* itself, though they stopped short of closer engagement with secondary literature in order to avoid a situation in which they were ‘belastet durch irgendwelche Interpretationsmechanismen’, an approach that Rabsch insisted was not born out of any disavowal of academic scholarship, but out of a need to maintain the integrity of the artistic process and not reduce it to the channelling of predetermined readings or values into a piece of sculpture that could never do such ideas justice.²²

In the interview, Rabsch also sought to dispel a common misconception, as he saw it, held by many viewing the monument: the two chairs did not refer to the well-known lines from the poem ‘Hegire’ from the ‘Buch des Sängers’: ‘Nord und West und Süd zersplittern / Throne bersten, Reiche zittern’ (FA, III/1, p. 12), where the cracking thrones refer to the political instability and physical destruction in Europe following the Napoleonic Wars and from which the poem’s lyrical voice was seeking refuge. Rather, the chairs respond to the following passage from the ‘Buch Hafis’:

Und mag die ganze Welt versinken,
Hafis mit dir, mit dir allein
Will ich wetteifern! Lust und Pein
Sei uns den Zwillingen gemein!
(FA, III/1, p. 31)

The motif of Goethe and Hafez as twins became central to Rabsch and Thevis’s thinking. Given the reality of time and space that divided them, of course, the two poets only exist as allegorical siblings. The two sculptors saw in the utterances of Goethe’s lyrical persona both an intellectual

²² From the interview with Rabsch.

curiosity regarding, and an emotional drive to reunite with a lost half, though one that was only possible through acts of imagination and realized in artistic production. The choice of the chairs over more literal human figures was in part born out of a concern for originality, stated Rabsch: ‘In einer Stadt, wo es vor Goethe- und Schillerköpfen wimmelt, wollten wir keine weiteren menschlichen Figuren bzw. kein bildliches Werk herstellen.’²³ The artists’ choice was also conceptually and ethically grounded. On the one hand, the choice of abstract form became the means by which two unrelated, historically distant figures could appear as allegorical twins. On the other hand, the chosen form also marked an attempt to acknowledge and respect the aniconism prevalent in some Islamic thought: by not representing human forms or faces in art, the artists aimed at creating a new ‘German’ artwork that understood and respected Islamic tradition, and thus sought to suspend their monument between two cultures without being solely determined by either.²⁴

Cut out of that most immutable of materials, granite, the monument might seem to imply that the two poets and their respective cultures are fundamentally and unwaveringly separate, that occidental and oriental divisions are concrete and immutable. Yet closer attention to the monument’s form implies a less binary reading.²⁵ Both chairs were purposefully and visibly cut from *one* piece of stone and thus refer intimately to each other. At the most basic level, the common material used to build both chairs implies an underlying idea of unity. That unity can refer to the shared biology of the human race (alluding, again, to the metaphor of the twins), which remains consistent and to which cultural differences are, arguably, incidental. It can also be seen to refer to the relationships between distinct cultures, Occident and Orient, or

²³ From the interview with Rabsch.

²⁴ From the interview with Rabsch. On aniconism in Islamic art, see Oleg Grabar, ‘From the Icon to Aniconism: Islam and the Image’, in *Museum International*, 55.2 (2003), 46–53.

²⁵ See also James Hodkinson, ‘Transnationalizing Faith: Re-Imagining Islam in German Culture’, in *Transnational German Studies*, ed. by Rebecca Braun and Benedict Schofield (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 193–212.

even Christianity and Islam specifically, which are united through numerous shared core beliefs and a common prophetic heritage, yet also markedly divided by elements of theology and doctrine, exegesis, and traditions of observance.

Speaking on the construction process, Rabsch described the sundering of the single granite bolder as having been kept as simple as possible in execution, as involving a single, uninterrupted cut made using a wire saw (*Seilsäge*), resulting in two pieces of stone created ‘durch einen Strich’. The making process and the monument’s final form refer, for Rabsch, to the biology of a living cell dividing, though they also reflect a wider historical idea, whereby processes such as wars and religious schisms can enforce separations upon unified communities — a process that functions as part of, though is also in opposition to, the organic natural whole of humanity. The monument was meant, as Rabsch commented, to stretch beyond a mere dialogue between discretely demarcated cultures. Rather, it expressed for him an ideal of ‘Vielfalt in Einheit’, simultaneously preserving cultural differences and gesturing to the fact that differences can also be viewed as internal, if not incidental, to a holistic and wholly inclusive model of humanity.

What, though, of the actual textual excerpts embedded in the monument? As part of the joint diplomatic project by Germany and Iran, Rau and Khatami were asked to select quotations from both Hafez and Goethe. Rau’s chosen stanzas from Goethe were set to flank the two chairs of the monument. At one end we find this quatrain from the *Divan*’s ‘Buch der Sprüche’:

Herrlich ist der Orient
Ueber’s Mittelmeer gedrungen,
Nur wer Hafis liebt und kennt
Weiß was Calderon gesungen.
(FA, III/1, p. 66)

Goethe invokes here the Spanish playwright and poet Pedro Calderón de la Barca, whom he admired greatly and regarded as a fellow literary mediator between Occident and Orient. Only those who know the traditions of Hafez and the Orient can truly appreciate what moved

Calderon's work, writes Goethe, so Rau's choice of this citation speaks of the enrichment that the encroaching Orient has spread to the cultures of Europe. At the other end of the monument we also find the aforementioned poem 'Zum Divan', with its emphasis on the inseparable unity of Occident and Orient and cited by Khatami in his speech.

The ghazal from Hafez, chosen by Khatami, arguably opened out potential contradictions within the dedication ceremony and continues to do so within the monument to this day, however (see Fig. 2). Sexuality, again, is at the root of the tensions. The lyrical voice describes his lifelong passion for a beloved, whom he addresses in the second person. There is extended discussion of the central motif of the eyes, both the downcast, narcissus-like gaze of the lyrical voice, and the enigmatic brow and the spellbinding glances returned by the beloved. Though Farsi makes no linguistic distinctions in gender between female and male nouns or pronouns, and this is true of the beloved in this ghazal, it is, as already noted, widely accepted that Hafez dedicated many poems to the young boys he desired and to male lovers generally. Whilst the linguistic gender neutrality of the beloved in the Farsi original makes the verse's homoerotic inclination easier to hide, however superficially, the translation into German forces the issue in that it demands the gendering of the beloved. Historically, Hafez's first major Germanophone translator, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, knew this issue all too well and remarked upon it in the introduction to his translation, though, along with many nineteenth-century translators, he opted to translate 'beloved' as 'Freund' in most of the ghazals.²⁶

²⁶ Wilson, *Goethe Männer Knaben*, pp. 205–07.



Fig. 2: The bronze rendering of the ghazal from Hafez. Photo by James Hodkinson.

As Mommsen notes, it is odd that Khatami should have chosen this particular piece by Hafez, which is not only a more obscure poem almost certainly unknown to Goethe, but is also brazenly homoerotic and seemingly at odds with the intellectualized or spiritualized versions of Goethe and Hafez to be found in his dedication speech. Perhaps it is true that, as Mommsen further surmises, Khatami chose a poem containing two mutually inclined male figures, as it is a motif that can be read as Hafez's imagined reciprocal admiration (if not erotic desire) for Goethe.²⁷ Presented in a language unreadable for most Germans, the ghazal is, though, mediated through translation. The German translation to be found on an explanatory plaque, located a short distance from the monument to this day, bears a nineteenth-century rendering by the Austrian orientalist Vincenz Rosenzweig von Schwanau, which reverts to using the male 'Freund', and redacts the other eroticized figure in the original ghazal, the serving boy or 'Mundschenk', who is so common to the poems of both Hafez and Goethe. More complete and

²⁷ Mommsen, 'Gedanken über ein Mahnmal', p. 16.

arguably more faithful German translations of this poem did appear that year, including Gisela Kraft's 'Nachdichtung' of Thomas Ogger's translation, which was published first in *Treffpunkt*, the weekend supplement of the *Thüringische Landeszeitung*, (2 October 2000). This translation was true not only to the rhyme scheme of the original Farsi but also to the ghazal's sexual proclivities: it refers quite openly to the male beloved as 'der Geliebte'.²⁸ Whether or not Kraft's publication marks an attempt to address the arguable deficiencies and omissions of the version used on the plaque, her version certainly throws into even stronger relief the discrepancy between the Hafez original and Rosenzweig's rendering. Quite when, where, and by whom within the process of installation and dedication it was decided to use that older version at the monument remains unclear. Without levelling specific or personal criticism, it seems symptomatic of a practice of avoiding potentially explosive themes, pursued in the name of harmonious relations and cultural diplomacy, and so characteristic of the monument's dedication ceremony.²⁹

Yet the monument's expressive power is neither wholly determined by these political contexts, nor is it derived solely from the poetic citations embedded in it or appended to it. Indeed, its artistic expression can also be seen to flow as much from the more abstract qualities of its form and materials. The artists found within the *Divan* an already self-reflexive and

²⁸ Mommsen cites the Ogger/Kraft rendering ('Gedanken über ein Mahnmal', p. 15). This version can also be found online directly alongside the Farsi original: 'Hafis: Goethe und Hafis', in *Wikipedia* <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hafis#Goethe_und_Hafis> [accessed 4 August 2020].

²⁹ The involvement of politicians, and the imprint this left on the monument, reflects a wider tendency within the dedication ceremony, held at the Weimar Residenzschloss in July 2000. The ceremony involved Khatami's speech, the podium discussion, and a number of other contributions. Reproduced as a series of transcripts of papers, speeches, and reports in the *Goethe-Jahrbuch*, the event appears to have been geared toward celebration and to have emphasized how the legacy of Goethe and Hafez, venerated both in Germany and Iran and continued in the monument, represented a model of inter-civilizational dialogue that could be positively transformative of prevailing cultural and political attitudes in the East and the West. See *GJb*, 117 (2000), 13–25.

fictional treatment of the encounters between two poets and between East and West generally. The structures the artists settled upon represent at once two cultures, two symbolic twins, and two chairs. This reading is made possible by the artists' choice of a less fixedly representational and more abstract form, and that choice in itself can be seen as their attempt to continue the *Divan's* overtly modern treatment of this subject matter. To this effect Rabsch commented:

Goethes Hafis-Darstellung ist nur, kann nur eine imaginäre gewesen sein — und gerade das ist uns an den Gedichten aufgefallen. Wir wollten keine fixierte, historische Abbildung liefern, und Goethe, so kam es uns vor, hat das mit dem Persien des Mittelalters auch nicht machen wollen. Die Sammlung lasen wir nicht als Versuch eines authentischen Orientbildes, sondern als seine durchschaubare aber immerhin aussagekräftige Fiktion.³⁰

As the creative process unfolded, it became apparent that the more figurative representation also allowed for a certain open-endedness that might facilitate ongoing discussion and public participation in and use of the monument. The 'twins' are also 'chairs' and thus designed to allow children to climb on them and the public to sit on them, swapping positions in order to view each other from different perspectives. Both sculptors were aware, too, of the history of cultural responses to the *Divan* that already existed (i.e. Iqbal, and others). Rabsch commented that the monument was designed not only to reflect Goethe's imaginary encounter with Hafez, but also '[um] sich selbst innerhalb einer Tradition der Erwiderungen zu positionieren'. The monument is a work in part generated within and coloured by a particular political context. In a sense it perpetuates a tendency within that context, by referring tantalizingly to the culturally contentious detail of Hafez's writing, for example on sexuality, only for this and other such issues (the criticism of Islamic orthodoxy for one) to be obscured by abridged translations or other, select quotations that emphasize positively connoted cultural unity and dialogue over matters of dispute. Yet, also born of a contemporary, idiosyncratic engagement with Goethe's

³⁰ From the interview with Rabsch.

writing and legacy, the monument's structure treats with more sophistication issues of representation, identity, cultural difference, and occidental-oriental relations, and reflects critically, too, on the issue of how art of the present can respond to and complement art of the past. In these ways the work also constantly threatens, on its own terms, to break free from the political strictures of its inception.

Re-Sounding the *Divan*

Through their sound installation *Cultural Sounds?*, recording and performance artists Martin Recker and Paul Hauptmeier continued the tradition of self-reflexive artistic responses to Goethe. Both were students of the Hochschule für Musik Franz Liszt, Weimar, where they worked under renowned Canadian sound artist Robin Minard. *Cultural Sounds?* was also the product of a competition. Entries were sought for 'Genius Loci', an urban festival of sound and light that takes place over several nights every summer in Weimar, during which visual and sound art fill the city, projected onto the surfaces and installed in the public spaces of its built environment.³¹ *Cultural Sounds?*, the winning entry, was conceived and realized as a densely layered piece of recorded sound lasting just under twelve minutes and intended for immersive listening. It was delivered as a playback performance through two banks of loudspeakers, mounted at differing heights and angles on scaffolds erected behind the two chairs of the monument. The technical equipment was covered by dark canvas, effectively leaving two shadowy towers behind the chairs, whilst several spotlights were mounted next to the speakers and cast light of shifting colours and intensity onto the monument and surrounding space (see Fig. 3). Audiences were treated to several playback performances of *Cultural Sounds?* each hour during the evenings of the festival in the summer of 2016.

³¹ On the 'Genius Loci' festival in Weimar see their website: <<https://www.genius-loci-weimar.org/en/>> [accessed 4 August 2020].

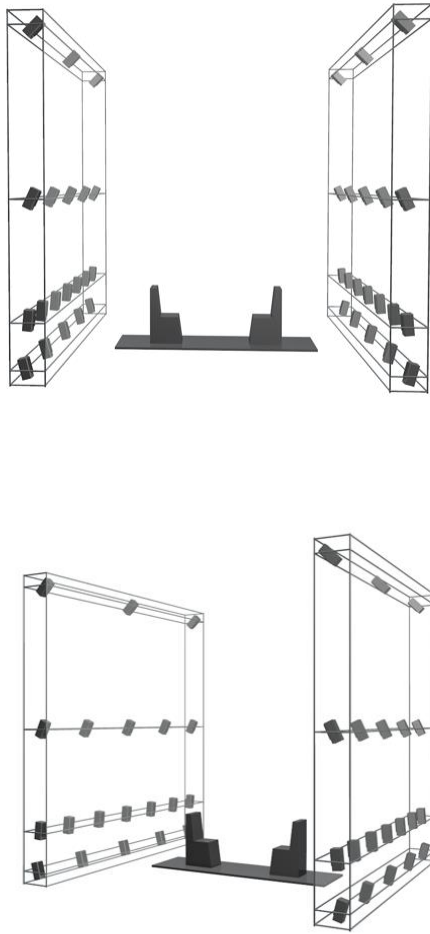


Fig. 3: Diagram of the installation’s technical specifications, courtesy of the ‘Genius Loci’ festival. See <https://www.genius-loci-weimar.org/en/audio-competition/location/> [accessed 3 August 2020].

Recker and Hauptmeier’s written reflection on the piece, combined with excerpts from an original interview conducted with them in summer 2017, help illuminate the artists’ stimuli, intellectual perspectives, and creative process. On their website the duo state clearly their ‘reading’ of the tradition with which they were connecting:

We see the Hafez-Goethe Monument — a location that represents an understanding and interexchange that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries — as a call to question prejudices, cultural clichés and separation. By deconstructing the culture specific

acoustic quotations, the binary juxtaposition of orient and occident is criticised and the alleged contradiction is repealed.³²

Recker and Hauptmeier clearly saw themselves as continuing a tradition in which art gestures beyond its culture of origin and, by configuring itself in its relationship to another culture, overcomes a sense of belonging exclusively to any one territory. In interview the artists were open about having ‘familiarized’ themselves with Goethe’s original work and its reception, though spoke of having avoided sustained engagement with primary and secondary textual sources.³³ They took the monument as their point of departure and worked on the legacy of Hafez and Goethe as (re-)mediated through it, rather than working with text.

The artists’ emphasis on working from and at the monument places the piece firmly in the tradition of what musicologists call ‘site-specific’ sound installation, that is, sound art which depends on the acoustic, spatial, technological characteristics, as well as the cultural markers of its intended environment or landscape, to realize its full effect. This is arguably true of *Cultural Sounds?*, which now also exists as an online reconstruction of the performance.³⁴ The site-specific dimension of the original work, though, places it in a field of tension: it seeks to break up East-West binaries and transcend a purely German context and territory, whilst deliberately remaining tied to a monument in the heart of a German city and cultural centre and performed as part of a local festival. Reflecting on this tension, the artists commented:

Goethe’s *Divan* ist nicht nur eine imaginäre Brücke zwischen Kulturen gewesen, sondern auch ein deutsches literarisches Werk des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts. Er schrieb von diesem Standort aus und blieb auch gewissermaßen dort stehen. Die Kreativität, die Imagination hat es ihm ermöglicht, über diesen Standort und über

³² See ‘Cultural Sounds’, Hauptmeier / Recker [artists’ website] <<http://www.hauptmeier-recker.de/2017/06/01/cultural-sounds/>> [accessed 4 August 2020].

³³ From an interview with Recker and Hauptmeier, conducted by the author, 26 June 2017.

³⁴ *Cultural Sounds?* is available online as a streaming sound file, where it can be listened to as a rich stereo recording and watched alongside videos of audiences listening to the piece in situ. See ‘Cultural Sounds’, Hauptmeier / Recker.

sich selbst hinauszudenken. Dasselbe wollten wir, als deutsche *sound artists* des 21. Jahrhunderts, mit Klang-, Ton- und Stimmenaufnahmen versuchen.³⁵

This strategy of working in a way that is both geographically connected to Germany, and yet also seeks to escape that context and meet another culture in a non-hierarchical moment, is reflected in the artists' desire to record and use a range of authentically Iranian recorded sources. Thus, alongside 'processed instrumental recordings and abstract sound objects', they worked with 'field recordings from Germany and Iran' and 'interviews with people familiar with the Iranian and German cultures', including German-Iranian colleagues and residents of contemporary Tehran.³⁶ How successful is this endeavour? How do the artists move beyond a practice of sonic citation, which might at any point veer towards appropriation and orientalist cliché? How, in other words, does the piece function?

Although *Cultural Sounds?* presents itself as a continuous piece of sound, it is actually made up of a sequence of sonic vignettes, each of which segues into the next. Some of the segments comprise abstract sounds (extended musical notes or 'drone' sounds), some comprise vocal sequences, and others evoke a sense of place that might be recognisable as either Germany or Iran. The piece employs various artistic strategies and technological techniques available to sound artists to evoke but also to disrupt a stable sense of geographical place and the unambiguous attribution of cultural origins to sound sources.

The work contains linguistic components. Numerous voices feature, taking on different positions, perspectives, and functions. Perhaps surprisingly for literary scholars, there is no direct literary citation of either Hafez or Goethe, but rather contemporary utterance. A female voice enters the mix around 09:39. The voice is that of German-Iranian project collaborator Niusha Ramzani, who contributes several highly personal reflections evoking memories of

³⁵ From the interview with Recker und Hauptmeier.

³⁶ See 'Cultural Sounds', *Hauptmeier / Recker*.

place in Iran and exploring her Iranian heritage. Ramzani's inclusion is, in many ways, the artists' response to the controversial legacy surrounding Goethe's beloved Marianne von Willemer, to whom the 'Buch Suleika' was addressed, but whose own verses, sent to Goethe in letters, were incorporated into the poems without acknowledgment of their true author.³⁷ Ramzani's original work is credited and she recorded the readings herself. Her contribution also assists in the exploration of culturally and geographically unstable places. The passage in question is set against the sounds of a garden, including the wings of a bumble bee, birdsong, and feet walking through grass. Ramzani's voice effectively bifurcates, as passages of her speaking the same text in both Farsi and in German play out simultaneously, as if she were translating herself. The German voice speaks: '... man riecht den Regen ... es riecht nach Erde, nach Gras, es riecht nach Blumen.' Which, though, is the translation and which the original? Significantly, neither recording and neither voice is given sonic pre-eminence, both play at the same volume and are panned left and right in the stereo mix. This production technique creates a kind of benign disorientation for listeners seeking to ascribe to either voice or language greater authority.

During the original performances, the audience could move freely between the chairs and speakers, moving towards and away from either voice in a physical sense, though they would often find that individual sentences spoken by the two voices were cyclically relocated to the installation's other, apparently opposing 'pole'. The passage, then, uses vocal components recorded in Germany to evoke a memory or impression of Iran, placing both languages on an equal footing, and positioning the spoken passage before a sound collage that also blends non-verbal sounds of German and Iranian gardens. Whilst anchored in the physical geography of the monument in Weimar, the cultural geography of the passage can thus be 'located' both in Germany and Iran — and cannot be reduced to either.

³⁷ See Markus Wallenborn, *Frauen, Dichten, Goethe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), pp. 177–88.

Elsewhere in the piece, the sequenced juxtaposition of non-verbal sounds works in a subtly different way to challenge cultural preconceptions. At around 05:00 listeners are immersed in the sound of a modern cityscape, awash with sounds of traffic, busses, and the swish of light trains or trams. The sounds of this cityscape actually fade in over the decaying sounds of the preceding passage, which involves drumming from traditional Persian folk music. Yet where, in cultural and geographical terms, is this passage to be located, indeed, what is to be the focus of our listening? Are these merely overlapping sound sequences, each of which is meant to signify a distinct space, one traditional, the other modern, one Western, the other oriental, or can the segue itself be taken as an object of listening? If so, then in listening to that overlap we could effectively be listening to street music, played by musicians of the Iranian diaspora, relocated through sound art to a modern, potentially German city space. Listeners could, however, also be listening to a more internally complex sound montage from a Tehran street, which contains and juxtaposes modern urban infrastructure and traditional cultural elements.

As the sequence continues to unfold, we hear voices emerge from the city's sounds, conversing almost indistinctly in Farsi, and the sound of the adhan, the Islamic call to prayer, permeating the edges of the soundscape. Arguably, as the ostensibly Iranian sound elements proliferate at certain points, the soundscape appears to pull the listener's associative ear towards Tehran. Yet these sounds could also have been recorded at any number of Shia mosques or amongst Farsi-speaking communities in Germany. Whilst the recorded sequences and sound components do not in themselves answer questions of their actual provenance, the piece as a whole poses those questions. Even where individual sound elements conspire to evoke a momentarily fixed sense of geo-cultural location, such moments occur in a piece that otherwise engenders a practice of culturally restless listening — one which reminds listeners not to ascribe sounds too readily to supposed cultural origins. Evoking initially stable dualisms

of East and West, of Germany and Iran, of modernity and tradition, and the urban and rural, *Cultural Sounds?* subsequently uses sound, in its many verbal and non-verbal forms, to question that very stability.

Conclusion

The *Hafez-Goethe Monument* was realized within the framework of a project sponsored by UNESCO, an organization with the self-proclaimed goals of ‘building peace’ through ‘intercultural dialogue’. It was also conceived not just as a memorial to poets and poetic works of the past, but also to a renewed spirit of cultural diplomacy between Iran and Germany at the start of the twenty-first century.³⁸ For all of its worthy political intentions and its engagement with the complex and fraught issues arising in contemporary East-West relations, that particular political discourse tended to cite Hafez, Goethe, and his *Divan* as historical correctives to the binary mindsets and conflicts of contemporary politics and, ultimately, to look away from, rather than explore fully culturally and politically contentious themes scholarship has highlighted within the writing of both poets. Whilst the artists considered here engaged with the *Divan* as text and with Goethe scholarship to some extent, their works were also coloured by the political and diplomatic uses of Hafez, and of Goethe and his *Divan* which occasioned their commission. Where the monument is marked by quotations selected by politicians rather than the artists and makes use of arguably loaded and abridged translations, *Cultural Sounds?* takes that monument both as its starting point and staging ground and, therefore, unavoidably reconnects with those same political tendencies. In the light of this, a return to the findings of scholarship, combined with some close reading of the monument, brings back to the fore more contentious issues sitting very close beneath the surface in the

³⁸ See ‘Unesco in Brief: Mission and Mandate’, *Unesco* [official website] <<https://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco>> [accessed 4 August 2020].

works of Hafez and Goethe, but seemingly absent from contemporary artistic responses to them.

Yet for all of the powerful gravitation exerted by cultural diplomacy, both contemporary works also break free of that context and into new territory. In exploring how Goethe's oriental themes intersect with the idiosyncrasies of their own expressive media, the works arguably produce new and relatively sophisticated commentary. That commentary does not necessarily focus on the literary texts themselves, or refer directly and explicitly to their ideas, but rather responds to many of the aesthetic and cultural issues that the texts raise. Rabsch and Thevis neither mirror nor track in any detail the form or content of Goethe's *Divan*, yet the monument sets up and rejects simple East-West cultural binaries, acknowledges that meaningful cultural differences and cross-cultural connections can coexist, and shows, too, a sensitivity to specific themes, such as the ethics of corporeal representation in Islamic art. *Cultural Sounds?* experimentally arranges multilingual vocal recordings of non-verbal sound elements from distinct cultures and locations by inviting listeners to attribute sound exclusively to points of origin and belonging. However, with the rhetorical question mark in its title, the piece ultimately problematizes binary and exclusive understandings of where sound comes from and where it is located, and continually refuses to allow the cultures it refers to be divided into wholly discrete Eastern or Western categories.

Both the monument and installation can, then, be located between two ideological and discursive fields, one academic, steeped in historical detail, informed by cultural theory, and dedicated to the complexities of hermeneutic analysis, and the other political and seemingly bound to use the *Divan* selectively as a template for inter-civilizational diplomacy. Yet neither work can be wholly reduced to either field. In approaching these particular works and examining how they respond to poetic works of the past from within overlapping and contrasting contexts, we should perhaps remain aware of the difficult detail that scholarship

has brought to light, though which is overlooked or downplayed elsewhere for reasons of political expediency. Yet this discussion also reminds us that sophisticated artistic responses to complex themes need not only arise from close reference to texts and that non-literary art can speak back to literary scholars on themes that matter to them in innovative and productive ways — even if that art evades their usual terms of reference.

Notes on Contributor

James Hodkinson is Reader in German at the University of Warwick. He has published widely on topics such as Romanticism, gender, and orientalism and Islam in modern German culture, and has conceived and run a large-scale public engagement project entitled ‘Reimagining Islam: From Alterity to Empathy’ at his home institution. Most recently he has been writing on contemporary sound art and its relationship to space, identity, and literary traditions.