

POET SLASH ARTIST

A conversation between Co-curators Hans Ulrich Obrist and Lemn Sissay

Hans Ulrich Obrist and Lemn Sissay OBE are the co-curators of Poet Slash Artist. Obrist is an art curator who has spent his career working with some of world's most renowned artists and thinkers. Sissay is an award-winning poet and writer and is chancellor of the University of Manchester. You can see his poems on many buildings throughout the city.

Together they devised the Poet Slash Artist exhibition and brought together the 25 artists contributing artwork. In June 2021 they spoke together about why it's important to put art and culture in public spaces, and what excites them about blurring between visual art and language.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: You and I both felt it was urgent to invite poets to Manchester and to MIF because Manchester is a city of poets.

Lemn Sissay: It really is a city of poets. We have Carol Ann Duffy, the previous Poet Laureate. We also have Simon Armitage. My poems are on buildings around the city. We also have John Cooper Clarke, who is a very famous punk poet. We have the new Poetry Library, and it's also a [UNESCO] City of Literature. So it's the perfect place to have this new exhibition.

There's nothing else like this exhibition. It's not a book launch, it's not a performance of poets in the traditional sense, but these artworks are performing.

HUO: The poems are performing; they're going into the city. As [French writer and philosopher] Édouard Glissant always told me, exhibitions need to go beyond the walls of the museum. Many people who would never go to an exhibition could encounter it if it's in the street, if it's on buildings or store windows. There is possibility.

LS: The magic happens when someone is walking past, and they engage with a space they wouldn't have otherwise engaged with. They stop at a place they wouldn't have otherwise stopped at.

HUO: I remember I also spoke about inviting artists and poets to create posters. I have thought that when we go beyond the walls of the museum, we use posters and there is a tradition of poetry doing the same thing. And on buildings, poems can be copied onto facades too.

LS: Yes, in my ideal world, something from this exhibition ends up being on the side of a building, or inside a railway arch or a pavement or down by the canal. Not even in an obvious place. Poetry in public can be very big, but it can also be beautifully hidden.

HUO: "It is a crime to live with a person you don't love". That's Tracey [Emin]. That's going to be a neon and a drawing and a poster in the street.

LS: I love this. "It is a crime to live with somebody you don't love". I've always thought it could be interpreted in so many ways by the person who engages [with it], which are deeply personal.

HUO: So we can actually say that the home of the exhibition is the city.

LS: Yes, and in the citizens too.

HUO: You talked of the city of angels and angles. Can you explain that, because it is so beautiful?

LS: It's the perfect set of words for where we are at now. The angel is taken from a beautiful drawing by [poet/artist] Friederike Mayröcker, who has just passed away. If the angel is not a central part of what this is, then nothing is, because there's something very powerful about this message of an angel being left with you. It could bring me to tears thinking about it. And angles – Manchester can be quite an angular place, very defined, and what we're doing is blurring the lines. We have quite a few of the poets coming up to Manchester too.

HUO: This has been in research for more than a year, mostly Zooms and [virtual] studio visits. It also allowed us to do quite de-centralised research, or multi-centred research, because the artists are quite literally from different continents. From Gozo Yoshimasu, who created the films in the exhibition in a hotel room in Ishinomaki [a city on the Japanese coast heavily affected by the 2011 tsunami]; to Chilean poet-artist Cecilia Viçuna, who revisited her notes for her edition of work by contemporary Chilean poets – *Four Mapuche Poets* – to create the poster for the exhibition; to Sudanese painter Ibrahim El-Salahi who now lives and works in Oxford, and whose new work in the exhibition features poetry taken from his Prison Notebook written during the six months he was wrongfully imprisoned without trial in Sudan.

Etel Adnan is a very senior artist in the show and Etel said “the world needs togetherness, not separation; love, not suspicion; a common future, not isolation.” It’s also a motto because it’s about not separating poetry from art. I’m from Zurich – there was DaDa and surrealism – art and poetry is not separated. And Lemn, you are participating in such a wonderful way with [artist] Xu Bing.

LS: Yes, Xu Bing has a particular style of using the alphabet, the English alphabet, but being able to embed it in Chinese text. At first the language appears like Chinese text, inside it somehow he has incorporated the words: “Can't sell a leaf to a tree/Nor the wind to the atmosphere/I know where I'm meant to be/And I can't be satisfied here” which is taken from my poem ‘Gold from the Stone’. It's just that it's like he has his own language, which incorporates my language. I can see my language, I can see my words, but it still looks thoroughly alien.

HUO: There is also Adonis, the Syrian poet, and he creates these visual poems, and I mean, the future is invented with fragments from the past, because he goes into these classical poets [and extracts fragments of their poetry].

LS: I also want the literature world in Manchester to see how powerful the poet as artist is. It already is, but this could be the beginning of something for poetry and literature in Britain. That’s what I wanted to happen. Which brings me from Adonis to Isaiah Hull.

I have experienced Isaiah Hull as a performer, and as a new shining light of poetry in Manchester and I’ve watched his career develop, but I’ve never seen anything like this before from him. His poem is incredibly powerful, and very complex. And I'm looking forward to people, to the public, to see the poem outside to dive into this poem. People will be asking themselves, “what does it mean to me?”, and that's exactly what I want. He's a Manchester born and bred young poet. And without this exhibition, Poet Slash Artist, he may not have created this.

HUO: We also have incredible other UK based artists in the exhibition that are well known for their visual practice. Lubaina Himid and Heather Phillipson both have major exhibitions at the Tate this year, and here in this exhibition we see the importance that poetry and words play in their practice. We’re also delighted to include the work of the incredible [American poet] Anne Boyer, another first I believe, because she has never previously exhibited her visual work publicly.

LS: Precious [Okoyomon] is another revelation you have brought to me, and which I'm really pleased to have come across and to hear the news about Precious winning the prize for the Frieze [2021 Frieze Artist Award].

HUO: Exactly, and what's exciting about Precious is this new generation. We meet a lot of young poets and artists and we've both observed a fluidity of practice: artists who are poets or architects or urbanists or designers. We have that in Precious' work and we also have that in Jota Mombaça's work. Jota is a self-taught poet, artist and electrician from Natal in the North East of Brazil. Through de-centralised Zoom visits, they have activated improvisations, mundane performances, compositions, poetry. Tarek Lakhrissi also has this fluidity of practice, and he did the 'PROBLEMS POEMS POWERS POSTERS' posters for us. So does [French-Caribbean visual artist and poet] Julien Creuzet, whose wonderfully poetic film *Ogun, Ogoun* is in the exhibition. We also see it in the work of South African artist Lebogang Mashifane, whose 11 lines of dispersed poetry can be found around the exhibition, with QR link to their performance of the poem *Dear Artist Child*.

LS: Yes, and Vivienne Griffin's practice has been referred to as 'anti-disciplinary'. They've created this incredible film with gaming software that layers soundscapes of spoken poetry, and their poster explore how language itself is changing and responding to a new generation.

Right from the beginning you said we want a cross-generation connection. It's the young poets that are actually blurring the lines, that's where the excitement is. We see it too in the work of [poet and playwright] Inua Ellams, who has created a new graphic illustration of his poem *Fuck/Concrete* from his incredible collection *The Actual*, and [poet] Jay Bernard, who created powerful drawings on cotton t-shirts using ink, decaying bark and other organic matter. I know that [American sculptor, essayist and poet] Jimmie Durham was excited about that idea, of transferred [age] ratios. We get stuck in our boxes, and it's really important to constantly dismantle ideas that don't justify themselves by their creativity.

HUO: Yes, as we learned from Grace Lee Boggs that every exhibition is a chance to contribute to a transgenerational dialogue. Jimmie Durham's was actually a magical studio visit. Remember when he came with a stick? The poem suddenly sat on a walking stick.

LS: That was a little bit of magic, you see the moment that they're inspired by the idea, and you see them connect to an idea, that's very rare.

HUO: So it's a stick, 95cm, 3cm thick, with canvas text tags attached by brass wire. And the little poems are kind of hanging. And it's only four lines, a poem of four lines.

LS: Everybody, right now as we come out of the pandemic, is trying to get the public's attention to sell them things. Adverts on television are touchy feely, you know, we're coming out of this, of this pandemic. And this is this is what should be. You can walk past it if you want to. But you'll come back tomorrow, because you will walk past it again, because it's out there in the gallery of the streets.

HUO: It's not only transgenerational, it's urgent.

LS: There is nobody in this exhibition who should not be here. That's the deal. We're also blurring the lines that Jimmie Durham shouldn't be with Isaiah Hull. Jimmie is in his 80s, and Isaiah is in his 20s, but they should totally be together. People get stuck and they get pushed into silos, and this is the absolute opposite. It's such a joy to work on.

HUO: On our relationship with Manchester, I've always said that MIF is the proof that [British artists] John Latham and Barbara Steveni were right. They did the Artist Placement Group and said that every corporation, every governmental unit, every company, every brand, no matter what the organisation, needs an artist on the board and an artist in residence. The Manchester International Festival came out of that, because Manchester had Peter Saville, and he was the Creative Director for the City Council. And Peter said you need a festival where everything is new and interdisciplinary things can happen which can't happen elsewhere. That's how it all started.

The city also leads us to Renee Gladman. Renee is really interesting poet-slash-artist-artist-slash-poet because the poems very often act as cities. In a way it was perfect for our theme because she draws cities as poems.

LS: Can I tell you a secret? When we'd chosen most of the artists and then you said, "we need to meet them in their studio" [via Zoom] and I thought - wow - we've had so many meetings to get to here, and now we've got to go to everyone! And this was the most important part of the whole process. Thank you for that.

HUO: I'm so grateful you introduced me to Imtiaz Dharker. I didn't know her poetry or her drawings, and she showed us her notebooks.

LS: She's such a kind soul.

HUO: [Quoting Dharker] "Show me the face that grew out of these walls that found the space to breathe and become the soul of this place". So beautiful.

We also send each other books, and I remember you liked the book by Sky Hopinka.

LS: Yes, and there's a piece Sky Hopinka has done which is a poster turned on its side, with the poem at the top there. Am I right in saying he was involved in the [Native American] indigenous peoples' fight for land?

HUO: Yes.

LS: So there's a whole great story here, in this human being. And Sky also introduced us to the incredible work of [artist, filmmaker and independent film producer] Tiffany Sia, whose work exploring place, boundaries and representation feels perfect for the multi-practice, multi-lingual, multi-generational heart of this exhibition.

Poet Slash Artist is on at HOME and throughout the city 2 July - 18 July, and continues at HOME and Tony Wilson Place until 30 August.