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Oracular Transmissions by Etel Adnan and Lynn Marie Kirby
Susannah Thompson

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Cover image:

Oracular Transmissions by Etel Adnan and Lynn Marie Kirby

by Susannah Thompson • 14.08.2020

The physical heft and lofty title of *Oracular Transmissions* holds out a promise of great and grandiose things. What are the oracular statements such a tome will reveal in an age of crisis and uncertainty? Is this book, published in Los Angeles, a mind-body-spirit book repackaged as art? It is a little of both – this expansive, weighty publication of some four hundred pages is an extension rather than a documentation of three projects by the Lebanese artist, writer and poet Etel Adnan and the American interdisciplinary artist and film-maker Lynn Marie Kirby. While maintaining their solo careers, the artists, who are also close friends, have collaborated on a number of projects since 2002. As a work in its own right, *Oracular Transmissions* marks a further collaboration, in which Adnan and Kirby are joined by the poet and translator Denise Newman, the writer and curator Jordan Stein and, perhaps most compellingly, the graphic designer Brian Roettinger, whose design and typography synthesises different elements of the book and (as Stein notes in his introductory essay) 'both records and reimagines' (p.10) the projects *Back, Back Again to Paris* (2013), *Alhambra Exchange* (2016) and *Transmissions* (2017), which are presented in reverse chronological order.

Adnan and Kirby have consistently worked with text and writing, having created multiple publications as part of their interdisciplinary practices. Roettinger's design translates their three projects into a holistic, recomposed work, which subtly signposts where the reader should pause and reflect on each distinct body of work through the use of colour, font, layout and orientation. Each section is further interspersed with a series of poetic prologues by Newman, which give insight into how and where the work was made:

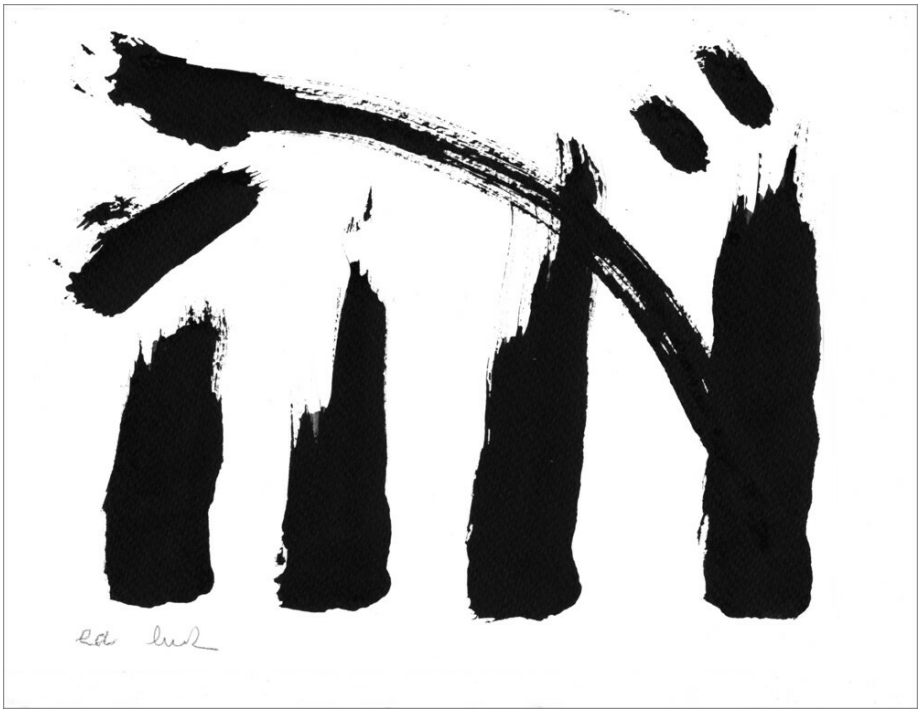


Fig. 1 Collaborative drawing, by Etel Adnan and Lynn Marie Kirby. 2017. India ink on paper, 20.3 by 25.4 cm. (Courtesy KADIST, Los Angeles).

They meet in English Sausalito. They meet in French Paris. They meet disembodied by email and phone. Long ago they met under the linden trees, passing a camera back and forth, drunk on friendship.

Later, Lynn disordered the images live on stage as Etel performed her poem pacing back and forth. Now they're sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, heads bent over a sheet of paper, making wide brushstrokes, talking about what to do for the KADIST show.[1]

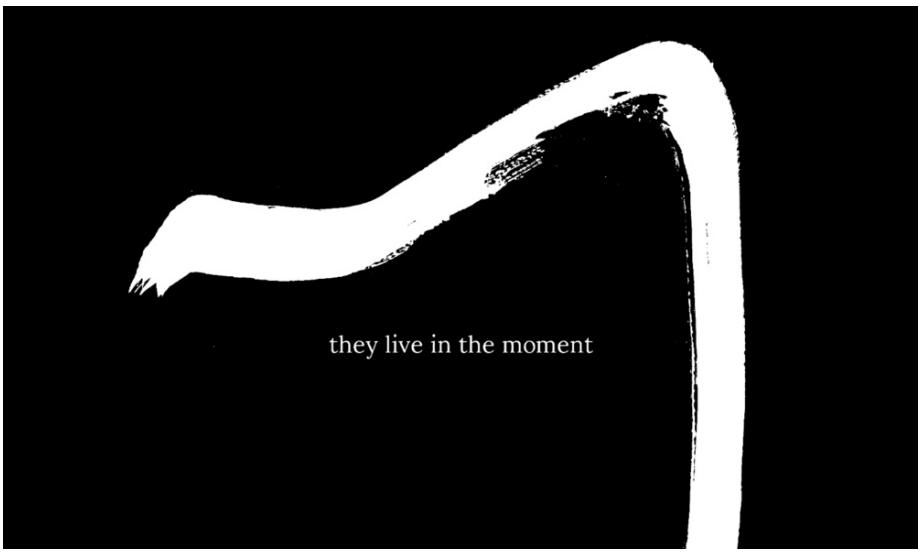


Fig. 2 Still from *Transmissions*, by Etel Adnan and Lynn Marie Kirby. 2017. Duration 12 minutes.

Multiple shifts within the book from portrait to landscape orientation make the act of reading active and attentive – from section to section the reader must raise their arms and tilt their head to make sense of the words. It is through the need to frequently turn and rearrange the book, rather than passively propping or resting it, that the relationship between reader and object becomes more sculptural and performative, reinforcing the sense that this is not a record of works completed, but that rare thing: an artists' book that becomes another multi-dimensional work of art (all too often, such attempts result in an over-designed, under-read catalogue).

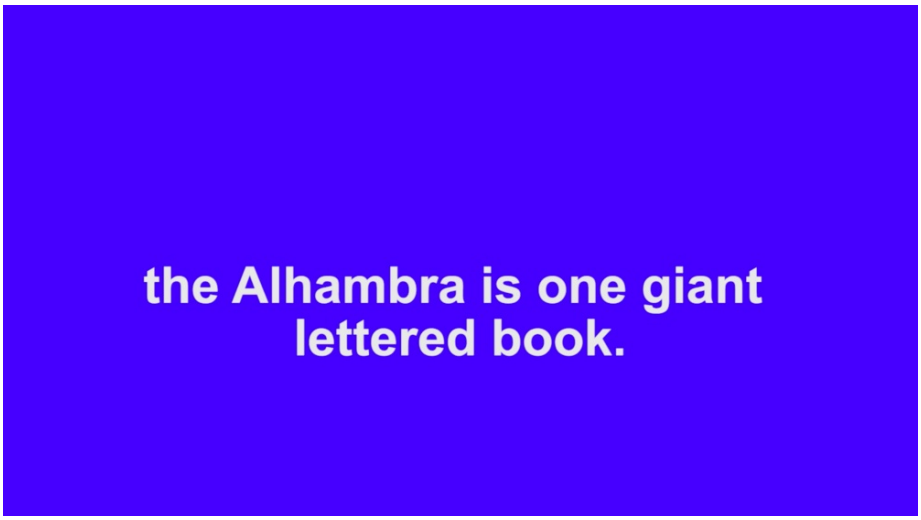


Fig. 3 Still from *Alhambra Exchange*, by Etel Adnan and Lynn Marie Kirby. 2016. Duration 6 minutes 40 seconds.

The first part of the book originated as a broadsheet, loosely based on a discussion about the Oracle of Delphi (hence the title of this book), which was produced by Adnan and Kirby to accompany Adnan's paintings in *If Not Apollo, The Breeze*, an exhibition curated by Jordan Stein at KADIST, San Francisco, in 2017. *Transmissions* consisted of a video incorporating the artists' collaboratively made ink drawings FIG.1 and lines of text FIG.2, and a live reading performed by Kirby based on notes and recorded discussions produced by the artists in Paris, where Adnan is based. In the book, italicised text denotes its origin in the video work, whereas the bold text refers to the text used in the performance. It reads as a kind of dialogic philosophical meditation on truth, ritual, wisdom and communication, two people chipping in, finishing each other's sentences, enthusiastically expanding and interrupting one another on the topic of conversation. One line reads '*it is a woman the oracle* is never a man so woman is basic to that civilisation **the truth comes through her** [sic]'. It is one of many observations throughout the book that is implicitly political and pointed, but delivered lightly, in conversation.

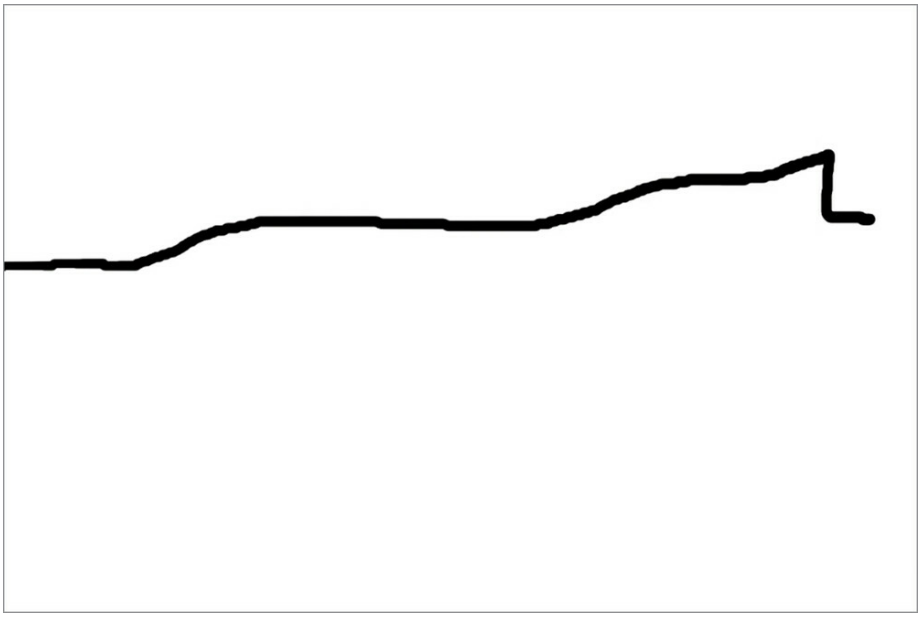


Fig. 4 Still from *Back, Back Again to Paris*, showing a tracing of Etel Adnan's painting made by Lynn Marie Kirby. 2013. Duration 1 minute 42 seconds.

The middle section is based on Kirby and Adnan's *Alhambra Exchange*, one component of a collaboration by Kirby and Christoph Steger focused on the Alhambra Theatre, San Francisco, a 1920s defunct cinema building that was inspired by the Alhambra Palace, Granada, and now houses Kirby's gym. As part of her fieldwork for the project, the artist spent a week in Granada, during which she and Adnan exchanged emails and images of the Palace. Each page in the book, which takes the form of an epistolary novel, is an email to 'Dear Etel' or 'Dear Lynn'. Some of the earlier exchanges demonstrate the close friendship that the artists share (they write of holiday plans and mutual friends), and there is sincerity and affection in the way they express their gratitude for the energy and creativity generated by their discussions. The exchange begins in earnest with images of the Alhambra sent by Kirby to Adnan, to 'see what kind of response the images evoke'. Kirby's writing then begins to resemble a kind of 'site-writing', including detailed descriptions of tourists, selfie sticks (which have to be explained, very funnily, to Adnan, who would 'really like to know' what a selfie stick is) and conversations with fellow visitors. As the exchange progresses, the discussion centres more closely on ideas about Islamic design, pattern, reflection, tiles, infinity and god. These correspondences are followed by video stills from *The Alhambra Project*: white text, centred on a bright blue page, they tell of further tales of the Alhambra and Arabic culture, and conclude with a series of texts that both describe and perform repetition **FIG.3**.

The last part of the book is devoted to *Back, Back Again to Paris*, a work that originally formed part of Adnan's solo 2013 exhibition *Words and Places* at CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco. Like Adnan's contribution to the 2017 Apollo show, many of the works in

Words and Places revisit Adnan's fixation with Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, California. As with *Transmissions*, Kirby joined Adnan to produce a new work for the exhibition. Broadsheets distributed at the opening featured a collaboratively produced text and a scannable code linking to an online video. The text begins with an excerpt from Adnan's 1993 novel, *Paris, When It's Naked*. As Stein's essay informs us, Kirby identified every sentence in the book that included the word 'Paris', before running each one through speech recognition software called Dragon Dictate. Adnan then intervened in this 'translated' written text adding further lines, which are signalled in *Oracular Transmissions* by the use of uppercase letters. In an extra-large 'Oracular Times' font, designed by Roettinger, the text runs without stopping over almost eighty pages. As Stein has noted, the 'errors in translation are positively exhilarating, if not completely bewildering'. Lines include, for example, 'Paris is in the machine that Ethernets and rejects them' or 'the fan is swelling and pouring into the streets and we are swinging'. For Stein, this is 'inaccuracy transformed into poetry. Discrepancy into gold' (p.13). It is easy to imagine each element animated or performed, rewound back into their original manifestation. The effect here is something between reading expanded forms of artist writing or experimental literature – the texts are as much to be looked at and handled as 'read'. Like the artist's co-authored ink drawings for *Transmissions* (2017), the use of chance, play, free association, machine and collective authorship in *Back, Back Again to Paris* are close to Surrealist games or Dada poetry FIG.4.

Oracular Transmissions is the first book I have encountered that is published by Pasadena-based X Artists' Books, whose stated intention, exemplified abundantly here, is to produce 'courageous and beautiful [. . .] artist-centred books that fit within and between genres'. The first lines of each stanza in Newman's preface distils what this book aims to do, and ably achieves: 'A work of art that is a book'; 'A work of art that is a conversation'; 'A book that overruns its container'; 'A collaboration between friends decentres the work of art'; 'A collaboration that is a friendship that is a conversation that is a book that is a work of art'.

Footnotes

1 E. Adnan and L.M. Kirby: *Oracular Transmissions*, Los Angeles 2020, p.291.

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