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# Shift: Music Meaning, Context

## EXHIBITION ESSAY

**Artists: Bani Abidi, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Tony Cokes, Jeremy Deller, Hassan Hajjaj, Sven Johne, André Lützen, Cecil McDonald, Jr., Emeka Ogboh, and Taryn Simon**

*Shift: Music, Meaning, Context* explores how music changes in form and interpretation as it moves across different performers, cultures, and eras. Some of these transformations are radical: folk songs are used for propaganda, pop hits are deployed as tools of torture, and cultural origins are erased—or reinvested—in particular songs, instruments, and genres. At the same time, sonic forms can become sites of healing, cultivating spaces for celebration and grief. This exhibition brings together an international group of artists investigating music and sound to open questions about the contours of cultural ownership and to demonstrate that music, like all artistic forms, is subject to alteration and change as it moves through different contexts. The resulting multitude of meanings is inherently political, and the act of attributing significance to a song cannot necessarily contain the elastic nature of music itself as it travels toward future audiences and interpretations. Presented by the Goethe-Institut Chicago and Museum of Contemporary Photography, *Shift* transforms the MoCP's galleries into a unique choral mélange.

The exhibition begins with a large-scale wall projection of the video *Wissower Klinken* (*Cliffs of Wissow*) (2007) by **Sven Johne** (Germany, b. 1976). Johne, well known for his fictional realism, worked with twelve singers from the Leipzig-Nord Men's Choir to recount the story of a tourist guide from his hometown on the island of Rügen who died after being crushed by rock debris from the locale's beloved cliffs. The chorus stands at attention while an unseen narrator recounts the memory of Klaus Barthels' death as though it were a folk tale:

*"Barthels loved to sing, and he always had a passion for German hiking and traveling songs. Thanks to his pleasant manner and his powerful voice, it never took long until all the tourists started to sing along."*

The longer story of Barthels's life on Rügen, which is in the former GDR (German Democratic Republic, or East Germany), is that before the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, and the reunification of Germany, he'd served as a soldier patrolling the area. This place was not only made famous by Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, but it was also known as a place where many GDR residents attempted to flee life behind the Iron Curtain by traveling across the Baltic Sea to Sweden and Denmark. The video's narrator recounts that Barthels's knowledge as a nature guide derived from years of patrolling the area as a border soldier. He met his own demise at the same place where he had likely caused the death of GDR citizens trying to escape.

When the narrator's tale in Johne's video ends, the choir members, representing Rügen's twelve remaining tourist guides, break into song. The choir performs the iconic adaptation of Franz Schubert's composition "Der Lindenbaum" (1827), "Am Brunnen vor dem Tore" by Friedrich Silcher (1846). The choir removes the song's initial stanzas, which focus on love, turning it into a reflection on death alone. Through this redaction, the song posits Barthels's death on the very site he had patrolled as an act of divine retribution.

In many instances, the exhibiting artists in *Shift: Music, Meaning, Context* employ songs to delve into conditions of allegiance and belonging. For *The Song of the Germans* (2015), sound and installation artist **Emeka Ogboh** (Nigeria, b. 1977, lives between Nigeria and Germany) recorded an assemblage of ten translations of the German national anthem in the languages of selected African diasporic vocalists. Playing from individual speakers, the Igbo, Yoruba, Bamoun, More, Twi, Ewondo, Sango, Douala, Kikongo, and Lingala translations of "Das Deutschlandlied" blend into a precisely timed composition. These are the voices and heritages of individuals entering and finding their place within German cultural traditions and landscapes.

Ogboh created this exploration of language and belonging during the 2015 European refugee crisis, when a record 1.3 million migrants applied for asylum in Europe, with Germany a primary destination.<sup>1</sup> Today, it is estimated that more than one in four people in Germany have an immigrant background (recently increasing due to the recent migration waves from Syria and Ukraine). The country's ongoing demographic shift has been accompanied by debates about who and what is considered German.

Known for critiquing South Asian and global cultural politics and nationalism, artist **Bani Abidi**'s work (Pakistan, b. 1971, lives between Pakistan and Germany) expands the conversation by shifting attention to a region and political circumstance closer to her own concern. In late 2003, two years into the post-9/11 "Global War on Terror" and the United States of America's heavy-handed conscription of Pakistan as a logistics resource and military partner, Abidi commissioned a Lahore band to learn and perform the US national anthem for a video artwork titled *Shan Pipe Band Learns the Star-Spangled Banner* (2004). Scottish pipe bands are a musical remnant of British colonialism once associated with the military; this musical form has since been absorbed as a common fixture within Pakistani cultural traditions and celebrations. Abidi's use of the two-channel video form serves to heighten viewers' awareness of the complicated cultural negotiations at hand for the band as well as the foreign songs that overlay peoples' daily lives.

Many viewers of *Shift* may remember the Global War on Terror, launched under the administration of former US President George W. Bush, as an era-defining policy and military campaign that was billed as a defensive response to the 9/11 "attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world."<sup>2</sup> Governments and populations abroad, as well as immigrants within the United States itself, faced the immediate challenge of needing to symbolically prove allegiance to the West as a way to maintain their own safety, status, or access to resources.<sup>3</sup> These efforts ranged from large-scale, political actions such as Pakistan opening national borders for military access, as Abidi alludes to in *Shan Pipe Band Learns the Star-Spangled Banner*, all the way down to individual and interpersonal gestures, such as the phenomenon of immigrant taxi drivers in New York City who reflexively adorned their cabs with red, white, and blue sticker decals and billowing US flags.<sup>4</sup>

Like Abidi, Ogboh, and Johne, **Jeremy Deller** (United Kingdom, b. 1966) stages performances of music in unexpected contexts to raise questions about larger social shifts. In his five-minute video documenting the performance *Acid Brass* (1997), a British brass band covers acid house tracks, connecting the music genre's origins in Black and queer communities in Chicago in the early 1980s to its adoption in the United Kingdom, where it converged with a nascent youth movement and party culture. The juxtaposition of the music itself and the musicians is intentionally humorous: instead of a single DJ performing electronic tracks in a club, a full uniformed brass band plays them on trombone, horn, and other instruments—live on stage.

For Deller, British brass bands and the broader genre of house music are intrinsically connected as byproducts of their economic contexts. Brass bands emerged in early nineteenth century Britain with the Industrial Revolution, when companies established bands for their workers, thereby organizing their leisure hours with music, rather than political activity. House and techno, on the other hand, relied on newer, more advanced synthesizers and forms of music production, even as they originated in the post-industrial landscape of the Rust Belt. In *Acid Brass*, Deller connects these two sites in music and labor history to Margaret Thatcher-era Britain, where the privatization of national industries and crackdown on labor unions threatened the sort of working-class communities associated with brass bands—and where acid house became central to a burgeoning rave scene.

Deller has said of another collaborative music project, *Steel Harmony* (2009), in which a British Caribbean percussion band covered songs by the Buzzcocks, Joy Division, and others on steelpan, “A cover version is not only a musical adaptation, but it’s also a social adaptation.” The “cover” project *Acid Brass*, initiated a decade after house music gained popularity in the United Kingdom, makes overt the sort of cultural transformations that house music underwent as it moved from queer clubs to mainstream dance music, and as it reached new audiences—and acquired different cultural associations—across Europe.

Themes of cultural hybridity and global artistic collectivism are consistent across the entire *Shift* exhibition and are especially celebrated in the ongoing *My Rockstars* body of work by British Moroccan photographer **Hassan Hajjaj** (Morocco, b. 1961, lives between the United Kingdom and Morocco). Hajjaj’s dynamic project features hundreds of cultural figures, musicians, and artists, all striking physical postures that exude the same vibrance and energy as the North African textiles that he hand-styles around them. These *Rockstars* sitters often hold instruments, perch on motorcycles, or rest atop small stools and overturned cartons. Frames handcrafted by the artist are a signature element of his still-image work. Hajjaj’s frames hold cans of commonplace pantry items connected to either Moroccan culture or the cultural background of each subject. The boldness of their mixed materiality is unconstrained by glass in these unglazed photographs.

Hajjaj himself can be considered within a present cultural moment of global artists of color who are repositioning familiar elements of heritage as celebrated adornments, as these artists honor and catalogue their own definitions of royalty. The two specific *Rockstars* on view in *Shift* are Mestre Cobra Mansa (Master), the Capoeira legend who brought the Afro-Brazilian music-based cultural form to audiences around the world, and a hip-hop, break-dance-style street performer, anonymous “Acrobat,” who kicks into the air upside down in a perfect execution that nods to Morocco and the Bronx, New York. Hajjaj describes his artistic development and style as being highly inspired by legendary African photographers Seydou Keïta, Samuel Fosso, and Malick Sidibé.

German photographer **André Lützen** (Germany, b. 1963) is also interested in elements of performance in documentary photography. His series *Generation Boul Fale* (1997–2001) follows rap artists in Marseille, France, and Dakar, Senegal, conjuring an atmosphere that blurs the distinctions between the two locations. In these photographs, hip-hop groups Pee Froiss, Carré Rouge, and Da Mayor, among others, play concerts, record albums, and film music videos. Presenting his own semi-fictionalized version of the musicians' lives alongside their own staged personas, Lützen's grainy images probe the global influence of American rap, including in diasporic African communities like those in Marseille and in Dakar's hip-hop scene.

*Boul Fale*, a Wolof term that translates roughly into “do things for yourself, be yourself,” became a catchphrase for the first wave of Senegalese hip-hop artists. In the late 1980s, groups like Positive Black Soul pioneered Senegal's legacy of conscious rap, influenced by political American rap groups like Public Enemy and KRS-One. Rapping in French, English, and Wolof, Positive Black Soul and other hip-hop groups released songs critiquing the Senegalese government, promoting sex education and AIDS activism, and encouraging listeners to vote, often combining their activist lyrics with West African instruments and musical forms. Some artists were also heavily influenced by mbalax, the Senegalese and Gambian popular dance music associated with the countries' 1970s post-independence movements, Latin music like Afro-Cuban salsa, and musical forms associated with the griot, the West African practitioner of oral history. By the time Lützen began working on this series, the Senegalese rap scene had diversified; some artists became more influenced by mainstream American gangsta rap, while others viewed hip-hop primarily as a mode of social critique.

While music, like any artistic form, can be a mode of creative individual expression and celebration, it can also bear testament to loss, exclusion, and violence. **Tony Cokes** (United States, b. 1956), whose work is defined by minimalist, PowerPoint-like videos using text he adapts from a range of sources, examines the US military's use of music as an implement of torture in *Evil.16 (Torture.Musik)* (2009–2011). In this work, Cokes excerpts a 2005 article originally published in *The Nation* detailing how detainees in Afghanistan, Guantánamo, Iraq, and other locations were forced to endure music played at deafening volumes for unbearable lengths of time. The songs that play on the video's soundtrack have all been used in torture, including songs by Metallica, Britney Spears, and Bruce Springsteen. The choice of American music specifically amounts to “the crudest kind of cultural imperialism,” as the video's text reads: culture, in this case, music, is not a metaphor for power, not a detached arena, but the implement of violence itself. Tracing how news reports in major US publications treated this “enhanced interrogation technique” as an object of humor, Cokes's video raises questions about a larger cultural complicity in the War on Terror and collapses the boundaries between the music industry and military violence, and between entertainment and war.

In *An Occupation of Loss*, by **Taryn Simon** (United States, b. 1975), professional mourners simultaneously broadcast their lamentations, enacting rituals of grief. Their recitations include northern Albanian laments, which seek to excavate “uncried words;” Wayuu laments, which safeguard the soul's passage to the Milky Way; Greek Epirotic laments, which bind the story of a life with its afterlife; and Yazidi laments, which trace a topography of displacement and exile. Co-commissioned by Artangel and Park Avenue Armory, *An Occupation of Loss* was presented at Park Avenue Armory, New York, September 2016, and Artangel, Islington, London N1 8DU, April 2018.

*Professional Mourners* presents thirty-one portraits of professional mourners who collaborated in the New York performance of *An Occupation of Loss*, as well as ten blank portraits of professional mourners who were denied entry into the United States. The related project *Laments from Quarantine* is a collection of recordings compiled in spring 2020 by Simon from collaborating artists in her 2018 performance *An Occupation of Loss*. Many of the artists were unable to mourn at funerals due to coronavirus restrictions, while some continued to attend funerals despite social distancing recommendations.

Picking up on the motif of the chorus and the voice that threads through many of the artworks in the exhibition, *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012) by **Lawrence Abu Hamdan** (Jordan, b. 1985, lives between the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon) investigates the practice of forensic vocal analysis, which are linguistic tests that immigration authorities perform on asylum seekers' speech to substantiate (or challenge) their claims—despite the technique's many documented flaws. For this work, Abu Hamdan collaborated with graphic designer Janna Ullrich and a team of linguists, activists, and researchers to respond to the testimonies of twelve Somali people seeking asylum in the Netherlands whose applications had been denied. The large vinyl wall print, a graphic that resembles a cross between a statistical report and a musical score, traces all the ways that different social factors can impact a person's speech, demonstrating the inefficacy of the practice of forensic vocal analysis. In *Conflicted Phonemes*, Abu Hamdan questions notions of authenticity and ownership over an individual's voice, and points to how speech can be scored and interpreted to hold meanings unintended by the speaker.

Visitors to *Shift: Music, Meaning, Context* will encounter several photographic selections from Chicago-based artist **Cecil McDonald, Jr.** (United States, b. 1965) interspersed throughout the museum's galleries. These selections from McDonald's series *In the Company of Black* (2007–2016) showcase individuals' interactions with, and enjoyment of, listening to music, and the privately assembled collections of music—both analogue and digital—that define community and home. Here, McDonald shares the enthusiasm of his own two sound-aficionado daughters in widely relatable moments of family life. This musical engagement is a through line of their family bond, depicted through the Black record classics being listened to by McDonald's preteen daughter, an iPod held by his youngest child, and actual instruments and sheet music shown beside him in the family's living room. Whereas many other artists in *Shift* depict music in public settings, McDonald shows that our associations with music are highly personal. Each person's interpretation of a song is a subjective process through which the meaning of a piece of music can change.

The wider project of *In the Company of Black* opens other Black Chicagoans' homes and party sanctuaries. McDonald developed this body of work over several years, seeking to portray everyday African American life—far removed from sensational media tropes focused on the poles of Black pain and Black exceptionalism. His interest lies in the artistic and intellectual pursuits of Black culture, as it intersects with and informs American culture more broadly.

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***Shift: Music, Meaning, Context*** demonstrates that music, like any other artistic medium, can be subject to unexpected modification, joyful transformation, and violent perversion of its original intent. From a national anthem translated into the home languages of diasporic singers to an examination of how US pop hits played at deafening volumes become tools of torture, *Shift* explores how music and other sonic forms can become sites of play, ritual, and power.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 in 2015,” Pew Research Center, August 2, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Global War on Terror,” George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/global-war-terror>.

<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the Pakistani government has employed the rationale of counter-terrorism measures to crack down on human rights within Pakistan. See, for example, Phelim Kine, “Pakistan’s Dangerous Anti-Terrorism Law,” *The Express Tribune*, July 19, 2014, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/737975/pakistans-dangerous-anti-terrorism-law/>.

<sup>4</sup> Clyde Haberman, “All Wrapped Up in a Debate Over True Patriotism,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/04/nyregion/04nyc.html>.