

Profiles /

Gabrielle Goliath's 'Elegy' is a Powerful Lamentation for Victims of Sexual Violence

   

BY M. NEELIKA JAYAWARDANE

31 MAY 2019

Winner of the Future Generation Special Prize, the artist sheds a light on rape culture in South Africa and around the world



A single, sustained note can sometimes be capable of evoking powerful emotions. South African artist Gabrielle Goliath's multi-channel, open-sound video installation *Elegy* (2019) comprises recordings of seven performances in which different female performers emerge from velvet-dark backgrounds and hold a single, clear, high note for as long as they can. As each performer begins to lose breath, she steps down from a low podium and exits to her right, and another performer steps up behind her, holding the same note, which ebbs and rises with the tessitura and timbre of her voice. Projected life-size on seven screens arranged in an arc, the performers constitute a resonating chorus, reminiscent of Greek and Roman theatre. Their shared note sounds out as purely – and for about the same duration – as a struck tuning fork.

Goliath has been staging live performances of *Elegy* since 2015. Each commemorates a specific South African woman or LGBTQIA+ individual whose life was claimed by gendered, racialised or sexualised violence. These have taken place in South Africa, Brazil, the US and Europe. Goliath told me that for each iteration of the piece, she documents the work of the performers 'as a kind of archive of mourning'. Together, the performances and the recordings give voice to lives that were meant to be expunged from our memory.



Gabrielle Goliath, *Elegy* (video installation), 2019, 7-Channel HD video, sound, colour. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery, Cape Town and Johannesburg

Goliath was recently awarded a Future Generation Special Prize, and *Elegy* is currently on view in Venice alongside works by the other award nominees. There, the work explicitly acknowledges the victims of gender-based violence it commemorates by including their names in the title, along with a brief framing statement. Goliath's decision to avoid more overt references allows viewers to experience the unadulterated emotions a mournful note evokes. By subtly creating a lineage between historical individuals like Louisa van de Caab – an

MORE LIKE THIS



Luc Tuymans
Retrospective at Palazzo
Grassi, Venice



**Has There Ever Been a
Blander Epithet than
'Interesting'?**



**Elective Affinities: Berlin
Art Hits Minneapolis**



**Atrocity Exhibition:
Francesco Arena's Politics
of Imperceptibility**



**Secret Memos Detail UK
Museums' Brexit Fears;
V&A Warns of Scrapping
Shows and 'Struggle' to
Remain Open**



**'Social Surrealist For Our
Times' Martin Puryear
Chosen to Represent US
at 2019 Venice Biennale**

enslaved woman who was killed by her intimate partner in 1786, and those whose lives were taken in more recent times, including Kagiso Maema (a transgender woman who was brutally murdered in 2018) and Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Masooa (a same-sex couple who are commemorated together) – Goliath also helps us reflect on the links between historical and contemporary violence. The work is ‘taken under the conviction that art has, despite its capacity to re-inscribe harm, the possibility also of facilitating transforming aesthetic and inter-relational encounters,’ Goliath said in a public talk in March at SUNY Oswego. As with her other works, *Elegy* is intended to ‘facilitate a certain...“recovery” of the subject, performed in the context of absence, of loss, and in such a way as to draw viewers into a more relational, and so affectively, ethically and politically-involved encounter.’

In her research, Goliath found that a range of opera singers, who require no mechanical amplification, are able to sustain a B-natural for prolonged periods. ‘The note becomes...a location of sorts for a collective vocalized, ritualized labour,’ she explained. ‘So what is important is not any symbolic or referential aspect to the note, but rather its melodic irresolution, non-narrative form, the duration and repetition by which it is sustained.’ That labour is both physically and emotionally exhausting, a sense the performers pass on to their audience. With their singular, continuous lamentation, they remind us that we must create a space to honour each South African woman or LGBTQIA+ individual and grant them the love and dignity they were denied in life.

Advertisement



Cathy Wilkes – Creator of Intimate, Sculptural Tableaux – To Represent UK at 58th Venice Biennale



The 57th Venice Biennale



Weekend Reading List



Critic's Guide: Venice



Briefing



Conditions of Living

Advertisement



Gabrielle Goliath, *Elegy* (video installation), 2019, 7-Channel HD video, sound, colour. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery, Cape Town and Johannesburg

Goliath is sensitive to the spaces and cultural contexts in which her works are presented. This includes contacting the victim's family or community for a scripted tribute, to be made available at the performance. In a recent essay, "'A Different Kind of Inhabitation': Invocation and the Politics of Mourning in Performance Work by Tracey Rose and Donna Kukama' (2019), the artist considers how physical and cultural violence resonates both internationally and in South Africa, 'a country marked by the traces, disparities and as-of-yet unreconciled traumas of colonialism and apartheid, as well as socially entrenched structures of patriarchal power and rape-culture.' Yet she invokes the words of literary theorist Pumla Gqola to assert that rape is not a 'South African invention'; rather, gendered forms of violence are 'a global phenomenon...[that have] survived as long as [they have] because [they] work to keep patriarchy intact', communicating 'who matters and who is disposable.'

Elegy is spare yet complex. It depends almost solely on the power of voice. When we cannot articulate pain, when words and language are insufficient, we turn to wordless cries. The singular note that *Elegy's* performers vocalise conveys a life – an agency, a subjectivity – that cannot be erased. That note resonates powerfully within us, long after the performers have exited the podium, and long after we leave the pavilion.

'Future Generation Art Prize 2019 @ Venice' <<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/222965/future-generation-art-prize-venice-2019/>> , runs at Università IUAV di Venezia, Ca' Tron, until 18 August 2019.

Main image: Gabrielle Goliath, *Elegy* (video installation), 2019, 7-Channel HD video, sound, colour. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery, Cape Town and Johannesburg

M. NEELIKA JAYAWARDANE

M. Neelika Jayawardane is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York-Oswego, and a Research Associate at the Visual Identities in Art and Design (VIAD), University of Johannesburg (South Africa). She is a recipient of the 2018 Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for a book project on Afrapix, a South African photographers' agency that operated during the last decade of apartheid.

Share this: [!\[\]\(74d4806277d7e73349d8e8c0897931e9_img.jpg\)](#) [!\[\]\(5f42d2cd7ad901bc24e5d35a38c777fd_img.jpg\)](#) [!\[\]\(628bc0b1ef2b63d1fc4442fb794e3e78_img.jpg\)](#) [!\[\]\(210e01d0c2c300cf4405442bfd570b4e_img.jpg\)](#)

Profiles /

[M. NEELIKA JAYAWARDANE](#)[GABRIELLE GOLIATH](#)[VENICE](#)[PROFILES](#)

London

1 Surrey Street
London
WC2R 2ND, UK
+44 (0)203 372 6111

New York

247 Centre St
5th Floor
New York, NY 10013
+1 212 463 7488

Berlin

Zehdenicker Str. 28
D-10119 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 2362 6506