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## Material Qualities of Sound: Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste Interviewed by Jareh Das

*Hearing with ears and bodies.*



Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, *XXX-XXX-XXXX (Phone Piece)* (2020), performance with landline telephone. Courtesy of the artist.

In her response to Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste's performance *XXX-XXX-XXXX* (2020), a performance conducted over a landline, Ladi'Sasha Jones writes: "The curved shell of the handset in my hand. The click of the hook switch as it interrupts the dial tone. Stuffing my fingers into the coils of the cord. The resounding beep that came from pushing the buttons."

Reading Jones's words took me back to two years ago when I spent all of 2020–21 in Nigeria at my parent's home as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. I found myself spending two to three hours each day immersed in online research as I adjusted to a slowing down with all the extra time on my hands.

During this downtime, I came across Toussaint-Baptiste's *XXX-XXX-XXXX* and decided to give it a call via Skype. Toussaint-Baptiste responded, which took me completely by surprise. *Do I hang up? Do I continue?* We ended up having an almost two-hour conversation, and throughout, while I processed images of speaking via the landline he had installed in his studio, I got transported to my childhood experiences of our own landline in Lagos: 01-587-4199. I was shocked to realize that I still remembered the number. Jones's response so deftly reveals how "the performance's impact lies in the way it shifts the viewer/listener's experience of connection."

Toussaint-Baptiste's current exhibition, *Set It Off*, addresses affective and relational possibilities of sound through the perspectives of minimalism and a resistance to predetermined representations of Black American experiences by favoring instead abstract visual and sonic expressions of Blackness.

—Jareh Das

### **Jareh Das**

I have a deep investment in performance art, and it is a lens through which I navigate my understanding of contemporary art, so when I came to read about your work via Issue Project Room, I went on an intensive internet research dive into your projects. I ended up being intrigued by lots of things relating to the centrality of sound in what you

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do and came across XXX-XXX-XXXX. I had no idea if this project was still live, and I wasn't expecting you to answer. This really threw me, (*laughter*) and I nearly hung up, but I am so glad I didn't. Can you speak a bit about the conditions you set for realizing this work and also the anticipation of the unexpected from the phone exchanges you had?

### **Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste**

I had a thought about what it would mean to create a piece in which I would be bound to a device and space for a period of time, and it feels weird to say, given the circumstances of a global pandemic, that it came to fruition. Connections and reconnections occurred through those conversations that were all just really, really wonderful. It also felt like a form of self and collective improvement through conversations with people such as yourself, literally from all across the world and also across time with people whom I hadn't spoken with or seen in over two decades. We all had a lot of time to talk more and detach from the virtual realm of social media as people were homebound, so there was something nice about having that opportunity to slow down and connect with people in a different way beyond being endlessly busy living in a capital-driven present with its coercive forward momentum.

Then there was that use of technology on its way out. Who uses landlines? Somebody could call from their parent's landline, for example, before it was getting cut off and tell me how that along with the device a number they've had all their life is about to disappear. Not just a number but a part of a family's identity in some way, or, rather, a domestic identity rooted in a domestic space, the home.

In terms of the parameters, I was prepared to go on for as long as possible, and I was able to keep it going from June 2020 through May of 2021. It was only when I moved for a residency for three months and didn't really have the ability to install a landline that the project was interrupted. As the world began to wake up again, this also got me moving too. I think continuing the project in different locations would be an interesting challenge, particularly when I'm in places for longer periods and can consider how to continue the performance.



Installation view of *Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste: Set It Off*. 1708 Gallery. Photo by David Hale. Courtesy of Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

**JD**

So you plan to continue the work?

**JTB**

I'm thinking about it, yeah. When the project began I was in what felt like a fatalistic place in early 2020, and it seemed as if the phone calls would continue without limitation. There was a sense of perpetuity caused by the pandemic when it felt that certain people and our government couldn't get their shit together, so I had envisioned being homebound for longer. Even when living away from home for three months, there was a potential to keep the work going as a continuation in a different location. Another challenge I found with this transferring to another location was that I'm also realizing that as buildings modernize, these accommodations for landlines are slowly fading. I took this for granted when I did the work in New York City compared to other locations. But, yeah, essentially it is a performance that doesn't have an end.



Detail view of Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, *Get Low (The Fall/The Drop)*, 2021, wood, polyethylene and tinted glass. Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. Photo by David Hale. Courtesy of Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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**JD**

That's a good point about technology and this generational familiarity of having the landline that is disappearing. I'm still always stunned when I fill out something and it's asking you for a landline, and I'm like, Who uses a landline? Although I did have an experience last year speaking with someone older, and I had time slots to call him, which took me a minute to get my head around as he only spent a few hours of the day at the phone, which I thought was brilliant.

**JTB**

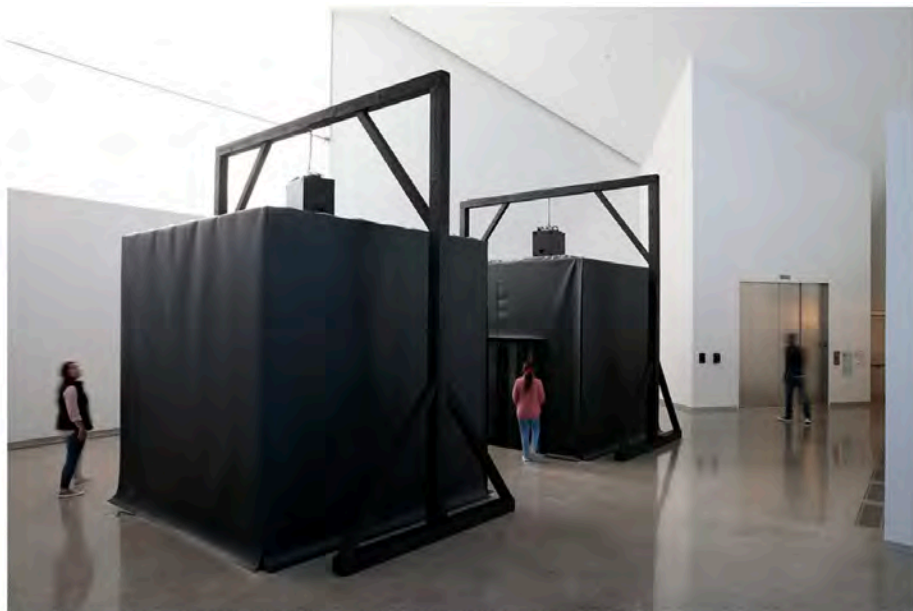
I love this.

**JD**

Could you expand on the physical demands of the proximity of XXX-XXX-XXXX? Being near the phone, you know when it rings. Were you getting people calling regularly or repeat callers?

**JTB**

The repeat callers were a few friends who instead of doing a Zoom call or texting all day would call on the landline. It also became a form of accountability for me because I don't enjoy talking on the phone, so this was me sort of setting up this task for myself that I had to participate in and care about. It became important to complete the task—answering the phone—as I'm obsessive in that way. Let's do this to an extreme, say, twelve hours, six days a week. I had to make myself accountable to this set of parameters in this work and talk to anybody who called up.



Detail view of Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, *Get Low (The Fall/The Drop)*, 2021, wood, polyethylene and tinted glass. Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. Photo by David Hale. Courtesy of Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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**JD**

Your current exhibition, *Set It Off*, is installed across two sites, 1708 Gallery and the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. Visitors are encouraged to enter two large-scale black cubes that incorporate the circulation of water from the James River with subwoofers emanating thick, pulsating compositions of bass tones and infrasonic vibrations emanating through the space, architecture, and body. How has the sonic allowed you to explore Blackness intersecting with visual abstraction?

**JTP**

I am thinking about this set of concerns through different lenses. I don't have a background in painting or fine art; my background is in composition. The cubes are both abstract and confessional in terms of how they allow for a gathering of bodies to experience sounds and vibrations. I've always been interested in architecture, sculpture, and sound as things that are indicative of negative space as an absence rather than a stand-in for, or residue of, bodies. I also think of the installation as holding memory, yet in a way that's alive, as subwoofers make sounds feel animated, which speaks to the material qualities of sound—even though it's invisible, it's still quite palpable.

**JD**

What about entering into a dark space enveloped by both sound and architecture? One has to surrender to the experience by relying on other senses and not the visual.

**JTP**

I am using darkness and the low frequency in these works as a lens for Black American cultural practice. I am cultivating a temporary imaginary where the idea or notion of identity isn't dependent on what we see, how we're seeing, or how we see other things. It's also founded on how we not only hear with our ears but with our bodies.

Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste: *Set It Off* is on view at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University and 1708 Gallery in Richmond, Virginia, until June 19.

*Dr. Jareh Das is a researcher, writer, independent curator, and (occasional) florist who lives and works between West Africa and the UK. Her interests in (global) modern and contemporary art are cross-disciplinary, although her understanding is filtered through the lens of performance art which informs both her academic and curatorial work.*