In Frequencies We Cannot Name: Language, Sound, Silence

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Brakke Grond, Amsterdam
In collaboration with Mu.ZEE, Ostend

Language is never neutral. It carries the sediment of power relations, colonial encounters, and the violence of translation. *In Frequencies We Cannot Name* interrogates how we read, hear, and feel cultural expression across difference, proposing that the inability to immediately decode meaning might not be a failure of communication, but rather a generative space of encounter that resists colonial epistemologies. We experience meanings through touch, feeling, and bodily sensation. Things we may not have words for, but which move through us powerfully nonetheless. These encounters offer ways of knowing that resist colonial frameworks of understanding.

This show emerges from the recognition that colonial documentation practices, ethnographic recordings, missionary translations, administrative classifications, fabricated hierarchies of legibility continue to shape how we encounter cultural "Others" still, still today. Drawing from Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity, the show asserts the right of cultural expressions to remain untranslatable, to maintain their secrecy as an act of sovereignty rather than withholding.

Central to this framework is Rizvana Bradley's theory of anteaesthetics, which challenges the Western aesthetic regime that demands cultural objects be immediately comprehensible or beautiful according to European standards. Bradley's anteaesthetics suggests that certain forms of Black and indigenous cultural expression operate *before* or *outside* Western aesthetic categories entirely, in futurities of our now-moment. They exist in systems of meaning that precede and resist colonial aestheticization. With sound, such resistance to the normalized order vribrates its own frequencies, humming escapes from the colonial archive's visual taxonomies and embodying knowledge systems that resist transcription into Western notation.

The exhibition unfolds across three interconnected frequencies of understanding, each acknowledging different registers of cultural encounter:

Surface Frequencies present works that appear initially legible but reveal increasing complexity upon sustained engagement. These pieces interrogate the colonial assumption that cultural meaning should be immediately accessible to outside observers, instead revealing layers of significance that emerge through time and attention.

Embodied Frequencies privilege felt experience over intellectual comprehension, operating in Bradley's anteaesthetic register. Here, sound installations, tonal languages, and ritual vocalizations create immersive environments where meaning emerges through bodily encounter rather than cognitive decoding. These works suggest that some forms of knowledge can only be accessed through embodied participation, not analytical distance.

Encrypted Frequencies maintain their opacity as an act of cultural sovereignty, refusing Western aesthetic categorization entirely. These works exist as complete systems that do not require external validation or interpretation, challenging the anthropological impulse to decode and the curatorial drive to explicate.

The collaboration between Brakke Grond and Mu.ZEE creates a productive tension between Amsterdam's position as a contemporary site of cultural encounter and Ostend's collection, which contains traces of Belgium's colonial history. This geographical dialogue allows the exhibition to examine how objects may have been aestheticized or museumified in ways that strip them of their anteaesthetic power, while also considering how contemporary artists reclaim and transform these narratives.

Otobong Nkanga's *I Dey O* exemplifies this curatorial approach. The title, meaning "I'm fine" in Nigerian Pidgin English, already signals a linguistic complexity that in its constant reinventions resists defies transparency and much less translation. In writing of Glissant's thinking through or Créole, Marie Baur writes, pidgins and creoles bring forth the

> possibilities of their 'detouring' […] 'Détour' […] points to a moving within and yet around allocated, fixed positions of inferiority. […] Glissant's concept introduced in his *Le Discours Antillais* (Caribbean Discourse) (1981(1989)) allows the application of attentive and not extractive ears which bring life, virtuality as Glissant would have it, in and under erasure to the fore. (Baur, 4)

Nigerian Pidgin is a creole formation that emerged from colonial contact but maintains its own grammatical logic and cultural specificity. The work consists of concrete spheres of various sizes connected by ropes, creating both a sound installation and a spatial metaphor for societal connections that resist alteration. The weight of the concrete spheres suggests the material force of exchange systems, while their sonic properties activate the space through embodied encounter rather than visual consumption. Here, the Nigerian Pidgin title operates in Bradley's anteaesthetic register. It exists as a complete linguistic system that preceded and exceeds colonial English, maintaining its opacity for those unfamiliar with its particular grammar while offering profound meaning to those who inhabit its linguistic world.

Rather than offering explanatory frameworks that domesticate difference, *In Frequencies We Cannot Name* creates conditions for visitors to experience the generative potential of not-knowing. The show acknowledges that some cultural expressions are not meant to be decoded by outside observers but rather exist as systems of meaning that maintain their integrity through opacity.

This curatorial approach positions the groupshow as both a critique of colonial epistemologies embedded in historical museum practices and an invitation to new forms of cultural encounter. One that honors the right to remain untranslatable while creating space for genuine cross-cultural dialogue. In doing so, the museum reimagines its role, moving beyond traditional frameworks of cultural translation and interpretation to become a space where difference can be encountered without being consumed.

The exhibition ultimately argues that locality, the specific contexts from which cultural expressions emerge, cannot be understood through universal frameworks but must be approached through what Glissant calls "relation": a mode of encounter that acknowledges irreducible difference while remaining open to transformation. In this space between understanding and opacity, between sound and silence, new possibilities for cultural encounter emerge.