

Amant Learning Resource

SIREN (some poetics)

Curated by Quinn Latimer

September 15, 2022–March 5, 2023



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Introduction

This learning resource is a guide to the group exhibition *SIREN (some poetics)* and a tool to help you connect and learn with young people through art. You will find background descriptions and information for your discussions and in-gallery activities that respond to the artworks on display, supporting the exploration and understanding of some of the key themes in this exhibition.

This learning resource also includes some activities that can be activated by the Amant's Education Facilitator. Co-facilitated visits for groups of young people and schools are available on Thursdays and Fridays.

We provide materials to accompany this resource, such as paper, pencils, and clipboards. Please visit our reception desk for more information.

To book your visit, please email tours@amant.org or complete the booking form on our website.

Key Concepts

Myth

A traditional story narrating fictional events explaining part of the worldview of a people or illustrating a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon. Originally these stories were oral traditions passed on through generations.

Siren

In Greek mythology, sirens were the voices of the sea, usually depicted as part woman and part animal with either bird or fish bodies. Their purpose was to lure the wandering sailors with enchanting songs. These songs were said to bewitch the sailors leading them into a trance and ultimately to their death. The most common description of sirens comes from Homer's Greek epic poem *The Odyssey* from the 7th century BCE. Their songs were sweet, and they sang divine stories to keep sailors in a blissful dream state. Many accounts describe sirens, and details develop over time; they often set up oppositional modes of dividing human from non-human, land from sea, male from female. This exhibition takes the siren as a starting point and challenges the division that tries to control them.

Poetry

A style of writing that typically uses language in a method that unifies word and sound, using mostly rhyme or other techniques. Poets craft literary figures such as metaphors or similes to convey a theme or emotion. "Poetics" is a general theory about poetry and voice.

Gender

Humans are born with biological characteristics of sex, either female, male, or intersex. Gender, however, is the social concept based on the norms, behavior, and societal roles expected of individuals primarily based on one's biological sex. Gender identity describes a person's self-perceived gender, which could be masculine, feminine, both, neither, or otherwise. People whose gender identity corresponds to their biological sex may be referred to as "cisgender." Transgender people have a gender identity that does not conform to the sex they were assigned at birth.

Voice

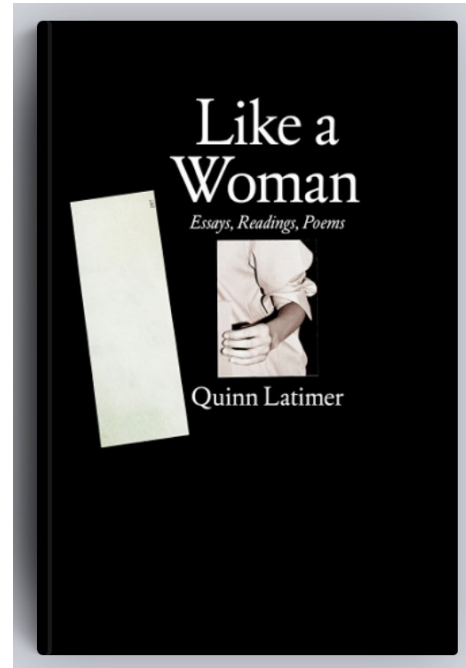
In this exhibition the voice presents itself through image, textile, text, and sound. The voice is commonly understood as sounds people make from their mouths which can be speaking, pitch, accents, etc. The voice, like the human body, is created, made, and unmade. It can be natural, machine-made, or both.

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About the Curator

Quinn Latimer is a California-born poet, critic, and editor. Quinn's poems and texts are accessible in books, as well as spoken aloud in a private or public space. For Quinn, the written and the spoken word, like other sounds, also have form, occupying space as if it were an object. She sometimes writes works of prose or poetry, such as her books *Rumored Animals* (Dreaming Horse Press, 2012) and *Like a Woman: Essays, Readings, Poems* (Sternberg, 2017); and on occasions, she also writes about other artists, poets, and writers as an art critic and essayist, as *Sarah Lucas: Describe This Distance* (Mousse, 2013), and *Film as a Form of Writing, with Akram Zaatari* (Wiels, 2013).

Quinn is interested in the position of women throughout history, especially in the field of art and culture. Quinn is interested in voices that have often been silenced or censored, and through her work, she celebrates them. She lives between Basel, Switzerland, and Athens, Greece. In fact, Greek mythology has been an important source and influence for Quinn and some artists in this exhibition.



About the Exhibition

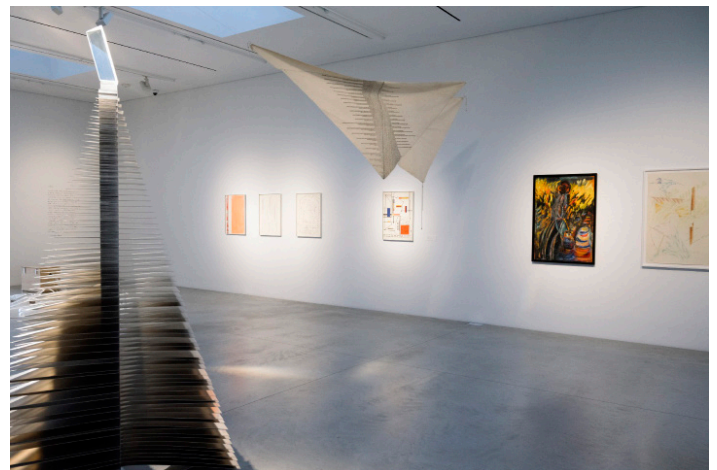
SIREN (some poetics) is a group exhibition featuring the works of 17 cross-generational artists and poets from different parts of the world. Quinn Latimer, the curator of this show, considers the 'Siren' as both, a mythological figure and a prolonged sound used as a warning system. In Greek mythology, the original siren was said to be a genderless voice without a body, neither human nor animal, that sang from beyond. Their voices were heard as if from a speaker across the water, and they offered comfort, bliss, and pleasant dreams. As the image of the siren developed from oral tradition to visual, the siren became figured as a woman, part bird or part fish, whose song attracted sailors to their demise. They had sailors forget their language, sense of self, and got them lost so they couldn't find their way back home.

This exhibition challenges this version of the siren myth by prompting us to re-imagine the siren song as a productive break in a journey that provides unexpected opportunities. The sound of a siren is loud and abrasive, interrupting all that is in its sonic path. During an emergency, it announces that harm is imminent, demands a shift in direction, and prioritizes the wellbeing of those in harm's way. The siren as both mythological creature and warning system use sound to either create harm and to warn against it. The artworks in this exhibition engage with the siren's many forms of production, including alarm, body, prophecy, the nonhuman given a human form, sound made.

There are many paths into this exhibition: this learning resource focuses on the concept of siren as a means of communication, in which the siren can be heard, read, or seen through different formats. Experience the Amant campus galleries as an active circuit board, where the artworks are the electronic nodes that communicate across time and space. The voice/sound of the siren becomes the tool to understand the meaning behind the drawings, installations, painting, videos, and sound works that are included in this exhibition.

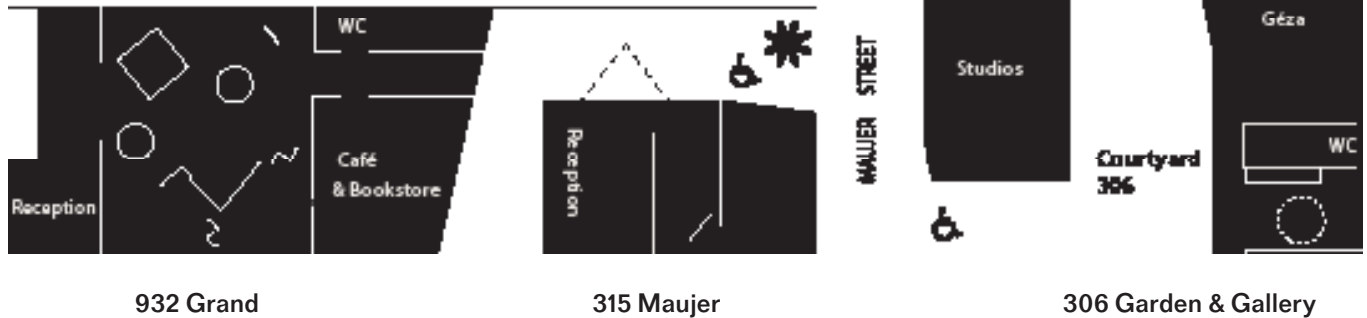
Below are questions to reflect on while you visit:

- ▶ **How does this exhibition further inform your understanding of a siren?**
- ▶ **Where does the siren appear in the artworks you encounter?**
- ▶ **What story does the siren tell you?**



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Selection of Artworks



Gallery 315 Maujer

SIREN (some poetics) occupies the three galleries of the Amant campus and gathers a group of artists whose work speaks about the different forms of communication. People learn and share information through language, in spoken or written form. Central to this exchange is the act of sending and receiving a message. Yet not only humans exchange information and feelings. Animals communicate through sound, scent, and actions, and computers signal to other computers through electronic networks. As you move through Gallery 315 Maujer, you encounter forms of communication by humans, animals, bacteria, and even robots.

Nour Mobarak

Fugue I and Fugue II, 2019

Trametes versicolor mycelium, wood pellets and speaker.

Artist Nour Mobarak's *Fugue I and Fugue II* are four sound sculptures made with saprophytic mycelia, a fungi network that feeds on dead plant and animal remains. The work is a living organism, sustained by wood pellets reverberating with sound composed by the artist. One sound component offers acapella songs; the other conversations with the artist's late father, Jean Mobarak, who suffered from memory loss. They speak in song and sometimes in rhyme.



Jenna Sutela

nimiia cétii, 2018

HD video, sound, color, 19 minutes

Jenna Sutela's video *nimiia cétii* features a fictional language made by a computer system and footage of bacteria. For this video, Sutela borrowed a text said to be channeled from an alien to a 19th-century psychic medium. She then fed this text into a machine learning application which was interpreted by a computer to form a new language. This is shown alongside footage of *Bacillus subtilis*, a bacterium that might survive on Mars according to recent spaceflight experiments.



Bia Davou

Untitled (Odyssey), 1980s

Ink, fabric and thread on linen (set of four sails comprising one installation).

Bia Davou's series of "Sails" are large-scale textile works hanging from the ceiling of the gallery. They are geometric-shaped works embroidered with verses from *The Odyssey* and the Fibonacci golden spiral, a series of numbers that make the spirals found in nature. The "Sails" explores the relationship between text and textile, song and poem, the oral and the written, epic and code. They also call attention to the story of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus the main character in *The Odyssey* who faithfully awaited his return while he was at war. During this time, it is said that Penelope weaved the sails of ancient ships and in this context, we are reminded of gendered labor of weaving and sewing.



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Gallery 932 Grand

In Gallery 932 Grand, you see a group of artists that explore language as a tool for connection. Language is the vehicle that contains the message shared between living and nonliving things. Like language, you can think of the siren as a mythological creature and an alarming system to be a medium for a message sent and received. The siren is the tool for communication and is understood through image, text, or sound, and it is experienced by watching, reading, and listening.

However, you can also experience the siren through participation. Before you leave the gallery, find the pile of security tags sitting in one of the corners of the space. You are invited to take one of the tags, and take it to Gallery 306 where you will encounter the corresponding work of art. This action will set off a siren chorus composed of distorted metal-detector sounds.

Liliane Lijn

Queen of Hearts, Queen of Diamonds, 1980

Two sculptures; optical glass prism and aluminum

Queen of Hearts, Queen of Diamonds by Liliane Lijn are two monumental aluminum sculptures with optical glass prisms at the top of each. The two Queens are twins, and their figure is made by layering aluminum plates that take their shape from the optical glass prism at the top representing their heads. They come from Lijn's interest in matriarchal archetypes, a typical example of a social system in which women hold power, such as goddess figures from Greek, Hindu, Indigenous, and other cultures. Through this work, the artist reimagines a woman's figure and challenges the way society portrays influential figures as male rather than female.

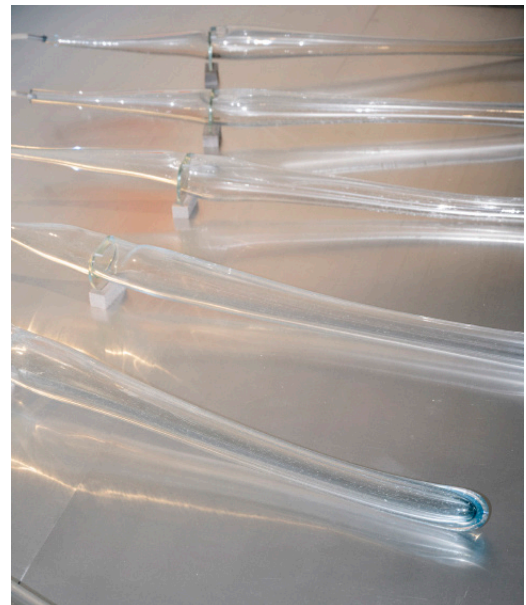


Katja Aufleger

***Sirens (Al Wakra Vol.III)*, 2019**

Seven glass organ pipes, engine, wood, silicone hose, and aluminum

Katja Aufleger's *Sirens (Al Wakra Vol.III)* are seven glass organ pipes resting on an aluminum plate that emit a low-pitched hum. Glass is made by heating sand, and the glass pipes in this work are made from sand collected from the Al Wakra desert in Qatar, a country on the Arabian Peninsula. This desert is home to the "singing dunes," when moved by the wind their sand grains produce sound. The artist connects the glass pipes to engines and tubes of air that transform the glass into organ pipes designed to echo the dunes' tones. The sounds the glass pipes emit are the kinds of evocative base drones and electronic blips familiar to listeners of experimental electronica.



Katja Aufleger

***Condition 7.3 5 pm (Al Wakra)*, 2019**

HD video, no sound, color, 10 minutes and 15 seconds

The "singing dunes" described above are made visible across the gallery in Aufleger's silent video *Condition 7.3 5 pm (Al Wakra)*. This video is set in the desert of Al Wakra in Qatar and depicts the wind swishing through a dune. Here, Aufleger visualizes the acoustic by capturing the wind moving the sand, famously known as the singing dunes of the Al Wakra desert. The singing dunes are facts, not a myth in which the dune's specks of sand become speakers, like sound waves; the wind takes the grains of sand through space, producing a wall of sound often talked about in music.



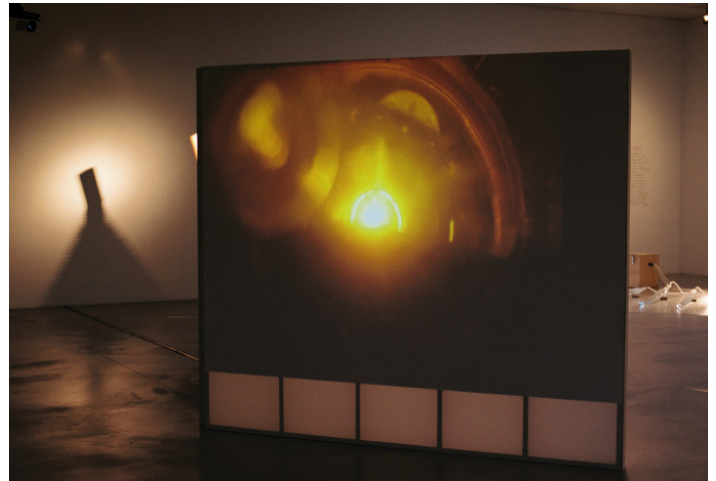
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Aura Satz

***Preemptive Listening (part 1: The Fork in the Road)*, 2018**

Film, stereo, color, sound, 8 minutes and 47 seconds

Interrogating the sound of a siren, Aura Satz's short film, *Preemptive Listening (part 1: The Fork in the Road)*, considers the siren's melodic sound as a site of sonic obedience and disobedience. In this film, Satz layers voice, video, and sound to show the siren's potential to be rewired and re-tooled for social change. The voice of actor and activist Khalid Abdalla narrates his experience of sirens in Egypt during a moment in the Arab Spring popular uprising of 2011. He speaks of sirens as sounds of resistance, lost futures, and oppression, understood as a prolonged cruel or unjust treatment. His voice becomes a signal, activating emergency rotating lights that spin across the film according to the cadence of his speech. Meanwhile, Lebanese trumpet improviser Mazen Kerbaj plays a composition using circular breathing that is punctuated by siren sounds, citing a previous experience when, in July 2006, he stood on a balcony in Beirut and played his trumpet to the sound of Israeli bombs falling in the distance.



306 Courtyard and Gallery 306 Maujer

Siren (some poetics) concludes with the siren appearing in the most unlikely places, and being activated through all kinds of elements, some of them natural, and other ones produced by humans or machines. First, as you walk through the courtyard of 306 Gallery, you find the wind bells above one of the buildings, which sing as the wind passes through them. Then in Gallery 306, you will activate a chorus of sirens with the security tag you took from Gallery 932.

Mayra A. Rodríguez Castro

Senti, 2022

Stainless steel, aluminum and silver aggregate chimes, horsehair string

Poet and artist Mayra A. Rodríguez Castro's *Senti* is an artwork that relies on a space it inhabits, sound sculpture made of wind bells developed in Colombia to mimic the poet's voice. The bells sound as the wind passes through them, creating a sweet song tuned to the musical key of her voice: the minor to major notes reached by Rodríguez Castro herself.



Shanzhai Lyric

Untitled (Portrait of a Siren), 2022

50 pounds plastic anti-theft security tags, anti-theft security panels and soundscape

Untitled (Portrait of a Siren) is made of six anti-theft panels arranged in a circle, forming a siren chorus. The work has two components. The first is 50 pounds of grey plastic anti-theft security tags in Gallery 932, and the other is the six anti-theft panels. The sculpture's alarms are activated when visitors walk through the panels with the security tags that trigger the sirens. The composition is created from distorted siren sounds, and their soundscape transforms instruments of surveillance into instruments of song.



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Activities

Sounds of Safety

SIREN (some poetics)

The following activities for writing and drawing were developed in collaboration with the artist duo María Bonomi y Lucía Cozzi.

María Bonomi y Lucía Cozzi are a Brooklyn-based artist collective from Argentina. They met as Mil Mundos Books members in 2019, where their collaboration began. Their practice focuses on art as a channel for action, reflection, and healing, enhanced when shared in community. In their paintings, *encuentros* (Spanish for “meetings”), they co-create spaces of research and dialogue using canvas as the conversation space. They value process over output, as they learn through movement through. Alongside their studio practice, they organize actions and events in coalition with other Mil Mundos members and community organizations in Brooklyn.



Activity #1
Drawing
5-15 minutes

Pick one gallery of the show to contemplate. Consider the artworks, the space, people coming in and out, surrounding sounds, scents, textures, wall text, and any other components you can identify. Create a drawing representing what is in the room but is not visible, the non-visual factors such as sound or feeling surrounding and within the art. For instance, How would you draw the sound/song of a siren?

Materials

Colored pencils and colored paper. (You can find them in our Bookstore and Cafe or you can ask for them to one of our mediators)

Discussion

- ▶ How was your process of observing the space and the movement of people in and out?
- ▶ Was there anything that you hadn't noticed before but were able to observe in contemplation?
- ▶ If you had to give your drawing a title, what would it be?

Activity #2:
Writing
5-15 minutes

Walk around the exhibition and pick an artwork that stood out to you. How it engages your senses? Write a list of around 20 words and sounds that this artwork invokes in you. The sounds don't need to come from verbal language but all kind of noises and non-human voices that surround you. Create a poem based on these words. The poem can be written to read loud if that helps you to perform some specific sounds.

Materials

Pencils, paper, clipboard if needed.

Discussion

- ▶ Why did you pick this artwork?
- ▶ Is this reflected in your final poem?
- ▶ How did this piece invoke your different senses?
- ▶ What is your idea of a siren, and how has this show further informed it?
- ▶ Can you imagine other forms of sirens beyond sounds and human engineering?
- ▶ What words do you think of for safety?
- ▶ What words do you think of for danger?
- ▶ How does safety and danger shape the sound of a siren?

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Activity #3

Mind Map

10–15 minutes

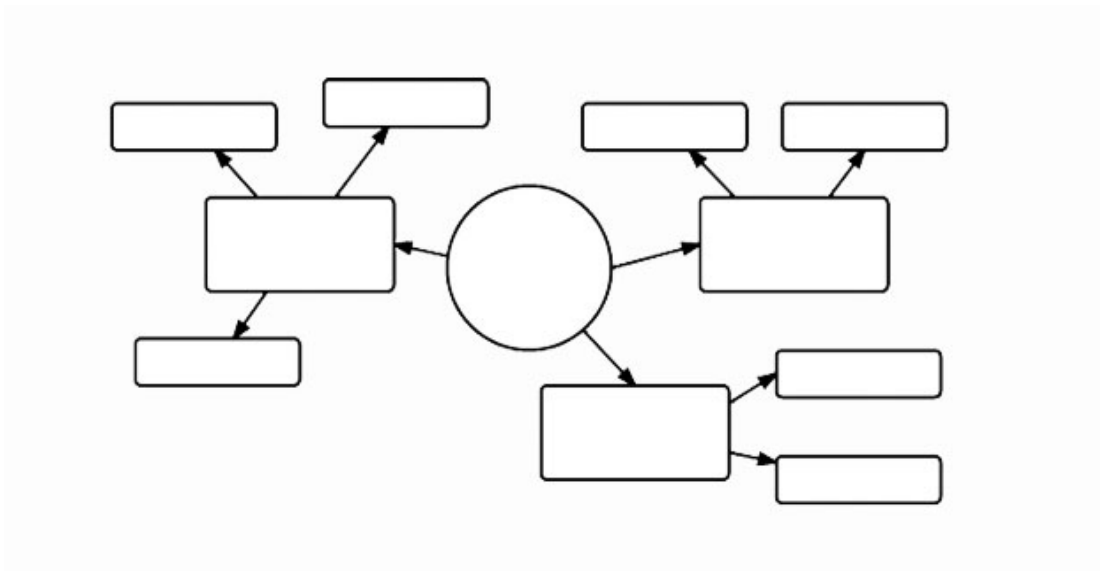
Walk around the galleries and contemplate artworks and how they relate to each other and to the space. Draw a mind-map of the show at large, or one of the galleries, to reflect on themes, the artworks and your experience. A mind map is a diagram used to visually organize information, showing relationships among parts of a whole.

Materials

Pencils, papers, clipboards.

Discussion

- ▶ How did you identify the different components to include in the mind-map?
- ▶ In what order did you add them and why?
- ▶ What are the connectors or relationships that you've mapped?
- ▶ Poetry is not only written words, but sometimes poets include symbols, drawings and they play around with the visual structure of the text to write poetry. Describe the similarities and contrasts between mind-maps and poetry.



Notes
