

In spite of my own desire to see you disappear is the first institutional solo exhibition in North America by French artist Paul Maheke.

Paul Maheke: *In spite of my own desire to see you disappear* is commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto; and Southern Alberta Art Gallery Maansiksikaitapitsinikssin, Lethbridge

The exhibition is presented with the support of the Consulate general of France in Toronto, and Trampoline, Association in support of the French art scene, Paris



In spite of my own desire to see you disappear is presented as part of *Artist First*, a Mercer Union commissioning platform. *Artist First* commissions are made possible with the generous support of Femi & Aminat Adeyinka, Kaye & Paul Beeston, Rebecca Carbin, Joanna & Meric Gertler, Christie Kirchner, Margaret McNee, David & Erica Neligan, Frances & Tim Price, Lauren Charyk Silverberg, and Morden Yolles. Learn more mercerunion.org/support

artistfirst

TD Programming & Engagement Assistant is made possible with Leading Support from TD Bank Group



Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art
1286 Bloor Street West, Toronto ON M6H 1N9 Canada
(one block east of Lansdowne TTC Station)

Director & Curator: Theresa Wang
Curator & Head of Exhibitions: Aamna Muzaffar
Operations & Development Manager: Sonya Filman
TD Programming & Engagement Assistant: Abby Kettner
Lead Exhibition Preparator: Vanessa Rieger

Open Tuesday through Saturday, 11AM–6PM
office@mercerunion.org | mercerunion.org

Board of Directors: Femi Adeyinka,
Matt Brown, Miles Gertler, Sarah Heim,
Christie Kirchner, David Neligan,
Philip Leonard Ocampo, Erica Russell,
Marina Shepaksov, Farnoosh Talae

Mercer Union acknowledges the support of its staff, volunteers and members, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council.



ISBN 978-1-926627-67-0



SPACE: Ella Gonzales | Sleeve: which cannot be reduced
27 September–16 January 2024

Mercer Union's SPACE billboard commission has invited artist Ella Gonzales for its 2024–25 season for a yearlong series titled *Sleeve*. Working with materials such as plastics, silks, and acrylic paint, *Sleeve* plays with the billboard site through iterative gestures that change the composition within a single shell. Over the course of the year, the artist presents three sculptural banners or perhaps, three distinct moments in a single work always in the process of becoming. Read more about the first edition, *which cannot be reduced* (2024), along with an accompanying text at mercerunion.org

Ella Gonzales is a Filipina Canadian artist working between painting and Computer-Aided Design programs. She has recently exhibited at grunt gallery, Vancouver (2024); The Power Plant, Toronto (2023); Unit 17, Vancouver (2023); Galerie Nicolas Robert, Toronto (2023); Xspace Cultural Centre, Toronto (2023); and the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge (2022). Gonzales holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Western University and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Guelph.

SPACE invites one artist to produce a yearlong series of images for a public-facing billboard on the east façade of Mercer Union.

Image: Production Still: Ella Gonzales, *Sleeve: which cannot be reduced*, 2024. Courtesy the artist.

To receive future publications by mail and many other benefits, become a supporter of Mercer Union. Cultivating artists and challenging audiences since 1979.

artistfirst

BIOGRAPHIES

Paul Maheke is a multidisciplinary artist whose work spans drawing, video, sound, and dance. He has sustained a long-term exploration into the ways in which marginalized bodies, narratives, and histories are made visible and invisible.

In 2023, Mercer Union invited Paul to develop a new sound installation for his first institutional solo exhibition in North America, titled *In spite of my own desire to see you disappear*. Both a departure and an extension of Paul's dance practice, the work brings together diverse sonic references—ranging from ambient music, R&B, and chamber music—within a series of provisional structures in the gallery. Taking the premise of a conduit that transfers one's experiences to another, *In spite of my own desire to see you disappear* studies the encounters and tensions that unfold when one's subjectivity is divulged.

Mercer Union's collaboration with Paul emerges from our long-held commitment to commissioning new work, and creating milestone opportunities for artists to bring their visions to fruition in Toronto. Through our commissioning platform *Artist First*, we invest in the lifecycle of a project from conception to realization, cultivating discovery, risk-taking, and artistic development through long-term support and dialogue. To learn more, visit mercerunion.org/support



Paul Maheke is a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Montpellier. Maheke's work has been shown in solo presentations at Mostyn, Wales (2024); Kunsthalle Bratislava, Slovakia (2023); High Line Art, New York (2022), The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2021); Collection Pinault, Paris (2021); and Chisenhale Gallery, London (2019). He has participated in group exhibitions and festivals at institutions including Tate Modern, London (2024); Rudolfinum, Prague (2023); ICA Miami (2019); and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2018). He has been featured in major international exhibitions including Biennale du Congo (2022); Glasgow International, Scotland (2021); 58th Venice Biennale (2019); Performa, New York (2019); Baltic Triennial 13, Estonia (2018); and Manifesta 12, Italy (2018).

Image: Paul Maheke, *A fire circle for a public hearing*, 2022. A High Line Performance. Photo: Iki Nakagawa and Kathryn Logan. Courtesy the artist and the High Line.



Paul Maheke:

In spite of my own desire to see you disappear

28 September–30 November 2024



A conversation between Paul Maheke and Louis Chude-Sokei

LOUIS CHUDE-SOKEI: How does the body work in your practice?

PAUL MAHEKE: After graduating from my Masters in Paris in 2011, I was mostly working with drawings and installation when I started to physically perform gestures in public space. These gestures were always conducted anonymously and through them there was the desire to just disappear. My drawing practice was about self-portraiture and looking at the body as a vessel for history and embodied knowledge. I took the opposite approach with my performance work where I wanted to completely remove the public's understanding of my body from my work. I wanted to explore the idea of an artwork that may not be seen or experienced by people in a complete way.

LCS: In a recent conversation with choreographer Bill T. Jones, I admitted my own discomfort with dancers because their ease with their visibility in a public space can make others uncomfortable as they reflect on their own bodies in that space. In art, music, culture, and literature, discomfort is often connected to resistance, and for an audience, to how we grow and expand. When I first encountered your work, I saw it as hypervisibility vis-à-vis erasure. However, the desire to disappear that you have stated is more complex. As writers, scholars, and artists of color, we deal with silencing and marginality, so what does it mean to play with erasure? Erasing yourself through visible gestures is seemingly a contradiction.

PM: I always need a level of abstraction. When I first made drawings, they were barely visible on paper and there was a strong act of resistance against the appetite for black bodies, brown bodies, marginalized identity. Édouard Glissant speaks about it beautifully with the concept of “opacity,” and I wanted to explore something that would go further through the idea of “translucency.”¹ I started to think about it with my good friend Nkisi (Melika Ngombe Kolongo) and the choreographer Ligia Lewis. We collaborated on *Levant* (2018), a work in which we filmed our three bodies in a dark space. I wore a headlamp on my forehead and Ligia choreographed me and Nkisi as I filmed. There was the attempt to capture images and movement, but also to let the body escape and disappear. This tension between hypervisibility and erasure, or darkness and light, is what I am interested in because something that lacks definition has the possibility for more movement and abstraction.

When I speak about Glissant I also think about how he talks about the

“abyss” in relation to the Middle Passage, and the idea of a space under us that holds a part of mystery. It is the foundation of what the world is, and the abyss can stare back at the self. I see my work as attempting to use tools to make the invisible visible. I like this failure, this incapacity of representing the invisible. The attempt is an opaque gesture and one of resistance.

LCS: There's an epistemological interruption, a change in signification, when you move the body from expected spheres into unexpected ones. Seeing your body in an unconventional space is witnessing a person confronting the abyss in real time. This is extremely uncomfortable for those of us who are operating within the norms of physical movement which we have embodied to prevent ourselves from engaging the abyss. In my first book about blackface minstrelsy, I used a term that came back to me when I read critics responding to your work: “naked mask.”² It refers to how when you reveal something, you're actually concealing it. That when you are showing your vulnerability, you're actually masking something.

PM: When you are put in a position of performing for an audience, you also need to consider the parameters of the performance to keep a form of agency. The space of performance is no different than the space that we know of as the world. Performance can be dangerous in the sense that everything can be consumed—digested, integrated, but also appropriated. How do you resist this? That's where I agree with you about the resistance that silence can bring, whether it is a sonic silence or a visual silence.

The premise of the exhibition at Mercer Union is grounded in a personal journal. *To Be Blindly Hopeful* (2023) at Mostyn in Llandudno was the first show where I used and published this vulnerable material for everyone to read. *In spite of my own desire to see you disappear* follows this project. The journal is still present, but I gave it to Ndobó-emma, a musician based in Montpellier, to read and interpret it as music. We performed together once at the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo, and I was interested in bringing her in on a project where we could collaborate further, especially because her practice is in a realm of more popular music, like neo-soul and R&B.

LCS: The sound piece is very melodic and quite emotionally affective, which, to be honest, is surprising as a sound installation. It's in conversation with the journal, and in many ways the journal entries are painful. Does working with the style of R&B, which is rooted in heartbreak, failure, desire, and pain, offer you something in a gallery space? Is that the way you convey the affect of the journal? There are also pure sonic moments that activate space in a powerful way.

PM: I'm going to go back to a psychic medium reading I was given, in which I was told that I had the energy of a torch singer. I believe that my work also has this energy. [Laughs]

LCS: Paul, you have nailed it. That makes perfect sense. [Laughs] I come out of reggae and sound system culture, but I've retreated from the musical because music is very linked to memory and specific bodily movements. Rhythm and melody are deeply coded, and it's a way of producing continuity and organizing time and collectivity. But in my sound work I'm interested in what happens if we abandon that. What does sound do for memory without the expected movements and organized methods that draw collectivity and community?

PM: It sounds like your relationship to sound is my relationship to dance, and why I stopped dancing for a while because I needed to reconfigure it. A few years back I asked curators I worked with to not use the terms “blackness” or “queerness” in texts where they wrote about my practice. It comes with a set of expectations and imaginations that are not necessarily connected to my own relationship with my work. I've returned to drawings and installation because they allow me to move away from that legibility.

LCS: Music is an interesting metaphor. When you use certain terms (black, queer, immigrant, this, that), they create melodies and familiar rhythms. That's what shows up in the writing about you and how people consume you. If we are to move from a form of identity politics to somewhere else, I think it has to engage the incredible complexity and confusion—the productive confusion—of blackness. We tend to use blackness as a singular thing because we want to create solidarity. What I find exciting, dangerous, and fueling your work, is how you're coming to terms with the question: which blackness are we talking about? Tell me more about your relationship to that.

PM: I'm kind of turning my back to the idea of a monoculture around blackness. I think it's important for me to speak from a specific place, and that's why I can't use umbrella terms. My language can be abstract sometimes, but I reclaim it and at the moment I kind of refuse to be in a situation of translation with my work and how I speak about my work. That is also a bit scary for me because it's much easier to arrive and have a prepackaged discourse around a work. But now I'm trying to move away from that and that's why the show in Toronto feels so raw. It's personal, and that's where I'm leaning towards.

LCS: It might be why after years of producing so much scholarship, two

years ago I wrote a memoir in an attempt to ground the work that I do as a scholar and thinker and make sure that it goes back to a specific place. Not because my experience is everyone's experience, but to make sure that we understand that abstractions come from somewhere.

1. Glissant, Édouard. *The Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
2. Chude-Sokei, Louis. *The Last Darcy: Bert Williams, Black on Black Minstrelsy, and the Black Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.



Louis Chude-Sokei is a writer and scholar whose works include *Race Und Technologie* (2023), *Floating in A Most Peculiar Way* (2021), *The Sound of Culture* (2015), and *The Last Darcy* (2005). He currently advises the Guggenheim's Art and Technology Initiative, and is the editor of *The Black Scholar*, the leading journal of Black Studies. At the Venice Biennale (2024), he contributed a sound installation as part of the German Pavilion. He founded the sonic art/archiving project Echolocution and was a curator of Carnegie Hall's Afrofuturism Festival (2022). Notable artistic collaborators include Mouse on Mars, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Marina Rosenfeld and Mendi & Keith Obadike.

Cover image: Production still: Paul Maheke, *In spite of my own desire to see you disappear*, 2024. Courtesy the artist.

Interior image: Paul Maheke, *We took a sip from the devil's cup*, 2021. Installation view: Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 2022. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Louis Haugh.