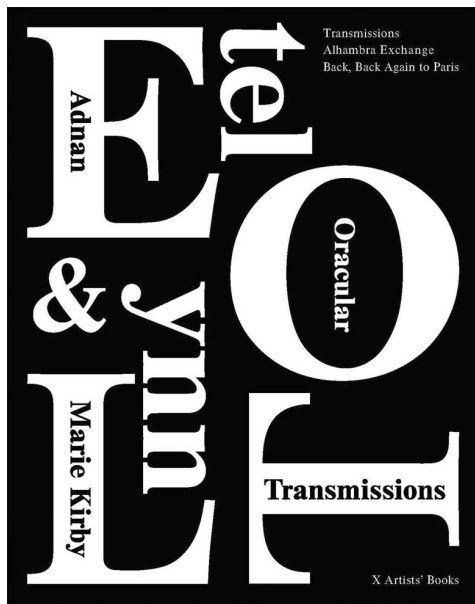


## Etel Adnan and Lynn Marie Kirby

Oracular Transmissions

Los Angeles: X Artists' Books, 2020

REVIEWED BY MARY BURGER



Right now  
it's working  
part of it is  
transmission

So begins *Transmissions*, a collaborative project by the artists Etel Adnan and Lynn Marie Kirby, the first of three such projects brought together in the book *Oracular Transmissions*. Adnan and Kirby have known each other since the early 1990s and have been collaborating for nearly that long. Their

collaborations reflect the multiple modes of their individual practices—Adnan is a poet, novelist, essayist, and painter; Kirby works with film, video, installation, and performance. In their collaborations the artists call on these practices and on conversations, email correspondences, and more, to find the interfaces between their various modes and explore phenomena like language, ritual, the infinite, and truth.

The projects in *Oracular Transmissions* are presented in reverse order of their creation: *Transmissions* (2017) is followed by *Alhambra Exchange* (2016) and *Back, Back Again to Paris* (2013). The book also includes an introductory essay by Jordan Stein, curator at KADIST San Francisco, and a poem sequence by poet and translator Denise Newman. Book designer and typographer Brian Roettinger is effectively another collaborator, through his dynamic adaptation of Adnan and Kirby's multifarious works for book form.

Adnan and Kirby created *Transmissions* for an exhibition at the KADIST space, curated by Stein. Titled *If Not Apollo, the Breeze*, the show concerned interpretations of the Oracle at Delphi, the ancient Greek priestess and prophetess. Stein describes the show as engaging with the "irrational, ambiguous, portentous, and hallucinatory." Adnan and Kirby began their piece with a conversation and shared drawing session. Kirby then made a video using transcriptions and audio recordings of the conversation and animations of the ink drawings. For the KADIST exhibition, she projected the video and spoke in a live narration using excerpts from the conversation.

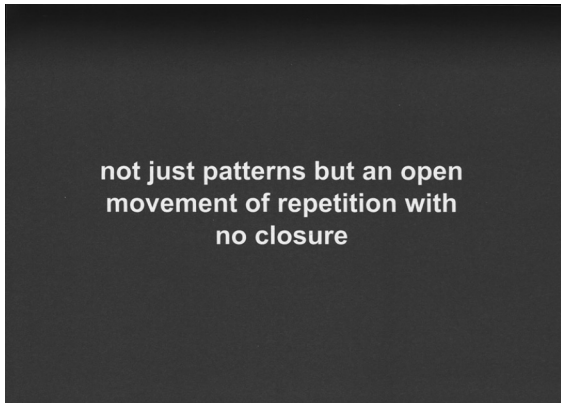
To capture the polyvocal qualities of *Transmissions* for the book, Roettinger set the text in half-inch-high type, with margins that wander back and forth on each page, and italic and bold fonts that call out words that were projected or spoken aloud in the performance. The resulting text flows over the pages in a stream that traces the leaps and turns of thought.

interesting  
because  
*it's not*  
*controlled*  
it comes  
from  
**a desire to**  
**remain free not**  
**to control your**  
**thinking**  
**not to fit your**  
**thinking into**

The piece begins and ends with several of Adnan and Kirby's ink drawings, works that amplify the mystery and portent of the text.

*Alhambra Exchange*, the second project in the book, grew from Kirby's encounter with the Alhambra Theater, a movie palace in San Francisco from the 1920s. Now repurposed as a fitness center, the theater was inspired by the actual Alhambra, a Moorish palace in Spain that dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 2016, Kirby and collaborator Christoph Steger staged a day-long participatory event, *The Alhambra Project*, in the theater and the surrounding neighborhood. The event included performances, a walking tour, and other works that explored cultural legacies associated with the theater. Adnan and Kirby's *Alhambra Exchange* was one piece in the day's events.

*Alhambra Exchange* began with a correspondence. Kirby made an artistic pilgrimage to the Alhambra in Grenada, and she and Adnan exchanged emails about the trip. From their correspondence, Kirby made a text-only video, using white sans-serif type on a deep blue background. Stills from the video are reproduced in the book as full-page spreads. The pages make a slow-motion flip book, in a cadence that evokes Kirby's descriptions of moving through the palace rooms. The text touches on the material



*Still from Alhambra Exchange, by Etel Adnan and Lynn Marie Kirby, 6 minutes 40 seconds, 2016.*

details of the palace, the fountains and tile patterns and calligraphy there, and on immaterial concepts of language, infinity, and god. Here, as with *Transmissions*, the artists move continually between the particular and the undefined.

To make *Back, Back Again to Paris*, the third project in the book, the artists' collaboration began with a distancing gesture, a deliberate mishearing. Kirby took the text of Adnan's 1993 novel *PARIS, WHEN IT'S NAKED*, and dictated every sentence with the word "Paris" to a speech recognition application, to create a dizzying mistranslation. Adnan then inserted further responses into the transcribed text. Kirby made a video that included

disappear. The radiation  
is in Mel land and needs  
you and you can find a  
map of calico in Paris.  
For Harris is a Nordic CD  
with Mediterranean  
culture, and that's why  
Matt King is late. Why,  
why Damascus hunting

animations of some of  
Adnan's paintings and text  
of the mistranslations of the  
word Paris—parents, Harris,  
heiress.

In *Oracular Transmissions*,  
the full text from *Back, Back  
Again to Paris* is presented, in  
the same oversize font used  
for *Transmissions*. The text is  
fully justified, with Adnan's  
emendations set off by capital  
letters, so that each page seems  
dense with large type. Like  
a message from the oracle,  
the mistranslated text offers  
moments of lucidity amid a  
sea of mystification.

Paris, why the  
Mediterranean under this  
familiar light? I USED  
TO KNOW WHY,  
BEFORE THE WAR  
STARTED RECENTLY  
IN DAMASCUS,  
BUT WARS AFFECT  
MEMORY Yes, Harris

For his introductory essay to the book, Jordan Stein has borrowed a line from *Back, Back Again to Paris* as his title: “right here in Paris, ideal PDF readers.” The essay places the book and the collaborative projects in the context of the artists’ respective careers, and in the context of the “portentous, and hallucinatory” oracular itself. Stein notes that the artists produced broadsheets for both *Transmissions* and *Back, Back Again to Paris*, and that broadsheets are an important part of their shared practice. In such a visually rich compendium of the artists’ work, I would have liked to see a sample from one of their broadsheets, to know more about how they’ve used that form.

Denise Newman’s poems move like precise gestures amid the loose-limbed collaborations. Her four poems serve as prelude and interludes, not commenting directly on the projects in the book, but on the deeper form of the book and on the artists’ collaborative relationship, their movements through language and time:

Without realizing it, Lynn and Etel were already creating the work for the book as they sat discussing it, painting one afternoon in Paris. Nothing is precious when there’s no inside or outside.

Taken as a volume, *Oracular Transmissions* exceeds the bounds of a book in bringing Adnan and Kirby’s multi-faceted practices alive. As art critic Susanna Thompson has written of this publication, “...this is not a record of works completed, but that rare thing: an artists’ book that becomes another multi-dimensional work of art.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Susannah Thompson: ‘Oracular Transmissions by Erel Adnan and Lynn Marie Kirby’, Burlington Contemporary (14th August 2020), <http://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/oracular-transmissions-by-etel-adnan-and-lynn-marie-kirby>