



Desert Dictionary—a situation for a speaker, a loudspeaker, and a desert—Boris Baltschun

The four-part project Desert Dictionary by Boris Baltschun is a collection of entries into an imaginary dictionary. These word contributions link language with landscape and appear as sonic responses to and in the landscape. Navigating between the poetic and the political, the personal and the practical, the contributing voices propose stories and histories of the (idea of) desert.

Desert Dictionary, a project by Berlin-based artist Boris Baltschun in partnership with Modern Art Projects South Africa (MAPSA), is part of MAPSA's Sound-based Art Projects—a continuation of its annual Land Art initiative. These endeavours challenge artists to create site-specific works responding to Richmond and the Karoo, emphasising sound culture and the social dimensions of listening.

The project stemmed from two key questions: What if radio's principle were reversed, requiring listeners to travel to a remote spot for access instead of enjoying broadcasts anywhere? And, if so, what kind of program would be presented, and how would it be experienced?

At the heart of Desert Dictionary is this experimental approach to radio. Listeners journey to an isolated Karoo site for a unique broadcast, further accompanied by a solar-powered book created in collaboration with the Richmond Bookbinding Project and technical specialist Sukandar Kartadinata (Berlin). Integrating oral history, local storytelling, and environmental sound, the project comprises twenty-nine dictionary entries composed by South African artists, musicians, and community members in response to the question: "Which word would you suggest for a desert dictionary, and how does it relate to the desert?"

Desert Dictionary - book edition

Edition of 3 + 2AP

Dimensions: 27,5cm x 21cm x 6,5cm

Weight: 1.8kg

Published by Modern Art Projects South Africa, Richmond - NC

Conceived by Boris Baltschun, Berlin

Book binding by Victoria Wigzell & Mongezi Ncombo / Pulp Paperworks, Johannesburg

Solar and audio technology by Sukandar Kartadinata / Glui, Berlin



The Desert Dictionary project was developed by the artist, electronic musician and composer Boris Baltschun between 2019 - 2023. It appears in five iterations - a situation installed at Modern Art Projects South Africa, Richmond - NC, a radio play commissioned by Deutschlandfunk Kultur, Berlin, a record released by arbitrary, Copenhagen, a multi-channel live-performance and a book edition.

The central part of the Desert Dictionary project is a collection of twenty-nine entries into an imaginary dictionary - contributed by twenty-nine different people based in South Africa. The recordings of these contributions took place in various locations across South Africa in the summer of 2020 - 2021.

The same question was asked to every contributor - which word would you suggest for a desert dictionary and how does the chosen word connect to the desert?

Contributors - name, recording date, location:

Miné Kleynhans, 05.12.2020, Blue Rain Guest House, Bloemfontein
Nkosinathi Gumede, 06.12.2020, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein
Joleen Richards, 09.12.2020, Vetmuis Plaaskombuis, Richmond - NC
Ivan Messelaar, 11.12.2020, Modern Art Projects, Richmond - NC
Mongezi Ncombo, 09.12.2020, Modern Art Projects, Richmond - NC
Seretse Moletsane, 15.12.2020, William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley
MC Roodt, 15.12.2020, William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley
Morné Ramsay, 15.12.2020, William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley
Niel Nortje, 16.12.2020, Jolly Cool Bar Melville, Johannesburg
Venus Chappie, 20.12.2020, private residence, Johannesburg
Willem Boshoff, 24.12.2020, private residence, Johannesburg
Hélène Smuts, 24.12.2020, private residence, Johannesburg
Tubatsi Mpochemoloi, 05.01.2020, Nirox Arts, Cradle of Humankind
Richard John Forbes, 05.01.2021, Nirox Arts, Cradle of Humankind
Benji Liebmann, 08.01.2021, Nirox Arts, Cradle of Humankind
Lizette Chirrimie, 15.01.2021, private residence, Cape Town
Karlien Van Rooyen, 16.01.2021, private residence, Cape Town
James Webb, 09.01.21, private residence, Cape Town
Liza Grobler, 12.01.2021, Liza Grobler studio, Cape Town
Norman O'Flynn, 13.01.2021, Norman O'Flynn studio, Cape Town
Linda Diederiks, 15.01.2021, private residence, Grassy Park
Gerhard Marx, 22.01.2021, private residence, Cape Town
Maja Marx, 22.01.2021, private residence, Cape Town
Luja Marx, 22.01.2021, private residence, Cape Town
Eldi van Loggerenburg, 29.01.2021, private residence, Johannesburg
Victoria Wigzell, 01.02.2021, Pulp Paperworks, Johannesburg
Phala Ookeditse Phala, 04.02.2021, Center for the Less Good Idea, Johannesburg
João Renato Orecchia Zúñiga, 25.02.2021, Transwerke, Johannesburg
Lindiwe Matshikiza, 25.02.2021, Transwerke, Johannesburg

Technical:

The book's clamshell box is covered with Wicotex Brillianta BRI4219 (Azurblau).

The electronic components on the inside are based around a Teensy 3.2 board, a Teensy Audio Adapter board, Nobsound 100W TPA3116D2 Amplifier board, an array of supercapacitors, a Visaton FRWS 5 R loudspeaker, an Offgridtec solar panel (5 W, 12 V), 5v and 12v voltage regulators, and custom-made code running on the Teensy board.

The interior consists of two main parts:

- a solar panel fitted into the lid
- an insert fitted into the base consisting of two plexiglas sheets held together with spacers. The top sheet features cut-outs for a volume dial, a push button and a circle of holes above the loudspeaker mounted underneath. The bottom sheet provides mounting space for the audio electronics and the loudspeaker.

Operation:

The book runs on solar power. In other words the voices get activated by the sun.

The electronics are designed in such a way that once the solar panel is exposed to the sun it will start to charge immediately. When the system detects a defined amount of power stored in the supercapacitor it will automatically start to run the audio. The supercapacitor is quick to charge (about 30-90 seconds, depending on the intensity of the sun), but has limited energy storage. So when the book is closed or taken out of direct sunlight it will stop running within about a minute.

The audio playback is controlled by a semi-random algorithm implemented on the Teensy board. It randomizes the 29 audio files (the individual contributions) in such a way that each audio file will occur only once in every cycle. The algorithm also makes sure that the audio files in the first half of each cycle haven't been played back in the previous cycle's second half - so as to avoid repeats in too close proximity. The system will never produce the same cycle twice, but has the above limitations in terms of true randomness.

The push button on the lower left let's the user skip to the next file in line (it will not circumvent the algorithm altogether).

The dial on the lower right allows for volume control of the audio playback volume within a certain range (note that it doesn't turn off the audio entirely).

