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## GAC Podcast - Transcript of Jenny West Interview

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### **One Thousand Four Hundred and Forty to Zero – by Jenny West**

*One Thousand Four Hundred and Forty to Zero*, an installation by Jenny West was commissioned by the Government Art Collection (GAC) in 2005 on behalf of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for the public atrium of the purpose-built British Embassy at Sana'a in the Yemen.

In April 2007, Jenny came to the GAC to talk about her work with Chantal Condron, the GAC's Curator of Information and Research, for a web cast interview (available to download at [www.gac.culture.gov.uk/projects/sanaa.asp](http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk/projects/sanaa.asp)). The following discussion is a more extended version of this interview, based on earlier email correspondence with Jenny.

#### **Q&A:**

**Chantal Condron (CC): Can you tell me what your starting point was once you received the GAC commission?**

**Jenny West (JW):** Almost immediately after receiving it I had an opportunity to visit the Alhambra in Granada. I was fascinated by the relationship of light and form that is apparent in all parts of this beautiful palace and garden and I became interested in developing a piece of work, which combined these two elements. Shortly after this I visited New York: the dominance of repeated grid forms in the architecture and layout of the city, along with a heightened awareness of perspective and viewpoint made a strong impression upon me. During my stay I visited a kitchenware shop on East 52<sup>nd</sup> street and bought several large sieves, strainers and cake moulds with a view to working with or referring to them in the work. I was also looking at the work of Candida Hofer, her photographs of spaces are animated by light, form and pattern and seemed particularly relevant to my ideas for the suspended work in Sana'a.

During the early stage of the project I discussed my ideas with the architects of the building, Design Engine Architects and Penny Johnson and Adrian George from the GAC. I wanted the work to be a sensitive and subtle response to the space and the light within the building. This was quite difficult to envisage as my only knowledge of the space at this point came from drawn plans and a small model of the atrium space that I had made.

**CC: You finished installing the work in February this year, a process that took several days. Were there particular or unexpected challenges of working in that space? Any logistical challenges of working under specific geographical or environmental conditions?**

JW: I was very careful to plan and test all aspects of the work in my studio; the separate elements of the work were manufactured and then constructed and assembled here in the UK before being shipped to the Yemen along with all the tools I would need. 1440 individual 'plumb bobs' suspended in 36 stepped rows of 40 make up the work. It was a time-consuming and delicate operation to suspend such a large quantity of individual elements in the high space, this was the main challenge. The work took nine long days to install, two more than I had initially anticipated.

**CC: You once said that you like to work with a space and 'see what happens'. I like this idea of making a work with an element of unpremeditated chance and the contradiction between this random approach with what results in a perfectly formed and precise work. How did you work alongside Design Engine Architects?**

JW: I worked closely with the architects throughout the project, this was very important both in terms of planning and realising the work. We discussed the technical issues linked to the production and installation of the work from the construction of the ceiling plates, which were shipped out to Sana'a, so as to be inserted into the ceiling of the embassy, to issues such as the airflow through the building. We also discussed the most suitable and durable materials to work with. We were in contact regularly by phone and email, and I received photographs of the building at different stages throughout its development, which was fascinating and helpful.

**CC: You began researching and planning ideas for the installation in 2005. Can you tell me about your particular inspirations and how they influenced your design?**

JW: When I visited the Alhambra in Granada it was a beautiful sunlit day in late summer, I experienced the interplay between light and architecture which is an exquisite aspect of the palace and gardens. Everywhere there was a delicately patterned lace-like surface and structure, lightness and weightlessness was present in all things. I wanted to reflect this quality in the work I made and decided to use a repeated motif, (the white plumb bob) within a clear geometric form to echo the aesthetic sensibility of Islamic architecture.

I was also very interested in Candida Hofer's choice "...to let white define many of her compositions, from the most subtle contrasts illuminating architectural detail, to the motifs highlighted by emphasising repetitive forms, such as row upon row of spotless library reading tables. Looking closely at her photographic images as a whole the overwhelming effect is that of being tonally pale,

suffused with light.”<sup>1</sup> I wanted the installation to embody this quality and so white became a factor in my choice of material for the plumb bobs.

In January 2006 I began work on a series of suspended models for the installation. Initially I hung individual small-scale plumb bobs, from a grid system marked out on the studio ceiling in different configurations. I explored ways in which these small-scale elements could be arranged systematically, and suspended in descending, equally spaced rows, to form a stepped screen. At this point the plumb bobs acted as preparatory replacements for objects such as colanders and strainers, (I envisaged that these would be pierced by the light to create patterns upon the interior space). As the work progressed I became more and more interested in the idea of maintaining a very small single unit and multiplying it within the work to create a complex but highly structured form, which made reference to Islamic carpets and architecture.

**CC: The repetition of forms, in this case the plumb bob, is often central to your work, with startling effects. Can you tell me more about this?**

JW: Multiplication can create startling effects, and produce a sense of wonder. I am fascinated by repeat through the duplication of something man-made, both when it is connected to an obsessive act and when it serves a function. Multiplication allows for interplay between parts and the development of a complex whole. I was interested to read the following passage in relation to this subject matter: “A striking feature in Islamic architecture is the fragmentation of the décor, whose determining principle is the multiplication of variations of small and very small elements. The multitude of decorative treatments of surfaces in Islamic architecture is without parallel in the architecture of the non-Muslim world. Its effect is extraordinary and its function quite unmistakable. It goes hand in hand with the non-directional plan, the tendency to an infinite repetition of individual units and the continuous merging of spaces without any specific direction or any specific centre or focus.”<sup>2</sup>

**CC: Several of your previous works have incorporated domestic objects e.g. funnels, sieves and kitchen utensils. I’m interested in your re-appropriation of these everyday, often unremarkable objects into things of beauty in their own right. Often we’re only familiar with these things as individual objects, but when you bring multiple numbers together, they seem to take on a more striking identity. Can you tell me more about your interest in using them within the wider context of public display?**

JW: Working with kitchen implements continues my association with functional and ready-made objects. I respond to kitchen utensils as beautiful sculptural

objects, yet also as familiar objects that play a part in my everyday life. Their physical use in the domestic environment as devices, which purify, sieve, blend, direct the flow, strain etc, have analogies to psychological and emotional states of mind, and I am interested in this relationship and how it can be communicated in a public context.

**CC: You've said that the process and physical action of drawing is central to your work. I like your comment: '*I've never been interested in drawing anything in front of me – an object. I invent*'. Can you tell me about your working practice and your interest in transforming 2D drawings into 3D spaces?**

JW: I construct a drawing in the same way that an object might be built, slowly, in layers. The process of drawing, its duration allows for concentration and reflection and these states of mind are central to the resulting work. The system of perspective allows me to work with precision, to extract information from existing objects through measurement, this method of drawing is related to the development of three dimensional form, it is inventive though rigid, allowing for an element of visual certainty.

Initially I made drawings to explore, plan and invent sculptural forms in order to prepare for their construction in three dimensions. Recently I have developed drawings, which exploit the mathematical perspective and geometry of domestic objects, to produce delicate spatial structures. By working directly onto the walls of buildings, unfolding and extending images out into the space with thread and wire, the work has physically interacted with the fabric of the architecture and leads the viewer on a journey through real space.

**CC: I'd like to ask you what it was like to create a work for a high-security diplomatic building. How did the process differ from other public art commissions you have produced in the past?**

JW: I negotiated, discussed and worked with a larger and wider number of people than I might normally work with. From the curators at GAC: Design Engine Architects; the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which acted as the project sponsor; the manufacturers and suppliers of the sculptural component; to the staff at the Embassy.

The visual content of the work and the selection of materials and their colouration were discussed at length during the early planning stages. Some minor adjustments were made in light of the politically sensitive context.

**CC: What sort of response did you encounter from Embassy staff or passers-by when installing at Sana'a or have you received since returning to the UK?**

JW: The response to my work as it was being installed was positive, I think it was important for both me and the Embassy staff to discuss the work and the process of making and installing it, most of our conversations took place from a great height (as I was at the top of a scaffold). I think the staff genuinely enjoyed the work and thought it was a beautiful and appropriate addition to the space. I did encounter some concern about the practical nature of the work particularly in regard to keeping it clean. Design Engine Architects are very enthusiastic about the work, especially having received photographs of the completed work.

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> *Candida Hofer, Architecture of Absence*, from an essay by Constance W. Glenn. Aperture Foundation 2005

<sup>2</sup> *Architecture of the Islamic World, Its History and Social Meaning*, edited by G. Michell. Thames and Hudson