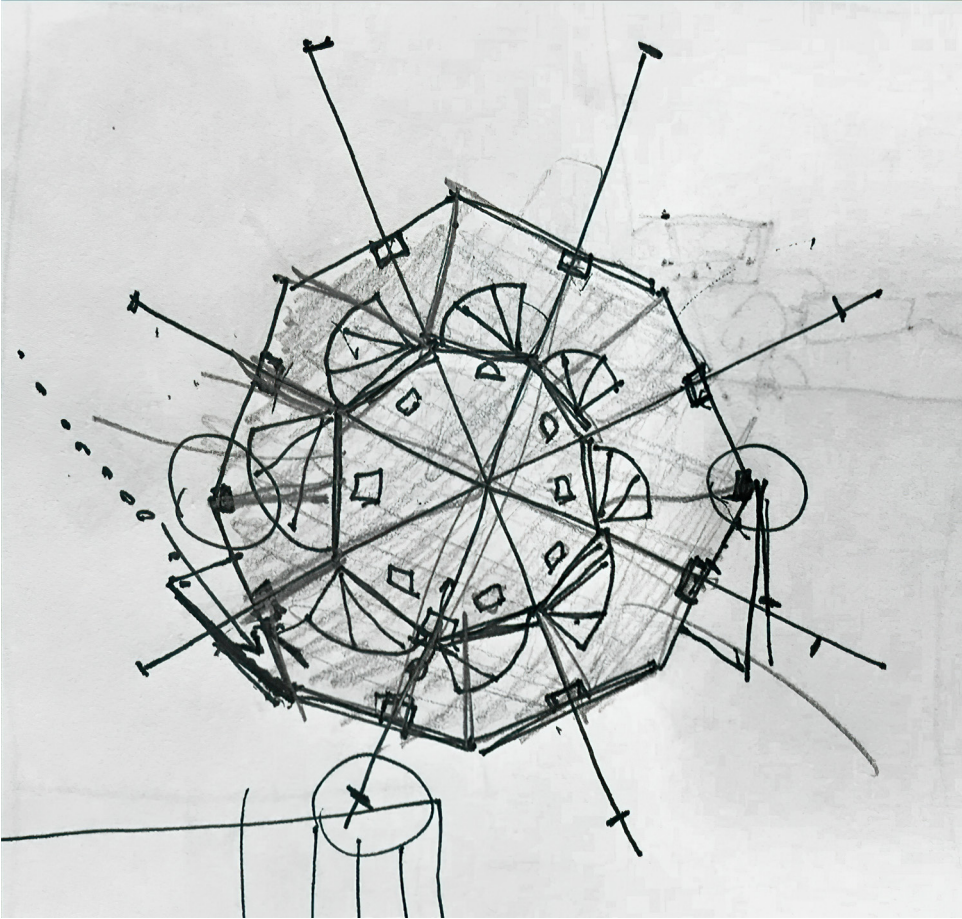
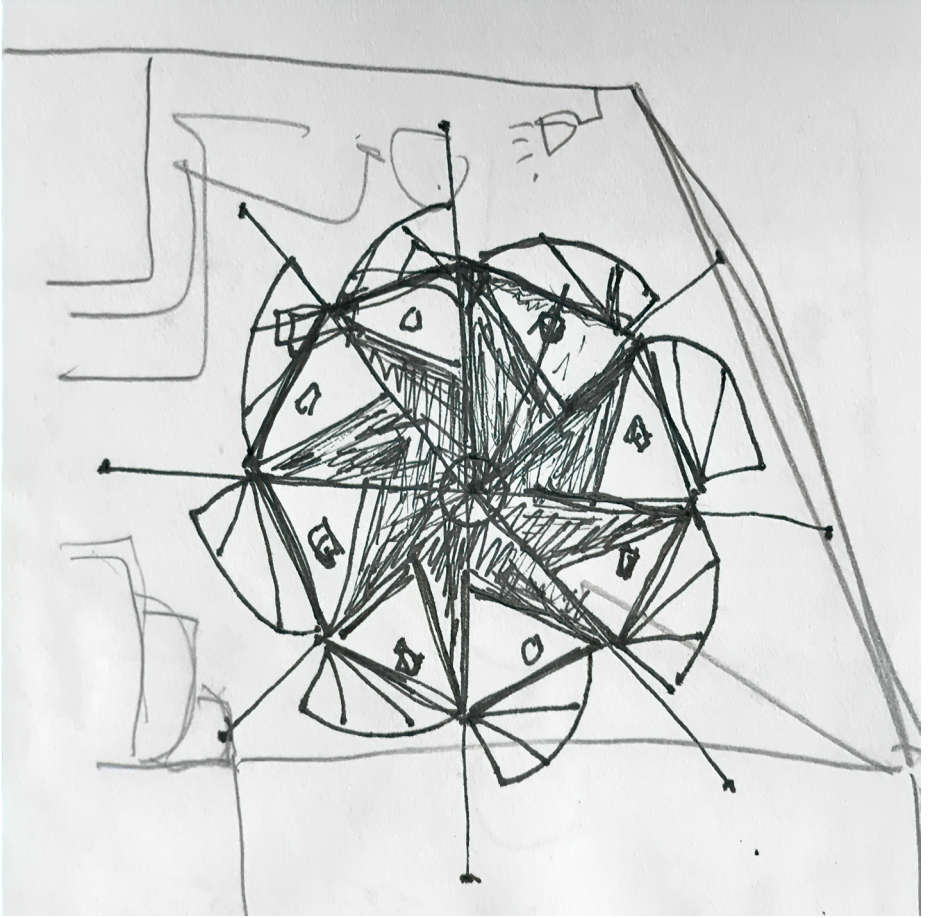


Suad Garayeva-Maleki: It is interesting to revisit the whole thing at the end of the exhibition. Yesterday, while making an Instagram post and looking at your videos, I was thinking that there are so many layers that this project brought out and they only became fully apparent at the end of the show. So it would be nice to talk about all of that. As well, of course, we have to cover how you approached it from the beginning and all of the processes that went into it.

Let's just start from the first time you heard the proposal to do a show in Baku. In the beginning it must have sounded very outlandish. You started with a country - of which you knew nothing about - and then in the end you managed to find all these connections. What did this mean in terms of your own explorations of history and connectedness in the world?

Pedro Gomez-Egaña: That's a nice question. Actually, I should say that the way the project has developed in Baku has been quite different to other projects. It usually takes me longer to find a thread to investigate when I have been invited to do a project in a new location, and where the goal is to have a site-specific approach. When I started looking into Azerbaijan however, the relationship to Thor Heyerdahl became a point of interest very quickly. But then, it took a very long time to find an angle with which to work Heyerdahl into the project. I wondered for a long time whether the project should be about Heyerdahl's theories, about the man himself and his attitude to exploring various countries, or how Azerbaijan and Norway might be related and so on. This struggle was very interesting because it forced me to pursue all sorts of lines of research. **It meant going to Gobustan and looking at the archeological aspects; it meant looking into folk music; looking into Heyerdahl's personal life, and also thinking about the politics and the poetics that might be involved in using Norse Mythology as grounds for scientific speculation.**





Sleypnir instalyasiyasına eskizlər, kağız, qələm. Rəssamın icazəsi ilə.
Sketches for *Sleypnir* installation, paper, pen. Courtesy of the artist.

SGM: And this is why I think - not to jump to the results and conclusions - that this research turned out to be multilayered for all of us. Even just looking at the musical element of that connection - music being the conduit that connects everything together. We went from thinking of bringing a Norwegian choir to you writing something different, composing your own complete soundtrack. What is interesting is that, as you explored all of these themes, they filtered and you didn't take just one direction. So let's talk about this musical side, because it is something we underestimated in the beginning but something that later became a very important carrier of elements in this work. Not just the voice of the stories you are telling, but this meditative music that uses the folklore elements - how did that come about? The score - how did you think that up? And how much space does music take in your practice usually?

PGE: There are two sides to this answer, and both have to do with how music ties everything together in this project. On the one hand, there is the notion of *rammeslått*. This is a Norwegian musical gesture, based on repetitive sequences that are thought to have mystical qualities, and that have the ability of inducing trance-like states and opening certain portals of consciousness. After Heyerdahl, people began to draw parallels between *rammeslått* and early Azerbaijani folk music, especially musicians such as Hallvard Bjørgum. **I was very interested in *rammeslått* because there is a lot in the project that refers to ways of moving through the world in mental projections, and *rammeslått* presents itself as a way of travelling, by virtue of a different state of consciousness, through the power of music alone.** So I thought - OK, I need to work with this, and so I spoke to composers and musicologists, listening to different manifestations of this music on both sides.

But then - and to go on to the second part of my answer - there is a very interesting dynamic that happened at one point of the project and it came up when I introduced Borges to the process. I began to find that **the more these authors spoke of exploring the world, the more it inevitably leads to the personal and intimate.** Many astronauts actually talk about this, how when you are out in space and are able to grasp, with a single gaze, the whole world, it immediately mirrors back into the private and existential. Both Borges and Heyerdahl, in their exploration of a collapsed geography, talk about this kind of effect. For me, then, this meant that I would inevitably have to involve myself personally in the project as well. This was very unusual because I never use directly autobiographical content in my work, but it really made sense in this case: I couldn't just present these narratives of broad explorations and their private consequences without me including myself in it. My involvement took a couple of forms, one of which was to include Colombian instruments in order to bring my geographical history to the piece. These instruments are the Colombian harp and the *tiple*, both of which I play for the soundtrack, together with the violin, an instrument I have played for many years. So the world that *Sleipnir* presents is not just about Norway and Azerbaijan, but also Colombia, and so I was suddenly even more personally invested in the narratives of the work.

Növbəti səhifədə şəkil: İştirakçı-performansçılar ilə instalyasiyanın görüntüsü. *Sleipnir*, 2018. İnstalyasiya, ağac, metal, diyircəkli yastıqlar, elektromaqnitlər, səs. 216.5 x 616 x 616 sm. YARAT tərəfindən sifariş olunub.

Rəssamın icazəsi ilə dərc olunur.

Picture on the next page: View to the installation with performers. *Sleipnir*, 2018. Installation, wood, metal, steel bearings, electromagnets, sound. 216.5 x 616 x 616 cm.

Commissioned by YARAT. Courtesy of the artist.





SGM: It was also a very surprising leap for me, but more as an objective observer that was very closely involved in the process. About how this thought developed - I also found that it was very personal in the end and that was very beautiful. There are two important things to talk about, but to break it down...

Borges- being in the dark room of the installation evokes that dark cellar where he goes in order to experience 'Aleph': the light opens up and the whole magical situation of the light coming in and the music accelerating and the tempo picking up and the expectation that something great is going to happen. Of course, in *Sleipnir* it never quite gets resolved and that's why you always feel like you are in the water as it goes up - up and down and up and down - and that's why it gets you into a trance and this is what I was thinking when I was reading *The Aleph*. In the beginning of the story there's a lot of resistance, a lot of realistic resistance, from the protagonist towards this man who claims he has seen something. This madness he dismisses, although from the very beginning we see that there are certain obsessive predilections in the author with with Beatrice. There are things there that already suggest that he himself is also mad and then when he finally enters the darkness, he accepts it and a beautiful world opens up to him. It's funny what you said about it, because that is exactly my question. For me, it was a moment when he is ready to accept the beast in his head and he is ready to take that leap of faith, not so much into this void, but into the void within himself.

PGE: It's so incredible. We think we are going to reach these moments of existential self-realisation within contexts that we can predict and understand - you know, like when you go to the psychoanalyst, or to church, or when you are in a special location or on a special day like your birthday or wedding. But **these moments actually happen in the most absurd and unexpected - even unwelcome - places.**

SGM: Exactly. It's something that you reject because it's scary. Even with this work you see the pavilion from the outside and it looks lovely, all choreographed nicely - you have the performers doing everything perfectly, this beautiful structure, and then you go in and you don't know what to expect. So when you ask the viewers to leave their phones, leave everything behind, stay completely quiet and they have to go in for ten minutes, it becomes an exercise of forcing people to be alone in the dark with their own thoughts, confronted with this situation of complete uncertainty.

PGE: I find these strategies of forcing people into spaces that heighten their attention both useful and risky. I appreciate this line of reflection because it taps into questions on **what kind of field of attention particular artworks need**, which is something that I feel is not discussed enough in our field.

SGM: It was curious to see the reactions of people. They go in expecting to hear a story, a little bit like the protagonist in *The Aleph*. And then they go in and come out saying that it felt really uncanny, that it was like a meditative experience, you know they all - at least, I feel like a lot of the people that went in - actually detached from your voice, from what it was telling them and managed to go on a journey, each in their own way.

PGE: Yes, I feel that the story and the whole staging functions as a vehicle for audiences to go into their own experiences.





İnstalyasyonun içersinden görüntü.
View to the inside of installation.

SGM: So on to this personal element - you say you have not used it much before, but I think it is such an important element of this work. Instead of a voyeuristic situation, it actually hits the right chord, in a way. So I found that the most powerful part of that story - that voiceover - was when you were talking about the scorpions in the house.

PGE: Yes, and I remember you and I decided to prioritise the use of my voice in the soundtrack. I also remember the decision not to use an audio studio to record this - **I did it at home and it was important that I would be here, in my home, getting into that emotional space** from where I could say these things into the microphone in a way that would hopefully translate to people beyond the actual words.

SGM: Yes, because then it becomes music, it becomes part of the score, so it is difficult to translate. It became an aesthetic decision. And speaking of aesthetics - why red?

PGE: Oh right, the red! Well, it turns out that one of the first graphic representations of Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse, was found on a rock in Sweden and it had this particular red tint. It became a way to summon that kind of archeological layer in the piece.

SGM: Red is also such a laden colour. Symbolically, it just represents so much. It's curious - we met in Istanbul and one of my favourite novels of all time is *My Name Is Red* by Orhan Pamuk. It's basically about art as a metaphor for life with all its passions and struggles – narrated as a murder mystery set in the Middle Ages in Turkey, during the Islamic Renaissance among the miniaturists. It talks about the painstaking art of creating the miniatures, in which across generations you just have to perfect a skill and you cannot deviate from it.

All of this part of the world - because you did a project in Istanbul, and now doing one in Baku - seems like you are going further and further East. And, of course, then you had another show in Berlin about a Chinese observatory. Being from the Western Hemisphere yourself, and now living in a very Western country, I wonder, in a way, that you seem to be brought into this either through context or through actual exhibitions. How does it all reconcile - East and West? Is it a theme or is it more coincidental? Can we talk about that?

PGE: What a wonderful question. I don't know if I have a lot of conscious thoughts about this but I can remember very concretely hoping this would be a trend now in my work. Of course, there is a degree of agency in what we do as artists, but also we can't control where we get invited to develop projects so it is also a bit up to chance. I remember hoping I get something in Kazakhstan or around the Caspian, or something in Iran. I find the region so fascinating and not just because it is so different. Or maybe I have been surprised at how much I resonate with what I have found here. I cannot put my finger exactly on it but I really feel it. I also had a similar experience in Southern India where I was surprised to learn that they feel very close to Colombia. **They love Gabriel Garcia Marquez, to the point of claiming that he really isn't Colombian but from Kerala.** They also have stories about Colombian football players, it's crazy.

SGM: Absolutely, it is almost as if the Global South - I don't want to get too political - but it seems like we all share, unknowingly, some of these temperaments and lifestyles and closeness and the understanding, despite a very different history and geography. And of course we are even more connected with India, through the Mogul culture and miniatures - historically, our visual art is very much connected to that part of the world.

PGE: Absolutely, but it also has to do with the West in the opposite direction. I am one of those people who grew up with a very Eurocentric definition of history, where the Industrial Revolution was the centre of time, and Europe the centre of the world. **So as a Colombian adult it has been both wonderful and embarrassing to realise that there is so much of our cultural origins linked to this other part of the world, Eurasia, the silk route and so on.** I have been very excited to make a personal journey of acknowledgement of this part of the global narrative, both in my work and personally.

SGM: That brings me to my next comment on movement. In more than a symbolic sense - not just as a physical or mental direction. The act of movement itself is significant. In your work, it is either the sculptures that are moving through hidden mechanisms - or just moving themselves from the perspective of the viewer - or are being actively animated by performers. Instead of just carrying out the choreography of movement, it is through movement that they animate the work. So, can you tell me a little bit about that in your practice and also how the different decisions come about - to bring in a human element or to have everything mechanical?



İştirakçi-performansçılar ile instalyasyonun görüntüsü.
View to the installation with performers.



Instalyasiyadan fraqment.
Installation detail.

PGE: An aspect of it, for sure, has to do with my interest in the relationship between culture and technology, and particularly in relation to time. I feel that technology has changed the way we understand temporality, for instance before the Industrial Revolution time was ruled by agrarian cycles, night and day, child-bearing and such and it then moved onto a mechanical time that is ruled by transport, and the organisation of labour. Some of these shifts in the notion of time affected our relation to the body as is the case in Fordism and Taylorism where exploring physical movement was all about increasing productivity at the factory. So, in that sense, **I am interested in the Marxist notion of the body being a part of a machine, and how this blurs the line between organic and mechanic.**

But there is another aspect that has to do with the knowledge that the viewer has of someone operating the artwork, and being able to gauge how the motion and visual effects in the work are produced. In *Sleipnir* you immediately see the eight performers and understand that they are doing something that you will then experience inside. **There is an interesting complication in the viewer understanding that they are part of something very technically complex but dependent on human effort as well.** Aside from any comment on labour politics, I feel that it also changes the way the audience appreciates the performative dimension since it is not just a case of pressing play. There is a person who has been dedicated and choreographed to bring the artwork to life.

SGM: There is a feeling of community here. You are assisted in animating the work by the performers and they become an essential part of it. You are putting them in plain view of the audience, even before they go into this experience. It becomes a collaborative work that would not be possible without other people. We kept on saying that without them it is nothing, but this is also where the idea of heroes comes in. Because when we think of Thor Heyerdahl and the great explorers and your own father, they are all heroic figures that we have inherited from history. I think a lot of this work had to do with your ideas on the making of heroes and what that means for the people that surround them. So that is the first part of my question. But also, what do you think changes, in our social, technological, communication age, where revolutions are being made by millions of people together online? Is this concept of hero in the traditional sense of the word relevant at the moment? In the 'Thor Heyerdahl' sense of the word?

PGE: For sure, there is a lot of hope in the emergence of an awareness, of a collectivity, as a powerful agent. But a different kind of collectivity, not the collectivity of the protest, for instance, which is very contested. It's not just about being in a group of people making noise, but perhaps being part of a collective in the sense of networks where one actor in their living room can hack into powerful structures and generate the right kind of unrest or commentary. Again, the idea of geography here is collapsed, it is not about where one is, but more about a technical and ideological alignment: a principle or a political conviction in this sense becomes the relevant way to define a location, a place.

There is something additional to mention here with the parallels between my father and Thor Heyerdahl: they both managed to be who they are in great part because of the silent effort of many other people close to them, particularly family members, most of whom are not properly recognised. Their type of character and persona depends on the myth of the solo, heroic, male figure. The whole constellation that is necessary for the heroic moment to exist disappears as soon as the powerful individual sets in. This is why

I wanted *Sleipnir* to include the work of a collective in a very visible way.

SGM: It is interesting that most of our performers were - of course, picked on a volunteer basis - female. And it is also interesting that this 'ship' - we can talk about what it represents - is put in motion by women mostly and all the stories that are represented in it also have to do with your mother being given a house full of scorpions. Moreover, according to your conversation with his son, Thor Heyerdahl completely neglected his wife, which became an important element that needs to be addressed.

PGE: Yes, I resonate with you on the anti-patriarchal tones. For a while - I don't know if you remember - I wanted only female performers but I was not happy about the gender aspect becoming such a central comment. But, for sure, a patriarchal force needed to be deconstructed in order to make this piece work.



SGM: There is also an important and less obvious mechanical movement in the work. I mean, of course, the metallic magnetic balls, which surround the pavilion and also spread across the gallery walls, beating out a rhythm, which seems random at first, but upon longer immersion creates an ambience of tension and imminence. Can you tell me about them and their significance for the work?

PQE: Yes, to me the movement, sound and presence of these steel balls carry a lot of symbolic charge. On the one hand they are a musical-percussive element, beating rhythms and patterns compulsively, this is in reference to the musical insistence found in *rammeslått*. On the other hand, **these are reflective spherical objects that compress and reflect the entire space** which is a common way of illustrating Borges's *Aleph*. I also see these balls as representing the decapitated head of god Mimir, giving sound to visions and omens. Finally I like how these balls are knocking on the architectural structures of the show, these constructions that close the space down, and negate the landscape outside: the pavilion and the exhibition room itself. **It is as if they are trying to knock the walls down and set some kind of energy free.** I think Sleipnir can be seen as a ghost that has a very strong movement drive, and that is always trying to move, to escape, and to travel.

SGM: You talked about the representations of Sleipnir, about its eight-leggedness, its roundness to allow perspectives from all sides like *The Aleph* and also of it being a vessel. So what is this thing that they are animating? This structure, this octagon - what is it then? What is it for you? Is it a horse? Is it a ship?



İnstalyasyadan fraqment.
Installation detail.



İnstalyasiyadan fraqment.
Installation detail.

PGE: I think that it is definitely a ship, but **a ship where one travels without physically going anywhere.** A ship of theories and speculations, and also the ship of my mother being in her scorpion-infested island without being able to leave. At the end of the performance she says “This house is my ocean and tonight is my ship”. Darkness, in this sense, is also a vehicle.

Speaking of scorpions, I remember when I went to Gobustan and I was talking with the archaeologist on the site who was showing me the rock drawings. We started talking about Thor Heyerdahl and his temperament and then I started thinking - *this guy reminds me of my Dad!* And then I - for some reason - started thinking about scorpions because Gobustan is in a desert, so I asked the archeologist if she knew of any depictions of arachnids in the rock drawings. It turns out that there is actually a drawing that some people interpret as a scorpion. I was like - wow - so there are also scorpions here! When I looked them up it turns out that they are the same kind of yellow scorpions that exist where my parents live. While working on the Norse myth part of the research I had an exciting moment of realisation when I found that Sleipnir was an eight-legged horse, but that **it probably was a ship and not a horse, and then someone in the online forum asked “what if Sleipnir was not a horse but an insect, a scorpion!”** Suddenly the eight-legged horse, that is a scorpion, and that is also a ship drifting in the darkness began to take shape for me.

SGM: Yes, and the ship metaphor was also very strongly felt being on the Caspian Sea - and the actual element of these oars(wo)men moving the metal slabs and the panels - it all felt like being on water.

PGE: My parents' house is actually on an island that is in **a lake that grows and shrinks, it's like a little Caspian!**

SGM: It is interesting to think about these enclosed spaces - the island in Colombia, the Caspian being a completely enclosed environment that has all this history of being connected to the world, which is no longer. Or Odin's men, travelling from this part of the world to another, because there is no way of actually getting there by sea now.

The next element I want to talk about is water. Not just of the Caspian and its shrinking and expanding, because this is the nature of water, but also water as a carrier of stories. It also becomes a conduit for these stories being transmitted, because of all the ancient practices and beliefs like 'whispering to the water'. The figure of an artist is usually associated with storytelling and of course we have here Thor Heyerdahl, who is the greatest storyteller of all - he managed to imagine this story of Azerbaijan and Nordic Vikings being connected, of the ancient people from the Gobustan caves and it is such an outlandish theory, but still it was taken for its romance, for whatever it represented, on face value. Often we are told that history is nothing but storytelling, and this storytelling also comes into your work quite a lot, with Edgar Allan Poe for example, whether it is fiction or retelling history, which you often do as well. So do you also see yourself as one of those storytellers?



PGE: I think so yes, a sort of collaged storytelling, because I draw from literature as well as historical data and quotes or sayings from different people. I bring them all together in one text, and **the degrees of care or violence with which I mix the references, is my storytelling.** It's like a patchwork - it is either very rough or smooth and the varying intensities become the compositional aspect of the work. None of the stories that I am telling in my work are just fabrications - they all have historical legs. **There are lots of ghosts in my stories - it's a kind of ghost dance.** They are all in there, intermingling in a way that they never would have otherwise.

SGM: This brings us back to our technological reality. We all live in a collage of stories from around the world - you can go from looking at kittens one minute to images of war the next - does it make us desensitised? Or is it a very contemporary state of being.

PGE: Yes, this is the nature of our everyday, that there are all these layers that come and go very quickly, and many things happening at the same time. I also work with many co-existing layers, but as opposed to media culture, I try to modulate the attention with which audiences read them. **Instead of a space of many distracting layers, I attempt a space where the layers amount to focus and contemplation.** It's like taking a whirlpool and trying to shift the same waters in the opposite direction.

SGM: It is like the centrifugal versus the centripetal force! Which one are you? The centripetal or the centrifugal? I always confuse them.

PGE: Yes! **Centripetal - the one that pulls inwards.**

SGM: It's a little like *Sleipnir* because it is circular - a ship that pulls us in every direction, although it did get him - Odin - to amazing places. So it is almost as if he is also a force going from every which direction but in the end managing to reach a goal. We are not talking about Thor Heyerdahl but Odin, the God - or first Viking. The hero of heroes, I guess, but we do not know his story. It's also that you become, with your stories, a centripetal force in this ship - you can almost see it revolving. If I imagine *Sleipnir* moving anywhere, it would be in a circle.



İştirakçi-performansçılar ile instalyasiyanın görüntüsü. *Sleipnir*, 2018. İnstalyasiya, ağac, metal, diyirceklı yastıqlar, elektromaqnıtlar, səs. 216.5 x 616 x 616 sm. YARAT tərəfindən sifariş olunub. Rəssamın icazəsi ilə dərc olunur.
View to the installation with performers. *Sleipnir*, 2018. Installation, wood, metal, steel bearings, electromagnets, sound. 216.5 x 616 x 616 cm. Commissioned by YARAT. Courtesy of the artist.

PGE: Absolutely, like a horse chasing its tail. It is really interesting and I think what activates the centripetal force - to continue with the analogy - is that **the spinning is not only about geography, but about connecting that geography with the personal.** In this sense, places, facts and stories move you out into the world, but emotional resonances shift the dislocating tendency and you end up travelling inwards. Like the *Aleph*, which is all the places in the world co-existing in one focused point in space by virtue of the main character's personal experience of pain.

SGM: That is interesting. I think you might have just answered the universal question of how to live, how to continue living when you are in a situation of all the information jumping at you. How to focus, how to filter it? Because, right now, the most obvious force that is operating is that of distraction. So what you are saying, and what you are trying to achieve through your work, is that by using this information coming from different directions we can actually be extremely inclusive. Instead of using it for distraction, we can use it to focus on the essence of things.

PGE: I think that it is not by chance that practices such as meditation are so big and so important right now. Look at people like Yuval Noah Harari, the hugely influential author of *Sapiens*. At the end of his last book, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, he claims that it is only because of his meditation practice that he could make such virtuosic associations between culture and history.

That blew my mind! It suggests that **some of the most powerful ways to understand, invent and shape the world, can be the result of extremely abstract processes** that somehow bring alignment to the mind, and that have nothing to do with the accumulation of knowledge.

SGM: Absolutely. So this kind of meditative filtering, if you will, should be a very effective way of thinking and being, as humanity, as individuals, as communities, as whatever else we are. I love that we started with meditation and we ended with meditation!

PGE: Yes, **we went out and came back in.**



Pedro Qomes-Eqanya: Sleypnir sərgisi üçün 2019-cu ildə YARAT Müasir İncəsənət Məkanı tərəfindən nəşr olunub. Bakı, Azərbaycan.

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Front cover: *Sleypnir*, 2018. Installation, wood, metal, steel bearings, electromagnets, sound. 216.5 x 616 x 616 cm. Commissioned by YARAT. Courtesy of the artist.

Back cover: View to the installation with performers. *Sleypnir*, 2018. Installation, wood, metal, steel bearings, electromagnets, sound. 216.5 x 616 x 616 cm. Commissioned by YARAT. Courtesy of the artist.

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