

Betye Saar



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Mojotech

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Betye Saar: MOJOTECH

May 16 – June 28, 1987

“A mojo is an amulet or charm used in some voodoo-based beliefs (religions). Its power is somewhat ambiguous, as it depends on both the user’s strength of belief and his or her motive. As a shaman gleans the environment for special ingredients and objects to fabricate the mojo, I glean estate sales, flea markets, and thrift shops at home and in my travels for special materials for my work.

My intuition works like radar in accumulating materials. The found objects and discards are then altered, manipulated and transformed in assemblages, collages and installations.” -- Betye Saar

Los Angeles based collage and multi-media artist Betye Saar was in the residence at MIT List Visual Arts Center for a month to create several new works, pursue research in new media, and participate in public events. In making her art, Saar draws deeply from her experiences, expectations, intuitions and convictions. Life’s pleasures and pains, facts and mysteries, are the subjects of her work.

In this project at MIT, Betye Saar combines her interest in a variety of spiritual forces with a curiosity about the possibility for magic in technology. In the mural work Mojotech, a variety of amulets, charms, and voodoo symbols are merged with printed circuit boards, electronic apparatus, and assorted technological tidbits. This is a communal work and visitors are invited to participate by bringing personal or technological offerings to be placed on the platform at the base of the work. This accumulative process was inspired by the tradition of African sculpture which incorporates a variety of both decorative and “power” elements from throughout the community.

Saar has programmed an LED sign, “electronic radio” with lines from an old blues song and a list of voodoo ingredients for casting spells, creating an eerie juxtaposition of medium and message. A side chamber, I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, dedicated to the memory of the artist’s mother, offers a more reflective experience with images, light and interactive sound. In Saar’s holographic collage Visions, three-dimensional images appear and disappear as the viewer moves before the work. A videotape about the artist will be presented each day at 12:30 and 3pm. In conjunction with this project, the artist has created a “satellite” work at the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, 300 Walnut Avenue, Boston.

Many individuals contributed to the success of this exhibition and the residency experience. The artist would like to acknowledge the contributions of several key individuals. Installation: China Altman, Johannes Horn, Michael O’Connell, Jon Roll, Rosanne Rizzo and Alison Saar; sound design and interactive sculpture: David Atherton, Bill Coderre, and Tom Sullivan; holography: David Chen, Betsy Connors; electronic sign: Dana Frils-Hansen.

Betye Saar: MOJOTECH is part of an ongoing series of residences sponsored by the New Works Program of the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities.

MIT List Visual Art Center, Cambridge, MA, 1987



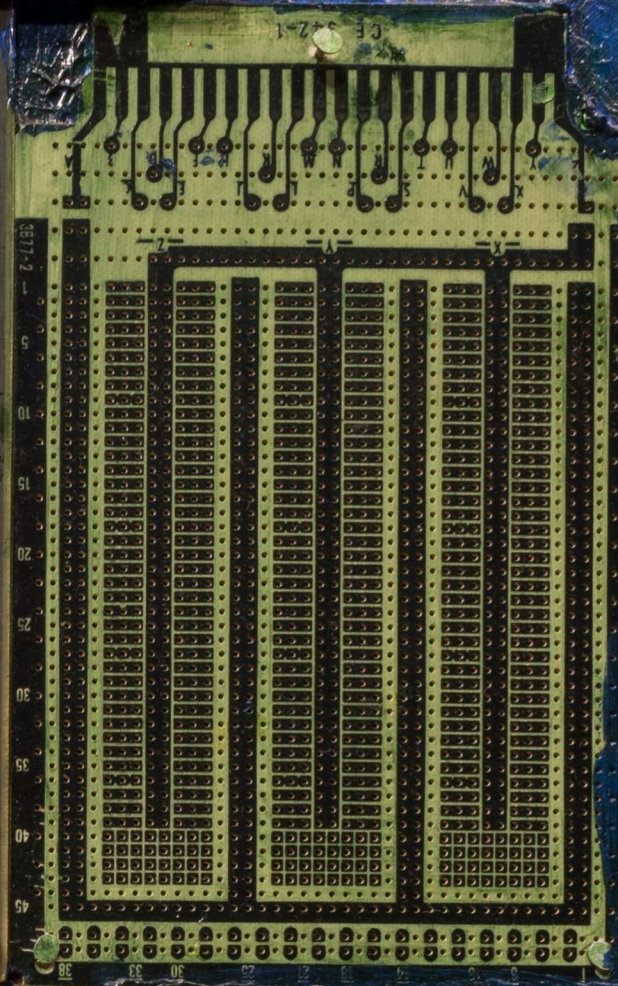
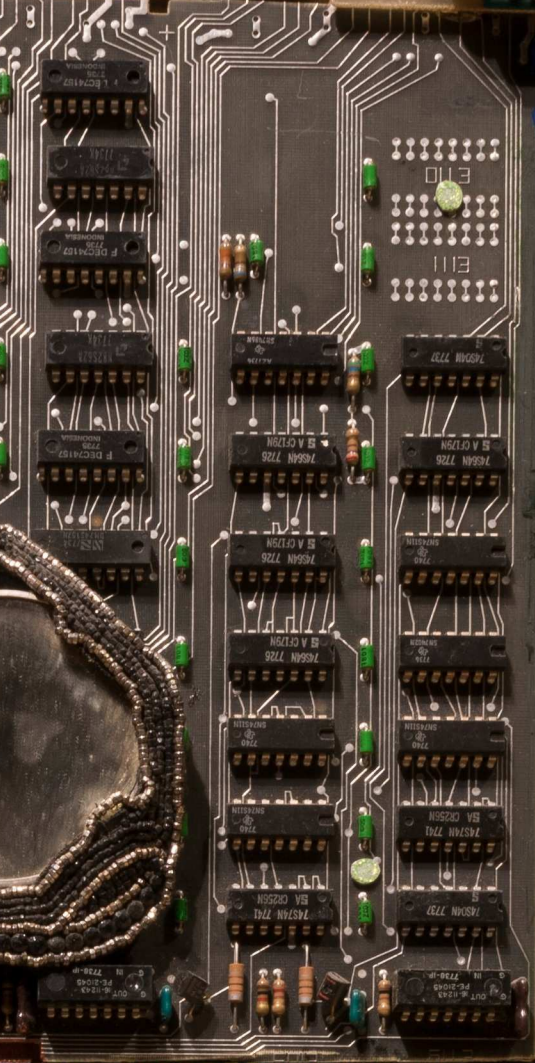
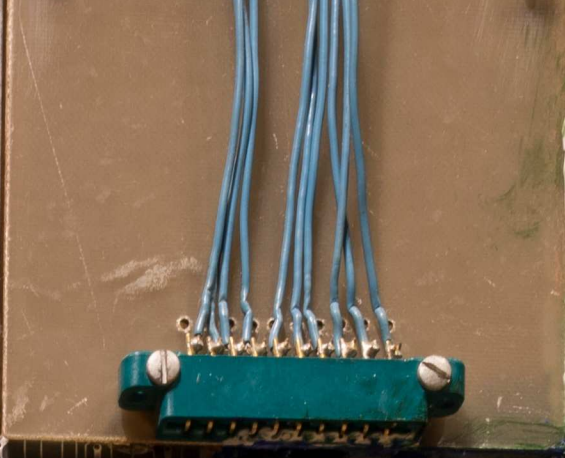
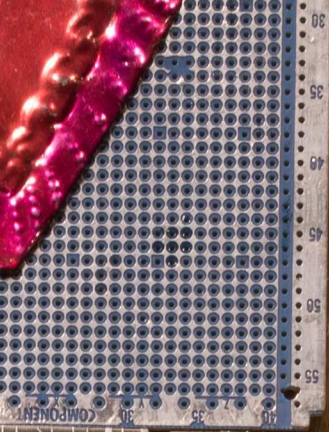
Installation view *Betye Saar: MOJOTECH*, MIT List Visual Art Center, Cambridge, MA (May 16 – June 28, 1987)

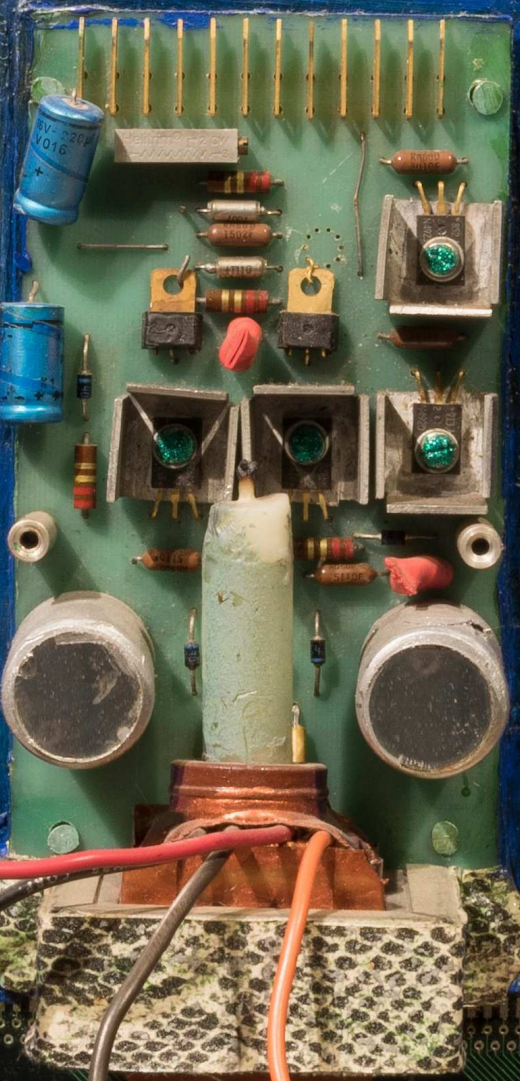












TERMOVNE C1876 REV. B
CIRCUIT SIDE MADE IN USA
LEFT SIDE



*I got my mojo workin' . . .
I'm gonna use it on you*

Old blues song

MOJOTECH

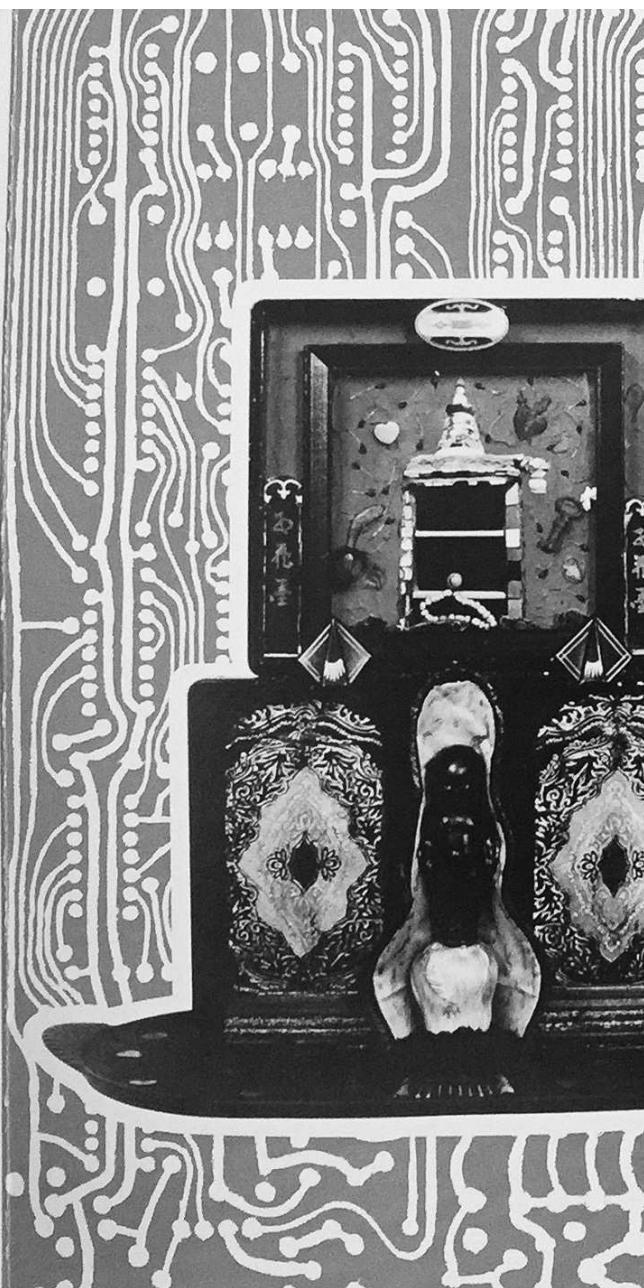
A *mojo* is an amulet or charm used in some voodoo-based beliefs (religions). Its power is somewhat ambiguous, as it depends on both the user's strength of belief and his or her motive.

As a shaman gleans the environment for special ingredients and objects to fabricate the *mojo*, I glean the flea markets, estate sales, and thrift shops around my home in Los Angeles or places I visit such as Alaska, Maine, and Texas. Marketplaces in Africa, Brazil, Crete, and Mexico have also divulged special materials for my work.

My intuition works like radar in accumulating materials. The found objects and discards are then altered, manipulated and transformed in assemblages, collages and installations.

Here at MIT my focus will be on technology as an element of *magic* and on art as *ritual*.

Betye Saar 1987





MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

Wiesner Building, 20 Ames Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139
617-253-4680

MOJOTECH: BETYE SAAR AT MIT

Since the late 1960's the work of Los Angeles artist Betye Saar has moved from charged, universal statements about the social and political concerns of blacks to more intimate, internalized exploration of her own heritage and beliefs.

One of the works she will create at MIT will investigate the possibility of magic and ritual within modern technology. At other sites, she will create intimate, temporary offerings to the passersby.

Born in 1926, Saar studied at UCLA and California State at Long Beach, and has shown widely in galleries and museums including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Studio Museum of Harlem, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Betye Saar's residency projects are made possible with the support of the New Works Program of the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities.

Residency: April 21–May 15, 1987

Exhibition: May 16–June 28, 1987

Spirit Catcher Meets Big Science

Betye Saar will speak on her past work and MIT projects.

Wednesday, April 29, 7 pm

Open Studio

The artist will be in the gallery working and available for informal conversation. The community is invited to participate and contribute materials and small objects for possible use in the work. Mondays, April 27, May 4, and May 11, 2–4 pm

Mother's Day at The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists

Betye Saar's special Mother's Day family celebration, installation, and reception. 300 Walnut Avenue, Boston. Call 442-8614 for details and directions. Sunday, May 10, 3–5 pm

Exhibition Opening and Reception for Betye Saar

MIT List Visual Arts Center

May 15, 5–7 pm

The exhibition will continue through June 28. Weekdays 10 to 4; weekends 1 to 5.

"Spirit Catcher: The Art of Betye Saar"

A 30-minute videotape about the artist will be presented daily in the gallery at 12:30 and 3:00.

May 16–June 28

A Version of Survival, 1983
Mixed-media assemblage
14½ x 15½ x 6¾ inches

April 15, 1987
Volume 31, Number 30

West coast artist creates "Mojotech" at MIT

By CHINA ALTMAN
Staff Writer

Betye Saar, an artist from Los Angeles, arrived at MIT's List Visual Arts Center to create a new work: Mojotech, referring to the blues song: "I got my mojo workin'."

Mojotech is planned as a special room-size multi-media work incorporating modern, technological materials such as computer hardware and an "electronic billboard." It will represent her personal response to the magical side of technology.

In an artist's statement about her MIT project, Ms. Saar explained, "A mojo is an amulet or charm used in some voodoo-based beliefs (religions). Its power is somewhat ambiguous, as it depends on both the user's strength of belief and his or her motive. As a shaman gleans the environment for special ingredients and objects to fabricate the mojo, I glean the flea markets, estate sales, and thrift shops for special materials for my work. My intuition works like radar in accumulating the found objects which I then alter, manipulate, and transform. Here at MIT my focus will be on technology as an element of magic and on art as ritual."

Ms. Saar who will be in residence through May 16, requested contributions from students and other members of the MIT community for Mojotech.

As in all List Center residencies, this one will begin with a series of open studios in which we are invited to meet the artist and view her work in the gallery as it progresses. During three Monday afternoons—April 27, May 4, and May 11—those interested are invited to come and to decide whether they would like to contribute small mechanical objects or technical materials (as opposed to natural or organic matter) for possible use in Mojotech or other Saar projects.

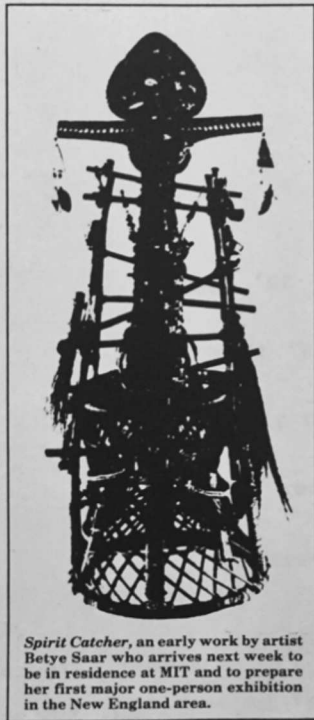
In deciding to create this "accumulative" sculpture, Ms. Saar said she has been inspired by the tradition of African tribal sculpture which often is made up of diverse decorative elements and power symbols. She will incorporate materials and objects found during her residency, as well as items contributed by visitors.

Along with two major assemblage from her earlier works Mojotech will form part of a major exhibition at the List Center opening May 16 and continuing through June 28. The earlier works are: "Spirit Catcher", 1976-77, an altarlike, basket-like floor piece decorated with objects from Nigeria, Haiti, and Mexico and "A Version of Survival", 1983, an open box with a tiny black doll, colorful Moroccan leatherwork, keys, jade pieces, and Mexican metal amulets.

Dana Frits-Hansen, assistant curator at the List Center, commented: "In making her art, Betye Saar draws deeply from her experiences, expectations, intuitions, and convictions. Life's pleasures and pains, facts and mysteries are the subjects of the

sculptures and environments which she crafts almost entirely from familiar, found materials. She creatively integrates other people's discards to make evocative personal statements on universal themes."

Her residency and exhibition here will be the first solo presentation of this important black artist in the New England area. Since the late 60's Saar's work has moved from charged statements about the social and political concerns of black people to more intimate, internalized exploration of her own heritage and beliefs. (See box for information about the variety of related events and activities).



Spirit Catcher, an early work by artist Betye Saar who arrives next week to be in residence at MIT and to prepare her first major one-person exhibition in the New England area.

Born in 1926, Ms. Saar received a BFA from UCLA, and pursued graduate studies at California State at Long Beach, University of Southern California, and California State at Northridge. She has exhibited widely, including major solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Museum of

Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. She has received several public commissions, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and her work is included in major museum collections, including the High Museum, Atlanta, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Mojotech: Betye Saar at MIT at the MIT List Visual Arts Center is made possible with support from the New Works Program of the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, a state agency.

This project is part of an ongoing series of List Arts Center residencies sponsored by the New Works Program.

Gallery Hours: weekdays 10-4 pm; weekends 1-5 pm. Admission is free. Gallery phone 253-4680. The List Center is in the Wiesner Building, E15, at 20 Ames Street, not far from the intersection of Ames and Main Street in Kendall Square, Cambridge.

Events of the Betye Saar Residency:

April 22, Wednesday: Saar will present a public lecture on her work at the Southeastern Massachusetts University Art Gallery, North Dartmouth, on Wednesday, April 22, at 2:30pm. Call 999-8546 for directions.

April 29 Wednesday: "Spirit Catcher Meets Big Science," a lecture by the artist, at 7pm, List Visual Arts Center. Free.

May 10, Sunday: Saar will create a special Mother's Day celebration at the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, 300 Walnut Avenue, Boston, from 3-5pm. She will plan special works and an event for the whole family. For details and directions, call the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists at 442-8614.

May 15 Friday: Opening reception for Betye Saar, List Visual Arts Center, 5-7pm. Open to students and all other members of the community, as well as to the public.

—May 16-June 28: "Spirit Catcher: The Art of Betye Saar," a 30-minute videotape, will be presented daily, Monday-Saturday, in the gallery at 12:30 and 3pm.

New from MIT's Weekly

Contact: China Altman
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77 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, Ma. 02139

'Mojotech' melds human spirit with technology

By CHINA ALTMAN
Staff Writer

What happens if you cover disembodied innards of a computer with snakeskin? Or position a small voodoo doll within tangles of technological coils so that it peers out as if from a metallic jungle?

According to Betye Saar, the first black woman artist ever to be in residence at MIT's List Visual Arts Center, you might have made a "Mojo," as in the Blues song, "I got my mojo workin'."

Saar, here from Los Angeles, is creating a room-sized installation called *Mojotech*, made partially from small technological artifacts brought to her by MIT students and community members.

She explained that a *mojo* is an amulet or charm whose "power" depends on both the user's strength of belief and the motive in making it. The idea comes from the voodoo religion and from quite a wide spectrum of folk sources.

Ms. Saar compared her work at MIT to that of a shaman, the person who gleans the environment for special ingredients and objects to use in fabricating a *mojo*. During recent weeks the gallery has been set up not only as her working studio but as her place to receive technological items.

"When I look at something that has been brought to me I see it in terms of pattern, texture and form. I know it had a function but that was its previous life," she said.

Why set herself the goal of making a *mojo* at MIT?

"I want my work to have power," she said, "so that when people look at it, it will touch their feelings. I'm concerned with mystery and beauty, how they relate to the human spirit."

In the distinctive aura of MIT—"different," she said, "from other schools, even different from UCLA"—she has worked to discover and create her own reaction to technology.

At MIT, she said, she began dealing with a basic question, "How can technology be more of what I do, which is about the human spirit? My focus here is on technology as an element of magic and on art as ritual."

She said, "If pieces of technology were dropped into certain third world countries or into a jungle they might become talismans. We've already seen that technology

is magic; in that case it would become an entirely different kind of magic."

Her work here deals with both accumulative and communicative energy. She said she has been inspired by the tradition of African tribal sculpture often made up of diverse decorative elements and power symbols.

How will Saar's MIT *mojo* work? It would be safe to say that *Mojotech* will work in the sense of representing her personal response to the magical side of technology.

How will it work for those who come to see it? There's a chance that it might work differently for each person coming to the Saar room during the weeks of the exhibition.

The Saar space also has a meditation room she created in an alcove of the gallery. Called "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end," this is dedicated to her mother who died last January. Since entering the alcove will involve a decision to take part in a visual mystery, no descriptive clues are being offered in this article.

Except it would be fair to say that those who enter this alcove will have a special experience if they sit down in the wooden rocking chair there. In an experience appropriate to Ms. Saar's world of mystery and magic, the chair was found for her by an artist colleague working at the List. As they were looking it over to decide on its role in the show, she found that the chair has many attributes, including a name, which is Joe.

If you sit in it she promises that something will happen, something magical and technological.

Mojotech will open with a reception Friday, May 15, 5-7pm, at the Bakalar Sculpture Gallery of the List Center in the Wiesner Building (E15). The community and public are welcome, with a special invitation to students.

Along with two major assemblages from her earlier works, *Mojotech* forms part of her major exhibition at the List Center, running concurrently until June 28 with the exhibition of works by abstract painter Elizabeth Murray. The first full day for Ms. Saar's installation will be Saturday, May 16.

This is Ms. Saar's first major exhibition in New England. Her work has received



Artist Betye Saar, "gettin' a mojo workin'" for her May 16-June 28 "*Mojotech*" show at the List Visual Arts Center. Ms. Saar focuses on "technology as an element of magic and art as ritual." Students, the MIT community and the public are invited to a reception, Friday 5-7pm, opening her exhibit at the Bakalar Gallery of the List Center in the Wiesner Building.—Photo by Donna Coveney

increasing recognition, including major solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

List Center Gallery Hours: Weekdays 10am-4pm; weekends 1-5pm. Admission is free. Gallery phone: x3-4680. The List Center is in the Wiesner Building, E15.







Betye Saar

Mojotech, 1987

Mixed media assemblage

76 x 294 x 16 in (193.0 x 746.8 x 40.6 cm)

Exhibition History

“Mojotech” MIT List Visual Art Center, Cambridge, MA (May 16 – June 28, 1987)

“Betye Saar: Resurrection: Site Installations, 1977 to 1987” Main Art Gallery, Visual Arts Center, California State University, Fullerton, CA (February 6 – March 6, 1988)

“Art As a Verb: The Evolving Continuum: Installations, Performances and Videos by 13 American Artists” Maryland Institute, College of Art Baltimore, MD (November 21, 1988 – January 8, 1989, Metropolitan Life Insurance, New York, NY (March 10 – June 12, 1989; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY, March 12 – June 18, 1989), catalogue

“Among Africas/In America: Betye Saar & Jose Bedia” Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada (June 11 – July 8, 1990)

“The Ritual Journey” Joseloff Gallery, University of Hartford, West Hartford, CT (March 11 – April 24, 1992)

“The Realm of the Spirits” University of Colorado Art Museum, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO (October 9 – November 7, 1992)

“Betye Saar: The Secret Heart” Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, CA (September 7, 1993 – January 9, 1994)

“The Art of Betye Saar and John Outterbridge: The Poetics of Politics, Iconography, and Spirituality” 22nd Biennial of Sao Paulo, Museum of Modern Art, Sao Paulo, Brazil (October 12 – December 11, 1994), catalogue

“Ritual and Remembrance” Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA (April 19 – June 29, 1997)

“Betye Saar: Still Tickin’” Museum De Domijnen, Sittard, The Netherlands (June 28 – November 15, 2015), catalogue

“Betye Saar: Still Tickin’” Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Arts, Scottsdale, AZ (January 30 – May 1, 2016), catalogue

“Betye Saar: Blend” Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, CA (October 15 – December 17, 2016), catalogue

“NOW | Monster Chetwynd, Moyna Flannigan, Henry Coombes, Betye Saar, Wael Shawky” National Galleries of Scotland, United Kingdom (October 20, 2018 – April 28, 2019)

This publication accompanies the presentation *Betye Saar: MOJOTECH* at The Armory Show, New York, Roberts Projects Stand 710, March 5 – 8, 2020.

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Photography: Donna Coveney, MIT List Visual Art Center, Cambridge, MA; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, Scotland; Robert Wedemeyer.

Images: page 2 and 20–22 Betye Saar at MIT List Visual Art Center, Cambridge, MA, 1987

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