

## exhibition review

### የተወጠረ ገመድ / Tightrope: Elias Sime

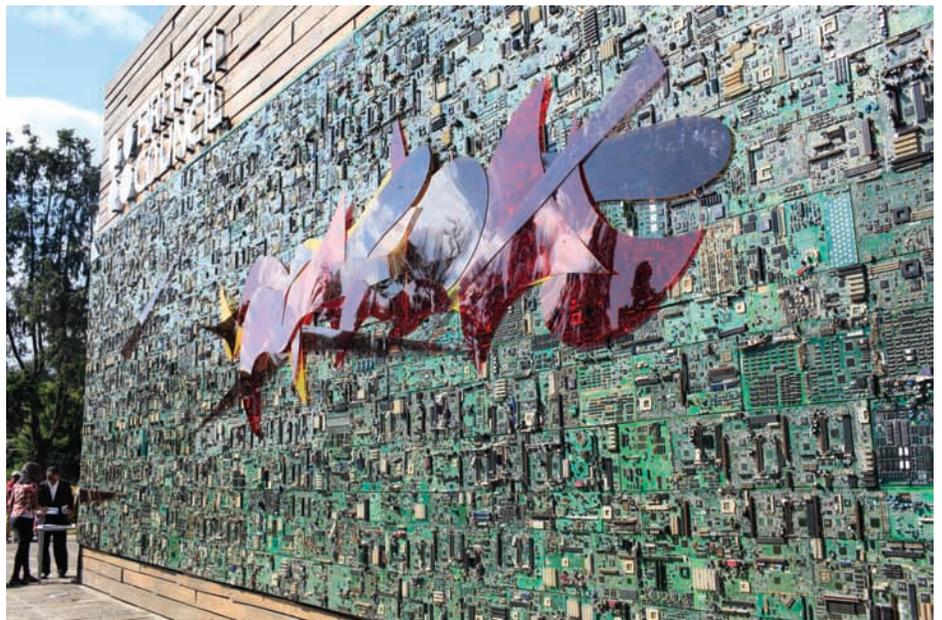
British Council, Goethe Institute, Italian Cultural Institute and Alliance Éthio-Française, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
October 19–December 31, 2013 (British Council)  
Ongoing (Goethe Institute, Italian Cultural Institute, and Alliance Éthio-Française)

reviewed by Kate Cowcher

Showcasing twenty-five large, map-like works by Ethiopian artist Elias Sime, each constructed from thousands of discarded electrical components, “Tightrope” was a show as vast in its physical scale and its curatorial vision as it was intricate in its material detail. The multisite exhibition opened simultaneously at the four leading European cultural institutes—the British Council, Goethe Institute, Italian Cultural Institute and Alliance Éthio-Française—in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa. The works that Elias presented were seven years in the making and “Tightrope” was the latest in a series of collaborations dating back to 2001 between him and curator

Meskerem Asseged, Founding Director of Zoma Contemporary Arts in Addis. Invoking manifold questions about the entwining of technology with urban life, particularly in the developing world, Elias insisted that “Tightrope” was not exclusively about Addis. Yet the current disruptive transformation of the city provided a pertinent backdrop for his enormous constructions and their evocation of infinite, interconnected cityscapes. Indeed, Addis is undergoing major renovation; main roads are ripped up, traditional *chika bet* housing demolished, and crucial pipes and wires are unearthed and vulnerable. The metamorphosis of the urban fabric is ubiquitous, both above and below ground. As imposing as this development is for Addis Ababans, life continues. Regularly rerouted buses trundle down desurfaced roads; demolished sidewalks complicate but do not prevent the walk to work, school or church. In a manner much admired by Elias, the resilience of neighborhood connectivity is evident everywhere. And yet, the balance of this life with infrastructural growth and burgeoning technology always appears precarious. As Elias discussed in the first of two well-attended evening discussions about the exhibition, the title “Tightrope” derived from the inherent tensions of contemporary urban development, in Addis and beyond. The Amharic title (የተወጠረ ገመድ) translates literally to “the rope that is stressed or stretched.” Speaking of a societal “tightness” that comes

1 Elias Sime  
*Tightrope #1* (British Council) (2013)  
Motherboards and other materials; 1400 cm x 380 cm  
Photo: Helen Zeru





2 Elias Sime  
*Tightrope #13* (Alliance Éthio-Française) (2013)  
 Daughterboards and other materials; 970 cm  
 x 278 cm  
 Photo: Aida Muluneh

3 Elias Sime  
*Tightrope #4* (Goethe Institute) (2013)  
 Motherboards and other materials; 1040cm x  
 354cm  
 Photo: Aida Muluneh

with rapid change and a need to tread very carefully, Elias insisted that successful development required balance; life in a city such as Addis was likened to walking a tightrope. Throughout “Tightrope” motherboards, other electrical circuit boards, and their constituent parts constituted Elias’s principle media, but the four exhibition sites offered vast variations in the composition, theme, and scale. The Goethe Institute and British Council showcased four of the largest pieces between them, all installed outside for public view (Fig. 1). The Alliance Éthio-Française and Italian Cultural Institute housed numerous works inside their respective galleries that ranged from the modest and monochrome to the dazzlingly bright and all-encompassing; the Alliance, in particular, hosting some large-scale installation works (Fig. 2). Addis’ European Cultural Institutes are a firm fixture in Ethiopia’s contemporary art scene, and have been particularly since the era of the socialist revolution (1974–1991), when space to exhibit outside of them was scarce. They are currently some of the leading providers of education and training, and make banks of computers available for this purpose. Positioning the city as the site of complex developed-developing world relationships, as mediated through technology, “Tightrope” was one of the more immediately reflexive exhibitions that these institutes have recently hosted.

Grids and networks dominated the compositions of works at the Goethe and Italian Cultural Institute, their pattern and uniformity recalling aerial photos of relentless, zoned city planning (Fig. 3). At the Alliance Éthio-Française, seemingly rational geometry gave way to more painterly, curvaceous, and colorful patterns, created by the multitudinous braiding of electrical wires according to vari-

ous Ethiopian traditional braiding practices. Fluorescent perspex shapes hovered over some of the microcosmic city blocks, their presence ambiguous yet in a city occasionally blighted by a discolored haze of smog, their unnatural coloring was often disquieting. Elsewhere, large fragments of glassy material were embedded, recalling topographical features that either dictate or are overrun by urban development. The ordered and the improvised, the natural and the manmade, all were here evoked. Embedded within many of Elias’s compositions were multiple boards still loaded with now-obsolete components, their individual complexities serving as synecdoche for the macrocosmic scapes they were a part of. If electronics companies such as Jameco have, in their advertising, likened the internal architec-

ture of the computer to a miniature city, here Elias likened the vastness of the city to the boundlessness of a composite motherboard’s capabilities.

Close examination of each piece revealed an intense selectivity, an obsessive ordering of the component parts. Just as when they had powered a machine, they functioned here in an ordered collaboration. Arranged by color, or shape, or size, Elias had sifted thousands of tiny pieces, giving each of them a precise position in his overall composition. Just where these many pieces had come from, however, proved to be the million-dollar question. Elias told his audience that he purchased moribund electrical parts by the truckload from a guy in Mercato, Addis’ enormous trading hub. Examining his work in the company of Bruce Brown, a former USAID IT manager, revealed that “Tightrope” contained within it a distilled history of computer manufacturing.<sup>1</sup> Here were stripped-down motherboards from the 1970s (Fig. 4), TV circuit boards with their traces indicating the former presence of a tube, a pre-LED lighting system known as Nixi





4 Detail, *Tightrope* #4 (Goethe Institute) Motherboards  
Photo: Dunja Hers

tubes, and the remnants of processors from obsolete manufacturers such as Zilog. Here, 1960s color-coded resistors and early read-only memory appeared alongside an Intel I486 processor from 1991, and components marked as being manufactured in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Portugal, Brazil, Germany, and Russia. As Brown discussed, very few, if any, of the parts exhibited here were likely to have powered machines within Ethiopia; more plausibly, they arrived in the Horn of Africa in an already stripped down, post-functional state.

Almost all of “*Tightrope*’s” components predated the Restriction of Hazardous Substances Directive (RoHS) that came into effect in 2006. This directive sought to restrict the use of toxic materials in electrical goods and to attempt to reduce the massive amounts of e-waste generated by the electrical industry. “This is most certainly all lead,” said Brown, pointing to the soldering of the motherboards on a work at the Goethe Institute (Fig. 5). Although now coated with a protective varnish (protecting, indeed, the viewer and the work), this revelation cast “*Tightrope*” in a more provocative vein than was immediately apparent, invoking larger, darker questions about how vast amounts of poisonous electrical waste had ended up here. In the exhibition discussion, however, Elias alluded to his attraction to things that have passed through many hands, appreciating them as objects of community and connection. In one piece at the Alliance Éthio-Française, electrical goods were arranged alongside other waste products: photographs, shells, chewing gum packets, etc. Their infrequent presence, and Elias’s personal emphasis on their social significance, made relatively innocuous local networks of community and consumption visible, whilst also underscoring the developing world tendency (or necessity) to use, re-use, and use again. Indeed, “*Tightrope*” succeeded in simultaneously evoking local resourcefulness and global wastefulness. Elias’s work called forth, via the

image of the growing city, the tense coexistence of communal consumption with more sinister global connectivities, in which poor nations, while rapidly developing their access to technology, have become dumping grounds for rich-nation toxins.

Elias’s archeological impulse was matched by Meskerem’s interest in what she termed “anthropological contemporary art,” an interest that has guided the pair’s extended collaboration.<sup>2</sup> Pertaining to a concern for using contemporary art and curatorial practices to explore cultural heritage, examine societies’ relations with the environment, and provoke questions of sustainability, Meskerem discussed this at length in a presentation at the Goethe Institute. In this vein of art as inquiry, “*Tightrope*” provided no utopian view of urban potential; its works served as charged talking points about ongoing challenges. Indeed, the exhibition could be appreciated on a number of levels: for its aesthetic beauty and its craftsmanship, complete with the traditional weaving that Elias was trained in; for its vastness in size and its resonance with Addis’s urban upheaval; for its

political provocations about technology and development, as well as environmental abuses on the African continent.

Undoubtedly part of “*Tightrope*’s” success was in its timeliness. For the opening, visitors were taken from one site to another on board an open-top double-decker bus. This traversing of the city, complete with its abundant exhaust fumes, honking car horns, and construction-site clanging, served to underscore the show’s multiple provocations. Given that each of the cultural institutes extended the run of their part of “*Tightrope*” past their proposed closure dates demonstrated the works’ clear public appeal. The afterlife of “*Tightrope*” is worth consideration; certainly the issues raised by the exhibition have enduring relevance. While within Addis, the works unquestionably invite pause and contemplation in an environment experiencing relentless growing pains. Beyond the immediate context of this city, however, the works pose thornier questions about the global economy, the social lives of cities and the perpetual obsolescence of technology.

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#### Endnotes

1 Personal communication with Bruce Brown in Addis Ababa, February 9, 2014.

2 From 2004–2005’s “*Min Neber?*” exhibition in which Elias made works in response to the spiritual practices of an ethnic group from Gurage to “*Tightrope*’s” precursor, “*Ants and Ceramicists*” (2010), which brought the practices of Ethiopian ceramicists, a traditionally maligned group, into view, Elias and Meskerem have long been interested in using contemporary art and curatorial interventions to expose social practices.



5 Detail, *Tightrope* #4 (Goethe Institute) Red stripped-down motherboard  
Photo: Dunja Hersak