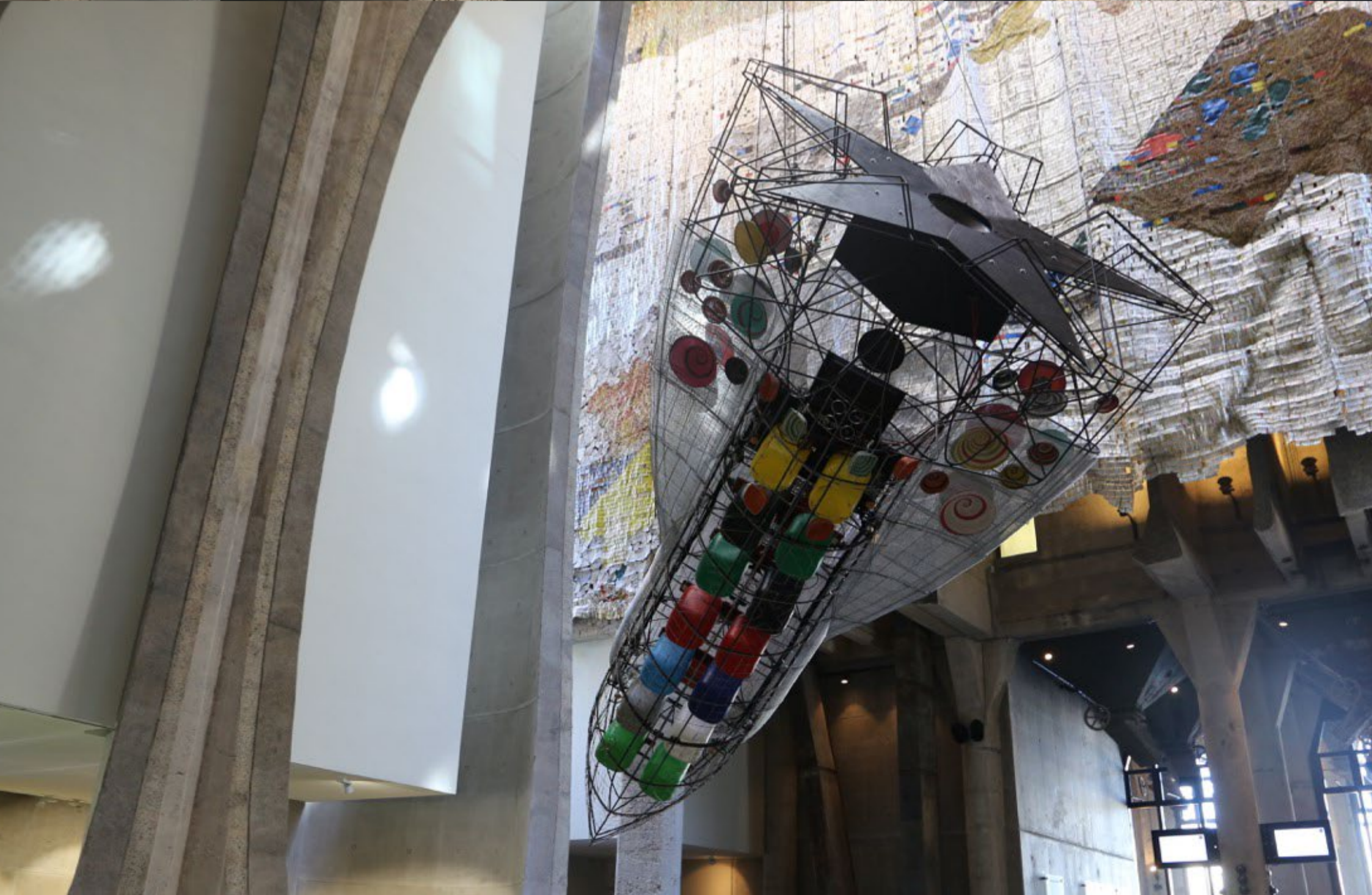




DUBSHIP I - BLACK STARLINER

An African Robots vs SPACECRAFT project

Installation photos from exhibition at the Zeitz MOCAA April - August 2019





Dubship I – Black Starliner 2019

An African Robots vs SPACECRAFT project

By Ralph Borland with Jason Stapleton, Lewis Kaluzi, Farai Kanyemba, Wellington Moyo and others. Thanks to Eden Labs and Thingking for their support.

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One hundred years ago this year, in 1919, the Black Star Line shipping company was established by Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, as a wholly black-owned and staffed shipping line with the eventual aim of repatriating the descendants of African slaves from the Americas and Caribbean back to Africa.

Named to rival the established White Star shipping line, which numbered the Titanic amongst its vessels, the Black Star line raised funding from hundreds of black families in the diaspora to buy a series of old liners, renaming them after contemporary black heroes. These ran cargo between the Caribbean and the United States, in a short-lived attempt to set up a viable shipping business.

Under pressure from the US government, which infiltrated Marcus Garvey's organization using the first black agents in the recently established FBI, and in financial and legal difficulties, the Black Star Line collapsed after only three years of operation, and Marcus Garvey was jailed for mail fraud.

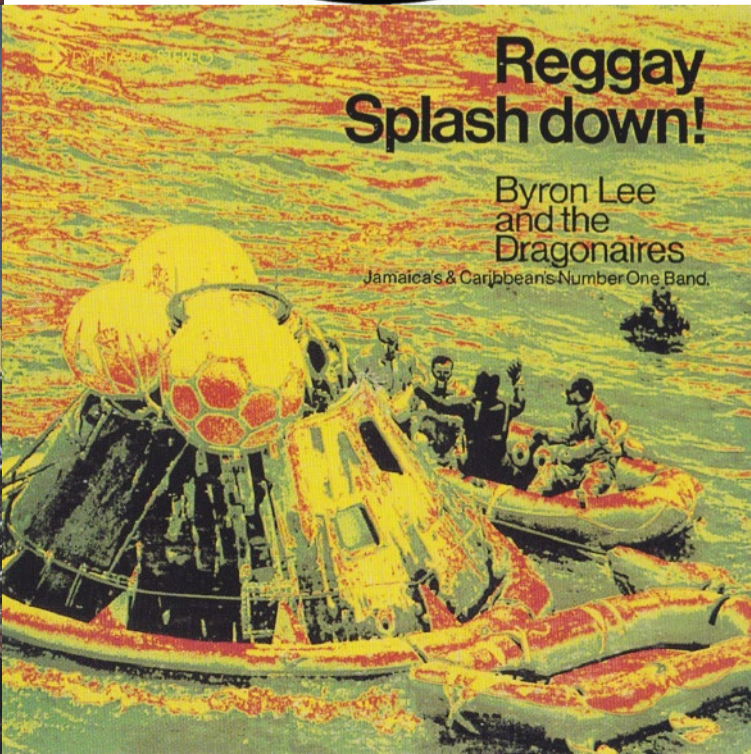
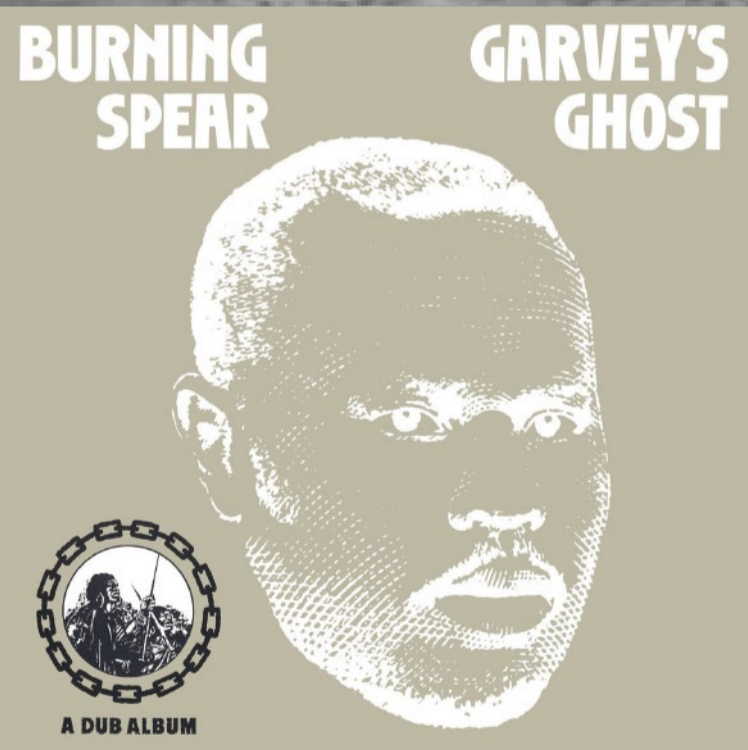
While it was short-lived, the Black Star Line has resonated onwards through history. Some fifty years later, in Kingston, Jamaica, the reggae singer Fred Locks wrote and recorded the song 'Black Star Liner' (1976). The lyrics of the song describe 'Seven miles of Black Star Liner, coming into Kingston harbour' – the Black Star line had become, in Rasta imagination, a mythical ark coming to take black Africans home to the motherland. Marcus Garvey himself is a Moses-like figure for Rastafarians – the religion had been founded on his prediction that "a black king shall be crowned" in Africa; a prediction realized in the ascendance of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia.

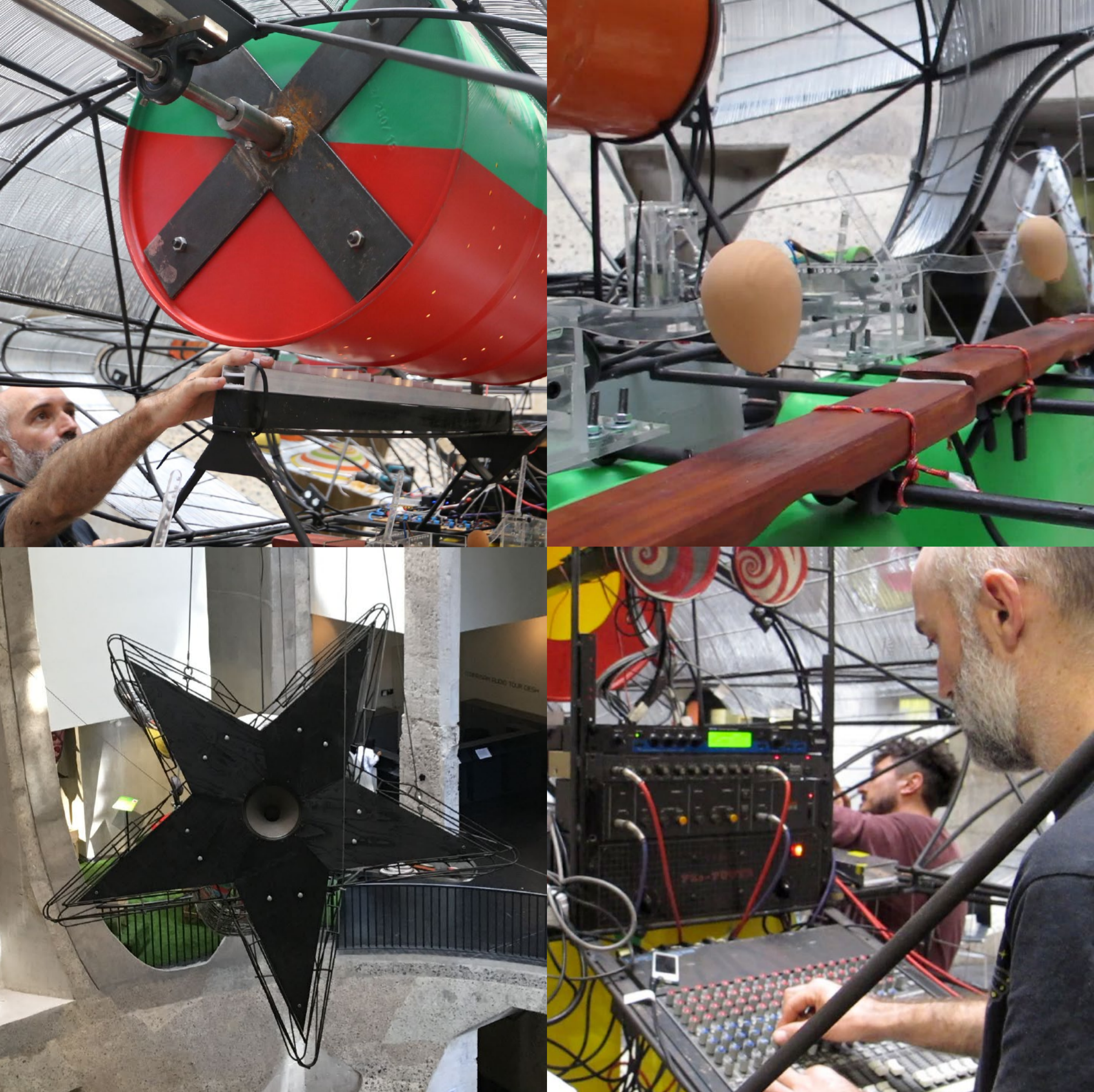
Fred Lock's track came with a B-side – a dub version of the song, with the lyrics removed, the bass and percussion emphasised, and early electronic effects used to create echo and delay and a feeling of spaciousness in the track. Dub emerged in late 1960s Jamaica through the advent of new technologies for manipulating sound, reproduced through huge sound systems at dancehall parties. It has been hugely influential on electronic music production, influencing much popular music today.

Dub also influenced imagination in other arenas – the iconic 'cyber punk' novel by William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984), includes a spaceship called Zion crewed by Rastafarian former mine workers, "the irregular, discolored plates" of its makeshift hull "laser-scrawled with Rastafarian symbols and the initials of welders". "The music that pulsed constantly through the cluster... was called dub, a sensuous mosaic cooked from vast libraries of digitalized pop; it was worship... and a sense of community".

Imagery of space exploration appears on dub album covers and in song lyrics. The form has an intrinsic relationship to technology, emerging "as an example of how cold, alienating Western technology can be domesticated by those not intended as its users" in the words of Jamaican writer and artist Louis Chude-Sokei. David Toop writes about dub as a foreshadowing of Virtual Reality, in conjuring imaginary spaces through sound.

This sculpture, *Black Starliner*, takes these elements to produce its own 'version' of an imagined spacecraft, depicted in wire art and an electro-mechanical musical sound system. This 'Dubship' operates not between the continents of Earth, but into space and between stars. It speaks of a desire for return or a new home which is both rooted in the African diasporic experience, and more universal – the desire for a refuge, a homeland; a transportation through technology.





The sculpture incorporates an electro-mechanical, analog sound system. At the heart of it is a rotating oil drum, pierced with a pattern of holes through which light shines from inside the barrel, using a technique based on the 'piano roll' or barrel organ. The pattern of holes encodes a version of the Fred Locks dub track *Black Star Liner* (1976). Light-dependent resistors (LDRs) in a row under the rotating barrel are triggered whenever a hole, and light, passes over them. Each LDR operates a mechanical striker which hits a note in the track: the bassline is captured by custom-made wooden marimba notes, while percussion is derived from the variety of plastic and metal containers acting as cargo inside the vessel. A bank of vintage sound-effect units introduce dub's signature echo and delay to the track, while an old amplifier drives the sound through a custom speaker-cabinet incorporating a 1960s 18-inch speaker along with a pair of second-hand guitar amplifier 12-inch speakers. The resultant half-minute loop has a loping, walking bassline, with a mechanical undertow, as if a combination of the spaceship's machinery and the cargo clinking together in the hold is producing the music.



African Robots and SPACECRAFT are projects to collaborate with street wire artists in Africa and abroad to introduce new subjects to this African vernacular art form, which starts with children making their own toys – wire cars – and leads to an informal means of employment for adults, creating a resourceful form of art in public spaces. The intention of African Robots and SPACECRAFT is to take wire art to new places, putting it in relationship to science fiction and technology, and stimulating new forms of connection between artists and technologists from a range of sectors. **Dubship I – Black Starliner** presented the opportunity to explore a Pan-African approach to wire art, incorporating techniques from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. It picks up on existing approaches taken by wire artists, applying them at a larger scale. For example, Zimbabwean wire artists in Cape Town make wire art sharks, describing their form in tightly-spaced wire – we used this technique, working with wire artists who pioneered the form, to create the translucent wire skin of the spaceship. The hull of the spaceship uses copper-wire binding approaches seen in Mozambiquan wire art; and telephone-wire weaving from Kwa-Zulu Natal.



The sculpture weighs 500kg and is 6 metres long by 3 metres high and 3 metres wide. It is constructed around a 12mm mild steel rod 'wire frame' with good structural integrity. The sculpture has engineering certification for its own suspension, on a 10mm wire-rope bridle. The sculpture disassembles into 3 sections via nut and bolt connections, for transport. The sculpture is covered with wire art panels, and contains plastic jerry cans, wooden marimba notes, and electronic, mechanical and audio equipment.

We are currently exploring the transport of the work in a standard shipping container for ease of sea shipping. It is our intention to tour the sculpture over the centenary period of the Black Star Line (2019 - 2022) taking it to West Africa, then to New York and the USA, and the Caribbean, echoing Marcus Garvey's original intentions for the project. We have entered the work for consideration at Dak'Art in Senegal in 2020; and New York's Harlem Pier would be a fitting place for it to arrive in the US back where the first ship was launched 100 years ago.

PAN AFRICAN SPACE STATION presents

DUBSHIP I - BLACK STARLINER

**a live radio dub lecture with
RALPH BORLAND**



**Friday 13th Hauntological Version
from 5.30pm (SA time)**

**TUNE IN AT
WWW.PANAFRICANSPACESTATION.ORG.ZA**

The sculpture is accompanied by performance. Lead artist Ralph Borland delivers a 'dub lecture' about the project and the history it engages with, drawing from a range of dub music over its half-century history. The performance aids the project's aims to spread knowledge about the history of the Black Star Line and dub music to contemporary audiences, combining elements of the radio DJ, dub selector, and lecturer.

This performance was selected for the National Arts Festival in South Africa in 2019, and was performed on Pan African Space Station as a live radio broadcast on 13 September 2019. We have also staged musical collaborations with the sculpture, with live musicians improvising on their instruments while an operator manipulates the Dubship's sound system.

Ralph Borland, 2019
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For more information please see:
<http://dubships.spacecraft.africa>