

GALERIE
CHANTAL CROUSEL

Tarek Atoui

REVUE DE PRESSE | SELECTED PRESS

ArtReview

Tarek Atoui's Living Instruments



Tarek Atoui, *Souffle Continu*, 2020 (installation view). Photo: Ros Kavanagh. Courtesy the artist

Whether it's quasi-sculptures of drum skins and kit stands or a floor-filling, deconstructed organ, the artist's electroacoustic contrivances are absurdly moving

The centrepiece of *Souffle Continu* – Tarek Atoui's sculptural ensemble of unorthodox, outsize musical instruments, transforming IMMA's Baroque chapel into an experimental performance space – is a sprawling, deconstructed organ. Composed of electrical air blowers, variously configured 'flutes' (small timber crates fitted with brass reeds or adjustable vents) and long, loose, serpentine tubes, the Paris-based Lebanese artist's elaborate, floor-covering *Organ Within* (2022) radiates Rube Goldberg-style mechanical absurdity. But as a musical organ, it looks biologically organic too: like the invertebrate, tentacular splay of a giant squid or the spilled innards of a slaughtered beast. When played (as a 15-minute computer-sequenced cycle, or in performances by Atoui and invited musicians), the instrument gasps and groans. Sighing, wailing, hyperventilating: its voicings are both animalistic and machinic, a wheezing body or chugging engine, coming to life or shutting down.

Two adjacent objects appear, at a glance, more recognisably practical. These two-metre-tall glass-panned cabinets resemble rudimentary museum vitrines, but they function within Atoui's network of organ gadgetry as 'wind houses': display cases to step into, instruments to play and experience from within. Hooked up to pipes and pumps, the chambers become wardrobe-size flutes, specialist performers or gallery visitors opening and closing panels or operating pulleys to control airflow, causing tremulous modulations in the droning, amorphous music. When experienced while standing inside these *Wind Houses* (#1 & #2) (2024), the strange sonics are physically affecting, the cabinets behaving like sensory activation tanks: sending pulses and murmurs throughout the body, into the bones, stimulating awareness of sound's penetrating, extra-aural reach.

Declan Long
Tarek Atoui's Living Instruments
ArtReview, June 1, 2026.
<https://urls.fr/T9af-r>



Sunflowers, 2026 (installation view). Photo: Ros Kavanagh. Courtesy the artist

This multisensory scope is vital to Atoui's inclusive, expansive sound-sculpting. Following a revelatory 2012 workshop series with students at Al Amal School for the Deaf in Sharjah (as part of *Below 160*, an electronic music project focused on deep bass frequencies), Atoui began to further explore nonauditory sonic phenomena, inventing instruments calibrated to the myriad subtleties of low-end vibration or percussive tactility. Ever since, he has continued to dive deeper into the felt complexity of musical effects, whether experienced as listener or performer.

At IMMA, a second, smaller-scale array of lively electroacoustic contrivances, staged in the four compact rooms of the museum's ground floor under the collective title *Sunflowers*, represents further facets of Atoui's boffinish delight in merging sound with substance. These intricately kinetic, differently resonating installations (comprising works made from 2021 to 2025) bear comparison with band setups for studio sessions: relaxed arrangements of snaking cables, drum skins, kit stands, cymbals, speaker boxes. In each case, Atoui adds combinations of associated, or largely unrelated, equipment – record players and analogue tape loops, suspended metal sheets, containers of water, a medical stethoscope – layering textural sounds and aligning diversely sensitive materials in novel, active configurations, orchestrating a polyphony of harmonic shimmers and rhythmic throbs that play, in part, on programmed loops, but also adapt to minute-by-minute ambient shifts. Microphones capture and amplify movements between objects and throughout the spaces, however quiet. (One body of works, notably, is subtitled *The Whisperers*, 2021–22.) The passing drift of visitors, the shivering of suspended cymbals, the ping of water droplets into a steel bucket (a tiny action that here reverberates like a Space Echo snare-hit on a deep dub recording): all contribute to understated swells and lowkey eddies of sound. No doubt the eclectic instruments come more energetically alive when used in workshops or performances (a possibility flagged in accompanying notes), but even in autoplay mode, they make an impression on the listening body. Sitting or standing, still or moving, we experience a symphony of intimate tremors.

Declan Long
Tarek Atoui's Living Instruments
ArtReview, June 1, 2026.
<https://urls.fr/T9af-r>

ARTFORUM

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA TO ASSEMBLE “A GATHERING OF REMARKABLE PEOPLE” FOR QATAR PAVILION AT VENICE BIENNALE



From left: Sophia Al-Maria, Tom Eccles, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Tarek Atoui, and Ruba Katrib. Photo: © Brigitte Lacombe.

Building on Tiravanija's years-long practice of inviting collaborators to share ideas and a meal, the exhibition will feature a film by Qatari-American artist Sophia Al-Maria, live performances organized by Lebanese artist Tarek Atoui and inspired by the *takht* (classical Arabic orchestra) and the *wasla* (a musical suite or sequence), a large-scale sculpture by Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican artist Alia Farid, and a culinary program of Middle Eastern cuisine put together by Palestinian chef Fadi Kattan and highlighting chefs from the MENA region.

“On the global stage of the Venice Biennale, this exhibition demonstrates Qatar’s unwavering belief in the power of culture to bring people together and to create space for reflection, connection, and affirmation of our shared humanity,” said Qatar Museums chair Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the pavilion’s commissioner, in a statement. “Qatar is proud to provide a platform for the creative talent of our nation and the Arab world. Together, these artists and their work highlight the importance of resilience in a complicated time, empowering communities, inspiring generations, and strengthening our combined heritage.”



Tarek Atoui—known for his innovative musical performances—will take over Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall this autumn

The Lebanese artist and composer blends sound, technology and sculpture to reference current social, historical and political realities



Tarek Atoui performing at the Issey Miyake Spring-Summer 2026 presentation at Centre Pompidou, Paris, in October 2025
Photo: © Luna Conte

The Beirut-born artist and composer Tarek Atoui—known for his innovative performances featuring intricately engineered instruments—will take over Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall this autumn (13 October-11 April 2027).

Atoui will create the next Hyundai Commission in the vast cathedral-like gallery that has previously hosted works by artists such as Kara Walker, Cecilia Vicuña and Olafur Eliasson. The Northern Sámi artist Máret Anne Sara’s installation Goavve-Geabbil is currently on show in the space (until 12 April).

Gareth Harris

Tarek Atoui—known for his innovative musical performances—will take over Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall this autumn

The Art Newspaper, January 27, 2026.

<https://urls.fr/6t3Dzk>

According to a Tate statement, Atoui draws on extensive research into music history, instrumentation and production, creating “multisensory environments that re-think how we understand and experience sound”. In 2016, he created a series of new music performances in Tate Modern’s South Tank entitled *The Reverse Collection 2016* [↗](#). At the 2019 Venice Biennale he presented *The Ground* [↗](#), a work focused on contemporary and traditional musical practices developed in the Pearl River Delta region of China.

Last year Atoui launched shows at the TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary gallery, Madrid, and at HangarBicocca in Milan which was reviewed in *ArtForum* [↗](#) by Cornelia Lauf: “No matter how dramatically construed the performance may appear onstage, the art is in the composition, even if [Atoui] implicitly questions authorship by allowing algorithms to generate scores,” she wrote.

In an interview in *Frieze* [↗](#) magazine, Atoui describes how his practice developed: “In the early 2000s, after graduating from the Conservatory of Reims, I began working with electronics—computers, MIDI controllers, sensors—and learning how to improvise, which was a lot of fun. I also did a residency in 2006 at Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music [STEIM] in Amsterdam.”

Asked about his different roles, as a conductor and performer for instance, he adds: “Sometimes I’m hosting; sometimes I’m performing; sometimes I’m just giving instructions. It’s about wearing all these different hats. Sometimes I also have to step in and be the guy who says, ‘Okay, this is how we’re going to do it.’ So, it’s not totally open, but it is about being hospitable and trying as much as possible to create a space in which everybody can feel like they are in the right place.”

Catherine Wood, the interim director of Tate Modern, says in a statement: “Blending music, technology, sculpture and performance, [Atoui] is a truly cross-disciplinary artist whose work references current social, historical and political realities. Architectural space plays an important role in Atoui’s ongoing investigation into sound and vibration, and we can’t wait to see how he engages with audiences within the public space of Tate Modern’s iconic Turbine Hall.”

Meanwhile Tate’s chair of trustees, Roland Rudd, floated offering naming rights to the Turbine Hall last summer for upwards of £50m according to a report in the UK newspaper, *The Telegraph* [↗](#). Asked to confirm the £50m figure, a Tate spokesperson says: “That comment was speaking in hypothetical terms.”

Last year Tate and Hyundai Motor announced a decade-long extension of their sponsorship partnership, which covers the Hyundai Turbine Hall commission and the Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational until 2036.

Gareth Harris

Tarek Atoui—known for his innovative musical performances—will take over Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall this autumn
The Art Newspaper, January 27, 2026.

<https://urls.fr/6t3Dzk>

REVIEW



MOUNTAIN ECHOES

Inspired by the music traditions of North Africa, **Tarek Atoui** explores the power of sound, reflection and provenance in *At-Tāriq*, his current solo show at the **Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum** in Madrid.

Words by Will Jennings

The TBA21 basement gallery at Madrid's Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum is a noisy space – both visually and aurally. Upon entering Tarek Atoui's installation, *At-Tāriq*, the visitor's quick first impression is of a darkly lit room packed with what reads as piles of clutter. There are stacks of unrecognisable objects, bits and pieces hanging from the ceiling, and whereas most galleries tidy away their electronic cabling, here countless chords spread across the floor in a chaotic mess.

Slowly, a semblance of logic emerges from the arrangement. There are several large yellow carpets, each with chairs invitingly positioned in a nominally domestic arrangement. Once reclined into, they are hard to leave – not only because of their soft comfort but also because their low height and deep seat seem designed to force the visitor to remain in place, trapped in a restful welcome.

Tarek Atoui's title refers to the 86th surah of the Qur'an, the Morning Star or Nightcomer, with both meanings relating to the conceptual root of a project that began in Córdoba and is set to continue far beyond this TBA21 installation. In 2023 Atoui hosted a residency in the Spanish city with fellow musicians Ziúr, Susie Ibarra and Nancy Mounir, and while there encountered varieties of Andalusian music that intrigued him through their connections to the music of the Amazigh people of the Atlas Mountains in both form and instrument, even though it had developed and fused with other influences into its own form. "As somebody who comes from the Levant in the Middle East, it is hard to visit Andalusia with innocent eyes," Atoui says. "I want to look at what Muslim heritage became, and this idea of the Andalusian music was on my mind."

Atoui had pre-existing experiences with the music of the





Tarek Atoui's studio. 2024 © Alexandre Guirkingier

Maghreb through previous projects connected to Lebanon's AMAR Foundation, which houses the largest collection of early twentieth-century Arab music recordings. However, after talking to Daniela Zyman, curator of *At-Tāriq*, in Córdoba, he decided it was time to begin a deeper research project exploring the Atlas Mountains, looking for the musical roots and cultures and their practice in everyday life.

Whenever visiting Morocco, Atoui collected CDs and cassettes of music, but "not the latest releases – the things that bus and taxi drivers put on". As much as the music, Atoui admired the low fidelity of the recordings: bootleg copies; repeatedly rerecorded music with added patina and noise; street music recorded on phones then onto CD, including noises of traffic, talking and kids playing. It spoke to the artist of the value of aural culture and of how a truth of people, place and music is not in singular polished, produced artefacts of culture but within the careful act of making, presence, observing and listening.

Atoui then started a project to find the sounds from these recordings, travelling into the Atlas Mountains and turning up at homes, sometimes unannounced (as a nightcomer may) seeking shelter and accepting generous hospitality. He met musicians, was given recordings on memory sticks and CDs, visited instrument makers and – most importantly – spent time listening. The installation, *At-Tāriq*, is Atoui continuing that aural tradition, recording the music he found not as an ethnomusicologist but as a

fellow musical practitioner wishing to continue the musical journey. Much of the soundscape created at TBA21 is formed of these recordings, variously layered, edited, reformed and explored.

The installation comprises several amplifiers, many concealed within the stacked and suspended sculptural objects. These are all made with instruments and materials also encountered on his journeys: 200 metres of the cables connecting it all are clad in Moroccan beads; wicker, ceramic and wood pieces were made by craftspeople from the region; fossils from the mountains sit in piles; the seats are covered in handmade textiles; and those five carpets were made by women cooperatives, traditionally dyed with saffron to give a warm yellow hue.

These materials are not solely about a visual aesthetic but are also all complicit in the aural experience. The sound work that Atoui has made in collaboration with musicians Ziúr, Susie Ibarra and Nancy Mounir, along with his archive of found recordings, is played on a long loop in a rich, exploratory surround-sound experience through microphones secreted inside and upon the collection of material artefacts. Recorded music is played within the drums, ceramics and objects to amplify sounds through materials of the landscapes it came from. Often, digital and analogue compress, so it is not clear to the listener which elements are recordings and which are made by the objects in the space. A drum beat amplified from within a Moroccan drum leads to fossils vibrating upon its stretched skin, adding new percussion; a machine



Tarek Atoui. Installation view of *At-Tāriq*, TBA21 (Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary), 2025. Photography by Lourdes Cabrera

that looks like a reel-to-reel tape player is listening to glass beads with a bright light shining through them to a sensor, turning geology to sound; a dinosaur tooth scrapes across a drumskin; water ripples and drips. "We are used to headphones and high-fidelity music systems," Atoui says of this analogue/digital interplay, "but here it is wilder, it travels through the materials, potteries and metal barrel and has a resolution that is a bit murky, somehow hazy."

This makes for a layered listening experience that encourages moving around the space, getting up close to each object as well as spending time deeply reclined at each of the five yellow-carpeted majlis. "From a sound perspective, it's like different bands playing at the same time, you see and are aware of each part in a certain form of harmony," Atoui says. "You hear the same sound piece in all five spaces, but at the same time each of them has a different particularity."

This loss of threshold and need to move through the space is political as well as sensorial. By experiencing it from only one position, the listener would never truly experience the work, but if they migrate around it, pay attention, explore it visually and aurally from different angles, they will understand that to try and understand something from only one perspective will never reveal nuance or truth – just as Surah At-Tāriq encourages reflection beyond the immediate. As music journeyed across land and seas, and as Atoui himself journeyed into and over the Atlas Mountains, so too the listener to *At-Tāriq* must journey the work, listening and thinking around it and into it.

This is only the beginning of a research project the artist imagines going on years into the future, taking him into geographies beyond the Atlas Mountains on a pilgrimage to countless unknown destinations. Where an ethnomusicologist would document, order, classify and accurately record the sounds they encounter, Atoui will fold them together into his own compositions, performances and artworks, as well as into the materials and objects he collects on the way. This does not mean future iterations of *At-Tāriq* will grow in scale, or have more carpets and majlis, but that the work will expand, edit and transform organically. Atoui explains it as a porous structure, "although here it looks compact, because technically, aesthetically and sonically the five channels are emblematic of a nomadic journey. In the future, I see them each going in a particular direction, as each is a nucleus around which more things can be built."

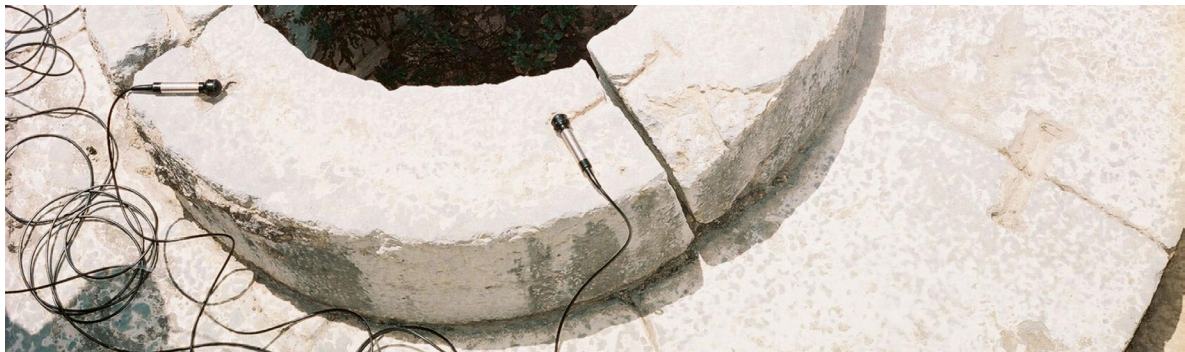
Over the years to come, *At-Tāriq* may split up, objects may decay, new pieces be added, new microphones inserted into currently empty vessels, freshly found sounds added to the score, newly made or discovered vernacular materials, instruments, and crafted pieces folded into the mix, and the soundscape could evolve into richer, deeper explorations. It is the start of a new aural archive, one rooted around poetics, proximity, distance and decay. ■

At-Tāriq runs until 18 May

FRIEZE

Tarek Atoui on Hospitality, Collaboration and Expanding Musical Instruments

The artist and composer on integrating pedagogy into his practice, rethinking instruments and preparing for his first solo exhibition in Italy at Pirelli HangarBicocca



Main image: Tarek Atoui, *ŸE Elefsina* (detail), 2015–16, photographic documentation. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; photograph: Alexandre Guirkingier

C. Spencer Yeh Pedagogy is a core element of your practice, evident from the numerous workshops you have led over the years, most recently *The Hive* [2024] at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris. How did this come about?

Tarek Atoui Teaching is something I have enjoyed from the outset. In 1998, at the age of 18, I had the opportunity to leave my native Lebanon to study electroacoustic music at the French National Conservatory of Reims. There I learned things that, to me, seemed amazing. Years later, I realized other people would love to have the same kinds of learning opportunities, too – they just didn't have access to them.

The first workshops I did were in France in 2004, at a centre for children of the employees of the French national electricity company [EDF]. I was exploring the basics of sound and amplification. Afterwards, I thought, 'Why don't I take this to the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon?' So, I went in 2005. Then, in 2007, I took it to Cairo. After that, I used the idea as an excuse to be on the road as part of my identity as a musician; I'd travel around leading workshops, the way a band might perform at a concert. Little by little, as the number and scale of these workshops increased in line with my involvement in large curatorial projects, and opportunities for residencies also arose, I started to think about how to incorporate this work into my broader practice, in a very natural way.

C. Spencer Yeh

Tarek Atoui on Hospitality, Collaboration and Expanding Musical Instruments

Frieze, January 8, 2025.

<https://urlr.me/qUFNXJ>



Tarek Atoui, *I/E Elefsina*, 2015–16, photographic documentation.
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; photograph:
Alexandre Guirkinger

At a certain point as an artist, you come to realize that you don't want to be spending all your time making work for exhibitions.

At a certain point as an artist, you come to realize that you don't want to be spending all your time making work for exhibitions. Just as musicians don't want to feel sucked into touring and playing concerts. You think: let's bring education into this constellation, too – not just in terms of what I can teach, but also what I can learn. In *Organ Within* [2019], for instance, in which you also participated, I collaborated with the instrument-makers Vincent Martial and Léo Maurel on building an organ.

CSY How did you develop your work in the field of electronic music into a sound art performance and exhibition-making practice?

TA In the early 2000s, after graduating from the Conservatory of Reims, I began working with electronics – computers, MIDI controllers, sensors, etc. – and learning how to improvise, which was a lot of fun. I also did a residency in 2006 at Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music [STEIM] in Amsterdam, where I worked with the Dutch electroacoustic composer and artistic director of STEIM, Michel Waisvisz. Michel soon became a good friend and, in 2007, he invited me to join him as co-artistic director for a year.

GALERIE
CHANTAL CROUSEL

Sadly, Michel passed away in 2008, and it felt the right time for me to return to the Middle East. I wanted not only to take back some of the things I had learned in Europe, but also to see how I could develop those ideas further in parts of the Arab world. From there, I just kind of fell into making art. That's why my first art event – *Un-drum* at the Sharjah Biennale in 2009 – was in the Arab world. It was a shift that also came about due to the places I was navigating, where the cultural infrastructure was not as developed as in Europe or the US. For instance, I might be playing music in a venue that served multiple functions – gallery, concert hall, cinema – and where all creative practices were regarded equally. From this register, I slid into the art world, and invitations and opportunities multiplied.



Tarek Atoui, *The Whisperers*, 2023, workshop at the Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection, Paris, France. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; photograph: Clément Vayssières

CSY You worked with composers Éric La Casa and Chris Watson for your touring show 'Waters' Witness', which originated at the Fridericianum in Kassel in 2020. It showcased your project *I/E (Infinite Ears)* [2015–ongoing], in which you use sound recordings of various coastlines, from Athens to Abu Dhabi. What was it like to collaborate with Watson and La Casa, whose practices are arguably very different than that of an improviser?

C. Spencer Yeh
Tarek Atoui on Hospitality, Collaboration and Expanding Musical Instruments
Frieze, January 8, 2025.
<https://urlr.me/qUFNXJ>

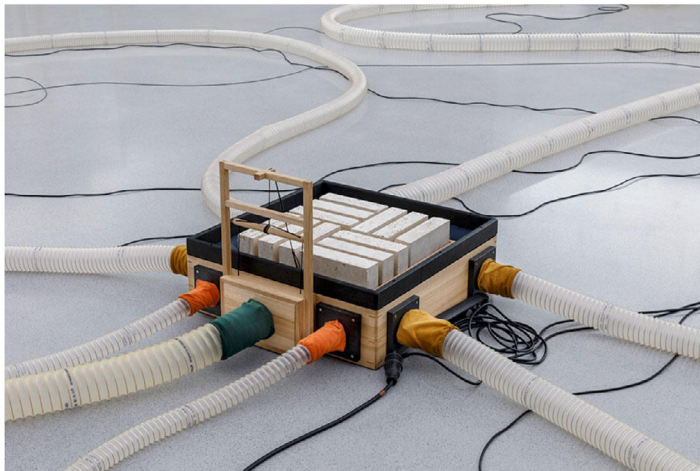
TA Working with Chris and Éric – or with others whose practices involve recording sound – is actually very similar to how I work with improvisation: it's about knowing how to insert yourself correctly into the present tense or how to find your spot in a complex situation. The act of recording is precisely this: how you position yourself within the frame of what you're trying to record. In Éric's work, for instance, there's a dynamic process. He's not in a fixed position just letting the tape roll. He's actively moving the microphone, sculpting the sound, focusing on particular frequencies, on certain matters like air movement or a detail in the sound. From more traditional musicians to more contemporary improvisers, I started paying attention to how each of them works and what singular qualities they bring to the table. When you and I worked together on *Organ Within*, I asked you to bring an instrument you like, and you came with a violin. I'm interested in discovering people's affinities, their sensibilities and methods of doing, rather than in dictating what I want from them.



Tarek Atoui, *I/E (Container)*, 2013, performance view, FIAC, Carrousel du Louvre, Paris, France. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; photograph: Marc Damage

CSY What would you say is your own singularity? Or do you feel yourself increasingly becoming like a conductor?

TA To be honest, yes: sometimes I'm hosting; sometimes I'm performing; sometimes I'm just giving instructions. It's about wearing all these different hats. Sometimes I also have to step in and be the guy who says, 'Okay, this is how we're going to do it.' So, it's not totally open, but it is about being hospitable and trying as much as possible to create a space in which everybody can feel like they are in the right place.



Tarek Atoui, *Souffle Continu, Organ Within*, 2022, in collaboration with Alan Affichard, Loïc Martin and Vincent Martial, exhibition view, Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2024. Courtesy: © Tarek Atoui, kurimanzutto, New York, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria; photograph: Markus Tretter

CSY I'm interested in this idea of being hospitable. Where does that come from?

TA The notion of hospitality is deeply embedded in all cultures, but especially in the Middle East, where it has significant societal value. It is not only ingrained in daily life, but also celebrated throughout history in poetry and literature. It's a quality that individuals are expected to display at all times, ever-ready to extend generosity and warmth. I grew up with this understanding, so hospitality naturally became a fundamental consideration in my work, too.

True improvisation is not random; it's the result of years of dedication, honing unique sounds, techniques and identities.

In the context of a biennial, for instance, where there are numerous artists and constant activity, it's essential to ensure that the environment feels comfortable for those you have invited to participate, enabling transitional moments to happen in meaningful ways when moving between different cultural or artistic worlds.

Hospitality, in this sense, involves a careful and responsible approach to bringing ideas and people together. It also means respecting those who improvise. True improvisation is not random; it's the result of years of dedication, honing unique sounds, techniques and identities. When you welcome an improviser, you acknowledge this journey and provide a space in which their individuality can flourish. For musicians, hospitality is about respecting the personal and cultural 'baggage' they bring. It's about creating an environment where their work is honoured and can express itself fully, without being stifled or diminished.

C. Spencer Yeh

Tarek Atoui on Hospitality, Collaboration and Expanding Musical Instruments

Frieze, January 8, 2025.

<https://urlr.me/qUFNXJ>



Tarek Atoui, *The Whisperers*, 2023–24, exhibition view, Luma Westbau, Zürich, Switzerland. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; photograph: Nelly Rodriguez

CSY Let's talk about your forthcoming exhibition at Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan – your first solo show in Italy – which will bring together existing works with new commissions.

TA I don't consider these new works, so much as a natural progression in my practice. I've made tons of instruments and I haven't fully explored the potential of them all. They're instruments – they're not meant to be used for just one piece or one exhibition – so reusing them is simply common sense. My proposal for the exhibition at HangarBicocca is an homage to improvisation, and comes as a sequel to my current show at Kunsthhaus Bregenz [KUB]. While my proposition at KUB brought together three distinct projects, each presented on a different floor of the museum, the exhibition in Milan will dismantle and reassemble these projects in a new composition, using HangarBicocca's vast space. This will be done as a ten day improvisation that will be taking place with my team, the museum's team and myself.

CSY Don't you find there's always this pressure to do something new?

TA In the art world, it took some time for galleries and museums to embrace this idea of repeating the same works or using the same instruments in different contexts. There doesn't have to be just one or two editions; it can be infinite. So, it's a whole different logic than applies to painting, for instance. It's just following its own logic, and that's what I like about it. For HangarBicocca, instead of producing new artworks, the innovation is in the work method and extending my approach and practice of improvisation.



Tarek Atoui, *Souffle Continu, Wind House #1*, 2023, in collaboration with Johannes Goebel, Alan Affichard, Gérard Perrin and Mayeul Reignault (Perron et Frères), installation view, Kunsthau Bregenz, 2024. Courtesy: © Tarek Atoui, Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria; photograph: Markus Tretter

CSY When did you first present all these instruments together?

TA ‘The Wave’, my exhibition for the 2019 Okayama Art Summit, was the first one I did along these lines. I borrowed from *The Ground* [2017], *The Reverse Collection* [2014–16] and *Organ Within* and put a piece together that had a totally different meaning.

CSY In a number of these works, it feels like you are drawing on different elemental forces: *Organ Within*, for instance, is very reliant on the act of pushing air; *The Whisperers* [2021–22], on the other hand, has to do with friction.

TA You’re right, there is friction in *The Whisperers*. This came from using systems and acoustic environments that can amplify and produce sound out of vibrations in materials, elements in contact with each other, conjugated together. *The Whisperers* are also inspired by four educational workshop sessions I held with students from my son’s kindergarten class at the École alsacienne in Paris between November 2020 and June 2021. These assemblages of plastic, wood, brass, water, bronze, glass and stone allow for experimentation with the acoustic properties of each material and how they transmit and reflect sound. So, *The Whisperers* are meant to channel sound, rather than function as instruments per se.



Tarek Atoui, *Waters' Witness*, 2020–23, exhibition view,
Kunsthhaus Bregenz, 2024. Courtesy: © Tarek Atoui,
Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Austria; photograph: Markus Tretter

CSY Yet, at the same time, there still is the opportunity to modulate and adjust things so that the piece can move in certain directions. And there's also the element of a 'master brain' or computer that can play a composition when no one is there. Can you touch on that?

TA This is also something that became important to explore for me, because it's effectively an extension of the techniques that I was using initially – computer programming and electronics – and of the way I compose with these interfaces and software. The 'master brain' you mention, which is the software I write, can be automated. That allows me, or anyone else, to compose generative, algorithmic pieces that bring these instruments to life in fun ways without the performers being present. The movements of motors, switches and instruments all become part of the composition. This, in turn, broadens the scope of what an instrument is and makes us reflect on how the sound is being extracted and how we can see it happen.

CSY Can you talk about the composition process and how it relates to individuality?

TA Most of my instruments aren't made by me; they are crafted by people whose profession is to make them. As I was saying earlier, they are not like artists' limited editions or numbered series. The maker has the authority to make as many instruments as they want. So, you don't need to buy the instrument as an artwork from a gallery, you can buy it from the maker. What you buy from the gallery – or what the collectors and institutions have access to – is the composition through which these instruments come to life.



Tarek Atoui, performance view, 2024, Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria.
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; photograph:
Miro Kuzmanovic

CSY I find your point about what an instrument might be very interesting. When you look at *The Reverse Collection* or *Organ Within*, you can immediately tell that these are objects which haven't existed before, yet they are still recognizable as instruments. However, in a large-scale installation such as *The Rain* [2023] – an immersive soundscape featuring an array of traditional Korean percussion instruments – each element operates as a component part of the whole, like an ingredient in a recipe.

TA With *The Rain*, I wanted to create something that had a sense of multiplicity. I wanted to use a variety of sounds – shimmering, dripping, rubbing, friction – to build up acoustic layers to give the *feeling* of rain rather than just the *sound* of rain. To do this, I started from the Korean drum tradition, working with a drum maker named Seok Seo to deconstruct the whole vocabulary of the instrument – the ropes, the skins, the materials – and rebuilding it in such a way that we could play our drums using heat, vibration, water and wind. Over a period of five years, we made about 50 hybridizations of drums, a big orchestra that played together to produce this more complex sound. *The Rain* comes from my travels and explorations throughout Southeast and East Asia, from Korean percussion to traditional wind instruments common to Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Japan, Korea and China – something I hope to share with audiences in the years to come.

Numéro



Tout savoir sur l'artiste Tarek Atoui, sculpteur du son exposé à l'IAC

Chaque semaine, *Numéro* décrypte le travail d'un artiste contemporain exposé actuellement. Ici, focus sur l'artiste franco-libanais Tarek Atoui, sculpteur du son, à l'affiche de sa première exposition personnelle en France à l'IAC de Villeurbanne.

L'artiste Tarek Atoui, sculpteur du son et créateur d'instruments

Véritable architecte et sculpteur du son, **Tarek Atoui** en fait le cœur des installations et performances qu'il réalise depuis une vingtaine d'années. Né au Liban en 1980, ce Français d'adoption entre dans l'art contemporain par la musique : une formation en composition électro-acoustique, puis une expérience en tant que directeur artistique du STEIM – centre de recherche dédié aux nouveaux instruments de musique à Amsterdam – lui ouvrent un riche champ de possibles. Depuis, l'homme conçoit des objets sonores qui mêlent matériaux séculaires et techniques traditionnelles, entre branches d'arbres, pierres de granit et récipients en bronze utilisés comme instruments, cymbales, hauts-parleurs, harmonicas et platines vinyles, avec des machines informatiques créées sur mesure, que les mécanismes déclenchent automatiquement ou qui captent les vibrations de leur environnement. Souvent collaboratives, ses œuvres sont régulièrement créées à l'issue de workshops, avec par exemple des élèves de maternelle ou des personnes sourdes et malentendantes. L'artiste, représenté en France par la galerie Chantal Crousel, a déjà exposé à la Biennale de Venise, à la Tate Modern ou encore au Mudam.

Matthieu Jacquet
Tout savoir sur l'artiste Tarek Atoui, sculpteur du son exposé à l'IAC
Numéro, January 5, 2024.
<https://urls.fr/UCS5rq>



Vue de l'exposition "The Drift" de Tarek Atoui à l'IAC, Villeurbanne, 2023. © Thomas Lannes.

Tarek Atoui à l'IAC : sa première exposition institutionnelle en France

Pour sa première exposition monographique dans une institution française, **Tarek Atoui** propose à l'**IAC** – Institut d'Art Contemporain de Villeurbanne – une expérience visuelle et sonore dans laquelle les visiteurs sont invités à utiliser leurs oreilles autant que leurs yeux et leurs mains. D'une salle à l'autre, l'artiste franco-libanais égrène ainsi une soixantaine d'instruments de son invention : ensemble de sept grands tubes noirs traversant presque toute une salle, harmonica électronique de poche à six hauts-parleurs, ensemble de pierres volcaniques plates sur pilotis, ou encore totem surplombé d'un bol en bronze rempli d'eau... Si certaines s'animent automatiquement grâce à des machines conçues pour l'occasion, d'autres invitent le visiteur à les manipuler lui-même, tandis que certaines restent silencieuses, attendant les interventions ponctuelles de l'artiste et laissant le visiteur dans l'attente d'une potentielle activation.



Tarek Atoui, "Whispering Playground" (2021). Courtesy de l'artiste.

L'œuvre choisie par l'artiste : la symphonie du familier

Une installation étonnante et complexe trône au milieu d'une des salles de l'IAC. Plusieurs éléments apparaissent, posés au sol sur un tapis gris : un seau en métal, une platine et un tas de vinyles, une caisse claire noire, un bac en plastique transparent, ou encore des petits morceaux de bois géométriques, rappelant les blocs d'un jeu de tangram. Si a priori rien ne semble relier ces objets familiers, les câbles noirs tissent entre eux une véritable réseau, tel une toile activée par une programmation invisible. Comme de coutume dans les œuvres de Tarek Atoui, l'installation s'anime alors sous les yeux du spectateur interloqué : d'un côté, des balles de ping pong vibrent légèrement sur la caisse claire, de l'autre, un tube d'arrosage goutte à goutte fait discrètement résonner le seau, pendant qu'un deuxième fait couler l'eau sur la cymbale en équilibre sur le bac, générant une symphonie discrète, accessible aux plus attentifs d'entre nous.

Les mots de Tarek Atoui

"Le Whispering Playground est une œuvre pivot à la fois par sa symbolique, et son rapport avec les éléments de l'exposition. C'est une forme de synthèse des différentes directions qu'explore ma série The Whisperers, et particulièrement le Whispering Manual qui présente une série d'ateliers pédagogiques. L'œuvre est un point de rencontre des différents axes de ma pratique : la composition, l'exposition mais aussi l'atelier et la pédagogie. Cette installation est très sérieusement composée, mais a été pensée avec des objets de la vie de tous les jours, que l'on peut trouver dans une salle de classe, à la maison ou dans d'autres lieux. Elle est à la fois œuvre et espace d'activation, puisqu'elle est avant tout destinée à des ateliers et à des moments de pédagogie, qui ont lieu sur sa surface et sa topologie.

Le Whispering Playground est comme un microcosme de tout ce qu'on voit et rencontre dans l'exposition "The Drift" : les différents modes d'écoute qui peuvent être visuels, vibratoires, oraux ; les différents matériaux tels que la pierre, le plastique, le métal ou le bois ; mais aussi les différents mécanismes de production de son comme la rotation, l'eau ou la vibration. J'aime beaucoup cette pièce, qui a été pour moi d'une grande inspiration et d'une simplicité complexe – ce qui me plaît toujours dans la production de mon travail."



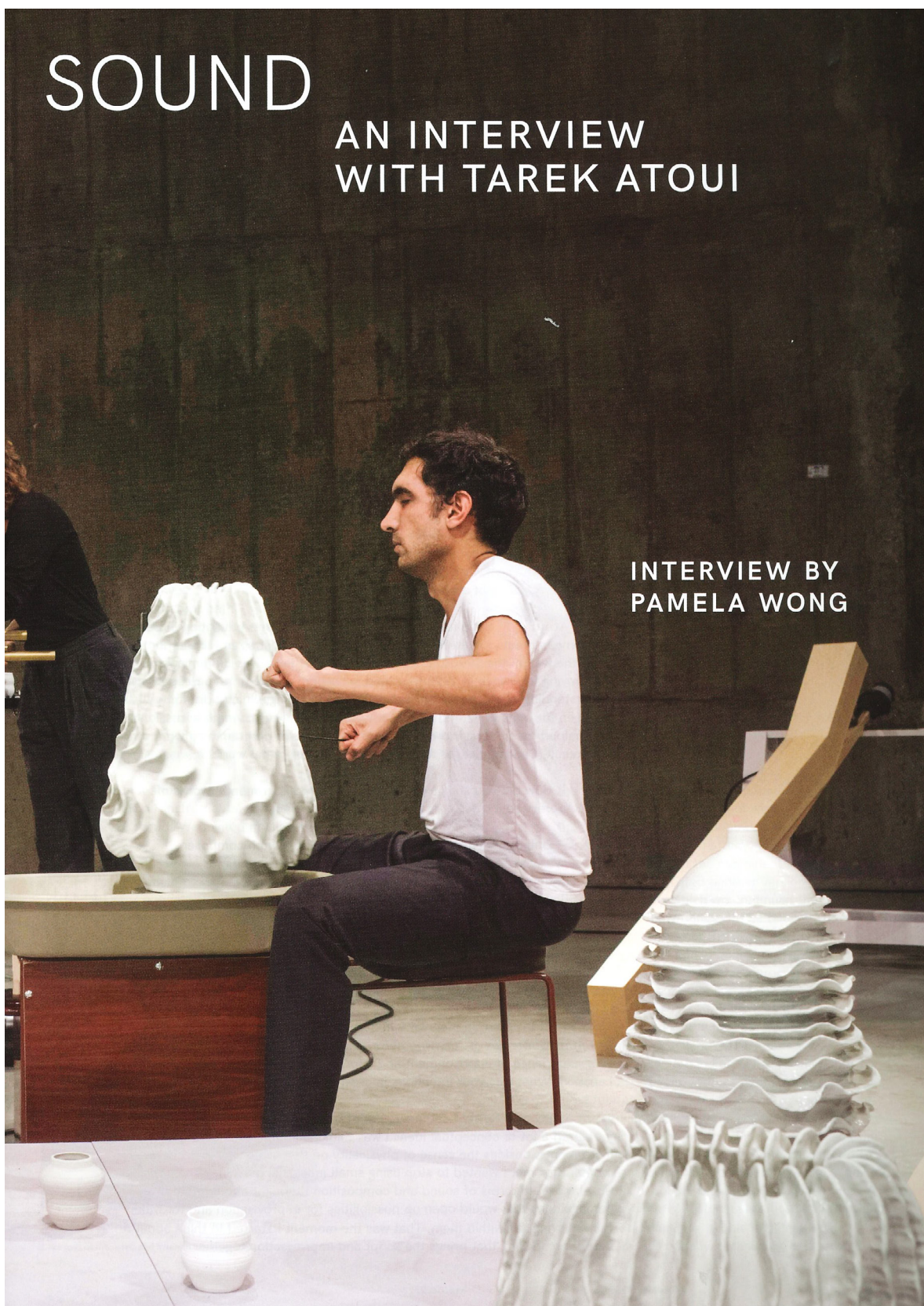
Tarek Atoui, "Whispering Playground" (2021). Courtesy de l'artiste.



SOUND

AN INTERVIEW
WITH TAREK ATOUI

INTERVIEW BY
PAMELA WONG



Over the past two decades, Tarek Atoui has established a distinctive experimental sonic practice, working in the interdisciplinary spaces of contemporary art—where it is possible to synthesize and hybridize elements of genres such as electronic music, live performances, and sculptural installations into new formats that defy a singular cultural mode of production. Born in 1980 amid the Lebanese civil war (1975–90) and having lived in France since his university years, Atoui has traveled extensively to connect with the musical practices of different cultures. Most recently, he performed an electroacoustic composition, *Prelude to Rain* (2023), with a Korean instrument maker at the opening of the 14th Gwangju Biennale. In September, the latest iteration of his touring installation project *Waters' Witness* (2020) will take place at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, in Sydney. Following the Gwangju opening, *ArtAsiaPacific* caught up with Atoui to discuss the visual, tactile, and audio aspects of sound; the engineering process behind his projects on the history of instrument-making; and how our experiences with sonic elements shape our perception of the world.



TAREK ATOUI performing in Sharjah, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation.

Pamela Wong What was your experience of the music and art scenes in Beirut after the civil war? And how did your subsequent move to France shape your understanding of art?

Tarek Atoui Despite never receiving a music or arts education in Beirut I became interested in literature, math, physics, chemistry, and theater. After the war, in the 1990s, a number of small art initiatives did emerge, but moving to France in 1998 to attend art school allowed me to deepen my understanding of electronic music. I had started DJing, which I did for a while between the ages of 17 and 21, but it was really my love of math and science that helped me understand how sound and computer programming work. As a result, I became eager to explore more experimental work.

PW How did you shift from DJing to making experimental works of contemporary sound?

TA One of my earliest influences was the late Dutch composer Michel Waisvisz. He was a pioneer in considering instruments for electronic improvisation and real-time software for techniques of sampling and digital processing. His works influenced how I think and make instruments; how I regard aspects of gesture, movement, and fluidity; and how electronic tools such as computers and sensors allow improvisation to be more fluid. For example, with the machines that I built for *Un-drum* (2009–) I was thinking about the stage—about physicality, movement, and engaging with the act of making and playing music.

PW At the Sharjah Biennial 9 in 2009 you performed the first version of *Un-drum: Strategies of surviving noise*, a painful but powerful piece exploring your experience of imprisonment and interrogation during the 2006 invasion of Lebanon. What was your intentions in creating this work?

TA It was a form of catharsis. But at the same time it's an event that mobilized a lot of conceptual ideas I was thinking about. Building these instruments, besides the sense of physicality on that scale, was a decisive moment for me. I wanted to stop using small industrial machines and consider how I move. In terms of sound and composition I thought about creating compositions that would open up possibilities for improvisation and for other things to happen within them. That was the moment I started to think about a way of composing that brings the script and improvisation together.

PW The first iteration of *Un-drum* was personal to begin with. Later on, you created a Chinese version based on audio you collected from the time of the Cultural Revolution, a period that witnessed the destruction of numerous sonic traditions. What parallels, if any, did you see between Arabic and Chinese cultures? And how did you build a connection through composition?

TA I first encountered Hu Fang from Guangzhou's Vitamin Creative Space during my first visit to China in 2010. These conversations eventually led to *The Ground* (2010–), which was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2019. After a few visits to China, I realized how even under the apogee of the Cultural Revolution, there are art forms that the regime could not touch, like certain opera forms, *guqin*, or instruments and traditions that are rooted in the culture. It was interesting for me to observe that part of heritage that constitutes one's identity. It was also liberating, I learned, in the sense of how art can open other realities that a regime cannot get a hold of. It was an important discovery for me as it transformed my work and made it less literal. After looking at these connections and making these instruments, I could see how with the history of classical Arabic music, art thrived even under the Ottoman Empire and totalitarian regimes; there were still changes and a sense of radicality that announced the fall of the regimes themselves. That changed my outlook, and from there I started along a different path.

After five years of observation and conceptualization, these ideas came together in one project. It is a project about space, one that has a compositional approach that looks at instruments. It took time because it was not directly translating something that we learned about *guqin* or agriculture into something else. To begin with, it was translating my observations into principles of sounds, then into objects. After that, it was a case of inviting the constructors, engineers, and craftsman to work on this project with me.

When we first showed this work at Vitamin Creative Space in 2017, we had 11 instruments, some created out of ceramics, electronics, or wood. We invited musicians on residencies at



Installation views of TAREK ATOUI's *The Ground*, 2020, dimensions variable, at Sharjah Art Foundation, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.

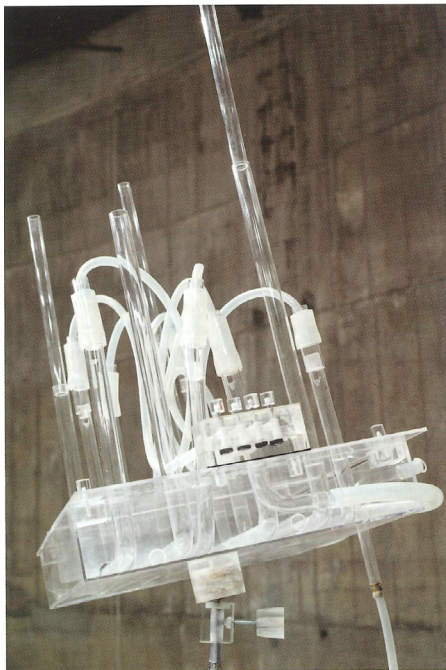


Installation views of TAREK ATOUI's *The Ground*, 2020, dimensions variable, at Sharjah Art Foundation, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.

the Mirrored Gardens space, people whom I was interested in for their sense of experimentation, and their ways of improvisation and composition. They were given ten days to record, arrange, and use the space they want with the machine. Later, we repeated this format and created another version at NTU CCA in Singapore, during which we continued the exploration and discussed how things can be taken further. The decisive chapter was at the Royal Academy of Arts in Stockholm, during which I collaborated with this group of participants via the master's program, and we tested how things come together to create one body, one space. All these years of research and collaboration then materialized as the final version of *The Ground* at the Venice Biennale in 2019, before it traveled to the Pinault Collection in Paris and the Sharjah Art Foundation. *The Ground* has become one of my most fundamental pieces that deal with instruments, performance, compositional space, and research. All these layers were compacted in a work, while at the same time it did not need these references for it to have power and expressiveness. What I like about this work is its quality of addressing a wide range of people with different listening abilities and sensibilities to sound, and engaging people in different ways conceptually, historically, technically, and sensorially.

PW Comprised of kinetic objects that seem to exist independently to create their own sounds, *The Ground* is often viewed as a large sound installation. To what extent did you consider the sculptural aspect of this project? Or, for that matter, in your practice in general?

TA This sculptural aspect exists in other works of mine, such as *The Reverse Collection* (2016), which dealt with notions of space, instrumentation, composition, and stage presence. But, yes, the sculptural aspect is maximized in *The Ground*. The form that I arrived at was one in which it became a space with instruments, where performance could emerge over traces of previous performances. Somehow, it is like a living creature. *The Ground* includes instruments that do not require a human presence to be activated, that constantly activate themselves. The lack of human presence at the surface of this work creates another agency that is liberated from this dimension of bringing the space to life—because the space *is* alive. When the human factor comes in, it adds another value or direction, and something totally different happens.



TAREK ATOU, musical instrument from *The Reverse Collection*, 2014–16, at Tate Modern, London, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Tate Modern.

PW In 2012, for Documenta 13, you created *Metastable Circuit* (2012), which comprises these sensor-based interrelated modules, computer software, and speakers with an interface of sensors, knobs, and buttons that connect to a database of 1,000 sounds of all nature, from instruments, field recordings, hip-hop groups, and other materials that you gathered throughout the years of your travels. Based on this scientific concept of “metastability,” which explores the seemingly paradoxical state of change while maintaining stable, the machine connects differently to sounds every time you play it. It sounds to me a very challenging musical machine to improvise on. What do you see in improvisation?

TA The machine selects sounds randomly or changes its functions. It is difficult to learn, or requires rediscovery every time I turn it on. It was a very risky idea to perform with something that is so hard to control, but it was a nice challenge because it was like building a Lego castle: you build it up until everything collapses and you repeat it again. It's like ushering in a state of attention through careful and concentrated listening, through a whole experience you build with time; your sensibility toward the improvisation; how you work with others; what position you take inside the collective; when do you contribute and when do you go silent—all these things that you learn to weigh in and to measure. Sometimes you need to be more at peace and forget about emotions.

A lot of what I do is in preparation for a moment of improvisation. But since I did not study composition or arrangement in a classical way, I was always more at ease with improvising while thinking about shapes, forms, and scores. It is also a way to generate materials. When you improvise, you generate sound, things you can record, listen to, or use. In creating moments of improvisation, I understand better how to finish a production, how to work with the space, and how to create something that is totally different.



TAREK ATOUI with Chris Watson, *I/E* Elefsina recording sessions, 2015, launching hydrophones at the beach near the port and recording in Percephone cave in Elefsina, Greece. Photos by Alexandre Guirkinger. Courtesy the artist.

PW The process of archiving forms a significant part in your projects, such as *I/E* (2013–), in which you collected sounds from multiple port cities via a container transformed into a mobile studio. What is it about port cities that fascinates you?

TA Firstly, I come from Beirut, which is a port city. And because of my knowledge in economics I was fascinated by cities that developed their entire economy from being a harbor. The reality of the harbor tells us about what is inside the city and how the inside functions based on the level of activity, the type of goods that are exported or imported, and the important types of materials that are required. You can also observe the environment and demographics around harbors, such as its industries, natural reserves, airports, and human lives. Listening to the water was also informative. You have silent water and you have agitated water, with boats, wildlife, construction sounds, explosions. The water speaks about the land and what humans are doing on that land. It becomes an interesting exploration as I build a collection of recordings and imagine how they would connect to a travelling container. When the container arrives at the harbor it generates performances and encounters and allows people to enter the space. These days, in cities such as Singapore or Hong Kong, the harbor has become a fenced area with high security. For me it was a way to return the harbor to the people. For me *I/E* represents this idea of import and export, inhale and exhale, interior and exterior.

PW Alongside the historical aspect brought about by your archival approach, for projects such as *The Reverse Collection*, there is a sense of universality in which you explore the similarities of instruments from different cultures. Are you attempting to address the universal human experience?

TA When you have a collection of instruments from all over the world in an anthropology museum with interwoven histories—colonial, pre-colonial—the cultures and traditions of these instruments lose their context in regard to where, how, and when they were made. They become sound objects of a universal and timeless kind. And despite these performers and instrument makers coming from different cultural backgrounds, we all share the universal language of improvisation and experimentation, such as “extended techniques,” which means using found objects and elements to play any instrument, like John Cage’s extended piano. That is a universal language I rely on.

The third dimension is in the scores and compositional approach, which do not reference anything cultural or ethnic. Instead, it looks at the materials. Abstract sound is also universal in that sense. In all, the project was an attempt to create a collection of instruments based on the anthropological one, with the same sense of universality that I saw in the original collection.

PW I am interested in how you choose your materials or tools. Is it a process of trial and error? For instance, *WITHIN* (2012-) began with workshops with Deaf students, but later evolved into a sophisticated set of unique instruments expressing sound through their tactile qualities. Can you tell me more about the details of building these sets?



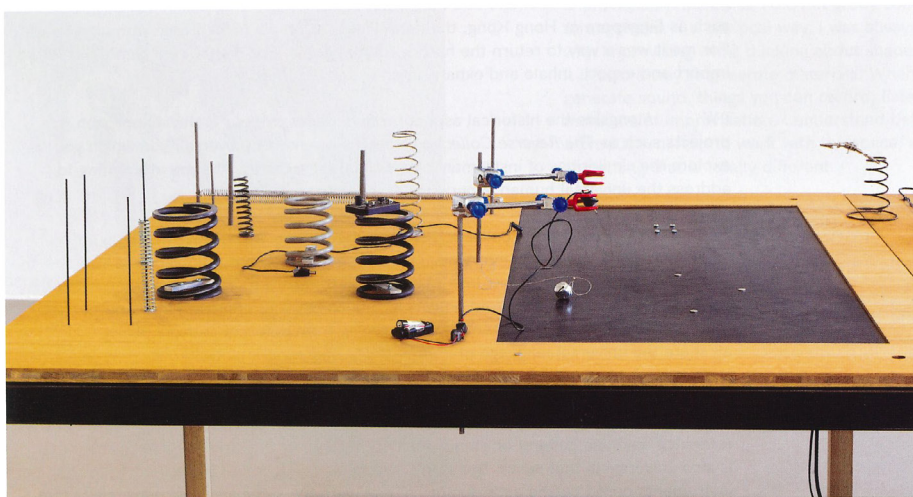
Performer from TAREK ATOUI's, *WITHIN*, 2017, from performance at Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2017. Photo by Florian Kleinfenn. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

TA It was a process of trial and error, as well as a learning process. I was learning what sound means to Deaf people as they were learning what sound is and discovering new relations to sound. It was like a double-ended exploration. Of course, there were moments when we failed, but together we found something different. This level of sophistication and achievement in instrument-making was very much due to creating valuable moments between hearing and Deaf people, between highly qualified experts and beginners. For example, during my three-month-long stay at the school for hearing and Deaf kids in Norway we worked on ideas of percussion, designing patterns, drawings, the relationship between drawing and rhythm, sound and touch. After a series of workshops developing sketches of some of the instruments, we put together sound artists and instrument makers with Deaf people to test the ideas, prototyping, getting feedback on the accessibility of these ideas.

When I was working on *WITHIN*, I felt that the combination of expertise and abilities, rather than that of sound and musicians. It was creating situations of hospitality, as in how to build an ideal environment for these instrument makers to work on these challenging ideas, and for the Deaf people, who never did music, to feel comfortable and concerned with the topic of music, and to feel that they have a knowledge that is as valuable as their collaborators.

PW For your installation *The Elemental Set* (2019-23) and your performance *Prelude to Rain* (2023) at the 14th Gwangju Biennale in April, you delve into the cycle of transformation through elements of water, fire, and earth. In your previous works, you seem to concentrate more on human sounds and activities. Has there been a shift from a human-centric view to focus more on nature?

TA I usually work on multiple projects at the same time, so I wouldn't call it a shift. But, yes, in this performance these sounds have very natural origins. There were some [human voices] but used differently. Indeed, it is not like field recordings or collecting materials, it is a much more composed result from the research and experiments in the studio, conducted with musicians and instrument makers such as In-seok Seo that are very much based on these elements and the sounds of the drums.



Partial installation view of TAREK ATOUI's *Waters' Witness*, 2020, at the Fridericianum, Kassel. Photo by Andrea Rossetti. Courtesy the artist and Fridericianum.



Installation view of TAREK ATOUÏ's *Elemental Set*, 2019–23, ceramic, percussion instruments, water systems, sound, and electronic components, dimensions variable, at the 14th Gwangju Biennale, 2023. Photo by glimworkers. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

The performance is the next chapter of *The Elemental Set*, and the full manifestation of *The Rain* will be performed at Art Sonje Center in November 2023. *The Elemental Set* at the Gwangju Biennale was meant for education and workshops, as it is being activated and used by kids and others. *The Rain* is a composition, much like *The Ground* that I created in China, which deploys different narratives but sits on the same thread. *The Rain* will include a lot of natural sounds, as it conceptualizes these acoustic sounds out of heat, wind, water, etcetera. For me it is great fun to have this framework, not to complicate it with layers but just to stick to the materials as much as possible.

PW Your projects remind me of the idea of the “angel of history,” originally proposed by Walter Benjamin, which imagines a guardian angel recording all of our activities. To what extent are we recording human activities? And at the end of the day is anyone going to discover your records?

TA That’s a good point. If we look at it this way I believe there is an attention to oral traditions and cultures. Even though I also enjoy written things, books, scripted and documented materials, I’m much more skeptical about the generation of these materials. What I’m doing is about present, live situations, moments of being together, being in a space or situation that is very hard to translate to other formats, such as texts, videos, CDs, recordings, albums, or any kind of documentation. I’m still on the ephemeral side. I like the ephemerality of things because I believe that it’s one extension of modernity. There is a way to balance our presence on social media, or our relationship to artificial intelligence, and all these questions that we are dealing with. This aspect of ephemerality is important because it makes our reality valuable, and it completes our modernity, balancing it in an essential way. I don’t need to expand my audience. I don’t need to be in touch with 20,000 people through the internet as much as I need to be in touch with 200 people in a space and physically on a project. That is a choice I made and I’m trying to work along it.



Detail of *Elemental Set*, 2019–23. Photo by glimworkers. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

Le Monde

Avec le plasticien et DJ Tarek Atoui, faire du son une matière première

L'artiste d'origine libanaise, qui façonne des sculptures sonores, sera exposé pour la première fois en France à l'Institut d'art contemporain de Villeurbanne, en octobre.



L'artiste et compositeur électroacoustique Tarek Atoui dans son atelier parisien, le 24 juillet 2023.
AUDOIN DESFORGES POUR « LE MONDE »

Si vous prêtez bien l'oreille, au gré d'une balade dans le Marais, à Paris, vous entendrez peut-être une étrange musique sourdre des bas-fonds, à travers une soupente aux vitres brisées. C'est là, dans la cave voûtée d'un hôtel particulier, que Tarek Atoui a installé son atelier, depuis quatre ans. En bas de l'escalier, un incroyable bric-à-brac : des dizaines d'instruments de musique, inventés par le plasticien-DJ-musicien et conçus sur mesure par des artisans du monde entier.

Installé depuis une vingtaine d'années à Paris, l'artiste d'origine libanaise, né en 1980, a fait du son sa matière première. Mais, plutôt que de se contenter de simples concerts, il le sculpte, le façonne, le détourne, en explore plastiquement les qualités. Un travail d'une infinie singularité, qui le fait circuler partout sur la planète, de Chardja (Emirats arabes unis) au Luxembourg, de Yokohama (Japon) à Porto (Portugal). Pinault, Vuitton, il a conquis toutes les fondations privées. Pourtant, jamais Tarek Atoui n'a exposé dans une institution publique française.

Emmanuelle Lequeux
Avec le plasticien et DJ Tarek Atoui, faire du son une matière première
Le Monde, August 1, 2023.
<https://urls.fr/ORbPPH>

L'Institut d'art contemporain de Villeurbanne (Rhône) lui offre sa première chance, à partir de la mi-octobre. Un centre d'art ouvert aux plus folles expériences. L'idéal, pour lui. *« J'ai imaginé l'exposition comme l'articulation d'une décennie de projets, dans l'idée de mélanger tous ces corps de travail, sans les isoler ni les cloisonner, dévoile-t-il. Ce sera comme un grand flux d'énergie, qui traversera l'espace. »* S'y croiseront ainsi les œuvres de la série *The Whisperers*, sculptures poétiques qui conduisent et amplifient le son, et d'autres, créées dans le cadre de *Within*, projet d'instruments de musique conçus en collaboration avec des personnes sourdes et malentendantes.

Une cour de jeu

L'exposition sera comme une cour de jeu, où l'artiste compose avec les instruments, et où ces derniers interagissent : *« Ils peuvent être animés de façon mécanique, ou par un système de larsen, par des vibrations, ou encore par la transformation d'un signal électrique en ondes musicales »*, détaille Tarek Atoui. Le tout construira une sorte de nuage sonore, toujours changeant, enveloppant. *« Depuis une dizaine d'années, j'ai créé plus d'une soixantaine d'instruments, et je me dis qu'il faut peut-être ralentir cette production, pour explorer la façon dont on donne à entendre ces instruments, dont on les perçoit. Mon travail avec le monde des sourds m'a appris que l'expérience du son, c'est bien plus que de lui faire traverser l'air jusqu'à nos oreilles. »*

C'est plutôt une expérience de tout le corps, de ses vibrations, des sensations offertes par la conduction osseuse, par l'électricité. Bref, une synesthésie, qui passe aussi beaucoup par le regard. Avec Tarek Atoui, l'œil écoute, pour reprendre une formule de l'écrivain Paul Claudel. Au sein de ses sculptures, les formes et les matières font voyager le son autrement : la porcelaine, le bois, le papier, une brindille, une bassine d'eau, chaque matière *« joue »*.

Pour l'expliquer, il nous fait toucher du doigt cette percussion inspirée par la tradition coréenne. Les haut-parleurs s'enclenchent, un tremblement de terre. Trois plaques de céramique, fichées près du tambour, y répondent, chacune avec leur résonance : elles ont été moulées à la pâte molle sur une cloche, qui était frappée au moment du moulage. Se souviennent-elles de cet instant tintinnabulant de leur genèse ? *« Je trouve l'idée belle, de les savoir traversées par quelque chose de si intense, et les vibrations de la cloche ont dû travailler la densité de la matière. Un peu comme le bois d'un violon, qui est travaillé par le jeu du violoniste. »*

Pour mettre en place les harmoniques étranges à l'Institut d'art contemporain de Villeurbanne, il compte un bon mois d'installation pour tester le système, relier les instruments, calibrer l'ensemble, jusqu'à « *créer son propre étonnement* ». Oter aussi un maximum de murs, créer des perspectives, des traversées, pour que le son circule. Mais attention, même si la tentation est grande, il sera interdit de toucher, comme dans tout musée. « *Tout sera délicatement balancé, il ne s'agit pas d'en faire un Luna Park où le public peut tourner tous les boutons ; sinon, on n'apprend rien sur l'écoute.* »



L'artiste et compositeur électroacoustique Tarek Atoui dans son atelier parisien, le 24 juillet 2023.
AUDIOIN DESFORGES POUR « LE MONDE »

La pédagogie au centre de l'œuvre

En revanche, toutes sortes d'ateliers seront proposés, aux scolaires, aux familles, aux adultes. Cela n'a rien d'annexe pour Tarek Atoui : cette pédagogie est au centre de son œuvre. « *Pouvoir toucher le son, mettre un micro dans l'eau et percevoir les variations, toutes ces explorations enfantines sont essentielles pour que chacun entre dedans avec ses propres capacités auditives et sa connaissance du phénomène.* »

Emmanuelle Lequeux
Avec le plasticien et DJ Tarek Atoui, faire du son une matière première
Le Monde, August 1, 2023.
<https://urls.fr/ORbPPH>

A ses yeux, Villeurbanne promet d'être un « *chouette terrain de jeu : des associations de sourds, des écoles, toutes sortes de groupes sont intéressés par le projet* ». Pour répondre à de nombreuses demandes, Tarek Atoui va d'ailleurs éditer, avec l'Institut d'art contemporain, un manuel destiné à tous, qui rassemble différents jeux sonores à reproduire chez soi, avec quelques outils de cuisine.



L'artiste et compositeur électroacoustique Tarek Atoui dans son atelier parisien, le 24 juillet 2023.
AUDOIN DESFORGES POUR « LE MONDE »

« *Je viens de l'oralité, écrire pour moi est une douleur, mais j'ai franchi le pas* », s'amuse-t-il, en évoquant ce *Whisperer Manual*, déjà édité en anglais. « *Moi, je suis venu tard à la musique, je n'y ai pas touché avant mes 20 ans, c'est ce qui explique mon aisance pédagogique* », raconte celui qui raffole de ces temps d'atelier avec les enfants, qu'il mène de Cordoue (Espagne) à Istanbul. Il a fait ses premiers pas dans la musique comme DJ, dans son Beyrouth natal. Puis il a filé vers Reims, pour faire des études d'électroacoustique, avant de repartir vers l'Orient.

« *J'ai travaillé avec les enfants de camps de réfugiés palestiniens, avec les gamins qui collectent les poubelles au Caire. Bref, j'ai toujours utilisé ce que je fais pour me mettre en dialogue avec les autres et découvrir des endroits où je n'aurais pu aller.* » C'est une des raisons qui lui ont fait choisir l'art, plutôt que le monde de la musique. « *Je voulais explorer l'univers du son avec une approche plus conceptuelle et abstraite* », dit-il. Et d'ajouter : « *A travers le son, je peux tout revisiter, la matière, l'espace, l'architecture.* »

ARTFORUM

HIGHER FREQUENCIES

Evan Moffitt on Tarek Atoui

HIS HANDS SWAY back and forth as if he is conducting an invisible orchestra. They rarely touch his instruments, which spill across the limestone floor in a tangle of wires and electronic panels; activated by motion sensors, their ethereal sounds echo through the hall. Tarek Atoui is mesmerizing to watch, unusually so for an artist who began his career as a DJ almost three decades ago, and as the sun finally sets behind the vaulted clerestory windows of Luxembourg's Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean—a cathedral-like space designed by I. M. Pei—his performance crescendoes to a rumbling climax.

Stranger than Atoui's movements, however, are the wired-up resonators and amplifying devices for his ongoing work *Waters' Witness*, 2020–, which he activated at MUDAM on October 8, 2022. Piles of steel I beams, hunks of unpolished marble, and pieces of found wood conceal speakers or link up to them externally. Beneath a glass dome, a lever drags a sharp rock across another rock in steady circles, like a Stone Age turntable. Drops of water fall from a beaker into a shallow pool. Most of these materials were sourced from the ports of cities around the world, including Beirut, where Atoui was born and raised. Audio samples recorded at noisy docksides were channeled through each material in order to elicit their unique vibrational frequencies. The resulting soundscape is hauntingly indistinct, like a concerto submerged in amniotic fluid—an effect heightened by the fact that our own bodies are composed mostly of water. If the harbor is the heart of economic activity, *Waters' Witness* is the sound of its pulse.

Twenty years ago, Atoui had just completed his studies in electronic music at the French National Conservatory in Reims when he began playing what he describes as “tribal, almost hardcore, angry techno” at countryside raves in Brittany. As any raver can tell you, techno is felt as much as heard. Good bass will shake you to the bone. When you listen to techno at 180 beats per minute—the speed at which Atoui was playing most of his music—the heart quickens, causing blood to rush through the body in sublime agitation. He sensed there was a physicality to techno, even if he didn't fully understand its implications at the time.

In 2005, Atoui returned to Beirut to record his first album. The city, then in the throes of Lebanon's war with Israel, reverberated with bombs. When he wasn't in the studio, he found himself in the streets recording the destruction with a handheld video camera. He had no real plans for the footage, but that mattered little to

the Hezbollah agents who arrested him one afternoon on suspicion of espionage. Tied up, blindfolded, tortured, and locked in a dark cell, Atoui wondered if he would hear the news that he was going to die.

When he was released two days later, he had gone partially deaf in his left ear. But if a sound wasn't fully audible, he could still pick up its vibrations. Atoui became aware of his body's capacity to act as an acoustic resonator. Back at his decks, he found the small, deft movements of DJing insufficiently physical to express what he was feeling. While a guest director at Amsterdam's Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music, he developed the MIDI controller he later used in *Waters' Witness*, which can be played without touch, like a

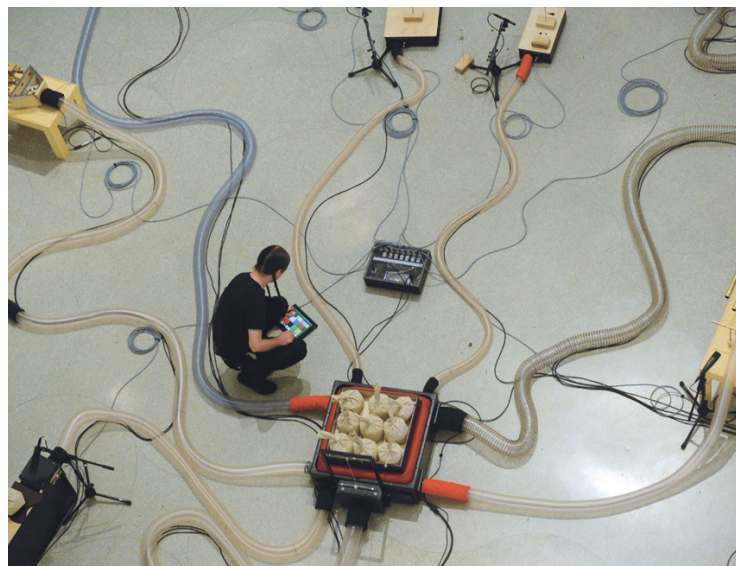
theremin. It allowed his movements to become more fluid, liberating him from the muscle memory of his imprisonment. “After this arrest, I was looking to build something that really allowed for physical expression, and the MIDI controller I developed was a way to claim back this movement, release my energy and frustration,” Atoui told me recently on the phone from the United Arab Emirates, where he was attending the opening of Sharjah Biennial 15.

It was in Sharjah that he first put his invention to the test, in a 2009 piece he called *Un-drum/strategies of surviving noise*. While preparing for the performance, Atoui began working with the Al Amal School for the Deaf to develop instruments—including deeply grooved wooden boxes that amplify the sounds of struck coils and metal bars that look like tuning forks—for those who are hard of hearing. These objects typically act as resonating chambers, their frequencies readily perceptible through touch. “It was meant to



View of “Tarek Atoui: Waters’ Witness,” 2022–23, MUDAM Luxembourg, Photo: Eike Walkenhorst.

Every architectural space has its own unique frequency, and Atoui tweaks his installations to better pluck it from the air.



Clockwise, from top left: Tarek Atoui, *Dahlem Sessions*, 2013–. Performance view, Museen Dahlem—Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, May 2014. From the Eighth Berlin Biennale. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Tarek Atoui, *Organ Within*, 2019. Performance view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 27, 2019. Photo: Enid B. Alvarez. Tarek Atoui, *The Reverse Collection*, 2016. Performance view, Tate Modern, London, September 16, 2016. Photo: Thierry Bal.

break this psychological barrier that some deaf people have that ‘music is not our thing,’” he says. “The act of listening is much broader and wider than just channeling sound through the ear. If we start to pay attention to other ways of listening, a whole horizon of building instruments, of working together, of occupying space, becomes possible.”

Collaboration has since become a central part of Atoui’s practice. He often activates his acoustic installations in live, improvisatory duets with musicians such as Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe, Pauline Oliveros, and C. Spencer Yeh. Each collaborator brings a different intuitive understanding of how sound might travel through an instrument they’ve never played before. Atoui records each performance, sampling them in future sets, creating an iterative composition that builds and swells as it lives on in the world. His method connects Atoui to Minimalist composers such as Steve Reich, while also allowing him to conceive his music more physically. “On a compositional level, I started to work with subtractive methods, triggering a lot of dense sounds and then taking things out, like a mass of noise I was sculpting and carving,” he says, describing a conceptual process literalized by his motion-sensor MIDI controller. This is one reason Atoui prefers to work in arts institutions, where the longer duration of exhibitions—in contrast to one-off concerts or performance

festivals—enables music to gradually change over time.

Every architectural space has its own unique frequency, and Atoui tweaks his installations to better pluck it from the air. Rendering it equally audible to audiences of different hearing abilities is a considerable challenge, however, and means that he must often amplify his performances through counterintuitive means. “Sometimes the best acoustic situation is the worst in terms of performance, or visibility, or accessibility,” he notes. For *Organ Within*, 2019, an event that unfolded in the rotunda of New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Atoui countered the echo in the Frank Lloyd Wright edifice by placing his speakers at the very top of its coiled structure. His sets are always brightly illuminated, allowing deaf audiences to see how he creates the sounds they feel.

In recent years, Atoui has been studying historical instruments and, in some cases, reverse-engineering them. For the 2014 Berlin Biennale, he recorded musicians playing folk instruments that hadn’t been touched in decades inside Museen Dahlem, and in *The Reverse Collection*, 2016, presented at London’s Tate Modern, he asked instrument makers to blind-build what they thought had made the sounds he captured for the Biennale. Atoui was less interested in the production of accurate re-creations than in giving physical expression to different ears. His constructed archive testifies to the

fact that music is just as variable as the bodies that perceive it.

Days before we spoke, Atoui was in the Atlas Mountains of North Africa playing drums with a Berber tribe. He has been investigating different forms of percussion in preparation for a project on Korean drumming that will open at the Gwangju Biennale on April 7. All the instruments that will be used for the event—woodwinds, strings, brass—are capable of percussion, and because drums vibrate at lower frequencies, they’re singularly perceptible to deaf listeners. The project has taken him back to his days as a DJ: “I got these huge drums that are super bassy and almost play hard techno, even though they’re seventy years old!”

Atoui’s exploration of traditional instruments is an extension of his efforts to bridge differences of culture, age, and ability by amplifying them. Each drum, each body, each space has a particular sound that, when felt deep within the body, links us by our most fundamental senses. “What I strive for is to give value to things by listening to them,” he says. “And, by listening to them, better understanding the value of an object, the importance of a phenomenon, the reality of a place.” Listen not just with your ears but with your whole body, and you’ll hear past the noise. □

EVAN MOFFITT IS A WRITER, CRITIC, AND INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST BASED IN NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

TAREK ATOUI objets sonores en migration

Marcella Lista



Le Mudam, musée d'art contemporain du Luxembourg, présente jusqu'au 5 mars 2023 *Waters' Witness*, une grande installation de Tarek Atoui, créateur d'œuvres-instruments et de milieux sonores.

Waters' Witness. Vue de l'exposition *exhibition*
view Mudam Luxembourg, 2022. © Ph. Eike
Walkenhorst / Mudam Luxembourg).
(Pour tous les visuels *all pictures*: Court. l'artiste et
galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris)

■ Dans le Grand Hall du Mudam, l'installation de Tarek Atoui, *Waters' Witness*, déploie une composition sonore itinérante, où aucun système d'amplification reconnaissable n'est visible. Colonnes de bois contenant du compost, poutres métalliques noires et blocs de marbre brut dessinent les grandes lignes d'une topographie dispersée. À portée de câbles, toute une génération d'assemblages techniques distillent des flux, absorbent des liquides et viennent troubler la quiétude de plans d'eau. Systèmes de goutte à goutte, pompes à air et autres éléments cinétiques produisent tour à tour des micro-événements au sein de ce que l'on perçoit comme un circuit interconnecté d'impulsions. Il faut déambuler, s'asseoir, se pencher vers le sol pour appréhender pleinement le paysage sonore qui émane de chacun de ces éléments : une composition contrastée de sources plus ou moins identifiées, qui passe à travers ces divers matériaux et dispositifs comme autant de filtres ou de résonateurs. L'exposition présente la troisième itération d'un projet ouvert,

commencé au Fridericianum de Cassel en 2020 et poursuivi à la fondation Serralves en 2022, où Tarek Atoui développe avec le musicien Éric La Casa une enquête aurale sur les grands ports marchands à travers la planète : Athènes, Singapour, Abou Dhabi, Beyrouth, Porto. Partant de prises de son directes effectuées localement, dans la tradition du *field recording*, l'œuvre entremêle des gestes plastiques, musicaux et conceptuels que l'artiste a développés au cours des quinze dernières années.

MÉTASTABILITÉ

Tarek Atoui est né à Beyrouth en 1980. C'est à l'âge de 18 ans qu'il arrive en France pour mener des études de commerce avant de bifurquer vers la pratique musicale. Déjà rompu au *sampling* de la culture DJ et à l'improvisation électronique, il s'inscrit dans l'atelier d'électroacoustique Césaré, le Centre national de création musicale créé à Reims par le compositeur Christian Sebille, passeur de l'avant-garde musicale des années 1960 et

1970. Dix ans plus tard, il est directeur artistique invité au STEIM d'Amsterdam (Studio for Electro Instrumental Music), une institution entièrement dédiée à l'invention d'instruments électro-acoustiques. La musique en tant que mise au travail d'un matériau acoustique à travers une étendue concrète d'espace apparaît très tôt dans les réflexions de Tarek Atoui. « Depuis le temps de mes études en musique électroacoustique et en art sonore, dit-il, j'ai compris la pratique de l'exposition de formes d'art sonore dans l'espace, à travers les œuvres de John Cage, de Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis et Cornelius Cardew – des compositeurs qui ont étendu notre compréhension de ce qu'est la composition et introduit, au sein de cet acte, des éléments de durée, d'espace et de hasard, ainsi que des éléments graphiques et génératifs. (1) »

Son œuvre se construit dans cet espace expérimental inachevé, constamment en chantier, qui élabore sans cesse de nouveaux instruments pour repenser les potentialités du jeu, des formes d'adresse et de partage de l'intention musicale. Dans l'une de ses premières performances présentées dans le monde de l'art, *Un-drum / strategies of surviving noise*, donnée à ciel ouvert dans le site archéologique de Darat el Funun à la 9^e biennale de Sharjah en 2009, l'artiste mixe des sons électroniques dans une gestuelle intense, utilisant des capteurs électromagnétiques qui suivent les mouvements de ses mains. L'œuvre dérive de son expérience de la guerre du Liban de juillet 2006, pendant laquelle l'artiste a été arrêté et brutalisé, perdant en partie son audition à l'oreille gauche. D'emblée, l'émiettement de la matière musicale qui caractérise son œuvre vient activement malmenier l'intelligibilité du son : l'écoute est sollicitée et engagée comme un acte politique. La conception d'instruments électroacoustiques ouverts à une grande diversité d'interprètes constitue rapidement le socle de son travail.

En 2012, il crée pour la Documenta 13 *The Metastable Circuit*. Ce dispositif technique conçu pour la performance associe des tables de mixage et de modulation électroniques avec un programme informatique pensé sur mesure. Il est possible d'y composer en *live* avec plusieurs dizaines de milliers de *micro-samples* – parfois réduits jusqu'à 200 millièmes de seconde –, tirés de pistes que l'artiste accumule depuis des années : des titres de musique pop, des échantillons de *field recording* et des sons de synthèse. La notion de *métastabilité*, empruntée à la chimie, donne la mesure d'un système esthétique qui utilise l'inertie et la durabilité pour créer quelque chose que l'on pourrait qualifier de « milieu sonore » : un continuum acoustique, syncrétique dans sa masse même, où les événements perturbateurs, rapidement absorbés,

produisent des transformations au long cours. Tarek Atoui pense ainsi ses instruments comme des entités corporelles, des organismes capables de métaboliser la pléthore anonyme des sons trouvés et les actions ponctuelles de ses interprètes. Des instruments, autrement dit, qui soient capables de faire face à l'impondérable.

TRANSMISSION

Les invitations que Tarek Atoui reçoit à explorer des archives musicales lui donnent l'occasion de développer une réflexion méta-historique. *On and from Tarab*, commencé en 2011, puise dans la plus grande collection de musique classique arabe – la collection de Kamal Kasar, AMAR Foundation à Beyrouth. Le *sampling* et la réinterprétation de ce corpus donne lieu à des sessions auxquelles s'associent des musiciens et musiciennes provenant du jazz et d'autres traditions d'improvisation. « Je ne cherchais pas à raviver une tradition perdue, précise Atoui, ni à livrer un constat sur l'histoire de la région. (2) » Ce qui l'intéresse, c'est la tradition de transmission orale d'une musique qui, avec le refus de l'écriture et de la notation, résiste au droit d'auteur et à la propriété. Lorsqu'il est invité à travailler avec un autre objet historique, le synthétiseur pionnier DIMI conçu par le finlandais Erkki Kurenniemi dans les années 1960, l'artiste met en place un circuit interconnecté où les parties individuelles improvisées de quatre musiciens se dissolvent en une seule masse sonore, ne permettant de distinguer aucune voix.

Dans *The Reverse Sessions* et *The Reverse Collection*, entre 2014 et 2016, Atoui s'intéresse à la collection ethnographique d'instruments musicaux conservée aux musées de Dahlem, à Berlin. Ce corpus, chargé de l'histoire coloniale de l'Allemagne, est soumis par l'artiste à une série de déplacements. Atoui obtient tout d'abord l'autorisation de convier

des musiciens et des musiciennes à improviser collectivement sur ces objets de musée. À l'issue des concerts enregistrés, des partitions sont notées et, à leur tour, ces matériaux dérivés des artefacts originaux sont confiés à des luthiers pour concevoir de nouveaux instruments. De là commence chez Tarek Atoui l'élaboration d'un instrumentarium manufacturé, qui hybride l'électronique et l'acoustique en partant de sonorités dont l'origine est mise à distance. L'Orgue à claquets, le Lithophone, le Koto à tuyaux, les Trompes de Poutine, le Violon à Roue Hybride, l'Aquaflûte, la Toui, et d'autres instruments nouvellement baptisés, incarnent d'une certaine manière la transition d'un patrimoine contesté. Pardelà l'objet de musée, une expression vivante de la collection de Dahlem peut être restituée à la communauté et remise en circulation dans le monde. C'est cet état d'esprit qui anime l'artiste lorsqu'il étend son expérimentation avec des matériaux et des techniques de tous temps, pour produire des sons musicaux.

Le travail du métal, de la terre, du bois, de la peau, est poussé par Atoui au-delà d'une lutherie conforme. Jeter une plaque d'argile contre une cloche de bronze pour en recueillir la résonance, faire goutter de l'émail à la surface d'une peau de tambour pour en accidenter la fréquence et le timbre, sont quelques-uns des gestes qui examinent les nuances infinies pouvant s'insinuer dans la rencontre entre l'action et la matière. Dans *WITHIN*, projet de recherche au long cours qu'il entreprend avec Council (2013-17), l'occasion est donnée par l'artiste à des communautés de sourds et malentendants de concevoir avec lui des instruments spécifiques, où les infrabasses, sen-

The Toui. 2016. Fabriqué par *fabricated by* Léo Maurel, Strasbourg. Vue de l'exposition *show view* The Reverse Collection, Tate Modern, Londres, 2016. (Ph. Thierry Bal)



Marcella Lista

Tarek Atoui, *objets sonores en migration*

artpress, N°508, March, 2023, p.42-47.

sations tactiles et visuelles jouent un rôle prépondérant. De façon générale, cet instrumentarium va au-delà du simple détournement musical de l'objet trouvé – tel que proposé historiquement par les performances Fluxus. Seule une fabrication spécifique permet d'affiner les paramètres acoustiques des objets sonores et, selon l'artiste, de « leur donner plusieurs fonctions dans une même pièce (3) ».

ŒUVRE-INSTRUMENT

Dans le projet *Waters' Witness* convergent deux chantiers de recherche de Tarek Atoui. Le premier concerne l'instrument collectif *I/E*, conçu par l'artiste en 2013 et développé depuis dans de multiples contextes. Le second est une recherche pointue sur la conduction du son en milieu aquatique, entreprise dans le cadre d'un atelier et d'une exposition intitulés *The Whisperers*, en 2021. *I/E* vaut pour « Inhale/Exhale ». Cette œuvre-instrument inverse une certaine tradition de la musique électroacoustique : au lieu de traiter le *field recording* à travers la manipulation électronique de sons abstraits, comme a pu le faire Pauline Oliveros dès les années 1960, Atoui procède à une captation de sons ambiants qui, elle-même, devient le filtre pour d'autres sons. *I/E* commence dans un container industriel installé dans l'espace public, qui fut d'abord présenté sur la place du Carrousel du Louvre, en 2013, puis à Elefsina, le port industriel d'Athènes. Ce container customisé devient un outil et habitacle pour enregistrer, stocker et jouer en public. En préambule aux performances, l'environnement acoustique du container est prélevé pour constituer son portrait sonore à travers lequel passe, ensuite, la musique produite sur place. « Quand on a créé cet organisme qui inspire et expire les sons de son

entourage, explique l'artiste, notre rêve était qu'il échoue dans un port pour y créer une bibliothèque sonore. C'était l'idée d'un synthétiseur sonore qui, au lieu de faire de la synthèse avec les sons abstraits d'oscillateurs d'ondes sinusoïdales, faisait de la synthèse avec les sons concrets des *field recordings*. De là, des boîtes en bois (elles-mêmes sous le nom de *I/E*) ont été créées, dans le principe de pédales, de processeurs. Sans faire de la musique concrète, le son concret servait de catalyseur, de morpheur ou d'enveloppe, qui contenait tout le reste. Même si des instruments, des nappes électroniques ou des choses plus tonales arrivent, elles apparaissent comme le détail d'un *field recording*. » Depuis, ces boîtes en bois sont devenues autant d'instruments singuliers. *I/E Elefsina* propose par exemple une boîte de réverbération, utilisant les caractéristiques acoustiques de la grotte de Perséphone à proximité du port. *I/E Abu Dhabi* est une boîte de distorsion, qui annule les spectres en soustrayant un son à un autre, etc. Le bois utilisé pour chacune commente lui aussi le contexte : cèdre du Liban pour Abou Dhabi, un bois longtemps importé vers les Émirats avant la pénurie actuelle, tandis que le bois de tek pour Singapour renvoie à son usage dans la piraterie.

MATÉRIAU SONORE

Dans *Waters' Witness*, ce sont les matériaux concrets qui viennent à présent filtrer les sons de cinq ports captés depuis 2015 par micros ambiants, micros de contacts et hydrophones. Cette bibliothèque est divisée en trois types : les sons mécaniques rendent compte de l'activité des machines, les sons de voix témoignent de celle des présences humaines, tandis que les sons abstraits captent les résonances et réverbérations de ces activités dans les éléments conducteurs tels que l'eau et le métal. Ces trois ensembles de sons circulent tour à tour dans deux circuits qui fonctionnent

comme en stéréophonie à travers le Grand Hall du Mudam, partant des colonnes de compost à l'intérieur desquelles le son est complexifié par la présence d'hydrophones et d'enceintes subaquatiques, pour traverser ensuite les poutres métalliques et les blocs de marbre mis en résonance par des transducteurs. Le matériau sonore parvient enfin sous forme d'impulsions aux sculptures-fontaines qui ajoutent une musique concrète, acoustique, à l'enveloppe musicale amplifiée. « Les matériaux font du *processing*, ils ont un grain qui n'est pas du tout celui du logiciel d'ordinateur. Le geste est sculptural, pour moi, au sens où le son sculpte la matière. » Les blocs de marbre ont été achetés près du port d'Athènes. Les poutres métalliques sont des poutres génériques utilisées dans les ports et recouvertes d'une peinture qui réagit à la température, ici taillées dans les proportions du pentagramme afin d'en harmoniser les résonances. Les colonnes à compost sont nourries de la végétation provenant des alentours du Mudam. Au lieu d'eau qui coule dans les fontaines, Atoui souhaitait au départ des huiles de bateau qui couvrent les eaux de Singapour : « Toute la baie est huileuse, avec des centaines de bateaux qui attendent parfois des semaines pour entrer dans le port et forment un bloc qui sature l'horizon » (4). La présence de matériaux concrets étend dans un geste plastique la préoccupation musicale de Tarek Atoui pour l'environnement social, économique et géopolitique. Étrangement, le marbre, le métal, l'eau et le bois entrent en résonance avec l'architecture minérale d'I.M. Pei au Mudam, comme s'ils venaient dissoudre imperceptiblement, dans le son et la matière brute, les blocs taillés de travertin qui marquent sa signature. L'interconnexion opérationnelle de toutes les composantes de *Waters' Witness* porte l'idée d'instrument à une nouvelle échelle. Elle donne à penser l'interdépendance des actions humaines dans l'exploitation des ressources de la planète à travers une écriture instrumentale qui met physiquement en présence ces ressources mêmes. Si l'eau est le témoin de l'extraction mondialisée, dans *Waters' Witness*, « on ne sait pas qui observe qui ». L'œuvre fait affleurer une multitude d'éléments en état d'incertitude, questionnant les rôles de chacune et de chacun. ■

The Ground (détail). 2018. Vue de l'exposition *show view* May you live in interesting times, 58^e biennale de Venise, 2019. (Court. La Biennale di Venezia)



1 Tarek Atoui dans « Interview: Tarek Atoui, Catherine Wood, Andrea Lissoni », *Tarek Atoui. The Reverse Sessions/ The Reverse Collection*, Mousse Publishing, 2017. 2 *Ibid.* 3 Sauf mention contraire, les citations sont issues d'un entretien de l'auteur avec Tarek Atoui, 15 janvier 2023. 4 Cette idée n'a pas pu être mise en œuvre au Mudam, où le sol est en travertin.

Marcella Lista est historienne de l'art et conservatrice au Musée national d'art moderne – Centre Pompidou, où elle est responsable de la collection Nouveaux Médias.



Tarek Atoui Migrating Sounds

Marcella Lista

Until March 5th, 2023, the Mudam Museum of Modern Art in Luxembourg will be presenting *Waters' Witness*, a major installation by Tarek Atoui, a creator of instrument-artworks and sound environments.

In Mudam's Great Hall, Tarek Atoui's installation *Waters' Witness* consists of an itinerant sound composition devoid of any visibly recognisable amplification system. Wooden columns containing compost, black metal beams and blocks of raw marble outline a scattered topography. Within reach of cables, a whole generation of technical assemblies distils flows, absorbs liquids and disturbs the tranquillity of bodies of water. By turns, drip systems, air pumps and other kinetic elements produce micro-events within what is perceived as an interconnected circuit of impulses. Spectators must walk around, sit down, and bend towards the ground in order to fully apprehend the soundscape that emanates from each of these elements: a contrasting composition of more or less identifiable sources, which passes through these various materials and devices like so many filters or resonators. The exhibition presents the third iteration of an ongoing project, which began at the Fridericianum in Kassel in 2020 and

continued at the Serralves Foundation in 2022, where Tarek Atoui conducted an aural survey of the major merchant ports around the world with the musician Eric La Casa: Athens, Singapore, Abu Dhabi, Beirut, Porto. Based on live local audio footage, in the tradition of field recordings, the work interweaves visual, musical and conceptual gestures which the artist has been developing over the past fifteen years.

METASTABILITY

Tarek Atoui was born in Beirut in 1980. At the age of 18, he arrived in France to study business, before switching to a musical practice. Already familiar with sampling from DJ culture and electronic improvisation, he enrolled in the electroacoustic workshop Césaré, Centre national de création musicale, which was created in Reims by the composer Christian Sebille, an intermediary for the musical avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s. Ten years later, he was the guest artistic director at STEIM in Amsterdam (Studio for Electro Instrumental Music), an institution entirely devoted to the invention of electro-acoustic instruments. Music as the working of an acoustic material through a concrete expanse of space appeared very early on in Tarek Atoui's reflections. "Since studying electroacoustic music and sound art," he says, "I have understood the practice of exhibiting forms of sound art in space, through the works of John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis and Cornelius Cardew—composers who have broadened our understanding of composition and introduced elements of

The Reverse Collection. Vue de l'exposition
exhibition view Tate Modern, Londres, 2016.
(Court. Tate Modern ; Ph. Thierry Bal)

time, space and chance, as well as graphic and generative elements." (1) His work takes shape in this unfinished experimental space, which is perpetually under construction and constantly developing new instruments to rethink the potentialities of play, forms of address and the sharing of musical intent. In one of his first performances presented in the art world, *Un-drum/ strategies of surviving noise*, presented in the open air on the archaeological site of Darat el Funun at the 9th Sharjah Biennale in 2009, the artist mixed electronic sounds in an intense gestural language, using electromagnetic sensors that followed the movements of his hands. The work derives from his experience of the Lebanese war of July 2006, during which the artist was arrested and brutalised, partially losing his hearing in the left ear. From the outset, the dispersal of musical matter that characterises his work actively undermines the intelligibility of sound: listening is solicited and engaged as a political act. The design of electroacoustic instruments open to a wide variety of performers quickly became the basis of his work.

In 2012, he created *The Metastable Circuit* for Documenta 13. This technical device, designed for performance, combines electronic mixing and modulation tables with a tailor-made computer programme. It makes it possible to compose live with tens of thousands of microsamples—sometimes reduced to 200

Marcella Lista

Tarek Atoui, objets sonores en migration
artpress, N°508, March, 2023, p.42-47.



WITHIN & Infinite Ear. Vue de l'exposition show
view Bergen Assembly, Sentralbadet, Bergen, 2016.
(Court. Bergen Assembly ; Ph. Thor Brodreskift)

thousandths of a second—taken from tracks that the artist has been accumulating for years: pop songs, samples of field recordings and synthesised sounds. The notion of metastability, borrowed from chemistry, reflects the scale of an aesthetic system that uses inertia and durability to create what might be described as a “sound environment”: an acoustic continuum, syncretic in its very mass, where rapidly-absorbed disruptive events produce long-term transformations. Tarek Atoui conceives of his instruments as bodily entities, organisms capable of metabolising the anonymous plethora of found sounds and the one-off actions of his performers. Instruments, in other words, which are capable of facing up to the imponderable. Invitations extended to Tarek Atoui to explore musical archives gave him the opportunity to develop a meta-historical reflection. *On and from Tarab*, begun in 2011, draws from the largest collection of Arabic classical music—the collection of Kamal Kassar at the AMAR Foundation in Beirut. The sampling and reinterpretation of this corpus gave rise to sessions with musicians from jazz and other improvisational traditions. “I was not trying to revive a lost tradition,” Atoui says, “nor to make a statement about the history of the region.” (2) What interested him was the tradition of oral transmission of music which resists copyright and ownership by eschewing writing and notation. When he was invited to work with another historical object, the pioneering DIMI synthesiser invented by the Finnish designer Erkki Kurenniemi in the 1960s, the artist set up an interconnected circuit where the individual improvisations of four musicians dissolve into a single sound mass, making it impossible to distinguish any voice. In *The Reverse Sessions* and *The Reverse*

Collection, between 2014 and 2016, Atoui took an interest in the ethnographic collection of musical instruments held at the Dahlem Museums in Berlin. The artist subjected this corpus, which is steeped in Germany's colonial history, to a series of displacements. Atoui first obtained permission to invite musicians to improvise collectively on these museum objects. Following the recorded concerts, the scores were written down, and these materials, derived from the original artifacts, were entrusted to instrument-makers in order to design new instruments.

INSTRUMENT-ARTWORK

From there, Atoui began the development of a manufactured instrumentarium, which hybridises electronic and acoustic elements on the basis of sounds whose origin is kept at a distance. The Organ Within, the Lithophone, the Pipe Koto, the Putin Trumpets, the Hybrid Wheel Violin, the Aquaf flute, the Toui and other newly baptised instruments might be said to embody the transition of a contested heritage. Beyond the museum object, a living expression of the Dahlem collection can be restored to the community and put back into circulation in the world. This is the artist's state of mind when he pursues his experimentation with materials and techniques from all ages to produce musical sounds.

Atoui pushes the work of metal, earth, wood and skin beyond normative instrument-making. Throwing a lump of clay against a bronze bell to capture its resonance, dripping enamel on the surface of a drum skin to shake up its frequency and timbre: such are some of the gestures which examine the infinite nuances that can creep into the encounter between action and matter. In *WITHIN*, a long-term research project he is undertaking with

Council (2013-2017), the artist gives the opportunity to deaf and hard of hearing communities to design specific instruments with him, in which low frequency effects and tactile and visual sensations play a major role. In general, this instrumentarium goes beyond the simple musical reappropriation of found objects—as performances by Fluxus historically proposed to do. Only a specific manufacturing process enables the artist to refine the acoustic parameters of the sound objects and, in his words, to “give them several functions in the same piece.” (3)

Two of Tarek Atoui's research projects converge in the *Waters' Witness* project. The first concerns the collective instrument entitled *I/E*, which the artist designed in 2013 and has since developed in various contexts. The second takes the form of advanced research into sound conduction in the aquatic environment, undertaken as part of a workshop and exhibition entitled *The Whisperers* in 2021. *I/E* stands for “Inhale/Exhale.” This instrument-artwork inverts a certain tradition of electroacoustic music: instead of treating field recordings through the electronic manipulation of abstract sounds, as Pauline Oliveros did in the 1960s, Atoui produces a recording of ambient sounds which itself becomes a filter for other sounds. *I/E* begins in an industrial container installed in the public space, which was first presented on the Place du Carrousel du Louvre in 2013, then in Elefsina, the industrial port of Athens. This customised container becomes a tool and a cabin for recording, storing and playing in public. As a preamble to the performances, the acoustic environment of the container is sampled to constitute its sound portrait, which the music produced on site then passes through. “When we created this organism that inhales and exhales the sounds surrounding it,” the artist explains, “our dream was that it would wash up in a harbour to create a sound library. This was the idea of a sound synthesiser which would synthesise the concrete sounds of field recordings, instead of synthesising the abstract sounds of sinusoidal wave oscillators. On that basis, wooden boxes [also called *I/E*] were created, following the principle of pedals, of processors. Without making concrete music, the concrete sound served as a catalyst, a morpher or an envelope, which contained everything else. Even if instruments, electronic waves or more tonal things emerged, they appeared as the detail of a field recording.” Since then, these wooden boxes have become as many singular instruments. For example, *I/E Elefsina* presents a reverb box, using the acoustic characteristics of the Plu-

Marcella Lista

Tarek Atoui, *objets sonores en migration*

artpress, N°508, March, 2023, p.42-47.

tonian Cave near the port. *I/E Abu Dhabi* is a distortion box, which cancels out spectra by subtracting one sound from another, etc. The wood used for each box also provides a commentary on the context: cedar from Lebanon for Abu Dhabi, a wood which was long imported to the Emirates before the current shortage, whereas the teak wood for Singapore refers to its use in piracy.

SOUND MATTER

In *Waters' Witness*, concrete materials filter the sounds of five ports which have been recorded since 2015 by ambient and contact microphones and hydrophones. This library is divided into three types of sound: the mechanical sounds reflect the activity of machines, the sounds of voices reflect that of human presences, and the abstract sounds capture the resonances and reverberations of these activities in conductive elements such as water and metal. These three sets of sounds circulate by turn in two circuits which function in stereophony throughout the Great Hall of Mudam, starting from the columns of compost in which the sound is complexified by the presence of hydrophones and underwater speakers, before crossing the metal beams and marble blocks which are made to resonate by transducers. The sound matter, in the form of impulses, finally reaches the sculpture-fountains which add a concrete, acoustic music to the amplified musical envelope. "The materials are processing, they have a grain that is not at all that of computer software. The gesture is sculptural, for

me, in the sense that sound sculpts matter." The marble blocks were purchased near the port of Athens. The metal beams are generic beams used in ports and covered with paint that reacts to temperature, cut here in the proportions of a pentagram in order to harmonise the resonances. The compost columns are fed with vegetation from around Mudam. Instead of water flowing into the fountains, Atoui initially wanted to use the boat oil that covers the waters of Singapore: "the whole bay is oily, with hundreds of boats sometimes waiting weeks to enter the harbour and forming a block that saturates the horizon." (4)

In a visual gesture, the presence of concrete materials extends Tarek Atoui's musical concern for the social, economic and geopolitical environment. Strangely, the marble, metal, water and wood resonate with the mineral architecture of I.M. Pei at Mudam, as if imperceptibly dissolving its characteristic travertine blocks in sound and raw material. The operational interconnection of all the components of *Waters' Witness* takes the idea of an instrument to a new scale. It suggests the interdependence of human actions in the exploitation of the planet's resources through an instrumental writing which physically brings these very resources together. If water bears witness to global extraction, in *Waters' Witness*, "we don't know who is watching who." The work reveals a multitude of elements in a state of uncertainty, questioning the roles of each and every one. ■

Translation: Juliet Powys

1 Tarek Atoui in "Interview: Tarek Atoui, Catherine Wood, Andrea Lissoni," *Tarek Atoui. The Reverse Sessions/The Reverse Collection*, Mousse Publishing, 2017.
2 *Ibid.* 3 Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are taken from the author's interview with Tarek Atoui, January 15th, 2023. 4 This idea could not be implemented at Mudam, where the floor is made of travertine.

Marcella Lista is an art historian and curator at the Musée national d'art moderne – Centre Pompidou, where she is the head of the New Media collection.

Tarek Atoui

Né en 1980 à Beyrouth

Vit et travaille à lives and works in Paris

Expositions personnelles récentes Solo shows:

2022 *Waters' Witness*, Fondation Serralves, Porto;

The Whisperers, The Contemporary Austin;

The Whisperers, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York

2021 *THE GROUND Sessions*, Bourse de Commerce, Paris

2020 *Waters' Witness*, Fridericianum, Cassel

2019 *Organ Within*, Kurimanzutto, New York

2018 *I/E*, Fondation Serralves, Porto

Expositions collectives récentes Group shows:

2022 Biennale d'Istanbul; Triennale de Guangzhou

2021 Biennale de Gwangju; Darmstädter Ferienkurse,

2020 Biennale de Sydney

2019 *Infinite Ear*, Centro Centro, Madrid;

Okayama Art Summit; *Inner Ear Vision*, Bemis Center for

Contemporary Arts, Omaha; Biennale de Venise

I/E (Container). À droite *right* Tarek Atoui.
Performance Carrousel du Louvre, Paris, 2013.
(Ph. Marc Domage)

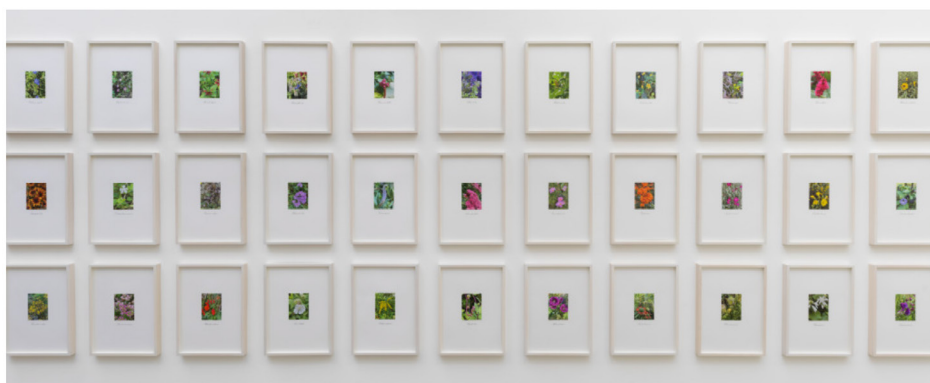


LES « À VENIR » DE DANH VO ET TAREK ATOUI



À la galerie Crousel, deux expositions personnelles n'en forment plus qu'une. Le projet des artistes Dahn Vo et Tarek Atoui, de cueillette photographique en constellations sonores, invite ainsi à une « communauté qui vient ».

Dans *la Communauté qui vient*, Giorgio Agamben en appelle à l'exposition de singularités pour ce qu'elles sont, et non pour les présupposés, attributs, rôles ou fonctions à travers lesquels on voudrait les définir ou les classer a posteriori. Cette communauté qui vient ne s'incarne donc jamais, à strictement parler, dans un *être là* définitif et impérieux. Elle ne cesse de *venir*, de s'inventer des *à venir* et des *devenirs*. Tel semble être également le projet qu'ont développé Dahn Vo et Tarek Atoui pour la galerie Chantal Crousel. Et ce qui devait être deux expositions personnelles simultanées est devenu un seul et même territoire de possibles où s'affirme une forme inédite de « nous » choral et pluriel sans que s'efface la singularité propre à chacun.



Dahn Vo, vue de l'exposition, galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2021, Ph. Nick Ash

CUEILLETTE PHOTOGRAPHIQUE

Il est vrai que l'un et l'autre se connaissent et s'apprécient depuis longtemps, et que Vo, dans la ferme où il vient de s'installer aux alentours de Berlin, possède et active régulièrement les œuvres d'Atoui qu'il lui a achetées, en particulier au solstice de la Saint-Jean, avec des amis musiciens. Mais ce qu'il y a de plus bouleversant dans ce projet, c'est la façon dont leurs œuvres, en s'infiltrant l'une dans l'autre, en s'hybridant l'une à l'autre, se soutiennent, s'étaient et s'épaulent. Et cela, qu'elles soient communes ou autonomes, réunies ou séparées.

Danh Vo nous présente presque pour la première fois l'herbier qu'il constitue jour après jour de toutes les plantes de ce nouveau territoire de la campagne allemande dans lequel il va faire (sa) demeure, manière inédite de se faire accueillir à travers une pratique de cueillette photographique. Car à travers cet herbier, il ne fait pas exister ces fragments poétiques de nature qui préexistaient bien avant lui, mais tente de (ré)exister à travers eux, de (re)trouver une voie/voix dans l'égrènement de leur nomination que son père, en moine copiste, inscrit sous chaque image. Tarek Atoui ne fait pas autre chose à travers son travail de collecte de vibrations, de timbres, de murmures et de chuchotements – son exposition s'intitule *The Whisperers* – qu'il nous restitue de façon tout aussi rigoureuse et précise qu'ouverte à l'imprévu et l'imprévisible de celui qui va s'en saisir. Ici, pour un ensemble d'œuvres, les visiteurs ; là, pour un autre, les élèves de la classe de maternelle de l'École alsacienne de Paris que fréquente son enfant et avec laquelle il a travaillé pendant le confinement au fil de cinq ateliers. Les sons de l'eau, du bois, de la pierre, du verre, du laiton, du bronze. Les sons des matériaux des œuvres de Vo. Les sons des territoires naturels ou urbains. Toutes ces sonorités, toutes ces fratries et sororités sonores que l'artiste restitue et amplifie selon une autre forme de paysage où chaque élément acoustique se retrouve relié, connecté, par de fines, ténues et fragiles lignes d'énergies, de tensions et de résonances, à l'instar de balises interactives d'émotions et de poésie temporaires, nomades et disséminées dans l'espace. *Not everywhere but anywhere...*



Tarek Atoui, vue de l'exposition *The Whisperers*, galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2021, Ph. Nick Ash

CONSTELLATIONS SONORES

Bien évidemment, Danh Vo repart une nouvelle fois de la séminale dernière lettre envoyée avant sa décapitation par le prêtre missionnaire catholique Théophile Vénard en 1861 à son père, et recopié par Phung Vo, père de l'artiste. Mais sa (re)lecture résonne autrement dans ce contexte de par les métaphores florales de l'existence humaine qui y sont inscrites : « Un léger coup de sabre séparera ma tête comme une fleur printanière que le Maître du jardin cueille pour son propre plaisir. Nous sommes tous des fleurs plantées sur cette terre que Dieu cueille en son temps, un peu plus tôt, un peu plus tard. [...] Tâchons tous de plaire, selon le parfum ou l'éclat qui nous est donnés, au souverain Seigneur et Maître. » Ce qu'expriment tout à la fois l'herbier et les fragments de statues particulièrement précieuses contenues dans des caisses à claire-voie. Et celles-ci semblent bien plus soutenir comme des attelles ces corps en morceaux que les enfermer et les sanctuariser. Chez Tarek Atoui, ce sont nos voix qui pourraient se (re)formuler, voire renaître de façon presque épiphanique, à travers le parfum et les éclats des subtiles constellations sonores disposées dans l'espace de la galerie et à notre disposition. Saurons-nous être à leur écoute de leur grain comme à l'écoute de nous même ? Saurons-nous accepter leur dépassement, et leur faire confiance ?

La vie, notre rapport aux choses, à notre passé, à notre culture ou à notre mémoire sont là comme en réparation. À nous de savoir saisir le potentiel et les devenirs de cette exposition en nous dessaisissant de nos a priori et de nos certitudes, en nous délaissant de nos pierres que nous avons rendues muettes parce que refermées sur elles-mêmes et devenues sans signification, sinon sans usage. Car, comme l'annonçait Vladimir Jankélévitch : « Le devenir contrarie l'arrondissement plastique de l'objet, car il est la dimension selon laquelle l'objet se défait sans cesse, se forme, se déforme, se reforme et se transforme ; le changement que le devenir fait advenir n'est pas modelage, mais modification continuée. » La communauté qui vient à laquelle nous invite leur projet, c'est très précisément ces modifications continues qu'il nous faudrait observer, recueillir puis accueillir, voire fertiliser et faire rejaillir, à partir de ces grains et ces voix que ces deux artistes simplement et humblement nous proposent, à l'instar d'une offrande faite au monde.



Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui, vue de l'exposition, galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2021, Ph. Nick Ash

GALERIE
CHANTAL CROUSEL



Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui, vue de l'exposition, galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2021, Ph. Nick Ash



Couv. : Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui, vue de l'exposition, galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2021, Ph. Nick Ash.

Marc Donnadiou
Les « à venir » de Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui
artpress, November 4, 2021.
<https://urls.fr/kH6zll>

ArtReview



Tarek Atoui performing at the opening of his exhibition
Cycles in 11, 2020, Sharjah Art Foundation, Dubai.
© Sharjah Art Foundation, Dubai

The Interview
by Ross Simonini

Tarek Atoui

“I want sound to be objectified in a certain way”

Every so often, a composer, seeking total musical freedom, breaks down the materials of music itself. So they build their own instruments, from scratch. Exponents have included Harry Partch, Daphne Oram, Pat Metheny, Björk and the Boredoms, to name a few. Tarek Atoui is a visual artist working on the outskirts of this rarefied group of innovators. He has built a knot of glass tubes into which he blows across pools of water to vary the pitch. He plays a turntable covered in sand with an animal horn and a bundle of herbs. His instruments are objects of sculptural beauty, activated through touch and breath and motors.

For the Beirut-born Atoui, though, these instruments are only one element of a controlled situation of organised sound – others include place and history, which he researches through travel, and the curating of his performers, who are often nonmusicians. His ongoing piece *WITHIN* (2012–), for example, is an improvised performance by deaf people, who play instruments designed to emphasise the haptic qualities of musicianship, rather than aural ones.

The sound of Atoui's performances is richly textural, and often resists conventional musicality. His 2019 exhibition *The Wave*, at Okayama

Art Summit, was a collection of many of his instruments playing automatically, and together they produced a metallic flutter of clicks, teeming with skittering creatures. Other works approach abrasive noise, free improvisation and drone. When performing, Atoui often appears to be lost in an emotional trance, twisting his face like a blues guitarist as he taps a stone with a mallet or explores a knob on a wooden box.

Atoui and I spoke in the autumn of 2021. He and I discussed his innovative methods of listening to music and the challenges of being a musician in the ecosystem of contemporary art.

Acoustic Behaviours

ROSS SIMONINI *Did you begin as a musician or as a visual artist?*

TAREK ATOUI The starting point was a musical one. Even today, I consider myself to be always doing composition.

RS *But you don't release much music in the form of albums.*

TA I have released very few things. Bits and pieces of things here and there, besides a record release in 2006. And this characterises a bit like my situation and who I am and what I do.

RS *You've mentioned John Cage as an important early influence. How did you start with music?*

TA My interest in music came at eighteen with electronic music, new music, experimental music and noise music. This led me to electro-acoustic music and the work of composers such as [Karlheinz] Stockhausen and Cage and many of his peers and colleagues of that time. At the same I was discovering improvised music.

RS *Do you still consider your music to be electronic?*

TA Yes, totally. And when I also say it's all composition, this is one aspect of what I mean. What I do today is, I still use the computer and the ideas of sequencing and managing time and events, but instead of being applied

inside an abstract piece of software on the computer, now it's a motor, or a sculpture.

RS *When you're making instruments, what is your starting point?*

TA At this point, it tends to start more and more from the organic materials themselves, and from thinking of ways of extracting sound or broadcasting sound through these materials. And then the electronics come at play when needed, by exploring the properties of materials and their acoustics, resonances and acoustic behaviours.

RS *Working in this way, have you come to any sort of perennial truths about the relationship between visuals and sounds? I'm thinking for example of the Boubou/kiki effect, and how people around the world have similar visual associations for the words 'Kiki' and 'Boubou'.*

TA No, not really, but something I'm now deeply convinced of is the capacity of our brains to structure and make sense of how we receive and interact with sound. You see, whether we are a trained listener or somebody who listens to abstract noise music, we are both capable of listening in the same way. And that's a nice starting point for me to create listening conditions.

RS *What kind of conditions?*

TA Like the condition of proximity, of being able to be close to the source of sound, to witness

the mechanism. To see the process of sound happening. Like a piece of ceramic being struck by a bouncing wooden marble. Or two branches rubbing against a rough metallic surface which is amplified with contact microphones.

RS *Is this why you don't release much audio on its own, because you want the sound and visuals to be married?*

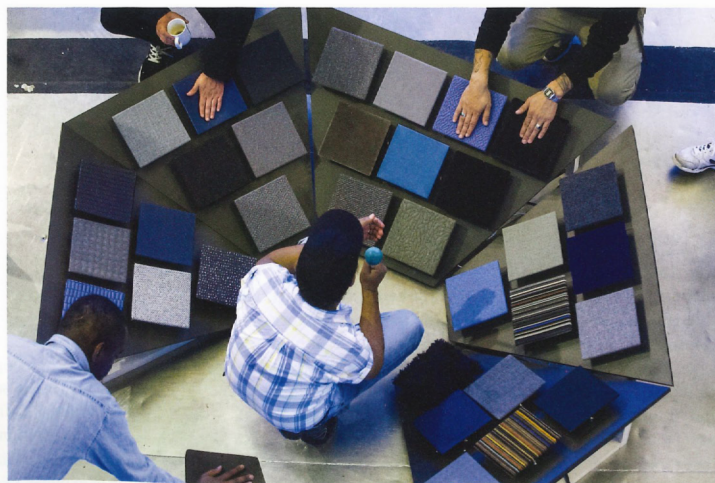
TA Exactly. It's not just about making it into a record and like having people be able to experience it in stereo. I want sound to be objectified in a certain way, in a certain sense, or offering people a different duration – where you can spend hours listening to something, not just like 20 minutes.

All about the source

RS *Do you enjoy recorded music?*

TA I also like the abstraction of the source of the sound. I like field recordings, I like found footage. I like listening without knowing where it came from. But I have to also question the space in which I am listening to the sound system, and the sound terminal through which I am listening.

RS *Right. It's like laptop speakers – we consider them low quality now, but in 50 years we'll remember that sound nostalgically.*



WITHIN, 2016, performance at Sentralbadet, Bergen.
Photo: Thor Brodreskift

GALERIE CHANTAL CROUSEL

TA Yes. But what is poor quality and what is good quality? That's relative, in a certain way. Should all sounds have the same qualities? As a composer, it's very nice to be able to navigate between ultracompressed, ultramodern, powerful sound and the old, degraded sound of the wax cylinder, one of the earliest forms of sound recording. I find it great to have cheap speakers along with supergood speakers. This palette is supergood.

RS *Each speaker is its own kind of instrument.*

TA They're really identities. You can sometimes buy cheap amplifiers that are very loud and harsh and barky, and sometimes those are amazing.

RS *How do you listen to other people's music?*

TA I have a situation now – I have been listening to all the records that my musician friends gave me after their gigs during the last five years. I have 60 records and I'm listening to these with a turntable plugged into a transducer connected to a metal bucket in which water is dripping. This is the left channel. And the right channel is sending the sound to an underwater speaker inside a glass box.

RS *How does it sound?*

TA Inside the glass is very resonant. Sound underwater travels superfast. So it bounces very harshly and quickly against the glass. You are in a very strange acoustic space when you listen through something like this.

RS *Do you also listen to music casually, through your earbuds and a phone?*

TA Yes.

RS *So you're not resistant to that kind of listening?*

TA No, on the contrary, I find it fun. I just also find it fun listening inside the water tank. If you don't like what you're listening to, or you want to play with it, you can just add more water or subtract some, or you can blow bubbles into the water. You can play with disturbing this aquatic environment, and it makes listening playful.

RS *How do you start making instruments?*

TA I came into instrument-making from a digital space, from doing computer programming, then I shifted this knowledge to circuit boards and DIY electronics. That's how I started building my first instrument, and then I started working with other people who do other types of instruments, whether strings or wind. So I went backwards, in way.

RS *With your own instruments, you're always a novice. You're not dedicating 30 years to mastering the harp, for instance.*

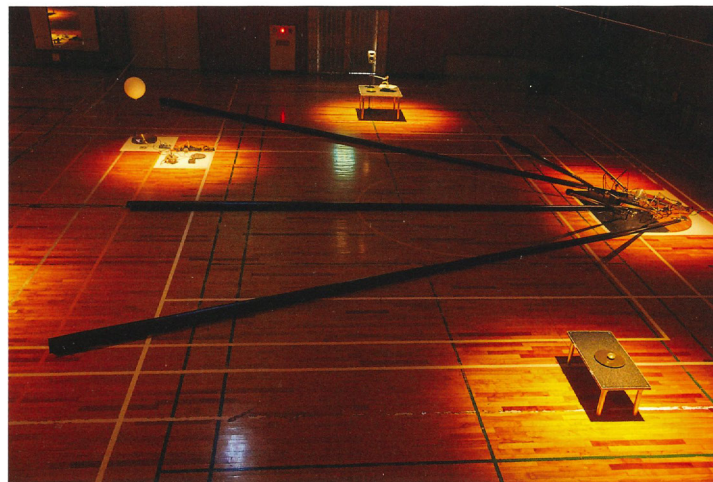
TA Yes, you see, this approach has its limits. So it's not that type of mastery. I think I would like to master a more general way of listening. This is as important as learning one instrument.

RS *Do you consider tuning systems when you're making instruments?*

TA Sometimes, but that's where I regret not having studied music earlier. I tried to study solfège and musical notation and acoustic instruments, like the clarinet, but I realised it's going to be a lot of work. So I studied electroacoustic music and programming and film recording, and sound editing. And I knew that this kind of production is an instrument that I could learn better with focus. I think now we have enough tools and history behind us to be able to consider traditional musicianship as an additional quality a musician has, but it's not the only, fundamental quality anymore. I think people should not be so concerned about this. This is not what makes great musicians.

Finding unity

RS *As someone working with improvisation, do you find that you're searching for a certain feeling when you're making your music?*



The Wave, 2019 (installation view, Okayama Art Summit, 2019). Photo: Ola Rindal

November 2021

27







above Tarek Atoui, studio view
preceding pages *WITHIN*, 2012–
(performance view, Sentralbadet, Bergen, 2016).
Photo: Thor Brødreskift

TA Yes, when a unity happens between the body, the sound and the instrument. When everything seems to be in conversation with the space and with the people. But what you learn with time is not to force this feeling, and not to think that it comes from any situation where you're in full confidence.

RS *Have you found that working within contemporary art contexts changes the nature of musical performance?*

TA It allows me to go to different places. It has put me in situations that were uncomfortable and difficult, but at the same time liberating. It invited me to rethink the way I was building my machines and responding to different contexts that the artworld offered, like working outdoors, or in museums where the acoustics would not be perfect or where people's attention was not like a concert situation. And of course, someone's first reaction could be to say, ok, this is not a good way to perform, and actually yes, it is not a good place to transpose the musical discourse, but there is definitely something you can do with it and things you can learn from it.

RS *Art seems not to have decided on a correct set of parameters and musical systems in the way that the music world has.*

TA Yeah. But there are parts of the world where it's the same institutions doing the music and the arts, and there is not much cultural diversity.

But I like these situations – where the musicians, artists and filmmakers are all in dialogue with each other.

RS *Can you discuss any particular art context for performing?*

TA In 2009 I was commissioned to do a performance in Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates. It was supposed to be in a closed courtyard, and there were so many people outside, unable to get in. But at the last minute it didn't feel right. Why would it be in a courtyard, in a closed space, where you could still hear the music from outside? And so we decided to play outside. And then it became for me a very nice, memorable moment. The audience mixed and merged with people in the street and it felt like a real opening was happening in the city.

RS *We think of music as isolated artform, to be watched and heard in a concert hall, but traditionally it was woven into ritual and ceremony and daily life.*

TA Yes. I did a performance at the Berkeley Art Museum in 2015, and for this we put nine huge Meyer Sound subwoofers inside the building. These were very resonant in the building. People could view the performance from different levels in different floors. It lasted an hour and a half, but it was nice to see that people were not even looking at the performers. They could listen to these very low-end vibrations through the wood, through the materials of the architecture.

At that moment, the building and these different people all came together at once.

RS *Do you test the acoustics in buildings where you work?*

TA No. To test and predict the behaviour of nine subwoofers inside a four-storey nineteenth-century building requires a large budget.

RS *You seem to have a more punk approach to the situation.*

TA Yeah, it feels right. For me, I'm always considering where to spend effort and where not to spend effort. I don't want to worry about a lot about calculations and validating them.

RS *Do you think you're moving towards the Cagean philosophy in which all sound is music?*

TA Well, no. Of course, all sound can be music, depending on how you want to use it and work with it. But sound can be so many things. It can be a source of energy. It can be a source of emotion to be manipulated. It can be other things besides being music, and it's nice to be manipulated.

The Whisperers, a solo exhibition by Tarek Atoui, is on view at Chantal Crousel, Paris, through 20 November

Ross Simonini is a writer, artist, musician and dialogist. He is the host of ArtReview's podcast Subject, Object, Verb



WITHIN, 2012- (performance view, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2017). Photo: Florian Kleinfenn

all images Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

OCULA

Tarek Atoui's Sonic Environments

Tarek Atoui discusses his experimental practice in sound.



Performance view: Tarek Atoui, *112* (Shafra, Aleppo Festival, Aleppo (2018)). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

In Tarek Atoui's totalising sonic environments, space, architectures, bodies, and instruments can be both conductors and receptors of sound. The innovative Beirut-born, Paris-based sound artist and composer builds and instrumentalises sonorous objects, materials, and physicality, which resonate in collective compositions and generate different acoustic landscapes.

At the moment, *Cycles in 11* at the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) (26 September 2020–10 April 2021) spans 11 years of his practice and collaborations in Sharjah, especially his work around deaf culture, which originated with the project *WITHIN* (2013). Growing out of a 2008 SAF residency, *WITHIN* became foundational to the ways in which Atoui studies the perception of sound by the hard of hearing and nuanced perspectives towards listening.

His corresponding examinations of how sound performs in space has led to a transdisciplinary network of musicians, researchers, and instrument-makers who have built musical devices that are accessible to all degrees of hearing.

Sharjah is also where Atoui's gallerist Chantal Crousel first encountered his work in 2011, during *Visiting Tarab*, a Performa 11 commission with SAF, which drew from the world's largest repository of classical Arabic music by Lebanese collector Kamal Kassab.

Nadine Khalil
Tarek Atoui's Sonic Environments
Ocula, March 17, 2021.
<https://urls.fr/qlJXJB>



Tarek Atoui, *Un-drum 2: The Chinese connection* (2009). Performance view: Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.



Performance view: Tarek Atoui, *Visiting Tarab*, Performa 5, New York (2011). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

Moving from one archive to another, Atoui is in the process of building another sonic library, recording and sampling sounds at harbours and inside military bases, fish markets, and oil tanks around the world in the *I/E* project (2013–ongoing), a new iteration of which is in Kassel for his first solo exhibition in Germany at the Fridericianum, *Waters' Witness* (3 October 2020–28 March 2021). The recordings, stored in the form of 'sound boxes', reflect changing audio palettes that echo their underwater and industrial contexts, and translate into distinct material and spatial considerations.



Tarek Atoui, *I/E Elefsina* (2016). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn.

In his sonic ecologies and propositions, Atoui abstracts, embeds, and embodies sound in transitory forms, shifting roles between researcher, programmer, composer, performer, and collaborator, often inviting others to intervene. His oeuvre sits at the cusp of redefining the language of visual and performing arts and challenging contemporary sound production. The aural becomes a catalyst in situating our relationship to time, presence, and space as he investigates and experiments with the thresholds of audibility, amplification, and accessibility.



Tarek Atoui, *The Ground* (2018). Exhibition view: *Cycles in 11*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (26 September 2020–10 April 2021). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. © Sharjah Art Foundation, 2021.

Atoui's output contests traditional hierarchies of perception and modes of listening, positing an all-encompassing, fluid vision that connects instrumentation to bodies and gestures toward hearing movement. His accomplishments, which have taken him from the Sharjah Biennial (2009, 2013) to documenta in Kassel (2012), the Berlin Biennale (2014), and Venice Biennale (2019), have earned him the 2022 Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize, with USD \$200,000 and production expenses covered for an upcoming solo exhibition at The Contemporary Austin's Jones Center in Texas and the FLAG Art Foundation in New York.

Upcoming projects include his participation in the 13th Gwangju Biennale (1 April–9 May 2021), the 50th edition of the Darmstadt Summer Course (31 July–14 August 2021), and Struer Tracks, a sound art festival taking place between 20 August and 5 September 2021 in Denmark.

In this conversation, Atoui discusses his experimental practice in sound.



Tarek Atoui, *The Ground* (2018). Exhibition view: 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *May You Live In Interesting Times*, Venice (11 May–24 November 2019). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Andrea Avezzù.

NK: First of all, congratulations for the FLAG Art Foundation Prize. Do you know what you will do for it?

TA: I have an idea. I'm looking at the different audiences and people I've worked with in the past as components of the work, reaching out to music students, associations for the deaf, and a whole array of people with varying degrees of expertise.

The challenge is to have them work together in interesting ways. What I want to do, especially given the current circumstances, is create a collective work that stems from both studio and performance processes. I want to first open a laboratory for researching sound practices that can be activated as a residency or workshop space. An exhibition will be born from this laboratory, as well as an on-site performance programme.



Performance view: Tarek Atoui, *Organ Within*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (27 June 2019). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. © Guggenheim Museum.

NK: Do you think virtual practices are something artists have to do more and more these days?

TA: While I'm trying to initiate these remote studios to which I send instruments, sound objects, and ideas, and work with people there, I'm still advocating for the opportunity to meet in a space and work together.

“Even a small plastic cup is a space you can play and record sound in. You can broadcast a whole installation in it. I feel at ease in architectural space, because sound has this ability to travel and occupy it.

NK: You often talk about bridging the worlds of music and art. What was the definitive moment that launched you into the field of contemporary art? Did it start with your relationship with the Sharjah Art Foundation?

TA: It's not something that just suddenly happened. It occurred progressively, in that I always had an interest in the art world and its practices. There were several encounters with artists like Lamia Joreige, who I was a software developer for. But I think Sharjah represented the moment when I received a substantial art residency, invited by Jack Persekian after our encounter in Amsterdam in 2008.



Exhibition view: Tarek Atoui, *WITHIN*, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris (18 February–25 March 2017). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn.

NK: I remember seeing you play in Beirut's underground venues in the late 1990s. Did you ever think you would become an artist?

TA: I knew that my studies in economics and cultural management was not the path I was going to follow, but it took me some time to find out what this would be. Even though I realised it would be linked to music and sound, I wasn't sure what aspect of the field it would be in. Was it going to be composition for dance? Theatre? Film? Touring with bands?

After one album release, I realised I wasn't interested in the latter. And little by little, I transitioned into making sound, which I found I cherished the most.

NK: When did you first get into sound performance?

TA: I started in France around the year 2000. I was DJing in techno music at the time.



Opening performance: Tarek Atoui, *WITHIN*, Bergen Assembly, Sentralbadet, Bergen (2016). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

NK: A lot of your performances are improvisational, where you co-create with others. Although you incorporate technological tools, you often activate handmade instruments in performance. How fundamental is programming to your language, allowing this interaction to occur?

TA: It's a great tool, and one that I still use both conceptually and practically. When it comes to activating my compositions, programming is a tool that I'm in control of and can employ like a meta-instrument, in how it can structure a research process and bring something mathematical in.

NK: Even your instruments are open work, disassembled and reassembled in sound. What led you to handmade apparatuses?

TA: The idea of the material took me to craft. Thinking about the sound of ceramics led me to work with ceramicists.

NK: Your work looks at the body as a vessel of resonance, but also considers the machine as a body, such as with the 'Un-drum' series (2009–2010). How would you formulate this relationship between the body and the machine?

TA: *Un-drum / strategies for surviving noise* (2009) was the first time I built this machine. It set up the cornerstone of my relationship to instruments, as well as to gesture in performance in ways that still echo today—all that changes is the medium and the ways in which things are built.



Tarek Atoui, *Un-drum 1: strategie of surviving noise* (2009). Performance view: Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

I moved from work that was digital in nature and that could be done by myself to compositions that call upon the craft or know-how of specialists. Yet the logic of putting things together, like building an instrument's software, is still the way I create a score with several improvisers.

The 'Un-drum' series included ideas like blowing up the surface of a small digital controller, the MIDI, and magnifying certain gestures to make them absurd or impossible to execute in relation to notions of virtuosity in the classical form. These are still present in my work, and you can see inversions and distortions of these notions in acoustic instruments that are no longer computer-based or digital.



Tarek Atoui, *I/E Abu Dhabi* (2018). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Alex Guirkingner.

Nadine Khalil
Tarek Atoui's Sonic Environments
Ocula, March 17, 2021.
<https://urls.fr/qlJXJB>

NK: Do you think you would have been this subversive in sound if you were trained in classical music?

TA: There are people who are trained classically who are similarly disruptive but still have a significant technical mastery, to which a conceptual layer is added. In my case, I don't have this virtuosity.

From an early stage, I didn't propose rhythms or structures when I interacted with musicians, who came from jazz or classical music backgrounds, for example. I only had concepts or abstract ideas to put on the table.

“I like the idea of releasing the potentiality of a space by not erecting walls. In many of my works, the spaces are totally open, connecting with the outside as much as possible.

NK: There still seems to be an urge for you to break a boundary, whether it's sonic or perceptual. Where does this drive come from?

TA: It's really coming from an awareness of what was established before me, of understanding the history behind sound practices, and growing up in an artistic environment that was very rigorous and therefore not easily satisfied. There's always an attempt to push things further and ask yourself the question of what lies beyond this point, or how it can be done differently.



Tarek Atoui, *Pulses in 11* (2020). Exhibition view: *Cycles in 11*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (26 September 2020–10 April 2021). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. © Sharjah Art Foundation, 2021.

NK: Going back to ‘Un-drum’, tell us about the second one in the series: *the Chinese connection* (2009), and how it compared the cultural shift during the Maoist Communist revolution to the pan-Arab movements in the ways it created a new mythology of modern art forms and social change.

TA: It was a specific commission from Jack Persekian for an exhibition called *Disorientation II: The Rise and Fall of Arab Cities* (21 November 2009–20 February 2010), which was about the fall of the Pan-Arab movement and my contribution to this was to kind of skip that debate and instead, look at how it compared with the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

NK: Is it true that you have lost some of your hearing due to a detainment in Lebanon? And do you think that’s what led you to working with deaf people?

TA: I think that’s a simplification, although I have read it in the press. ‘Un-drum’ functioned as a process of healing in order to move away from that, and it’s honestly not that intense. I feel the difference between my ears sometimes when I’m tired or stressed, but otherwise, I’m not suffering from it.

NK: Do you distinguish the act of listening from hearing? In much of your work, these are simultaneous processes and listening becomes active.

TA: Both can be part of the same world. Hearing is a form of listening. There’s this exercise of returning to an unconscious state of listening, which is something similar to naïve listening—when you listen to music and you don’t know who’s doing what within the piece. You don’t distinguish the instruments from each other, you just listen to the ensemble as a whole.

NK: Now that you’re back at the Sharjah Art Foundation with *Cycles in II*, much of this show relates to durational facets marking over a decade of collaborative work. Can you say more about the work *Pulses in II* (2020)?

TA: *Pulses in II* forms part of the introduction to the show. It’s this idea of the metronome that punctuates the space when you enter it, where there’s a corridor on the right with all these stones that are acting more like mega-frenetic metronomes.



Tarek Atoui, *The Wave* (2019). Exhibition view: *Cycles in 11*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (26 September 2020–10 April 2021). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. © Sharjah Art Foundation, 2021.

NK: They look like contraptions driven by water. Why did you incorporate water?

TA: Because of the organic quality of the water drop, like sand in the hourglass. There's an inexactitude to water, which takes time to fall, and is affected by its environment.

Different notions of metronomes were combined together, such as the strict, digital metronome of the computer. Then you had a disc in ceramic that was rotating to the rhythm of 11.

NK: Why is 11 significant?

TA: It's a time signature or rhythmic cycle in Arabic music.

NK: So time becomes abstract if there's no linearity to it.

TA: The rhythm is not regular at all. There's a structure that propels the water to drop, but then the drop happens in a very irregular way. Sometimes it drops in one second and sometimes in ten, so yes, there's an abstraction to it.

NK: Sound is then both elemental, as part of nature, and psychoacoustic or manipulable. You seem to blur the lines between instrumentation and materiality, using the material as an instrument by permuting an electric current through it. Can the body also be seen as a responsive conductor or machine?

TA: Maybe it's an augmented body—an organism that is heightened by technology—but I wouldn't say that it becomes mechanic or machinic through this augmentation. The machine is not a substitute to the body you see, or at least this doesn't form my relationship to technology.



Tarek Atoui, *Pulses in 11* (2020). Exhibition view: *Cycles in 11*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (26 September 2020–10 April 2021). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. © Sharjah Art Foundation, 2021.

NK: You have a very intuitive way of working with space in your installations. How significant is the space around the sound, through which sound migrates?

TA: Even a small plastic cup is a space you can play and record sound in. You can broadcast a whole installation in it. I feel at ease in architectural space, because sound has this ability to travel and occupy it.

I like the idea of releasing the potentiality of a space by not erecting walls. In many of my works, the spaces are totally open, connecting with the outside as much as possible. I'm not saying that the space is always an instrument necessarily. There are cases when spaces are and others when they aren't. Prehistorical caves, for example, were set up according to resonance, and where people felt comfortable in terms of sound.



Tarek Atoui, *Pulses in 1f* (2020) (detail). Exhibition view: *Cycles in 1f*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (26 September 2020–10 April 2021). Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Omar Rasheed.

NK: Do you think we have enough words to describe sound?

TA: Not really, especially not in sign language.

NK: Do you see with your ears?

TA: Yes.

NK: You've often said that the human voice occupies a very narrow range of frequency, which you've learned from those who cannot hear it. The monumental bass synthesiser, *Zero Point Nine*, which you developed at a residency with the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, works with subsonic sounds that produce ultra-low-frequency electronic sounds that are felt before they are heard.

TA: Yes, it is an instrument that was made during my research with deaf communities, in collaboration with Meyer Sound, which manufactures subwoofers. The idea was to come up with a language similar to sign language—a system that would translate finger movements into bass frequencies. These are gestures that are familiar to deaf people who are very skilled at using their fingers.



Tarek Atoui, *The Wave* (2019). Exhibition view: *Cycles in 11*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (26 September 2020–10 April 2021). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. © Sharjah Art Foundation, 2021.

NK: As a mode of communicating?

TA: Yes, the movements and the bass frequencies become a system of communication combined. Although it's a very technical instrument, it's also very intuitive, in that anyone moving their hands or fingers would immediately get a result. So you can bypass the technicality by just standing on it and moving your hands.

NK: Are sound and silence binary? And what is silence in sonic terms?

TA: They aren't, but this is a tough question. Silence is complex; it's more a state of mind or an inner disposition than an absence.

NK: *The Reverse Collection* (2016) is intriguing from an anthropological point of view. You began with ancient instruments you were given permission to record, which were played to instrument-makers who engineered new objects that produced the same sounds according to their interpretations.

TA: I was concerned with how objects, shapes, and functions could change with oral transmission. The experiment was conducted with about a dozen instrument-makers from all over the world, to see what they would imagine without an awareness of the actual instruments behind the recordings I was sharing with them, from Berlin's Ethnological Museum.



Tarek Atoui, *Zero Point Nine* (2016). Performance view: *WITHIN & Infinito Ear*, Bergen Assembly, Sentralbadet, Bergen (2 September–1 October 2016). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.



Tarek Atoui, *The Reverse Collection* (2016). Performance view: Tate Modern, London (16–23 September 2016). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Thierry Bal.

NK: Your other site-specific work has been quite different, such as your field research in China's Pearl River Delta for *The Ground* (2018), first presented at Mirrored Gardens in Guangzhou. Why did you decide to focus on elements of agriculture and architecture for these instruments, also made in collaboration with craftsmen and electronic engineers?

TA: It came from observing a very unique urban topology around 2010, when Guangzhou was progressively expanding and agricultural practices were starting to get entrapped between building blocks and rapidly growing urban landscapes. From there, I started looking closer into how people were producing in this context.

NK: Your work *I/E* (2013–ongoing), on the other hand, takes different ports—Abu Dhabi, Athens, Singapore, Porto, Beirut—as points of departure. It functions as an aggregation or assemblage—some people have called it a sound library. It's the first time you seem to be collecting and trapping sound inside material, instead of diffusing or disseminating it. What are you going to do with all of these sounds?

TA: I'm still in the process of collecting. The question of what happens to this library of sounds becomes more important when you consider that I recorded in Beirut a few months before the explosion. Hopefully I will have the answers after a few more cities. Now I'm aiming for the big harbours in Europe, like Antwerp or Hamburg.



Tarek Atoui, *Zero Point Nine* (2016). Performance view: *WITHIN & Infinite Ear*, Bergen Assembly, Sentralbadet, Bergen (2 September–1 October 2016). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

NK: How significant are field recordings, and the need to be inside environments, especially in terms of electronic music?

TA: Field recordings and electronic sound were all part of the same education and vocabulary for me. Electroacoustic music is very much interested in this idea of a sonic object—as seen in Pierre Schaeffer's *objets sonores*—which in the early stages was a field recording.

NK: What is the residue of sound? What is left behind?

TA: It's something very personal, but also totally unpredictable in terms of its impact and interpretation. It could be that you visit my pieces and you're left with a memory of falling off your bike for the first time, for example. Sound can bring you back to something that is very intimate.

Sharjah Art Foundation

Tarek Atoui *Cycles in 11*

It's no overstatement that Tarek Atoui's work is literal music to the art world's ears. Sitting somewhere between art display, performance, and sound lab, Atoui's solo exhibition "Cycles in 11," curated by Sharjah Art Foundation director Hoor Al Qasimi, occupied the heritage house of Bait Al Serkal, and unfurled more than a decade of collaboration with the Foundation and its wider community.

Atoui's relationship with the Emirate is longstanding. It started in 2008, when the electroacoustic composer was invited to participate in the inaugural March Meeting, which set the stage for his art-world debut. What followed was a decade of exploring different modalities of listening, composition, and performance, and the ensemble of custom instruments on view at Atoui's show stand as testimonials that challenge the constraints of what it means to be a musician today, taking performances outside of the concert hall and

into other realms. Conceived and built in several steps with musicians, composers, and artists, "Cycles in 11" was also a starting point for a regional and international residency program that extends into 2022.

One of Atoui's long-term projects is *I/E* (2014–), in which steel rails are affixed with sound capsules that play recordings of different seaports around the world. From Singapore to Porto and Beirut, raw audio is captured from the unfrequented depths of the ocean, the inner mysteries of oil tanks, and the hullabaloo of fish markets, using recording devices inserted into metal, stone, and wood vessels. The Sharjah iteration, in collaboration with French musician Eric La Casa, echoes a vague archeology of sound excavated from the Zayed and Khalifa seaports as well as the mangroves of Abu Dhabi, and laid out in the open space of the Foundation's Art Square. With this growing library of sounds of the unknown, Atoui attempts to archive the sonic identities of spaces.

The sound recordings show up again in *The Wave* (2019), mixing the organic with the synthetic. The resonances of cow bone on volcanic stones from central France, percussive cymbals and gongs, and an electronic harmonica left aural imprints in space. In this composition, a large wooden platform peeking between the flora and open-air architecture forms the base for some nine instruments from previous projects. Serving as reeds, seven acrylic tubes rolled up telescopically, resembling horns of variable length, protrude from the platform as

sound emanates from six small buzzer speakers, washed over by a fan blowing compressed air in a biome that expands modes of listening beyond the aural.

Likewise, *The Ground* (2020), a collaboration with Guangzhou's Vitamin Creative Space and Mirrored Gardens, activates visual, haptic, and aural modes of comprehending sound. Composed of a room resembling a DJ setup, the installation spans over five years of research into the ecology and agricultural processes of the Pearl River Delta. The custom acoustic and electronic instruments on view are a result of craftsmen and electronic engineers interpreting the musings Atoui recorded in a notebook: "Like the cycles of soil that recovers from fertilizer, *The Ground* has no beginning and no end . . . Its pulses and rhythms are the traditional brick walls of the Mirrored Gardens . . . Its instruments are the swamps, the stones, and the wood of this place . . ."

What is evident is that Atoui is less interested in music-making and composition than he is in looking at sound as an elemental force of nature, vibrating particulate swirls traveling away from the source and crashing into other particles. He gives form to the hidden frequencies and acoustic properties of the everyday, forming a sonic and visual orchestra that reverberates in the landscape.

RUBA AL-SWEEL

Installation view of TAREK ATOUI's *The Wave*, 2019, composition for *The Disharmonica*, *The Duofluctus*, *Horns of Putin*, *The Lithophone*, *The Lymaçon*, *The Piezothing*, *The Rotator*, *Sub-Ink* and *The Spin Collector*; sounds from *I/E Elefsis*, *I/E Abu Dhabi* and *I/E Singapore*; wood; acrylic tubes; speakers; fan; dimensions variable, at "Cycles in 11," at Sharjah Art Foundation, 2020–21. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.



monopol

Künstler Tarek Atoui

"Sound muss durch den ganzen Körper gehen"



Foto: Alexandre-Guiringer
Tarek Atoui und Chris Watson 2015 am Tempel von Elefina, Griechenland

Der Künstler Tarek Atoui sammelt auf seinen Reisen Geräusche und Geschichten. Jetzt eröffnet seine erste deutsche Einzelausstellung in Kassel. Im Interview erzählt er, was er von gehörlosen Menschen lernt und wie ihn der Klang immer wieder austrickst

Tarek Atoui, Sie sind gerade in Kassel und bauen Ihre Soundinstallation "Water's Witness" im Fridericianum auf. Der Ausstellungsraum wird ja immer als wichtiger Faktor angeführt. Aber als Soundkünstler nimmt er für Sie eine ganz elementare Rolle ein, oder?

Grundsätzlich ja. In dieser Ausstellung wird es aber noch ein bisschen anders sein als sonst, denn ich werde Sound in Metall und in großen Marmorsteinen verwenden, der Raum befindet sich also quasi innen. Durch diese Konstellation mussten wir noch einmal ganz neu denken und ausprobieren. Ich werde also zum Beispiel keine regulären Lautsprecher nutzen wie sonst. Aktuell experimentieren wir noch, wie das am besten funktioniert. Es ist vor allem ein Arbeiten mit dem, was das Material einem gibt. Wie man aus diesem Material Sounds extrahieren kann, wie man mit ihm und aus ihm heraus Sounds komponieren kann.

Katharina Cichosch

Künstler Tarek Atoui "Sound muss durch den ganzen Körper gehen"

Monopol, September 29, 2020.

<https://urls.fr/Diad-z>

Grundlage der Installationen werden sogenannte "Soundscapes", Klanglandschaften von Häfen sein, die Sie seit einigen Jahren in aller Welt aufnehmen. Wann und warum haben Sie mit dem Sammeln begonnen?

Das hat ganz intuitiv angefangen. Ich wollte den Sound dieser Städte einfangen, die aus Häfen geboren wurden. Wo der Hafen reflektiert, was sich rund um ihn herum entwickelt hat. Angefangen habe ich vor fünf Jahren. Nach und nach sind so Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede zusammengekommen, aber auch Materialien aus den Häfen. Dies alles kehrt nun in dieser Ausstellung zurück: Der Marmorstein beispielsweise geht zurück auf den Hafen von Athen, aus den Innenräumen eines massiven, griechischen Tempels. Der Stahl geht zurück auf den Hafen von Abu Dhabi, er hat sehr merkwürdige und interessante akustische Eigenschaften. Es ist gewöhnlicher Standard-Konstruktionsstahl, wie man ihn in Abu Dhabi in riesigen Mengen verwendet – das Baugeschehen dort ist bekanntlich sehr aktiv.

Gibt es einen bestimmten Bezug zur Stadt Kassel – abgesehen vielleicht von der Athen-Verbindung, die auf der letzten Documenta eine Rolle spielte?

Geografisch gesprochen, ehrlich gesagt, nicht. Aber tatsächlich spielte Kassel für mich 2012 eine wichtige Rolle, und das war auch während einer Documenta. Damals habe ich eine ganze Weile in der Stadt verbracht. Ich kam sechs Monate vor der Ausstellung, habe viele Leute kennengelernt, und diesen Ansatz, mit dem ich heute arbeite, entwickelt. Ich glaube, Kassel war erst die zweite Station nach Sharjah, an der ich diese Methoden ausprobiert und genutzt habe.

Zwischenzeitlich haben Sie neben Soundperformances auch ganze Sets an Instrumenten entwickelt, teils in Zusammenarbeit mit gehörlosen Menschen. Einen Teil der Ausstellung werden die sogenannten "Tables of Content" darstellen, mit dem Sie Ihr Publikum einladen, selbst Teil der Komposition zu werden. Wird das angesichts der Corona-Auflagen überhaupt möglich sein?

Ja, absolut! Das Publikum kann sich zu Workshops anmelden und wird dann von meinem Team oder auch mir selbst begleitet. Später werden Mitarbeiter des Fridericianums die Workshops anleiten. Die "Tables of Content" sind Teil dieses Vorschlags, den ich in der Ausstellung mache – hier von Experiment, Bildung und Vermittlung der Prinzipien, auf denen die Arbeit basiert. Es sind Zusammenstellungen, die ich aus früheren Instrumenten konzipiert habe. Und sie sind so gestaltet, dass mehrere Leute gleichzeitig zusammen spielen können – egal ob Anfänger oder Profis, gehörlos oder hörend.

Und dann?

Ich mag offene Stimmungen, die ein Spielen in total intuitiver Weise ermöglichen. Folglich ist das, was da herauskommt, Klang in einer wirklich rohen, primären Weise. Das ist für mich die Kraft von Sound – wenn es vibriert, man ihn spüren kann, in unmittelbaren Kontakt zu ihm kommen kann. In den Räumen, die ich kreierte, geht es nicht um einen einzelnen Weg des Zuhörens. Es geht um viele Möglichkeiten, Sound zu erfahren: durch das Auge, die Ohren, den gesamten Körper. Jeder Einzelne kann also sein ganz eigenes Hörerlebnis in diesem Raum erschaffen. Die Arbeit mit gehörlosen Menschen hat mich gelehrt, Situationen zu kreieren, die verschiedene Zugangsweisen zugleich ermöglichen. Wir sind alle auf eine bestimmte Weise taub. Unsere Beziehung zu Sound ist, im Gegensatz zum Bild, sehr intim. Nicht umsonst schließen wir oft die Augen, wenn wir zum Beispiel Musik hören.

Gleichzeitig wohnt den von Ihnen mitkonstruierten Instrumenten oft auch eine große ästhetische Anziehungskraft inne. Wenn man sich diese Kontraptionen anschaut, will man sofort ausprobieren, wie man sie verwendet, wie man sie zum Klingen bringt.

Ja, natürlich ist die Ästhetik des Instruments ein wichtiger Teil der Einladung, es auch zu spielen. Sorgsam mit ihm umzugehen. Ich habe allerdings auch Instrumente, die sehr grob aussehen. Jedes Projekt hat seine spezifische Ästhetik. Generell ist es mir aber wichtig, dass alle Instrumente ansprechend und schön aussehen. Nicht wie Prototypen, sondern wie etwas, das man tatsächlich spielen kann und soll. Darüber hinaus haben sie alle ein Eigenleben – sie sind nicht mein Eigentum. Wenn ich an Instrumentenbauer herantrete, dann haben sie eine *carte blanche*, die Instrumente zu produzieren, an andere Leute zu verkaufen. Das ist es, was ich aufregend an dieser Arbeit finde: das Potential, dass sie in ganz andere Dimensionen und Formen fließen und dort weiter verbreitet werden kann.

Sie arbeiten mit vielen Menschen zusammen, nicht nur mit Instrumentenbauern, sondern auch mit Komponisten, Musikern oder wie hier mit dem Ausstellungspublikum oder dem Museumspersonal. Wodurch auch Sie selbst immer wieder unterschiedlichste Rollen einnehmen.

Genau, für mich ist ein Projekt dann gut, wenn viele meiner Fähigkeiten zum Tragen kommen, als Komponist, Künstler, Computerprogrammierer - oder auch schlicht als menschliches Wesen. Am Anfang eines Projekts baue ich einfach etwas, um es anderen zu geben, ihnen Zugang zu ermöglichen. Manchmal bin ich Lehrer, manchmal Koordinator. All das ist Teil der Praxis. Sobald das Projekt entwickelt ist, beginnen all diese Dinge zu verschmelzen.

Welchen Anteil hat die elektronische Musik für Sie gespielt, die ja schon in ihren Ursprüngen eine höchst experimentelle Angelegenheit darstellt?

Das ist eine gute Frage! Denn tatsächlich komme ich gewissermaßen von dort. Als ich damals nach Paris gezogen bin, habe ich elektroakustische Musik studiert und viel in diesem Feld gearbeitet. Es gibt aber für mich keinen Unterschied zwischen Algorithmus und dem Organischen, zwischen digital und analog. Für mich hängt alles miteinander zusammen. Es kommt nur auf die Betrachtungsweise an, wie man zum Beispiel den Klang eines Wassertropfens beschreibt – letztlich ist auch dieser ein elektrisches Signal.

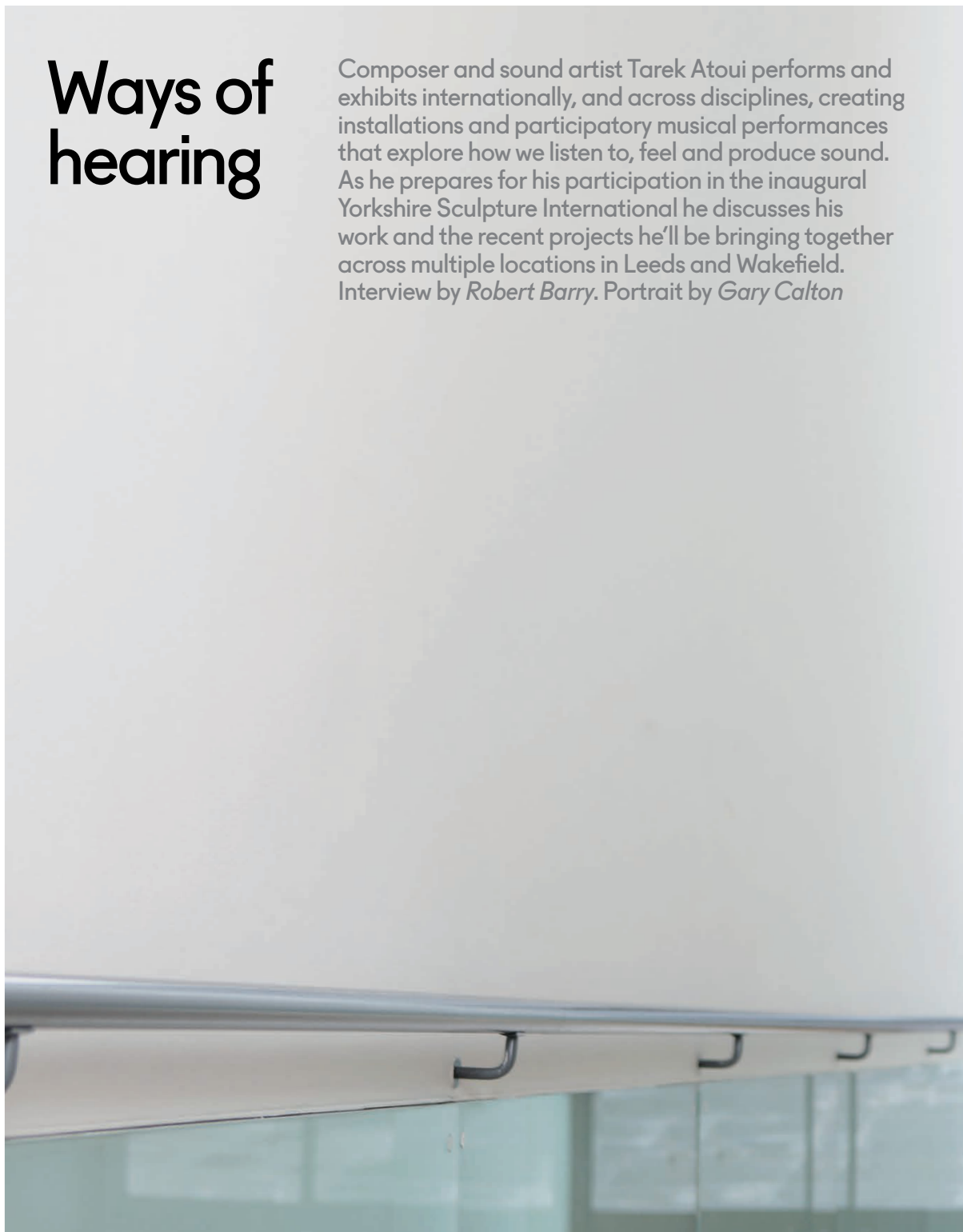
In einem Interview von 2019 haben Sie erklärt, noch immer keine Definition von Sound geben zu können. Und tatsächlich beschreibt das Wort, ähnlich zur Farbe, ja beides: die physikalischen Wellen, die Klang kreieren, und die Weise, wie diese als Sound im Körper und Gehirn wahrgenommen werden. Und das ist wieder abhängig voneinander. Sind Sie einer Definition inzwischen nähergekommen?

Nein, ehrlich gesagt nicht. Ich fühle mich sehr demütig gegenüber diesem Phänomen ... Es ist etwas, das man nicht beschreiben kann. Wenn du versuchst, es zu fassen, wird es dich immer wieder austricksen. Der beste Weg ist daher meiner Meinung nach: Zu genießen, wie man Sound in seinen mannigfaltigen Aspekten entdecken und erleben kann. Vielleicht werde ich irgendwann einmal eine Antwort darauf haben. Aber jetzt aktuell bin ich nicht derjenige, der erklärt, was Sound ist oder was er sein soll.

Art Quarterly

Ways of hearing

Composer and sound artist Tarek Atoui performs and exhibits internationally, and across disciplines, creating installations and participatory musical performances that explore how we listen to, feel and produce sound. As he prepares for his participation in the inaugural Yorkshire Sculpture International he discusses his work and the recent projects he'll be bringing together across multiple locations in Leeds and Wakefield. Interview by *Robert Barry*. Portrait by *Gary Calton*







Born in Beirut in 1980, Tarek Atoui studied electronic music in Paris. His lateral approach to the subject includes the creation of new instruments and collaborations that can involve both experts in diverse fields and broad public participation. These often take the form of long-term projects such as *WITHIN*, which investigates sound and music in relation to the deaf and the hard of hearing; *I/E*, an exploration of coastal cities through sound recording; and *The Reverse Collection*, instruments created by professional instrument-makers based solely on the sounds of musical exhibits from the collection of the Ethnological Museum at the Dahlem Centre in Berlin.

Robert Barry: You've said that when you're working in a particular place you don't like to prepare too much, because your expectations always come up against reality. Is that true of your approach to the project here in Yorkshire?
Tarek Atoui: Definitely! At the moment there is very intense preparation, building pieces bit by bit, but then the final structure is something I don't want to have overly planned. The way I work, when I enter a space and place a musical instrument or loudspeakers, is to work with the properties of the space. The moment of installation is a moment of composing, not just of setting things up technically. What I tend to do is put everything in the middle of the space, then start turning things on one by one and seeing how they 'dialogue' with

the space and also between themselves. Then the form and the composition of the space takes place from listening.

RB: Beyond the fact that you will be working once again with musical instruments and in collaboration with large groups of participants, what was the initial idea behind this project?

TA: This is the first time I'm going to reflect on my practice. Over the past seven years I've shifted from doing a lot of things on my own to collaborating with a lot of people, whether they are musicians from different backgrounds, instrument-makers or researchers. This led to major projects that stood over several years, such as *The Reverse Collection*, which started at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin [which holds more than 9,500 string, wind and percussion musical instruments from all over the world], and led to the creation of a new ensemble of instruments. Then there's *WITHIN*, the project that I'm still doing on sound and deafness, and *I/E*, that's about harbours and field recordings.

'Audiences including professional and amateur musicians, the hearing, the deaf, young and old, all come together'

Each of these is still ongoing in its own way, but bringing them together here is the start of a series of exhibitions that I call a 'synthesis' exhibition. For this, not just the instruments, but also the compositional principles – the ideas of collaborating, of improvising, of working with space, as well as the objects themselves – come together and are assembled again in different ways and according to different imaginaries. So in the context here, different audiences will be able to meet – from professional musicians to amateurs, from the hearing to the totally deaf, from young to old, from student to professional. All these aspects are getting combined and approached in the same way.

RB: So what you call a synthesis is not the same as a retrospective?

TA: No, not at all. Coming from the field of sound practices, it's really a synthesis in the sense of a synthesiser, where the oscillators and the sine waves [different sound-generating modules] are these projects, and the synthesiser is the sum of all these components.

RB: Can you tell me more about your project *WITHIN*, and how your ideas about the deaf experience of sound have developed over the course of this project?

TA: This started with an encounter with a school for the deaf in the United Arab Emirates. It was an experiment that I wanted to conduct. As I was coming from electronic music and working with



Facing page: *I/E*, performance at the Serralves Foundation, Porto, Portugal, 2018; top: *The Reverse Sessions*, performance at kurimanzutto, Mexico City, 2014 (a precursor to *The Reverse Collection*); above: *I/E*, performance at Durub Al Tawaya, Warehouse421, Abu Dhabi, 2017

low frequencies, I was quite interested in knowing how deaf people relate to this, because they sense vibration much better than us. So, I went with subwoofers [loudspeakers designed for low frequencies] and electronic tools that I had created, and spent time working with a school in Sharjah. I took on this task of saying, 'How can all the parameters of music-making be revisited from a deaf and hard-of-hearing perspective?' First it was an enquiry into sound, into listening and into modes of sound perception, then those enquiries evolved into mutated ideas of making instruments that can be heard and played by deaf and hearing people.

RB: Can you point to anything specific that you have learnt about the deaf experience of sound over the course of this project?

TA: It's the richness of listening that was opened to me. Listening was not just with the ears, as we would think, but it was also listening with the fingers, with the bones, with the eyes, listening to the body and to gestures. All these became modes of listening. If you consider that the reception mode in a performance situation is happening through all these channels, it invites you to remap a lot of the relationships inside that space.

You become more subtle about how to use vibration, and how to create compositions that articulate the visual, the gestural, the sonic and the vibrational in one complex discourse, and also to create situations where you are aware from the beginning that you're not trying

to create a level ground for everybody to get the same experience. You are, rather, creating a ground that is fertile, and then people can sculpt their own experience in it.

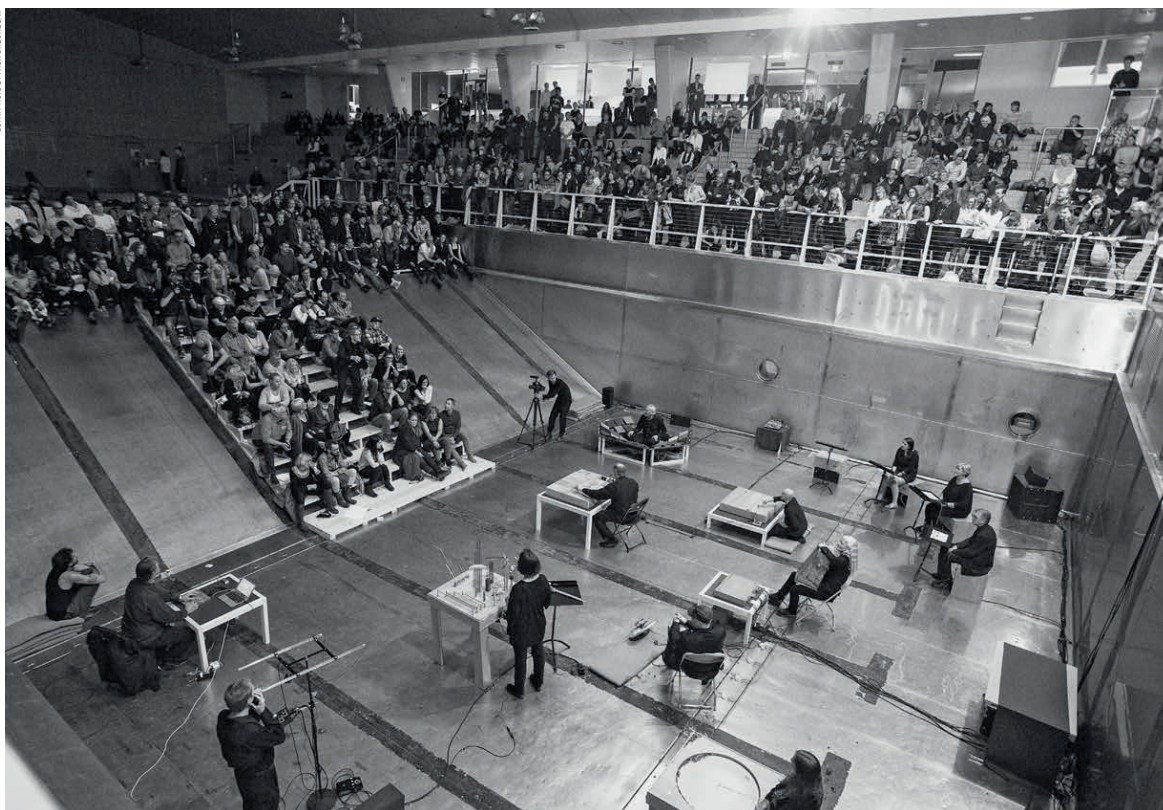
I often start my introductions at concerts saying, 'Nobody will hear the same thing, and there is no need to worry that you're not getting everything.' On the contrary, people are invited to walk or to change positions in the space, to sit near certain sound sources, or sometimes to take balloons and listen through the vibration of balloon membranes.

Also, the way you work with light inside the concert space is very different. If you are trying to focus on movement and gesture, then you end up lighting the space and not creating dark atmospheres. When it comes to equalising instruments, you wouldn't necessarily augment the low-end spectrum, but rather try to add what is missing for deaf people. So, all these things together, if we bring them to one observation, it's really that all senses are connected and interdependent. 'Handicap' becomes an expertise, actually.

RB: How did you become interested in sound?

TA: Through literature, I would say. I didn't come from a musical family. But I was reading a lot when I was a kid, and from literature it was theatre, and from theatre, I came to music. Electronic music is something I really discovered when I arrived in France, when I could start to buy records and mix them together and do

BOTH PHOTO BY THOM BRONKHORST



experiments with them. Then at some point I entered the class of electroacoustic music – not really knowing what electroacoustic music was! It was just the possibility for me to keep on doing experiments with turntables.

RB: Do you think your approach is still influenced by this sense of the theatrical?

TA: Yes, maybe – at least the sensation of being on stage. Something I did in my early works was to bring back the body into the equation of making electroacoustic music.

RB: You're quite known for your very physical performances on stage. Is that a way of emphasising this role of the body?

TA: It's just a way of letting it free, of letting the body loose, and having it become part of the act of improvisation. And that's why I built these electronic interfaces that employed big surfaces and wide movements.

RB: You worked for a while as the co-artistic director of the STEIM [Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music] in Amsterdam.

TA: It was the director [the late] Michel Waisvisz who was the true reason why I got into this institution. The work of Waisvisz is super-important to me still today. He was thinking precisely about these issues of the body and improvisation. He had built these glove systems [*The Hands* (1984-), a wearable system of gestural control for electronic music], a very dynamic

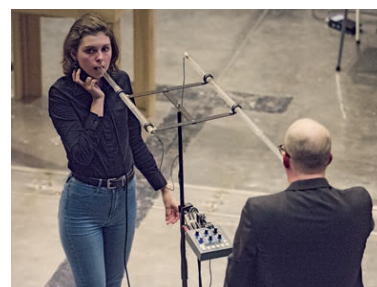
way to play samples and to do collage in real time with digital controllers in the shape of gloves. Also, he conducted research work on 'sufficient' electronic instruments that are not powered by electricity or which take electricity from the Sun or from the body.

Waisvisz was mobilising all these ideas on the one hand for professionals, putting them at the service of musicians and composers who were all residents at STEIM, and also working with young audiences, bringing these technologies inside schools and cultural centres.

RB: Your work remains, on one level, essentially music. What for you is the difference between art and music?

TA: On a conceptual level I don't think there's a difference. Both are as rich as one another, but unfortunately today we miss their complementarity. We've lost the interconnection of contemporary practices between and beyond mediums. Contemporary practices in sound, image, sculpture, cinema, if they all have a place within one institution, that would be the contemporary art institution.

For me, it's a difference that is much more practical, but it opens up to important things. To give you some examples: the music world today – unfortunately – doesn't allow a composer to work with duration, if you want to make a piece that lasts six months, that unfolds in a space over time. The music world doesn't work with this logic. It works more with shorter intervals. There are



Top and above: *WITHIN*, performance at Bergen Assembly, Bergen, 2016; facing page: *WITHIN*, performance at Le Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse, 2018



© LE PRINTemps DE SEPTEMBRE. PHOTO BY FRANK KALX

also situations for dealing with reception and performance that the music world does not offer – for example, where people could encounter something by chance. So the art world is offering material, spatial frameworks that are very interesting to explore for musicians today, that are at the core of the contemporary discourse.

RB: One project that has marshalled a lot of different institutions, *The Reverse Collection*, is interesting in the way that it turns the colonial gaze back on itself. What are your thoughts on the sometimes vexed issue of appropriation in music and art?

TA: *The Reverse Collection* unfolded from these ideas of appropriation and decolonisation. But I didn't want to tackle them frontally. More interesting, for me, was the work of ethnomusicology and what researchers were doing inside this institution [the Ethnological Museum at the Dahlem Centre, Berlin], than what brought these instruments to the institution. When you come to the collection of a museum of instruments, you immediately realise that the instruments are not played any more. They are preserved and they are treated – sometimes chemically, sometimes physically. Then the instrument is at rest, *ad vitam* [forever].

I asked the conservators of the museum, 'What's the purpose of this instrument, besides being exhibited as a sculpture?' They say, 'It's material for research. Ethnomusicologists can come and measure it and make a replica, but you

don't play it.' That's where the idea came of saying, 'Why not try and make replicas out of the sound and not the model?' Then we entered this long debate with the museum. 'Is it possible to play these instruments one more time, and in what conditions and how?' Of course the first answer you get is 'No.' Then negotiation starts.

The idea was not to propose something in conflict with the traditional methods of ethnomusicologists or to put them in question. It's just taking another parallel. This is one way to make a replica. What is another way?

RB: There are instruments that are 40,000 years old, such as a flute made out of an animal bone. When you approach creating new instruments, how much do you feel you're still part of this 40,000-year tradition?

TA: I think the practice is really still the same. It brings us to the question of who's doing what for whom? Is the musical piece coming from the existence of the instrument, or is the instrument coming from a musical idea or a composition?

'Listening is not just with the ears; it is with the fingers, the bones, the eyes, listening to the body and to gestures'

Both are valid, and this has been the dynamic ongoing thread, instruments coming from engineering and physics, and instruments coming from creative ideas and necessities. Techniques and technologies transform, but it is still the same primitive need.

RB: A lot of your work seems to approach sounds from beneath in different ways. In *I/E*, you're taking sounds from underground or underwater, elsewhere you're looking at sounds below the threshold of human hearing. Even *The Reverse Collection* suggests a kind of ethnomusicology from below. How should we understand this sense of 'beneathness'?

TA: It's more the idea of covering a spectrum, an attempt at thinking what's outside the margins or outside our bandwidth, or outside our reach as human beings – and sometimes also outside our speed as moving bodies or computing entities. That's the crucial thing: this sensibility to what we might be missing.

● Tarek Atoui's work can be seen as part of 'Yorkshire Sculpture International 2019', 22 June to 29 September, at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds Art Gallery, the Hepworth Wakefield, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, and outdoor locations across Leeds and Wakefield. yorkshire-sculpture.org, free to all

Robert Barry is a writer and composer, and visual arts editor at *The Quietus*.

Tarek Atoui's "The Ground: From the Land to the Sea"

The exhibition was devised for both an immediate encounter with sound art and a durational process of "de-composing".



Installation view of *TAREK ATOUI*'s "The Ground: From the Land to the Sea," NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, 2018. Courtesy NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore.

A strange etymological affinity between "composition" and "compost"—both taken from the Latin *componere*, meaning "to put together, to collect whole from several parts"—found its way into Paris-based, Lebanese sound artist Tarek Atoui's most recent solo exhibition, "The Ground: From the Land to the Sea." Following Atoui's preoccupation with the latent possibilities of sound composition, the exhibition was devised for both an immediate encounter and a durational unfolding, where processes of deep listening, activation and collaboration were crucial in "de-composing" the encoded expectations of performance.

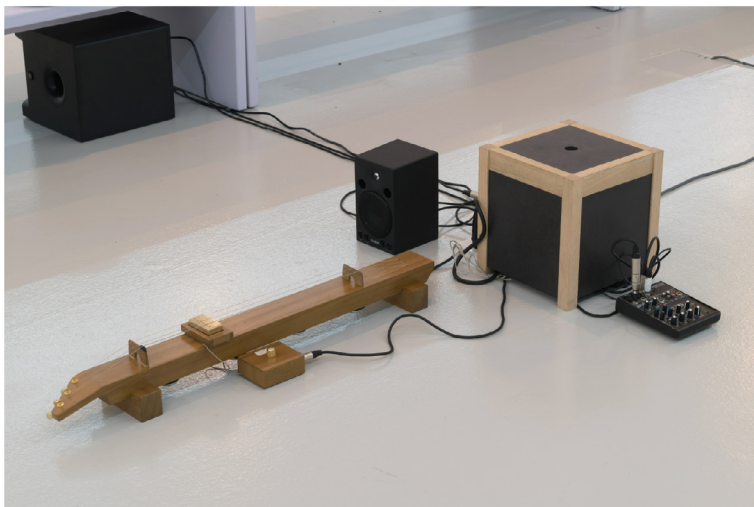
Upon entering the gallery, one is immediately immersed in aural washes of trickling water and snapping shrimp emanating from a nearby speaker. Crackling static from maritime communications punctuates this repose. These were sounds taken from the project *I/E* (2015–), a growing library of field recordings from harbors and coastlines by Atoui and his collaborator, French sound artist Éric La Casa. Moving around the garland of twelve speakers, one hears the dawn chorus of Elefsina, a city on the outskirts of Athens, emanating from the corner of the gallery, occasionally blending into the mangrove song of cicadas. The listener was enfolded within a continuum of sound, space and moving bodies, rather than dissolved into an unintelligible sonic bath.

Marcus Yee
Tarek Atoui's "The Ground: From the Land to the Sea"
ArtAsiaPacific, May 18, 2018.
<https://urls.fr/acPmRR>

GALERIE
CHANTAL CROUSEL

Drawn from cities such as Abu Dhabi, Athens and Singapore, the composition of field recordings revealed the connective tissue between the land and the sea as a dynamic constellation of trade, security, ritual and ecology. Diverging from the academic discipline of ecoacoustics, these recordings did not claim to be a mimetic documentary of site. Instead, Atoui emphasized sonic abstraction, an untethering of sound from location that brings to mind Robert Smithson's distinction between the site and non-site. This paradoxical encounter with the soundscape chimed between placement and displacement, immersion and attention. By lending a listening ear to the circumambient track of place, the location became at once foreign and intimate.

Instruments developed for *The Ground* (2017)—a five-year project in collaboration with Mirrored Gardens, a field-cum-creative space in rural Guangzhou that falls on the intersections between contemporary art and agricultural practices—produced further resonances between sound and site as they transposed the artist's observations on agricultural, architectural and craft practices along the Pearl River Delta. Collections of such instruments were on display in *The Spin Library* and *The Turntable / Study #1* (both 2018), which were more resonantly environmental in their formal interplay of sound and materiality, as opposed to the indexing of nature. Listeners were re-tuned to the contact between surfaces as a locus of sound. The set-up involved a collection of ceramic discs played on a record player, hacked to synchronize with external sounds. A wide selection of styluses, from branches to feathers, traced the granules and grooves of the gyrating discs, some beating to rhythms derived from classical Arabic music.



Installation view of *TAREK ATOUI*'s *The Trichord*, 2017, string instrument, dimensions variable, at "The Ground: From the Land to the Sea," NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, 2018. Courtesy NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore.

Marcus Yee
Tarek Atoui's "The Ground: From the Land to the Sea"
ArtAsiaPacific, May 18, 2018.
<https://urls.fr/acPmRR>

GALERIE
CHANTAL CROUSEL

Likewise, *The Trichord* (2017) was an instrument playable by both hearing and deaf persons. Aside from plucking its strings, the pressure of one's hand on the instrument's dense wooden frame absorbs its reverberation, thus modulating the feedback loop. To listen is also to feel its vibrations across the floor, the eddying of the air. Developed for WITHIN—a project exploring diverse ways of experiencing sound by deaf and hearing people—*The Trichord* was not merely an instrument for the symbolic inclusion of the deaf, but also for hearing persons to experience multimodal ways of listening. These instruments intertwined tactile, visual and aural elements, transporting one to a sensorium where sound is unignorably relational, inseparable from its very plasticity.

Collaboration invoked another ecology in the exhibition. Atoui, together with Singaporean music curator Mark Wong, and sound artists Yuen Chee Wai and Vivian Wang, invited a host of sound practitioners—many of whom are from Singapore's experimental music scene—to tinker with the installations throughout the exhibition's run. Vivian Wang, the first of twelve guests, mentioned "a sense of bliss" from her explorations, and that learning to play the instruments was like "getting to know someone", a process that was not undergirded by mastery. Without the pressure to perform, these interventions accumulated into an abundance of tactics in hearing and playing for the committed listener, unraveling the contingent, prototypical ethos behind these instruments.

"The Ground" transformed the gallery into a sonorous instrument, a jamming studio, or a listening alcove, flouting any expectations of finish and fidelity. After all, the authoritative score is mere paper—material for compost. It is in the breakdown of sound that capacious ways of listening, or rather, sensing, re-emerges.



"TAREK ATOUI", _I/E_, 2015, photo documentation of recordings in Athens. Copyright Alexandre Guirkingier. Courtesy the artist.



"TAREK ATOUI", _I/E_, 2015, photo documentation of recordings in Athens. Copyright Alexandre Guirkingier. Courtesy the artist.

Marcus Yee
Tarek Atoui's "The Ground: From the Land to the Sea"
ArtAsiaPacific, May 18, 2018.
<https://urls.fr/acPmRR>

frieze

TAREK ATOUI Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France

The gallery fills with a gusting wave of bass. I can, of course, hear it – it's like an engine revving from the bottom of a well – but more striking is the way it feels, thrumming through my chest, neither inside nor outside but, somehow, both at once. The musician is playing something called a Sub Ink, a sub-woofer hooked up to a drawing mounted on a music stand: sounds are produced by fingers tracing the graphite marks. It is just one of a collection of unusual musical devices filling the main space at Galerie Chantal Crousel: there are also wooden tables mounted with large metal springs and screws, a laptop operated by a series of finger pads laid out like a hand, and a floor-based cockpit of differently textured textile samples, each of which is connected to a range of noises.

This strange orchestra is part of 'WITHIN', an ongoing collaboration between artist Tarek Atoui and a growing number of individuals, groups and organizations. Atoui launched the project in 2012 to explore the ways that deafness can make us think differently about the experience of both sound and performance. So far, there have been iterations at Sharjah Biennale in 2013, the Berkeley Art Museum in 2015 and several institutions in Europe – most recently the Bergen Assembly in Norway last year. As part of the project's development, Atoui has worked with the curatorial duo Council (Sandra Terdjman and Gregory Castera) as well as sound engineers, composers and groups of people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Atoui's aim is for these instruments to end up in a music school or educational institution. In the meantime, they are in regular use at Chantal Crousel.

The exhibition, which also includes five videos of the project's previous

iterations, involves a busy programme of events. Aside from the Sub Ink, the highlight of the opening performance was the playing of the Ouroboros. Taking its name from the ancient symbol of a serpent eating its own tail, the instrument is made up of two lengths of transparent tubing held horizontally in the air. The player – one of several professional musicians performing alongside Atoui – places speakers to their throat and lips before one of the tubes. By opening and closing their mouth, the player controls the Ouroboros's sounds: the effect is soft but insistent, like a spectral calling from through the trees.

On my second visit to the gallery, the Ouroboros had a very different effect. I arrived as Atoui was giving a lesson to a group of deaf children. One girl struggled to control the instrument: her mouth opened and nothing came out but her determination was striking. So, too, was the way the children communicated: through touch, gesture and a constant attentiveness to the actions and intentions of one another. Sign language requires such focus. It also requires clear sightlines, as Atoui explained, citing pioneering deaf architect Jeffrey Mansfield, in an excellent interview in the exhibition booklet.

Watching the children, it became clear that Atoui's strange instruments are less geared towards a performance for an audience than towards facilitating a process of discovery. This involves a different conception of play and of sound: not only heard from afar but felt as a texture at the fingertips or a humming through the chest. As an onlooker, it's hard not to feel left out, but this only reinforces Atoui's premise: that there are limits to both sight and sound, limits at which each sense blurs, often unnoticed, into something else entirely.

Tom Jeffreys

This page
Above
Jorge Macchi,
Still Song, 2005,
installation view

Below
Tarek Atoui, *WITHIN*,
2017, performance
documentation



Above
Gian Maria Tosatti,
Sette Stagioni
dallo Spirito (Seven
Seasons of the Spirit),
2016–17, installation
view

Below
Tarek Atoui, *WITHIN*,
2017, installation view



monopol

documenta (13) Künstlerauswahl



Tarek Atoui, „Un-drum 2: The Chinese Connection“, 2010, Experimentaclub, Madrid

TAREK ATOUI

In der Orangerie will der Libanese ein musikalisches Labor wachsen lassen. Selbstverständlich mithilfe von Elektronik

Computer sind keine Menschen. Und doch erinnert die Art, wie Tarek Atoui mit dem Laptop umgeht, das Mischpult bedient oder ein Touchpad berührt, an ein Verhalten, das eigentlich nur bei Paaren zu beobachten ist. Es wirkt, als flüsterte er oder stritte sich mit den Maschinen, als bekämpfte oder streichelte er sie. Vor allem aber scheint er mit ihnen zu tanzen.

Wie in Schardscha, der Hauptstadt des gleichnamigen Emirats, wo Atoui seine jüngste Performance auf einem Platz in der historischen Altstadt aufführte. Im März dieses Jahres eröffnete er ein Konzert oder vielmehr eine Klanginstallation, die Flötenspieler, Trommler, Gitarristen, Sänger und immer wieder Atoui selbst mit seinem Equipment mehrere Stunden ohne Unterbrechung realisierten.

Tarek Atoui wurde 1980 in Beirut geboren und studierte am Konservatorium von Reims in Frankreich Elektroakustik und zeitgenössische Musik. Eine Ausbildung, die die experimentellen Formate beförderte, die Atoui bei der Performa in New York (im November 2011), der Transmediale im Berliner Haus der Kulturen der Welt (2007) oder eben in Schardscha präsentierte.

Zwischen weißen Mauern erklangen traditionelle arabische Musik, elektronischer Sound, minimale Geräusche und religiöse Lieder. Eine Zusammenstellung, sagt Tarek Atoui, die nach einer Weile *tarab*, einen tranceähnlichen Zustand, erzeuge. „*Tarab* ereignete sich in den Hinterhöfen“, erzählt Atoui, „in denen die Menschen lange Zeit zusammensaßen und auf verschiedenste Art und Weise kommunizierten.“

Der Aufführungsort von Atouis Performance in Schardscha ist im Grunde auch ein Hinterhof, ein versteckter Ort, durch den die heiße Wüsten- und die kühle Meeresluft weht. Bei der Documenta in Kassel will der Künstler nun die Orangerie beziehen. Wie könnte das aussehen?

Wo traditionell Bäume und exotische Pflanzen stehen, soll ein Laboratorium wachsen, in dem Tarek Atoui zusammen mit Studenten Instrumente bauen möchte; keine Werkzeuge, mit denen lediglich Töne erzeugt werden, sondern Objekte, mit denen man sprechen kann.

Außerdem plant Tarek Atoui diverse Auftritte. Seine technische Ausrüstung, die Rechner, Bildschirme, Kabel und Knöpfe, die Hard- und Software, soll um Sensoren erweitert werden, die auf Atouis langen, schlanken Körper reagieren und auf die er selbst antworten muss. Zwischen den digitalen, computergenerierten Klängen, den Geräuschen aus Radios, Kinos oder Archiven dürfte das auch in Kassel ein sehenswerter Paartanz werden. *as*



TAREK ATOUI setting up four microphones in the desert of Ash Shigaya, north of Kuwait, to record the sound piece *Unplified*, 2012. Courtesy MinRASY Projects, London.

On the May morning after the debut of sound artist Tarek Atoui's newly commissioned piece *Unplified* (2012) at the Museum of Modern Art in Kuwait City, Atoui, who had only a few hours of sleep the night before, was surprisingly energetic. Wearing one of his signature quirky, androgynous sweaters despite the already intense heat, Atoui was quick to smile and crack sarcastic jokes. Born and raised in Lebanon and now based in Paris, he sat down with me to discuss his new installation and the collaboration process run by Rana Sadik and Samer Younis that produces and displays contemporary art projects in Kuwait—before recounting how he began his career as a sound artist, as well as his upcoming work.

Atoui's *Unplified* was a sound installation presented inside a blindingly illuminated portacabin, which was located in the museum's searingly hot courtyard. The temporary building was split into two connected rooms without air-conditioning. The first room was empty except for an audio recording of desert sounds, filtered through Atoui's custom-designed feedback system. Installed in the second room were four microphones that amplified the listener's movements in the space so that the emptiness of the desert was replaced by the sound of human presence, together forming what Atoui describes as a "full sonic experience." He began our breakfast by explaining that the process of creating *Unplified* was "like an experiment . . . I didn't know what was going to happen in the desert. I know my studio in Paris, but this was quite extreme."

How did the collaboration between you and MinRasy Projects come about?

It started with a form of commission. Over the past few years, MinRasy had been inviting artists to work on the theme of the Palestinian presence in Kuwait. Before me, there were Tarek al-Ghoussein, Khalil Rabah and others, so I am a continuation of this project. In my case, what Rana Sadik proposed was doing a sound installation based on a book by Ghassan Kanafani, titled *Men in the Sun* (1963), about three Palestinian refugees who die en route to Kuwait, where they plan to seek work. What Rana told me is that when she read this book, she could imagine or hear the sounds that Kanafani was describing. So this is how things started.

What do you hope is communicated through *Unplified*?

I have no hope at all! I really don't know what I hope people get or feel from it. It is a very abstract piece of work; you can relate to it on different levels. Based on the response I received yesterday, there are a diversity of experiences you can get out of it. I developed this as a conceptual sound piece with a complex relation to the book, but I didn't have a specific intention . . . I know it is not an easy piece; it is not an environment that you can stand at ease in. It's hot and it's saturated, in terms of light. The sound, as well, is saturated and these three elements function together. What I really like is that these elements reproduce the intensity that I wanted.

On the subject of the elements, this is quite different than most of your other pieces, which are primarily sound-based. *Unplified* mimics a desert environment through its use of oppressive heat and blinding light. Was this your idea, to create a desert environment in which to experience the work?

Actually it was Rana's idea first to present it this way, and I thought it was great. With Rana you can dare to push boundaries, and she offered me this possibility. And then I thought that, yes, this is how it should be. I'm used to working in a more typical exhibition space and presenting my work in a more modest way. Now the piece is a full ensemble that also contains sound, and these elements are not easily separated.

Just like the main characters in the book, who traveled across the desert from Basra, in Iraq, to Kuwait inside a water tanker, you also made this journey. What was that experience like?

Well, this was not my idea, actually; it was Rana's again. It happened in December 2011 and my trip took only a few hours. But it was good that I did the journey anyway, as it helped my process. I knocked on the water tanker I was traveling in, but it wasn't interesting, so I didn't use this sound.

Instead of using the natural, raw sounds of the desert that you recorded, you manipulated them. How did you do this and why?

I didn't want to create an illustration of the sound environment of the book. The idea was

to transform this into something else, to use the story as a generator to produce something different. But there is still a relationship to the novel: having four speakers relates to the number of characters in the book. The idea was to tune the analysis system on each speaker to act differently, creating a symphony, where each speaker generates a different sound and the four create the piece together, but when you move through the space, you can still hear each one on its own. I didn't want to use or show the sound in a raw way. The sound loop in the installation is two hours long, cut down from seven hours of recorded sound footage.

Sound art in the Middle East is still something of a rarity. How did you begin your career?

When I was a teenager, I was a techno DJ, but after DJ-ing for a while I got bored and thought that I better study something more seriously. I really started sound art when I finished high school and went to university in France, where they teach these things. At some point, I started coming back to the Middle East and began doing projects here.

Though you are from the Arab world, you work internationally. How much is this region a point of reference in your work?

Not much, actually. What really interests me is not the regional context of the Middle East, but perpetuating and prolonging things related to the history of sound art and contemporary music. A lot of the questions that interest me come from this discourse, with less and less regional connotations, even if the material or themes are taken from this environment.

What is coming up next for you?

After participating in Documenta this summer, I will start a project with a British performing-arts troupe called Forced Entertainment, who are reinventing contemporary theater. Then I'm going to Beijing and Hong Kong at some point, to continue the project shown in Documenta; and I will perform *Revisiting Tarab* at the Serpentine Gallery [in London] during Frieze week in October.

See our website for an Arabic and Chinese version of this article.
يمكنكم قراءة ترجمة عربية لهذه المقالة في موقعنا على الانترنت.
欲阅读此文章的中文版请登陆我们的网站

THE
NEW YORKER

TAREK ATOUI: VISITING TARAB

When he was growing up in Beirut, Tarek Atoui had little interest in Arabic music. He wasn't alone; many Lebanese of his generation, myself included, tuned in to mainly American and European music. He left Lebanon in 1998 and moved to France,



where he studied contemporary and electronic music at the French National Conservatory, in Reims. Since he graduated in 2003, he's been travelling the world performing his own brand of sound art, which relies on manic body movements to control the sounds of machines he built himself. Much of it involves knob turning, he says, "like playing systems of faucets."

Atoui has made music about Lebanon before—this piece, from his "Un-drum" series, draws upon his arrest and torture during the 2006 war—but it wasn't until Atoui received an invitation to participate in this year's Performa biennial, in New York, that he immersed himself in his own musical heritage. After some preliminary research, he decided to focus on *tarab*, a trance-like effect associated with a form of Arab art-music from the early twentieth century. (To get a taste of *tarab*, listen to the Sufi singer Abdel Nabi al Rannan and Asma al Koumsariya.) Atoui was attracted to the improvisation, which binds the audience to the performer. "*Tarab* is not a music genre but a state of 'melotrance' that you reach after being exposed to music for a certain amount of time," Atoui told me. *Tarab*, he said, "used to happen in courtyards, where people would come and sit for hours."

While he delved further into *tarab*, Atoui remembered hearing about Kamal Kassar, a Lebanese lawyer, musician, and collector of traditional Arabic recordings. Kassar had spent years scouring the Middle East and beyond for rare old 78-rpm discs and studio tapes dating back to 1903. Atoui invited musicians he wanted to collaborate with for the Performa commission—from the experimental hip-hop musician DJ Spooky to Tokyo-born composer Ikue Mori—to Lebanon to peruse Kassar's stash. "The idea was to open up the collection to a number of musicians from different practices but all related to sampling," Atoui said. He saw this as an opportunity to not only educate other musicians but also himself. "Even though I am from this culture and this region, I knew as little as they did."

Nana Asfour
Tarek Atoui: Visiting Tarab
The New Yorker, November 4, 2011.
<https://urls.fr/ksCRR4>

Kassar, who has created a foundation to digitize and preserve his collection, proved to be an avid teacher. In his climate-controlled music pavilion in the Lebanese mountains, Kassar treated the musicians to hour-long lessons in Arabic music history. These not only included recordings played on an old gramophone, but also archival images and film footage, as well as live performances. “Kamal created this environment that was like being in a space out of time,” Atoui said.

As he went through the music, Kassar explained the difference between Arabic forms such as *doulab*, *qasida*, *taqsim*, and *samai*. (Those of us who have not enjoyed Kassar’s private lessons can learn more at [Maqam World](#) and [Traditional Arabic Music](#).) To render the music more accessible to his guests, Kassar divided the material into sections—urban, rural, religious, etc. Mori was drawn to a rhythmic form called *basbraf*; others found an affinity with the breathing of Koranic music, drumming from the north of Egypt, Sufi music from the south. After choosing the tracks that appealed to them, the visitors returned home to work on their own compositions for Performa.

They kept in touch with Atoui, who had to figure out how to bring all the pieces together. “A lot of them were careful about not offending this culture,” Atoui told me. “They were very precise about how they cut sentences to the meaning of the songs.”

On Saturday, at Performa, Atoui will string the works of the sixteen invited musicians into three suites of about an hour and a half each. It will open with Atoui’s own composition, based on a traditional set of Egyptian violin solos filtered through his custom-made electronic contraptions and interrupted by a variety of samples of film and ambient sound. After his solo performance, each of his collaborators will take the stage to play his or her own piece, with Atoui returning several times during the evening to improvise. He will direct another *tarab* session in March in Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates, this time with an Arabic orchestra and seminars on traditional and contemporary music. If his generation were better informed about their musical heritage, Arabic music, would, Atoui says, “take a completely different shape.”