

Acoustic Encounters

Magdi Mostafa in conversation with Clelia Coussonnet

Clelia Coussonnet

009_07 / 29 January 2016

In his site-specific sound installations or interventions, Magdi Mostafa questions spaces and attempts to reveal their inherent, yet invisible, energy. While bringing these remnants and traces to life, he investigates the historical, social or economic values embedded in the layers of objects and places. Mostafa's sensorial environments are activated by the energies and bodies of the viewers who navigate the artist's labyrinthine installations, which explore the flux and reflux of sound. In this conversation, which took place in September 2015 during the Biennale de Lyon, Mostafa reflects on how uncertainty and chemistry play a vital role in his practice, enabling permeation between himself, the public, and sound. He also addresses sound's capacity to unearth lost feelings and images, and its potential to create spiritual experiences within exhibitionary frames that tap into the tactics of performance.

Clelia Coussonnet: You followed a classical curriculum at the Helwan University's faculty of art education in Cairo, studying amongst other things painting, sculpture, ceramics, printing techniques and textile arts, until graduating in 2004. How did your relationship with sound begin?

Magdi Mostafa: Despite the absence of a new media department, my studies were a gateway to experiencing a variety of art forms, helping me break boundaries between materials and thoughts. I was given the opportunity to participate in different workshops and, as a student, to assist international artists in both the Cairo and Alexandria Biennales. Yet my real starting point with new media was the opportunity to show at the Youth Salon in Cairo. The Egyptian Ministry of Culture organizes this annual event, launched 26 years ago. It issues an open call for artists under the age of 30 to submit their works. A selected jury chooses around 100 young artists to be shown in the Palace of Arts, out of which five artists receive a prize and one is awarded the grand prize. From 2002 to 2010, this space became the playground for my practice: the place where I would experiment and make mistakes.

My father had a great interest in music and I grew up in a house with a fantastic music library. At that time in



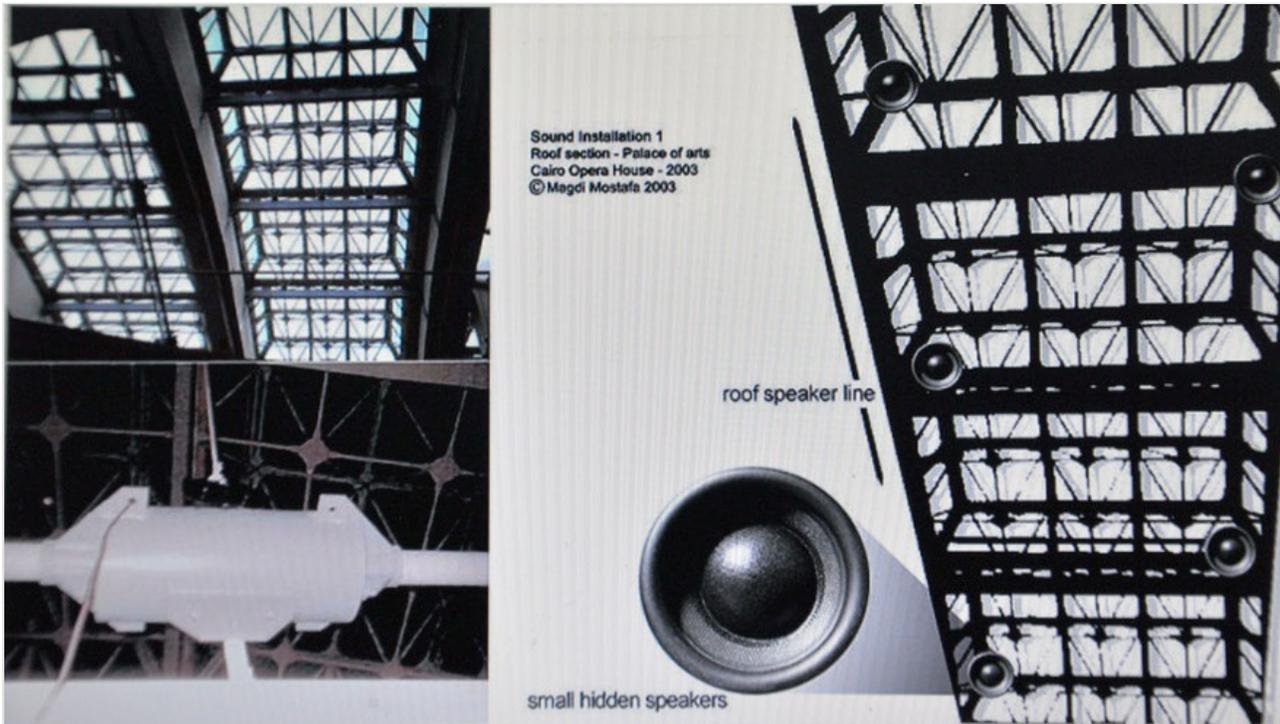
Magdi Mostafa, *Soundscape: Can Ricart*, Multi-channel Sound Installation, Barcelona 2009.
Photo: Magdi Mostafa - Courtesy of the artist.

Egypt we had heavy Japanese-made cassette players that marked the 1970s and 1980s landscape. As a kid I loved audiotapes and enjoyed trying to see what was inside devices and speakers. After 2003, when I obtained enough knowledge of recording, editing and setting up a multi-layered sound piece, sound became my language. I did not necessarily relate to sound as a medium, but rather as a way to 'orbit' my ideas. It could be the result of a certain process or the inspirational seed or both: to give sound a physical presence, which I gradually linked with space. Pictures or video hardly account for such an experience. It is a chemical reaction. You need to be present in the space to hear the echoes and the vibrations of sound: you have to become submerged.

CC: Your interest in acoustics is influenced by varied ideas, such as scientific and astronomical theories. Can you talk about the influences on your practice?

MM: To be honest, I believe sound art does not have an 'ABC' like other forms of art. Its developments are still quite new, after all. The first reflections around sound art were led by the Italian futurist Luigi Russolo in the 1920s and, since then, digital developments have critically changed the landscape of sound art. In any case, I admire the experiences of John Cage, Joseph Beuys, Max Neuhaus, and Anish Kapoor. Greek musician Evangelos Papathanassiou's early arrangements are also passionate to me: he was amazingly one of the first people to compose with analogue synthesizers in the 1970s.

CC: Your first sound installation, *Walls' Talk* (2003), was censored at the 13th Youth Salon of Cairo in 2003. It consisted of around 100 speakers discreetly dispersed in the four floors of Cairo's Palace of Arts. They were placed in the ceiling as well as in the walls, corners, and on the ground. The looped ambient soundtrack kept



Magdi Mostafa, *Walls' Talk*, site specific multi-channel sound installation, 2003.
Installation plan and photograph: Magdi Mostafa. Courtesy of the artist.

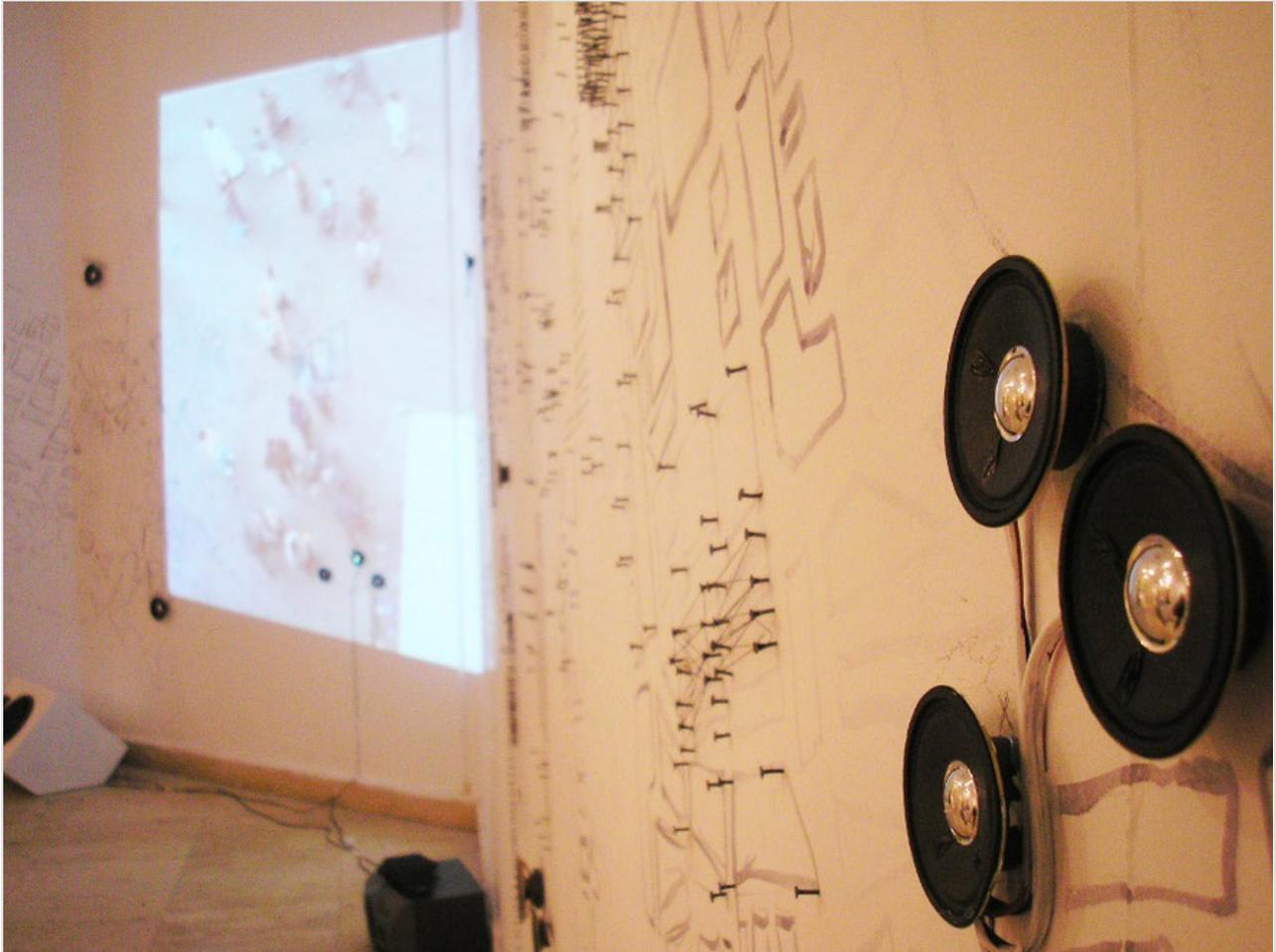
moving from one group of speakers to another. The effect was ghostly.

MM: With *Walls' Talk*, my idea was to fill the entire building with sound. Back then, Cairo had an interesting electronic music movement, and in 2006, Mahmoud Refat concretized this movement by launching the label 100Copies Music, working with musicians like Hassan Khan, Maurice Louca, Adham Hafez, and bands like Bikya, Telepoetic, to cite just a few. Yet the concept of sound as an art form to be shown in galleries was not widespread. I believe no tangible manifestation of sound art had happened at the time. This medium was neither familiar to Egyptians nor to the jury of the Youth Salon, who rejected my proposal. It became a big challenge and only the head of the jury, Fatma Ismael, supported me. She was curious about new media and helped me set up the installation. I wanted to rely on the existing speakers of the building's announcement system to diffuse my sound and, even though it was taken down three or four days after the opening, a massive audience heard my piece. Despite this censorship I was happy with the work – I had succeeded in breaking down the wall between myself and the public.

CC: A few years later you broke down the wall with the jury, too. It was in 2007 that your installation *Madena* (2007) – made in collaboration with Ahmed Basyony – won the first prize of the 18th edition of the same event. For this work you projected videos of Cairo's streets onto the walls of the exhibition space while a live performance of a man sewing a map of the city took place. Another map was drawn directly to the walls. Ahmed and yourself were also present, mixing environmental sounds with recordings of discussions occurring among the audience.

MM: Yes, for *Madena* Basyony and I added other elements to the sound, such as drawings interspersed by

speakers or a looped video, so that the jury would be able to digest it and become familiar with it. Basiony was also very much interested in using performance in the piece; in fact, the man who was sewing was his brother. It is also worth mentioning that in 2006 I was somewhat reinvigorated by attending the 'Open Studio' exhibition, curated by Clare Davis at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, which was based on sound works and experimental music. It was the first time I saw an entire show about sound in Egypt. This somehow pushed me to develop *Madena* and further projects.



Magdi Mostafa and Ahmed Basiony, *Madena*, (installation details), 2007.

Photo: Shady Noshokaty. Courtesy of the artists.

CC: If I understand correctly, it is not always easy to be accepted as a sound artist. Have you ever suffered from a lack of institutional support in developing your practice?

MM: Sound seems to have become a 'fashionable' medium today, but 13 years ago it was not an easy path. Another art scene, one that is not connected to the contemporary, has always been more widespread in Egypt – it is a conservative art scene where aesthetic values are prioritized. I respect that but the younger generation wants to expand borders and to focus on exploring new media. Unfortunately, there are no institutions to support this quest.

It is also hard to find the adequate technology. If you look at my piece *The Surface of Spectral Scattering* (2014) it might seem high-tech but in reality it took me three years to complete using the easiest technology available: small LED amplification devices underneath a platform. You might think that I am using 100 sensors, robot-circuits and patches to programme my works but, in the end, the LED devices give less risky results and can be changed safely. It is not always easy to find alternative solutions. I have contacted people in China and Indonesia to find the best way to resolve my technological issues. While I am gaining experience it means that the work requires a lot of research and a compromise with technology.



Magdi Mostafa and Ahmed Basiony, *Madena*, multi-channel sound installation and live performance, 2007.
Photo: Shady Noshokaty. Courtesy of the artists.

CC: How is sound received in the cultural environment in Egypt now?

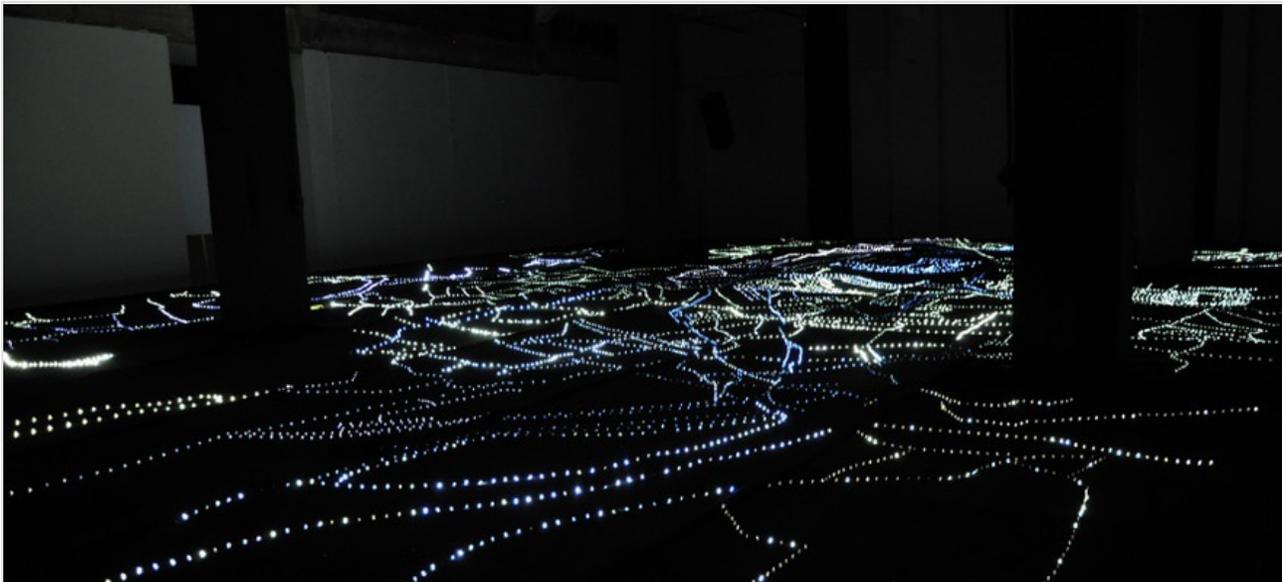
MM: Generally, the cultural environment is very interesting although sensitive and tense, as a social and political polarization has permeated it. In terms of growth, a lot of change has happened within the Cairo art scene in a short period of time, but that change is still not big enough. You can still count on one hand the number of artists working on sound as a medium. There is definitely interest in it but you cannot organize a

sound art event without having half of the participants being musicians. Some artists that are not sound-based create pieces with sound along with other works like videos or sculptures.

The public has also changed a lot. The government and institutions might be at the hands of the older generation but it is the time for young Egyptians – the streets and the future is theirs. You cannot underestimate the power and effects of laptops, WIFI, and smartphones. Ten years ago, I never would have had the curious feedback and attention that I now receive in Cairo. One central issue is that when talking about art in Egypt, one always privileges Cairo. While the cultural movement spreads in the capital it shrinks in other Egyptian cities, even Alexandria, especially since 2011.

CC: Are there more educational proposals around new media that have fostered greater understanding?

MM: In general, yes. For example, the number of post-graduate courses in Arabic that include new media arts at the faculty of art education in Helwan University is increasing. The German and American universities also contribute to this dissemination. International exchanges, as well as an enhanced access to Internet and social networks, have encouraged the transmission of knowledge around new artistic practices. But there is no governmental support. After the revolution, the quantity of exhibitions decreased and there have been less financial opportunities to produce artworks. The lack of academic research and writing is also an issue: the theory-based art criticism we currently have is a sort of 'protective umbrella'. Some young artists wait to be approved by this umbrella. I personally prefer to do without it.



Magdi Mostafa, *Surface Of Spectral Scattering*, multi-channel sound and light installation, 2014
Photo: Magdi Mostafa, Courtesy of the artist.

CC: You said sound is the orbit for your ideas. Does it fail you sometimes?

MM: I believe that sound is the best field and largest horizon one can have. When I look at my work, I try to take a step back as an outsider observer. I become energized and complete when I hear my sound recordings. For me, it is important to be honest and to have my spirit and my work aligned. I also learn every day by witnessing the different reactions of the audience. Each edition of a project matures through such a process, maybe because most of my pieces have changeable parameters.

CC: New media is all about inventing a new language using sophisticated technology, innovative digital tools and communication devices – in a sense it can be considered one of the most cutting-edge explorations in the art field. In contrast to this, your experimentation sometimes moves towards more outmoded technologies such as in your installation *Sounds Cells: Electro-Magnetic Orchestra*. Set in a dark room, hand-made electromagnetic kits are scattered on a table, inviting the audience to move them and feel 'square' sound waves. As you explained for *The Surface of Spectral Scattering*, you might also choose the easiest technology. This piece, set in a dark room too, looks like an aerial map of a city. The lights flicker and while wandering around the space the audience can hear sound moving through different sources.

MM: I admire people working with high technology and I enjoy following what is new. The relationship between science and contemporary art is extremely compelling. Still, I am trying to avoid the trap of being a 'digital artist' because this is not me. I am not a scientific person: I am a much more literary one. In my work, using simple technology serves as something emotional. Even though the intellect has to exist, I aspire more to poetry. In this, I hope not to recall the audience's mind or intelligence more than to trigger their feelings, their memory and their imaginary spaces. In *Sounds Cells: Electro-Magnetic Orchestra*, even if you can see the speakers, their mechanism is hidden: I want to push emotions related to social or historical events that are embedded within technology.

CC: To achieve emotional encounters, not only do you invoke our ability to listen but you also engage the rest of our senses. Your installations are often visually alluring. You bring smells to the space as in *Elements of The Unexpected* (2012) where dough mixers are whipping thick date syrup, filling the room with a sugary scent. Sometimes we can touch parts of the piece like the electric kits of *Sounds Cells: Electro-Magnetic Orchestra*. Not to mention the lights and the temperature that you choose to create sensorial and immersive environments...

MM: Some sounds have their own smell. If it is missing, I add it. Yet I also work a lot by accident. The smell of the syrup, for instance, came as a surprise and was not a pre-intended element. I liked it and decided to amplify it. As *Elements of The Unexpected* was shown in a small room with a low ceiling I added an even larger quantity of date syrup to have a stronger scent.

Another work with smells is *Transparent Existence* (2010), which was exhibited underneath the Mawlawi Museum in Islamic Cairo. To see the piece, the audience had to go deep down into the basement of the building in a tight and dark space. A pervasive smell of earthiness came from under the ground where you could see five Sufi graves. The experience was akin to being wholly present in a spiritual way. The feeling was



Magdi Mostafa, *Sound Cells: Analog Orchestra*, sound installation, 2009.
Photo: Graham Waite - Courtesy of the artist.

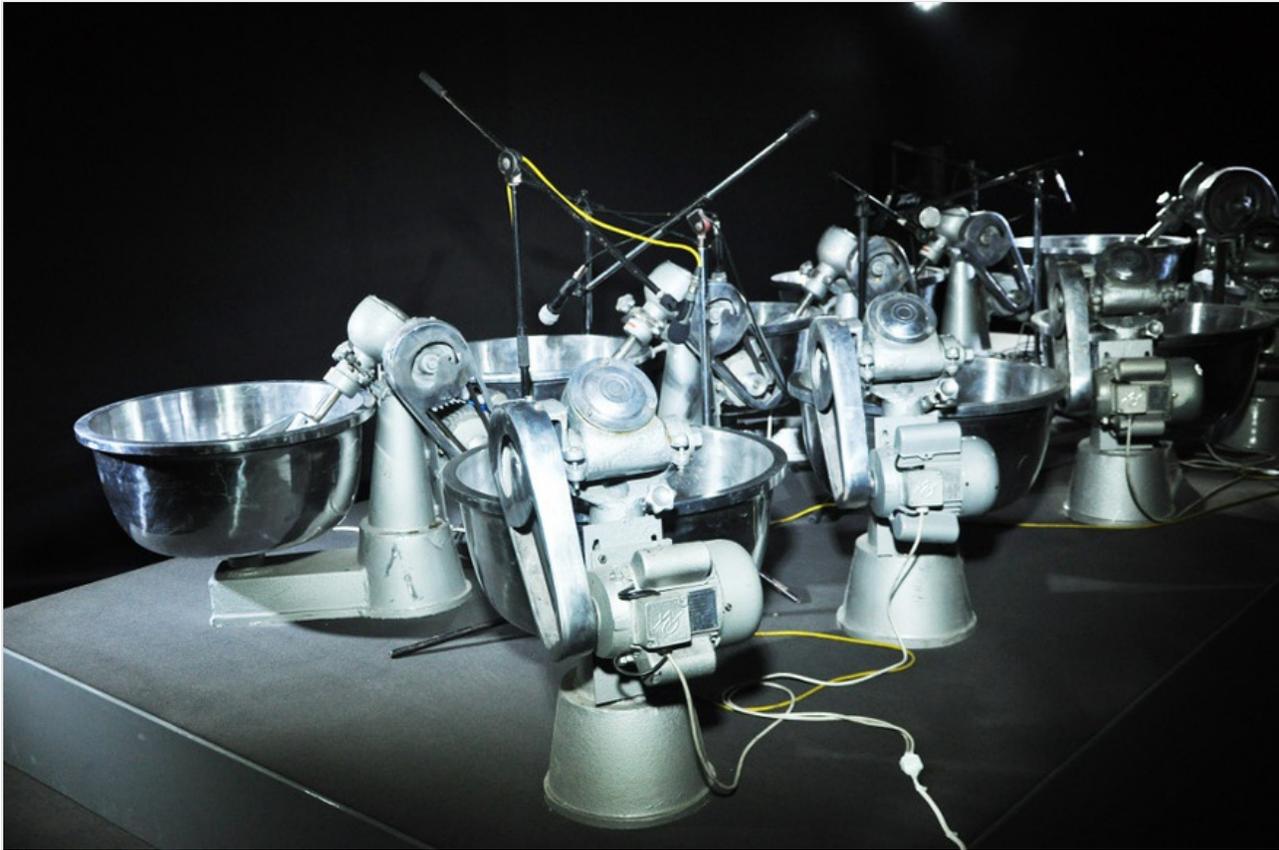
unusual. Immediately it brought to mind the deaths of all the good people we have lost during our lifetimes. *Transparent Existence* makes you feel something you do not see. All those parameters spurred the need to add musk incense around the beam of light.

CC: There is an important spiritual resonance in your work that echoes emotional introspection. Is your practice a kind of meditation?

MM: Absolutely, it is a meditation. I am trying to dive beneath the surface of reality and perceive the magical elements behind it, as well as the links between unexplainable reactions and behaviours and some (subconscious) forgotten memories or childhood experiences.

CC: The body of the viewer and the history embedded in a space activate the work through an invisible process then?

MM: Interpretations are open. This is the mystery of sound – the open horizon I mentioned previously. What we hear is subjective; each decides which inputs to add to the existing work. It convokes your memory. Whilst one person may hear something and think about their childhood another might think about religion. Sound takes you everywhere – it depends where you want to go.



Magdi Mostafa, *Elements Of The Unexpected*, sound installation, 2012.
Photo: Magdi Mostafa. Courtesy of the artist.

CC: It comes back to that chemical reaction you mentioned.

MM: This chemistry also manifests when I come to a new venue. I meditate there and absorb as much as I can from it. The properties of the space influence me; not the dimensions but the energy embedded within the room. It can be weird, quiet, tense, or positive – the space decides for you and gives you something back. I think of it as a container, a challenge, or an enemy that I have to beat or work with. There are also tensions between the energy that exists in a vacuum and your own energy spreading into that space. A piece such as *Transparent Existence* recalls a temple. *The Surface of Spectral Scattering* has more gravity. I redesigned a map of downtown Cairo inspired by the neighbourhoods that had clashed. What I called a 'map of protest' is not a concrete manifestation of anything physically existing: it is a dream about watching rage from outer space, or taking it there. I was also inspired by the Big Bang theory and the search for the 'surface of the last screaming'. It is a piece about dreams and memory.

I feel my installations have an urgent need to live in the space. The audience should dissolve into the piece. There is a profound organic relation between energy and space.

CC: Does this mean that the viewer cannot be passive if he or she really wants to discover the meaning of the artwork beyond its initial appearance?

MM: I do not have influence over that but when *Transparent Existence* was exhibited in the Mawlawi Museum a beautiful thing happened. There was a woman who came four days in a row to meditate for two hours inside the space. I could not have predicted it. It was the chemical reaction.

CC: To what end do you view these projects as performative, or even performance art? It seems to me sound is contingent on interaction with an audience, so it would be interesting to know how you might position your work within the frame of performance.

MM: I am not sure yet. If we can consider a live sound improvization as a kind of performance art, then of course! When I perform with sound on stage or in an art space, there is a scripted part that constructs the sound piece but around 50 per cent is left unscripted. Here the performative element is not just between your movements and the equipment, triggering them like a musician, but more to do with the immediate decisions you make within the unscripted aspects of the performance and the mental process behind it. I would take *The Sound Element* (2012) and *Element no.2* (2009) as an example in this context. I very much believe in Terry Fox's saying that when you repeat a performance, it's not a performance anymore – rather it's like you have hired someone to perform it for you. In that sense, I try to be aware of adding new and unexpected elements, acoustics and setups to the sound piece that is to be performed again, though I also prefer not to perform the same project more than three times. The first time is always the most enjoyable!

In my installations, I find the performative element mostly present in a project like *Madena* (2007), in which the performance element was important: Basiony and I were improvizing sound in the space while his brother performed on a sewing machine. We were managing the piece and thinking about how people would move around it through live improvization and multichannel audio mixing. These mechanisms brought life to the piece and encouraged people to move around the space and even participate using the microphones. This project was different from next ones. For example, in *Sounds Cells: Electro-Magnetic Orchestra* (2009), the performative action came from the machines and the kits in the artwork. I programmed it like this so it would be dynamic, but in a different way. The audience is left in a pre-prepared situation where the machines, driven by a programmed patch, play the role of actors while the artist is absent.

CC: Personal memories are important to your practice. *Sound Cells (Fridays)* (2009–2012) is almost autobiographical with references to childhood memories, such as the sounds of women doing their laundry on Friday mornings while the men were at the mosque. In this multi-channel sound installation 50 dismantled speakers on a minaret-like structure transmit an abstraction of the Friday sermon that you sampled from eight-week recordings in your neighbourhood of Artellewa, Cairo. You intersperse it with the microphone-intensified rumblings of old washing machines. In this case, sound has the power to call up lost images, events or moods.

MM: There are two kinds of memories: personal and shared. In *Sound Cells (Fridays)*, I was trying to understand what makes the particular atmosphere of Fridays repeats itself in the same way forever. You feel vibrations from the walls, you hear microphones and washing machines, and there is almost no one in the streets. The sound means that you have to go and pray but, beyond this, the noises trigger reminiscences. The

washing machines I installed have been taken from houses and, because they were not bought in shops, there are still rusty metal signs or fingerprints on their surface. Memories from a random family, from a house, are written on the object itself.

I am familiar with the bread mixers I used in *Elements of The Unexpected*. Every breadmaker in Egypt had one. Those machines carry historical, political and economic messages. Every object may have religious, social and geographical values as well.

CC: Could you give me an example?

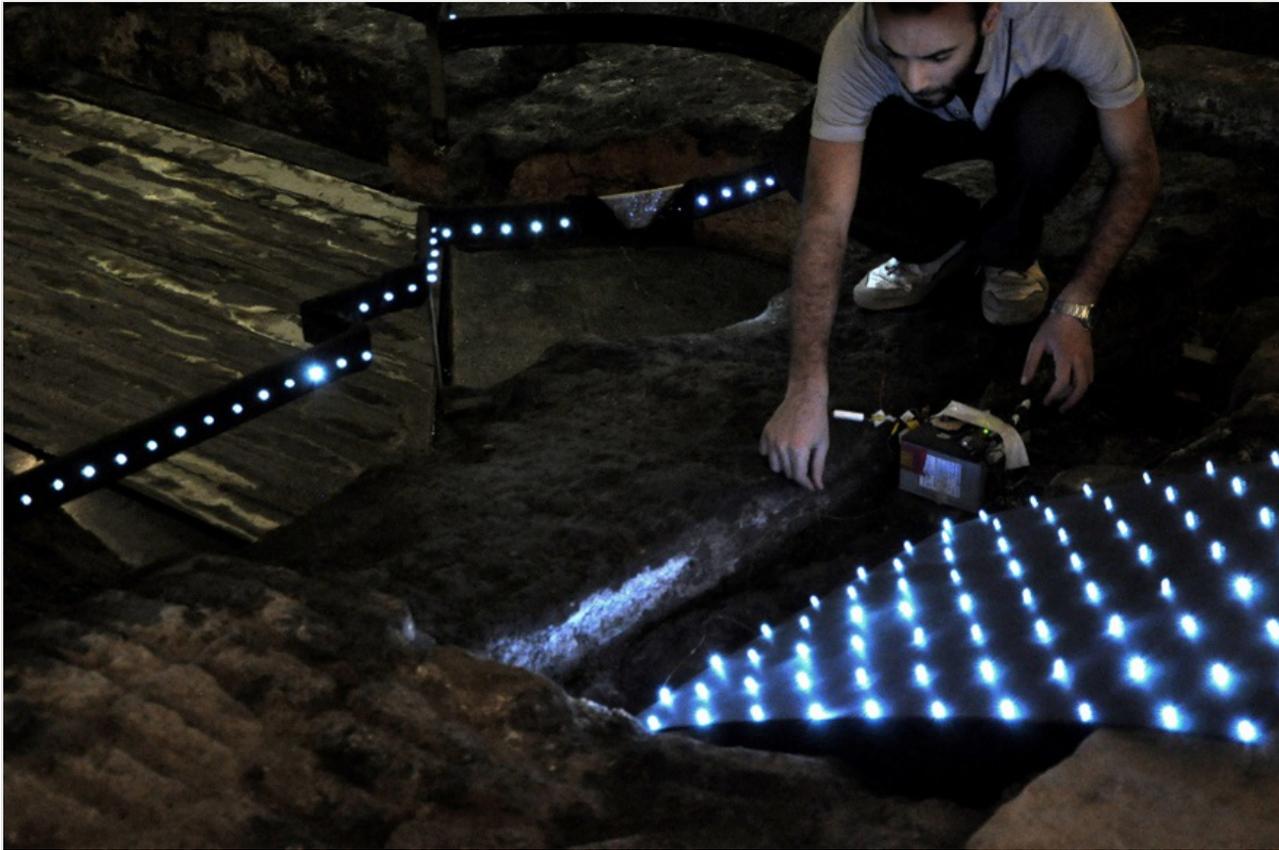
MM: You can clearly use an object as a container to many other layers. In 1964, Jasper Johns wrote a note to himself in his notebook: 'take an object – do something to it – do something else to it. Repeat'. The dough mixers of *Elements of The Unexpected* that I brought to Dubai bear the inscription '*suna fi suria*' (made in Syria). In the UAE, the locals are unfamiliar with them whereas workers buy them to prepare their bread. Those aluminium-made devices have an economical and industrial feeling. They are part of politics because they represent both migration fluxes and workforce exploitation. The mixers, as well as the labourers, do not belong to the place.

CC: You realize site-specific installations, drawing on historical references or particular urban settings. The meaning of the piece might change according to the exhibition location and to the knowledge the audience has of these resonances. Is this a problem for you? When *The Surface of Spectral Scattering* was presented in Townhouse Gallery (2014), for example, the noise from the streets permeated into the exhibition space. What happens when that same piece enters La Sucrière for the Biennale de Lyon (2015)?

MM: In Cairo, the piece was shown in a 'street' context in an old garage converted into an art space. There was a high ceiling, so we built stairs five meters above the work. When climbing up, you could not see the artwork until you had reached the top. There you encountered an aerial map of 'Cairo' spreading over 450 square metres. It felt as if you were flying. In Lyon, the setting was a cultural space – La Sucrière is an old sugar warehouse. Its ceiling is lower, so the staircase had to be smaller and the piece covered about 300 square metres. In the Biennale de Lyon, the exhibition time frame is also smaller but the public is bigger. I believe it is a positive risk to adapt the works and to have altered meanings. If you are always worried about something being lost then maybe you will never gain something new.

CC: It allows for more permeability and interpenetration. In the end, each activation is unique because there is a transient meeting between the artwork, the viewer, the rest of the public and yourself when you are present. Uncertainty plays a huge part in the process.

MM: It is true; it is a collective performance between me, the public and the objects. My practice is about putting the audience in a situation where it has to follow a certain path, underlining its need to engage. Receiving the piece supposes some effort to become absorbed – the work takes something from you and gives you something back, exactly as space does. But my work is not guaranteed and its reception changes all the time.



Magdi Mostafa, *Transparent Existence*, (light testing), 2010.
Photo: Hossam Alsawah.

The dynamics of sound can control the way you act or stay in the space. If you are a very good listener you can follow the sound. There are several random key events and background soundwaves that – I hope – enable the piece to be interesting all the time because it is always different. I am also careful about choosing discreet and ambient lighting and sound as we each have different standards of what noises are acceptable. Sound triggers liquids and it provokes vibrations within humans in a similar way. This is why, as much as possible, I try to reach the 'golden wave of sound' that is accepted by most people. It impacts my sound design as much as the environment does. If there were a train passing close to one of my installations I would change my sound to fit with it. I always adjust to the surroundings.

CC: Speaking about environments, you have also done some projects within the public space. In Barcelona, you re-appropriated derelict factories and filled them with sound. *Soundscape: Can Ricart* (2009) echoes *Walls' Talk* in many ways. What changes when you work in exterior spaces?

MM: While I was doing my residency at Hangar, a multimedia centre in Barcelona, I saw this abandoned industrial area. I thought it was a fantastic place – all the industrial energy of the rusted machines left inside gave it the look of a post-war landscape. I wanted to infuse sound back into the factories to revive them and to create a dialogue within that huge space. For that project I used nine sound channels, 25-minute looped soundtracks, with one set for daytime and another for night-time. Pedro Soler, the director of Hangar at the

time, supported me in setting up this illegal one-day show. The industrial plant had probably been silent since the late 1970s. Suddenly, the massive sound it emitted drove the inhabitants of the neighbourhood in. It was incredible to be part of this magnetic encounter.

CC: It seems easier for you to spur this kind of performativity in a place with history rather than in a sterile white cube.

MM: No, I would not say it is easier; it is more complex actually. But it is much more interesting. The gallery space is like a blank page where you have to build something from scratch: you have to decide on a space. The white cube gets rid of any energy, detail or colour that can give a 'touch' to the work; it avoids, cleans and erases any previous traces. It is a weird characteristic to deal with but it is undemanding. My preference goes towards spaces that carry multiple options and layers.

CC: The relation to the audience is also very different within the public space.

MM: It is true – you never know who is coming and whom you will be meeting. It makes art a bit more important because it is more engaging and effective. In a museum you have borders limiting the experience of art and in a gallery (a professional interface) the public has the intention of seeing art. In the street, you get more honest feedback: the audience receives you without being mentally prepared.



Magdi Mostafa, *Transparent Existence*, site investigations – Mawlawi Museum, Cairo, 2010.

CC: In past years, you have also realized live performances. Do you still do that?

MM: Indeed, I have done live sound improvization performances in art spaces. I consider live performance very important – it is a sensitive and holy practice. I performed until 2013 using sound compositions, field recordings, and my own sound archives mingled with beats, drums and keyboards. It is radically different work compared to my installations and it was well received. I want to make clear that I was not 'doing music' but rather performing special composed ambient and experimental sounds. At a certain point, I decided to stop for a while and to create a different archive, which would open a new perspective for me. I have focused on site-specific installations.

CC: Why did you stop if you enjoyed it so much?

MM: It is hard to say. Live performances became quite common and easy. There are no standard rules for this artistic process: is it about composing from scratch? Or about mixing other people's work? Or both? What is the thin line between a sound artist performing, a musician performing, and a DJ performing? At this point in my career I am being critical of myself and of others. Anybody can go on stage with laptops and a midi-controller. I wish to do something that looks and sounds different than the typical way of performing sound today. Maybe I can achieve it by putting ten machines on stage and performing with them instead of with a MacBook Pro, or maybe with both. I do not know yet. I strive to embrace sound in a creative way. I need to develop and think more about it. This is why I have decided to stay away from live performance for a while. If I come back to the stage it should be with something structurally strong and unexpected, not only in the acoustic sense but also in the visual presence.

CC: When I first asked about those live sessions you said that performance is a holy practice. Could you elaborate on that?

MM: The stage has its own feelings: one is actually confronting the audience on the spot as well as being judged face-on. When I started my live performances, I was still young and it gave me confidence. It takes more courage to perform on a stage than to install an artwork and leave. On the stage you have to give something to the audience. It cannot be prepared like a playback, it is about improvising. It is an opportunity for mistakes; an opportunity for coincidences. It is live, and it should be alive.

CC: Here again energy plays a great role – you receive vitality from the audience. Could we speak of a communion between you and the public?

MM: Most of my performances took place in complete darkness and the public gave its full attention to the sounds I was making. I have been told before that this experience feels 'like sitting in a church'. I feel nostalgic about that amazing human-to-human interaction. People shout in your face, you can hear everything they say from 'brilliant', 'make it louder', or 'fuck you' to one clapping and another saying 'shh'. They can tell you immediately what they think. It is so stimulating to experience how sound is freshly made and received; it tells

you where you are with honesty.

Magdi Mostafa (b. 1982) lives and works in Cairo, Egypt. Primarily exploring the conceptual relationships between sound and space, Mostafa's work often draws on his interests in the phenomenological experience of the individual in the city and recalling unexpected-outmoded technologies. Recent exhibitions include the Sharjah Biennale 11, Jogjakarta Biennale XII, Surface of spectral scattering solo at Townhouse Gallery Cairo, Egypt; Sound Element at Mathaf, Qatar; and Elements of the unexpected at Art Dubai, UAE.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clelia Coussonnet

Clelia Coussonnet is an independent cultural project manager and art writer. With Mediterranean origins, she specialises in contemporary art from Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and their diaspora. She is a regular contributor to *Another Africa*, *Diptyk*, and *IAM*. Her areas of research include silenced voices, mapping and place, mysticisms, memory and its fragmentation, orality, sound-based artworks, and rhythm.

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