

BRINGING THE NOISE: THE EARLY DAYS OF SOUND ART IN THE UAE

By: Simon Coates

During the summer of 2013 I started work on curating what would become the United Arab Emirates first-ever exhibition of sound art. Named Peace In An Open Space, the conceit was to assemble a set of exhibits that worked both as an introduction to the sound art medium and as a context within which it could be measured: the state of sound art now. To augment context I wanted to include works that had been locally produced. By the time the exhibition launched in January 2014 at the Gallery of Light in Dubai my suspicions had been confirmed: there was no sound art in the UAE. Whilst there had been visits from the occasional luminary parachuted in to perform or work on projects yet, there was no one who had dedicated their practice to sound. Two years on and there's a change in the air.

It's 8.35PM on Friday September 18th 2015 in Dubai and Abu Dhabi-based American artist Jonny Farrow is a little over half way through his live sound art set at the first "Tse Tse Fly" event in a dingy hotel bar of the city and people are sitting on the floor, entranced. Farrow has assembled a collection of hand-made oscillators that run through a set of guitar effects pedals and into his mixing desk. Entirely improvised, Farrow builds a set of pulsing sound on stammering sound, switching pitches before locking into a groove. Farrow claps his hands above his head in time to the rhythm. And the audience claps along. Visual arts correspondent for UAE's largest circulation newspaper, The National, Anna Seaman has reported on the UAE art scene since 2008. Why does she think there are so few sound artists in the United Arab Emirates? "As much as I respect the art scene in the UAE, I would still say that it is a reactive community with not much of a pioneering spirit. This means that artists tend to follow what they know in terms of medium, and while they produce excellent art, it does not often break the mould in terms of medium. It also has to do with audiences: sound art is a very courageous choice when faced with an audience not used to it.

Anabelle de Gersigny is an artist and curator living and working in Dubai. In April 2015 she curated the Safina Radio Project, a temporary radio platform that took the shape of a boat that toured the canals

during the early part of this year's Venice Biennale. The boat hosted artists and curators, broadcasting their conversations online. One angle on the scarcity of sound artists discusses the commercial nature of the UAE art scene. Anabelle explains "There is a very commercial drive in the art scene, with the galleries leading the development of a 'scene' in the early years. Also, I think that many of the institutions and galleries have underestimated their audience - but this seems to be changing and leaders such as Sharjah Art Foundation are playing an instrumental role in that". Tse Tse Fly contributor Jonny Farrow agrees. "It's still a very young scene and, while it is a very lively one, it leans toward the commercial. Sound art, in my opinion, will likely never be commercial in that it is, generally speaking, a dematerialized practice and output".

The inclusion of Islam Chipsy's EEK as part of Abu Dhabi Art 2015, and The Tacit Group and others programmed by the New York University Abu Dhabi bears out Anabelle's point on change. In 2013 Beirut-based musician Joe Namy took part in an artist residency programme in Dubai, creating an interactive sound art piece. In 2014 the American art pioneer Bill Fontana was commissioned to make the sound art installation Acoustical Visions and Desert Surroundings as part of the Abu Dhabi Festival. But, once again, none of these artists are either UAE-based or born in the country.

Maybe sound art is yet to be fully understood? It also seems that, while in other parts of the world serious, committed artists are out-numbered by serious, committed musicians, in the UAE it is the opposite case. Why does Anna Seaman think that is? "I agree with your use of the word serious - because there are plenty of musicians here in the UAE but artists are given many more opportunities. It is a tough life here to make it as a musician given licensing laws that do not allow for impromptu gigs or open mic. The opposite is true for art. The government are investing a lot in the arts in the UAE and there are many people offering platforms for new and emerging artists. I think this has an impact on the overall numbers".

So is the corollary that sound art as a medium in the UAE is perceived as another genre of difficult music? And that sound artists are



Holländische_Meierei_Zurich



Sound art on the screen at Tse Tse Fly Project

therefore given the same level of support as, say, a classical pianist or a freeform jazz musician? As Farrow suggests, the dematerialized nature of sound art already makes it a difficult medium to grasp. Seeing it as something that is firmly for others cannot help the cause. Yet, for the artist who is willing to experiment with sound, here is ripe with inspiration: the sound of the sea and the timbre of languages like Urdu, Nepali and Hindi phonics; the differing regional Arabic dialects; radio stations in multiple languages; shisha pipes bubble, vehicle engines rev, roar and stutter; construction site noise and desert quiet, etc.... The nexus of Bill Fontana's Acoustical Visions and Desert Surroundings 2014 piece evolved from two vibration monitors buried in the Abu Dhabi desert sand. Fontana had noted how the sound of shifting sands mirrors the sound of the sea and the monitors yielded a myriad of noise as grains of sand ebbed and flowed. Anyone who works with sound will tell you that it teaches the participant to see with their ears.

I put together the "Tse Tse Fly" Middle East platform in May 2015, partly as a reaction to the continual bussing-in of sound artists from abroad. The live sound art events series that debuted on September 18th is the physical manifestation of "Tse Tse Fly's" stated aim: to support and nurture talent that is right here whilst throwing a spotlight on others whose practice embraces sonic experimentation in the broader region. Whilst it is understandable that external talent is brought in by cultural organisations, the hope is that such project demonstrates that the UAE hosts a rich, growing vein of talent. There is a wealth of sound artists and experimental musicians in Palestine, Lebanon and Egypt. Tehran-based Porja Hatami released the Resonance album of sound art in collaboration with famed German electronic artist Arovane in August 2015. Lebanese sound artist Tarek Atoui is a performer and curator respected worldwide. Alexandria-born Wael Shawkly has demonstrated the power and versatility of sound in art through projects from the Sharjah Foundation to London's Serpentine Gallery. Even Saudi Arabia has wiry post-punk band Sound of Ruby. So now it's the UAE's turn. The artists are here - they just need coaxing into the daylight. So, given the marginalization of sound art and the lack of support for serious musicians locally, the route that I chose to draw attention to the platform is one more heavily trodden: Tse Tse Fly events are marketed as club nights. The nightclub culture is a vital part of the country's entertainment machinery. The format - sound, lights, bar, people - is familiar and accepted. So, rather than trying to persuade a distractible audience that sonic experimentation is worth listening to in, say, an art gallery, why not simply plug sound art into the existing nightclub culture framework? Straight out of the Dadaist cookbook and as with any assisted readymade, this simply means taking something that is already in existence and using its familiarity to invite an audience to perceive it in a new way. Instead of commercial

dance music, sound art is played via the club's system. Instead of promo videos, the screens show video art. Substitute nightclub DJs for sound artists performing live and the format is successfully subverted. After all, if Dada started with the Cabaret Voltaire in the Holländische Meierei club in Zurich in 1916, then why not at least try something similar in twenty-first century Dubai? One of the best things about the UAE is also one of the country's biggest challenges, especially in the creative sphere: you can become almost anything you want to be, and that includes an artist, curator, critic and designer. In turn this means that gatekeepers exist who may never have experienced the rigours of intense academia or put in the spadework needed to achieve critical positions and positions of criticism. However, by framing what could be regarded as an exhibition of sound art as something altogether different - a night out in a club, for example - the gatekeepers are left scratching their heads and a whole new audience is ushered in. In a country that has such a healthy music and nightlife scene - albeit commercial and largely imported - it is conceivably inevitable that sound art's progress arrives as a kind of hitch-hiker. Centred as it is around the hegemonic gravitational pull of corporate art events and organisations, the innate commerciality and conservatism of the UAE arts scene will only pay sound art lip service and move on to the next big (wall-hangable, sellable) thing as it looms over the horizon, like Echo after Hera's curse, repeating the voices of others. Such is the nature of a market in pursuit of a patron. Sound artist and producer Anthony Kroytor has been living in Abu Dhabi for around six months now. As with others, he sees the lack of sound artists here as having commercial roots, although from a slightly different angle: "It seems that the population is largely composed of transient workers. Everyone sets a limit, which is usually expressed in either money or years. Once the limit has been reached, they leave. People come to pay off debts or earn savings, not to make art. The potential audience has mercantile interests. Few people are willing to seek out new and strange things after an exhausting day of work."

Abu Dhabi-based multi-media artist Isaac Sullivan makes a similar point on transient population: "People who like noise are voluntarily entering into two types of uncertainty. The first is an uncertainty of social context: if the form is chaotic or unrecognizable it cannot reliably encode or stimulate implicitly agreed upon, anticipated behaviours. The second is a more primal uncertainty, an inability to anticipate what's coming next. Joseph Campbell is rumoured to have said that poetry comes out of anxiety about the food chain. To interpret and extrapolate, poetic forms and also musical forms can confer the pleasure and feeling of safety that we experience when inhabiting predictable circumstances. In that sense, to embrace noise is to renounce a sense of home".

Advances in technology and the immaterial nature of sound makes

it feasibly the most accessible addition to an artist's practice. Smart phones are built with more sensitive microphones than those used by any of the early sound artists, and online sharing makes it easy to upload and showcase work. Forward-thinking institutes and organizations are drawing sound art closer to their central philosophy. And there actually is a groundswell of interest closer to home. In his September 2015 article for Vision magazine entitled Sound track of a New Generation journalist Iain Akerman lists names like Zahed Sultan, Asma Ghanem, Samer Saem Eldhar (aka Psychaleppo) and Karim Sultan (a Tse Tse Fly member, incidentally) as ones to watch from the Middle East experimental sound and music scene. However does the transient nature of the region's population mean that other likely candidates simply don't hang around for long enough to set themselves up as sound artists in the UAE or is the country's potential audience just too small? Perhaps, given the commercial nature of the local arts scene, artists simply see sound and sonic phenomenology as a diversion rather than a central tenet of their own practice. What does Jonny Farrow think needs to be done in the UAE to advance the sound art cause? "Exposure. I believe that making space for - and presenting

sound work and its discourses - is the only way to do it. And it has to be done by sound artists and savvy curators because they are the ones whose passions for why sound is important and how it can work in a fine art context will attract other artists and audiences". Furthermore, framing the medium of sonic artistic experimentation in a way that people understand not only satisfies the appetite of the subversive artist, it provides an opposing yet familiar context that exists side-by-side with the more formal gallery and organisational platforms. Maybe this is proof that the absence of an alternative culture or sense of avant-garde locally can be a source of inspiration as well as lamentation. However inchoate, the infrastructure for some kind of progress in the acceptance of sound art is taking shape, albeit from unusual directions. Now it's just down to the artists to bring the noise. www.tsetseflymiddleeast.org

ABOUT THE WRITER

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Tse Tse Fly September 2015 event audience