

## The Islamic Sonic-Social

### Seth Ayyaz in conversation with Sheyma Buali

Sheyma Buali

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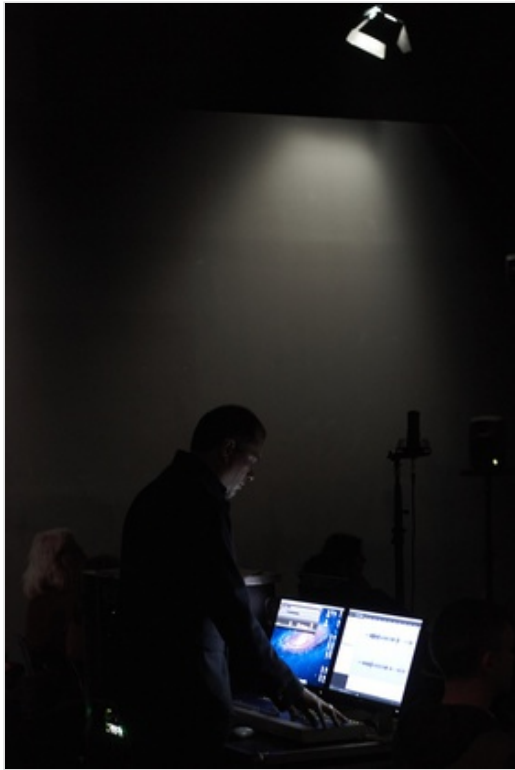
This interview examines aspects of the work of sound artist, composer and theorist, Seth Ayyaz. The starting point in Ayyaz's sound work refers to the bio-psycho-social conditions of listening that draw on his background in cognitive neuroscience and psychoanalysis. Using Islamic sonic performance as a prism, Ayyaz touches on the social domain, ethnic minorities in the greater Muslim world, and the changing geopolitics of the region today.

The interview is broken into three parts. In the first, *Ibraaz* Commissioning Editor Sheyma Buali breaks down the artist's ideas on 'the Islamic sonic-social' by unearthing theories behind three of his compositions: *Makharej* (2009), *The Remainder* (2013), and *the bird ghost at the zaouia* (2010), which together form a triptych titled *On The Admissibility of Sound* (2015). This is followed by part two of the interview: a short discussion between Ayyaz and artist and writer Lisa Skuret, thinking through expanded notions of listening. The final section is an edited transcript of a panel discussion that took place as part of Ayyaz's week-long exhibition in December 2015 as part of the fig-2 50-week series at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, *Listening Through a Beam of Intense Darkness*.

#### Part 1



Seth Ayyaz, 2015. fig-2 week 48/50.  
Photography by Sylvain Deleu.



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charged. To me, that context of sound is a way of addressing multiple people and organizing people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

**Sh.B:** The presence of the *adhan* goes a step further with their inclusion into everyday life through its digitization – people have it on their phones as alarms for prayer times or as ring tones. There is also an issue of volume – in Bahrain, for example, there is a volume war between the mosques in Ma'atem. In today's climate that is a political gesture.

**SA:** The anthropologist Charles Hirschkind, who I mentioned earlier, has written a lot about sound and this context. He talks about the dissemination of cassettes and recorded sermons or the 'ethically honed sensorium'. This has a lot to do with new Islamic politics in that the idea of piety is inscribed in these cassettes and listening to these cassettes is, in its own right, a form of piousness. It happens in a very benign way at times – in Cairo, for example, I would get into the taxi and the driver would chat away but in the background you would hear this faint Qur'an recital. It is not a malevolent thing, it is very

ubiquitous, but it can get picked up and politicized and articulated to the point where we are now.

What I hope to do is draw people into the awareness of sound and into listening. One of the issues is that it is so submerged in the background and it is so pervasive that we don't question or think about it. I am more interested in bringing into focus the fact that there are these sounds that function in particular ways and that have potential propagandist aspects. They also have positive aspects. I became intrigued by the presence of these sounds, distributed in the way that they are, and wanted to know how I could draw people's awareness into these presences.

## Part 2

On 5 December 2015, artist and writer Lisa Skuret held a workshop as part of the exhibition *Listening Through a Beam of Intense Darkness*. The workshop, entitled 'Messy and Material: Listening Laboratory', focused on listening as a multi-sensory act and as a group process. Here, Skuret and Ayyaz discuss communal, spatial and embodied associations of listening across their respective work.

**Seth Ayyaz:** There are a number of things about how our work relates, specifically regarding the sounds from the Middle East, Islamic cultures, and interrogating and investigating these sonic places and their markers of



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cultural identities. Your work extends from listening as an active process; listening as an action that happens in the inter-subjective space. Listening happens in between people and between groups of people and emerges from it. For example, in Morocco, the presence of music on the streets means that everyone is involved and can join in. There is not necessarily a hierarchy of involvement and everybody can be implicated. It is something that just starts to emerge from a matrix between people.

**Lisa Skuret:** Absolutely, there are processes that reinforce areas of identity, but it is also about trying to generate new forms through the listening. My work with expanded notions of listening is concerned with possible futures and with generating these futures communally.

**SA:** It is a way of dissolving the traditional notion of 'subject' and 'listener' into something that happens in an emergent way between people and through material objects.

**LS:** Yes, and also listening in a different way. We are culturally and individually habituated to listening in certain ways. I am interested in listening (and the listener) as a process of not-knowing and raising questions rather than knowing answers. In that way, we can consider not-knowing as un-doing or un-knowing: learning to listen in new ways.

**SA:** There is something about the way people explore this subjective space between one another that joins people together through these processes of intuition and empathy.



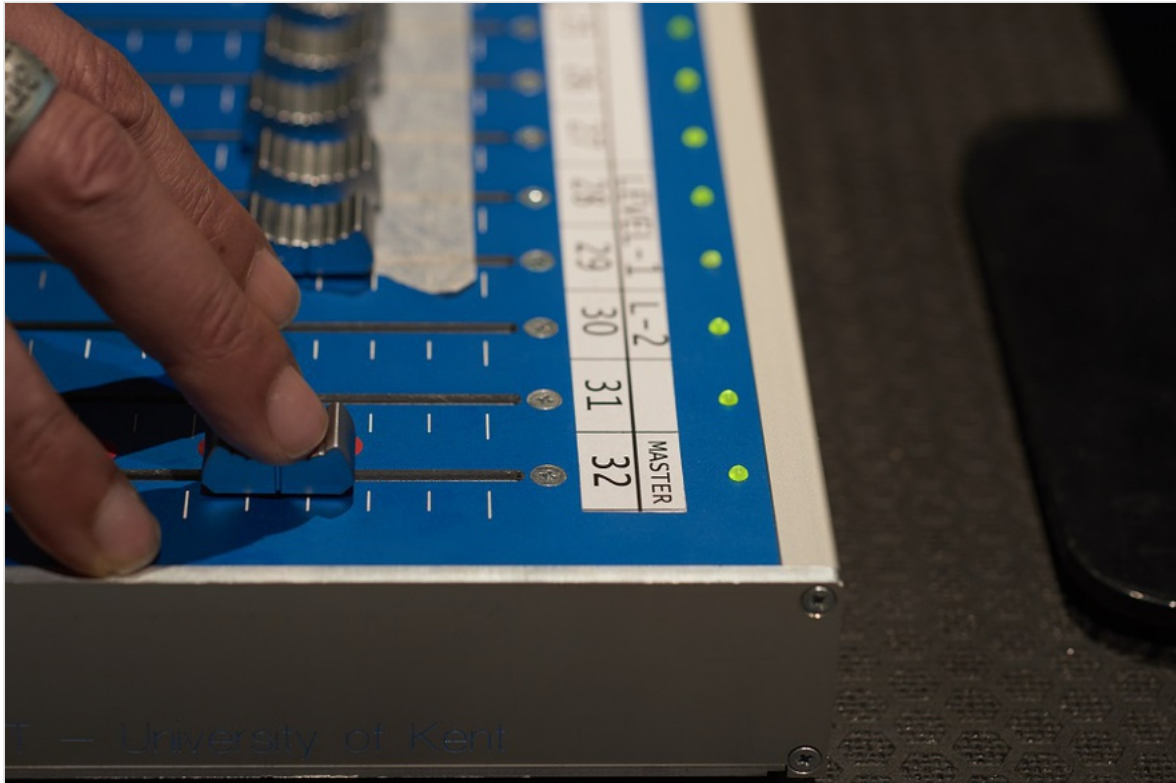
Seth Ayyaz, 2015. fig-2 week 48/50.  
Photography by Sylvain Deleu.

**LS:** And resistance. But working with groups can be problematic, especially considering the political situation we are in today. Posing difficult questions in a group context raises various issues. So listening also relates to resistance in terms of resisting change but also, perhaps more productively, resisting habitual ways of thinking.

**SA:** This idea of 'not-knowing' is something I would like to pick up on because there is a peculiar and interesting set of attitudes or, as you say, habits attached to this. For example, in *the bird ghost at the zaouia* and through studying classical Arabic music, a set of attitudes about listening and acting are tied to ethics. There is this idea of what is permissible in Islam, and there are these ideas on correctness, which we spoke of before. Take something like the *adhan* or the sound of a particular place: it is like a transparent index of a place, which seems familiar and almost oversaturated with meaning. They are 'emblematic' of a certain culture.

But, to me, there is something about intervening with that electroacoustically and translating these actor-object-sounds in different ways that takes that previous state of knowing to a place where you have questions. It starts to loosen up certainties about what you are hearing, how you are hearing, or what it may signify and the associations that the sounds may have. I am very interested in using sounds that are charged. It is about taking certainty and problematizing it.

**LS:** There is a connection between your work *Makharej* as an interrogation of the Arabic alphabet and our



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collaboration *A Call from the Library* (2014). Musicologist Zeynep Bulut refers to attempts to build a new voice through the process of our collaborative piece, and I think this also applies to *Makharej*. One needs familiarity and certainty; one needs to know how to navigate. So what do you do with that new construction, that unknown voice, that new composition?

**SA:** Yes, I would agree. This laboratory has also shown the intersection of our theoretical approaches. What strikes me about your work is that listening seems to be one sensory channel into wider thoughts on knowledge production.

**LS:** Sound affects our bodies and our awareness. Our bodies resonate and listen. We tend to perceptually filter out 'unuseful' sounds but we embody them and they influence our actions. The *adhan* is one example – if you live in a culture where it is part of your everyday reality, you may not question how these unattended sounds infiltrate everything or how they affect you physically. Not just the literal meaning conveyed through the medium of sound, but also the affects they have on your movements and agency. I speak of this in relation to my work, but this also relates to the process of making your piece, *the bird ghost at the zaouia*, which is based on field recordings from various religious rituals across the region.

**SA:** Here you are talking about the affective reaction a person has to sound, but I guess what I am asking about is the way you are trying to activate that type of contagion without using sound.



**LS:** Listening is multi-modal. I think that actively enlisting agency in our listening highlights the awareness and potential of this multi-modality.

**SA:** It highlights an introspective process.

**LS:** I think that concentration is like a 'travelling ear'. For example, it is often difficult to listen to one sound in particular without eventually finding yourself back in internal monologue. One of the exercises in my laboratory was listening to and following an environmental sound as it osculates between external dialogues and internal monologue. In following a sound, the sound's 'logical conclusion' may be experienced as a sensation and this sensation may, in turn, manifest communally in the group matrix as a feeling.



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### PART 3

This discussion took place as part of *Listening Through an Intense Beam of Darkness* and involved Seth Ayyaz, musicologist and performer Zeynep Bulut; composer and theorist Erik Nyström; artist and writer Lisa Skuret and fig-2 curator Fatos Ustek. Through the scope of sound theory, they discuss issues of cognitive opacity and translucency and argue the subjective response to sound.