

Sound Art in the Egyptian Avant-Garde: Tracing the Radicality of Ahmed Basiony's Experimental Workshop for Digital Sound Art

This research explores the current meaning of the 'Egyptian avant-garde', and asks how this has developed throughout the twenty-first century. Following the death of pioneering Egyptian sound artist Ahmed Basiony in 2011 and progressing towards the work of Jacqueline George and Yara Mekawei – two leading figures within a new generation of Egyptian sound artists – I question to what extent the frame of 'the avant-garde' enables new perspectives in understanding the current conjuncture of politics and aesthetics in contemporary Egypt.

The artist Ahmed Basiony is often hailed as one of Egypt's first sound artists due to his extensive creative use of interactive digital technologies in his works of installation art, particularly from 2006 onwards. Basiony's participatory methods and influential workshops at Helwan University, Cairo, resonate with critical theorists' recent attention to social dimensions of the avant-garde (such as spectatorship and participatory art (Bishop, 2012) and the socio-historical practices that link art and politics (Rockhill, 2014)), a term which multiple artists and writers have used to describe Basiony's work (Al-Qassemi, 2017; Noyes Platt, 2011) and which others have used in a postcolonial context to reclaim narratives of artistic innovation in the Arab world (Dickinson, 2013). Shortly after Basiony was killed by police snipers in Tahrir Square in 2011, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture curated a retrospective of his work at the 2011 Venice Biennale, which was widely read as a political attempt to claim ownership of the Arab uprisings through appropriation of Basiony's life, work, and critical agency, or, as Dina Ramadan has put it, 'the government responsible for [his death] was now honouring his life' (Ramadan, 2015, p.85). From 2010 to 2018 (the decade of the 'Egyptian Crisis') many writers have enlarged the definition of agency to encompass, most notably in this context, Arab intellectualism and identity-formation (Kassab, 2013; 2010), historical intervention (Rockhill, 2014), and sound (LaBelle, 2018; Voegelin, 2018). Here I argue that, against current political restrictions on freedom of expression, the Egyptian avant-garde after Basiony requires us to redefine our understanding of agency in avant-garde art.

This research seeks to address the following questions:

- In the repressive wake of the Egyptian Crisis, what lens should we use to evaluate the concept of the 'radical', its presence in sound art, and the 'radical' capacity of sound art in the Egyptian avant-garde?
- How have the sociopolitical dynamics of Basiony's life, and eventually his death in the Arab uprisings, affected categorisation of his artistic work (including sound art) within the art-historical categories of the avant-garde?

At this point, it is worth clarifying my use of the term 'radical' which, in the post 9/11 politics of the Western world, may be misunderstood. In her essay on Palestinian hip-hop movements, Caroline Rooney states that

[the terms radical and radicalization] by now have come to be uniformly and highly reductively equated with terms such as *terrorist*, *extremism*, and *fanaticism*. Where once *radicalism* was a term used for a liberation politics against oppression, it has now widely come to connote fanaticism. What this entails is a loss of distinction between reactionary extremism and progressive radicalism, and an ignorance of the often cosmopolitan left-wing intellectual and artistic movements in Arab metropolitan centers. The vanguardism at stake here is a question of the attempt to generate, as opposed to reflect, popular support for

antiessentialist emancipation movements through aesthetic and cultural forums. (Rooney, 2013, p.227-8, emphasis in original).

Discussion of the avant-garde requires critical consideration of issues of politics, society, and culture. As a result of the mass popular mobilisations, protests, and coup d'état through which Presidents Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) and Mohammed Morsi (2012-2013) were deposed, the current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has enforced an aggressive opposition to human rights groups and freedom of expression following what is often referred to as the 'Egyptian Crisis' (2011-2014), symbolised particularly by el-Sisi's signing of a contentious 'counter-terrorism' law in August 2015, and (to a lesser extent) by his use of propaganda in campaigns to lengthen his presidential term following the recent fall of autocrats in Sudan and Algeria to popular protests (Michaelson, 2019). In the most extreme cases, el-Sisi's government have applied this 'controversial' (Editorial: 'Egypt adopts controversial anti-terrorism law', 2015) and 'spurious' (*Amnesty International*, 2018) law through imprisonment, torture, and 'enforced disappearances' (*Amnesty International*, 2016, p.19). Whilst I should qualify here that such rulings have overwhelmingly been linked to explicitly ideological agitation, activism, political criticism, investigative journalism, or support for workers' unions (as well as to open support for Mohammed Morsi and his party, the Muslim Brotherhood), researchers must nonetheless be aware that this fragile political environment has severely restricted the extent to which artists can freely express social issues in their work.

A factor of significantly increased risk to Egyptian artists seems to be commercial success: how far an artist's work infiltrates transnational perceptions of Egypt's cultural identity. In 2019, the author Alaa al-Aswany, known best for his novel *The Yacoubian Building* (2007), was sued by military prosecutors as a result of his columns in *Deutsche Welle Arabic* (in which he was critical of military generals being appointed to civil positions) and his novel *The Republic, As If* (Schumacher, 2019; al-Aswany, 2018). The *Guardian* reports that 'The legal action has worried him for his family in Egypt', with al-Aswany stating that 'One can imagine frightening situations, in which [family or friends] are removed, in which they disappear ... that has happened to my friends This regime is terrifying' (Flood, 2019). Charting the deteriorating situation, al-Aswany has publicly stated his pride in attending the 2011 Tahrir Square protests in which Mubarak was overthrown, noting that 'freedom of expression under Morsi was allowed because the spirit of the 2011 revolution was "still strong"' (Editorial: 'Singer and novelist sued in Egypt as country tightens grip on free speech', 2019), but now, al-Aswany maintains distance from Egypt by living in the United States and publishing elsewhere.¹ Recently, Sherine Abdel-Wahab, star of Egypt's *The Voice*, was sentenced to six months in prison for making a joke about the cleanliness of the river Nile (*BBC News*, 2018). In comparison to the more commercially-viable arts, and as a relatively marginal, nascent, and intellectual artistic scene in Egypt, sound art presents no obvious, previous examples of political repercussions for creators of socially critical works, but we should be informed to some extent by these parallel artistic practices.

Social class has also played a historical role in the (in)tolerance of dissent. Patrick Kane has argued that in the period from 1908 to 1966, Egyptian political 'Elites with authoritarian preferences tolerated a middle class participation and discourse in the arts to deflect dissent and to encourage consensus for a Nahda [renaissance] or reform' (Kane, 2013, p.xxiv). Until the onset of the Egyptian Crisis, dissent seems to have been quite freely expressed in the production, circulation, and reception of the contemporary arts, often on major international platforms. Egyptian installation artist Moataz Nasr, whose work has suggested disapproval of the socio-political impotence and

¹ For example, *The Republic, As If* is banned in Egypt but was published in Beirut.

corruption of the Mubarak era,² won top prize at the 8th International Cairo Biennale in 2000 for *An Ear of Mud, Another of Dough*. Kane has noted that the work

critiqued the muted response to the suffering by children ... [It featured a] silent video display of Egyptians of various classes shown shrugging their shoulders in disregard to actual conditions, and set to the sound of a constant drone. (Kane, 2013, p.176; Nasr, 2000).

When interviewed by Traifeh in 2008, Nasr explicitly criticises late Mubarak-era society for its political corruption, impotence, apathy, and moral decline. Traifeh concludes that, 'though the treatment of specific political issues will remain forbidden as long as Arab governments still resist change', there have been 'several attempts to tackle these issues through careful and professional treatment of topics that have significant local impact and contextual relevance (such as politics, freedom of speech, and war) by some installation artists in the region' (Traifeh, 2008, p.40).

My own research further explores Traifeh's concern for 'careful and professional ... contextual relevance' by asking how, given the deteriorating political situation since the time of her research, it is now necessary to recalibrate conceptions of the avant-garde's 'radicality' in contemporary Egypt. Expressions of dissent must be reheard against increased risks of personal vulnerability, and the relative marginality of sound art (as a subset of the installation arts) makes it a suitably judicious medium through which to express what Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, describes as 'critiques ... with subtlety in times of great repression' (Al-Qassemi, 2017). Artists in these networks are clearly experienced and adept at encouraging subversive readings of their work without risking direct political repercussions, as demonstrated by, for instance, Hanan Elsheitik and Khalid Akl's 2013 installation in the exhibition 'Sixth Floor' (curated by Yara Mekawei), which represents the expenditure and renewal of life in Tahrir Square through a movable installation of burnt matchsticks.³

'Basiony was shot for protesting, not for his art' is the emphatic judgement of Al-Qassemi; 'posthumously, however, it becomes more difficult to draw a line between the two' (Al-Qassemi, 2017). Posthumous presentations of Basiony's work have been the most explicitly political ones, and since the historical circumstances of his death, one can see an intensifying historicisation of Basiony's legacy as part of an avant-garde aesthetic. For instance, his collaborator, mentor and colleague at Helwan University, Shady El-Noshokaty, eulogizes Basiony in the exhibition catalogue to the 2011 Venice Biennale as a 'glowing, revolting artist' within 'the old autocratic regime' of Mubarak (p.8-9). To publish these comments at such a major international institutional platform for Egyptian art demonstrates the way in which Basiony's critical agency has instead become a form of symbolic and static heroism: when historicised as a martyr, the threat of his radical, lived political activities is neutralised, making it politically viable for institutions to actively promote such discourse.

Ramadan has commented on the Ministry of Culture's mediation of the radicalism of Basiony's work after the 2011 uprisings via its posthumous presentation at the Egyptian Pavilion of the 2011 Venice Biennale: 'Here the curators remind us that the Ministry of Culture is alive and well, continuing to command the realm of national representation and memorialization. Under its auspices are martyrs recognized and remembered.' Ramadan concludes that 'In the months following Morsi's overthrow and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's ascent to power, an ongoing battle is being fought in Egypt over the right to narrate and remember the revolution' (Ramadan, 2015, p.82-5).

² See, for instance:

<http://www.modernedition.com/art-articles/new-arabic-art/contemporary-islamic-art.html>.

³ See from 14'43": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adl5N-0PmRQ>.

Therefore, interpretations of the 'radical' (and its associated risks) in the avant-garde must necessarily be redefined against the increased repression that has followed the Egyptian uprisings. In 2014 (the 'end' of the Egyptian Crisis), French-American critical theorist Gabriel Rockhill argues that 'a reconsideration of avant-garde practices' demands 'a more nuanced account of social normativity ... between rule and transgression' (Rockhill, 2014, p.136), and this has become increasingly urgent in less-democratic contexts such as Egypt. Similarly, in a 2015 article, Jing Wang, Professor of Chinese Media and Cultural Studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, argues that although 'sound practitioners ... consciously or unconsciously distance themselves from political discourse and avoid using sensitive terms ... being political can mean many things'. For Wang, certain intellectual narratives help to circumvent political risks: Chinese sound artists avoid direct association with political criticism as they 'are influenced by Western experimental art, critical theory and contemporary philosophy They are savvy about critical discourses' (Wang, 2015, p.73-4).

Risk-evasive forms of agency, as utilised by the artist-as-intellectual, are echoed in the following comment by Jacques Rancière, in a discussion of Basiony's work:

These are artists that are trying to restage events differently, present situations without playing the victims, that is, to re-think history ... to have some kind of irony of the situation and try to get out of this kind of situation of misery and depression by the manifestation of capacity (Papastergiadis, Esche, & Rancière, 2014, p.40).

Rancière's comments here are made in the context of a 2014 symposium on the status of autonomy in aesthetics, but I suggest reading them as an identification of new strategies of aesthetic/political distanciation ('restage', 'irony', 'capacity') that artists must increasingly adopt in societies where voicing socio-political opinions puts them at real risk.

Sound art and the avant-garde in the Arab world

As his mentor Shady El-Noshokaty writes, through his visionary artistic and educational commitment, Basiony alone essentially pioneered the use of sound art in Egypt as an experimental medium, inspiring a much wider group of artists both during and following his life (El-Noshokaty, 2011). In particular, his charismatic leadership of the Experimental Workshop for Digital Sound Art at Helwan University, Cairo, served as a rallying call for a new generation of emerging artists, amongst them Jacqueline George and Yara Mekawei. Regarding their link to Basiony, George and Mekawei have been described on the *100copies* website as his 'direct musical decedents [sic]', and their fellow performer Ola Saad, in an interview with ethnomusicologist Thomas Burkhalter, discusses how his descendants '[produce sound art] "for the sake" of Ahmed Basiony: "We try to remember him in continuing what he taught us"' (Burkhalter, 2013a, p.106-7). George and Mekawei also collaborated on collective projects such as the group (and later, eponymous album) Egyptian Females Experimental Music Session. Now internationally active artists, their work in sound art continues to explore new approaches that spring from their earlier 'radical Do-It-Yourself fashion' (100copies, 2013), a trajectory which may be understood in relation to Basiony's work, and in relation to these artists' own socioeconomic and political environments.

Sound art defies easy definition. This difficulty is succinctly summarised in the title of Alan Licht's authoritative work, *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories* (2007), and much recent scholarship on the often contiguous spheres of art music, sound studies, and sound art (LaBelle, 2006; Kim-Cohen, 2009; Born, 2013; Voegelin, 2018) clearly explicates the medium's joint roots in the evolution of experimental music and the 'gallery arts': an umbrella term which primarily denotes the visual arts, emphasising their exhibitionary, art-historical, and curatorial settings. At the outset of

Sound Art, Licht proposes the distinction that ‘Sound art belongs in an exhibition situation rather than a performance situation—that is, I would maintain, a necessary correlative in defining the term’ (Licht, 2007, p.14).

During the twentieth century, the intellectual and artistic movements through which the concept of the ‘avant-garde’ has crystallised have been overwhelmingly rooted in the intellectual thought of Europe and America. As such, the term ‘avant-garde’ is associated with an assemblage of intellectual principles cultivated in the historical, social and cultural conditions of these regions (such as Kassab, 2010). Increasingly, contemporary scholarship has sought to acknowledge the contribution of intellectual movements from outside these regions. In an important essay on the subject, ‘Introduction: “Arab” + “Avant-Garde”’ (2013), Kay Dickinson states: ‘Fleeting nods, sidelines, and footnotes, this is where the Arab avant-garde is lodged in English-language literature, pressed into the service of European-American inventiveness but with little concession granted to its own autonomy’ (p.13). It is sometimes doubtful why the term remains in use at all: prevalent Western historians and art historians often conclude with conviction that the avant-garde project failed in the twentieth century. For instance, Eric Hobsbawm claims that the avant-garde arts had failed due to their ‘intellectual arbitrariness and ... the nature of the mode of production the creative arts represented in a liberal bourgeois society,’ yet ‘[they] have modified the world of 2000 so profoundly that their marks cannot conceivably be erased’ (Hobsbawm, 1994, p.518).

In Dickinson’s argument, however, what the term ‘Arab avant-garde’ represents is the Arab world’s dismissal of this tacit complicity with the apparent failure⁴ of such movements during a century in which many Arab nations achieved independence for the first time: an enunciation which reclaims the mantle of artistic innovation and empowerment, and carries what she terms an ‘Arab persistence’ which ‘splays open multivalent, multidirectional, multisited, and multiply resourced makeup of the avant-garde’ (p.15). Furthermore, the term’s invocation addresses a reparative justice for its colonial historiography, as for Dickinson, following African American studies scholar Fred Moten (2003), the contribution of Arab artists was often reduced to ‘enforced hermeticisms’ and exploited for primitivist or exoticist strands within the narrative of Western experimentalism. As she notes: ‘what differentiates [simple curiosity and eclecticism from a looting or corruption of Arab intellectual property] is acknowledgement – most pressingly, acknowledgement that seeks not to expurgate colonial legacy’ (p.12).

Experimental music in the Arab world

To date, writings examining the evolution of sound-as-medium in an Arab avant-garde have primarily focused on the fields of experimental music. In his essay concerning musicians from Beirut, Burkhalter discusses genres such as hip-hop, extreme metal, art music, and popular musics, and offers a multifaceted analysis of the market as well as military and psychological influences on the identity of an Arab avant-garde (2013a). The explicit study of sound art in the Arab world, however, has received comparatively little attention.

As described above, this essay argues that it is of crucial importance to expand on the ethnomusicological perspective of writers such as Burkhalter by situating artistic movements within the Arab world in relation to the broader trajectories of global(ised) contemporary art, particularly by considering sound art as a pillar of this debate. Recent scholarship clearly states that ethnomusicology faces fundamental questions as a discipline, a challenge which finds obvious

⁴ As Gabriel Rockhill states, ‘Global judgements of success or failure require social univocity, and they are based on the assumption that a phenomenon like the avant-garde can have a single homogeneous result’ (Rockhill, 2014p. 144).

evidence in contemporary artists' requirements in moving between mediums such as music, sound art, and visual art to freely and successfully evolve personal and collective modes of expression. Relevant here is a section of Burkhalter's methodology, titled 'From Music Making to Transnational Media Performances', in which he identifies digital media technologies as a tool enabling a wider globalised reception for work: '[Beirut musicians'] musics become media products They are not side products of the music; rather, they intensify its aesthetical approach and vision' (2013b, p.25). Discussing laptop performance, he quotes Rolf Grossman, for whom the laptop 'is a new mode of musicianship: fusing self-research, composition, innovation, performance and distribution in a single technological device connected to digital networks' (Grossman, 2008, p.9; Burkhalter, 2013b, p.26).

In an important recent discussion on the discipline of ethnomusicology, Francesco Giannattasio states that (from an implicitly European perspective) 'the ethnographic revolution ... was mostly achieved in the last century'. He further argues that

we must ask ourselves what constitutes the specificity of ethnomusicology today. There seems to no longer be a need for traditional ethnomusicological research and there is a risk that our field of study will be considered archaic and obsolete. For this reason, in this new global soundscape in which we are immersed ... This review is so critical that it could call into question the very name of our field of study (Giannattasio, 2017, p.11).

However, although the problems identified here by Giannattasio are approached from an implicitly European perspective, they are also liable to be mirrored in work by scholars native to the Arab world: for instance, Dickinson argues that Palestinian ethnomusicologist Habib Hassan Touma's canonical work *The Music of the Arabs* (1996), whilst comprehensive in its scope, 'can be seen to stem from a socially specific configuration of history' (p.22) in its delineation of Arab identity, which ultimately closes its dialogue to expansive and hybrid cultural movements.

The most explicit attempt to sketch out a reading of the Arab Avant-Garde within contemporary music is made by Dickinson, who avoids seeking a reductive categorisation of the avant-garde, and instead favours a pluralistic use of the term. In this reading, it is most usefully invoked as a point of leverage into a global narrative of artistic progress. Openness is key: to look forwards with an openly expansionist view of the world's avant-garde resources, and to look backwards with a demand for open accountability as to how the overwhelmingly European, male avant-garde has impeded progress elsewhere in the world through its ahistorical, selective fragmentation and exploitation of 'exotic' or 'primitive' cultures. This dual position demands a 'hybrid and globally dialectic' (p.10) knowledge of universal, global progress, that simultaneously acknowledges the autonomy, agency and contribution of different histories and civilizations.

The Nahḍa,⁵ Dickinson argues, is but one historical case study of this thinking. Crucially, she notes that many Arab thinkers (such as the poet Adonis, philosopher 'Abed al-Jabri, and historian Abdallah Laroui) conceive of 'tradition' not as rooted, authentic, or essential (a perspective which, as in the

⁵ The Nahḍa (renaissance) period was a movement founded on the heritage of Arab and Islamic culture, but equally, inspired by direct experiences of European modernity through scholarly, religious, artistic, and political exchange. For Dickinson, the 'productive paradox' of Nahḍa philosophy (and in particular, the inspiration it drew from the statecraft of European nationalism) was its creation of a 'unique anticolonial regionalism'. The Nahḍa was typified by events such as the 1932 Congress of Arab Music in Cairo, which Béla Bartók and Paul Hindemith attended. Although in later scholarship the Congress was 'regularly defamed' along with the 'concomitant influx into the conservatories in Arab countries of European teaching methods', Dickinson argues, 'there is no denying how [such contexts] mainstreamed international dialogue', and inspired artists to 'dialectically engage "Arab" with "avant-garde"' by 'reinstating obfuscated histories, speaking back to, inflecting, deterritorializing, and crucially, expanding the exclusive canons of the avant-garde' (p.17).

above case of Touma, often causes stagnation in both production and scholarship of musics that are regarded as authentically 'Arab'), but as 'mobile and adaptive, [with] the urge to stall it as ideologically driven, forever coloured by the age in which this standstill is executed', or, 'As 'Abed al-Jabri continues, this is how heritage solicits contemporary commitment in order "to serve modernity and to give it a foundation within our 'authenticity,'" a process in which the Arab avant-garde also involves itself (Dickinson, 2013, p.25-6; 'Abed al Jabri, 1999, p.7).' In other words, both tradition, and its complement, the avant-garde, are continually enunciated in the present.

The history of colonisation of the Arab world, Dickinson suggests, irrevocably binds all analyses to this dual position of looking both backwards and forwards, both globally and domestically, due to the imposition and infiltration of Western culture and cultural institutions. However, the cultural is further complicated by the economic, specifically the forces of global capital at play in the avant-garde in art and music, and more widely, exploitative and uneven global notions of 'progress' or 'development'. Dickinson links both of these points, historical and economic, to the circumstances of the 2011 uprisings. Drawing on Argentinian theorist Néstor García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures* (1995) she also notes the homogenising effects of global markets on both traditional and avant-garde musics, as 'binaries like these collapse within a market economy, although such labels are extremely efficacious for negotiating the commercial placement of one's cultural production' (Dickinson, 2013, p.25).

If the avant-garde cannot distinguish itself from tradition in economic terms, Dickinson argues that it is able to do so in philosophical and aesthetic ones. She highlights its dualistic aesthetic tendencies in sound between noise, electronic processing, and militaristic evocation, across a wide variety of stylistic approaches in Iraq (Aida Nadeem's albums), Egypt (Halim El-Dabh's piano compositions), and Lebanon (Mazen Kerbaj's trumpet improvisations). Philosophically, she identifies the globally universal qualities of 'dislocation and alienation', as proffered by Islamic studies professor Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' (2004), within the historical avant-garde, which is nonetheless 'intrinsic to and differentiated in Middle Eastern experience, with disenfranchisement ... sharply sensed across the region' (p.28). She also invokes Johannes Fabian's (1983) term *chronopolitics*⁶ as a lens through which to analyse the Arab avant-garde compared to its European experience:

If one reads tradition from within the rubrics of *chronopolitics*, as sustained cultural achievement, then asserting a rich, documented history in the region also acts as a rejoinder to the European avant-garde's simplistic insinuation of its geopolitical and colonial Others' primitivity (p.33).

Despite these observations, Dickinson is keen to emphasise the 'social, rather than aesthetic' motivations of the Arab avant-garde, in contrast with European avant-garde, which 'has primarily agitated against the conservative bourgeoisie by promoting radical formalism and railing against the institutions of art and culture themselves' (p.34-5). Significantly for this essay, she equates two of her key conclusive arguments with the work of Ahmed Basyony: liberatory practice and group affiliation. Quoting Yaseen Noorani, she argues that the Arab avant-garde 'transfers "moral investment from a practice deemed to uphold social domination (aesthetic contemplation), to one

⁶ 'Among the historical conditions under which [anthropology] emerged ... were the rise of capitalism and its colonialist-imperialist expansion into the very societies which became the target of our inquiries. For this to occur, the expansive, aggressive, and oppressive societies we inaccurately call the West needed Space to occupy. More profoundly and problematically, they needed Time to accommodate the schemes of a one-way history: progress, development, and modernity (and their negative mirror images: stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition). In short, *geopolitics* has its ideological foundations in *chronopolitics*' (Fabian, 1983, p.143-4, emphasis in original).

envisioned as resisting domination (creative perception)''' and explicitly associates this approach with Basiony (p. 35; Noorani, 2007, p.77).

Dickinson goes on to correlate the European avant-garde's history with an autonomous formalism, secular society, and isolationist work ethic. Such characterisations, she notes, clash with social configurations familiar in many Arab countries, which attach great importance to religious faith as well as social and familial responsibilities and belonging. As Dickinson puts it, 'the palpable mobilities of alienation are plotted out geopolitically.' In the case of Basiony, who 'had dedicated years to group-created art works ... compositions like "City People" and "Cairo Sound" ... were multiply authored by a metropolis in which Basiony was merely a single citizen ... [he thus shared artistic] ownership with larger public assemblages' (p.35). As Dickinson notes, such an ethos also extends to formats and processes of artistic production and distribution.

Towards an account of contemporary Egyptian sound art in the Arab world

Although some early examples of what might be understood as sound art – such as Halim El-Dabh's *Ta'bir al-Zar* (1944), a manipulation of field recordings produced using an electronic wire recorder (for a detailed study of El-Dabh's contribution towards the Arab avant-garde see Khoury, 2013) – as well as more recent work in electro-acoustic music and installation art by individuals such as the Lebanese artist Tarek Atoui (Burkhalter, 2013b), it is a view commonly held by artists, curators and intellectuals that in Egypt, a cohesive sound art movement was first set in motion with the establishment of the 'independent experimental workshop for digital sound art' at Helwan University, Cairo, led by Basiony from 2006 to 2010. This workshop was just one amongst others supervised by El-Noshokaty focusing on media and creativity.

The circumstances surrounding Basiony's death in 2011 are a dominant subject in the existing literature on his life and his work. Read variously as police ruthlessness, martyrdom, or a combination of both of these perspectives, many articles examine how his agency in these events informed posthumous presentations of his work. Whilst my main intention here is to examine Basiony's work during his lifetime, these factors still play an important role in qualifying his position in an avant-garde movement.

The experimental workshop for digital sound art was 'the first academic programme in sound art experimentation in Egypt', and in a 'personal note on Basiony', published in the catalogue accompanying a posthumous exhibition at the Egypt Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2011, El Noshokaty states that Basiony was 'considered one of the most important artists of the new generation of contemporary Egyptian artists' (p.8-9). Basiony's final (and most frequently discussed) work, the performance art piece *Thirty Days of Running In The Place* (2011), demonstrates his continuous exploration of the expressive possibilities of new media art. For this piece, Basiony jogged around a single room for an hour a day for thirty days wearing a plastic suit that gathered data on him (steps taken, amount of sweat produced) via digital sensors. This data was then projected onto a large screen, visually depicting the relationship between the body and technology. Aida Eltoire, who curated the Egyptian Pavilion in 2011, explains that

the work was all about not going anywhere – staying in one place. Yet also about showing that you had a technology that could change things for you. He was using a digital medium to change the language coming out of his body - the codes came from sweat: it was wasted sweat that could become a piece of information.

In conversation with Christopher Lord, she concludes that the work is a piece about frustration (Lord, 2011).

What characteristics, then, exemplify the work of this 'important ... new generation'? How closely is this importance linked to the historical circumstances of Basiony's death? Can Basiony's legacy be considered part of an avant-garde movement, and if so, in what ways does this benefit our understanding of contemporary Egyptian art movements? How, specifically, might Basiony's experiments in sound art contribute to such an avant-garde movement? To what extent can other artists be associated with Basiony's work, and to the extent that they can, how (and why) might these artists have celebrated, perpetuated, or distanced themselves from such a legacy?

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