

Un-drum: Strategies of surviving noise: Sound performance by Tarek Atoui at Darat Al Funun.

15th October 2009

This piece of writing was unintended; then I heard Tarek Atoui, (Lebanese born sound artist) speak on different occasions about his work during a several week stay in Amman, and I attended his sound performance entitled *Un-Drum; Strategies of Surviving Noise* at Darat Al Funun. So I became inspired to write.

Its hard to try and explain the sensation of the physical experience of a sound performance. In itself the performance is an encounter the engages different senses and emotions which are hard to isolate and express clearly. But I will try and focus on several feelings that have remained with me a week after the performance.

Collision...

The sights and sounds basically don't match. On the one hand, Tarek's limbs glide in the air, in a magician-like manner hovering over a 2m table overcrowded with wires, mixers, an array of gadgets and his computer. On the other, the massive sounds coming from a tower of speakers generating noise I feel in my bones. I was not sure I could withstand this intensity for the duration of the performance; but to my own surprise I didn't move.

"My medium is sound" and his tools include self-made sensors, mixers and foot pedals that all feed into a computer program that Tarek tailored himself. For the performance, we add his body to the equation; and in some instances he really is using his entire body; his weight, his limbs, his mouth or a simple swing of his arm to somehow manipulate the sound.

Perplexed...

What is puzzling is that the movement of his hands and legs do not directly correlate to the music. So while your mind is making futile attempts to decipher this amalgamation into something translatable to a basic understanding of action-makes-reaction; you are simultaneously toying the idea that this is an 'experimental' noise music performance that impresses you at first with physical impact of the loud, and will continue downhill within the coming few minutes.... But it doesn't.

Tarek explains, that his work is basic on a 'written scenario' that forms a structure made up of 40% improvisation and 60% spontaneity. The performance is not based entirely on something concrete "but on an atmosphere of chaos in which possibilities are made to create different structures (thus) making the performance a process of discovery."

Tarek describes that while there is an underlying structure to the 'tracks' the program on his computer is made to react to the movements of his body around the sensors, pedals and mixers. Yet these movements may not cause a sound immediately, but in a time lapse. So while the actions feed into the computer directly, the program is programmed to 'decide' in sense, the output of the sound based on calculations of Tareks' interjections. " It's a struggle between man and machine... Trying to make sense out of what the computer

‘is’ and investigate its autonomy”

Happily Alienated...

In the confused attempts at trying to make sense out of it all, somehow there I am temporarily transported to another place. Through the entirety of the performance, a distance is created, or perhaps the body is engulfed with the sound so that all other sensibilities are temporarily subdued. The only instances in which some form of reality are part of the performance are between tracks when the music slows and Tarek breathing heavily, sweating and grabbing the towel before continuing on with the next; and even the fatigue is a little surreal as one cannot imagine the physical intensity of the performance.

Then the performance ends, and the world comes back. Slowly life comes back and the senses readjust. Surprisingly, the audiences – who had increased throughout the 40minute-duration of the performance- within minutes of the applause, form a curious crowd around the table, probing the artist and asking questions. Tarek explains that through his work he “wants to take the audience from one place to another... even if they do not have the vocabulary to understand the work” If people stay behind after the performance, that is a the ‘judgement’ of the people.