

# Affective Atmospheres

Site-specific sound, neighborhood music and the social formation

Seminar: Center for Arts and Humanities, American University of Beirut, Lebanon  
29<sup>th</sup> November 1 – 4:30 pm, and 30<sup>th</sup> November 10:00 am – 4:30 pm.

Screenings: Auditorium B, West Hall, American University of Beirut, Lebanon  
29<sup>th</sup> November 4:30 – 6:30 pm, 30<sup>th</sup> November 4:30 – 6:30 pm.

Concerts: Beirut Art Center, 29<sup>th</sup> November 8:30 – 10:30 pm, and 30<sup>th</sup> November 8:30 – 10:30 pm.

David Toop, Marcel Cobussen, Cathy Lane, Ashish Avikunthak, Anette Vandsø, Friedlind Riedel, Maria Papadomanolaki, Darci Sprengel, Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, Lasse-Marc Riek, Nicola Di Croce, Ali Jaber, Duncan MacDonald, W. Joshua Hudelson and students (AUB).

Presented by the Center for Arts and Humanities, American University of Beirut, Lebanon;  
Curated and organized by Dr. Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Arts and Humanities,  
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29<sup>th</sup> November

1:00 PM – Introduction – Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, CAH, AUB

1:15 PM – Keynote Prof. Marcel Cobussen

## Sound (Art) and/as Socio-political Affect

Public spaces are quintessential sites of human encounters where norms, values, desires, and interests are expressed, negotiated, and contested. Heterogeneous groups or individuals – differentiated by social, ethnic or economic status, but also according to gender, age or religion, or through their identity as permanent residents, tourists or passers-by – not only encounter each other in a public space, they also co-constitute this space. Sounds are an important factor in how public urban spaces are experienced, used, divided, organized, and claimed. However, not everyone has equal influence on its design: issues of inclusion and exclusion, hierarchies of belonging, power and disempowerment, integration and disintegration, are played out and made apparent here. The design, use, and function of public sonic spaces enable the performance of a community and reveal the (a)symmetries in its social make-up. The context within which we will investigate and rethink the public sonic realm *in relation to* socio-political affects is formed by the concept of “urban commons.” Commons can simply be described as that which is shared, and what is shared (and contested) in a city is first of all its atmospheric dimensions (Borch and Kornberger 2015). As city dwellers are submerged in a sea of shared sound, one of these atmospheric dimensions might be called “sonic commons” (Odland and Auinger 2009). Sonic commons results from people aurally using, consuming, producing, and appropriating a space; it is both the expression of the social (social life sounds as a whole) and the condition of the social (social life is mediated by sounds which embody social practices and interactions). Sonic commons thus immediately touches on issues of collectivity, diversity, power, inclusion, exclusion, etc. In this presentation I will explicitly stress the role sound artists can play by reflecting on and intervening in already

existing sonic ambiances. Often, urban sound design is only concerned with noise abatement. However, to follow Gernot Böhme, city planning should explore other ways of influencing its acoustic atmospheres in order to be able to contribute to the social composition of a place (Böhme 2000). By subtracting, adding, transforming or disclosing sounds, artists can help to raise awareness and sensibility to an urban ambiance. Sonic interventions can diversify an urban environment, thereby making new and creative experiences possible that can trigger different behaviors and new networks of interactions (Cobussen 2017, 2016; Lacey 2016).

2:00 PM - Coffee break

2:30 PM – Session 1

**Transforming the “Barrier of Fear”: DIY Music as Atmosphere in Post-Revolutionary Authoritarian Egypt** – Dr. Darci Sprengel, University of Oxford

After an initially successful revolution in 2011, military rule returned to power in Egypt in 2013. Ruling through a palpable "barrier of fear," it criminalized "unauthorized" music performance and public gatherings as concrete walls, barbed wire, and military check points came increasingly to punctuate the urban environment. In these conditions, some "do-it-yourself" (DIY) musicians have opted to abandon "politics" to focus instead on musically engaging "energy," "mood," and "atmosphere" to transform the feeling of being in public. This paper examines the political potential of sound and atmosphere in spaces of authoritarianism. Based on 30-months of fieldwork conducted in Egypt between 2010 and 2018, it analyzes how young Egyptian musicians use DIY music performance and listening to compel an otherwise frightened and defeated public into more productive affective registers. What atmosphere and produced by which types of music is contested territory, however. This paper thus argues that sonic atmosphere is an important site where differently-positioned social actors vie for power via a manipulation of affect. In conversation with theories of the public, sound studies, as well as queer and feminist theories of the body, it demonstrates that Arab and Islamic philosophies on the affective potential of sound expand ongoing feminist interventions in Western scholarship by foregrounding how listening, space, and the body intersect to produce political subjects.

**Noise in Cairo: Sonic Documents** - Duncan MacDonald, Associate Professor of Practice, The American University in Cairo

The soundscapes of Cairo are unlike anything I have ever heard in my life. My research aims to document some of its unique features through field recording, sonic mapping, video, and artistic creation. In a city where aurality is the norm, we find a means of communicating through noise that is fundamentally unique. One can say that noise is one of the few forms of expression that people are permitted to make in this city. While it may prove an annoyance to some, it is a way to assert one's existence to others - or even to one's self. Noise, here, is a form of communication that is used by everyone. It is used on a daily level to help distinguish between many, many kinds of street vendors with bread, candy, gas, tea, musical instruments, garbage, baladi, etc. These sonic cues punch through the dense cacophony of a city that is hot and rarely quiet. It is a means to call people to pray throughout the day. In key areas of the city, layers and layers of these amplified calls to prayer can be heard in what can simply be

described as an other-worldly urban soundscape. Microtonal vocals resonate like clockwork in this city of nearly 20 million people - all with singular voices, heralding a similar message. Noise is essential to the fabric of Cairo as a layered cacophony marking the passage of time and space. Large scale music festivals or gatherings are not common, as there is little encouragement in having the youth congregate. To this extent, the consumption of music, film, and many artistic forms take place at home via internet- within the safety of the familiar. As part of this conference, I wish to present some field recordings from Cairo, info about current artists working with sound here, and a new video work in-progress that explores traffic in Cairo and its relationship to music and noise. Concluding, I intend on creating a mini sound festival this Spring in Cairo. This conference is an opportunity to discuss such a festival and create a dialogue concerning how it may take form.

3:30 PM – Keynote Prof. David Toop

**An Ecology of Practice**

Within the field of sound there is no background, no environment, no body and mind, no us and them, no inner and outer, no ambience. As periodic waves, complex invisible events, resonance and pressure, sound runs through all bodies, objects, entities. After that, the problems can begin (hierarchical listening, rejection, refusals, selective listening, separation, oblivious listening, gendered listening, betrayal and so on). Field recording is a misnomer: the field of sound is a total field, not a separated field. The listener roams the world in order to inhabit sound; sound becomes the listener. For me, sound is one part of an ecology of practice, an intra-action of improvisation, instrument, performance, image traces, theory, history, auto-ethnography, ancestors, vocabulary, nourishment, resonances, communities of practice, time and memory, physicality and movement, archives and forgetting. As a life's work I try to become a better listener. All of this is a means to an end, which is to maintain a practice that is personally meaningful, alive and somewhat coherent, containing the possibility of having meaning for others. The implications of this practice are questions rather than answers: to what degree can this ecology of (listening) practice enable a divestment of destructive identities in the pursuit of a bigger question; why am I here? This is all I can speak about.

4:15 PM – Coffee break

4:30 PM – Screenings - Auditorium B, AUB

6:30 PM – Pick up to Beirut Art Centre

7:00 PM – Sound check

8:30 PM – Concerts - Beirut Art Center

Nicola Di Croce

Cathy Lane

W. Joshua Hudelson and his students, FAAS (Music), AUB

30<sup>th</sup> November

10:00 AM – Keynote Prof. Ashish Avikunthak

**Aurality and the making of cinema of religiosity**

Employing the filmic work I have done for the past 2 decades, I will elucidate as a practitioner the creation of a world of sonic aurality in my cinema. I will show how I employ anthropological and archaeological theories in the construction of an aural landscape that is attuned to cinema of religiosity. Here I construct a sonic universe in through the usage of mantric sounds, in which I embolden my audience to see and hear themselves in disjunctural ways.

10:45 – Coffee break

11:00 – Session 2

**Music as Atmospheres** – Friedlind Riedel, Bauhaus University, Weimar

In previous scholarship on music from Adolf Bernhard Marx to Margaret Kartomi authors have, with emphasis, pointed to the atmosphere manifest in musical situations. In this talk, I propose to go further by pushing atmosphere to the centre stage. This is not simply a methodological move, nor is atmosphere just another angle for the study of music. Instead I propose to study music as atmosphere. This talk departs from six founding observations: first that atmosphere is not an ancillary effect of music making but that music (making) abundantly is about atmosphere; second that music seems to hold some kind of affective power to penetrate situations, collectives and selves and manifests as atmosphere; third that it seems insufficient and unsatisfying to simply identify the feelings which music entices with the soul or self of an individual listener; fourth that it is however equally somewhat impossible to locate atmosphere simply in music or in sound as atmosphere appears irreducible to the auditory realm; fifth that both the musical or the acoustical are critical dimensions of any situation that manifests as atmosphere; and finally that there is a striking structural similitude between music and atmosphere and that thus the methodological challenges they each pose overlap, prompting us to think atmosphere through music and music through atmosphere.

**Plural identities, multiple affectivity, and the shape of urban atmosphere to come** – Dr. Nicola Di Croce, Luav, University of Venice, Department of Design and Planning.

Political influences, economic crisis, global migrations and ecological disasters are constantly conditioning urban atmospheres, and the way we perceive them. On the one side people (as well as non-humans) react to such macro-scale changes by adapting to, or refusing, the new *status quo*; on the other side institutions (both on national and local level) hardly try to regulate and design the social and built environment. As result, cultural identities are continuously challenged, and intimate or collective affectivity is exposed to intractable conflicts, and need to search for a possible coexistence. By listening throughout the historical markets of Palermo, the everyday cries of the street traders, and the slow expiration of such tradition, I intend to investigate social practices, their resistant aptitude, their defeat, and their relationship with urban transformations.

**Site-specific text as a prompt for affective atmospheres in transient urban spaces** - Dr. Maria Papadomanolaki, University of Brighton

Drawing from her ongoing site-specific body of work and her custom methodology, the paper will attempt to present Papadomanolaki's reflections on the role of text in her practice. More specifically she will be discussing the relationship between text, atmosphere and listening in her work as part of what she coins a sonic perceptual ecology. How can the transient atmosphere of a site be echoed in fragmented site-specific text? How do we listen to atmospheres and how can the text enrich, disrupt or envelop us within the passing-through

constellation of an atmosphere? The argument will be supported by examples of work, audience testimonies that Papadomanolaki has been gathering throughout the years.

12:45 – Lunch

2:00 PM – Keynote Prof. Cathy Lane

**Atmospheres of love and loss**

How do sonic atmospheres created by the specifics of geography, language, and the changing history of a place both contribute to and emanate from its social and cultural identity? This presentation will consider these questions with specific reference to the Outer Hebrides, remote islands off the West Coast of Scotland which have a rich and complex history of settlement and migration. Over the last two decades, Cathy Lane has been exploring various aspects of life on these islands through sound, listening to people, individually and communally; to the land, the sea and the weather and to archives, literature and music.

2:45 PM – Coffee break

3:15 PM – Session 3

**Sacrilege in Beirut: trans-local connections, musical meaning, and lo-fi aesthetics in the war metal sound of damaar** - Ali Jaber, Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA).

In this paper, Beirut-based Band *Damaar's* short-lived career will be understood as a trajectory through the 'Extreme Black Metal scene'. The author argues that the band's musical material did not only aid the re-production and maintenance of the style, but also opened a cross-cultural exchange between trans-local scenes in wartime Beirut. The author will use 'scene' as a central unit of analysis, and draw on two sets of sources. The first is the academic use of the concept 'scene,' which is closely related to 'sub-culture,' a key concept in the development of popular music studies, the shortcomings of which have been thoroughly discussed and are by now well known. The concept clashes with contemporary concerns about globalisation, the ambiguities of resistance and the heterogeneity of identity. Scene, on the other hand, connotes a more flexible, loose kind of space within which music is produced; a kind of 'context' for musical practice. It assumes less about the homogeneity and coherence of its constituent activities and members.

**Sounding the Unsocial: A Nomadic Listener** – Dr. Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, CAH, AUB

Indian cities are often known to be sonically overwhelming and potentially disorienting for a listening subject. It might be argued that grasping the complex nature of a sound environment of a typical Indian city by relying on the immediately immersive listening to the everyday sounds could be considered a phenomenologically reductive exercise (Cogan, 2006). Following this argument, the goal of the present investigation will be to discover if there is an apropos method capable of producing a comprehensive understanding of the historical dynamics in any urban sonic atmosphere through sound art practice. In this paper, the author describes the development of a sound work *elegy for Bangalore* produced through extensive fieldworks conducted in the city of Bangalore in India, involving the artistic processes of contemplative listening, sonic drifting and field recording.

5:00 PM – Screenings – Auditorium B, AUB

6:30 PM – Pick up to Beirut Art Centre

7:00 PM – Sound check

8:30 PM – Concerts - Beirut Art Center

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay

Lasse-Marc Riek

David Toop