

Aftersound: A Conversation with Mhamad Safa

A transcript from *Radical Sonic Imaginaries*; the first conversation in a new series titled *Countersonics* convened by **Gascia Ouzounian**. This event was co-presented by **The Showroom** and **Gascia Ouzounian** on Tuesday 8 March 2022, 6.30-8.30pm at The Showroom Studio, London, within the public programme for artist **Haig Aivazian**'s solo exhibition at The Showroom, *All of your Stars are but Dust on my Shoes*, 26 January–26 March 2022, as part of *The Consortium Commissions*, an initiative of **Mophradat**.

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Lily Hall: Welcome. Thank you so much for coming this evening, and on International Women's Day. My name is Lily Hall, and I work as Curator here at The Showroom. I'm really glad to be welcoming Gascia Ouzounian and Mhamad Safa this evening. This is the first event in a new series called 'Countersonics: Radical Sonic Imaginaries'. The series is convened by Gascia, and the intention is to explore sonic tactics for building counter-narratives to contested events, spaces, places and communities.

We're so glad to be holding this first talk in the series here at The Showroom, and as part of the public programme for Haig Aivazian's current solo exhibition 'All of your Stars are but Dust on my Shoes', which is part of The Consortium Commissions, an initiative of Mophradat. Furthermore, 'Countersonics: Radical Sonic Imaginaries' is funded by the European Research Council, as part of the project Sonorous Cities.

Gascia Ouzounian: Thank you so much. I wanted to say a very warm thanks to Lily, Seema, Oana, and the entire team at The Showroom. They've been wonderful in supporting this event.

Haig is an artist and curator who is doing vital work in Beirut despite the very difficult economic and political circumstances there. So, it's an honour to be part of that programme as well.

As Lily mentioned, this is the first in a series of conversations called 'Countersonics: Radical Sonic Imaginaries'. The idea behind the series is to explore sound and listening as tactics: how can sound practices and listening practices function as modes of resistance—as an oppositional or radical politics, particularly in crisis and conflict situations? Those are the questions that are going to be animating the series.

Something that has been important to me in thinking about this series is that we do collective thinking around these issues, particularly after the isolation of the pandemic. So, I hope that people can contribute very freely during the discussion period today.

I'm thrilled to welcome Mhamad Safa, who is doing groundbreaking work across sound, architecture and the law. We met in 2018 when I was visiting Beirut for the first time as an adult. I was born there but hadn't been back since. We met at Ashkal Alwan, which is an important artist development and residency centre in Beirut. At the time Mhamad was doing a project that was exploring noise legislation and the politics of noise in Beirut.

Mhamad, can you tell us about that early research on noise, and what inspired you to start exploring noise in the Beirut context?

Mhamad Safa: Hi, everyone. First of all, thank you, Gascia, for this opportunity. And thank you to The Showroom team, for setting this up. And thanks to everyone who's joining us today.

Just to give an idea of where this started, I started from the practice of architecture. The practice of architecture was not this nice design, fancy, cute architecture. It was more like a raw building at heavy construction sites. My main experience was in the post-war reconstruction of the southern suburb of Beirut. So, my relationship to building and architecture was connected to really intense work environments, directly dealing with labourers, construction site workers.

What was striking with the construction site workers in Lebanon is that there were no restrictions or legislations or forms of mitigation for noise, particularly for workers in the sites, especially foreign workers coming predominantly from Syria. There was so much compromise for how much they can listen and how much they can handle noise.

The work started as an investigation on hearing loss and hearing impairment. The project was investigating specific construction sites and dealing with workers there and an audiologist to make a larger argument about who has the right to absorb noise and who is shielded from noise. I examined the relationship of the government with noise, the relationship of the government with these legislations. It's related to labour laws as well. If there's hearing impairment as a result of noise, will there be a certain reparation? Or a certain form of compensation for the worker? But there was none of that.

GO: For me, it was so interesting to meet you and to talk to you about this research. Something that I felt you were bringing forward is the idea that not only was noise legislation underdeveloped in the Beirut and Lebanon context, so that civilians and workers aren't protected from sonic harms as they might be, but that the implementation of noise legislation in the city was also very different in terms of who you are, with regards to implementation by police or local authorities. I remember you talking about how if you're a tourist you can make noise, and it's different if you're a local. Can you talk a little bit about that? About this differential implementation of noise policy?

MS: This was striking, that the government was allowed to enforce specific restrictions on how much noise was being produced in specific contexts. But in the context of a construction site, it would sound ridiculous if you want to try to mitigate noise because the real estate industry was so sacred, so extreme.

One of the repercussions was on workers; and one was on noise legislation. Let's say you try to file a complaint. It will be rejected. Because you will get the answer, 'Oh, you're not going to make us stop building.' You're not going to even go into any kind of confrontation with real estate investors because they're stronger than the government. Noise was a repercussion of all this: the result of what you're allowed to do, what you're not allowed to do, and how much real estate was pushed to its extremes.

50cm Slab

GO: It's interesting to think about noise, as you're saying, as the byproduct of this frenzy of overbuilding—and the particular kind of reconstruction that happened in Beirut following the war, in which so much of the architecture was outsourced to international companies and starchitects: this strange of reconfiguration of the architecture of Beirut in that context.

As part of your architecture research as well as your artwork at the time, around 2018, you had this fascinating project called 50cm Slab, which entailed visiting a site which had been bombed, and creating a sound installation reflecting on that. Can you tell us a bit about 50cm Slab?

MS: When I was working in the construction site, after the war, it was still the beginning of the reconstruction project. The whole area was totally razed. There was nothing. Most of the conflict in 2006 was a conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. Hezbollah had a stronghold in that area, the southern suburb. Many of their headquarters were there. We went to visit a site that was a legislative council for [Hezbollah]. It was a huge complex, and we noticed that the whole building was like sand. But while we were investigating the building, we saw that the basements were still intact. I was young at the time. I was a trainee. I was following these engineers and they were looking at these buildings and these slabs and they were saying, 'Okay, this is interesting, look how it's holding. The missile couldn't penetrate it'.

They were talking about this missile all the time, which is called the vacuum bomb, which is being used now in Ukraine, by the Russians. The technical term is a thermobaric weapon. The IDF were using something called GBU 28, which is a guided missile that has a bunker buster. It penetrates. It starts to break slabs and it counts while it's breaking slabs. And when it gets to a certain number it releases a white powder. The white powder penetrates porosities; and it implodes later. It makes this huge explosion. It sucks the air out of the environment. This kind of weapon uses the oxygen from the surrounding environment to explode.

The main challenge for the IDF is that most of that area had really fixed slabs, specifically where there was proper military and administrative activity happening. The slab resisted. When they were rebuilding later, they made a thick slab which went up to, like, 50 centimetres. Usually in architecture standards it can get to 15, 20, 25 centimetres. But when we think about 50, we're thinking about something that has an intention to hold. The whole project was not [only] reflecting on the war that already happened, but also reflecting on a certain upcoming war as well. It was thinking about how there will be these basements now. The war is going to happen, 100%. We don't know when, but the war is going to happen. Because the conflict is still there.

[With 50cm Slab] it's the idea that these people in residence, the civilians, are going to go under these basements, and they might not die. But what's going to happen is that they're going to listen to the building collapsing on top of them. And to bombardment happening on top of them. The installation was a slab that had two speakers. I was using a generative form of composing music. It can constantly generate these small granulations as if something is collapsing on top of you. It weirdly appeared that it was really extreme when we installed it. 10, 20 seconds, 30 seconds was the amount of time that someone could stand under it.

GO: It's remarkable to think about this practice of defensive architecture—anticipating a future war. Because it's a region where there is a perpetual conflict. This idea of standing under this slab and listening to this—your sound installation was reproducing or producing this kind of experience for people. Why was it important for you to bring that kind of experience to other people?

MS: At the time I didn't have a close relationship or understanding of sound and trauma and the overwhelming experience of listening that happens during warfare. Because I lived warfare, and my relationship to sound was not.... I couldn't translate it into writing or words. And many, many people living in Beirut couldn't have this kind of translation. We'll think about sound as an extreme phenomenon but wouldn't know what is the relationship between sound and our sense of being.

I was doing this as a first iteration or a first understanding of the experience of thinking you're safe, thinking you're shielded. But at the same time, moments of violence and death and imminent destruction are being transported to you by sonic elements—by the compression of air moving through particles towards you. You are in contact with violence while you're thinking you are in the shelter. So, playing on the idea that you think you're in shelter, you think you're safe, but what is happening with sound is breaking all these relationships between you and your safety. Between you and your sense of being.

Sonic Aftershocks

GO: That early work seems to have led directly to your MA project in research architecture at Goldsmiths, where you worked closely with Susan Schuppli, who is here tonight. The article that we

shared [with the audience], 'Reverberations and Post-War Trauma,' came out of that MA research. For me it's a really important article. I wanted to mark it with having an event and a conversation, because for me it's extending our understanding of sound, reverberation, trauma and their entanglements.

One of the major contributions of that article is, when people study sound in the context of warfare, as you write, they're often looking at it in terms of the immediate harmful effects of sound upon the listener. We know, for example, that loud sound can cause anxiety, it can cause heart palpitations, it can cause heart failure, it can even cause death. It can cause miscarriages. But one of the paradigmatic shifts that I think your research is proposing is that you're thinking about it not only in the moment of experiencing the sound but you're thinking about it in this very long-term sense, which also reformulates the conception of reverberation and the unfolding of trauma over a long period of time.

An idea that came to me as I was reading your paper was that of a 'sonic aftershock'. As you write, even though this bombing of the residential complex in south Beirut happened in 2006, 'it continues to reverberate and resonate today'. Can you tell us a bit about that idea, about the long-term effects of sonic trauma, or sonic aftershocks?

MS: That's one of the most important reasons this research is happening, or why it started to happen. There are so many questions that were important as a contribution to sound studies and sonic cultures. When it comes to how sound can be harmful, it's a vague question. You would say 'sound is harmful'. It's really huge. It's really vague. There is no proper framework.

I was talking to a close friend of mine, Seth [Ayyaz], who's here, and he's an expert as well in this field. We're always questioning, 'Why is sound traumatic? How can that happen?' I just thought about a framework—about a method to think both about sound being violent [and] about trauma overall.

I started from trauma studies, from the work of people like Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and even going back to Robert Jay Lifton. There was always trouble with diagnosis. There was always trouble with language. There was always the trouble of thinking about the stressors themselves. To name someone who maybe most people know, Bessel Van Der Kolk, he would mention that trauma had a stressor—that there is an external stressor. But my question was, 'Okay, there's an external stressor. But how would that work on you? What's the mechanism of the external stressor?' And this got me to the question of reverberation, because for many writers, for many trauma theorists, especially Cathy Caruth, or even post-Holocaust trauma theorists, it was always the idea of 'long lasting'. Trauma is something that takes time to unfold, and it's something that has a repercussion or a harmony of the event. I would think of all these theories of the event. Thinking that the event reverberates. The event has specific harmonies and vibrations that go beyond its proximity.

So, in terms of a sonic framework, reverberation was a strong framework to think about how to make a diagram for trauma. That's one thing. On a second level, to think about [what's] beyond the impact. Because if we're thinking about the sound of an explosion, or a sound of warfare, if you deconstruct it,

or you go close to it, you would think about a startling sound. But this is instantaneous. The longest sound that can get stitched in your sense of being is its aftersound.

This is where an urban context comes in. Warfare is not happening in the void. It's not happening in a desert. It's happening between buildings that have specific acoustic qualities. They allow sound to reverberate. And reverberation, physically it happens [that] the louder you're getting, the more there's reflectors. The more there's an environment that has low absorption, for example, low absorption like glass and concrete to a certain extent, sound will reverberate more, and it will reflect more, so it will overlap on its own more. If I create a louder impact, it will reverberate more.

This is what I was thinking about. What is it that is traumatising about a sound? Is it the impact itself? Or is it actually its aftersound, its drone-y sound, its long-lasting repercussion? And this aligns with different theories.

GO: One of the things that your article brings which is really incisive is the idea of low frequency reverberations, particularly in the urban context, travelling and spreading through the city—the disorienting nature of them. You draw attention to how a person's sense of echolocation or sound localisation is disturbed and interrupted with these particularly low frequency as well as loud sounds.

MS: This is really important in terms of thinking about the structure of trauma. I had this interesting relationship with trauma literature related to victims of abuse, and especially within specific feminist writings and in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. This is the idea of threat and the idea of survival mechanism and the idea of localising threat. What happens with the specific experience of violence, of being exposed and being in an area that is ridden by loud explosive sounds daily? The main thing from witness testimonies was always the question of, 'We don't know where it's coming from. This is what makes us scared for our lives. We're worried that it might be really close, it might be far. We cannot locate it.'

But this is very interesting. First of all, the idea of sound localization is really important because it's a very basic evolutionary capacity that humans have, because otherwise they wouldn't have been able to locate predators. It's not only the fact of listening. No, it's just as well knowing where what you are listening to [is]: how far is it and where is it according to your head: Is it here? Is it here? Is it here? Etcetera.

When it becomes low frequencies, it becomes more complicated. What's complicated about low frequency is that the behaviour of what we call in acoustics an explosive sound, a shockwave—this belongs to a field called long-range acoustic propagation. What we know about this field is that sonic behaviour is really chaotic. It's unpredictable.

Someone who wrote really nicely about this is Tim Hecker, the famous ambient musician. His PhD was on shockwaves and on loudness. He mentions that the non-linearity of acoustics in low frequency and long-range acoustics is, it behaves as if it's quantum physics to normal Newtonian physics. It's really

unconventional. It comes from different sides, especially when it reverberates as well, it becomes more complicated because sound is coming to you from different angles. This is what I really like to look at: the idea of ubiquity, where sound is totally ubiquitous, so we don't know where it's coming from. And this is what accentuates the experience of threat. You have a moment—an event of death, an event of violence—which you cannot locate. You're more vulnerable to it.

GO: Listeners who are experiencing warfare are already in a state of hyperlistening or hypervigilant listening. They can't stop listening. Because you have to listen to survive, because you're always listening for a sonic signal of what's happening. And often, listening is the main sense that you're using. Visibility is going to be darkened. There are going to be electrical outages and so on. So, in that context, and particularly, as you're saying Mhamad, in the urban context—which is already a confusing sonic environment, with so many different kinds of reflections happening all around you—that feeling of threat is amplified.

Another major contribution in your article, again, was showing how sound, the city, and architecture become entangled within this framework of violent sounds. My question is, when there is a spectacularly violent campaign of bombing and shelling in a city, such as what is happening now in Ukraine, does the city itself become weaponized through sound? Does the city act as a carrier and transmitter of harmful sound? And how did you find that—how did you locate that in Beirut?

MS: That's really important. There's a key work on that for me: the book *Sonic Experience* by Jean-François Augoyard and Henri Torgue. It's a very strong manuscript on the urban context, the built environment and how sound behaves in it. They make an inventory of sonic effects, and they use terminologies that are related to music composition, like delays, filtering, etcetera. And the idea to describe how a city might function as a kind of a huge conductor of sound. That is not the case in other environments. I would even go before that to the work of R. Murray Schafer, and about how every object in the city, how every kind of decision that is taken by an urban planner or by city planner has strong acoustic repercussions.

When it comes to warfare, all these elements are totally amplified. They work as an amplifier. What happens in an urban context, in Beirut for example, is that reverberations are not only the effect of the buildings themselves, but they're an effect of the decision of a city planner who decided to make narrow streets, who decides to build this way. And the real estate mania that was happening in Lebanon—and building on every single lot that was available—all this had modulated every single aspect of what would happen in a city.

The most striking part about it is that to activate all these elements, you need a substantially loud sound. If I go down the street here and clap, it's not going to reverberate like it's a church. But when I make a really loud sound, like an explosive sound that goes beyond 200 decibels, the effects are going to be very substantial in the city. Sound is going to be pushed to its extremes because of the urban configurations. The relationship between architecture and urban decisions and real estate, it really affects sounds and listening; and within an environment of conflict this becomes more prominent.

Collateral Damage

GO: It's difficult not to think about the Beirut port explosion when thinking about spectacularly violent, harmful sounds.

You are now doing a PhD in law, architecture, and sound. Can you tell us about what you're working on at the moment? And where this research has led?

MS: In terms of my PhD research, I'm thinking about law, in particular about an area of law called international humanitarian law, which is the laws of armed conflict. I'm questioning this idea of whether hearing can be considered collateral damage. Not in a figurative way or a metaphorical way. Collateral damage is an actual, important variable. It's a very strong metric that is used to assess if any military operation is considered legal or not.

There's a legal framework for war. Anytime there is a military operation, or there's a military conflict, under this law, you're allowed to kill militaries. You're not allowed to kill civilians. This is the basic framework of international humanitarian law: civilians should be protected. Civilians and their objects should be protected. But you are allowed to have a certain amount of collateral damage. Collateral damage can be legitimate if the collateral damage is proportionate to how much you're gaining advantage as a military. Let's say you're killing a general. You're allowed to kill 100 people with this general. 'It's fine, we can allow that.' But if you're killing a soldier with a rifle and you kill 10 people with this soldier, they will tell you, 'No, this is totally disproportionate.' They count how much collateral damage there is.

So, my question is, if there is a legal military operation that is happening, meaning an army is attacking another army, and they're striking them, there are no civilians that were harmed physically, but there are civilians that heard it: would they be considered collateral damage? The problem with that question is that it will force this law and this legal framework to understand what is damaged from sound. How can you be damaged from sound? I'm ultimately thinking about trauma. But for this legal framework, the idea of inserting trauma and putting trauma in this equation might become a very complicated question. It will become like, 'Oh, it's not physical harm. There's no hearing impairment.' But how do we go about this?

GO: This is one of the big questions I think your work is posing: what needs to happen in the law for there to be justice for survivors of sonic violence and sonic harm? Will sonic harm ever be properly investigated or prosecuted? Can we develop better systems for protecting people from sonic harm?

MS: There were substantial case precedents on this, but the most intriguing case precedent was happening in the Occupied Territories in Palestine, in 2005 or 2006. There was an abduction of an Israeli military officer, Gilad Shalit, in Gaza. And the Israeli Air Force had deliberately done a massive amount of sonic booms. A sonic boom is basically when a fighter jet travels at supersonic speed, it

breaks the barrier of sound and creates a shockwave. It flew over Gaza deliberately over a few days. Human rights groups like B'Tselem and other groups like Physicians for Peace filed a lawsuit against the Israeli government. They were allowed to do this because they are Israeli groups. They went to the court and their whole argument, with physicians and expert psychiatrists, showed that there was substantial evidence that people were substantially damaged from sound. People had anxiety. People had what they call in law 'irreversible effects' and 'superfluous effects': unnecessary suffering because of this military operation.

It didn't go anywhere, but it created a certain legal conversation. The Israelis at the end said that this operation was directed towards Hamas militants, and it was mainly made to cause discomfort and distract them. Civilians were an 'incidental effect'. What happened to civilians was incidental. So, this is the first time where this question of sound being incidental was coming up.

Earwitnessing in Lebanon

GO: The law around this is still very much in its infancy. And yet at the same time, we know that these military actors are not stupid. They're not naive. And they're doing many of these kinds of operations on purpose. And the law, through work like yours, is catching up to this. That's why it's so important to think through these frameworks and ideas really carefully: what is this kind of trauma? How does it evolve?

Perhaps as a last question, before we open up to question/answer, to think about the wider context of listening in Lebanon, I wanted to ask you about the concept of earwitnessing. We're familiar with the idea of the eyewitness as someone who has witnessed an historical event. Earwitness is the aural equivalent to that. Someone who has heard a historical event, in this case, let's say a war. Can you tell us about why earwitnessing is important in the Lebanese context?

MS: The idea of witnessing is very important in this context. I was indebted to the work of Susan Schuppli on earwitnessing, and Lawrence Abu Hamdan, and the thinking about the ear, rather than just thinking about with the eye and visibility.

In the context of Lebanon, it's spectacular, the idea of listening today. It was already something [important] after several wars, because this country has lived through several short wars, that were swift but really loaded and aggressive. In the 2006 war there were 7,000 military operations in a month. To give you a context of the scale: in the Saudi coalition war on Yemen, it's been five years now, and there were 24,000 military operations. So, if you look at the comparison, 7,000 in a month is huge. All this is death. It's violence, but it's also sound. It's people who didn't die, but people who listened. It's the thing that you cannot escape. You can close your eyes, you can not see, you can move away, but sound is going to travel. It's going to penetrate any porosity, it's going to go inside you, you're forced to listen.

Earwitnessing is a forced form of witnessing. The eyewitness can decide not to see. But even if you close your ears, vibrations are going to make you feel what's happening. This is very important, understanding the earwitness, in my opinion.

In the context of Lebanon there were all these events. People were already familiar with explosive sounds, lots of car bombings, assassinations. It was really common. But there was a break for a few years. And then recently, three years ago, there was this great financial collapse that happened in the country and this substantial uprising that happened. And many of the tools that were used by protesters were generating loudness. Protesters would try to go inside the parliament, but it was heavily fortified. And the only way they could communicate and show anger with the representative of the state was by banging on huge metal sheets nonstop. Then, when protesters took over a few monuments, they would play loud music as a form of protest. Sound was totally present. But after that there was the 4th of August explosion. The amount of sonic shock that happened and the amount of sonic energy from it... I was in Beirut at the time when it happened. I wasn't really far [from it]. It was indescribable the amount of sonic force that came out. And it was accompanied by a very strong vibration. The shockwave was really substantial.

After that, there was this phenomenon where everyone I know was talking about how sensitive they are to sound. If you just click on something, if you just drop something on the floor, you would notice lots of startling from everyone. Startle reflexes were everywhere. And then after that there were a few instances where the IDF had flown—had done deliberate, low altitude raids over Lebanon. People were reliving specific traumas. And this discourse started to become way more prominent. It was the first time in my life where I saw a territorial discourse on trauma, and particularly trauma being sensitive to sound. It's like, 'We're really sensitive to sound, we cannot handle sound.'

Something that was really striking after the 4th of August blast: we went to a protest on the 8th, which was four days later. And everyone was so strict that there shouldn't be any music or any banging. No one wanted to listen to anything. People were really, really sensitive to sound. And it still continues now. A month ago, there were two Israeli jets that flew at low altitude over Lebanon. I was looking at Instagram, and most people were using trauma dialect, through words relating to trauma: reliving, exposure, triggers, external stimuli, etcetera. And it was really prominent, the idea of sonic culture.

GO: Thank you so much, Mhamad. I'm so grateful for this discussion. In your article you close with a discussion of the idea that the traumatised subject is a governable subject. And so, particularly in terms of what you're describing, it's very disturbing to think about this mass trauma which has occurred in Lebanon. And at the same time, I know from having visited there and having family from there, they're people who really have such a strong sense of power, politics, and resisting this kind of oppression.

Thank you so much, Mhamad. And thank you, everyone. So, let's open it up to questions.

Regulating Noise

Christina Hazboun: First of all, thank you for this really enriching conversation. The first thing is a little note that rips my ears when listening, and it's the word IDF. It's Israeli Occupation Forces and not Israeli Defence Forces.

The other thing is if we can talk a little bit about the human element of your research. Did you find certain patterns that the workers or civilians developed in terms of protecting themselves, shielding themselves? That's the first question. And then the other one is in terms of noise regulation and sound regulation in Beirut. How does this play in terms of gigs and parties? Are there cutoff times?

Mhamad Safa: First of all, I totally agree. We've been having this conversation among several writers [in a research project]. What should we say? Should we say IDF? Because we're trying to write it in a legal context? Should we say the way they say it or the way we want to say it?

For the regulations: there were specific moments in the recent history of Lebanon where they tried to enforce specific regulations on club music. But there's nothing that can be enforced in Lebanon because it's highly corrupt. Music being loud and having specific restrictions against it, is a metric that you can use to understand how corrupt this government is, and how much there is a compromise of specific people over specific lives or specific ears.

For me, personally, I'm not [for] the restriction on music or loudness in events. You can just wear earplugs. Or if someone is living there, there can be a certain negotiation. But it's nice to play loud music. What I'm saying is not just personal opinion. It's coming from the history of noise. The history of noise abatement is not a history of disenfranchised people being annoyed, or someone being really subjected to loudness. No, it was strictly upper classes being so annoyed by workers during the Industrial Revolution, workers coming to the cities and singing loudly, the sounds of the machine, the sounds of work, were really annoying to upper class. Noise was seen as something that is vulgar. And So it's not always bad to make noise.

When it comes to the other question, when it comes to the workers, I don't think there was any source of mitigation. It was a certain kind of a laissez faire that was happening at the construction site, meaning that you deal with it. There was so much compromise on many other things as well, other than sound. There was compromise on health; they would put workers in very dangerous conditions, without any security measures. I was with two workers going into the E.R., and them telling me, 'We don't have anything, we don't have any kind of insurance, we don't have anything, we just need some of you people that are in charge of the construction site to help us.' It's really dramatic, construction work and building and who manages to take all the shock—to absorb the shock.

The Sociality of Trauma

Seth Ayyaz: Thank you very much. Can I take this in a slightly different direction, because I'm just fascinated: it links to an idea of sociality of sound, and it links to an idea of resistance or resilience in the context of trauma. You were talking about the way that sound is contagious. The way it's a vector, it passes through bodies, it doesn't belong to an individual. It's not my listening, it's a field in which we're immersed, and it passes through us. To me that points to an idea of the social in some way.

There are two things I wanted to get your thoughts on. One is that for trauma to be trauma, the characteristic coming from a lot of contemporary psychoanalytic thinking, neurosciences and so on, it's not so much the impact of a sound or any event. It's a state of mind. The key characteristic state of mind is fundamentally being alone and abandoned and helpless and utterly powerless. There's something about being utterly an individual who is helpless and hopeless in the face of something completely overwhelming.

The thought I wanted to connect it to is what strikes me about the Lebanese context specifically is an insistence on 'we' rather than 'I'. That's the connection with what I'm thinking about in terms of resilience or resistance. That because you mentioned that in the aftermath of the port explosion, for example, you know, there's a tremendously sensitised state that everyone shares. But of course 'we' share it. It's not me alone that has this experience. It's us that have had this experience done to us. And I wondered if you would say something about that.

Mhamad Safa: This is really important. There are all these schools on trauma. Everyone knows the idea of collective trauma. And some of the writers on collective trauma like Jeffrey Alexander, they don't think that collective trauma is a type of trauma. They think that trauma is inherently collective.

I want to think about trauma as something that is being relived again. Trauma already happened, and you relive it again. But it already happened within the context of the family. And it's already something that happened within a specific kind of social context as well. But the most important thing, as you just said now, is feeling that you're alone and helpless, and not being connected. And this comes as a kind of a paradox to the idea of the collective. You're alone, you're traumatised, but if someone else gets traumatised, you will be traumatised. If you think about the understanding of trauma that came after the Holocaust and survivor syndrome, just knowing that you survived violence, and someone else didn't, has a traumatic effect. So, the social, in my opinion, is very, very intense [when it comes to] trauma in Lebanon. I feel it with myself as well.

When I was in Beirut during 4th of August, the feeling of being overwhelmed was seeing and listening to the experiences of friends that were in close proximity to the explosion. This is an effect. This idea of the social is really important. But when it comes to sound, when we think about loud sound, it is a collective listening experience as well. And it becomes a shared experience and becomes a question of who is closer to violence? Who is listening more to violence? Who is closer? How close you are ties to this question of collective trauma and cultural trauma, Freudian thinking of the family and trauma as

communication between several people, this idea of passing through generations. I refer to it slightly in the paper, which is the aftermath of the aftermath. The aftermath is a shared experience. I refer to the works of Rob Lifton on violence, the idea that violence that takes years to unfold.

This is informed by the works of William Sinclair, who wrote about the aftermath of slavery. The aftermath of slavery is that repercussions are collective, and they're long lasting, they appear generations later sometimes. So, the social is really important in the context of Lebanon, because it's a shared experience—and psychoanalytically it's a shared experience.

Sven Anderson: Thanks for everything. This has been really mind-expanding. Just to pick up on that question of the social element, I thought that the piece that you developed, 50cm Slab, is a really powerful idea of bringing something from your long-term research and practice back into contact with people as a kind of probe to see, how do they react to this? How do they react to this proposition? And I wonder, do you have any reflections for us on seeing people encounter that piece—who understood it in context of their lived experience of their shared trauma?

Mhamad Safa: At one point, I asked my dad [what he thought] and he was like, 'Why are we doing this to people? Why do you want anyone to listen to this? Why do you want anyone to be subjected to this? This is torture.' [Laughing].

The piece, in context, it was extreme. If you listen to it now—if I played it now on speaker—it will sound like a granular sound piece. But because of the space where it was, and because it was in a very small room with a metal sheet, and all the room was resonating with the frequency... The speaker pointed right down. I was thinking a lot about the spatial condition that makes this very annoying, not the sound itself on its own: where you are enclosed, how tight are the spaces, and how you're listening. What is your listening position? What's your positionality and everyone around you? And you're alone.

Weaponising the City

Susan Schuppli: I'm curious. I've been thinking about this comment about the urban infrastructure as being weaponised because it modulates and shapes sound. And I wondered whether that's an accurate characterisation, because I was thinking about what weaponisation often means, usually there's a recognition that some sort of ambient kind of condition could be operationalised, or strategic advantage sort of gained. I think it's a provocative comment. And I was wondering whether you could think of examples. We can think of examples with the use of sound in torture and presumably, in Abu Ghraib, I'm in no doubt about the kind of volume in which the detainees were held was part of the way in which the sound was being utilised, etcetera. But I was wondering, can you think of an example within the context of the urban where there's an understanding of the capacities of sound to produce specific kinds of collective experiences that were used in a strategic manner?

Mhamad Safa: First, I'm so happy you're here, Susan. Susan is a very big influence on my work and on everything I'm doing now. I do think there was weaponization of an environment. In Lebanon, they didn't build this way on purpose (so that sound can become totally amplified). I was thinking the environment became unintentionally weaponized. But I just had this testimony from a friend in Lebanon that, during one of the wars, occupation forces had flown in between two cliffs on purpose. Every time they wanted to do a sonic boom, they would go in between these two cliffs, and they would fly at supersonic speed, and it would generate a specific loudness. It makes this really annoying sound. I couldn't find any information where this was documented, it was just told to me that this happens.

But at the same time, I think what is weaponized is using loud sound to break glass, to shatter glass. This was a prominent practice as well: making sonic booms because, on a specific loudness, the glass will shatter, everyone will be really close to danger. And it was a known thing that on a specific loudness, you will break the glass, so they would use it. So, they didn't weaponize it in the sense that you're saying, but it turned into an element of violence or a weapon.

Atau Tanaka: Thanks for the conversation. I'd like to come back to your original practice as an architect and to follow on from the previous question of strategies, because indeed, you can weaponize by creating violent sonic acts. But then, in architectural design, acoustics exist as part of the practice but are often misinformed or, well, not implemented. After all the conversation, to come back to you as an architect, these defensive ways of design, whether we're preparing for war, or just trying to make a nice room, does all this fold back into your architectural thinking?

Mhamad Safa: This idea of thinking about architecture and taking into consideration a war... During my experience in working in the post-war reconstruction site, everything was trying to be built in a way to anticipate a new war. All the measures that were taken: they weren't these classical measures, like making underground tunnels; they were really subtle measures like [having] this thick slab, having a security council that makes sure that all the doors, all the pipes, all the tubes are 100% made in a way that can resist specific shocks. But, at the same time, architecture worked as a social element, as a way to militarise more people—to make more pockets of resistance. The architect who designed this space, this suburb, he would say, 'This will act as pockets of resistance. These areas will be for resistance against the enemy and the future war. We will try to build it better than it was before; we will build it in record time'. Record time and logistics were really important: how to anticipate a new war, how to be ready for a new war.

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Biographies

Mhamad Safa is a sound producer, architect and researcher, based between London and Beirut. His work focuses on the sonic make-ups of multi-scalar spatial and techno-scientific conditions. He explores their intersections with aural traditions, subcultural practices and environments of conflict. He was a fellow at Ashkal Alwan HWP in 2018. He graduated from the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London, and is currently a Phd candidate in International Law at the University of Westminster. Safa has shown individual and collaborative artwork and performances at Goethe-Institut Lebanon, Beirut; Arab Center for Architecture, Beirut; the Institute for Contemporary Art, London; the Centre for Research Architecture, London, and the Sharjah Architecture Triennial among others.

Gascia Ouzounian is a sonic theorist and practitioner whose work explores the history of sound technologies; experimental music and sound art; sound and urbanism. Recent projects include [Scoring the City](#); [Acoustic Cities: London & Beirut](#), and the book *Stereophonica: Sound and Space in Science, Technology, and the Arts* (MIT Press). Ouzounian is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Music, University of Oxford, where she directs the project [Sonorous Cities](#).

Sonorous Cities: Towards a Sonic Urbanism (SONCITIES) is a research project formed at the intersection of sound, urbanism, and critical spatial practices. The project's aim is to better understand cities and urban life through a critical investigation of the sonic conditions of cities, and of people's experiences of urban sound environments; to make critical and creative interventions into urban sound environments; and to support architects, designers and spatial practitioners in embracing sonic modes of urban analysis and design.