

*on hearing footsteps / sound as violence / sonic memory of trauma /
interruptions / sound as religious tool*

with **Lynn Mayya**
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*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Lynn Mayya, Matteo Zoccolo – 23 april 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

MZ: So, in your opinion, why do we need sound installations? Why do we need sound art? Why do we need to...

LM: Why do we need a nice mural? Or why do we need a nice painting?

MZ: Yeah, that's the same point. Why do we need a nice painting?

LM: We don't need it, actually. I think the artist needs that more than the perceiver. I think the artwork could be based on self-experience. It could be based on some emotions they want to express. It could be a message they want to tell, a story, a concept, or it can be just for the sake of... Something pleasant, or something unpleasant, even. It can go both ways.

For me, sound in general sometimes takes you to some weird state of mind. And there are specific sounds I really enjoy listening to. Um...

I don't know, sometimes I get attached to weird sound memories, to places. Especially after I moved from Dubai to here. In Dubai. I could never walk anywhere or go anywhere without headphones in my head, full volume, for real. If you remove your headphones, it's just too, too noisy around, there is no organic sound, you know what I mean? You don't hear birds. You don't hear rivers. You don't hear this kind of stuff, while here sometimes, you know, I'm walking at 23:00 in the evening, and I just don't feel like putting on any headphones because I wanna hear the wind, I wanna hear people talking in their houses, you can listen to their sounds.

Sometimes I like to listen to my footsteps in the streets. I can hear it so clearly here. It was fascinating to me. I was even recording it for my boyfriend. I told him, "Listen, in Europe you can hear your footsteps, can you imagine?" He was impressed!

MZ: I can't imagine that!

LM: You don't have this option in industrial cities like Dubai. We have such an environment in Syria, in some places, but not in Dubai. Maybe outside, like if you go towards the mountains, yes. It becomes more organic. But, in general, in the city, it's very overwhelming. Yesterday, when we were in the hörraum talking about the sensory memory and all of that... I don't consider myself a person who really experienced too much of the Syrian war. Like, I didn't stay for long there. I was there for almost two years during the war. I'm sure I've seen only 30% of what the others have been through.

And I remember, when we moved from Syria to Dubai, my sister was living next to the airport, and every time the airplanes were taking off or landing, I used to wake up at night. I woke up in the state of... I don't know, I woke up scared, because I was thinking for a second that it was the Syrian air force, subconsciously, waking up and thinking "No, you're in Dubai, it's the airport. Go back to sleep."

But it took me such a long time to digest the sound and to consider it natural again. For quite a long time, it was always scaring me, even though I know I was in Dubai, but this sound... I don't know, it's creating some kind of fear in you, although it shouldn't.

MZ: It's actually understandable that fears are very connected to sound.

LM: That's the psychology experiment we talked about yesterday, with the baby. It's very, very easy to attach fear to sound. Can you attach happiness to sound? Do you remember, for example, what was the soundscape the first time you kissed your girlfriend? It's easy, it's very easy to remember scary or traumatizing sounds.

MZ: Yes, true. Because sound works as a sort of alert.

LM: Yeah.

MZ: As we said today, you cannot close your ears because you always have to be ready to... You know, if something happens, you have to be ready to run. And you have to understand that there is a danger. So, you cannot close them, even when you sleep, as you said you used to wake up when you heard the plane. Even if you are sleeping, your ears are constantly receiving. I think this is very much connected to trauma and danger. It's a mechanism that works as a survival mechanism, the way we perceive sound as an interruption and as a sign of danger. I don't remember the sound that was all over when I was kissing my girlfriend for the first time, it was definitely a more tactile experience. You know, it's not really about hearing, it was more about touching and feeling, probably.

LM: Yeah, but you would also remember the place.

MZ: Yeah. It was also a visual experience. It was a visual and tactile experience.

LM: Exactly. That's what I was saying. Visually, it's very easy to memorize things. You can memorize the best place you had sushi, with all the decorations. But you can't remember, for example... But actually, for me sometimes it works both ways. In Nepal, I was there like two years ago, I really remember very, very, very well the frequency of the bell we had at the temple. And I can't visualize the whole place. I can't remember it visually. But I can remember, for example, how the water sounds there. It was crazy, you know, what do you call it? The water pipe?

MZ: the tap?

LM: Yeah, it was like this round one that has no filter, and the water just goes out very violently.

MZ: I can imagine the sound.

LM: Yeah.

MZ: Um, if I think about any memory of sound that I have, it's really much connected to situations in which I felt in danger. I remember the sound of the flood that I witnessed when I was in Biella, in Italy. The river was very big, too big. There was a lot of water that night and the sound was very deep, like a loud, constant earthquake. It was dark and scary, there was not much to see. And the building was also...

LM: Shaking.

MZ: Shaking. And it eventually got destroyed, after we evacuated it. This sound of water was almost like a rumble of thunder. But a constant one, that develops in time and sometimes changes, and maybe you hear something falling in the distance. This is a sound I remember very well. I also remember the sound of the siren in Jerusalem, for example, to remember the Holocaust. I mean, it's not connected to fear or danger...

LM: But the siren, in general, is always related to fear and danger.

MZ: Sound is an interruption. You know, like the bells are there to interrupt. Sound can be very violent. It can refer to violence, but it can also be very violent itself, it can be used as a tool for violence. Because you cannot control whether you will hear a sound or not.

LM: Yes, you can't control it, like when you close your eyes and say, "Oh I didn't see the danger."

MZ: When I was in Jerusalem, I was thinking a lot about how the different religions are using sound. The bells of the church, the Muezzin shouting from the minaret. Sound can spread and can reach everyone all around, at the same time, and no one can choose not to listen. Everybody's listening and everybody's reached in one second. All the city knows about that sound. And then if you put meaning in that sound, then you are actually communicating. But in a violent way, because people cannot choose to avoid it. What is your experience when you hear the Muezzin? What do you feel?

LM: I don't like all of them, but some are good. I don't have a religious attachment to it. Sometimes they have a good voice and good vocal skills, and they can do it really nice. But it doesn't mean anything to me, to be honest. As a ritual, regardless of what is the concept behind it, I enjoy it, although I don't believe in it. I just like to watch it. I like to hear that the church bells are ringing, even though I don't believe in Christianity. And same for Islam, I like to see people repeating the same things together, united in one thing. So, yeah... do all the Christians like the ringing bells? And do all the Muslims like the Salah? And do they

like it because they like it, or do they like it because they grew up with the ideology of liking it?

MZ: I guess some don't even question if they like it or not.

LM: Yes, I don't think everyone does.