Deep Reminding

Amin Ghasemi

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DEEP REMINDING

by

AMIN GHASEMI

Under the Direction of Jill Frank

ABSTRACT

*Deep Reminding* is an immersive multi-sensory experience comprised of sound, light and digital painting. My interest in the existential and mystical qualities of sound and light, as well as their power to engage, alter, and expand the consciousness of the audience, forms the basis of this body of work. These multi-sensory experiences open us to feelings and information that are not accessible through language and other media; they create an internal dialogue between the mysterious nature of the exhibition space and our perception of being. Conscious feelings and thoughts are suspended, hypnotized through listening and seeing.

INDEX WORDS: Sound, Sound Art, Light, Altered States, Consciousness, Existence
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AMIN GHASEMI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2019
DEEP REMINDING

by

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DEDICATION
To my loving parents for their endless support and infinite love that they have offered to me throughout all my life.
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From my heart I would like to deeply thank Jill Frank, who has always been a wonderful mentor and lovely friend during my time here at GSU, as well as amazing Craig Dongoski who has encouraged my experimental approach and become my artistic guru. I would also like to thank Constance Thalken, Pamela Longobardi, Nancy Floyd, Joe Peragine, Craig Drennen, Kate Cunningham, Jeremy Bolen, Susan Richmond, Jennifer Siegler, Hope Cohn, Nedda Ahmed Andy Ditzler, Adam Wagner, Adrienne Gonzalez and the rest of the GSU faculty and staff for their knowledge and support. These incredible teachers have been invaluable to my growth as an artist over the past years. Last but not least I would like to thank all my fellow GSU students who have helped me to progress during these years, especially Aaron Artrip for his generous spirit.
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1 INTRODUCTION

The inherent power of sound is its ability to shift the focus of the listener from outer world to inner self. This ability to transport the listener is one of the primary reasons that I use sound as the basis for my work: through sound, I can create a deeper personal experience for the audience. Shifting attention to the inner self is also one of the core principles of Sufism as well as other schools of mysticism. These belief systems contend that humans should seek answers, revelations, happiness, and peace from within, rather than from outside world. This teaching is particularly important in today’s world, which is filled with constant noise and distraction. The neoliberal, capitalist world order in which we live opposes this philosophy, seeking to keep people away from inner-self and inner-peace, defining life, success, dignity, and happiness in terms of property, wealth, acquisitiveness, and fame. These “achievements” come from the outside world and conform to neoliberal, capitalist value system. My work is a pathway for audiences to disconnect from this way of thinking, catalyzed through sound to reconnect, contemplate, and meditate on their inner being.

There is a kind of art which, instead of involving mind and critical thinking at the moment of encounter, bypasses the mind and engages emotions, psyche, and consciousness. After this type of encounter, the mind takes up its primary position again and starts to process and think about the experience. This type of art leaves the audience with a beguiling, mysterious experience which the mind cannot completely understand and harness. This process appeals to me because of how it resembles our lived existence and how it provokes universal questions like the meaning of life. I strive to create similar experiences in my own work, using mysteriousness
as an existential metaphor created through sound and light. These media hold mystical qualities; they are intangible, yet contain the power to connect the audience to the inner-self.

I create and use types of sounds that can potentially help the audience access their inner worlds and expand their consciousness. As source material for these sounds, I use drones, sounds from the natural world, human vocalizations, and any other sounds which I determine to be relevant to my purpose. I manipulate them so that they take on a hypnotic, meditative quality and play them in a space imbued with immersive visuals. Through this process, *Deep Reminding* detaches the audience from the external, fast-paced world and triggers an exploration of consciousness, reminding viewers of their deepest feelings, ideas and insights.

### 2 MY JOURNEY

The mystery of existence has always been a big and constant question for me. Who am I? What am I doing here? What is this universe? Is life just a long dream? What is death? What happens when we die? What does the journey of life mean?

These questions drove me to research the various belief systems and ritual practices that humans have developed and used throughout history to both connect with other realms and to better understand life’s mysteries. Some of these systems include mysticism, shamanism, meditation, art, and psychedelic experiences. Mysticism, in particular, appeals to me as an interesting and powerful approach that actively questions human existence and provides practical ways in which to seek answers. I am fortunate to have been born in Iran, a country and culture deeply rooted in mysticism. Iran is the birthplace of Sufism, which is one of the oldest and most significant schools of mysticism in the world. Sufism grew out of pre-Islamic Persian mysticism and has survived into the modern era. Its impact on my culture cannot be easily quantified: there
are traces of Sufism in every Persian artform, from poetry and music to architecture and handcrafts. The most well-known Persian poets like Rumi and Hafiz, whose works are still admired and studied today, are but two out of the many Iranian mystics who have used the power of language, literature, and poetry to brilliantly convey Sufism’s messages and secrets. In my youth, I read the poetry of Hafiz, Rumi and Khayam; these poets’ words impacted my thought processes and changed the way I viewed the world.

There was a Door to which I found no Key

There was a Veil past which I could not see

Some little talk awhile of ME and THEE

There seem’d - and then no more of THEE and ME.¹

This is one of Khayyam’s most famous works. In this poem he references the mystery of life and opines that nobody can figure out this mystery and knows the secret behind it.

As I learned more about Sufism, I became more curious and started to go to khanqah, a holy space found in most cities in Iran where Sufis gather to perform rituals. During these rituals participants perform hypnotic melodies and rhythms with two major instruments, tanbur (a sacred fretted-string instrument) and daf (a large frame drum with metal ringlets attached). Singing poems, chanting and dancing also take place. This ritual is sama, which means

“listening.” It is fascinating that Sufis named their main ritual for connecting to divinity as *sama* or listening.

*Sama* is the Sufi word for audition or listening. The followers of Jala-ud-din Rumi worked themselves into a mystical trance by chanting and whirling in slow gyrations. The dance is thought by some scholars to have represented the solar system, recalling also the deep-rooted mystical belief in an extraterrestrial music, a Music of the Spheres, which the attuned soul may at times hear.\(^2\)

Also during those years, I was exploring and devouring all kinds of music from 1960s and 1970s rock music to classical music, world music, electronic music, and classical Persian music. Eventually, I discovered Philip Glass and his *Solo Piano* album. Discovering this work was like finding something more than music. I remember listening to the album over and over, from morning to night, for months on end, to the exclusion of everything nothing else! What was in those beautiful, repetitive, endless piano notes in the piece called “Metamorphosis?” The title references the famous Kafka short story, but it is the traditional meaning of the word, denoting transformation from a childlike state into adulthood, that more closely matched my experience of the music. Through Glass’ music I, too, underwent metamorphosis. There is no start and no ending point in this music, nor are there any narration or spoken words. The piano flows endlessly like a river over time, melting time inside the flow; listening to this music, I am like a person hypnotized by the sun glittering on a river’s surface. There is no past or future in this music, there is only the expanded current moment. In Glass’ *Solo Piano*, I had found what I had been seeking.

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After this transformative experience I started a new exploration of music, but this time was not for the aesthetic of music or outstanding melody and harmony. This time I was looking for getting hypnotized through music. From researching Glass, I found Terry Riley, Steve Reich and other minimalist musicians. I fell in love with Indian classical music and the sound of the sitar. The mysterious qualities of Indian music and the sitar had a dramatic impact on me, shifting my focus from music to the magic of the sound itself. I became a fan of Electronic Dance Music (EDM), and especially the sub-genres of Psybient and Psytrance. Both of these use a variety of electronic sounds as well as cross-cultural sources of sound, such as Indian, Middle Eastern and Shamanic instruments, melodies and chants, and even sounds from nature. What makes these genres special and different from other genres is the way they use sound and its power to alter the state of consciousness. I delved into the history of electronic music and found Krautrock in Germany and bands like Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream and Klaus Schulz. I traced the essence and function of EDM, to create a trancelike state for listeners, back to its roots, which are in a place very familiar to me: the khanqah. It is amazing that the centuries-old music of the Sufi, with its fast tempo, repetitive and hypnotic character, and its ability to induce spiritual ecstasy has found new life, remixed and adapted into in the contemporary Western EDM scene.

After all these explorations and auditory growth, I learned that I feel the strongest connection to the sound by itself. This enthusiasm for sound reoriented me from being a visual person who studied photography to a person who wanted to create auditory experiences through sound. As R. Murray Schafer discusses in his book *The Soundscape*, since the Renaissance, with the invention of the printing press and perspective painting, visual language and the eye have been the dominant way for humans to collect information and knowledge. But Schafer believes
that before the Renaissance, the ear and hearing were of equal, if not greater, importance: “One of the most evident testaments of this change is the way in which we have come to imagine God. It was not until the Renaissance that God became portraiture. Previously he had been conceived as sound or vibration.”³ Schafer uses an example from the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism: “in the Zoroastrian religion, the priest Srosh (representing the genius of hearing) stands between man and the pantheon of the gods, listening for the divine messages, which he transmits to humanity.”⁴

In today’s world, humanity is possibly more visually-oriented than ever before due to the ubiquity of smartphones and their cameras, social media, and virtual/augmented reality devices. This change is so significant that I wonder whether other types of sensory experiences are in danger of becoming extinct, getting weaker and weaker all the time. The fear of sensory extinction pushes me to make sound-based art, which offers a unique aesthetic experience different from the typical world of visually-based art and culture. My existential curiosity is an equally important influence in my work, as is becoming adept at using the mysterious power of sound to bring present moment awareness, to shift the listener’s focus to inner-self and to alter the state of consciousness.

3 SOUND AND THE NOTION OF SACRED

“Every moment the voice of love is arriving from left and right”⁵

“The mystical experience is a private experience. But the musician-mystic can clothe that experience in sound, and it becomes available to humanity”⁶

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⁴ Ibid.
The idea that the universe is made of sound and light is widely held across many mystic belief systems. This concept has fascinated me for a long time. According to this idea, sacred sound is the origin for all sounds that are reflected to us in many different forms. This line of thought goes on to suggest that the universe is made of spiritual energy, which is present everywhere and could be heard as sound and seen as light. This concept is called the Audible Stream of Life. The human soul has the ability to listen to it and unite with it.

In his book *The Mysticism of Music and Sound*, Hazrat Inayat Khan describes Abstract Sound:

Abstract Sound is called Saut-i Sarmad by the Sufis; all space is filled with it. The vibrations of this sound are too fine to be either audible or visible to the material ears or eyes, since it is even difficult for the eyes to see the form and color of the ethereal vibrations on the external plane.7

Khan goes on to detail the lineage of *Saut-i Sarmad*: “Muhammad heard [it] in the cave of Ghar-i Hira when he became lost in his divine ideal.”8 The sound was then incorporated into The Quran as the words “Be! and all became.” Other religions also adopted the concept of divine sound; according to Khan,

Moses heard this very sound on Mount Sinai, when in communion with God; and the same word was audible to Christ when absorbed in his Heavenly Father in the wilderness. Shiva heard the same Anahad Nada during his Samadhi in the cave of the Himalayas. The flute of Krishna is symbolic of the same sound. This sound is

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8 Ibid.
the source of all revelation to the Masters, to whom it is revealed from within; it is because of this that they know and teach one and the same truth.⁹

Divine sound is also mentioned in many different ancient texts, religions and mystic belief systems. Native Americans call it “Song of the creator.” Hindus named it “Anahad Shabd” and “Akash Bani,” which can be translated to “Unlimited tone” and “Voice of heavens.” Sufis name it “Saut-i Sarmad,” or “The superior sound which fills the cosmos.” The Bible mentions it as “The Word.” It is called “Nada Brahma” in Sanskrit, or “The sound of All-Creator.” And in Vedas it is “Anahata Nadam,” meaning “Unlimited Voice.”¹⁰

As Khan explains, this audible vibration which fills the cosmos is too delicate to be heard by our physical ears. It can be experienced through a deep state of meditation, when a person expands inner silence and achieves a higher level of sensitivity in their consciousness. What is the deep state of meditation and how is it different from our ordinary state?

The mind in its conditioned state, that is to say, when limited to words and ego games, is continuously in thought formation activity. The nervous system in a state of quiescence, alert, awake but not active is comparable to what Buddhists call the highest state of dhyana (deep meditation) when still united to human body.¹¹

This sound can also be heard in other types of altered states, such as under the influence of psychedelic substances, in religious or aesthetic ecstasies, and in fainting or near-death experiences.

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But what does this sacred sound look like and how does it affect the listener? Khan explains, “It sounds like thunder, the roaring of the sea, the jingling of bells, running water, the buzzing of bees, the twittering of sparrows, the Vina, the whistle, the sound of Shanka—until it finally becomes Hu, the most sacred of all sounds.”12 He points out that sounds from nature and certain instruments bear the closest resemblance to the sacred tone and are therefore greater reminders of it. Some other schools of mysticism like Eckankar also consider sounds from nature to be similar to the sacred tone, therefore seekers can access the divine in their spiritual practices.

Referring to the effects of this sound on the listener, Khan describes it as intoxicating, ecstatic, uplifting, relieving and liberating. “The word intoxication is here used to signify upliftment, the freedom of the soul from its earthly bondage. Those who are able to hear the Saut-i Sarmad and meditate on it are relieved from all worries, anxieties, sorrows, fears and diseases; and the soul is freed from captivity in the senses and in the physical body.”13 There are various approaches and practices for experiencing this sound and feeling its vibration.

Some train themselves to hear the Saut-i Sarmad in the solitude on the seashore, on the river bank, and in the hills and dales; others attain it while sitting in the caves of the mountains, or when wandering constantly through forests and deserts, keeping themselves in the wilderness apart from the haunts of men. Yogis and ascetics blow Sing (a horn) or Shanka (a shell), which awakens in them this inner tone. Dervishes play Nai or Algosa (a double flute) for the same purpose. The bells and gongs in the churches and temples are meant to suggest to the thinker the same sacred sound, and thus lead him towards the inner life.14

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13 Ibid., 171.
14 Ibid.
According to this text, listening to natural sounds and instruments which mostly produce drone sound and meditating on them can trigger and awaken that sacred tone in human. In my work, I use sounds from nature and drone sounds to symbolize and refer to this spiritual quality of sound.

The famous American avant-garde musician and sound artist La Monte Young is known as the first minimalist composer, mentioned this aspect of sound in an interview:

When we speak of Nada-Sound, there are two types of sound: Anahata Nada and Ahata Nada. Ahata Nada is sound as we know it in a medium: a "struck sound". They call it a struck sound, but it really means more like a bowed sound; it means the sound of my voice talking, it means the sound of my voice singing. Anahata Nada is theoretically the sound of the ethers vibrating. It is this vibration that can be a model for the sound that we actually hear and experience. Anahata Nada is the sound of universal structure. ¹⁵

In another part of this interview he mentioned the impact of his works on 60’s and 70’s art movements and the role of his teacher Pandit Pran Nath (master Indian musician) in introducing the spiritual aspect of sound and music to him:

He was bringing to me something that was necessary for me to have and that I had not found in all of my studies. Even though I was the first to introduce long sustained tones into Western Classical music, he showed me that I still had something additional to learn. What he brought to us was an entire lifestyle and approach to music and to spirituality, and the understanding of vibration as a

spiritual practice, and music as a spiritual practice. It leads to a state of high god-consciousness, in tune-ness with universal structure: the cosmic sound.\textsuperscript{16}

4 ELEMENTS OF MY WORK AND INSPIRATIONS

Nature has always been the greatest inspiration in my life and art-making. In my sound pieces I use natural sounds, as mentioned in relation to the Audible Stream of Life, above, but I also derive inspiration from nature on a compositional level: the natural world shows itself through non-musical harmony, random repetitions, and unexpected happenings. Non-musical harmony is unification of natural sounds to form a pleasing and consistent whole, independent of human-made musical rules. In my work, I follow this approach, creating a consistent whole without following standard musical traditions and rules. Random repetition is another natural sound “technique” I use, like the sounds made by animals, which repeat freely and randomly, not based on pre-determined times and patterns. Unexpected happenings are related to random repetitions but because the cycle of repetition is very long, we hear these sounds in nature like unexpected happenings. Sonic reverberation is another repetitive and hypnotic element I use in my work which is also rooted in nature. Sonic reverberation is found in nature, from the fractal energy which creates fractal forms in plants, to the patterns on a snake’s skin or a butterfly’s wing. Repetitive and reverberating sounds are also evident in bird noises, cricket sounds, and human laughter.

The beauty of the natural world is another powerful entry point into questioning the mysteries of existence. Why we are instinctively fascinated and absorbed by beauty? And why there is a kind of infinity in the nature of beauty? Experiencing something extremely beautiful

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
can create ecstasy and an altered state in humans. I project my digital paintings in large scale on the walls of the gallery, depicting a mysterious landscape awash in ethereal beauty. These scenes, with their otherworldly character, harmonize with the elements of nature used in the sonic part of the installation. I use these large, still images and immersive sound to invite the audience into deep contemplation, similar to how encountering an impressive natural landscape deepens our understanding of our place in the world. This experience is often referred to as the sublime.

I also use light in my work as a conceptual and visual response to sound. Light also activates the space and adds to the hypnotic quality of the environment. In mystical thought systems, light is another element of the source of creation and divine spirit, working in tandem with sacred sound. Some belief systems think light is just another form of Supreme Sound. The light in my installation is elusive and playful, reminding us of sun glitters, stars, fireflies, or the Aurora Borealis. Part of the light element in the space is reflected from a glass of tea that I made from a plant which is called *Heimia salicifoli*, or “Sun Opener.” This plant held sacred by the Aztecs, and can be used to induce auditory hallucinations in humans. It causes hearing to be distorted so that sounds seem to be coming from a far distance.

5 CONCLUSION

*Deep Reminding* is a space in which people can both forget and be reminded. This installation, with its immersive and meditative qualities, detaches the audience from everyday realities and noises of the mind, inviting them into a deeper state of consciousness. When people experience the space, sound and light alter perception of time and presence. This alteration eases thought processes and leads to the surpassing of thoughts and the egocentric mind, connecting the
audience to the vast inner ocean of knowledge and insight. The mysticism embedded in the space is also a reminder of the mysteriousness of existence and our presence in this universe.
REFERENCES


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