

# Slides-zen-Dives: Electronic Improvisation with Pouya Ehsaei

The idea of this piece took shape when Kate Carr asked me on Facebook if I was interested in performing as part of an electronic music event that she was curating at IKLECTIK Art Lab in London.<sup>1</sup> I have known Kate in person since 2016. I first found out about her involvement with EEMSI following the release of *Birds of a Feather*, an album by the Sanandaj-based field recordist and sound artist Porya Hatami and the Toronto-based producer and sound artist Michael Trommer. It was released through Kate's own record label, Flaming Pines, in 2012.<sup>2</sup>

*Birds of a Feather* was the first Iranian experimental electronic work I knew that was issued through a non-Iranian record label—perhaps with the only exception of Ata Ebtekar's earlier productions, for instance his 2002 Warp Records release *Electric Deaf* EP. Since the start of his professional career, Hatami has only released through non-Iranian labels. Online data about him indicates that he is still based in Sanandaj, a city of mainly Kurdish population in the west of Iran near the border with Iraq. Finding his work was a surprise. I did not know him. None of my friends and contacts knew him directly either. He has been an enigmatic figure; a producer who has put out mature works of drone, ambient, and soundscape, often in collaboration with producers known internationally within ambient music circles such as the Northern Irish Darren McClure<sup>3</sup>. I contacted him three times during this research; he never replied.

Kate later published *Absence*, a compilation of mostly ambient works that became a 'soundmark' of Iranian experimental electronic music scene. Regarding how she first came into contact with the scene, she told me:

It was with Porya Hatami whom I reached out to via Soundcloud in 2012. He put out this album called *Birds of a Feather* via Flaming Pines later that year. Then I became more aware of the scene through Siavash Amini's work around 2014—I had previously seen a review of his work on Facebook. But then my first actual contact was through Arash Akbari in 2014 who had sent me a demo of his album *Vanishing Point*. As I was seeing more and more music coming out of the ambient scene, I just raised with Arash if he could curate a compilation, which he did. [This compilation was released under the name *Absence* on February 2016 through Flaming Pines.] My later contacts were with Sara [Sara Bigdeli Shamloo aka SarrSew] and Nima [Nima Aghiani]. *Interviewed on 1 Sep. 2017*

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<sup>1</sup> See the event's page on Facebook via the following link (last accessed 17 Apr. 2019): [facebook.com/events/169811266993682/](https://facebook.com/events/169811266993682/)

<sup>2</sup> Access the album via the following link: [flamingpines.bandcamp.com/album/birds-of-a-feather](https://flamingpines.bandcamp.com/album/birds-of-a-feather)

<sup>3</sup> [poryahatami.com/music/in-between-spaces/](https://poryahatami.com/music/in-between-spaces/)

The event at IKLECTIC was advertised on Facebook in relation to the developments of experimental electronic music in Iran.<sup>4</sup> 9T Antiope<sup>5</sup> (Sara Bigdeli Shamloo and Nima Aghiani) and I were invited to play. Kate had asked me if I could invite another Iranian electronic producer as well. I raised it with Pouya Ehsaei and he agreed to join. Pouya is a London-based electronic music producer, a member of the band Ariwo<sup>6</sup>, and the cofounder of Parasang<sup>7</sup> concert series in London. 9T Antiope's Visa applications were rejected by the UK embassy in Paris—Iranian performers all have stories to tell about a myriad of cancelled shows. While in Iran this happens mainly due to the establishment's problematic relationship with musical presentation, outside the country issues related to visa are the main cause. Previously, Ash Koosha—London-based producer who has released work through Ninja Tunes<sup>8</sup> and REALMS Records<sup>9</sup> among others—was refused entry to the US to perform due to the 'travel bans' put in place by the Trump administration, which have since affected Iranians and citizens of five other Muslim-majority countries. Thanks to his determined follow-up, Ash's visa was, however, later approved.

The performance night at IKLECTIK began with a short talk by myself, which was meant as an introduction to EEMSI for the audience. This was followed by our set. We improvised together with Eurorack modules and hacked electronics. The version submitted as part of this PhD was recorded live via the built-in X/Y stereo pair of a Zoom H4n digital recorder. We had used the Zoom as a back-up in case the line recording of the performance that was promised to us by the venue had issues, which it did.

The set developed, spontaneously and organically, as a series of drone parts and a percussive passage. The sonic output can be described in terms of constantly moving clusters of electronically-generated glissandi of different kinds that interweave and complement each other while heading towards 'nowhere specific'. To add more layers of 'liveness', two contact microphones were used on my modular system's case during the show, which allowed me to amplify, further process, and play with the often undesired and suppressed 'noises' resulting from physical contact between various parts of the system and my hands. These can be heard at the beginning of the recording as I start patching, for instance between 00:34 and 02:58, and towards

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<sup>4</sup> [facebook.com/events/i-k-l-e-c-t-i-k/hadi-bastani-pouya-ehsaei/169811266993682/](https://facebook.com/events/i-k-l-e-c-t-i-k/hadi-bastani-pouya-ehsaei/169811266993682/)

<sup>5</sup> [9tantiop.bandcamp.com/](https://9tantiop.bandcamp.com/)

<sup>6</sup> [ariwomusic.com/](https://ariwomusic.com/)

<sup>7</sup> Parasang is a weekly series at Redon in Bethnal Green, London, founded by Pouya Ehsaei and Harry Follett. See their page on Facebook via the following link (last accessed 17 Apr. 2019): [facebook.com/Parasanglive/](https://facebook.com/Parasanglive/)

<sup>8</sup> [ninjatune.net/artist/ash-koosha](https://ninjatune.net/artist/ash-koosha)

<sup>9</sup> [ashkoosha.bandcamp.com/album/aktual-2](https://ashkoosha.bandcamp.com/album/aktual-2)

the end as I begin un-patching to restore the system to its initial state, for instance between 13:27 and 15:10. I wanted to start the set with no pre-patching, to return to a similar state in the end and, as such, to begin and end with the ‘noise’ of the ‘background’ and the patching process, while integrating, instead of trying to eliminate or suppress, the usually-unwanted sounds of the environment and of the performance ecosystem.

On the cover of his 1978 record *Ambient1: Music For Airports*, Brian Eno characterised ‘ambience’ as ‘an atmosphere a tint [...] designed to induce calm and space to think.’ The early manifestations of EEMSI in galleries, in the form of ambient/shoegaze music had also made *a background* audible: the one which had been sounding in bedrooms and home studios through sonic explorations, late-nights net-surfing, and mid-day dreaming of individuals unsure and perhaps not so concerned about whether their experiment could ever find a way to the ‘surface’ and become integrated in the ‘foreground’ of social conduct. It did. As it happened, it became much louder, more confident, professional, and more pragmatic. It connected with other practitioners and enthusiasts, offering them a space to think new possibilities. Articulating the sound of the ‘background’, EEMSI resounded a previously personal, private, and reserved space. In so doing, and in introducing a new aesthetics, it reconfigured the social through (re)activating social spaces/places that were previously used for other purposes, such as music and theatre venues, street corners, cafés, and galleries. As such, EEMSI enabled new relations and forms of connectivity between people, but also between them and technologies, ideas, concepts, buildings, politics, urban environments, socialites, symbols, histories and stories.

*Slides-zen-Dives* performatively responds not so much to any individual practice within EEMSI, but to an important aspect of the scene as ‘a whole’ through literally making use of the sound of the background as raw material for ‘artistic’ manipulation, reintegrating it (or including it back) into an immediate experience of music ‘in the foreground’. It does so not to make any political statement of activist nature with the purpose of making the excluded heard, but with an aim to playfully aestheticizing it, leaving the political as an inevitably emergent by-product of radical collaborative material manipulation and its distributed (sonic/musical) affect. That is precisely what the experimental electronic music scene has done in Iran according to my interlocutors’ accounts, which draw attention to the playful and uniquely individualistic aspect of musicking in their views, as opposed to its immediate social-political implications, contexts, or backgrounds. As such, these do not seek to prescribe a particular mode of artistic and/or discursive exchange as a universal ideal for creating social impact. What they do offer, however, is a narrative in relation to particular understandings of a performed body of practice situated

within a music/art niche, which, in negotiation with various forces enacted within the increasingly cosmopolitan ‘society’, has acquired a capacity to engage a certain number of groups and individuals. Doing so, the experimental electronic music scene ‘in Iran’ inevitably articulates, like all social phenomena, a complex, multifarious, and heterogenous, lived experience of the place; an experience that forms a compound, not a hybrid, in which the political is an inseparable constituent and an expression. Although considering the social-economic-political contexts of Iran it may be tempting to explain such an experience in terms of an immediate understanding of its political substance, its significance cannot be and should not be reduced as such through ready-made analytical devices, as I have hoped to show throughout this text based on my interlocutors’ descriptions and my own experiences.

Slides-zen-Dives starts with a series of acoustic samples: bowed cymbals, struck bowls, and strummed plucked strings.<sup>10</sup> These were triggered via a programmable clocked modulation source, each according to a set timing. The most dominant of these sounds are the bowed ones, the first of which appears at 00:06. It seems that the sonic presence of this primary material, reinforced by more bowed samples that followed at 00:16, 01:10, and 01:19, had ultimately determined or rather dictated the aesthetic terms of the entire set, guiding our interactions towards the development of an array of ascending/descending glissando-type sounds. On my side of the table, the bowed samples got stretched, granularized, pitch-shifted, layered, and used in different ways in conjunction with other material and in relation to Pouya’s playing. It is evident from the recording that Pouya had reacted similarly to the form and texture of this material and developed the rest of his sounds in response to it, and to my playing. The result of this exchange was a constantly moving cluster of interweaving electronic drones juxtaposed with the acoustic samples. In order to add more layers of performative audio-reactivity and further complexify and entangle our interactions, we had also shared audio and control signals during the set: AC and 1 volt/octave pitch signals as well as digital gates, triggers, and clocks.

At 05:21 Pouya introduces a sine oscillator with an ADSR envelope on its 1v/oct (pitch) input. This sound recurs in ten to eleven seconds intervals until 07:20, before morphing into a continuous tone with an ascending pitch, which compliments my continuously-descending wavetable drone. It lingers for about a minute until it starts to descend—revealing that he had applied a long A/R envelope on its pitch input. Pouya’s sinusoid persists until about 10:05. At around 09:14, however, a series of filtered noises in the form of short pops guide the performance towards a new section. The almost-two-minute ensuing passage builds up an

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<sup>10</sup> These samples are extracted from an archive of recordings produced by Dr Paul Stapleton and used with his permission.

atmosphere that leads to the development of a fully percussive part, which becomes established at 11:08. In this part I play with a sample that I had recorded from a YouTube video of Shanbezadeh Ensemble performance of traditional south Iranian (aka *bandari*) music at Le Lieu Unique, Nantes, in December 2016.<sup>11</sup> At 12:42 drones and granularized *bandari* beats recede in a rainy soundscape. Rain was being sampled live during the performance by myself from the audio stream sent to my system via two microphones set up outside the venue. The set finishes with the slowly fading sound of rain. At the show, as the acousmatic rain faded out from the venue's 'inside' space and disappeared in the PA system, the 'organic' one just 'outside' the venue's closed doors faded in omnidirectionally and immersed the place. As such, one might say, this process sustained the 'event' for the curious ears while blurring the borders between the 'performed' and the 'environmental' sound; between the venue's and the city's soundscape; between the 'inside' and 'outside'.

*Slides-zen-Dives* was collaboratively shaped through a sympathetic exchange with performing bodies (human and non-human); a process through which biologically and socio-culturally situated imaginaries, decisions, actions, feelings, and expectations intermingled with digital agency, technological affordances/limitations, environmental affects, and their aesthetic co-developments. Such an exchange involved, since our first jamming prior to the gig, an empathic connection, which has been described in this text partly in terms of a cosmopolitan sonic/musical affinity: an intuitively shared understanding of desirable sonic/musical (not-)doings and soundscapes. This 'subliminal' connection, which is shaped in relation to a specific network of 'mattering' (Barad 2007), articulates a desire towards the formation of new relations and modes of sociality that transcends the everyday 'reality'—as the latter is experienced and perceived by individuals. After all, as Christopher Small has argued: 'Musicking is about relationships, not so much about those which actually exist in our lives as about those that we desire to exist and long to experience.' (1998, 183)

After the show, attendees stayed for further conversations. It was a good opportunity for engaging more intimately with their questions and to take some notes. Conversations quite rapidly went on the direction of the relationship between the performed sounds and 'Iranian characteristics'. Although everyone seemed happy with and energised by the show, for the majority it seemed surprising, if not confusing, that there were no 'Iranian' references in the music. The commentators were, however, surprised in *different* ways. Among themselves a

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<sup>11</sup> The video is available via the following link (last accessed 17 Jul. 2019): [youtube.com/watch?v=tNSUJwd2ezE](https://youtube.com/watch?v=tNSUJwd2ezE)

discussion started. One group was excited about the lack of ‘stereotypical references’ and the fact that focus of the night was on music and not anything else, while the other group was somehow disoriented as a result of what was deemed an absence of ‘Iranian features’.

Iran has been a hot topic in the ‘Western’ media since after the 1979 revolution for various reasons, mainly due to its new political ‘image’ that projected, for many ‘Western’ powers, a certain uncomfortable anti-imperialist activism rooted in an Islamic-revolutionary ideology. The post-revolutionary regime’s regional role, particularly in confrontation with Israel, and its human rights profile, justified their primarily prejudiced unease for them—maybe it was a self-fulfilling prophecy maybe not. Iran has been introduced to the ‘Western’ audiences, however, also as an ‘exotic’ travel destination for its ancient historic sites, Islamic architecture, diverse ecology, food cultures, and bizarre toilets, but also as the exporter of Persian rugs, saffron, pistachio, caviar, petroleum, and poetry. Among music enthusiasts Iran is mostly known for its classical and folk music. Oscillating between a ‘difficult state’ and an ‘exotic destination’ of historic and cultural significance, also of ‘friendly’, ‘sophisticated’, and ‘emotional’ people, the images of this country—as (re-)fabricated through media coverage, political discourse, and tourism—seem to have effectively created particular kinds of expectations from anything Iranian in the ‘West’. (Does anybody expect from a Spanish electronic duo to deliver sound with a ‘Spanish character’; for instance referencing flamenco traditions?!). I would ultimately consider the audience’s expectation regarding ‘Iranian characteristics’ even in a live improvised electronic music context, as well as their excitement about the ‘lack of stereotypes’, parts and parcel of such ‘images’ invented since the colonial period (although Iran has never been colonised as such).<sup>12</sup> From a different perspective, similar conversations have, however, been a part of the contemporary musical discourse inside the country as well. Discursive exchanges in this context often relate to the issues of authenticity and the capacity of Iranian classical or traditional music in ‘adapting’ to the demands of ‘modern’ era and contemporary music forms.<sup>13</sup> Similar ideas have been discussed within ‘pop’ music circles as well, for instance in relation to ‘fusing’ elements of Iranian classical music with elements of jazz<sup>14</sup>, blues<sup>15</sup>, rock, metal, and hip-hop.

The practice and words of the majority my interlocutors, however, demonstrate a resistance against such generic ‘hybridisations’ (or ‘fusions’). EEMSI’s frustration with politics

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Said has famously reflected on the issue in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion regarding these themes see Laudan Nooshin’s *Iranian Classical Music: The Discourses and Practice of Creativity* (2015).

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Mahan Mirarab’s work: [mahanmirarab.com/wp/](http://mahanmirarab.com/wp/)

<sup>15</sup> See for instance Mohsen Namjoo’s work: [mohsennamjoo.com](http://mohsennamjoo.com)

can also be partly viewed in relation to the commentary made in the media about the producers' work. Such an irritation has been expressed in different ways throughout the interviews and in casual conversations.<sup>16</sup> Although such a frustration seems to be the result of a certain lack of security and confidence formed through a life lived under the conditions created by the operations of the amorphous regulatorium in Iran, the country's isolation from its liberal, technologically advanced and affluent 'other' (the 'modern West'), and a humiliating mistrust regarding Iran in the 'West', it is mainly regarded by my interlocutors as a by-product of media 'misrepresentation'. Whatever the cause, its embodied residues manifest in the form of sonic-visual aesthetics; for instance in a disregard for any sound, image, or interpretation that draws from stereotypes of 'Iranian characteristics'. Such aesthetics, however, concurrently indicate a desire towards (re-)inventing futures. To understand this, one can characterise it in terms of Roland Barthes' description of the position of the critique vis-à-vis culture (or the 'mythologist' vis-à-vis myth). In *Mythologies* (1976, 158) he writes: 'The future becomes an essence, the essential destruction of the past.' From the majority of my interlocutors' point of view, this is a past in which Iranian culture seems to be stuck, perhaps mainly due to the dogmatic and revivalist performances of the political systems.

Shahin Entezami's (aka Togh) comment (below), however, sheds light on a different dimension of the media's 'exoticisation' of EEMSI. Sensing a potential danger, he believes that the common presumptions about Iranian politics, culture, and society, have led some commentators to think of the experimental electronic music practice in Iran as an exceptional phenomenon. Shahin thinks this approach is worrying because it encourages the producers in Iran to think of their work as inherently special; a condition that may work towards the loss of a sense of self-critique that has been essential for the development of an experimental music scene in the first place.

We know that a part of the attention given to us is because of everything else that has put spotlight on Iran. We are only making electronic music, which is of high quality for sure, but there is nothing special about the fact that a bunch of Iranian guys are making this or that kind of music. Such an attention to the electronic and ambient scene in Iran can make producers believe that they are doing something so worthy of attention. It has already made some far less self-critical. If this becomes widespread, which has fortunately not been the case, it can produce a self-destructive movement.  
*Shahin Entezami aka Togh (interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself)*

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<sup>16</sup> For instance see Sara Bigdeli Shamloo's (aka SarrSew) and Siavash Amini's discussion at CTM festival Berlin (2017), via the following link (last accessed 8 Feb. 2019):

[soundcloud.com/ctm-festival/ctm-2017-contemporary-sound-in-iran](https://soundcloud.com/ctm-festival/ctm-2017-contemporary-sound-in-iran)

Navigate, for instance, to 19:50 and listen until 21:46 for Sara and Siavash's comment regarding these issues.



Figure 6-13. Pouya Ehsaei (right) and me playing at IKLECTIK Art Lab, London, 14 Mar. 2018.  
Photo by Kate Carr.