

Tarek Atoui
the Shore /
a place
I'd like
to be

Sound lies at the heart of Tarek Atoui's artistic practice. As an electro-acoustic composer and artist, Atoui is known for creating sonic-sculptural landscapes inspired by sound as well as images, matter, space, time, human actions and organic processes. Within these inventive listening environments, which appeal to more than just the ear, he creates rich experiences and interactions that carry sensory as well as socio-political meanings.

The meticulously designed musical instruments, listening devices, sculptures and objects in Tarek Atoui's works are the result of detailed conceptual and technical processes. Drawing on historical, anthropological, musicological and scientific research and embodied experiments, they bear the stamp of his collaborations with experts and craftsmen, amongst many other people. Composed into fascinating, agile installations that interact with the context in which they are exhibited, they encourage activity in a myriad ways. Different things can happen in these non-hierarchical learning environments: a stand-alone musical composition might run or the instruments can be activated, either by professional musicians or during a guided visit. The installations might be the object of a participatory workshop. Visitors to the exhibition are gently prompted to listen to the space, to each other and to themselves.

Tarek Atoui's exhibitions have no fixed trajectories and do not depend on classical behavioural codes. The exploration of the space, observation of the exhibited artworks, and engagement with a succession of varied listening situations are all part of a network of sonic, sensory and human experiences, within which sound and listening are indivisibly connected. Musicians and visitors alike are encouraged to immerse themselves in this landscape and to surrender to the rhythms of the stimuli they encounter and the synergies that gradually form, all of which will flow through hands, eyes and ears.

By combining musical instruments, electronic devices and computers, as well as everyday objects, but also by experimenting with expanded forms of listening and concentration, Tarek Atoui confirms his engagement with political and social questions. From the very outset of his career, his practice has developed as a collective enterprise that breaks the traditional power relations between sense and reason, sensitivity and language, technology and craft. As an alternative, he simultaneously invokes perception, intuition, action, interpretation, memory and imagination as the catalysts for personal expression and identity formation.

Tarek Atoui's proposal for S.M.A.K. – the artist's first solo exhibition in a Belgian museum – brings together existing works and new productions in a carefully composed installation prompted by his unique understanding of deep listening, his attention to sensory perception and his socio-political motivation. The existing works are selected from larger projects like *WITHIN* (2013, on-going), which proposes new ways of generating music, and *The Whisperers* (2021-2022), an exploration of how existing sounds change in relation to an array of materials, such as marble, glass, metal and water. Two new works, *66 Soft Cells* and *Windhouse #1*, further expand the experiential and perceptual richness of the overall landscape. Like the word 'shore' in the title of the exhibition, which divides sea and land, Atoui creates the semblance of a dichotomy within the exhibition spaces at S.M.A.K. He alludes to two divergent realms, one a living room and the other an ex-

perimental laboratory, that continuously meet and merge on the site. Both relate to human activity, although they initially operate from opposite positions of rest and action, of familiarity and renewal, slowing down and accelerating, of personal encounters and automated networks. In this fluctuating environment, the artist inserts new objects that demand exploration but also includes a range of seats, plants, a library, and familiar objects like books and technical gadgets that the visitors can handle. Meanwhile, an extensive apparatus of computers and cables drives the audio installation, water bubbles up in a stone sculpture, and a visitor briefly disrupts the network by putting a record on a turntable. Here, how people play or appreciate sound is no longer dependent on a single form of knowledge, but on curiosity and a willingness to look at the world differently.

Tarek Atoui (b. 1980, Beirut, Lebanon) lives and works in Paris. Atoui has performed and exhibited widely over the past decade and his work has been included in several seminal exhibitions, including dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, Germany (2012) and the 58th Venice Biennale, Italy (2019). Solo exhibitions include: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia (2023); Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg (2022); the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, Portugal (2022 and 2018); The Contemporary Austin, Texas, USA (2022); The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY, USA (2022); Bourse du Commerce - Pinault Collection, Paris, France (2021); Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany (2020); Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE (2020); NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (2018); Bergen Assembly, Bergen, Norway (2016); Tate Modern, London, UK (2016); Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA, USA (2015) and the Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, France (2014 and 2015), amongst other institutions.

Group exhibitions include the 17th Istanbul Biennial, Turkey (2022); the 13th Gwangju Biennial, South Korea (2021); *Soil and Stones, Souls and Songs*, Para Site, Hong Kong (2017); *Art or Sound*, Fondazione Prada, Ca' Corner della Regina, Venice, Italy (2014); Performa 11, New York, NY, USA (2011) and Mediacity Biennale, Seoul, South Korea (2010).

His works are held in many public institutions, including CNAP, Paris, France; Nouveau Musée National de Monaco; Saradar Collection, Beirut, Lebanon and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, USA.

Atoui has been commissioned to perform at numerous institutions internationally including the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA (2019); Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany (2019); Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia (2018); New Museum, New York, NY, USA (2010) and Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2010).

The artist was awarded the Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize in 2022.

WITHIN

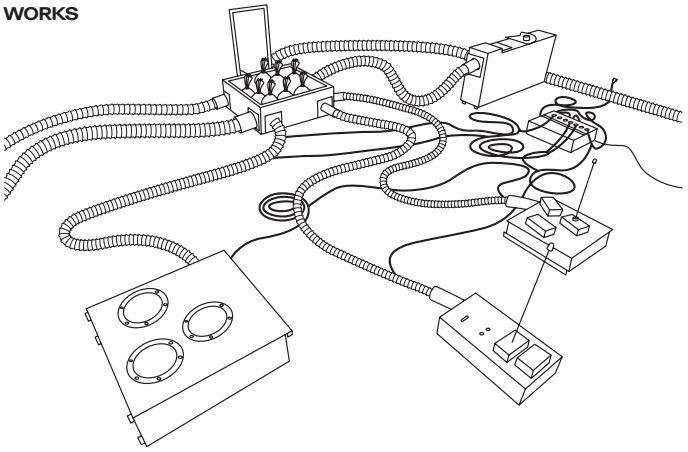
WITHIN (2013, on-going) is an anchor point in Tarek Atoui's artistic practice. It has become fundamental to his understanding of sound and listening. The project explores how deafness can change our perception of the sound spectrum, as well as spaces for sound propagation and the potential of instruments. *WITHIN* seeks to extend notions of listening beyond the purely auditory to achieve sound factors with tactile, physical or visual origins, or which depart from gestures. The project calls many things into question: the act of listening itself; how instruments are designed and played; the conventional definitions of improvisation; the writing of musical scores; and audience relationships. Since the inception of *WITHIN*, Tarek Atoui has designed a series of twelve musical instruments aimed at both deaf and hearing people. These instruments have already been played by hundreds of professionals and amateurs. Their design and 'playability' are the result of workshops and collaborations between artists, instrument makers, students, deaf and hearing volunteers, as well as speakers, designers, sound engineers and educators. All of whom have contributed to the creation of this collection.

THE WHISPERERS

The Whisperers (2021-2022) is a series of listening devices made from different materials that conduct and amplify sound in a multi-sensorial way. These assemblages of plastic, wood, brass, water, bronze, glass and stone allow for experimentation with the acoustic properties of each material and how they transmit and reflect sound. *The Whisperers* are inspired by four educational workshop sessions with pupils from a kindergarten class at the École alsacienne in Paris between November 2020 and June 2021. The various experiments that took place during the sessions were synthesised into *Whispering Playground*. Various auditory sources and inputs (sounds relating to industry, water and percussion instruments, or those from vinyl records...) converge in an intricate circuit of water, sound and vibration. Designed for groups of 8 to 12 people, from 4 years old, the aim is to introduce participants to the concepts of vibration, underwater sound and rotation in an exploratory and playful way. A series of works specifically related to these experiences have been developed, including *Drum Club*, *Jukebox*, *Platinum Record Player*, *Totem #1*, *Underwater Birds #2* and *Whispered Pulse*.

A Dutch-language edition of the *Whispering Manual* – a guide for teachers and educators – will be published to accompany the exhibition.

WORKS



Organ Within

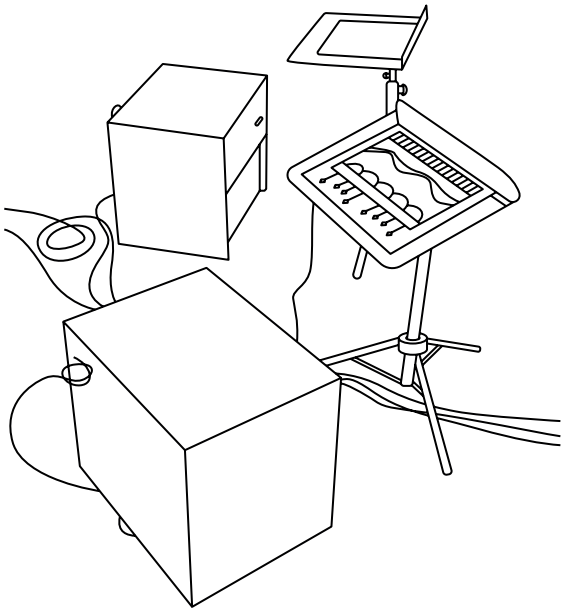
2022

Five wooden cube flutes, two brass and copper organ flutes, Meidinger 250W organ blower, transparent polyurethane tubes, MIDI interface, computer, computer screen, accessories, stretchers and bags, metal arm pulley

Initial concept by Léo Maurel and Vincent Martial (2019)

New version by Tarek Atoui, Alan Affichard, Loïc Martin and Vincent Martial
Courtesy of the artist

The *Organ Within* is a hybrid sculptural installation that unites research on historical church organs, deaf people's listening experiences and a constellation of modular synthesizers. It comprises a network of tubes that connect a computer to a ventilator and various organ modules that interact to create mutually adaptive sounds. An apt metaphor for *Organ Within* is that of a living body with a brain, lungs, organs and a heart, each assuming its own role but always in relation to each other and to the whole.

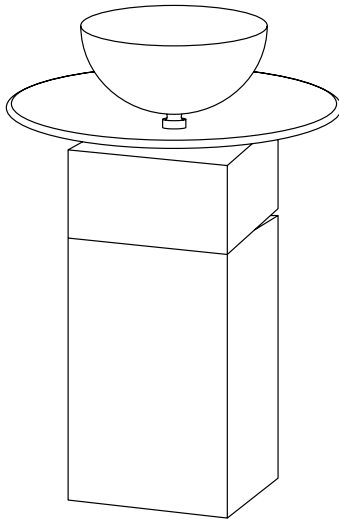


Sub-Ink #1

2016

Wooden seat, drawings and graphic scores, subwoofer, synthesiser
Created for *WITHIN* by Julia Al Sarraf, Troy, USA and Boris Shershenkov,
St Petersburg, Russia
Courtesy of the artist

Sub-Ink #1 makes sound immediately tangible. Performers sit atop a subwoofer, a special low-frequency speaker. They are in direct physical contact with the sounds that are generated. An existing ink drawing, attached to a music stand, serves as both a score for reading the composition and a keyboard for sending signals to a synthesizer. As an instrument, *Sub-Ink #1* not only transcends the auditory sphere but also challenges the meaning of concepts such as score, playability and improvisation.



Totem #1

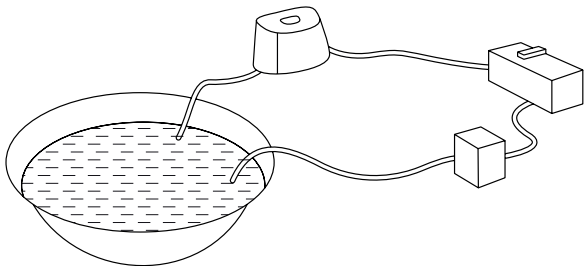
2021

Electronic box, cymbal, bronze bowl, water, mini amplifier, Micro Piezo

Listening device designed for *The Whisperers*

Courtesy of the artist

A bronze, water-filled bowl is mounted atop a soundproof wooden box containing a vibration speaker. Music played through the speaker resonates in the bronze object, causing sound vibrations and ripples to appear on the surface of the water. This visual experience of sound can be perceived in an identical way by a broad audience with diverse hearing capacities. With its Brancusian composition of rectangular, round and spherical volumes in precious materials such as marble, bronze and stone, and its deliberate colour choice, *Totem #1* also possesses the aesthetic power of a sculptural object.



Underwater Birds #2

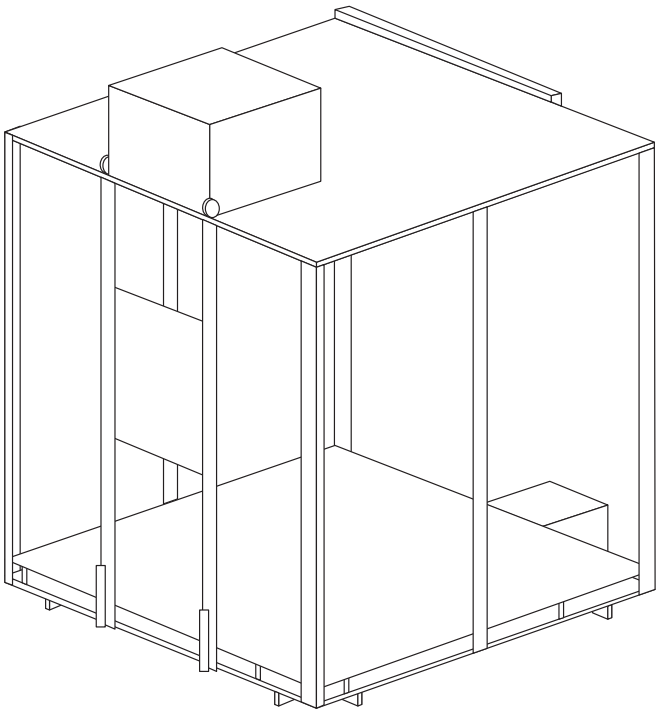
2023

Glass basin, water, fertilizer, plants, gravel, brass bowl, amplifier, hydrophones, underwater speakers, pumps, aeration system

Listening device designed for *The Whisperers*

Courtesy of the artist

In a glass receptacle filled with water and aquatic plants, a network of tubes blows bubbles of various sizes at different speeds. The oxidized water creates an ideal environment for plant growth. A hydrophone captures the sound of the bubbles, so abundant and diverse that it resembles a choir of birds. An ecosystem grows and evolves throughout the exhibition, forming a living, ever-changing 'composition'.



Windhouse #1

2024

Plywood, linseed oil finish, textile and sand counterweights, aluminium door rail

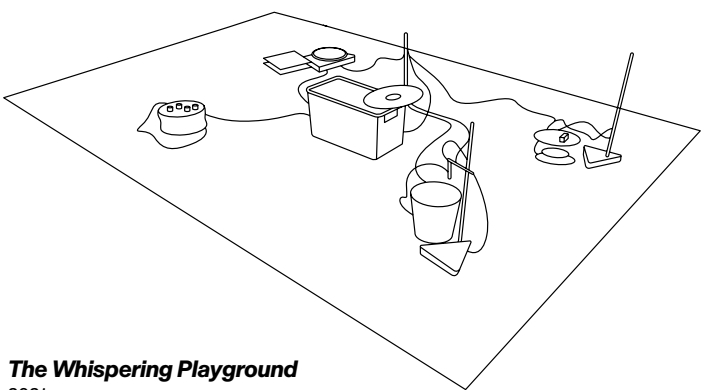
Concept: Johannes Goebel and Tarek Atoui

Research and modelling: Alan Affichard

Construction and design: Gérald Perrin and Mayeul Reignault (Perron et Frères)

Courtesy of the artist

Windhouse #1 is a listening and performing space, a musical instrument and wind harvester. It is inspired by the *SubBass Prototone*, a 2 x 2 x 2 m organ pipe built by Johannes Goebel in the 1980s. Goebel initially constructed the *Prototone* in wood. It produces sounds at the lowest end of hearing when it can only be experienced via the hands or body. Atoui built the *Prototone* during his *WITHIN* project at EMPAC (New York/USA) and the Bergen Assembly (Bergen/Norway) in 2016. It then became the focus of his work with a large community of deaf and hearing musicians. This new work has never previously been exhibited and will be performed for the first time at S.M.A.K.



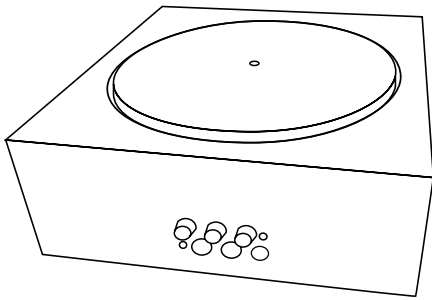
The Whispering Playground

2021

Pedagogical design for *The Whisperers*

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France

Interested in education and social connection, Tarek Atoui conducted various workshop sessions at a preschool in Paris during the pandemic. This led to the creation of *The Whispering Playground*, a circuit based on water, sound and vibrations that unites various sources and inputs (industrial, water, percussion, music played on vinyl records, etc.) into a complex mix. Designed for groups of 8 to 12 people, ages 4 and up, its aim is to introduce participants to the concepts of vibration, underwater sound and rotation in an exploratory and playful manner.



Turntables

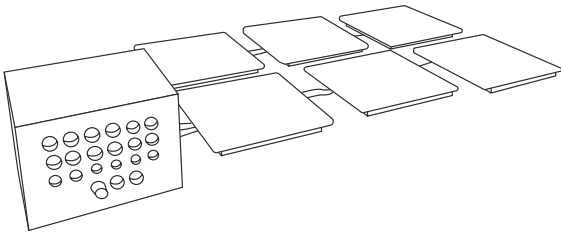
2023

Series of instruments designed by Boris Shershenkov, St Petersburg, Russia, and Tarek Atoui.

Turntables, external sound source, objects

Produced by the IAC, Institut d'Art Contemporain, Villeurbanne / Rhône-Alpes, France
Courtesy of the artist

Turntables are generally associated with club DJs and hip-hop pioneers, either as a means of manipulating sound or as tools for experimental performances and compositions. Yet the devices, together with vinyl records, have a rich tradition in both music and the visual arts. Specific examples include the experiments conducted by artists such as László Moholy-Nagy and Christian Marclay, or composers such as Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage. Tarek Atoui combines both these traditions to create a new series of experiments and instruments. This turntable rotates very slowly and supports heavy objects. External control is a key feature: autonomous sound sources (computer, microphone, etc.) determine its speed and when it stops and starts.



66 Soft Cells

2023

Fabric panels, computer, sound card, software

Software developed by BEK

Collection of sounds recorded in the ports of Bergen and Beirut in 2016 and 2019 via workshops with deaf and hard-of-hearing participants

Activation instructions by Tarek Atoui

Designed for *WITHIN* by Tarek Atoui and constructed by Boris Shershenkov, St Petersburg, Russia.

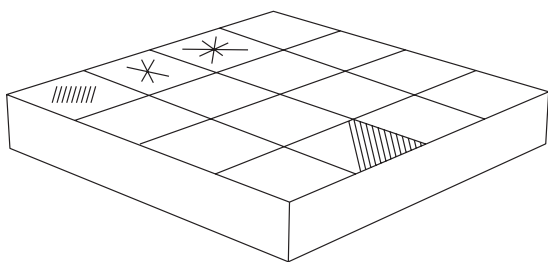
Extension of the first version *33 Soft Cells*

Co-produced by the IAC, Institut d'Art Contemporain, Villeurbanne / Rhône-Alpes (France); Cukrarna Gallery (Ljubljana, Slovenia); and S.M.A.K. (Ghent, Belgium)

Fabrics in collaboration with Kvadrat

Courtesy of the artist

The 66 textile-covered panels in *66 Soft Cells* are distributed throughout the exhibition space. Each has a different pattern, texture or colour. The panels are either mounted on the wall, as artworks, or linked to other instruments from Tarek Atoui's projects. When touched, they emit sound. The artist's field recordings from port cities serve as the basis for this work. He gathered these sounds, together with his collaborators, during numerous workshops with deaf people in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The boundaries between what one hears, sees and feels constantly merge in *66 Soft Cells*, thereby creating a rich sensory experience for both the audience and musicians.



Iteration on Drums #1

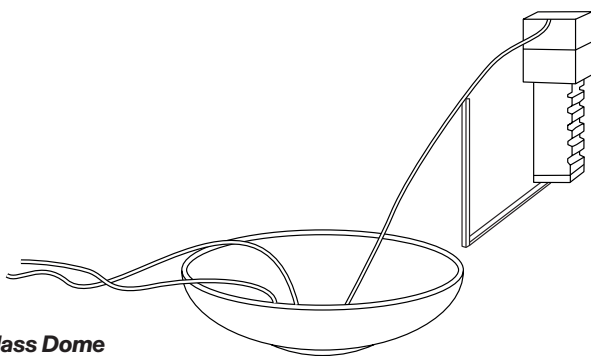
2016

Wooden table, 24 wooden panels, 4 contact microphones, mixing desk, wooden sticks, exercise manual, activation instructions (15 min sound piece)

Created for *WITHIN* by Thierry Madiot Paris, France

Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France

Iteration on Drums #1-4 are percussion instruments that explore how sound behaves when not transmitted through the air but via solid materials, such as metal and wood. When the drums are played with the accompanying drumsticks, the sound is felt first in the hands before reaching the ears. Sound is immediately sensed in the human body, triggering responses that can be both physical and emotional. This instrument is one of a set of four.



Glass Dome

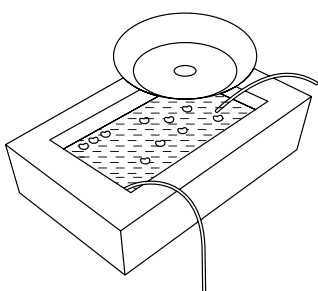
2022

Glass dome, water, brass bowl, marble, hydrophone, aeration system, brass rod, transducer, electronics boxes, pumps, microphone, sand, headphones

Listening device designed for *The Whisperers*

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France

The titles of Tarek Atoui's works reveal little about the precise mechanics behind each instrument. Nor do they communicate the range of materials or the effect of the sound, such as the striking presence of the water bubbles in *Glass Dome*. The list of materials in a work might be lengthy but it also reflects the in-depth research at the heart of Atoui's practice: materials are studied, manipulated, challenged and connected, all according to their inherent acoustic properties. Wood, air, water, copper, bronze, stone and electronic components form the units of an infinite spectrum of sound possibilities. The enumeration of materials is but a poor translation of the complexity of Atoui's works.



Whispered Pulse #3

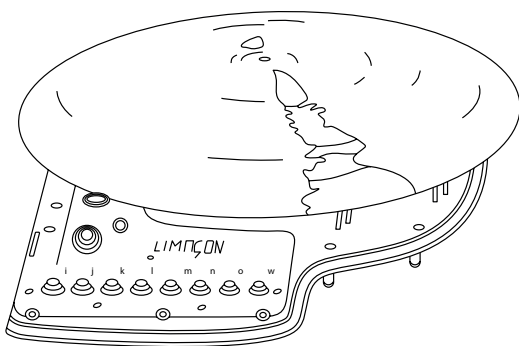
2022

Stone basin, water, bronze, mixing consoles, transducer, hydrophone, pumps, aeration system, headphone

Listening device designed for *The Whisperers*

Courtesy of the artist

Tarek Atoui not only explores how sound can be experienced through multiple senses but also how it can create dynamic interactions between elements such as place, time and ecology. The four stone and bronze elements of *Whispered Pulses*, filled with water and plants, are typically placed outdoors. Equipped with underwater contact microphones and synchronised by a computer system, they work together to create a kind of water clock. In this work, the progress of time is linked to a delicate blend of organic processes and new, ambient sounds.



The Limaçon #1

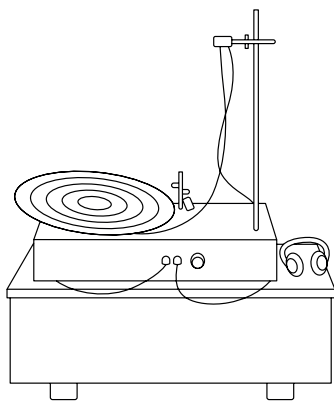
2019

Microphones, contact speaker, cymbal

Created for *The Shuffle Orchestra* by Boris Shershenkov, St Petersburg, Russia

Courtesy of the artist

At the core of Tarek Atoui's practice lies a continuous reflection on the concept of an instrument and how it relates to the acts of composing and performing. *The Limaçon #1*, or snail, is a musical instrument that enables the formal properties of resonant objects, such as cymbals and gongs, to be heard. Eight microphones are positioned around a contact speaker at the centre of the instrument. They follow the shape of the roulette curve known as Pascal's snail. When a cymbal, or other resonant object, is placed on the speaker, it generates a rich, complex feedback phenomenon between the device and the microphones.



Platinum Record Player

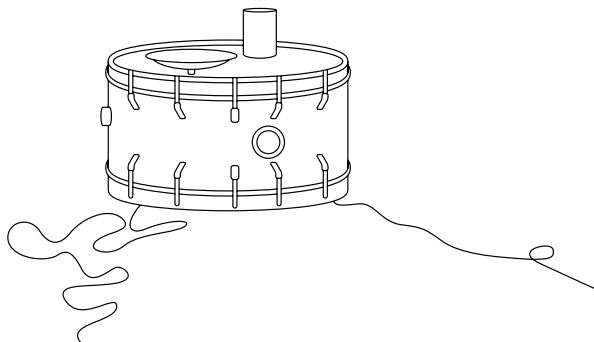
2022

Piano string, soundproof wooden box, mixer, amplifier, transducer, stands, clamps, motor, stone, polishing tool, headphones

Listening device designed for *The Whisperers*

Courtesy of the artist

Depending on the musical tradition and cultural environment in which visitors and listeners were raised, they use varying references and recognise different elements in Tarek Atoui's instruments and listening devices. Natural and industrial materials, mechanical objects, artisanal and commercial products belong to different worlds and time periods. For Atoui, they carry valuable archaeological, historical and personal meanings that contribute to the richness of his work. They are also crucial to the formation of communities around his oeuvre. With its round cymbal installed atop a soundproof wooden box, *Platinum Record Player* reminds us of an historic gramophone. The instrument generates its own sonic landscape thanks to the interaction between a vibration speaker, music, the cymbal, the wooden box, a piano string, and a contact microphone.



Drum Club

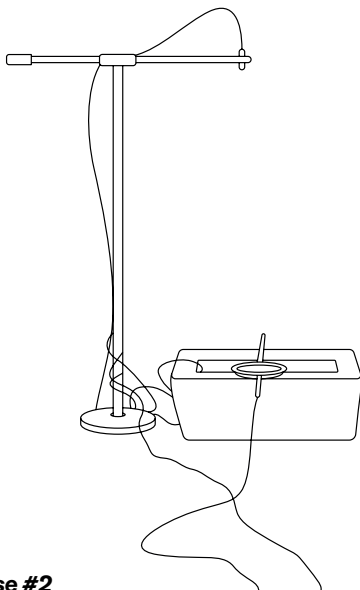
2022

Drum, bronze, cymbals, Hexbugs nano, magic balls, beaker, pebbles, transducer, amplifier, electronics, box, headphones

Listening device designed for *The Whisperers*

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France

In *Drum Club*, a horizontal bass drum functions not only as a musical instrument but also as an acoustic space and resonance chamber. By combining parts of percussion instruments, such as this drum and bronze cymbals, with sound equipment and everyday objects, Atoui demonstrates that instruments can be played and listened to in divergent, alternative ways. Imagination plays an important role in the manipulation of instruments and the composition of sounds. The sounds of *Drum Club*, for example, give the impression of originating in a strange, undefined space, as if you're standing outside a nightclub or music venue, listening.



Whispered Pulse #2

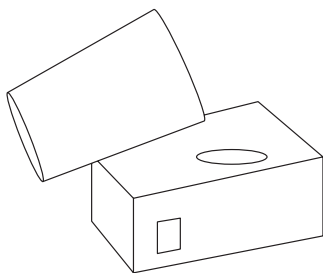
2022

Sub Ink, black pumps, small bronze cymbal, cymbal glass bulb, long mic stand on a round base

Listening device designed for *The Whisperers*

Courtesy of the artist

Tarek Atoui not only explores how sound can be experienced through multiple senses but also how it can create dynamic interactions between elements such as place, time and ecology. The four stone and bronze elements of *Whispered Pulses*, filled with water and plants, are typically placed outdoors. Equipped with underwater contact microphones and synchronised by a computer system, they work together to create a kind of water clock. In this work, the progress of time is linked to a delicate blend of organic processes and new, ambient sounds.



Jukebox

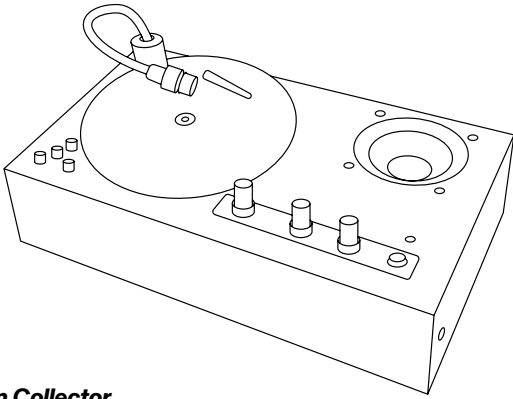
2022

Stones, soundproof wooden box, transducer, brass rod, contact microphone, amplifier, gramophone pavilion, headphones

Listening device designed for *The Whisperers*

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France

Tarek Atoui primarily departs from materials when creating an instrument. He explores how to extract sound from different substances and examines their conductive properties. Electronics allow him to further explore the qualities of the materials, their vibrations, and acoustic behaviour. For Atoui, everything starts and ends with composing. Electronics, everyday objects, and materials serve as tools, engines and sculptures. In *Jukebox*, a contact microphone is placed in a metal bucket to collect all the vibrations and sounds, which are then relayed to external speakers. The sounds come from the environment but are also transmitted from other parts of the work.



The Spin Collector

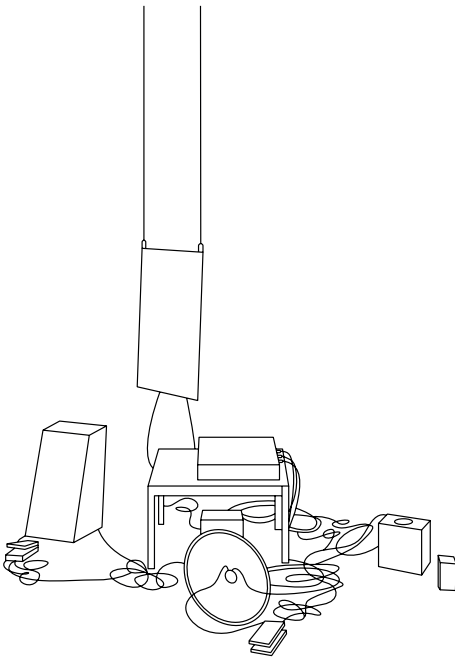
2019

Portable turntable

Created for *The Ground* by Kazuki Saita, DJ Sniff, Elico Suzuki and Yuma Takeshita, Tokyo, Japan

Courtesy of the artist

The Spin Collector is a portable record player from Atoui's earlier projects, *The Reverse Collection* and *The Ground*. Instead of vinyl records, it plays and amplifies a range of objects, including ceramic plates. These items create surprising beats and bass pulses that reverberate throughout the space, shaping the architecture, blending with other sounds and creating new listening experiences.



The True Laptop Quartet

2016

Wooden table, electronics box, rack of amplifiers, effects box, metal found objects, pedals, coil microphones, exercise manual, score, operating instructions

Created for *WITHIN* by Mats Lindström, Stockholm, Sweden

Courtesy of the artist

Found objects are often used in music to create unconventional sounds. Yet their function is as old as music itself. The invention of musical instruments is directly linked to the sounds of natural and existing objects. *The True Laptop Quartet* is a set of four instruments made from found metal objects, old microphones and tactile transducers. The latter are small speakers attached to objects in wood, glass, or metal, causing them to vibrate and generate sound. Performers of *The True Laptop Quartet* hold the instruments in their lap and feel the sound in their hands and bodies through the vibrations of the metal.

ACTIVATIONS

During *the Shore / a place I'd like to be*, Tarek Atoui invites visitors and families to activate some of the exhibited instruments at specially designated times. These moments of encounter and exchange are facilitated by a guide and offer everyone the chance to experience new ways of listening and creating sound.

Special tours for groups of deaf people and their families, in the company of an interpreter, are available on request.

PERFORMANCES

Collaborations and exchanges are at the core of Tarek Atoui's artistic practice. As a musician and artist, he develops concerts and performances where he invites improvisers with diverse experiences and backgrounds to experiment with his instruments.

Tarek Atoui will be performing at the exhibition opening on Friday 5 April at 21:00.

Visit our website for detailed information on exhibition-related activities and performances: www.smak.be

PUBLICATION: *WHISPERING MANUAL*

S.M.A.K. is publishing a Dutch-language edition of the *Whispering Manual* to coincide with the exhibition. It was originally created for Tarek Atoui's exhibitions at The Contemporary Austin and FLAG Art Foundation in Austin, Texas, which won the Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize in 2022.

Whispering Manual presents four experimental sound workshops for children and young people that were developed by Tarek Atoui. They explore the meaning of vibration, water, rotation, and wind in relation to both generating and listening to sound. Designed specifically for teachers and educators, the manual provides detailed information on how to organise workshops and collective improvisation sessions in classrooms or with groups of students.

The publication is available in the S.M.A.K. bookshop and will be distributed to schools and teachers.

This guide was published on the occasion of the exhibition:

Tarek Atoui

the Shore / a place I'd like to be

S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent

5 April – 25 August 2024.

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S.M.A.K.

