

On Constant Invention

Notes on Maverickism as Genealogy and Genealogy as Approach

Hasan Hujairi



Hwang Byungki and Hasan Hujairi.

Courtesy Hasan Hujairi.

I.

In late 2011, I found myself writing what I called the 'Post-Esoteric (Oriental) Art Music Manifesto'. The content of the manifesto itself was not important to me at the time, but the attached working papers were. These focused on mainly navigating the relationship between the lineages of contemporary art and sound art or 'art music' (which is sometimes referred to as *formal* or *serious* music as opposed to folk or some forms of popular music) in the Arab world. The idea behind the manifesto took seed earlier that same year while walking around New York City and thinking especially about the history of art there in the years following the end of World War II. That visit to New York made me think about my own position as an artist from Bahrain and whether or not I could ever belong to a larger artistic genealogy. At the time, I was revisiting my interest in Fluxus history after being reminded of it constantly in New York City. One such reminder was encountering, by chance, a public performance of an instructional piece by Yoko Ono, taken from her book *Grapefruit*.^[1] The piece I saw was based on the following instructions:

PAINTING TO SHAKE HANDS

(painting for cowards)

Drill a hole in a canvas and put your hand out from behind.

Receive your guests in that position.

Shake hands and converse with hands.

I was with my father at the time, walking out of the National Museum of the American Indian, when we first spotted some of the performers. We then spotted other performers presenting the same piece in other parts of Lower Manhattan. We were particularly tickled when we spotted more of them on Wall Street, strategically standing just in front of the New York Stock Exchange.

Shortly after my trip to New York, the idea of the manifesto and the genealogy of contemporary art in the Middle East returned to me while on a brief visit to Doha. At the time, the Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art was holding its inaugural exhibition that was entitled *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art* (2010–2011). I was familiar with some of the work on show, but I did not identify with a lot of what I saw. The exhibition was not arranged chronologically, but was presented through ten different categories, including individualism, form and abstraction, history and myth, struggle, and *huroufiyah* (abstract letterform art). I wondered if the curatorial tone of the exhibition was pushing a narrative of 'Arabness' that felt too conveniently digestible: the title of the exhibition itself was in Arabic and referenced the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's *Identity Card* (1964) which starts with, 'Sajjil, Ana Arabi' (something to the effect of: 'Write this

down! I am an Arab!'). Still, the exhibition made me think again about what kind of a genealogy I saw myself belonging to, or at least to which I wanted (and did not want) to belong.

Going back to my Post-Esoteric (Oriental) Art Music Manifesto, I noticed at the time that I was particularly critical of the recurring emblems of identity appearing in 'Arab' art. Stereotypical examples would be embedding Arabic script within works, Arabian horses, obvious 'oriental' landscapes, or references to ancient civilizations that flourished in the Middle East thousands of years ago (which was partially built into the framework of the regional nation-state narrative). Perhaps using such emblems make a work more 'authentic' for patrons, collectors, and perceived audiences (but I am purely hypothesizing here). Other references include the emergence of modern Arab pop culture (particularly represented with the sudden saturation of appropriated images of Um Kulthoum in a mock-Warholian fashion by artists and designers born many years after said diva's death), or slightly more pedantic references made to well-known works of Arabic literature and other iconic, historically significant texts, fictional or otherwise, represented and oftentimes reinterpreted through newer media forms.

This listing, of course, is an overt generalization of what many artists linked to the Arab world are making, and it is not the purpose of this essay to critique such phenomena. The only reason I bring these examples up is to highlight my own sense of alienation from the idea of what an 'Arab' art genealogy (let alone an 'Arab' art scene) is. This essay is a personal attempt at easing that alienation by considering how the question of genealogy might be used as a form of practice. I look at artists within my own field of interest who have constructed their own genealogies.

II.

It is overwhelming to imagine myself and my immediate 'scene' within that of a far-reaching Middle East and North Africa (MENA) narrative: a narrative that includes cultural hotspots such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and (occasionally) Turkey. In my earlier interactions with regional artists and curators at different events, I remember feeling intimidated by all the artists I met from such places - perhaps because I considered my own background as something of a drawback. I even thought at one point that being from one of the Gulf States made things slightly more difficult in terms of being taken seriously and that my acceptance into whatever event I was participating in was consolatory at best. I felt this way even though all the artists and curators were very approachable and the sense of camaraderie was palpable.

Also, having an unusual academic background and approaching contemporary art with experience as a musician made me see that entering the arena of the regional art scene was quite challenging. Another one of the challenges of being someone from a region that generally has a high GDP per capita is the frustration of not being eligible for many art-related funding opportunities aimed at MENA region artists, which I feel cuts me out from chances to develop my practice and expand my platform. I also worry for other artists from my native Bahrain who

are not able to communicate with the prevalent language (read: a highly-specialized English language) used within what is accepted as the contemporary art scene in the MENA region.

To this end, the idea of a unified MENA art scene is certainly misleading when there are subsets of artists that cannot truly participate and are, by default, disenfranchised. This brings me back to my discomfort with the framing of 'Arabness' in contemporary art, and the comfort I find in the term maverick as a way to describe an artist who works beyond the pre-defined frames. As an example, even though I do practice in the realm of sound art, I do not find myself making homages to 'electronic music' as many sound artists/experimental musicians may, nor am I comfortable with completely aligning myself to 'Arab' or 'Middle Eastern' music practice. Much of my work is in fact about bridging my own academic experiences. And by academic, I am not only talking about what I learned in classrooms in the United States, Japan, United Kingdom, and South Korea, but also as a foreigner living in each of those societies, often during difficult times, from the 9/11 attacks in New York, the Iraq War of 2003, and other events. Um Kulthoum, for instance, feels extremely foreign to me (although I learned to play the *oud* for many years and occasionally perform on the instrument). I feel that the use of pop cultural iconography in some cases, whether in homage or otherwise, is no different to kitschy paintings that contain Arabian horses or Arabic calligraphy which, for some reason or another, seem to always try to authenticate a kind of 'Arabness'. I am not particularly interested in that.

But that is not to say I am disinterested. In an essay entitled 'I am the Greatest: Ordinary and Exceptional Musicians', Bruno Nettle addresses a curious trend found in early examples of ethno-musicological fieldwork.^[2] Researchers of western music revered 'genius' composers whereas researchers of non-western music mainly looked for 'nameless', 'ordinary', or 'mediocre' musicians within the traditions they happened to be researching. Although the essay I mention is related to the field of ethnomusicology, I find it relevant when trying to make sense of a genealogy related to art music (or art practice, for that matter) in the Arab world. There are indeed histories here that have been relegated to the unknown, or unmapped. In this, I do not intend to negate contributions by exemplary individuals in the Arab world whose work has been overshadowed by other histories. Rather, I choose to imagine such individuals to be *mavericks*: figures who charted their own path through the terrain of art history.

III.

What is a maverick? One of the most concise definitions of a maverick in the case of composers (but it could apply to practitioners in any creative field) is in an essay by Kyle Gann entitled 'American Mavericks: What is a Maverick?'^[3] After citing different composers such as Charles Ives, John Cage, Harry Partch, Pauline Oliveros, and many others, Gann explains the general characteristics of maverick composers: 'independent, dissenters, nonconformists' who all found the idea of an original genealogy (for example, European concert music) to be 'too narrow' and 'full of rules'. 'These composers do not fit neatly into American culture. They didn't intend to,' Gann states. 'They are not pop musicians. They are not classical musicians. They

invent their own genres of music.' Gann calls these artists 'genuine [...] reacting to what they find and hear around them in this great melting pot of America.' He writes: 'They want to wake people up and teach them to appreciate the world around them. And they're not going to let anyone else tell them how to do it. They are the mavericks.'

One example of a maverick is the reason I am pursuing a degree in Korean music composition: a South Korean musician who grew up as a friend of Nam June Paik called Hwang Byungki. Byungki is a leading master in the kayageum, a Korean zither-like instrument with silk strings. While spending a few years in the USA as a visiting lecturer on Korean traditional music, Hwang interacted first-hand with the Fluxus movement in New York and then went back to Korea and presented the first 'avant-garde' piece of Korean music at the 1975 edition of the biennial contemporary music festival 'Space 75' in Seoul. The piece is called *Migung* (which means 'Labyrinth' in Korean), and it consists of seven sequences from groaning and hissing to chanting. Though this would not be a shocking performance today, back in 1975 it caused an uproar; many in the audience stormed out of the concert hall in outrage because of what Hwang did to the 'traditional' Korean instrument. I imagine that the reason behind the uproar was because the piece challenged what was conventionally seen as 'tradition', and 'tradition' is inevitably connected to national identity and nationalism. Hwang, as a player of a traditional Korean instrument, was perhaps expected to preserve the 'idea' of tradition, yet there he was presenting something completely unexpected. I would like to think that it is transformational moments such as these that leave some of the deepest impacts on their respective genealogies because they are not anomalies but eventualities. Case in point is that many consider his shocking piece from 1975 as being part of the canon for kayageum music.

I occasionally visit Hwang, who is in his late seventies now. He has become a mentor to me. In our meetings we sometimes talk about the meaning of tradition, which he explained to me once as being the same as our day-to-day life, in that our music – even if we play 'traditional' instruments – reflects what we witness and experience in our own lifetimes. Hwang also represents another type of 'maverick' artist: one that approaches 'traditional' musical instruments in a highly intellectualized and sensitive manner. The different kayageum players I meet often refer to him as a 'genius'.

IV.

My interest in different mavericks has led me to study the works (and lives) of various artists and thinkers relevant to my own practice: John Cage, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Erik Satie, and even Renaissance composer-murderer Prince Carlo Gesualdo. I have recently been working on translating John Cage's seminal book, *Silence: Writings and Lectures*^[4] into Arabic, which is an influential book not only to anyone interested in contemporary music but art in general. *Silence* is always exciting for me to revisit because Cage presents many of his ideas on sound, space, silence, and time in a way that encourages the reader to create his or her own opinions on such

matters. Over the years, this particular book by John Cage is something I find myself coming across in every library of every university I have studied at, and so it has been something of a companion of mine. The personal meaning of the book has changed over time, of course, but its most profound impact was the attitude assumed by Cage, a maverick for whom it is completely acceptable to be truly inventive. Yet, though *Silence* was published over 50 years ago, I am surprised to learn that an Arabic translation has never been made.

The reason I am translating the book is to fill that gap. Perhaps it is also a way in which to expand the notion of what a genealogy is. Consider one statement Cage makes at the very beginning of his 1937 text 'The Future of Music: Credo', in which he stakes his faith on the fact that 'the use of noise to make music will continue and increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments, which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard.' Where the point of disagreement was between dissonance and consonance in the past, Cage writes, in the future will become a disagreement between noise and musical sounds. 'The principle of form will be our only constant connection with the past,' Cage proclaimed. 'Although the great form of the future will not be as it was in the past, at one time the fugue and at another the sonata, it will be related to these as they are to each other: through the principle of organization or man's common ability to think.'

A maverick, in this sense, is someone who writes his or her own history. Take Halim El-Dabh, a pioneer of early electronic music and creative ethnomusicology. I met him in 2014 at his home in Kent, Ohio. I had contacted El-Dabh to ask if I could visit him after I had completed my residency at the Vancouver Biennale in the summer of 2014. I wanted to ask him about his approach to composing music and about his very colourful graphic notation systems. I first became familiar with the work of El-Dabh after listening to a piece of his music from 1944 entitled, 'Wire Recorder Piece', which is believed to be the first work of electro-acoustic music or *musique concrète*.

In conversation, El-Dabh explained to me that both his early electronic music and his graphic notation system were connected to his personal interest in ancient Egypt: The 'Wire Recorder Piece' was based on an experiment he conducted while studying agricultural engineering at university. As he had learned that ancient Egyptians used mirrors to keep locusts from attacking crops, he was curious to know whether the same could be achieved through playing back sounds that he thought might disorient insects. His colour scores, on the other hand, were informed by ancient Egyptian colour notation systems in which coloured circles were drawn, with each colour used pertaining to a tone, while the size of each circle represented how long each tone lasted. El-Dabh would also seamlessly direct his speech to talk about his relationship with different composers such as Schoenberg (and studying the score of 'Pierrot Lunaire' with a group of friends in Cairo), Stravinsky (and how he also studied the musical score of the 'Rite of Spring' with the same group of Cairene friends, and years later meeting Stravinsky himself in Colorado while hitching a ride to observe a rehearsal he was leading), and even John Cage

(who had given a memorable performance at Kent State University where El-Dabh was a professor for many years).

El-Dabh, in his own right, made his own musical lineage. I find this attitude liberating: as someone who comes from a small country with very little weight in the contemporary art or contemporary music scenes, it opens the possibility of being an artist in any way, and not feeling pressured to follow a particular genealogy. This is why I am interested in the idea of the maverick as a methodology. Take the example of Cage, who is aware of the history of his practice but also looks towards the future, developing his own work not only by accepting histories, but also by moving beyond them. As an artist, his example allows me to give space to my own personal background, such as my academic research in historiography and music composition, and to connect both with a vision for my own creative future.



Halim El-Dabh.
Courtesy Hasan Hujairi.

What I enjoy about working with sound art is that it allows me to converse with the contemporary art scene without necessarily approaching it from the angle of the plastic arts. It is also interesting to me because it allows me to combine the role of the composer with the role of the contemporary artist (and what both roles stand for). Sound art is somewhat liberated from other practices in the region because it does not necessarily rely on visual cues and their attached material cultures. I also think that sound art is still a somewhat esoteric practice within contemporary art and it has its own layers that require audiences to search through. For me, sound is where the idea of being a maverick is articulated in the crossing of boundaries.

This returns me to the issue I laid out at the start of this text regarding the challenges with situating a practice within a genealogy of sound art and art music in the Arab world. I started by looking at my problematic genealogy – being part of a small scene in Bahrain under a much larger scene in the MENA region. I tried to navigate my placement through addressing the Post Esoteric (Oriental) Art Music Manifesto I had written in 2011 only to realize that the practicalities of being truly initiated into this larger MENA scene were challenging at times. I was able to break through these challenges by focusing on my own practice of sound art and seeking out artists that I relate to. Ultimately, my conclusion is this: Although the idea of a maverick artist seems to be an outsider or a loner who is disinterested in what other artists are doing, the truth is mavericks are hypersensitive to what has come before them, what their contemporaries are doing, and they are genuinely trying to look towards the future for a way to develop their work. In other words, mavericks are true markers of the progression of a creative genealogy, whether it is in music or any other form of creative expression. To this end, genealogy *is* the approach of maverick artists who write their own history.

[1] Yoko Ono, ed., *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings by Yoko Ono* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1970).

[2] Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

[3] Kyle Gann, 'American Mavericks: What is a Maverick?', American Public Media http://musicmavericks.publicradio.org/features/essay_gann01.html.

[4] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

About the author

Hasan Hujairi

Hasan Hujairi (1982) is a composer, sound artist, and independent researcher who divides his time between his native Bahrain and Seoul (South Korea). His sound art performances and

installations build on his academic interest in Historiography and Ethnomusicology, which he presented in different venues in Seoul, Tokyo, London, Glasgow, Amsterdam, New York, Beirut, and Bahrain. Hasan participated in art residencies in the Korean National University of Arts (Seoul, South Korea), STEIM (Amsterdam), and the Red Bull Music Academy (London) for his activity in Sound Art and Music Composition.

Hasan's academic background includes a BSBA in Finance from Drake Univeristy (Iowa, USA), a Masters degree in Economic History/Historiography from Hitotsubashi University (Tokyo, Japan), and Ethnomusicology research at the University of Exeter (Exeter, UK). He has in the past acted as curator at Al-Riwaq Art Space (Adliya, Bahrain) and has been involved in other independent art initiatives in Bahrain. He is currently pursuing his doctorate studies in Korean Traditional Music Composition at Seoul National University's College of Music. Hasan is also an accomplished oud player.