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*Using his recently co-commissioned work 'Wind Organ' as a starting point, we delve into the processes and thinking behind Ali's practice, which explores sound and its mechanical production.*

Ali Miharbi (b. Istanbul, 1976) is an artist interested in the biological, social and economic rhythms in everyday life, the concept of play, and the physicality of information. His work



Ali Miharbi, 2017. Photo credit Christian Luebbert, Copyright Delfina Foundation

takes a variety of forms that range from photographic, graphic, sonic or sculptural pieces to dynamic systems driven by live or stored data.

In the spring of 2017 Ali was in-residence at Delfina Foundation and following this he was co-commissioned in a partnership between Delfina Foundation and the Horniman Museum and Gardens to produce a site-specific artwork relating to the museum's collection, through support from Arts Council England and SAHA. This work went on show in mid-August and continues to be on view to the public until 26 November. In the following interview, we speak to Ali about the work exhibited, *Wind Organ*, the process behind it and his wider practice.

Delfina Foundation: Could you speak about the relationship between *Wind Organ* and your previous practice?



Ali Miharbi, *Vocals*, 2017. Exhibition view, Pneuma, Pilot Gallery, Istanbul, 2017. Photo credit Ridvan Bayrakoglu

Ali Miharbi: *Wind Organ* is a continuation of my on-going interest in the materiality of sound, information and its relationship with space. An earlier project, *The Whisper* (2016), was an indoor sound installation where compressed air was pushed through several branching hoses into acoustic resonators. It created sounds that resembled whispered vowels that could be heard across the room. The motivation was to connect the experience of listening to a mixture of whispered speech and breathing sounds and emphasize the physical aspect of speech, which can also relate to issues such as the suppression of communication and privacy.

Later in April 2017, my solo exhibition at Pilot Gallery in Istanbul was entitled *Pneuma* and revolved around the subjects of wind, voice, breath, routines, as well as the surprises of everyday life for which weather was not only a metaphor, but also directly influenced some of the work. In *The Wind*, a wind vane contained in a glass case tried to act as if there is wind inside the case, based on the weather data received from the Internet and with the help of a motor mounted underneath the pedestal. Another installation in the same exhibition was *Vocals*, an installation with a similar mechanism to *The Whisper*, but this time with loud, scream-like sounds that felt somewhat threatening, but could also be interpreted as calls for help. As an extension of these series of works, I had the idea to connect the voice-like sounds I have been experimenting with, with an outdoor musical instrument played by the wind.

DF: Where did this interest you have in sound and space arise from?

AM: My earliest practice was mostly web-based, critically reflecting on issues such as intellectual property, freedom of expression, surveillance or war in technological contexts while exploring the possibilities of the Web as an experimental space. Later, as the Internet became indistinguishable from the everyday life and as the once-existing boundaries between the real and the virtual were being more and more blurred, I started to develop a new language based on interactions in real space. Lately, I have been trying to encounter a deeper sense of this hybridization by going back to the roots of this communication where the physical and the symbolic were blurred. Another related point is that nowadays the term 'technology' is being used synonymously with 'computer technology' by the tech industry. This could be seen as an indication that computers have become more and more invisible, sneaking into all kinds of older technologies in their tinier and tinier forms, and what they can potentially do also starts to vanish from users' sight. One of my responses to this was to look at technology in a deeper sense, and I also started to explore older, more tangible technologies and more physical forms of communication, hoping to discover new meanings in them from within our present framework.

I became more and more interested in sound, not only because sound is directly perceivable as opposed to electric signals, but also because sound has many things in common with electricity, as both are used as media for symbolic communication, where sound becomes speech and electricity becomes electronics. As I am more interested in what sound does rather than the contents of the symbols it can carry, I started to explore its relationship with space. This includes sound installed across the exhibition space, as well as sound created in tangible ways, rather than being played through loudspeakers.

DF: In the summer of 2017 you received the co-commission for a work from Delfina Foundation and the Horniman Museum. What sort of research did you conduct for this piece and how did you arrive at the idea for *Wind Organ*?

AM: I had been doing research about Aeolian harps (there is one in the Horniman Museum collection that I saw during my residency at Delfina Foundation in winter 2017) and other instruments played by the wind. I thought other collections of the museum such as the natural history collection, not only the musical instrument collection and the gardens, resonated with the idea of an Aeolian harp whose design is inspired by human voice. Typical Aeolian harps, named after Aeolus, the Ancient Greek god of wind, consist of strings stretched across two bridges on a soundboard and produce an alien kind of music when played by the wind. My initial idea was to somehow acoustically filter this sound such that it resembles vowels in human speech, but later I switched to flute-like instruments after finding out about traditional Asian instruments made of bamboo poles, as well as kite flutes, thinking that using a combination of tubes cut in different diameters could give me more freedom to filter the sounds and a more robust design for an outdoor installation. Although I found out that creating realistic vowel sounds was not possible when using such tubes as the flute-like sound they produce is more harmonic than the buzzing noise of human vocal cords, I used human vocal tract shapes as filters anyway, to take me as close as I could get to vowel sounds. This way, each tube became an instrument which used a simplified mechanisms to produce the vowel sounds in human speech, but which resulted in a much more musical sound while the wind added a chaotic component.

DE: For people who haven't had the chance to see the work could you briefly describe the installation.



Ali Miharbi, *Wind Organ* (installation view), 2017. Photo credit Dan Wiell. Copyright Delfina Foundation

AM: *Wind Organ* is made of modular parts made of a combination of stainless steel tubes with different diameters and when the wind blows tangentially to the slots on each of these parts, they start whistling, like a side-blown flute. Three of those flute-like parts, stacked in slightly different angles and welded on top of each other, stand on a pole to support them on the ground. The installation consists of five such poles and each pole uses three instances of one 'flute' type. Each type was designed based on simplified human vocal tract models corresponding to the vowels /a, e, o, u, i/. Each pole faces a different direction in so that the installation as a whole covers all possible wind directions.

DE: How was *Wind Organ* physically produced? The work is an instrument, what was the process involved in enabling it to make sounds?

AM: I first designed and printed small 3D models and tested them both in front of a fan, as well as by swinging them in the air. Later, I used PVC pipes to create a prototype for each shape in their actual dimensions and tested these again in several different ways, including spending hours on a rooftop in Istanbul to catch the late-afternoon breeze during the summer. Finally, I drew plans for the actual fabrication in London so that they could be made from steel tubes for the final installation at the museum.



Ali Miharbi, *Wind Organ* - Prototype Testing, Istanbul Rooftop. 2017

The main principle of the instruments is that of a side-blown flute. When the wind blows through the slots tangentially, the tubes start making a range of different sounds similar to whistling, weeping, howling, etc. depending on their shape and on the wind speed. By adding a constriction (a tube with a much smaller diameter) between two pieces of tubes and varying the location of this constriction in different designs you are able to change the characteristics of the sounds.

DE: Could you talk a little about the relationship between the physical and audio elements of the work?

AM: My intention was that the piece suggests some connections between voice, breath, music and nature. Some of these connections are closer than they appear, for example I recently came across to a research that found correlations between the rhythmic patterns of local spoken languages and rhythms of that culture's music, and other research about the use or lack of certain consonants in local languages based on their local climate or landscape. To me, using the models of vocal tracts rather than conventional musical instrument designs for *Wind Organ* was not merely an experiment in musical instrument design, but it was also an exploration into these concepts.

The physical design of the piece was as minimal as it could be whilst achieving the behaviour I imagined. There were also practical choices, such as the choice of a material that would be suitable outdoors, so it turned out to be a musical instrument



that had to have some sculptural aspects in order to function properly. Other than those, there is always a component that remains unknown until the finished piece is experienced, which I also like.



Ali Miharbi, *Wind Organ* (installation view), 2017. Photo credit Dan Wiell, Copyright Delfina Foundation

DF: Visually the work appears quite industrial, due to use of cylindrical raw steel. This lies in contrast to the landscaped gardens in which it is installed, but it also connects it to the London skyline you can see in the distance. How and why did you chose materials used for *Wind Organ* and did your background in engineering have any influence here?

AM: The choice of materials and the visual design were mainly based on practical consideration. I also wanted to keep the look clean so that visual details imply nothing more than what the instrument does. Also, I didn't want the piece to look too dominant in the gardens where it is located and the simple design, mainly consisting of poles with

relatively small diameters, helped to achieve this. With respects to the work's design and production, I learnt a lot from existing theoretical information available online from people who have done similar projects in the past, through my own trial-and-decades, so in fact there wasn't much of an engineering element in the production of the work in the sense of needing to make complex calculations for example.



Ali Miharbi, *Wind Organ* (installation view), 2017. Copyright Delfina Foundation

DF: *Wind Organ* is installed outside, in the gardens surrounding the Horniman Museum, a museum of anthropology and natural history in South London. This is somewhat of a different space to a 'white cube' gallery. How did this effect your process and what opportunities and/or drawbacks did this pose?

AM: Getting out of the gallery space and experimenting with the wind directly was something I had been thinking to do for a while and this co-commission provided a good opportunity to do that. The Horniman Museum's collection was inspiring and working in a non-art institution gave the process a completely different context, such as showing in a space that is normally not dedicated to artworks and considering an audience different from the

usual art gallery goers. Constraints became guides to explore this new territory, so I saw the whole thing as an exciting challenge that provided me with a different way of approaching my own practice.

DF: What are your main takeaways from making this work? Has *Wind Organ* led into any new projects or ideas?

AM: I think this project will lead to experimentations with different variations in the future, both indoors and outdoors. Currently I am working on an indoor installation, another version of *The Whisper* (2016), which originally used 3D-printed organic shapes as acoustic resonators, and in this new iteration will use much more simplified shapes with a more 'raw' approach informed by my experience with *Wind Organ*. I will also definitely be doing more outdoors projects involving the use of wind in the future.

*Wind Organ was installed in the gardens at the Horniman Museum in South London between 16 August and 26 November 2017.*

*Wind Organ is a co-commissioned by Delfina Foundation and the Horniman Museum and Gardens, realised with support from Arts Council England and SAHA.*