

## FORUM: Aziz Hazara in conversation

In this conversation, artist Aziz Hazara shares the distinct and converging interests of his concurrent exhibitions at Mercer Union, Toronto; Experimenter, Kolkata; and ICA Milano; and the process of developing long-term dialogue with curators and collaborators Nasrin Himada, Hajra Haider Karrar, and Francesca Recchia.

FORUM: Aziz Hazara in conversation was hosted on Zoom on Wednesday, 5 July 2023, 2 PM EST.

Learn more about the event on Mercer Union's website:

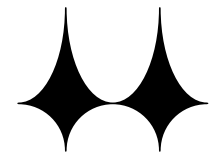
<https://www.mercerunion.org/programs/forum-aziz-hazara-in-conversation>

Aamna Muzaffar (Mercer Union): Hello everyone and welcome thank you for joining us today. Just a quick note to say that live captioning is available and you can enable it at the bottom of your screens with the closed captioning button labeled with a cc. My name is Aamna Muzaffar and I'm currently the interim director and curator at Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art. I'm joining you today from Toronto, a place that I've come to as an uninvited guest on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. A city that is today also home to many Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island. As we're fortunate to come together online from different places, across cultures and various entangled histories, I ask you to take a moment to acknowledge the rightful stewards of the land in which you are situated.

This event is part of FORUM, Mercer Union's ongoing series of talks, lectures, interviews, screenings and performances that extends on our commitment to free public programming both online and in the gallery. I want to offer my sincere thanks to our co-presenters for today: Experimenter, Kolkata; and ICA Milano. As well as TD Bank group for Leading Support on the exhibition Aziz Hazara: *Bow Echo* which is on view at Mercer Union through to the end of July.

This FORUM convenes a conversation with Aziz Hazara to explore the distinct and converging interests of his concurrent exhibitions in Toronto, Kolkata and Milan and we'll be joined by the guest curators of these exhibitions, and I'll introduce them in just a minute but first I'd like to introduce the artist whose work and practice has brought all of us together today, Aziz Hazara, and feel free to come on video Aziz. Aziz Hazara is an artist based between Kabul and Berlin working across video, installation, photography, sound, and sculpture. His practice addresses such dichotomies as proximity and distance, migration and memory, life and death, reality and fiction, war and peace.

We're joined by guest curator Nasrin Himada, a Palestinian writer and curator who currently holds the position of Associate Curator at Agnes Etherington Arts Center at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario; Hajra Haider Karrar, writer and curator at SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin; and finally, Francesca Recchia, an independent researcher, educator, and writer and previously acting director of the Afghan Institute for Arts and Architecture in Kabul. It's a full panel, it's a very impressive panel and it's my pleasure to welcome each of you and to thank you for what will surely be a spirited and insightful FORUM.



To get us underway I'm going to invite Nasrin Himada to get us started and Francesca and Aziz please come on video, and I'll see all of you and speak to all of you at the Q&A towards the end of the program. Thank you.

Nasrin Himada: Thank you so much Aamna, thank you Sonya and thank you everyone at Mercer Union for organizing this and inviting us to talk about our respective exhibitions featuring the work of Aziz — there you are [referring to Aziz] oh good okay it worked. Like Aamna said, I guest curated the exhibition at Mercer, but before Aziz and I get to talking about that I wanted to invite Aziz and Francesca and Hajra to speak of their respective shows first. And Aziz if you don't mind maybe also taking us through, telling us a little bit about the story of putting together the show in Milan which features many new works and more recent works. I think yeah that would be kind of my first question, in my first inquiry into yeah, what's gonna happen in this conversation. And I don't know if you guys figured out the images too, but do you want to pull them up? If you want to pull them up as well this would be a good time.

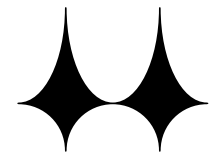
Aziz Hazara: Sure.

Nasrin: Great.

Aziz: Thank you so much it's a pleasure to be in conversation with these three beautiful souls that I've known for many, many years now, and the exhibition at ICA came about in conversation with Francesca where we were talking about sitting in Kabul and talking about the intervention culture and this whole civilizing mission that the Western had in and applied in Afghanistan, especially in Kabul. So, the exhibition started with the dialogue with that and then we were bringing all these these different aspects of what it meant to live in the intervention, and also what's the consequences of these interventions afterwards and how are the different generations supposedly dealing with these questions. Yeah, and so the productions happen, most of the production happens in Berlin and again it's post August 2021, and then also reflecting upon what it meant, and those the different works that respond in different time. The title of the exhibition comes from *Condemnation*, where at the time there was a pretty fashionable amongst the politicians and those who are responsible to issue these statements of condemnation in relation to suicide bombing. And we started from there and the work is a collection of all these statements that are collected over the years since 2003. And what happens is that all these statements, and the groups that were responsible producing these statements, they also started producing condemnation statements after they took power. So the whole irony of condemning an act was there, and the kind of the work happens in a collaborative manner where a lot of this edition happened in collaborating with different people who recently got to Germany or who've been in Germany since post 2014. So the process was, as often in my practice, a collaboration and working with different people in different methods and yeah.

Nasrin: Amazing, do you want to take us through in more detail some of the works? I'm curious to know more about the yellow Jerry cans and the sound. I know you are also really really interested in sound and I think in *Bow Echo*, and in you making these speakers in the form of these Jerry cans. It would be awesome for you to talk to us about just the process of integrating sound into your installation work and into your video work, and specifically into these boxes.

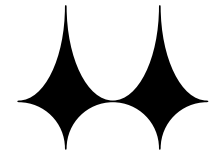
Aziz: Yeah sure. I think the question of sound began with making the work called *Monument*, and then it continued towards *Bow Echo* where the sound becomes a protagonist. And since



then been thinking about the sonic landscape and what it meant in Afghanistan where speakers became very very popular and the influx of all these speakers comes with different warfares. And here with the bushkas, we in Farsi we call them "bushkas", and since the 1990s it was involved in the conflict and this is an object that is constantly transforming. So it was used as a smuggling, first it's a oil container, a cooking oil container and then because of this rapid plastic production which is happening across the country and in the neighbour countries as well, so they became a very everyday object which every household had it. And then this was camouflaged and reused and reused and repurposed the objects, for instance if the NGOs does some aid work, they bring and line up these buckets. So these objects are constantly transforming and in the case of the so-called "war on terror", these objects became the protagonist where a lot of different little groups start using it, and because it's a very everyday object and it's in everybody's house so it was very easy to camouflage it from these drone warfares basically. The technologies that they brought and scanning everything and every possible object. And then 20 years later and all these objects that turned, became sort of homemade bombs and again I mean in conversation with suicide bombing and what happens with Bow Echo is that these objects comes to the landscape and then it stays and transforms. And in this case, I was thinking of these, the sound that was produced during the militancy, and these are the sort of sounds that were banned, you couldn't hear them from public radios and televisions at the time in Kabul. And then the takeover of Kabul and then these sounds become permanent. And the sort of starting point with using these sounds were when Kabul collapsed and there was this militant who recently seized a Humvee from Americans and he was running around the city with this Humvee playing the songs which were produced in Peshawar and Karachi. So that, sort of that starting point and then also thinking of this constantly transforming this object, this very everyday object.

Nasrin: Amazing thank you. I don't know Francesca if you want to jump in since you're the curator of this show and I'm always curious to know more about the story of how people find each other so how did you come across Aziz's work, how did you guys start the conversation, how did you start to think about the show together?

Francesca Recchia: Well thanks for having me tonight it's a joy to be here. Well, Aziz and I have been friends for a decade now, so we met in Kabul in 2013, so this is a very very very long conversation and the exhibition at ICA is a step in a dialogue that is a combination of friendship and professional respect that has become very difficult to disentangle, so it's hard to tell where the friendship starts and where the professional collaboration ends, and I think that's one of the strengths of you know this working together there's a mutual trust and a mutual understanding that is in many cases fairly undisciplined and unfiltered that allows for a very honest intellectual exchange. So I suppose the exhibition is really, I don't want to say the culmination because I'm hoping that this is one step of many more to come, but is you know an important point of turning public a conversation that has been going on privately for many years. And I suppose, I mean Aziz has mentioned specific things about the exhibition, one thing that I want to say is that a lot of what brought us together is a discomfort, is a common discomfort about the perception of what is contemporary art in Afghanistan. There is a very pedantic, patronizing notion from Western outlets of what is meant to be an artist in Afghanistan and that generally responds to a very long list of trite stereotypes. Especially in a moment where there was significant money flow from you know this



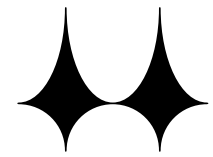
development business, so-called contemporary artists will get loads of cash to basically illustrate the political agenda of you know Western NGOs. Obviously, Aziz never fit in that framework and from a critical perspective I've always been very vocal about the fiction of this conceptual framework. So I suppose this common uneasiness, and this is to put it mildly, is what brought us together and also created a very strong intellectual bond in terms of also undoing a lot of this fiction so much of the journey that has gone into the conceptual design of *Condemnation* responds to this. The one thing about *Condemnation* as an exhibition is that it's not an illustration of anything, it's very experiential and it's experiential of things that, you know I have no subtitles, so we would not try to tell people what they should be thinking about Afghanistan, which is what the the public discourse around Afghanistan mostly is. So it's in many ways a deep dive and it's a deep dive with no safety net so it was a lot of discomfort for a lot of people because they said you know but we don't understand and I think that's a good thing. That's what the exhibition wanted to do, to confront people with the fact that you know they've been told what to think in a very manipulative manner that served pretty much a very specific political agenda. So I leave it there, I'm happy to address other things later.

Nasrin: I'm curious though Francesca to know more about your favourite piece in the show and if you want to talk about it with us for a second?

Francesca: Well, it's very hard to tell. I suppose, I mean Aziz has already spoken of *Condemnation* which is very dear to my heart for many reasons. I'll probably spend a couple of minutes *Chalk Drawings* because that's also an ongoing conversation that we have with Aziz with works of this kind. So *Chalk Drawings* is a diptych of photographs and I think probably what I will start with is referring to the reaction of people. So I've accompanied several people through the exhibition and everyone was really taken aback from *Chalk Drawings*, because it looks so innocent. A lot of people say "so yeah but what is this?" And then when you start creating a little bit of context, then it becomes a very a work that makes you think. And so I think, I mean obviously I don't want to give too many spoilers because that will suck. I think that's one of the strengths of Aziz's practice, that the layers are so many and they're so intertwined so what you see at the beginning may look either so pretty, or so innocent and then you start digging and there's a level of irony, a level of blasphemy, a level of tragedy and then you start getting into a work and then also getting into yourself, reflecting of what this work both means and means to you. And so I think, to me, *Chalk Drawings* is particularly powerful in this because it asks you for time to make sense of it.

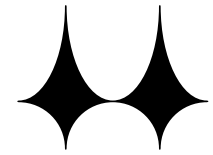
Nasrin: Amazing thank you. That was a good spoiler, it was more of a tease. I still haven't seen that one in person so I hope to one day. Hajra, it's so lovely to have read your text for this exhibition, I enjoyed it so much it was just so beautiful and I learned a lot and I would love to hear about your process engaging with the exhibition, I would love to hear about how you met Aziz, how you guys started talking about this piece and how you went about writing for it, for the exhibition and also what your favourite pieces are in the exhibition.

Hajra Haider Karrar: Thank you so much Nasrin and it's such a pleasure to be on this panel and to be having yet another chance to engage and engage together with all of you, and thanks a lot to Mercer Union, Aamna for arranging for this opportunity.



So these are lots of questions and quite a bit of a long story. I'm going to try and summarize it and try and start from how Aziz and I met and it's interesting because we have come from similar geographies, the entanglements run deep. I'm from Pakistan and yeah Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan which of course it's highly contextual but also highly entangled as well. But also, Aziz and I have studied in the same city as well many years apart but, and also thanks to Aziz and his amazing linguistic abilities we also speak a similar language now. So yeah there are a lot of common points that bring us together but also I think we met at a point where we are both diasporas and inhabiting multiple geographies and also in a way really, and in different ways, we are storytellers as well who are sharing stories of a certain place in a different context and in a foreign context. And also like when I met Aziz in Berlin, he was doing a residency at the Bethanien, and this is right around the time when the U.S troops had extracted and the Taliban had taken over. And it's also a lot of things to think through, right? Like how you, overnight suddenly lose a certain identity also becoming stateless, more so not an identity I think that would be too much of an overflow, but also really thinking of you know experiencing a sense of floating as well and how that functions and what does that mean? So I think something so precious has been these conversations that have taken place in Berlin, and that have also been at a point when Aziz has been conceptualizing and also manifesting a few of these works as well so it has been really a position of privilege as well to be able to witness that process in person and to talk through with it and about it.

And this is also a time, I think this was last year, I think in the summer when Aziz and Francesca had approached me to write for this exhibition and as you have already read the text, and I just want to share with you that this is at a time when the exhibition is an idea, the works are still being discussed, it's imagined a certain way and then we work on it and the work was not finished at that point and then we hear that, all of us hear that the exhibition has been postponed, but it's good news because now it's going to be a much bigger exhibition which is fantastic. So it's interesting because with each conversation with Aziz, and these were happening at a very crucial point also because it all started with when Aziz had thought about this, thinking about this work. And I just want to also mention that the sound that has been put together for this installation is coming from field recordings that cover a span of five years so it's a lot of research material that has been in circulation and that Aziz has been thinking through and with for a very long time, which now manifests in multiple ways I would say, in you know really stretching multiple dimensions through this work, *Bushka Bazi*. So yeah, I would call this piece of writing that focuses on *Bushka Bazi* specifically to be a work in progress because what happened was that I wrote about it and after my first draft I went and had a conversation with Aziz and the work is half done and then I'm like oh I need to revisit a lot of things. Then I you know do my final draft of course there were deadlines as well so we couldn't wait for the entire work at that point, so I'm like okay and we are all a bit happy with how it's turned out and we're like okay let's go ahead with it and then when I visit the show, I don't know how much time I spent over there and I just kept going around it because the entire exhibition, as Francesca said, it's experiential and Aziz's work is experiential. I like how Francesca phrased it that there are no subtitles but it's also something that asks you, it doesn't provide you an easy entry into it right? So, it really asks you to spend time and to if not understanding it then at least appreciate the complexity because it is not easy and the tension is there and you feel it and it is there constantly because for this work from each angle you discover a new point. And then I was just saying to Aziz I was like, oh my God I need to go back and go back to the text, and I need to revisit it and I would love to think it through. And also, I think in terms of the sites and how the works respond to the site I think that's also a very important point because another iteration of this work I experienced in the PSM gallery, which is of course a white cube and the way the work resonated in both these sites really gives you a lot to think about. Also like the multiple, once again the approaches and the dimensions that



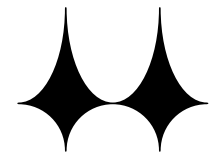
you get to discover is really something, is really thought-provoking in so many ways. Coming to your last question first as to my favourite work in the show I think it's quite difficult because there are a few works that are my favourite and that really draw me in, but I think I just have a special association with *Bushka Bazi* now. It's also something that I have closely witnessed coming into being so I think I would yeah say that that is my favourite. And just to share a little bit about the text and I think if it's okay I'll maybe read a small excerpt from the text as well. So the text is titled, "Amidst the Rebel of Empty Words: Aziz Hazara tracing the Ideascapes in Kabul and Beyond." So I'm going to read two short excerpts and the first one is kind of resonating a little bit with the description that Aziz shared with us for the work also and a little bit of its context:

"Thus despite being essential objects for daily living the bushkas have been a source of fear and anguish. As contrary to sound boxes, as in *Bushka Bazi*, they have been fashioned as explosive devices and car bombs used for suicide attacks in which unsuspecting citizens are often victimized as collateral damage. This strategic maneuver is a psychological conquest, where fear and distrust are instilled into everyday through the mundane, establishing a point of access and a presence that begin to reside in communal and domestic spaces."

Now the second one -- "The frenzy of sound and noise pollution that presides over the city of Kabul, mirrors the multiple parties, nations, armed forces, and foreign missions' mutual interference and claim to the land, where each one tries to speak louder than the other to be heard and display authority. Yet the reality of the situation remains that it is an incomprehensible and consistent noise for the disinterested and exhausted local populace. The soundtrack that is encountered in *Bushka Bazi* before visually experiencing this installation, is the soundscape of Kabul sampled and edited by Hazara from field recordings conducted over a period of five years across Kabul. *Bushka Bazi* thus records some of these experiences witnessed and endured by the citizens of Kabul while commenting on the Taliban mujahideen's ingenious and ghastly crafting of commonplace objects in Afghanistan. This installation comprises the complex layers of meaning that encapsulate the political, cultural, and social landscape of Kabul, embodying nuances of the relationship to the city and home that are consistently being defined by the other. The aesthetic register that assimilates the mundane and the quotidian also include a deep connection and engagement with poetry writing in the Pashto language, open quote 'drawing upon the long tradition of Persian and Urdu words, as well as the Khan Legend and recent history,' close quote. The sound spilling from these makeshift sound boxes in the installation, *Bushka Bazi* include Qasida and Naate recited in the memory of the deceased rebellion."

So, I'm going to end here because then it gets too long but then I go on to delineating the terms and how that functions. This is a little bit of my engagement with Aziz but also it's just to share it but it's also really thinking with and through Aziz's work of artistic strategies that he employs in his work of how narratives are shared, how especially from once again I'm repeating what Francesca mentioned of what is expected especially in the kind of pressure to be representative and then how do you think through these narratives and how do you share what the ground realities are?

Nasrin: Thank you so much Hajra, and we already have a question asking if the essay is available online?



Hajra: From my side it's still a work in progress so I am happy to share it, but I think this was also a text that was commissioned by ICA so I just need to ask them or after the show, I think after the show is done then I can perhaps share it.

Nasrin: Thank you thank you.

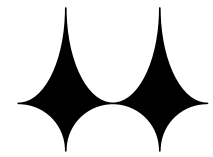
Francesca: Can I chime in for a second?

Nasrin: Yeah of course, yes.

Francesca: There's this the thing of, you know work-in-progress that I think is quite beautiful because there's also, I mean here I'm gonna do a bit of a spoiler, there is an ongoing conversation with Aziz about a possible bushka [inaudible] that is you know the story of this bushka is that in many ways you know responds to these ongoing transformation and this long process of collecting material and also legends I would say, urban myths around the bushkas so I think this is very much accumulative and organically growing never-ending perhaps, project.

Nasrin: Amazing, great, so nice to hear that thank you for the spoiler, I look very much forward to that. So I thank you both and Aziz for sharing the work and the process and your thoughts and about the pieces and the show and the exhibition and the writing and I'm excited to go back a little bit to a piece, an iconic piece, I feel like this is Aziz's iconic piece, *Bow Echo* that was released in 2019 and that I saw at the Sydney Biennial before I ever met Aziz. Before I say anything, I wanted to hear from Aziz about, now that I have you here I get to ask Aziz all the questions I've been wanting to ask since the show has been up, we mostly just exchanged memes or Aziz sends me memes we don't talk about work, which I love. I would love Aziz, for you to tell me about this process I know you made it in Kabul, I know it might be also a little bit tough to talk about because since 2021 and since everything that has taken place since the piece has been out, you haven't been back to Kabul, back to your community and back to your home where you also collaborate with a lot of people there, a lot of friends and family and especially the kids that are also presented in the video playing the kazoo and I don't know if you want to maybe go into just describing a little bit what *Bow Echo* is about. I'm curious to hear about the title and I'm also really interested in hearing about the collaboration with these kids from your community and how that went about.

Aziz: I think the irony is that the Kabul is here and then it's just scattered across West Europe. You see the people that I was working with are now roaming around in West Europe and to some extent in Canada, there's a huge community that was shipped over there. But *Bow Echo* came in a particular time where there was a lot of these proxy wars that were sponsored and it was across from Damascus to Kabul. So, a lot of the proxy warfare that was happening and especially within the community that I was living in West Kabul which is again, I mean Kabul in itself is ghettoized so the different ghettos in different parts of the city. And in the ghetto that I'm still living in and I still love it, there was an influx of these militants that was going to Damascus, and Mosul, and all these cities and then they're coming back with them, there was this conflict that was brought from the region. So this neighbourhood or this ghetto that we were there it was quite okayish during the American occupation but all of a sudden the rules of the game changed where they were blowing up tuition centers, schools and mosques so basically they turned it into the battleground for themselves. And also, again looking at the the 20 years of intervention where they just ruthlessly massacred thousands and

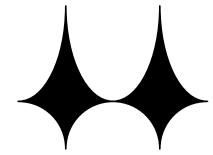


thousands of people across the country, not only in Afghanistan but also Pakistan and the region. So, for a very long time I was thinking what is an artist's position in this side of sort of context where you're blown left and right. And again, I mean the devastation that happens with after each blowing up of school or mosque or anything, or a nitrate or a drone attack, so it again the question of like thinking through that what does it mean to be an artist in this sort of time and what is the responsibility of an artist in these situations? So, I'd been thinking and it impacted me for a very long time that again the question of what's the responsibility of an artist. And years later I came across this collective graveyard where again the kids from my neighbourhood was blown away and there on the spot, the collective graveyard is next to, it used to be Soviet and at the time was American military camp, and the sort of activists or activism that was brought by these intervention cultures especially through the embassies, injected three embassies and served with Scottish whiskey in green zones. And then these collective graveyards just popped up everywhere and I was there and all of a sudden there was a wind that was passing through and there was a trigger, I decided on the spot it triggered me that I need to turn on my camera and film it. And then from there onwards playing with the wind and also you know at the time in Kabul, and still the landscape of Kabul is quite windy, and you get wind all the time so this became a protagonist and I was thinking through the wind that passes through different communities and then crosses different ghettos. And again, I mean a lot of time my practice deals with objects and this sort of normalization of violence where they were selling these M4 American weapon in the form of a plastic toy to kids, or a Soviet made grenade produced in China in the form of chewing gum. So then with these objects there was these tiny miniature-sized trumpets, and then the trumpets again I mean at the moment you notice an object and then it constantly appears here and there. And then I decided to think through and then play around these objects where my cousins here and there they just blow it off, and then again, I was thinking what would happen if we combine these two sounds, these two sonic experiences, of one is the wind and then the other one is the trumpet. And so, in the process of you know dealing here and there and then composing, *Bow Echo* came to be where it's again a community collaboration where not only the five boys were here there's a lot of others that goes at the back, and ironically a lot of these people, my collaborators have been displaced now in West Europe. So now looking back three, four years later and looking at *Bow Echo* is again a story of a wind that travels now from West Kabul to West Europe.

Nasrin: Thank you for sharing all of that Aziz, and yeah, I know the sound of the wind is so prevalent and that's really where a lot of the feeling comes up when you're witnessing or experiencing this piece and I want to hear more about the composition of the sound because you can't think about *Bow Echo* without thinking about the sound of this wind and it's not just the wind there's also something else that's quite eerie, quite haunting, quite powerful that feels like it's bigger than us when we're experiencing it and that's really uplifting us somewhere else, taking us somewhere else and I would love to know more about the process of you putting these images, the images that the sound conjures and also the images that you created in these collaborations.

Aziz: I mean one of the things that happened with this so-called "war on terror" was that the sonic experience where in the Northeast of the country, in the west of the country, even in Kabul there's the choppers that constantly flies NGOs here and there. And in Nangarhar where you can't literally sit together or in [inaudible] you couldn't sit. And then the relationship with people have with the drone sound, at the moment the sound appears in the landscape you disappear, you go out. So that, and then again the vantage point of the mountain where below this mountain there's this Soviet check post



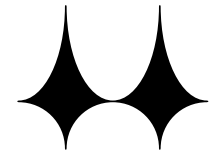


where now it's just merging with the landscape, the Soviet tank is merging with. And yeah, I mean this is a sort of the hill spot that we used to hang out and every now and then it appears in my photographs and next to it on the left is an American camp, and on the other side, on the right is also a Soviet but again American camp. So, this constant sonic experience of choppers flying and drones coming over you, it leaves you with this. Now I can't handle a monotone sound it just reminds me of some sort of machine that hover in the sky. So that was the sort of process of going through these images and making a composition of this shot was, I mean it looks very simple but it was very very long, especially with dealing with teenagers who have their own moods and their own timing where you can't tell them that what to do but you have to wait and then it's a constant wait process of you know, Hassan or Mehdi is in the mood that to blow up or they don't want to blow it up for three days, four days you can't do anything. And partly it's just waiting and waiting and having the camera and the right moment.

Nasrin: Well thank you. I feel like I'm distracting myself, there's an audience question let's go there first and then I'll come back to *Bow Echo*. "The combination of the sounds from the kazoos and the wind gets so powerful when you place your body in the center of the room and I think that when the work is experienced many times which makes the loop essential, it really becomes a part of our own bodies. I would be curious to know what Aziz feels personally as an audience within this work if this separation can ever be made?"

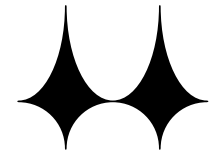
Aziz: Well whenever I watch or listen to *Bow Echo* the sound reappears and reappears in my memory for very very long time. And also in the process when we were editing sound, there's a friend of mine that now is in Germany, he was complaining, there's a month that we have been just chopping off the footages and he was complaining that he can't take off this the sound from his head although he was leaving, he was sitting in like three rooms apart but still like every now and then, 12 at night he would come he was like well I have the sound in my head I feel like the video is running. And we were just laughing, and we were like well this is the effect of this monotone sound and imagine being with that sound in the landscape of Kandahar, or Nangarhar, or Helmand.

Nasrin: We have a few minutes, I thought maybe I'll just read a little bit. It was really hard for me to write about this piece I could never, I don't think I can ever be capable of that, to write about it or analyze it anyway because when you're experiencing *Bow Echo* you're really just feeling it and I wanted to really go with the feeling, I wanted to write with that feeling in mind and like you're saying Aziz, same, when I watch *Bow Echo* I think I have to stand there, it's only four and a half minutes but I think I stand there for really like 30 minutes to just be with it for a longer duration. I can't even feel the time pass that slow because it feels so almost out of sync with the time that we're in, in terms of being there in a gallery space. So it was hard for me when Aamna was asking me to write an essay and I was like I honestly have no idea what I'm gonna write so I decided to write a letter to you Aziz because I feel like even though we don't always talk in specifics or in detail of what the work is about, I felt like we already understood where we were at with each other because the work connected us and bonded us in this way. When I work with an artist that's really what happens first, I am instantly connected to them because of how the work made me feel and it's before I can understand what that feeling is or or how to even put language to it and that's when I know that I'm experiencing something that's really collective and so I really felt that with you Aziz. I feel like you know we became



friends because I wanted to show *Bow Echo* to my friends in Toronto, I wanted to make sure that everyone I know that I love could see *Bow Echo* and then I got in touch with you and then we became friends and you know now it just feels like it's so much about bringing us together in this way, bringing people together in this way that I feel like really understand this type of grief that is generative. It's a grief that is generative, that is constructing a kind of different imaginary that feels bigger than what the world is right now and I feel like that's where *Bow Echo* took me. Anyway so I'm going to read a little bit of this text and then we'll open it up to more questions, feel free to start putting your questions in the chat and in the Q&A box and then we'll get back to it in a few minutes after I just read an excerpt:

"There's something about this work Aziz that keeps me that keeps haunting me. I've been using the word haunting a lot lately to mark feelings of grief that I otherwise can't describe. When I first witnessed and experienced *Bow Echo* it felt as though the work had somehow attached itself to me. In its after effect my body was remembering something familiar, something that was making itself felt and known. Perhaps these resonances were the same ghosts and spirits that have been calling to me for a long time, because as you know I can never stop thinking about Palestine." Actually, I should say today that I can't stop thinking about Jenin today. "And as you know I can never stop thinking about what happened after 911, so I can't ever stop thinking about Afghanistan either, and what has taken place after 20 plus years of occupation. I think about all that has erupted and transformed since then, and all the other places that have been impacted and continue to be impacted by the violence of invasion and occupation. The magnitude of so much loss, so much death, so much taken away, and so many lives disappeared is overwhelming, disturbing and at times unutterable. I can't hold all of it here, but I know it is this haunting that moves us and I've been grappling with it to complicate my understanding of entanglement and diaspora. In my recent work I've been working with artists and poets whose practices, like yours, unpack an expensive but contextually specific diasporic experience in its entanglement with dispossession and displacement. I think about how all these experiences of loss and grief open up and use space, a site for an emergent intimacy that is unbounded and functions without the need for a shared geographic territory. This collective intimacy builds on itself and connects a lot of us who are forced to leave our lands, and I feel the power of how precisely and generously *Bow Echo* moves us toward this shared experience. The writer Sisonke Msimang wrote a text during the pandemic called "Grief is Another Word for Love," which was published in June of 2021. Writing it from lockdown in Perth, Australia while her uncle was dying in Johannesburg, and Palestinians were under attack by Israel, she grapples with the entanglement of private and public grief. At home in South Africa she writes, death brings the neighbours and the house overflows and at dusk we sing until we cry or we cry until we sing. We pray, even those of us who are godless and we call out to our ancestors. Here in Australia someone could die on our road and we might never know it. How can mourning be a private affair when grief does not know how to stay inside? And I find myself returning to this question now Aziz, how can mourning be a private affair when grief does not know how to stay inside? I think this is what pulls me toward your work especially, *Bow Echo*. The occupation and invasion of Afghanistan that the film addresses resonates deeply with me and I imagine it's reverberance across lands and waters reaching the people of Palestine. The echo resounds there too in a spirit of solidarity and understanding that is embodied and that conditions a generative and relational compass. Grief is another word for love might also be a way to describe what pulls at us leading us to another place in our search because what we do is dictated by this love, the love of our people and our land.



*Bow Echo* pushes up against the limits of language, against the limits of representation and against the limits of time to activate this relationship between grief and love. It offers a movement to rhythm and sound that emulates and transpires in the wind at the top of that mountain. It's a presence that grounds us in a moment that is both expansive and precise. It's a dream that magnifies the unutterable. It's a node to your friends, family and all the children that surround you in your community, your neighborhood, your place. It's an ode to their strengths, their hopes, their memories, their dreams, and their life force that is of love, that is liberation, and that is of the land. The echo that resounds here Aziz, is that the work you make connects us. You're not Palestinian and I'm not from Afghanistan but we're entangled in a place of solidarity with so many others who are also building a diasporic world that is as intimate as it is vast, and as certain as it is undisclosed, a world that is of our dreams and unseen futures, that is of our own language in many a poet's tongue, and of the images that reside in us and are waiting to be seen. These images are of us and all that is bigger than us, the images of our people yet to be born in the lands that will be free." This will be a good place to end.

Aziz: Thank you Nasrin.

Nasrin: Thank you Aziz! Thank you so much Aziz for making such incredible work and thank you Hajra and Francesca and Mercer Union and I feel like, I don't know do we have any questions?

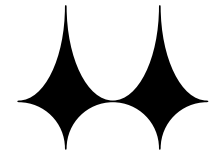
Hajra: I just want to say that was really, really beautiful Nasrin thank you so much.

Nasrin: Thank you Hajra that means so much coming from you.

Aamna: Wow, that was very powerful, very very intense, very insightful. I have a question, I know that, not that I'm trying to be special but you know I have the privilege of turning on my camera so I will. Aziz we we're talking about this a little bit earlier it's as if these three exhibitions in Milan, Toronto and Kolkata kind of assemble a very ambitious and expansive survey of your practice. How does it feel to have all of these works out and open to the public how does, how has it changed if it has at all changed the way you think about these works and what does it mean for you to bring these works to different kinds of publics both in Europe, in South Asia, in North America, yeah is there, I'm very curious to know the how it's felt for you in the last several months while all of these exhibitions have been on?

Aziz: Yeah I mean immensely I'm humbled to have the audience interacting with my works but again the irony is that I'm sitting in West Europe and I can't cross a border where I can't sit with my audience and then talk and the only way that I can reach is through my work and suppose the works doesn't need the identification and passports to cross these drawn lines that are just basically, I mean it's across Asia everywhere so it's again it's an honor feeling but again it's a dialectic of sharing a work but not being able to travel you know. So that and again I mean distance most of the time helps and sometimes it just, it gives you a clear picture.

Aamna: I don't see other questions coming in, I have more questions, can I ask one more question before we wrap things up? I don't think I've ever been to a conversation, a program where curators are sort of entangled with each other's practices so deliberately through one artist's work and I guess I just want to know from maybe each of you how it feels to do that, to know that there are sort of your comrades in similar kind of interests and research across the world looking at the same work and kind of



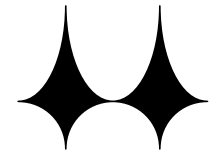
unpacking it in different ways are there things that you have learned from each other that you could share with us?

Francesca: I can start, in the sense that I suppose it is possible because of the political dimension the work of Aziz has. And so you either stand on one side or you stand on the other. And so if you stand on this side, that I would say is the right side then there is a sense of political solidarity that creates a ground or shared values and so there's a bunch of things that by default disappear so there's no competitiveness, there is you know commitment to push and promote and articulate a certain kind of political positionality that in itself could not be individualistic. And so I suppose the knowledge that there is other people it's already there because it cannot be otherwise and then when there's the passion for us, for work as powerful as Aziz's then you know you can only build from there so I suppose. I mean with Nasrin and I only interacted recently but with Hajra has been, yeah, a longer and very stimulating dialogue and then I mean obviously it became clear that without even knowing we have a huge amount of existing, pre-existing connections. Because again I mean if you come from a certain background and that's political you know the base is already there.

Nasrin: I think too, I mean I just want to along with Francesca I just do want to say though Aziz's intention and vision for bringing people together is really, it really I think that's the way that trust builds, is because as Aziz's love for getting people together is always there. And you know like when you go to visit Aziz, he's always having dinners or parties or there's always things happening, he's always bringing people together there's, I'm always meeting you know, I met so many of his dear friends right away. And then I think with this panel and with the way that these shows worked out in some way like this is also Aziz's way of like really conditioning this life force around him that is really about coming together and like having fun and also creating, and this is really what I think is key to this, is Aziz. And this real kind of the value and the principle that he holds when it comes to collaboration as friendship and I think that to me, that's what speaks to me when it comes to thinking about also Aziz's work and how it affects us in these deep ways and also I feel like that's what was, that's a shared value that Aziz and I also have and I feel like that was already in kind of how we came to right away feel this trust.

Aamna: Well Aziz you're going to be blushing for the rest of the night. Yeah Hajra do you have any thoughts?

Hajra: yeah I think Nasrin just put it really beautifully, collaboration as friendship because I think there are a few things I think, the way Aziz is of course bringing everyone together always, I think this idea and especially something that really stands out for me always and it's always so heartening and heartwarming, is and this reminds me of this once again thinking of this idea of grief as love as well is that there is a sense of community and collectivity that very much exists wherever Aziz is. And whether it is the way the process of working the way he is creating works, there's collectivity, collaboration and community there. Or whether it is thinking together, eating together, drinking together, I think that in itself is something you know very very present. Which kind of, I think apart from solidarities I think it really, and in addition to solidarities I think it really kind of becomes not just a meeting point but also a point of, you know, hope. And I think especially with the way things are where in our current milieu and where we are constantly meeting one terrible news after the other, I think these spaces and once again quoting Nasrin, grief as being generative, which is not just in the work but also in the work's strategy but also in social strategy I think that becomes very



important. And I think we've discussed quite deeply, or and of course this is just scratching the surface here, but about Aziz's work I think it's also something that I'm always curious about how everyone engages with Aziz's work. And I think that's always an enriching experience for me because it kind of like, there are certain points where you know, where because in a lot of ways the feelings resonate but I'm always quite interested to see the form they take and the kind of, the way they are articulated. And I think that's always, it's an ongoing conversation so it's a point of growth for I think all of us involved and I think I just really really appreciate that space, that generative space. So yeah.

Aamna: Thank you Hajra, thank you Aziz, thank you Francesca, thank you Nasrin. I keep coming back to your question Aziz, about you know, what does it mean to be an artist in these conditions in these times, and I think we've tried to answer some of that today by sharing with each other what it means to experience the work of an artist across the globe. So I thank you for being available for this kind of deep dive into your practice I know it's a vulnerable position to be in but you articulate your works and the urgency of your practice so beautifully and I look forward to continuing to follow your work and how it touches the works of others including all those that are on this panel today so thank you. I think we'll wrap up here any last words? You want to just say bye? Sounds good.

Aziz: Thank you so much.

Aamna: have a good evening, thank you everyone who joined us, thank you for the questions and we'll hope to see you at the gallery soon. Take care, bye thank you.