Zimoun
Zimoun:
2 covers
240 pages
114 images
6 essays
16,909 words
2 languages
1 typeface
This publication accompanies the exhibition Zimoun organized by The Art Gallery at New York University Abu Dhabi, and curated by Maya Allison. February 26-June 1, 2019.

Editor: Maya Allison
Arabic Editor: Alaa Edris
Authors: Maya Allison, Monica Bate, Alessandra Burotto Tarky, Guido Comis, Alexander Scholz, Karine Tissot
Design: Binnenland
Arabic Design Adaptation: Larry Issa
Translation: Ban Kattan, Alaa Edris
Editorial Production Managers: Alaa Edris, Anne Renahan, Claire Glasby
Copy Editor: Claire Glasby
English Proofreader: Stephanie Hunter
Arabic Proofreader: Mohammad Hamdan
First published in the United Arab Emirates in 2019 by NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery in association with Akkadia Press
www.akkadiapress.uk.com
© 2019 New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, PO Box 129188, Abu Dhabi, UAE
nyuad-artgallery.org
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Printed and bound in the United Arab Emirates by Emirates Express Printing.
First edition.

The NYUAD Art Gallery would like to thank its Advisory Council: H.E. Zaki Nusseibeh, Fatma Abdulla, Abdelmonem bin Eisa Alserkal, Antonia Carver, Sunil Kumar, Tarek Al-Ghoussein, Salwa Mikdadi, and Munira Al Sayegh.

The curator would like to thank the NYUAD Art Gallery team for making this book and related exhibition possible: Alaa Edris, Hala Saleh, Sebastian Grube, Kim Moinette, Tyler Lewis, Kris Mortensen, Tala Nassar, and Maisoon Mubarak.

The artist would like to thank: Florian Buerki, Annie Ruefenacht, Ulf Kallscheidt, Mimi Kind, Persis Hajiyan, Stephanie Sherriff, Lugh O’Neil, Leonie Zernitz, Anna Fach, Binnenland, Hannes Zweifel, Kevin Medal, and Dorothee and Paul Huegli.

The artist and the curator would like to thank: Studio Zimoun, the Binnenland designers, as well as Anne Renahan, Claire Glasby, and Larry Issa of Akkadia Press for their creative collaboration on this book, and Alaa Edris for her editorial production collaboration.
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Curating Zimoun: an Introduction

Maya Allison

Zimoun’s artwork is sculpture, music, composition, soundscape, and installation; it is minimalist, conceptual, expressive, technical, natural, open, rigid, and chaotic.

It is not new media, not glitch, not interactive, not even really kinetic art (he prefers the term “mechanized”), and it is not chance operations, though in dialogue with all of these. Stripped of referents, beyond the prosaic materials from which each installation is made, his work conjures myriad associations while evading categorization.

Nor does the title of a given artwork offer an interpretive door: each work is the sum of its parts. Every single work title begins with a number (as in 317 Prepared DC-Motors, Paper Bags, Shipping Container), as must an exhibition title. For his exhibition at the Art Gallery of New York University Abu Dhabi (the “NYUAD Art Gallery”), the exhibition title had to be limited to Zimoun because to further title it would require confirmation of the exact number of each kind of component in the entire show, and the title went to press before those details were locked in.

Without a cue from the artwork’s title, the viewer is left to make their own interpretations, and must rely solely on the direct experience of their senses. Here Zimoun excels: at every turn he extends work as far into our peripheral vision as possible, filling our visual field with grid upon grid of minute variations on repeat. As with the visual field, the aural field is filled with texture: every element makes sound, repeated in row upon row upon row of activity.

The essays in this book each take different approaches to the question of how to frame, contextualize, and discuss Zimoun’s artwork, beginning with art historical framing, proceeding through music and soundscape, and finally concluding with an interview with the artist himself. There, Zimoun offers: “I like to think of my works as audible buildings that can be entered and explored as much with your ears as with your eyes.”

When the visitor explores these “audible buildings,” they traverse an architectural/sonic composition. In the world of audio compositions, different sections of the music are referred to as “movements” of sound. In the case of Zimoun, this can be
mechanisms lying behind the unpredictability of all phenomena.”

For this book, he situates Zimoun’s project in relation to a
century-long lineage, from the birth of kinetic art experimen-
tation, as with Naum Gabo, but closer in effect to the hypnotizing
machines of Marcel Duchamp (fig. 1) (Fernand Leger’s 1924 film
Ballet Mécanique also comes to mind). As Comis traces this route,
he confirms that Zimoun’s installations stand apart from the
many “non-traditional art” categories: sound art, new media,
and their 1950s predecessors, “programmed art” and the many art
movement “isms” to which one might be tempted to compare Zimoun’s
minimal, abstract, expressive, chance-operations art.

In an earlier essay, Comis drew parallels to the artists Carsten
Nicolai (fig. 2) and Ryoji Ikeda, “who both work with the ele-
mental units of sound and their optical translation.” These
artists also share with Zimoun a similar type of aesthetic impact:
large-scale, room-enveloping installations of gridded repeti-
tion, activating the point where sound meets architecture. In the
work of all three artists, the viewer becomes acutely aware of
their own body in relationship to the architecture and space of
the artwork. And yet, Zimoun stands apart in his exclusive use of
analogue, never digital, visuals and sounds in his installations.
Comis points out that, unlike Nicolai and Ikeda’s soundtracks
or visualizations of sound, Zimoun’s audio is a natural con-
sequence of the object’s action, producing a uniquely integrated
visual and audio composition.

What we hear is what we see, and vice versa, producing a deeply
satisfying agreement among the senses. Still, viewers often
describe the audio effect of his work as sounding like nature—
rain, wind, thunder, rivers—producing a dissonance between
the sounds of the natural world and the visuals of industrial
mechanics. It might look like a city and sound like an ocean,
or look like a warehouse and sound like a thunderstorm.

Like the described tension between sound and visuals, the work
also shuttles across conflicting art historical referents. It
has the spatial awareness of Fred Sandback, the chance operations
of John Cage, the controlled grid of Sol Lewitt, the hypnotics

understood literally, as the body moves through different sound
(and visual) spaces. The exhibition at the NYUAD Art Gallery com-
prises five movements: five physical spaces through which the
viewer’s movements create the sequence and duration of the overall
composition. Move forward, move back, large room, small room: one
can speed up and slow down and reverse one’s experience of this
six-part composition.

In the exhibition mounted at the NYUAD Art Gallery, the first two
movements are long and narrow. Upon entering the building one
encounters both the reception desk and 37 Prepared DC-Motors, 85 m
Rope, Steel Washers ø 40 mm: a wall of dancing washers on threads
tinkle and clatter delicately on a thin shelf. Turn a corner and
192 Prepared DC-Motors, Wooden Sticks 2.4 m, a long stretch of tall,
vertical wooden sticks spin and thrum against the wall of an
18-meter-long corridor.

That corridor opens up into a double-height space where a cylin-
der of cardboard boxes soars to eight meters in 269 Prepared
DC-Motors, Cotton Balls, Cardboard Boxes 60 × 60 × 60 cm. A rumble
emits from an aperture at the base, and if one climbs inside the
hollow column, one sees that each box supports a motor, spinning
a cotton ball against the cardboard. The effect is thunderous.

Opposite that is a small door, leading into the center of the
gallery, and the central piece of the exhibition: here a field of
small (20 cm) sticks, arranged 20 meters deep and 10 meters wide,
dance from a rain of thread attached to spinning motors almost
five meters above. This is a new commission by the NYUAD Art
Gallery: 510 Prepared DC-Motors, 2142 m Rope, Wooden Sticks 20 cm.

Finally, through another door into another corridor, the final
movement. Here, similarly small sticks spin, but lining another
long wall, on a thin shelf, the small sticks are tapping inside
small cardboard boxes: 31 Prepared DC-Motors, 31 m Rope, Wooden
Sticks 19 cm, Cardboard Boxes 10 × 10 × 10 cm.

The curator Guido Comis once described Zimoun’s work as revealing
“what is otherwise invisible: the absolute precision of the

Curating Zimoun: an Introduction
fig. 1 Marcel Duchamp, Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics), 1920. Painted glass, iron, electric motor, mixed media. (Largest blade damaged in 2007 and replaced by facsimile in 2011), 165.7×157.5×98.5 cm.

fig. 2 Carsten Nicolai, Unitape, 2015. Real-time projection, large-scale screen, mirror walls, bench with loudspeakers, dimensions variable. Installation view of Datumsoria. The Return of the Real exhibition, ZKM | Karlsruhe, Germany.

fig. 3 Roman Signer, Stiefel, 2004. Epoxy resin, carbon, 40×30×11 cm. Installation view at Kunstmuseum Solothurn, Switzerland.
and sense of play of Marcel Duchamp, and the humble materials of Arte Povera. It is pure texture, but can never be abstract because it is concrete: we can name what we see and hear (boxes, motors, sticks, string).

Every attempt to describe Zimoun’s work includes comparisons to nature, to urban landscapes, and to music, to minimalism, and to technology. Scale and associations shift and destabilize our relationship to the installation and its spatiality, foiling every attempt to settle into a single metaphor, sense memory, or art historical genealogy.

It is this disorientation that the curator Karen Tissot addresses in this book’s second chapter, describing Zimoun’s work as “made for losing one’s bearings.” On one hand, she points out clear links between Zimoun’s aesthetic and Swiss cultural history. She aligns him with the artist-engineers Roman Signer (fig. 3) and Fischli & Weiss, and their roots in traditions of Swiss watchmaking and measuring time. She also identifies the concern in Swiss art more generally with the concrete as opposed to the abstract. Yet, in the end, she views his work as able to resist the limitations of tradition and interpretation, and opening multiple channels of connection between order and disorder.

Mónica Bate and Alessandra Burotto Tarky both worked on an exhibition of Zimoun’s work at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo of the University of Chile, in Santiago. In her essay, Burotto Tarky points out the ways in which Zimoun’s work echoes the concerns found in the string sculptures of Fred Sandback, activating the negative space around the work. She also notes the key role of documentation in Zimoun’s work, comprising a vast collection of videos that enable us to see his iterative investigations of these modular elements. The role that Zimoun’s documentation plays in his work cannot be understated: the works themselves can never be recreated, but instead of connoting ephemerality, the documentation lends them an air of monumentality, larger-than-life-ness. Through his website archive, one can see the progression, iterations, and investigations of materials and movement over the course of his career.

Perhaps because Zimoun’s installations exist primarily in museum and gallery contexts, one reads more discussion of his visual art than his audio art. In her essay, Mónica Bate responds to the sonic qualities of Zimoun’s installations, invoking the “soundscape,” a term coined by Murray Schafer in his 1977 text The Tuning of the World. The soundscape concept opens up a compelling and infrequently used avenue into reading Zimoun’s work. Schafer delineates the many types of sound, including terms well beyond the scope of a traditional art or music historian, such as keynote sounds, signals, and soundmarks, to consider our acoustic world with more nuance. With the acknowledgement of noise pollution, what and how we hear has emerged as a potent topic in the post-industrial era. Bate highlights the importance of one’s physical space to the quality of sound, as a concert hall is to a performance, or a cavern is to the sound of a river. This awareness permeates Zimoun’s projects, which directly engage with non-amplified expressions of sound.

In 2014, the editor Alexander Scholz visited Zimoun’s studio for an in-depth interview on his practice. Although Zimoun has been exhibiting and performing extensively for the better part of two decades now, Scholz’s interview stands as one of the most comprehensive texts on Zimoun’s practice to date. Scholz links the many threads at work in Zimoun’s practice. He draws connections to the Swiss physicist Hans Jenny’s studies of sound wave phenomena, and to the “useless machines” of artist/designer Bruno Munari. He also identifies the “pareidolia” effect in Zimoun’s audio: the scientific term for our strong impulse to find familiar references in unfamiliar stimuli (such as the sound of rain from wires on cardboard boxes). Scholz’s interview offers a rare look into the artist’s working process and thinking that produce these uncategorizable experiences.

Perhaps because his work is so multivalent, Zimoun has been curated into a staggering range of exhibition themes, including an exhibition that I curated in 2011, Nostalgia Machines, at the David Winton Bell Gallery at Brown University, in the US. All of the machines in that exhibition generated sensations in the viewer that connoted nostalgia in some way, backward-looking
even as we still imagine technology to be a thing that looks forward. For example, Zimoun’s 150 Prepared DC-Motors, Filler Wire 1.0 mm (fig. 4) sounded a bit like rain, and that sound is often used in cinema for scenes of nostalgia.

Today, at the NYUAD Art Gallery, Zimoun’s work appears without any overarching interpretive, thematic framework, as this exhibition is solo, and his first appearance on the Arabian Peninsula. What valence will it find here? Perhaps the same one it would find in any urban center: the intersections of natural and mechanical landscapes, as in the UAE’s urban peripheries, where the forceful power of our landscape cannot be missed, nor the flourishing of industry. As with any urban center, one of the “modern” human conditions is this dissonance: a river rushing under highway traffic, wild plants finding a way through crevices in concrete, a sandstorm experienced from a high-rise, a snowstorm silencing midtown traffic, and so on. In fact, that dissonance is the norm once we start listening closely to the threads of the soundscapes we inhabit every day.

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1 From the essay published on the occasion of an installation by Zimoun at the Swiss arts center, LAC (Lugano Arte e Cultura), in 2014: Guido Comis & Cristina Sonderegger, Zimoun – 36 Ventilators, 4.7 m³ Packing Chips, 956 Prepared DC-Motors, 60 Medical Infusion Sets... (ex. cat) (Lugano: Edizioni Sottoscala, 2014).

2 Ibid.

3 Here it is worth noting that when he performs, he does use amplification, but may compensate by depriving us of sight: he often performs in total darkness, again destabilizing our sense orientation.
To read the full book, please visit Magrudy's at NYUAD or Amazon.