Under the Radar: Ambient Music and/in the Iranian State

‘One thing I think is important to remember is that these performances were not raves. No part of any performance resembled a party. Everyone sat in the dark, moving discreetly to the music and most people were listening quite seriously. It was kind of a brain rave.’

Siavash Amini, Sep. 2016, interview with the Quietus
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What is Ambient music?

- It is not gestural
- It is airy, atmospheric, ambient
- Stretched sonic forms
- Gradual and slow changes
- Background music
- Influences: Field recording, Soundscape music
- ..., R. Murray Schafer, Irv Tiebel, Brian Eno, ...
Areas of Conflict

Musical practices versus Political ideologies and Religious narratives
An active strategy in negotiating a space for their musical practice in the society, transforming the inherited conflicts to a constructively dynamic dialogue with the system...
1. Islam in the Iranian plateau

- Islamic texts are highly ambiguous in their approach to musical practice.
- Islam is a discursive tradition. (Talal Asad 1986)
- Islam in relation to culture and politics
- Music has remained a central element of Iranian culture along with literature and poetry
- Music has long been a contested site for conflicting Identities in Iran.
1979 Revolution

- ‘Islamic’ versus ‘pre-Islamic’ identity
- ‘Tradition’ versus ‘modernity’
- Shah’s modernisation project
- Revolution as a rejection of Western values (‘cultural imperialism’)
- Post-revolutionary regime as a democratic theocracy
- Elections, filtered elections
- Sociopolitical dynamics
3. Locating the ‘Ambient scene’ in the post-2007 society

‘In 2007-8 a few galleries started curating events that focused on the relation of new media and digital technology to art. They invited artists, whose work fitted within the new hip category, to present work. That included a number of our now colleagues and friends in SET Experimental Arts Festival. These galleries treated our work as audio-visual art, which was a trendy category at the time. Performing in galleries was a good deal firstly because we did not have to pay for the space or apply for permissions. Secondly, we knew that there isn’t a big audience out there for our music and galleries could help spreading the word through their connections. The audience for any of our private events at the time did not exceed 50 people. So, our first audience, apart from our friends and families, were the gallery-goer crowd.’

Shahin Entezami aka Tegh, Apr. 2017, interviewed on Skype
Locating the ‘Ambient scene’

- Historical-social-political contexts
- Global (asymmetrical) flows
- ‘Cosmopolitan subjectivities’ (Turino 2003)
- ‘Cosmopolitanism’ (Stokes 2007)
- ‘Active search for an expressive home’ (Ramnarine 2007)
- ‘Affinity interculture’ (Slobin 1993)
- ‘Social Imaginary’ (Castoriadis 1987; Goankar 2002; Taylor 2002)
I believe currently there is more tolerance from both sides. Artists recognise the system’s limitations and respond to it creatively. The system also seems to be cooperative. So, for the moment things are working.

Ali Eslami, Aug. 2017, interviewed on Skype
Ambient scene's key features:

- Experimental and independent
- Reliant upon digital technology and the Internet
- Presented predominantly in gallery and theatre settings
- Ambient in aesthetics
- Minimal or no use of vocals
Aesthetics: background music

I was trying to make a piece that could be listened to and yet could be ignored.

Brian Eno, notes to *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978)
‘There are no specific rules for the type of electronic music we produce. Also, there have not been major obstacles, at least throughout the past 4 years. As a Rock band you’d still have problems to secure a permission unless you have connections. Even then you may not succeed. Even if you do, there is still the risk that they might cancel your concert, sometimes in the middle of the gig.’

Hesam Ohadi aka Idelfon, Jun. 2017, interviewed on Skype
Contexts, strategies

- Sociopolitical contexts
- Aesthetics of the ‘Ambient scene’
- Format and scale of the events
- Type and quantity of the audience
- Pragmatic approach to the permit system
- Politically cautious attitude of the artists
- Recognising the boundaries
- Creative play within/within the boundaries
‘In brief our practice concern creative experimentation with the sound. We are not about conveying any message beyond that. We have managed to dialogue with the system because we want to make it work and make it work here in Iran. So, we readjust our ideals and customize our shows based on the current structures, without compromising our creative practice. I am not sure if the scene will still exist in a four-year time: political situations may change or people’s anxiety about the prospect of a future might overcome their love for experimentation. I don’t know. But, for now the weather is clear. The scenery is beautiful, and there is hope in the air.’

Narcissa Kasraï, May. 2017, interviewed on Skype
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Photos courtesy of SET Festival Tehran (2017)
Taken by Aram Tahmasbi