

# Dreams and Music: Hassan Khan

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AUC\_LAB Notes on Practice

EDITED BY

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Kaya Behkalam, Anneka Lenssen, Beth Stryker (eds.)

*Dreams and Music: Hassan Khan*

AUC\_LAB Notes on Practice Vol.2



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## INTRODUCTION

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The present volume is devoted to an exploration of the practice of Hassan Khan, an artist who produces works, texts, pieces of music, and exhibitions from a capacious store of sources comprised of both notional incidents—“the way you dash across the road, the exact distance between two shelves in a run-down café, the hysterical ranting of an obsessed writer, a moment of embarrassment suddenly remembered while washing the dishes, the fantasy of an incredible victory, a burning ambition, a deep sadness, a half-smile, a simple song that every time it’s listened to reveals something new, a mistake taken absolutely seriously”—and the ordered structures of motivated meaning that are sustained in secret agreements and social coercion.<sup>[1]</sup>

This volume contains two examinations of relationships to source material in particular: *dreams* and *music*. Both by their nature are immaterial. Both seem to resist the domain of language as well, for their particular modes of signification may, at best, be only partially and indirectly recollected in prose. The invited essays for this book—Nida Ghouse on dreams and Sam Shalabi on music—play out by means of allusion and juxtaposition, offering perspectives that are closer to practice and artistic exchange than to the art criticism one might expect from a monograph. As such, this book is also about the challenge of placing images, objects, and events under the prison-house of language. We wish to explore the problem of trying to know Khan’s artistic practice—not just its processes of

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[1] Hassan Khan, “Trusted Sources,” *Artforum International* (October 2013).

composition, but also what escapes incorporation or becomes lost.

Sources rarely appear openly or unaltered in Khan's work, and they manifest not as factual documents but rather referents carrying their own idiosyncratic form, conveying ambiguities and enigmas through an intricate and nonlinear process of translation. Dream images can become text images and eventually find their way by parataxis into other image constellations and structures, as in *The Alphabet Book*. Or, into entire exhibitions, as in *KOMPRESSOR* at Gasworks London (2006), which was described in its subtitle as "an exhibition based on translating sets of dreams into different forms by the dreamer."

Crucially, Khan's attempts to make use of the compressor function of the middle term, which is to say the process of recomposing psychical material in negotiation with the censor by which our dreamt images appear, need not amount to an assertion of artistic agency. This translation may be more an operation of estrangement, or perhaps a dispossession.

"[I]n a dream I meet myself, but I cannot control what I see. Dreams are the most visible projection of the interior experience of the self, but also, because they're unknown, they're the most external. So what I did there was translate—as opposed to represent—those dreams, according to different processes for each piece... In *The Alphabet Book*... I wrote down dreams and then made a story, out of which I discovered an image. While I'm engaged in this process, I believe in it. Yet I have no faith in it. I don't believe in it as dogma. I can break it according to desire or error, but I believe in what it does to this process of translation."<sup>[2]</sup>

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[2] Shahira Issa in conversation with Hassan Khan and Wael Shawky, *Kaleidoscope* 15 (Summer 2012).

Nor do such procedures of non-linguistic translation imply an ambition to be truthful to the form of the original source. Rather, to break the representational order of the receiving language, to bring forth a form of difference. As Maurice Blanchot puts it, taking recourse to Walter Benjamin's language theory, here the translator "is the secret master of the difference of languages, not in order to abolish the difference, but in order to use it to awaken in his own language, through the violent or subtle changes he brings to it, a presence of what is different, originally, in the original."<sup>[3]</sup>

It is this twofold estrangement or exploration of difference that shines through works like *The Alphabet Book* or *Jewel*, both appearing in Khan's 2014 exhibition in Cairo and both objects of discussion in this book. A process of translation, which proceeds by producing difference at the interfaces of languages and forms, is evident in Khan's musical compositions as well. Instead of following the ubiquitous practice of sampling in much of today's electronic music, we might say that Khan accesses source material by reconstructing it. He records or produces new sounds that, while still referring to existing sources, arrangements, and instruments, become discontinuous with those they were taken from, as in Khan's concert *Taraban*, which took form through two songs by Youssef El Manialawy from the early twentieth century, making use of newly recorded performances on oud, qanoun, violin, riqq, and vocals. When working with musicians in a studio he uses endless repetitions and given obstructions, in order to disrupt their studied routines and to render their practice foreign to themselves. In the composition, this source material gets rearranged, and deconstructed by the use of additional middle terms: feedback systems and filters. Khan makes his music

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[3] Maurice Blanchot, "Translating" In *Friendship*, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

from making sounds surprise, disturb and reconcile with other sounds.

Both Nida Ghouse and Sam Shalabi have previously assumed the challenge of knowing (but not describing) Khan's work, even playing the role of interlocutor at times. Ghouse, a curator and writer living in Bombay, has produced numerous programs with Khan, including *14 Proper Nouns*, a series of discussions between them at the Delfina Foundation in London. Her present text *The Loss of Tokyo* is based on extensive conversations with Hassan Khan and an exploration of his notebooks and materials stretching back to the early 1990s.

Shalabi, a musician living in Montreal, is, among many other things, a founding member of the *Shalabi Effect*, a pioneering music project formed in 1996, which describes itself as "a free-improv ensemble that started by mixing classic psych rock guitar with oud, tabla, and electronics, and has evolved over the years to research the far-flung exotica of experimental live music."

From the investigations these two long-term collaborators of Khan's have contributed to this volume, we can begin to discern how he perpetually reverts to the artificiality of the edifices of meaning—that which is different, originally, in the original. Improvisation can become an act of rearrangement. As Sam Shalabi

describes it, elements of familiar structures begin mirroring themselves, dissipating, and briefly re-affiliating in Khan's music, as "a search for other hidden systems and structures within the individual and the act of creation itself."

Finally, the volume contains yet another line of investigation into this practice of translation and its ways of weaving in and out. In addition to the texts by Ghouse and Shalabi, the publication includes photographs documenting Khan's 2014 monographic exhibition in Downtown Cairo, images from *The Alphabet Book* and other works, and a series of previously unpublished documents selected by Khan from his notebooks and hard drives. These stand in as material traces of working process, or even notes and comments to the propositions of this book: whether recollections from dreams, hasty sketches, screen- and snapshots from travels, or found objects, spanning from the early 1990s until today, with commentary by the artist.

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- Kaya Behkalam, *Anneka Lenssen*