

# Mimosa House

## ***Syncopes. When the heart is like a feather.***

Daria Khan

*Syncopes*, the twelfth exhibition at Mimosa House, had been in preparation long before the pandemic unfolded – its opening postponed three times; now the works selected for the show have acquired new dimensions during this ongoing period of global suspension.

For almost a year, we have existed in a new syncopated flow of the post-pandemic world, one that unpredictably throws us out of habitual rhythms and puts our lives on pause. For some, this interruption was finite; for others temporary; for others still it incited productive acceleration; for most it has meant lost opportunities and deterioration of mental health. The new syncopated reality bears long-term consequences on our perception of time, stability and safety, and importantly on our relations with others, as it forces a reevaluation of closeness and proximity.

I first became interested in the notion of syncope in a philosophical and literary context, when I came across work of the late artist and novelist Svetlana Boym, who I was fortunate to meet in person in 2014, as well as texts by the writer and journalist Masha Gessen. Both emigrated to the US from the Soviet Union in the early 1980s and compared their experiences of migration to an embodied experience of syncope – an irreversible change that split their life and identity into a before and after.

Boym understood syncope in relation to nostalgia, which she connected to the loss of time, an event both unrepeatable and irreversible. Boym often revisited the writing of Vladimir Nabokov, who used the notion of syncope throughout his oeuvre. Nabokov described his forced immigration from the Russian Empire in 1919 as ‘a syncopal kick that I would not have missed for worlds.’<sup>1</sup> He also used syncope in reference to time in the novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (1936), as his protagonist described the anticipation of death: ‘between his movement and the movement of his lagging shadow – that second, that syncope – there is the rare kind of time in which I live – the pause, the hiatus, when the heart is like a feather’. Many years later, in his last novel *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), Nabokov synthesised the notion of syncope as a suspension of time: ‘Maybe the only thing that hints at a sense of Time is rhythm; not the recurrent beats of the rhythm but the gap between two such beats, the grey gap between black beats: the Tender Interval.’<sup>2</sup>

Trying to make sense of my own Soviet upbringing in the USSR, and later in post-Soviet Russia, and simultaneous sense non-belonging to the country of my birth due to my East-Asian origins, and finally my emigration later on, I found the notion of syncope useful for processing this experience. My family tree is full of blanks: faces cut out from the photographs, surnames changed and forgotten, forced displacements and families left behind. I have had to re-compose my family history out of these grey gaps and missing facts, learning to embrace them as a crucial part of the history. Sometimes, accepting absences can make you appreciate presences even more.

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (2012).

A syncope – a ‘tender interval’ – can be described in music as an unstressed ‘empty’ beat that interrupts the expected rhythm; in linguistics as the suspension of a syllable, or a letter; in medicine as a partial or complete loss of consciousness. Syncope changes the rhythmical pattern creating a break and interruption. This exhibition adopts these ruptures, asynchronicities and interruptions as productive methods to alter, transform and reconsider our perception of time, our engagement with text, image and sound and with reality in general.

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The newly commissioned film by the DJ, voyager and artist Chooc Ly Tan, *On the Offbeat* (2020), features interviews with interdisciplinary practitioners on the subject of syncope in sonic, spatio-temporal, bodily and even culinary experiences. The notion of syncope is tackled in relation to time and cosmos, gender and identity, diaspora and belonging, habits and behaviours. The scientist Rishi Malin Kumar describes syncope as a metaphor for the unpredictable occurrence of common knowledge in opposition to the systems of power, which then leads to collective uprisings. Elsewhere, artist and composer Hannah Catherine Jones views Eurocentric monoculture as a downbeat, where decolonisation acts as a syncopation, which disrupts the canon of history and knowledge, and of music in particular.

Meanwhile, the femme vogue dancer Omar Jordan Phillips describes syncope as a suspension that triggers our sense of anticipation, and also creates a pause for people to intervene in. The sound, music and rhythm of vogueing act as catalysts for the performer to narrate their personal story: of gender identity, of body transformation by the means of movements and gestures. The dance allows the body – the queer body of colour in particular – to come out of invisibility and manifest itself as it is, and importantly, as it is willing to be seen.

The historian Paul Gilroy writes about ‘temporal disjunction’<sup>3</sup> as an effect of invisibility, quoting the novelist Ralph Ellison: ‘Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around.’<sup>4</sup> The experience of being in the margins and out of beat within the dominant pattern is a common feeling among people ‘othered’ by their diversity and queerness. Tan’s film suggests that the syncopated rhythm of diasporic music and dance re-enacts this ‘temporal disjunction’, with every beat and movement adding to building an alternative empowering pattern. Being ‘out of beat’ connects people together, allowing them to recover their identity and presence.

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In 2016 Lala Rukh created her final seminal work, *Rupak*, consisting of 88 drawings and an animation. *Rupak* – the musical rhythm played on the tabla (a hand drum) – is characterised by its seven beat cycle, which might sound unusual for an untrained ear because of its distinct asymmetrical rhythm. It took Rukh many months of work to transcribe *Rupak* on paper, as she explained: ‘*Rupak* is *saath maatra* (rhythmic cycle of 7), and it took me a long time to grasp the

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952).

*sam* (first beat of any rhythmic cycle), which comes on a *khali* (empty beat). That was very difficult to get into because it went against a habitual understanding of the beginning always being marked with a beat<sup>5</sup>. *Rupak* is currently on view at Tate Modern, while Mimosa House features two works by Rukh: graphite drawings on carbon paper from the *Mirror Image* series (2011) and a sound work, *Subh-e-Umeed* (2008).

*Subh-e-Umeed*, which translates as 'expectation', records sounds of the artist's everyday environments. The sound piece closely traces the course of Rukh's day: birds were recorded during her early morning walks in a park; in the afternoons, after teaching at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Rukh attended protests during which she recorded the slogans of activists, which she later archived.

Meanwhile, the *Mirror Image* triptych depicts almost invisible reverberations of water on black carbon paper. These minimal marks – waves of dissent – condense the artist's participation in social uprisings and practices of close listening. *Mirror Image* maps the passing and stillness of time, seeming to capture an instant and an eternity at once. Graphite strokes recall pulsating rhythm of *qats* (marks made using the width of a calligraphic pen's nib), depicting notes in *Rupak*; the darkness of paper acts as a silence in between the sounds.

Alongside minimal mark making, water and horizon have been persistent elements in Rukh's work since the 1990s, when she first used calligraphy to depict the horizon. Throughout the years, Rukh's artistic language has become ever more minimal, and the late *Mirror Image* drawings can be viewed as a form of gradual self-erasure, as the artist said in relation to the series: 'This is when I had a courage to disappear'<sup>6</sup>.

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'The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.' These are the first lines of Virginia Woolf's great experimental novel *The Waves* (1931).

The novel formed the basis of Himali Singh Soin's video work *The Particle and the Wave* (2015), in which the artist scrolls through the text, highlighting its rhythmical composition and, in particular, the use of semicolons. In Woolf's text, semicolons act as ambiguous punctuation marks: shorter than full stops, longer than commas, yet not as enticing as colons. Scanning through the text and marking the delicate interruptions of the semicolons, Singh Soin tunes into the rhythm of the text and explores the sound of its pauses. Using a computer algorithm, she measures the distance between the semicolons, with every distance being assigned a distinct sounding of chimes, from low to high depending on the count of words in between the semicolons. The abstraction of text and distancing from meaning acts as a backdrop for Singh Soin's newly created musical score, inviting the listener to move with the pace of the text.

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<sup>5</sup> Lala Rukh, quoted in *The documenta 14 Reader* (2017)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Across the duration of the video, a gradual erasure of the text occurs, leaving fewer and fewer words and finally only semicolons. On the last day of the exhibition, Singh Soin will perform in front of the work, her spine aligning with the spine of the book on projection, as she writes marginalia onto the gallery wall. The final live act of the text's erasure will be accompanied by improvised jazz drumming performed by the musician David Soin Tappeser.

In a recent paper titled *Carnal Hermeneutics and Democratic Reading* (2020), the scholar Ariane Mildenberg describes Woolf's semicolons as 'hinges': 'By bringing to light this invisible hinge, Woolf not only "unhing[es] simple binaries (such as metropole and margin),"<sup>7</sup> but she also invites a reading practice of love and connection'. Semicolons invite continuity – of the text, of reading, and of life itself. In the context of Woolf's anti-imperialist politics, as argued by Mildenberg, the semicolons act as an attractive force, invoking the proximity and erasure of borders by connecting the disconnected parts of the text and of the world.

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The experience of emigration, and an anatomical approach to linguistic untranslatability, laid basis for Qian Qian's multimedia installation *People should listen to the birds' flight* (2018). The title of the work derives from *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934), a short story collection by the Polish writer Bruno Schulz, which Qian Qian read in Chinese. The artist noted that the English translation of the sentence didn't convey the same nuance as in the Chinese, where the word 'flight' is a bird-like hieroglyph, which combines with an hieroglyph depicting feathers; the combination of both represents the stillness and straightness of the state of flying. Embracing the failure of translation to transmit the subtlety of the intended meaning, Qian Qian chose to encrypt messages into Braille codes slabs. By inviting the audience to touch the slabs and activate sounds, Qian Qian allows the audience to decipher meaning through hearing the sound and interpreting it in their own way.

The act of touching generates sounds of birds singing, wings clapping wings, cars roaring, steps pacing – various noises of the city, recorded by the artist during her walks in London. The experience of being a migrant, and the continuous efforts to decipher the world and words around her, led Qian Qian to explore interdependence and translation between the cultures, and importantly the potentiality of lost meanings.

Coding and language are integral to another work by Qian Qian, a painting titled *Dah Dah Dah Dit Dah Dah Dah Dah* (2018). The title of the work is the binary code '0' and '1' written in Morse; the dotted line of the code becomes the painting's horizon, which features colourful, floating blobs connected by thin, angular lines. The abstract, egg-shaped blobs can be read in various ways: as cosmic eggs, alchemical images, planets, microorganisms or embryos. Meanwhile, the algorithmic terrain drawn in thin lines connecting the blobs refers to the unification of micro and macro universes, and to the artist's fascination with the theory of Quantum entanglement. This scientific phenomenon demonstrates a total interconnectedness between particles, and indeed between everything in existence. Qian Qian's meticulously built cosmology unites nature and science, languages and myths, by embracing the occurring slippages of meaning as a crucial element of staying alert, moving beyond automatism, and by enticing the practice of deep listening and attention.

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (2005).

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How does the data sound? Mira Calix's sound work *16 Weeks* (2018) employs the technology of 'sonification' to trace the ultrasound-recorded movement of a foetus in utero. Calix uses sonification – the practice of mapping data to produce sound signals – to translate the movement of the foetus into a sound piece.

Foetal images are generated by ultrasound, also called sonography – an imaging method that uses high-frequency sound waves to produce images of structures within the body. The artist converts the moving image of the foetus into greyscale data, a long binary code that, in turn, is sonified and then orchestrated by the artist, to be performed by an ensemble of six musicians.

In her translation of the random movements of a foetus into long-form binary code, and its further translation into a score for a live orchestra, Calix tackles the effects of pattern and its perception by humans. Cognisant that human senses crave symmetry in visual and sonic patterns, the artist intervenes into the irregular data, turning it into a melodic musical composition.

While Calix converts chaotic movement into the harmonious sound of an orchestra, the artist Ruth Beraha contrarily warps the legendary *Star Wars* soundtrack into a vaguely familiar cacophony. The resulting sound piece, *A long long time ago in a galaxy far away* (2019), which is played on a black square-shaped speaker, is the final work in the show.

Interfering with the song's theme by converting it from major to minor, the artist confronts the viewer with sonic disorder, as the sound emancipates itself from the score and its harmony, obtaining an out-of-sync quality – as if anticipating its final disintegration to the point of becoming incoherent. As the theorist Jacques Attali has suggested: 'Noise is nonsense: the absence of sense, interference with sense, or the proliferation of sense beyond the point of intelligibility.'<sup>8</sup> Beraha's work acts as a manifesto of discord, a violent gesture towards the musical score, which threatens to deconstruct music into 'noise [as] a source of pain'<sup>9</sup>.

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In early Summer 2017, just before opening Mimosa House to the public for the first time, I joined some friends on a volcanic island, where we took part in an audio-sensory experiment. The intention was to connect to our unconscious by way of sound. This 'descent' into the unconscious was accompanied by the percussions of a drum, performed live by a musician. Over a number of hours, the insistence, incoherence and uncontrollability of the percussion sounds was impossible to escape, and I began to find the rhythm of the drum irritating to the point of physical pain.

Half way through my descent, the cacophony of percussion started to form itself into a different sound – that of a choir. Still loud and inescapable, the choir of beautiful low voices that I now heard recalled a mass at church. I soon realised that, unable to deal with the insistent drumming and in order to survive its chaos, my hearing somehow transcribed the noise into a

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

choir. This sonic hallucination was an experience of syncopation, which liberated something inside of me, enabling a confrontation of the descent, where I could meet a visceral part of myself.

The philosopher Catherine Clément described syncope as a catalyst for closeness and affect: ‘the Subject in search of syncope does not want to escape from time, but from a part of itself that denies it access to intimacy’<sup>10</sup>. This echoes the words of Mildenberg, who identified Woolf’s syncopated semicolons as inviting ‘a reading practice of love and connection’<sup>11</sup> – referring to an insistence on continuity, proximity and the unhinging of binary thinking.

Syncope deprives the body of its obedience to the mind, throwing us out from habitual rhythm and manifesting change. Syncopation as a temporal arrhythmia interferes with that which is regular or taken for granted – the heartbeat of time and reality. The variety of voices, sounds and rhythms in this exhibition coexist in a syncopated polyphony, composed out of interruptions, silences and erasures, renouncing one single narrative, monoculture and dominance.

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (1994).

<sup>11</sup> Ariane Mildenberg, *Virginia Woolf, Carnal Hermeneutics, and Democratic Reading* (2020).