

TAREK ATOUI IMPROVISATION IN 10 DAYS

«There is no loop, there is no beginning and end in the sense of a musical composition or structure that starts and ends. There's a cycle that is always transforming, and a relationship between instruments that is always changing.»

TAREK ATOUÏ IMPROVISATION IN 10 DAYS

curated by
Lucia Aspesi

Pirelli HangarBicocca
06.02 – 20.07.2025

Calendar of Events Around the Exhibition

- 5 February:** Tarek Atoui and Seo in Seok, Korean traditional drum maker and musician, activate the show on the occasion of the opening
8 May: Activation of the exhibition by sound artist Enrico Malatesta
29 May: Performance by Tarek Atoui with Canedicoda, Charbel Haber, Mariam Rezaei
19 June: Activation of the exhibition by sound artist Diana Lola Posani

Creative workshops designed by the artist and dedicated to visitors and their families are offered throughout the exhibition period. Special guided tours and workshops open to groups of deaf and hearing people are conducted and designed in collaboration with experts in Italian Sign Language.

Museum Mediation

Museum mediators are present in the exhibition spaces to answer questions from the public, give information and context elements that can deepen the fruition of the artworks.

Catalog and Vinyl

Resulting from the collaboration between Pirelli HangarBicocca, IAC Institut d'art contemporain, Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes, Kunsthaus Bregenz, and S.M.A.K. Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art, Ghent, the catalog "DIALOGS" dedicated to the exhibition and the set of vinyls "MONO LOGS" are published in April 2025. Both are available at the Pirelli HangarBicocca bookshop and online.

Discover more on our website.



Tarek Atoui
Photo Locus Athens

The Artist

Tarek Atoui (b. 1980, Beirut, Lebanon; lives and works in Paris) is an electro-acoustic artist and composer whose work investigates the intersection between visual and sound research and experimentation through installations, complex sonic environments, and collaborative performances. Atoui explores sound and its perception combining computers and synthesizers with organic elements such as water, air, stone, and wood, to build instruments with innovative musical and visual qualities. His performances are characterized by the overlapping of acoustic layers, stemming from recordings of urban and industrial settings and sounds of instruments conceived by the artist in collaboration with artisans and musicians. Atoui's practice also extends to the exhibition space, which is transformed into a place of discovery and learning, constantly reimagining the relationship with sound and making it perceptible not only acoustically, but also through a multi-sensory experience. The temporal dimension is a central aspect of Atoui's works, in terms of both the production time required to make the installation components and the duration of the musical



The Ground, 2015-19 (detail)
Installation view, Bourse de Commerce -
Pinault Collection, Paris, 2021
© Courtesy Tarek Atoui and Pinault Collection.
Photo Aurélien Mole

experience. Visitors are invited to an immersive listening experience, during which the perception of sound and time intertwine, triggering an intimate connection with the work.

Atoui grew up between Lebanon and France and studied contemporary and electronic music at the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional in Reims. Since the early years of his research, he has incorporated the audience in the creative process, exploring the connection between sound and the body. This concept is influenced by leading protagonists of experimental music, such as John Cage (1912–1992), who invited listeners to focus on silence and environmental noises, encouraging deep reflection on how sound was produced and perceived. At the same time, jazz improvisation served as a foundation for Atoui to explore the possibilities of a language that is detached from traditional music conventions. Extending his research to different artistic fields, he examines the work of innovative figures «that strongly defined contemporary art practices—in the way that Jackson Pollock’s work broke with the forms of painting, Jean Tinguely’s did with sculpture, Stan Brakhage’s did with cinema, and Merce Cunningham’s did with dance.»

Atoui’s music is a process that consists in layering different languages and experiences. This approach includes workshops on musical improvisation that the artist has been conducting with teenagers since 2005, starting in various French cities, including Reims, and later in Amsterdam, Cairo, and several refugee camps in Lebanon. In 2007 Atoui became co-director of STEIM, the center for musical research in Amsterdam, and the following year released his first album of electronic music. A pivotal activity in the development of his performative practice was his participation to the artist’s residency at the Sharjah Art Foundation in the United Arab Emirates in 2008. There, Atoui combined musical score and live performances to create “Empty Cans”, a workshop featuring instruments made from parts of PlayStation joysticks or Wii Remote controllers. This initiative targeted young people, encouraging them to work creatively and actively interact with sound. The project was presented during the 9th Sharjah Biennial in 2009 and at the New Museum in New York later the same year. Atoui subsequently developed his first workshop with deaf people, *Below 160* (2011): a performance of electronic music at frequen-



cies below 160 hertz (low and infra-low tunes), during which he invited students from the Al Amal School for the Deaf in Sharjah to move through the space in response to musical vibrations.

After developing these workshops and collaborative projects, Atoui began to create the body of work entitled *WITHIN* (2013–ongoing), which was presented in an initial version at the 11th Sharjah Biennial in 2013 and expanded over the years. This is the first group of works conceived as continuously evolving pieces. *WITHIN* is composed of various instruments that utilize the passage of air through resonant bodies, allowing to analyze the viewers' neural responses to visual and corporeal stimuli.

The exploration of the mechanisms of perception, experience, and knowledge, which Atoui initially conducted first-hand as the sole



Chris Watson and Tarek Atoui
during the sound recording process
for *I/È Elefsis*, 2015, Greece
Photo Alexander Guirkingner

activator of the instruments, has given rise to collaborations with other musicians. For example, at the 8th Berlin Biennale in 2014 the artist invited 18 musicians to play instruments from the ethnographic collection of the Dahlem Museum in Berlin. Choosing intentionally not to provide access to information about the history or origin of the objects, Atoui leaves space for musicians to conduct recorded improvisation sessions, which are then brought to artisans with the request «to imagine and rebuild the instruments that would have generated these recordings.» The activity subsequently spawned *The Reverse Collection* (2014/2021), an installation composed of imaginary musical instruments whose forms, materials, and ways of playing are very far from traditional ones.

Atoui's attention to the cultural context and social dimension guides the development of new bodies of work, often conceived during travels. For five years, the artist explored

southern China, in the Pearl River Delta region, documenting traditional and contemporary agricultural, architectural, and musical practices in a booklet for artisans and instrument makers. This research resulted in the instruments used in *The Ground* (2015–19), an installation and live performance presented at the 58th Venice Biennale. Moreover, during studies conducted in South Korea in 2019, his approach to compositional technique changed, combining it with meticulous investigation into the acoustic properties of materials, for example immersed in water or subjected to heat, tension, rotation, or vibration.

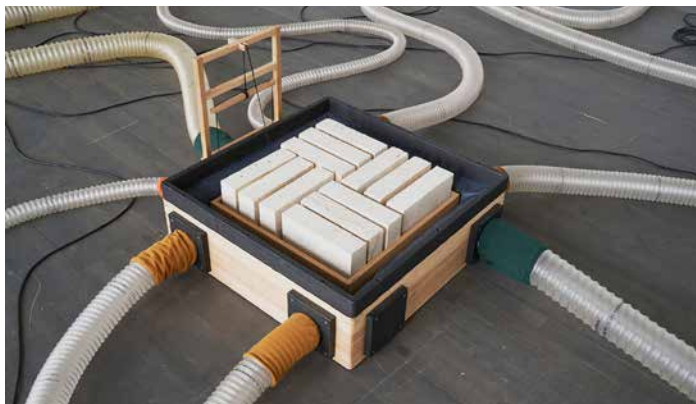
Tarek Atoui's voice is expressed in a transversal and poetic manner, combining the artistic, musical, and educational spheres into works that are reconfigured each time. This continuous evolution goes hand in hand with the exhibitions. Indeed, each show is an opportunity to design new ways of interacting with the public, the surrounding place, and the context: «I don't want to force the space to my work, instead I prefer to see how the space would transform the work.»

The Exhibition

“Improvisation in 10 Days” is Tarek Atoui's first solo exhibition in Italy. «In Milan, my proposal is a homage to *improvisation*,» explains the artist, borrowing a specific term from musical lexicon to underscore the experimental and transformative approach that characterizes the project. The show reimagines three groups of works—*Souffle Continu* (2022–24), *Waters' Witness* (2020–23), and *The Rain* (2023–24)—and their readaptation, conceived by the artist over 10 days, in the Shed at Pirelli HangarBicocca.

As in musical pieces where notes and themes intertwine in a spontaneous and ever-changing dialogue, the visual and sonic elements of these installations are rearranged in a composition with fluid dynamics, acquiring a new identity. This process of adaptation becomes an essential part of Atoui's artistic production, where “improvisation” appears in the reconfiguration of objects and components, transforming them in response to the environment and its specific features.

The artist conceives the exhibition as an open structure: «I like the idea of realizing the potentiality of a space by not erecting walls. In many of my works, the spaces are totally open, connecting with the outside as much as possible.» The spatial dimension is constantly changing—natural light marks the passing of the day and the elements of the works blend with the sounds, reverberating in the bodies and things. The evolution of the exhibition goes beyond the temporal indication of its title, and its true potential lies in its constant transformation and ability to initiate dynamic relationships between space, works, and people.




Organ Within, 2022 (detail)
Installation view, S.M.A.K., Ghent, 2024
Courtesy Tarek Atoui and S.M.A.K. © Dirk Pauwels

Souffle Continu, which includes:

 **Organ Within**,
2022

 **Wind House #2**,
2024

 **Wind House #1**,
2023–24

 **Reedboxes**,
2022–24

The **Souffle Continu** group of works comprises objects that use the passage of air to produce sound and vibration. In the artist's vision, it is intended as «a set of possibilities and a potential sound generator that can produce a multitude of music pieces, collective situations, and interpretations.» Atoui commenced his research on this type of work in 2013, in dialogue with deaf students, resulting in the development of an initial body of works entitled *WITHIN*. The intention was to introduce the audience to a sonic experience based not so much on auditory perception, but rather on a physical, visual, and gestural one. Each object is the result of collaborations with musicians and artisans, while its “playability” has been explored through various workshops with educators and students.

Organ Within emerged from a collaboration with Léo Maurel and Vincent Martial and their research on pipe organs in church-



Wind House #1, 2023–24
Installation view, Kunsthau Bregenz, 2024
© Tarek Atoui and Kunsthau Bregenz. Photo Markus Tretter

es, modular synthesizers, and the perception of tones by deaf people. Air, channeled in pipes spread out like tentacles on the ground, produces amplified vibrations that generate low frequencies, perceptible not only to the ear but also as physical sensations in the listener's body. Here, *Organ Within* is presented together with **Reedboxes**, small instruments shaped like wooden boxes assembled using materials with different acoustic properties that produce melodies.

Wind House #1 and **#2** are sound rooms that visitors are invited to enter. *Wind House #1* was inspired by *SubBass Prototone*, an experimental 200 x 200 x 200 cm organ pipe (whose measurements Atoui replicated) built by instrumentalist Johannes Goebel in the 1980s. *Wind House #2* has a more elongated shape that creates a different reverberation of sound in space. In both works, the device that emits the sound consists of a side opening that slides vertically, allowing different tones to be obtained depending on the amount of wind injected into the room by a compressor. The vibration of the soundwaves is propagated through the surfaces of the chambers and transmitted to the visitor's body, who becomes part of this imposing musical instrument.



The Rain, 2023-24 (detail)
Installation view, Mirrored Gardens,
Guangzhou, 2024
Courtesy Tarek Atoui and Vitamin
Creative Space



The Rain, 2023-24

The Rain explores multiple ways of producing sound using the four elements: water, air, earth, and fire. Atoui started this project during a research trip to South Korea that culminated in the presentation of the work at the 14th Gwangju Biennale in 2023. «This piece was an homage to these four elements, where the idea was to have them laying on the ground. Here, they play a fundamental role, they are the performers, and they are I would say at the forefront of bringing this piece to life and making it come together.»

The project also stems from an in-depth study of the techniques involved when crafting musical instruments, made from ceramic, porcelain, and traditional Korean *hanji* paper, also chosen for their sound transmission properties. Working with local craftsmen and scholars of traditional culture, Atoui selected and assembled these materials, paying particular attention to their



The Rain, 2023-24 (detail)
Installation view, Mirrored Gardens,
Guangzhou, 2024
Courtesy Tarek Atoui and Vitamin
Creative Space

provenance and significance. Some ceramic components, for example, feature decorative imprints made by pressing fresh clay onto a large bell decorated with relief motifs, a gesture that transforms the memory of a musical object into another instrument.

The interplay among the elements explored in *The Rain* can be seen in different works that play in original ways. For example in *The Water Bubble System*, the bubbling water produces an unusual timbre resulting from the interaction between water and air. In *The Big Drum*, the air flowing inside the instrument makes the membrane vibrate, generating the sound, while in *The Center Drum*, heating systems alter the tension of the drum skin, expanding its size and modifying its tones. «When it comes to earth and to tellurian forces, for me it's about vibration, it's about elements vibrating, shaking: with sound being the vibration itself, it is this material, very grounded feeling that you get in this space when sound becomes physical.» Through sounds that materialize and become physically perceptible, Atoui creates an experience that brings the listener closer to the natural elements.



The Rain, 2023 (detail)
Installation view, Art Sonje Center, Seoul, 2023
Courtesy Tarek Atoui and Vitamin Creative Space.
© Ahina



Waters' Witness, 2020–23 (detail)
Installation view, Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2024
© Tarek Atoui and Kunsthaus Bregenz.
Photo Markus Tretter



***Waters' Witness*,** 2020–23

Waters' Witness is a sound research project focusing on the theme of water. The installation consists of sculptural and sonic elements using different materials such as marble, metal, and ceramics. The work is based on the study and sound recording carried out by Tarek Atoui with Eric La Casa and Chris Watson, with the aim of documenting the human, ecological, historical, and industrial contexts of some coastal cities, such as Athens, Abu Dhabi, Beirut, Istanbul, Porto, Singapore, and Sydney, whose economic and social life is closely linked to their ports: «I have always been interested in capturing the sound of water. This exploration pushed me to start listening to bodies of water and to the intuition that by listening to a harbor and what surrounds it, you could understand the place.»

Working close to the water or directly underwater, Atoui uses various recording techniques applied to materials such as metal, stone, and wood to capture the sounds of the sea and port activities. These tracks come together in the installation entitled *Waters' Witness*, where they are combined with the noise of dripping water, used by the artist as a sonic element inside the sculptures.

The concept of stratification is central to Atoui's work and manifests in multiple aspects. For example, the use of marble blocks is not only related to their acoustic and reverberative properties, but also to their symbolic value as a material associated with the origins of classical Western art. With this installation, the artist composes a soundscape that unites different geographical and symbolic worlds, creating a space and time for new encounters, exchanges, and connections.



Tarek Atoui performing with *The Rain*, 2023
Art Sonje Center, Seoul, 2023
Courtesy Tarek Atoui and Vitamin Creative Space.
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Workshops and Special Guided Tours

During the exhibition “Improvisation in 10 Days,” you can take part in two workshops conceived by Tarek Atoui, open to both children and adults.

On Vibration and Resonance–The Hive

The aim of this workshop is to introduce participants to the concept of vibration as it propagates through air and different materials. The activity invites to pay attention to the sounds of everyday objects and to focus on their unexpected qualities. By combining percussion instruments with motorized and vibrating objects, the workshop intends to demonstrate the unusual and creative ways in which an instrument can be played, using simple everyday objects and natural elements with imagination and creativity. The artist poses the question, «How can we create and manipulate a sound object? How can we build a collective sonic landscape that interacts with its space and surroundings?».

Drops and Bubbles–The Rain

The goal of this workshop is to explore water and its ability to amplify and propagate sound and to make objects vibrate. «How do we amplify and play sound and how do we use underwater microphones to listen in water? Sonically, what distinguishes water from air and what does this teach us about the nature of sound? How can we start discerning nuances in sounds like water drops and air bubbles? How can we play and listen to each other at the same time?» To try and answer these open questions, Atoui encourages participants to actively experiment with water, objects, materials and available instruments, thus experiencing firsthand how to offer their own interpretations to these questions, creating a unique and personal sound experience.

Special guided tours and workshops open to groups of deaf and hearing people are conducted and designed in collaboration with experts in Italian Sign Language.

For more information, visit our website or ask to the info point and the museum mediators.

Selected Exhibitions

Numerous international institutions have presented Tarek Atoui's exhibitions, including Fundación TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Madrid (2025); Kunsthaus, Bregenz, S.M.A.K., Ghent (2024); Art Sonje Center, Seoul, Museum of Contemporary Art MCA, Sydney, Institut d'art contemporain – Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes (2023); The Contemporary Austin, Texas, FLAG Art Foundation, New York, Museo Serralves, Porto, MUDAM, Luxembourg (2022); Fridericianum, Kassel (2020); NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels (2017); Bergen Assembly (2016); Berkeley Art Museum, Pacific Film Archive (2015); Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2014). Atoui has presented his performances at Sharjah Art Foundation (2020); Palazzo Grassi – Punta della Dogana – Fondazione Pinault, Venice (2019); Para Site, Hong Kong; Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Turin (2017); Tate Modern, London (2016); Serpentine Gallery, London (2012); Performa 11, New York (2011). His major group exhibitions include: Taipei Biennial (2023); Gwangju Biennial (2023, 2021); Istanbul Biennial (2022); Venice Biennale (2019); documenta, Kassel (2012); Mediacity Biennial, Seoul (2010); Sharjah Biennial (2009).

This publication
accompanies the exhibition
"Improvisation in 10 Days"
by Tarek Atoui

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**Our mission is to make art
open and accessible to everyone.**

Pirelli HangarBicocca is a non-profit foundation dedicated to producing and promoting contemporary art. It was conceived and is supported by Pirelli. Established in 2004, Pirelli HangarBicocca has become a benchmark institution for the international art community, local public and region. It is a museum that is free of charge, accessible and open, and a place for experimentation, research and dissemination, where art is a point of reflection on the most topical themes of contemporary culture and society. It caters to a broad and diverse public with a program of major solo exhibitions by both Italian and international artists, a multi-disciplinary program of accompanying events and in-depth discussions, theoretical and informational publications, and educational courses. A team of museum facilitators is on hand at all times to help the public connect with the art. Vicente Todolí has been the foundation's artistic director since 2012.

Situated in a former industrial building, once a locomotive manufacturing facility, Pirelli HangarBicocca occupies 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest single-level exhibition spaces in Europe. This vast area comprises the Shed and Navate spaces, which are used for temporary exhibitions, and the permanent display of Anselm Kiefer's *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015*. This monumental installation with seven reinforced concrete towers has become one of the most iconic works in Milan. The building also houses a number of services for the public: a spacious entrance with reception area, facilities for educational activities, space for conferences and meetings, bookshop and bistro with a charming outdoor area.

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