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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2261 words.

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On taking control of your process

Installation and performance artist Naama Tsabar discusses the value of failure, the process of creating your own unique voice, and learning how to do everything yourself.

You make art that uses objects familiar to music fans—amplifiers, guitars, mic stands—but you do something different with them. You also employ music references like punk and noise that the art world may not understand. You don't quite fit into either place.

I'm a visual artist. Music was my first love. Art followed soon after. I've never questioned if I'm more one thing or the other because they're organically woven into each other. It's true, though, there's a certain border that art people can't—or don't—cross, because it's not their cultural creative history, and it's not what they're invested in. I've never considered myself a musician, even though I've played for many years and performed in a band when I was younger. I think the last two or three years is the first time where I'm like, "Wow, I'm actually writing songs and making music. How did that happen?" For me, it was more coming from art than finding yourself in music.



Untitled #3 From the Untitled (Double Face) performance Series 2016.

Within music, especially on the internet nowadays, there's backlash on some of the things I do. I have this performance where I sing a song by Pulp. At the end, I smash the guitar on stage, but it's unbreakable. Eventually it becomes this durational exhaustion act where I smash and smash and smash until the stage itself breaks. It becomes this act that only stops when I drop. There's a whole blog, which I

found by mistake, by only men, nerds that build guitars that are like, "Woman zero, guitar one!," "What is she doing?," "Loser!" There's a misunderstanding from both worlds, but that's the power of it.

But, yeah, it's not a straightforward visual art practice. I hope to always be surprised and confused by it, because it's interesting for me. It doesn't get boring.

For a lot of people, mostly men, music is about trivia. With your work, are you trying to subvert that sort of take?

My interest in music is what moves me. Growing up listening to music, I didn't experience it through masculine ears. I experienced it through my own ears—my own fantasies and ideas of it. I think that's subversive within itself, because it's a very masculine world—for a lot of the creative worlds, especially visual art.

I think that should stop. There are teenage girls all around everywhere, or female-identified people, that listen to music just as much as anybody else. They're moved by it and it propels creation within them. It really changes their life. There's no reason they should not have a voice.

Also, this quantifying, that's just like talking about gear. It's like what car people have... and I know nothing about cars. It's not interesting. It's not the essence of it.

Music is so sensual. It's one of the most violent senses... noise, hearing things. We constantly fight against it, right? We constantly try to get material to stop it. It's so hard to stop sound. Music's so experiential, and a lot of times there's this preconception of it not being authentic if it's processed through other means of thought and theory.

Does a project start as an idea based in art or music?

I'd say it starts with more formal art decisions, then it's fused together. For example, I have this body of work featuring felt, where I incorporate another material into it, carbon fiber that gives the ability to maintain a lot of tension. I basically sculpt the piece of felt with a piano string. As I tune it, the piece gets its curve, but I don't tune it to anything. I think about the curve I want to get, then I pluck the string to see what note I have, and that's what we work with.

You said you're not a musician, but you do have a background in music. Do you know what the note is?

I think I know. [laughs] I played classical piano for most of my youth and my teenage years and then I played guitar in bands as well in the early 2000s in the scene in Tel Aviv. So I do have musical background.

And you find yourself making music again now.

It's been such a surprise. I must say, it has a lot to do with the people I collaborate with. I'm so embedded in this amazing, mostly female, musical scene. Everywhere I go, I meet more musicians that have this open mind that want to go on this adventure and play these weird things and compose actual songs and compositions. I've been finding myself making music because of these people and through collaboration. As a teen, I thought I wanted to be a musician. It was always a failure, and I was never good enough. Finally, I found a weird circle back to it through art. I found my voice through other people and through the visual form.

With some of your performances, like the Pulp piece, there doesn't seem to be anything to sell from it once it's done.

I'm still trying to figure that out. [laughs] That specific piece originated from video art I did in 2008 in Tel Aviv. In 2010, I started doing it live. The live action's so much stronger than the video art. I never sold the video, and now there's this discussion about making a video of the performance. As a young creative person, I didn't think about what would sell, and I still try to keep that away from my creative process. The trick to being a visual artist, a musician, a performer is trying to not give into financial pressures, but still have something to sell. Luckily a lot of my work is also sculptural and physical and material and so, through the years, I've managed to understand more so how to make this work for me.

When you're writing music now, how is it different than when you were writing before?

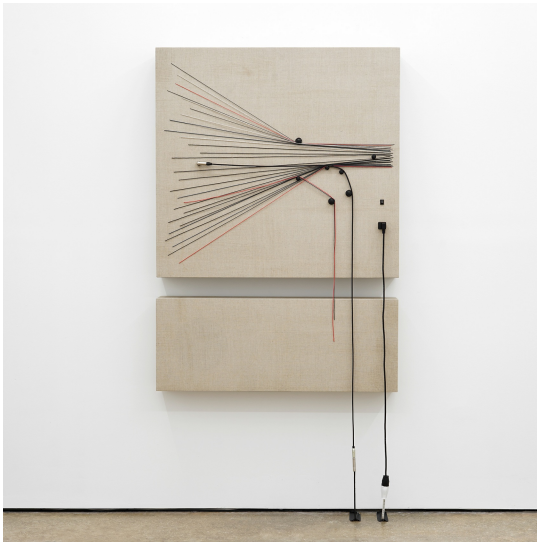
Well, first of all, I write music for a piece of felt with one string through it. [laughs] What I make now is so much about the body and dance and movement. That propels sound as well. There are all these other factors that play into that, when you're just sitting with your guitar, playing and writing lyrics. For me, it's a much truer process to life itself and the way things are, rather than focusing on sound and lyrics. It's movement. It's sound. It's completely amorphous. It's form. It's material. It's sensual. It's all these things. It's also all through collaboration. I find my voice through collaboration.

Do you guide or direct the collaborations, or is it more of a democratic process?

It starts out democratic and then on day three, it's like, "Alright, this is what's up." [laughs] Of course, the first three days are like a playground. Then we need to start taking things out and reducing until it's actually interesting. It's a bit of both. It's democratic to a certain point, but then it becomes reality.

Your role is an editor in a sense. I guess it's sculptural, too, shaping the material.

Just perfecting and specifying, yes. Being specific about what you want to get out of it. Each person has different qualities. I try at certain points in the creative process to be that outside eye saying, "This is really strong. Continue with that."



Transition, 2016. Wood, canvas, electronics, cables, knobs, amplifier tubes, speakers. Photo: Jesus Petroccini, courtesy of Spinello Projects

A lot of your stuff involves wiring, electronics. How did you learn all of that?

YouTube. I love YouTube. My stuff is super lo-fi. It's very intuitive for me once I understand how the mechanism works. Then if something doesn't work, I look on YouTube. I have the longest search questions. They're like a paragraph.

I have this work where I take apart guitar amplifiers, take out their circuitry, the speaker, all the knobs and everything, and put it back onto canvasses. I take all the wires running through the circuitry and prolong them, use the exact same gauge, same width, but now the wires are running as lines on a canvas. It becomes a visual play, a visual composition that's in conversation with more painterly kind of practices, but still all connects back, and it's still a completely functional amplifier.

I've definitely ruined a few amplifiers. I lost a lot of money in that process, but now I know what not to do. It's kind of just like... YouTube and trial and error. I try not to touch electricity too much. That's the one thing I'm kind of scared of. I also learned how to build a guitar through YouTube, though I don't build good guitars.

How did you build the indestructible guitar? Did you make that yourself?

That was a cheap guitar I bought. I covered it up with carbon fiber and then I cut a piece off of it and replaced it with solid aluminum. Then I redid the whole finish. It has a hammerhead that's invisible, but it's there. It's covered with carbon fiber that's very hard to break.



From performance *Untitled (Babies)*, 2010/2014. performed at Auto Body, courtesy of Spinello Projects Miami. Photo: Monica McGivern

For you, is there a certain importance tied to self-sufficiency?

For the longest time, I needed to know how to do it myself. I needed to be able to move my work myself, physically. As an artist in your studio, you make gigantic work. It's super heavy, and how do you move it around? Especially when you're starting off and you can't have help. For the longest time, I had to be self sufficient-know everything and do everything, including building a wall. From the very simple to the more advanced. I still try to go through with that in mind. Almost nothing's sent outside the studio. It's all produced within. It's all figured out by me.

The biggest presence that propelled me toward my direction was the non-mastery of things. It's a power, that if straddled right, can be very productive. As a woman, there is constantly this feeling of being told, "You don't know how to do it."

When I was growing up, I was questioned about everything: playing guitar, drawing, or the right things to do. It pushes you out of that world. You think, "Well, I can't. I'm not good enough." It's a weird combination of not being secure enough to do it, but having self-confidence to try to do it another way. In a weird, really reversed way, there's something good in not being able to master anything.

You're not afraid to fail.

Or what is failure? Who set the standards? And why don't I fit within these standards? And what can I do with that?

You see it a lot in dance today, for example, in choreography where this idea of the movement, the body, this rigid idea of a dancer has been completely broken by this idea of going outside of the order, and reclaiming it as you do so.

For me, that was a big deal. Not being able to hear my own voice through writing music or by painting. I needed my voice to be this crooked awkwardness of things that are all failures. When they're together, though, they create something entirely new.



Barricade #3, 2016. 12 microphones and microphone stands and matching audio equipment. Photo: Jesus Petroccini, courtesy of Spinello Projects

With all this gear, do you ever feel like you're on tour?

It's super tricky because I do tour a bit, but I don't go on the road for weeks on end and not come back. Every time I do a show I'm flying... I have a performance in Palais de Tokyo in Paris at the end of April. I'm performing my piece "Double Face," which is a right-handed and left-handed guitar that I put together in the back, so it forms a kind of sculpture, a new instrument that doesn't have a back to it and takes two people to play.

You'd think, "Oh, that's a guitar, right? You can take it as a guitar on the plane." But, in fact, it's a very expensive sculpture that's shipped like an art piece. That's where it becomes more tricky. Touring isn't only about me; it's a whole system.

When you bring sound and performance and noise into a museum, you're breaking all the rules. I have not had one soundcheck that wasn't like, "Can you turn it down a bit? It's super loud." Not understanding that once the place is full, that's not gonna be so loud, the bodies are gonna absorb it. It's all these small things that are completely from the music world. As you move through the visual art world, you're really challenging them on the simplest things. It's a learning curve.

You have to be a control freak in these situations. You have to be annoying and ask over and over again. When they tell you they have the same amplifiers as you do, you have to be like, "What amplifiers? What's the logo?" You never know what you're gonna get. As much as possible: control it.

Naama Tsabar recommends:

Diamanda Galas

PJ Harvey

Yona Wallach

Michael Clark Company

David Lynch

Walls

Name

Naama Tsabar

Vocation

Artist

Fact



Photo: Ebru Yildiz

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