



CAIRO

**Magdi Mostafa**  
**TOWNHOUSE FACTORY SPACE**

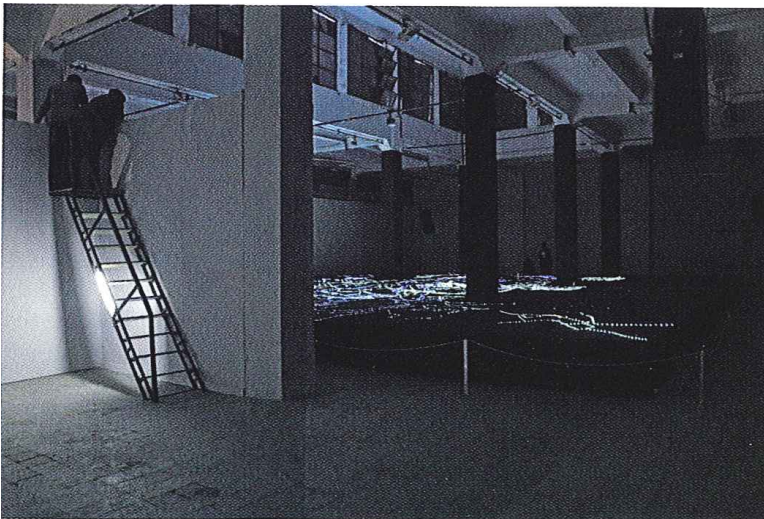
September, 2014, by ANNEKA LENSSEN

Magdi Mostafa makes art via a process of sensory bricolage, typically constructing his installations by capturing light and sound inputs from everyday routines and layering them into new spaces. His 2010 work *Transparent Existence* filled the basement of Cairo's Mawlawi Museum with a track of LED lights that followed the shape of the ecstatic dance movements Sufis had once performed there. With the lights programmed to respond to an ambient sixteen-channel sound work incorporating recordings from the site and surrounding streets, the piece overwrote its physical parameters with vibratory presences from other realities. In other projects, he has juxtaposed sound and space to deliver social commentary. *Sound Cells (Fridays)*, 2010, shown at the Sharjah Biennial that year, queried the ritual construction of gender with sound collected from two Friday activities: clothes-washing (female) and the noon prayer (male). The work consists of an arrangement of washing machines whose live sound is picked up by microphones, sending its amplified textures into the gallery space to mix with a recorded sermon about the value of women as procreative vessels.

Mostafa's newest installation, *The Surface of Spectral Scattering*, 2014, again involves a devised system for manipulating relationships between sensory energies - in this case, converting field recordings of boiling water, moving gears, and other mundane processes into a multi-channel soundscape, and then again into light patterns. The piece is Mostafa's most ambitious to date. Three years in the making, it is an approximately 6,500-square-foot map of Cairo's streets composed from tens of thousands of LED lights, hand-sewn and soldered into yards of fabric as daisy chains of connectivity. These are linked via an improvised audio splitter to designated frequencies in Mostafa's sound composition, so that they glow and fade in loose relation to its layered phase shifts. The piece was installed behind a wall and on view only at night, producing a distinctly ritualistic aura. Visitors climbed a flight of rickety stairs to a tiny observation platform, where the work could be viewed in its totality, then descended into the gallery to circum-

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navigate its dark perimeter. Viewed from the ground, the varying intensities of different chains of light made the work's internal depth of field seem to dilate and compress. This undermined the spatial fixity of the map and refocused attention on the body's capacity to also act as a receiver within a vast, dendritic system of energy flows.



Magdi Mostafa, *The Surface of Spectral Scattering*, 2014, LED lights, eight-channel audio, fabric.  
Installation view

Mostafa's practice, like that of many young artists in Egypt, makes extensive use of reverse engineering to facilitate the aesthetic transformation of its material. In recent years, the exhibition program at Townhouse has featured a number of laid-back interactive works by members of this "post-Internet" generation. What ultimately distinguishes *The Surface of Spectral Scattering*, however, is the metaphysical nature of its inquiry. As the exhibition's wall text suggested, its mapped terrains may also be comprehended as a "surface of last screaming," a phrase drawn from a cosmologist's metaphorical evocation of the movement of electromagnetic radiation after the big bang: the aural experience of a participant in a field of collective screaming after the crowd suddenly falls silent and the spreading sound returns as scattered, fading tones. For Mostafa, it seems the metaphor evokes the alienated relationship between the self and its dissipating spectral traces - whether within the circuitous space of postrevolutionary Egypt or that of the expanding universe. By devising a technological transubstantiation of the city's terrestrial pathways, he has produced an analogous redistribution of perceptions of collective energy. As the piece taps into an underlying database of energy exchanges and furnishes it with a format that makes it visible, it functions as an interface rather than as a stand-alone image. Ultimately, it impresses not by its novel visual form but by its insistence on treating self and surface as strange, notional objects.