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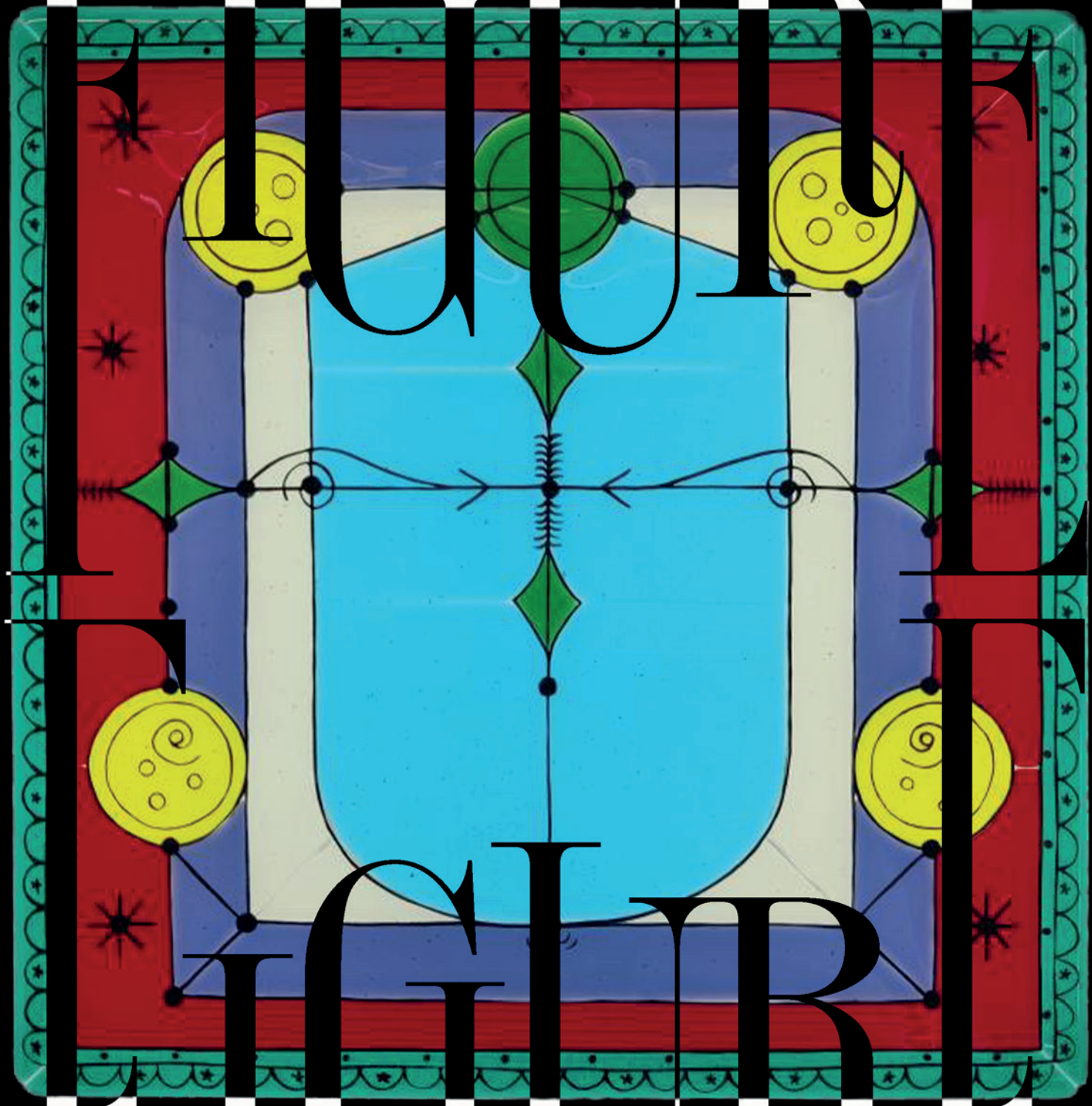

conversation with **ALIASKAR ABARKAS**

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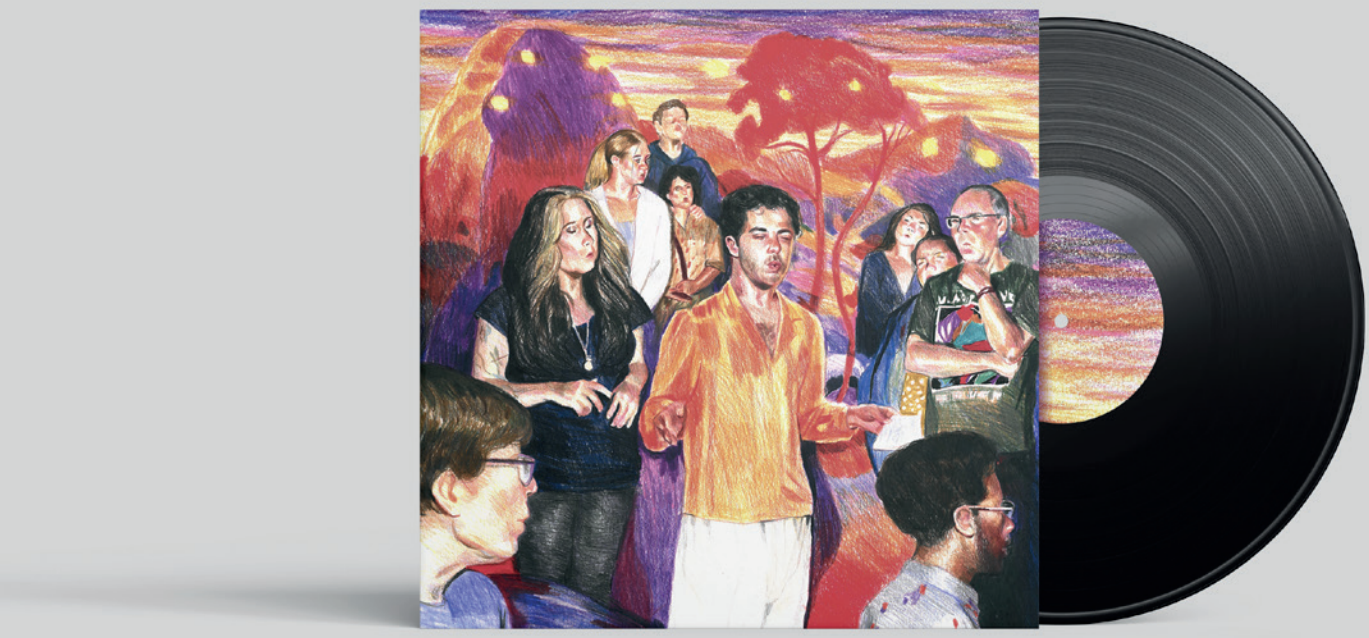
The Community Whistling Choir, If Body 2024, Performance Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome, Italy, Commissioned and curated by LOCALES, 2024. Photographer: Davide Palmier.

ANGELA BLANC *in conversation with* ALIASKAR ABARKAS

This interview took place in February 2024.

AB I wanted to start our discussion with one of the exercises you use as icebreakers in your workshops. Since your practice often revolves around breaking barriers and fostering collective engagement, could you describe one of these exercises and how it reflects key elements of your work—such as collective listening, improvisation, and the body's role in sound perception?

AA One exercise I often use is a collective listening experience. It begins with a simple invitation: 'Close your eyes and imagine there are many other people surrounding you, each from different parts of the world. Now, without vocalising your voice, try to imagine whistling in your mind. Pay attention to the resonance, the tune and the musicality. Notice how long it continues. Now, once more, in your mind, whistle as if introducing yourself. Envision 30 other people to 30 different



All The Whistlers, Album cover, Pencil drawing, 2024.

sounds of whistling merging into a harmonious melody. Can you hear the music? Try to continue the song whistling along while staying tuned to the other sounds. Now feel the proximity of each source of the sound. Your own whistle might be the loudest, but imagine yourself floating into the space, drifting between individuals who are whistling with you. As you get closer to each person, their sound becomes louder and more distinct. It is perhaps no longer polyphonic but individual, with unique voices. Now, slowly drift away from all of them and stop your whistle when it feels right for you. Open your eyes when you are ready.

AB That was a beautiful exercise—thank you for sharing. Before we dive into your work, I wanted to ask about the role of sound and art in your early life. How did your surroundings growing up shape what you do today?

AA I had a rather unconventional path towards contemporary art. I was raised in a small town near Isfahan, where art was often tied to religious ideology. However, I was fortunate to meet teachers who introduced me to more creative ideas. At just six years old, I joined the Centre for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, an organisation that offered an alternative learning syllabus through visual arts, literature, poetry, music, and theatre.

A fundamental experience in my artistic development was attending Orff classes—a music education approach that blends music, speech, movement, and drama in a playful, natural way. The school regularly invited musicians to introduce us to different instruments, allowing us to explore their sounds and textures. I experimented with various instruments, singing, and more. However, I never enjoyed playing traditional instruments. Even at that

Montez Radio, 2024.

young age, I preferred improvisation and was more drawn to composing music, though I didn't pursue it further.

Later, I took painting lessons with the only artist in my town, who painted landscapes similar to Bob Ross. While I now appreciate Ross' work, at the time, I looked down on that style because it felt like just copying. But I also understood the need for commercial survival he had as an artist—a pressure I also feel today. It was during this time that I realised I wanted to become an artist, much to the disappointment of my family.

I eventually enrolled at the Isfahan School of Fine Art, Iran's oldest modern art academy. I loved the ritualistic nature of painting—there is something magical about it. I was obsessive, creating 136 canvases in a year. With only four to six students each year, we had so much space and access to materials. It was a different time, and much has changed since then. Even within this isolated environment, where contemporary art was absent and libraries were sparse, I managed to explore art history, literature, theatre, and cinema. This led me to face existential questions and deeply question my relationship with art. One day, I stopped painting entirely and did not return to it for 10 years.

Afterwards, I decided to study media art and contemporary art theory at the University of Tehran. Later, I moved to London to pursue a master's degree in the Theory of Arts and Politics at Goldsmiths. This shift was transformative, as London's diverse learning environment forced me to rethink and rebuild myself as an artist. My dissertation explored the concept of practice-based research, and I became interested in 'fictioning' as a method in

All The Whistlers, Performance, *Academie des Mutantes* festival,
CAPC, Bordeaux, France, 2024. Photographer: Arthur Pequin.

contemporary art. This eventually led me to explore the theoretical and conceptual understanding of contingency, thinking about art through the lens of uncertainty and indeterminacy.

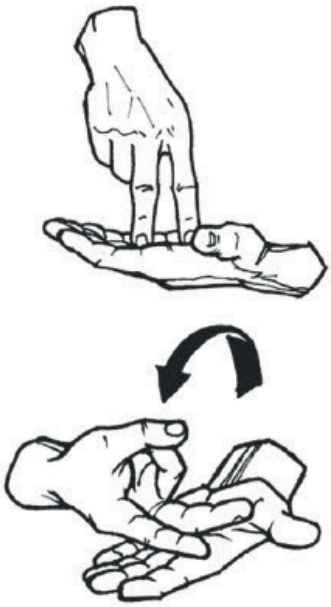
AB Can you expand on what you mean by contingency?

AA The idea of contingency revolves around the notion that everything could have been otherwise, depending on different circumstances or conditions. It emphasizes the role of chance, uncertainty, and the potential for multiple outcomes. This concept suggests that many aspects of reality are not governed by fixed laws but are subject to external factors or random occurrences.

At one point, I became fascinated by the concept of *falling*—its etymology, its philosophical underpinnings, and its manifestations in both history and personal experience. The word *falling* derives from the Vulgar Latin *cadentia*, meaning 'the fall of dice', which directly ties it to chance. A short text I published with Montez Press captured some of the residuals from that period of thought.

I began thinking seriously about *falling* on 11 September 2018. It struck me that both the memorial for the Battle of Karbala and the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks coincided on that same day. The Battle of Karbala, a pivotal event in Islamic history that deepened the divide between Shia and Sunni Muslims, had its memorial fall on the same day as the 9/11 attacks—a coincidence created by the Islamic lunar calendar being 10 days shorter than the solar calendar. I was intrigued by this juxtaposition of an ancient event and a modern tragedy, both of which profoundly divided people.

The idea of *falling* connected these events



#1
Analogy of fall

THE SUBJECT OF THE FALL

The fall's subject exists through its motion, through its journey from one point to another. The subject experiences changes and transformations during its descent, yet remains a unified and consistent entity. The fluctuations that come with the fall shape the subject's essence, creating a defining narrative and constructing its identity. The subject of the fall embodies the truth that motion and change are integral parts of existence, and its experiences serve as a testament to this.

THE VELOCITY OF THE FALL

The subject's velocity is a mystery, a symphony, a dance with a unique tempo, with each subject playing its melody in motion. Despite the common belief that all bodies, heavy or light, fall at the same rate, the truth is that each subject moves at its own pace, with its own rhythm. The speed of the fall determines the subject's path, trajectory, and its arrival time. The fall is a musical event, where each subject's velocity creates a polyphony of interconnected melodies. Though each subject is unique,

in my mind: the bodies falling from the World Trade Center on 9/11 and the martyrdom at Karbala. My own name, Aliasghar, comes from the youngest martyr in the Battle of Karbala, who fell from a horse after being killed. It is a loose, almost poetic connection, but the imagery of the falling body tied these moments together for me.

In my practice, I often construct narratives by connecting seemingly unrelated dots, finding turns in the randomness and weaving these elements into a coherent story. I began to collect ideas, images, and concepts related to *falling*. I explored not only the physical act of falling but also the fall of tempo, value, and meaning. Heidegger speaks of 'falling into the world', a state of being in the world, and I allowed myself to drift along this idea—falling, observing, and accepting the uncertainty of the journey.

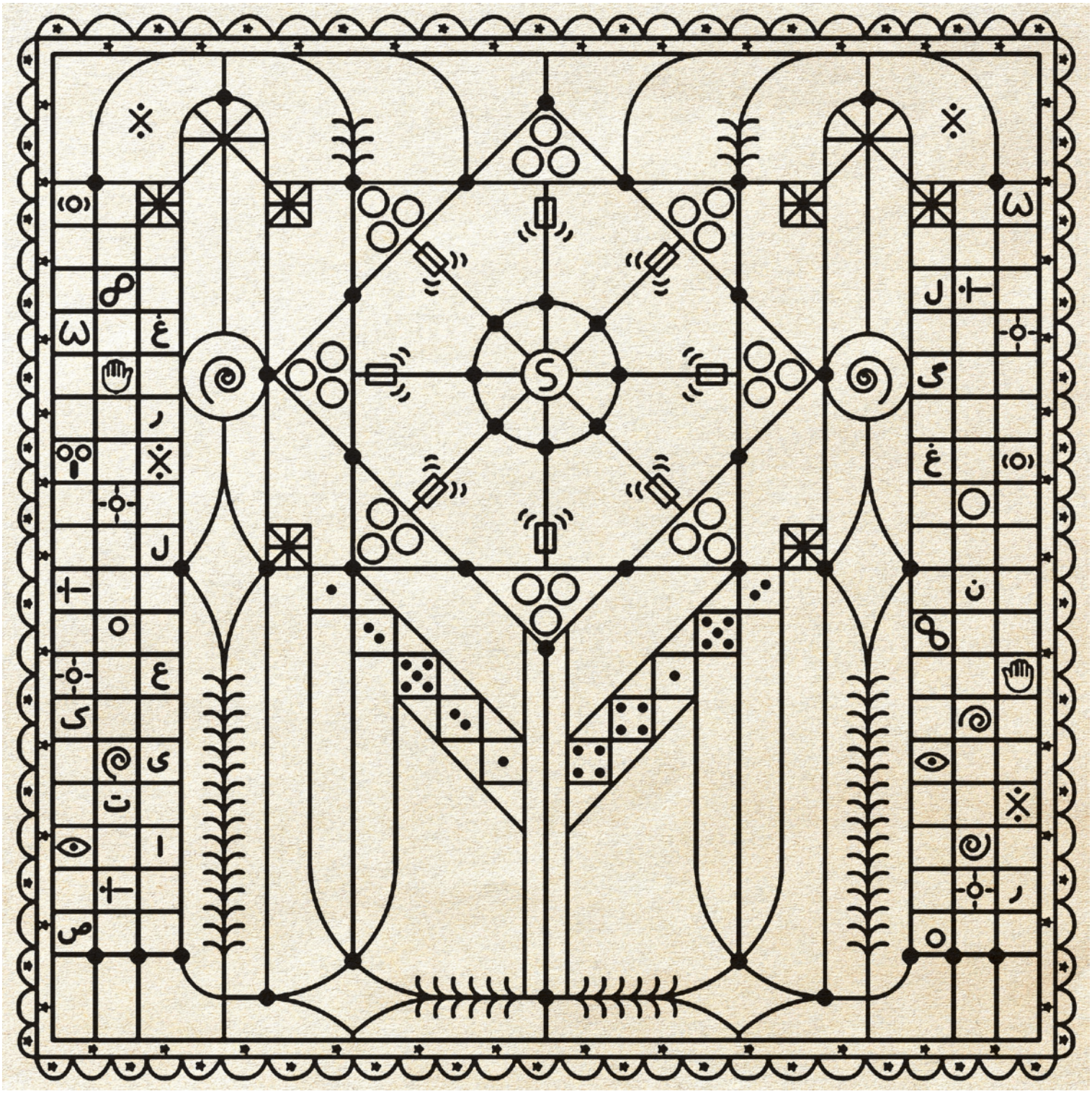
My practice remains fragmentary, rooted in the acceptance of not knowing where I am going. It is about embracing uncertainty and the potential for different outcomes, much like the roll of dice. This open-ended approach allows me to build narratives from seemingly random elements, creating a practice that reflects the contingent nature of everyday life.

AB How have the alternative educational programmes you have been involved in, such as Syllabus V and Open School East, influenced your approach to making art?

AA Often, there was no expectation to produce work, which really suited me at the time. They were open to all kinds of practices, allowing me to experiment. I needed a moment to forget everything I had learned, and they provided that space. I gained a lot from undoing previous ideas and approaches.

It was not just about theory—learning

Matadero, Performance, Institute of Postnatural Studies, Madrid, Spain, 2023.



Musician Talisman 003, Drawing, 2024.

could be sonic, somatic, experiential, and more. There was no pre-existing expectation of how to create work as an artist.

I think what I appreciated a lot was also the people I met and the friendships I built, which have provided me with an amazing support network over time. The ongoing conversations with peers, both during and after the programmes, have been invaluable.

All these experiences have greatly influenced my work. I enjoy bringing people together, and I wanted to create a structure that allows people to connect, learn from each other, and build friendships. This sits at the core of my practice and everything I do.

AB Your approach to art seems to be an ever-evolving, open process that relies on a network of peers. As you mentioned, it is rooted in alternative education. It is also interesting how important it is for you to make these processes and discussions visible. Building on your series of podcasts about alternative education, have you considered expanding this into a formal programme?

AA Sometimes, it feels like I am running my own institution, the Aliaskar Institute of Art. There is an institutional aspect emerging from the way I work, with its own ecosystem—an institution that has no fixed place and is fluid in nature. I find connections between people, places, and ideas that might not seem immediately related. By linking them, a story, tone, melody, or image emerges.

The idea behind the radio show was to document conversations with people who have directly initiated learning programmes. I wanted to open up a discussion about the different operational models of these programmes, as they vary greatly. The radio show on alternative education was also an attempt to contextualise

All The Whistlers, with Hyelim Kim, Performance,
Barbican Centre, London, United Kingdom, 2024.

my work.

AB A good example of this is the Whistling Choir that you founded. How did this project come about?

AA Yes, in a sense, the Whistling Choir is a school. I wanted to create a casual, non-hierarchical environment where people could come together around a simple, accessible narrative centred on a tangible activity—whistling.

Initially, this idea was a response to thoughts about language and communication. Language, at its core, relates to learning, consciousness, understanding, misunderstanding, expression, and even experience of being a migrant. Moving to London and having to speak English as a second language made me more aware of these issues. I became fascinated by writers like Kafka, who wrote in a language different from their native tongue, and the unique quality of expression that arises from that. I was inspired by Deleuze's book, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975), which explores how one can alienate oneself from the norms of a language and find a new way of speaking.

So, I asked myself: Can we invent a new language collectively?

On a different note, I am bipolar, and during manic phases, my ideas come faster than I can express them. I have experienced moments where the speed of my thoughts does not translate into the clarity of my expression—it is like the frequency of thought is so high that the idea becomes noise. And in that noise, there is a whistle.

Recently, I found an old note where I had tried to describe a feeling and an environment that was difficult to put into words. I wrote that I had to whistle to explain and describe what I

All The Whistlers, Performance, *Academie des Mutantes* festival,
CAPC, Bordeaux, France, 2024. Photographer: Arthur Pequin.

could see because I lacked the vocabulary to express it.

AB Can you describe the first gathering of the Whistling Choir? How did the rehearsals differ from the public performances, both in process and experience?

AA The first gathering was in November 2022. The women's movement in Iran had just begun. I felt a strong responsibility to respond to what was happening. At the time, I was at Open School East. Baesianz, a London-based collective, invited me to initiate something as part of a fundraising event in support of women in Iran. Sara Khan, a member of Baesianz whom I knew from OSE, approached me about it. So, I decided to teach the audience the melody of a revolutionary song that had recently been produced by a collective in Iran. I wanted everyone to whistle it together.

The response was very positive. People felt included and connected. Later, artist Soheila Sokhanvari, whom I met at Wysing Arts Centre, invited me to respond to her exhibition at The Curve gallery in the Barbican Centre with the Whistlers.

The idea of gatherings and rehearsals emerged after that and has evolved significantly since then. For each gathering, I invite a guest artist to co-facilitate the session with me. Over time, I have become more interested in the process itself. Interesting things happen during the gatherings, and the subsequent performances have become more experimental.

AB What was your experience like during the performance at The Curve in the Barbican, and how did the space influence your approach to the performance?

AA I loved it. The sound of whistling has this eerie, almost unsettling quality—something strange and unique about it. The acoustics of The Curve played a significant role in the experience. The

All The Whistlers, with Hannah Catherine Jones, Workshop,
The Mosaic Room, London, United Kingdom, 2024.

performance relied heavily on improvisation, audience engagement, and my role as a conductor in guiding the sound.

As artists sometimes we feel the pressure to constantly come up with new ideas, but I am still deeply intrigued by the Whistling Choir. There is so much more to explore and unpack.

AB I recently read an interview with German-British performance artist Tino Sehgal, who strongly opposes leaving any traces of his performances and refuses to use images to communicate about his shows as a statement against the art world's relentless drive to produce and create tangible things. In contrast, you actively encourage people to film, take pictures, and record rehearsals—not to generate monetary value, but to collectively capture the fleeting, intangible moments shared by the group.

AA I can relate to Sehgal's approach in some ways, but a significant aspect of my work is exploring how an ephemeral, immaterial experience can transition and metamorphose into a corporeal existence. I think of each gathering as a fragment, yet incomplete. I don't emphasise documenting events by taking photos or videos, though we do sometimes. What I am truly interested in is creating a mythical experience, a fabulated monumental image that captures the essence of the experience, which photography often fails to achieve.

This is why I have experimented with different ways to capture that quality. For example, the drawings I create combine photos of bodies into a new composition, saturating the colours and giving it a narrative, often referencing religious iconographies. These drawings carry a sense of humour by making these references.

More recently, I have been working with cosmograms, inspired by the medieval traditions of geometry, occult languages, and spell writing.

The Community Whistling Choir, If Body 2024, Performance, Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome, Italy, Commissioned and curated by LOCALES, 2024. Photographer: Davide Palmier.

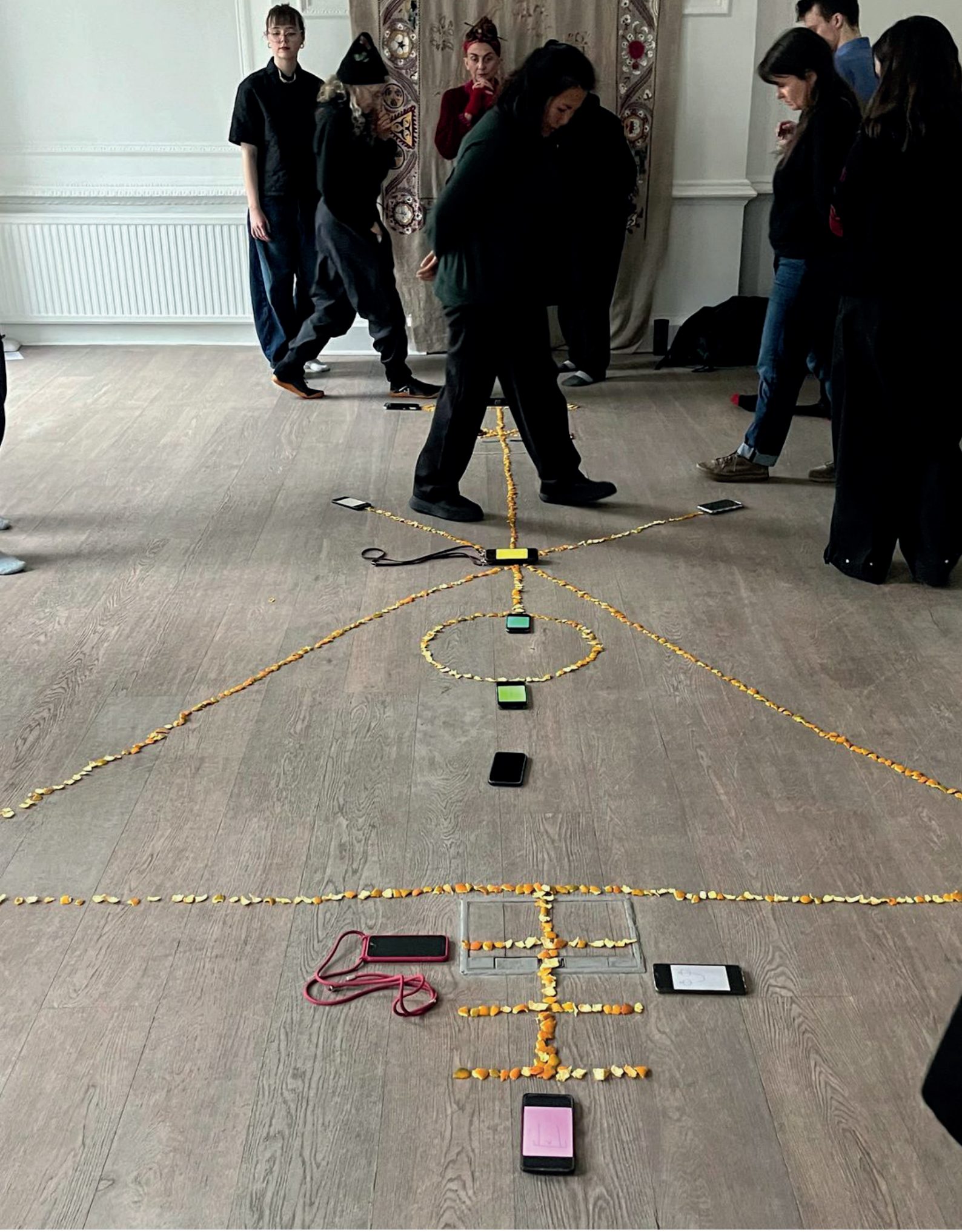
I translate the experience into cosmograms by creating drawings that encapsulate the arrangement of bodies in space, using symbols to represent sound, even the weather conditions, and so on. I have experimented with turning these drawings into stained glass, where everything is numerically, symbolically, and colour-coded.

I envision these stained glass pieces in windows, at the edge between inside and outside, inviting outsiders to join in. When the sun shines through the glass, it activates the image, creating a game board on the floor and suggesting a platform for more activities and recreating the experience.

AB Recording allows you to capture things that might be missed during the performance. I remember attending one of your workshops, where I was struck by how I could not hear my own whistle. Over time, I found myself in this in-between space, where individual and collective experiences merged, and the sounds blended together. When I listen to the recordings later, I am often surprised by how different they sound from my memory of the event.

AA That ties into what I was saying about the material contingency of the project. There is the immediate experience of being physically present in space, and then there are the ways I explore documenting the 'afterlife' of that experience, as I mentioned earlier.

It is the same approach with sound recording. I invite everyone to join in this game. Instead of just putting a mic to record and capturing everything—which we do as well—I use a technique that engages the audience. For example, I ask everyone to record the sound on their phones. Since each person starts recording at a slightly different time, playing back the



Spells for Collectivity, Workshop, Pushkin House,
London, United Kingdom, 2025.

recordings creates an immersive, polyphonic experience with sound coming from each phone. I then layer all these recordings together and edit them into a single file.

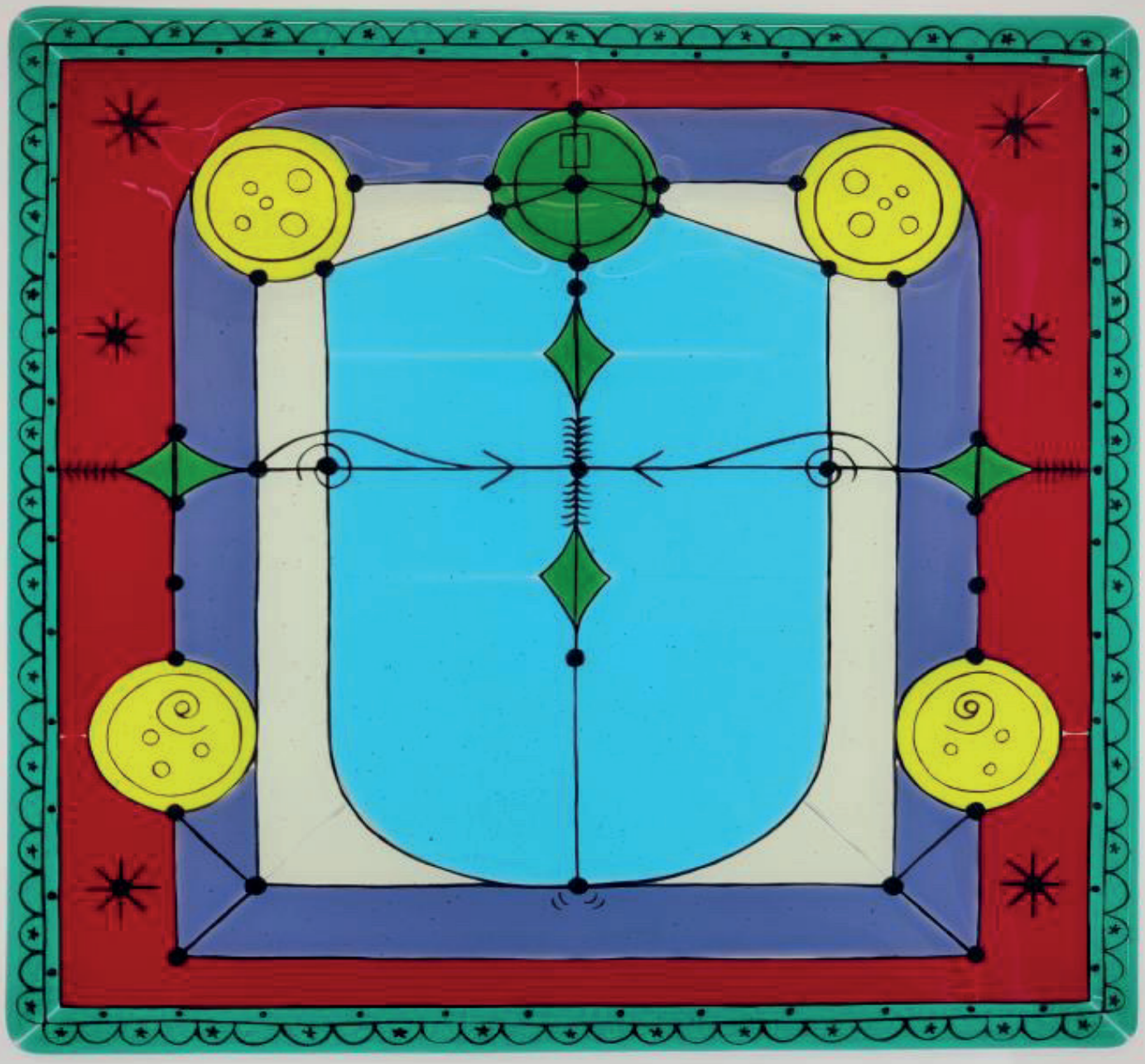
AB The experiences you facilitate are deeply shaped by the acoustics of the space and the dynamics of the group present, embodying the relational nature of sound and listening. Institutions play a key role in offering facilities and shaping the composition of audiences. How do you approach this collaboration?

AA One way to think about it is that institutions are made up of the individuals who run them. By collaborating with the people behind the institution, you are essentially engaging with the institution itself. To me, institutions are like living organisms; they are defined by the people who make them up.

Engaging with existing institutional infrastructures is fundamental to me. It allows me to influence how they work and operate, and it creates opportunities to change the culture of collaboration. This is a design challenge that requires strategic thinking and problem-solving. I propose different ways of doing things and open up conversations—it is a form of diplomacy.

Everyone involved in the project naturally shapes its development. I want to give agency to those who are involved and welcome their opinions. I am very conscious of how people's contributions are acknowledged—not just through credit, but also by how their involvement and their unique ways of doing things help evolve the work.

I am also very aware of how financial resources shape artists and their practices. Institutional support, even in kind, helps me sustain my work. There are many different models to achieve this. Additionally, the private sector



Untitled, Fused glass, 30 × 30 cm, 2024.

working with the private sector can be used to sustain the project—not for personal gain, but to support the ecosystem I want to create. This approach allows me to collaborate with more people and ensure everyone is paid fairly. Whenever I secure public funding, it goes directly back into the project as fees for collaborators, such as composers writing music or commissioning poetry from the whistlers.

Public funding is very limited, so it makes sense to also engage with the private sector. I want to create products that can be sold, like paintings and stained glass. The income from these sales can then be reinvested back into my community.

AB That is a message for the collectors reading this.

AA I would like to engage with that market—understanding how it operates and leveraging relationships between people and resources to build new ways of existing within the economy.

AB Bringing together people who don't know each other, each with different intentions, yet engaging in a shared experience without a predefined goal, creates a powerful form of collectivity. How do you perceive the political and social dimensions of collective listening and participation?

AA I enjoy being a mediator. When I have access to an opportunity or a space, I think about how I can open it up to more people and create an inclusive environment. By making an entry point accessible to everyone, people get involved, we form friendships, our worldviews influence each other, and together, we make 'art'.

AB How do you facilitate the group dynamic?

AA I use many different methods and constantly work on developing new skills to improve this. I always respond to the context—the people, the space, and the situation. It is important to be spontaneous

Untitled, Sound workshop, Swiss Church, London, United Kingdom, 2024.

and guide the experience, reading the energy and vibes of the people and responding to them accordingly.

AB During some of your sessions, I noticed how I shifted from focusing on my own whistle to experiencing a collective sound, where we almost became one body. This reminds me of your writing, which explores formative bodily experiences. In *FALLING* (Montez Press, 2023), you describe the experience of falling into space. And in *The Blossoming Bodies* (Awham Magazine, 2023), you explore different fictional and factual instances of metamorphosis—where human bodies turn into plants.

AA I am very interested in people, and I guess that is why the body becomes a significant element in everything I do. *The Blossoming Bodies* is about the decay of the body and its transition—it is essentially about mortality.

Falling was a significant journey for me. I learned a lot from being suspended and exploring those ideas. Many writers and philosophers have written about it, and my research was extensive. It was a rewarding exploration, closely tied to thinking with the body. Bodies in transition, moving through space and time, and the journey they experience.

The body that interacts with the world, bodies that come together, and the concept of a collective body.

Untitled, Kunstraum 53, Hildesheim, Germany, 2018.

Aliaskar Abarkas, Figure Figure 2025.
Courtesy of the artist.

DIRECTION OF PUBLICATION

Angela Blanc
blanc.angela@outlook.fr

INTERVIEW

Angela Blanc
blanc.angela@outlook.fr

VISUAL IDENTITY

Atelier Pierre Pierre
hello@pierre-pierre.com

www.figurefigure.fr

Instagram Facebook Twitter