

Transcript: Transmissions 3

A Reader-in-Residence conversation with Xuan Ye and Shaheer Zazai

KEYWORDS

carpet, lens, microsoft word, synthesizer, tone, sound, blackwood, typing, evolving, xuan, medium, fading, work, droning, challenge, aspect, tinny, design, symmetrical, intended

SPEAKERS

Shaheer Zazai, Xuan Ye, Laura Tibi

Laura Tibi 00:06

Welcome to "Transmissions," a podcast of the Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto Mississauga. My name is Laura Tibi, and I'm the Educator-in-Residence here at the Blackwood. This podcast begins by covering "Burning Glass, Reading Stone," a series of exhibitions across four light boxes on the UTM campus, running from September 2020 through June 2021. Although students have returned from their winter break, the campus remains quiet as the city is still under lockdown. Our continued conditions of mediation implore us to reflect on how the current pandemic has reconfigured nearly every aspect of our collective lives, making more apparent the social, economic, and environmental disparities in our world. We can begin by acknowledging the land on which the University of Toronto Mississauga operates, acknowledging that this is stolen, exhausted, and occupied land that has been inhabited, stewarded, and cared for by the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River, and that it continues to be the meeting place and home to Indigenous people from across Turtle Island. This podcast forms one part of our reader-in-residence program, featuring the reader and artist in question-driven conversation. The reader will then respond to the image series in the form of a reading, a set of images, a performance, a musical score, or another form of interpretation. In this episode, reader-in-residence Xuan Ye will speak with Shaheer Zazai to learn about his work featured in part four of the Blackwood's lightbox series, titled "Is, but will be." Shaheer Zazai is an Afghan Canadian artist whose practice explores diasporic cultural identity through digital iterations of traditional Afghan carpet patterns, and Xuan Ye is an artist, musician, software engineer, and improviser whose work combines sound, code, and movement, often using vocal experimentation and computation as a means to tap into prelinguistic modes of communicating. Xuan and Shaheer's conversation is intercepted by some experimental sounds in this episode, which Xuan created as a response to Shaheer's work. Xuan uses a modular synth, a technology that relies on code to generate these sounds. While Shaheer's digital composites remind us that the process of carpet weaving itself is code, relying on specific arrangements of shapes and densities of fabric to create the intended pattern, Xuan's sound interpolations are made up of organic and computational

mediations to produce a kind of textured, even tactile sound. So, in this way, both Xuan and Shaheer's technologies are centered around code.

Xuan Ye 02:50

[speaking with a synthesizer effect] So, just want to give the audience some context: right now, Shaheer and I are meeting in person at his studio in Toronto. [A low-pitched, electronic droning sound.]

Shaheer Zazai 03:14

[speaking with a synthesizer effect] Both wearing masks and trying to talk through a mask.

Xuan Ye 03:21

[speaking with a synthesizer effect] Yeah, it's a weird—it's a weird time.

03:23

[A long, low-pitched, electronic droning sound that gradually increases in volume, and then fades out.]

Xuan Ye 03:46

Thinking about this back to the origin, what was the initial impulse that makes you start this process?

Shaheer Zazai 03:59

So, the intent wasn't really to make any art, or it even becoming an art project, it was more to give myself a task or a challenge, as I like to call it, to type 2013 dots and spaces just to see what the outcome would be.

04:18

[The sound of an engine revving.]

Shaheer Zazai 04:20

That's a motorcycle going by. But, the challenge was mainly because I kept finding myself in front of a laptop, always, just like we all do. It happened to be January 1, 2013, which is why 2013 dots and spaces. It was more that I didn't feel achieved, so, it was partial challenge, partial punishment. The end result didn't really feel like much.

04:48

[A medium-pitched, electronic droning sound that extends into the conversation and increases in volume.]

Shaheer Zazai 04:50

And from there, I tried to expand into a larger amount of text and started playing around with Microsoft Word to see what else I could do with it. And that snowballed to what it has become now. Yeah, that's very interesting.

05:05

[Siren sounds of an emergency vehicle. The medium-pitched, electronic droning sound grows loud and tinny, matching the quality of the sirens.]

Shaheer Zazai 05:09

Welcome to Toronto where sirens are part of everything.

05:35

[The electronic droning sound rings louder, and in a tinny tone that mimics a siren before shifting to a higher pitch and fading out.]

Xuan Ye 05:38

Yeah, I was also super curious, you know, out of so many different software, why Microsoft Word?

Shaheer Zazai 05:48

I think it's more—I think the task itself led it to becoming a Microsoft Word as the medium because I gave myself a task to type. Specifically, when it's not intended to be an artwork, and I'm not coming to it with the intention of trying to create digital work. I feel like if I thought of it as 'I'm going to make some digital art,' I would have probably been drawn to using Photoshop or Illustrator or InDesign. But, I guess the uniqueness of the situation was that the intention wasn't art, so I wasn't really thinking in that context. So, typing—first thing that comes to mind is open a Word document and start typing. That became the basis of it, and from there on, I stuck with it, not just because that's where I started from, but because using an unconventional art making process creates new challenges in the process itself. So, that was entertaining for me, having to troubleshoot document-creating software to try and create imagery out of it. That troubleshooting aspect of it is probably the most exciting part of the process for me.

07:15

[Beeping synthesizer notes make a cheery melody that extends into the conversation and gradually deteriorates out of tone as it fades out.]

Xuan Ye 07:49

You just mentioned typing was the very starter of this process, but then, later on, like, the audience will associate your digital drawing with carpet. Can you talk about how you think the relationship between typing in Microsoft Word and weaving a carpet?

08:16

[Short, faint buzzing.]

Shaheer Zazai 08:16

I wonder if the audience can hear that. There's a fly in the background. Coming back to this—for your question, the relationship to carpets and textiles, so because—I mean, at the end of the day, none of what the outcome or how the audience receives the work was the initial intent. So even the carpet aspect of it, textile aspect of it, was not something I intended on, it's just where it led to. I think it speaks more to the nature of the process, because it's text, it's color, it's repetition, and there's a lot of numbers involved. I count a lot. There's a method to, like, if I'm making a diagonal line, it goes: one over, one down, two over, one down, and it's following that numerical order. Because of numbers and repetition, it started creating patterns, and patterns automatically started speaking to textiles. For me, at the beginning I really boiled it down to it being a subconscious thing—that textile imagery is something I've lived with. We've always had carpets around in the family. When we moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan, from Pakistan to Canada, we always carried our carpets with us. So, subliminally, it may have been there, but I fought it for a while, as well. When I started noticing that the work was becoming very textile-like, I didn't want it to go in that direction. Mainly, because I didn't intend it. I didn't intend to be somebody who's going to use a digital medium to create textile based work. I was not a textile based artist, either. Neither was I an artist who was working based on his culture and traditions. So, all those factors combined—because the intention wasn't there, I tried to fight it, and I tried to avoid it as much as possible. So, for a big while, one, I was not showing the work, and I was not comfortable putting it out there. At the same time, I tried to make it look like something else. I tried to do whatever it took to make it non-textile-like, but, at the end of the day, the process mimics carpet knotting techniques so much that there was an unavoidable factor of like, that's what the medium and the work wants to be over what I would like it to be. And whatever I wanted it to be, was mainly to avoid not falling in the bracket of an artist who's working based off their culture and history. So, that was just an internal battle, till I had to accept it—that that's where the work was going. And that acceptance came around the time I did my residency at OCAD for Digital Painting Atelier, which is where I brought my intent, and the intent at that point was to make a life-size carpet by typing it over a span of forty hours, because the residency was one week long—one week meaning forty hours of work. So, I took forty hours and I typed and improvised the design to create a life-size carpet. I feel like that's—the process mimics carpet weaving so much that, naturally, that's where it was leading.

Xuan Ye 11:51

Right. Yeah, that really leads to the question, because you just mentioned improvisation—it's part of your process. And a lot of these challenges was, you know, the tool, like Microsoft Word, or, you

know, the fact that it started to look like carpet. Yeah, like, how do you work with this kind of [inaudible] like, chance that's unknown to you?

Shaheer Zazai 12:29

It's the most fun part of it. Because I'm not giving myself—like, I don't plan my designs, I don't sketch them out. The only decisions that I make before the work starts is—or at least I used to. At the beginning of this project—before I get into that aspect of how it's intuitive—at the beginning of this project, I used to apply a lot of rules to my work: there were a set dimensions, there were set symmetry that I had to follow, and something that I learned around the time when I did the residency is that carpet designs are based on garden designs. So, I would have that subconsciously in my head as well. All those factors combining was making everything very symmetrical. Carpets are very symmetrical. So, I was applying those rules to it. So, things that I start with is: how big of a work I'm going to make, that defines how many Microsoft Word pages do I need to use to make the work; and then, what colors am I gonna use. I mean, Microsoft Word has a limit of fifteen colors, and that includes black and white, so I used to pick four colors, and then just play with it. The troubleshooting, or the intuitive aspect of it, or the improvised aspect of it, comes from—it's purely playing Tetris—it's every shape that I place on a page, limits how much room I'm left with on the page, and then it's somehow squeezing in the next shape next to that one. By doing that, one after the other, it slowly fills up the page, and the more the page gets filled up, the less room I'm left with. So, it's almost like, with every action, I'm making it more difficult for myself to comfortably do something else after. So, the more challenging it gets, the more exciting it gets. That improvisation, and troubleshooting, and responding to every action I've made before it, is pretty much what creates the design and how the work comes about.

Xuan Ye 14:48

Then I'm curious, do you ever go back?

Shaheer Zazai 14:52

Pretty much never, unless I notice a problem. Problem meaning, like I left something unhighlighted, like I missed something along the way. I'll edit in that way. But, speaking of editing, actually, when I first started this project, I used to delete my files, just to not give myself that option to be able to edit. So, I used to make the work, take a screenshot of it, and then delete the file so that I can't edit. So, all these parameters and rules that I would apply on it, pretty much was so that it's just: you start, and you finish, you don't go back and edit anything. That was also coming from a painters perspective—that when you're making a painting, you've rendered something, you're done with it, you move on. Of course, there's always the option to edit, but I always chose not to. Again, self imposed rules.

16:03

[Rapid beeping synthesizer notes make an energetic melody that invites movement, reducing into an echo as they fade out.]

Xuan Ye 16:19

Yeah, it seems like, you know, obviously, it starts from a rule-based logic. But, after a certain point, you started to leave it to chance, or your intuition, or other parameters, you set to yourself. How do you see this, like, pull and push? Like, do you find it as a challenge to deal with, or you feel like it's feeding you more inspiration, or?

Shaheer Zazai 17:02

I think it's more that it feeds the process, and it feeds—it's much more of an inspiration and an excitement, than it is a challenge that would stop me from doing it. I guess that's my nature—the more the challenge, the more that I have to solve, and that's exciting. It's exciting to have something to troubleshoot. Or, if it's—can you—I don't even know how to put this—it's like, if there's an obstacle, how do you get around it? Finding new ways to get around it. That's exciting for me over having an image in my hand and just making it. Because if I had any preconceived images, that then I just output, this would have become quite boring for me and I would have given up long time ago, but, I think it's the aspect that I don't know what's going to happen.

18:10

[Staccato synthesizer beeps, spaced apart, play an inquisitive melody, increasing in volume as they extend into the conversation.]

Shaheer Zazai 18:13

I can start a work, I can have a rough idea of 'okay, this is the direction I'd like to take it,' but almost like 99 percent of the time, things happen along the way that I did not foresee.

18:28

[The staccato synthesizer beeps play closer together, building upon the former melody and increasing in volume before fading out.]

Xuan Ye 18:40

Can we talk a little bit more about like, the phase, when early on, where you have this compulsion to make work that's symmetrical.

Shaheer Zazai 18:54

These are all realizations that have come much later on. Like I said, I don't like thinking about what I'm doing when I'm doing it. So, much later on, I realized that—these are the things that have come out in conversations during studio visits, things that have come out to come to light to me is that—the symmetry and the rules and the restrictions that I applied to my work was very much how I was

living. I mean, I'm born in Afghanistan, and I've lived in Pakistan for thirteen years, and then, now in Canada for almost fifteen, or, it has been fifteen. But, because of all this movement, and constantly having to experience a change, where you have to readjust and resaddle yourself, that I don't recall ever being a child. Like, as a child, I feel like I was always an adult, and I think a lot comes from always being in a state of alert, always being ready for the next challenge that you might have to experience. And the challenge can be simple things like: you're changing neighborhoods, you're changing schools, you're changing countries. It's always being ready to adjust to new. As a result, it creates a state of mind where you're so on alert, that you have to be—like, there's no room for error. There's no room for error, almost like, psychologically, physically, socially, and in your interactions—in everything you do, as long as you're awake, there's no room for error. So, it was interesting to realize this much later on that I was applying the same rules to my practice. I was doing what I was doing to myself also to my work. As a result, my work was so symmetrical, so controlled, that I would go back before considering the work complete. I would go through every character that I've highlighted and typed to check I didn't miss anything. And when I'm stitching the pages together, I would go down to the pixel state of the image, to make sure that there is nothing left that somebody could see as a problem. But, at the end of the day, it was just me seeing them, nobody else ever walked up to the work and said: "hey, there's something not right here." Everybody received it really well. So, once I reached that realization, I think, again, subconsciously, without intending it, there became a need for a change, and that change became allowing for errors to exist and allowing for non-symmetry to come about. And that was—it was almost like breaking out of a shell. Breaking out of a boundary that I had set for myself and pushing the work to become new on its own as well. Which is, I guess, where I am now. The work is evolving. It's becoming stranger. I've been told I use this word a lot: weirder. So, and that's, again, exciting. At some point, when I was making the symmetrical works, I used to think that, 'will there come a day where I'm like, I've run out of designs and I can't make anything new anymore? I'm gonna start repeating myself?'

22:46

[Long, droning synthesizer notes, spaced apart, erupt in shrill tones that echo into the conversation.]

Shaheer Zazai 22:49

But with this change, I feel like it's gonna keep evolving. And it's exciting.

22:53

[Shrill synthesizer notes build upon each other into a esoteric, reverberating melody that picks up in speed, losing its echo and warbling rapidly between tones before stopping.]

Xuan Ye 23:18

It's interesting, like, to me, I can't stop making the analogy between, like, human and machine in this process. It's like when you give parameters, if you—when you set out, like, control, it's such a machinic task. But, as you know, computer science evolves and develops, and now we have algorithms that are generative, even convolutional. The algorithm will evolve itself so that the machines or the machinic objects that are using the algorithm law will also evolve.

Shaheer Zazai 24:08

Yeah, it's interesting how the, what you're referring to, where the generative algorithms will repair itself almost. It will repair itself and it will evolve to be able to outdo what it couldn't do before. Yeah, and it's pushing boundaries. And it's interesting that something like a human sitting in front of a computer using Microsoft Word, and because of the repetition of it, it has done that very mechanical or computerized—it's mirroring that whole algorithm thing that you're talking about, but it's doing it to me. Where, the work is evolving, but not only is the work evolving, it's changing me by its evolution. I mean, I feel like my whole entire perspective has changed because of this project. Before I started making digital work, the lens that I would look at my own culture and my own history was a very negative lens, or focused on all the negative of where I come from, of Afghanistan's history and its culture. And the media feels that even further, especially when you're sitting so far away from your home country. And then, the only information input you have about your home country is media, and the media is very focused on war and the hardships that's going on. So, when you're at a distance, you're already looking at everything from a very critical perspective, and then on top of that, media's feeding your negative, you can really go deep into this negativity. And that's where I was at before this project started for me. Over the span of this project, I've gone from that person, to someone who became less negative oriented, but more curiosity oriented about my culture, and—almost like gone from that, to curiosity, to research, to wanting to change the lens that others now see my culture from—through, I guess. And now, the transformation that I'm able to see in myself, I pretty much give all the credit to the digital work. And simultaneously, I'm seeing the change happen in the work. So, I guess, to look at it from a very romantic perspective, the artist and its medium are like, they're like mirrors of each other. One changes the other and the reflection of it happens in the work, or you become the reflection of your work. So, the two go hand in hand, and the evolution of it goes hand in hand.

Xuan Ye 27:18

Yeah, and there's this constant feedback going on as well. Like, you just mentioned perception of information, right? Can you talk a little about the new work you make for Blackwood? Which, like, in our previous studio visit, you mentioned you think about information a lot.

Shaheer Zazai 27:46

Yeah. So, when I was first approached for the project for Blackwood Gallery, I wasn't thinking exactly what I was going to do, it was more that I was thinking on the basis of information I had at the time. So, at the beginning, the information I had was there's four light boxes. I was like, okay,

light boxes, that kind of falls right in the middle of the two ways my work exists: one, it exists on a screen; and it exists in a print form—and a lightbox is a print on a light screen, so, it's almost like, the exact middle ground between a computer screen and a print. So, that's where I was thinking from, so, I got very curious, I was like, okay, this would be really exciting to be able to use existing works and see it in a lightbox format on that scale, especially six foot by nine foot. But, because all my existing works wouldn't have fit those parameters, or those dimensions, that I had to consider making new work. And what this project did over the span of working on it, it broke a lot of my rules. I had rules such as: I would not copy paste ever; I will not use the same text from one work to create another work out of it. But when I started working for this project, also the palette I used was not a palette I would have used before. So, there was a lot of new things that the project itself was doing. And as for the information that I was keeping in mind, for me it was: it's a six foot by nine foot lightbox. So what do those two numbers mean for me in this context? It's six and nine. So I played with the font size of six and nine in Microsoft Word. So, I used every two characters on the main design is a different font size—so the first two are six, the next two are nine, and then that repeats throughout the work. Then I played with that and the base of the work is those two font sizes, and I created the entire work out of that. So, that in itself—also, what I normally used to do prior to this project is I always use monospace characters, meaning characters that occupy the same amount of space on the page, and as a result, I would always use the same font size throughout the design—because I didn't want any unexpected changes to happen. But, in this context, because I'm purely experimenting, it was fun to use two different font sizes. I know that sounds so, such a simple thing to do, but it really changed a lot in what I was producing. And then to work for that dimension and that scale was a challenge of its own. And, the work, I mean, it looks somewhere between the carpet work or the symmetrical work they used to make, and the non-symmetrical work that came after it. It's almost like the two existing at the same time, almost like layers. And from there, the other rule that I broke was the copy paste aspect. So, what I decided to—also the theme of the exhibition being a burning glass and a reading stone—I hope I remember that in the correct order—it made me, honestly, when I first read it, "Burning Glass, Reading Stone," I was not thinking about a lens, I was stuck in the poetic wording of the exhibition. So, I didn't really think of a lens till it dawned on me one day, that what they're talking about is a lens. And, that started, and I was already in the midst of working on this project that that factor started influencing the work. So, I started thinking about what happens to information when it goes through a lens, and for me, that lens is the parameters that I set for the work. So, the first work I made was based on the six and nine font size. The following works was me changing those parameters. So, for the next work, I took the entire text, and I changed the font size to nine for the whole thing. That stretched it, but it somehow maintained the design. And then, in the following, I changed the font size on every line—so the first first sentence being all nine, the next sentence all being six. I played around with that. So, it was an experiment to see what happens to information when you pass it through a lens, or you pass it through a filter, and what the outcome would be. And that became the basis of what I ended up making for Blackwood Gallery. And the final work

was made out of copy pasting every sentence and removing the ENTER, I guess, on a keyboard when you press 'enter' and then you go to the next sentence.

33:31

[A low, continuous, droning hum that oscillates between two tones gradually grows louder over the course of the conversation.]

Shaheer Zazai 33:34

So, to keep the design very legible, I had to do that. But for the last one, I decided that I'm just going to copy paste the text without making sentences out of it. It was just like putting everything one after the other. And that shifted the entire thing and turned it into almost like a gibberish. So, it was a lot of fun, to put it simply. It was a lot of fun to play with that information and constantly change parameters and see what the outcomes are. [The droning hum grows in volume and tone, rising upward in a continuous note that unfolds different tones as it builds, eventually fading out.]

Xuan Ye 34:55

When we talk about lens or filter, we could also think about it as the algorithm or the rule for this new work. It's like, they're variation of each other.

Shaheer Zazai 35:09

Yep, they are variation of each other. It's also, I mean, for me, when I think about lens, there's one—there's the literal lens, the glass that you hold that you can look through and it skews things for you. In the context of the exhibition's title, the lens can burn something because of the way the light is being focused on one point, or it can magnify what you're reading. But, outside of that, from my practice perspective, or from the lens that I make work through, it has a lot to do with the curiosity towards what cultural identity really means. And then, the lens that the audience brings to the table. So, I make work, and I put it out there, but the way people receive it is not what I have intended it to be. A lot of the times, well, majority of the time, that's how it goes, is that people see it from a different lens than I have intended it to be. So, it's interesting—it's raised this whole question for me, in my practice, is that is cultural identity even—does it even exist? The way we perceive it, is it a fixed point? Does it constantly transform based on who's holding the lens? And who's looking through it? Who's feeding the information through it? So, for me, being an Afghan, alone is a very strange concept to think about. Because there's the Afghan that I'm born, then there's the Afghan that I've lived at home with my family, then there's the Afghan you live when you come across other Afghans, and then there's the Afghan that people see you as. So, every person brings in their own parameters that they apply to you. So, you, your identity, is constantly transforming based on who's looking at it.

Xuan Ye 37:26

Yeah, I totally agree with what you said. Like, when people define, you know, the term like "information," because information, literally, it's supposed to be neutral. But there's also "message." Message is not neutral.

Shaheer Zazai 37:46

It's a translation of the information.

Xuan Ye 37:49

Yeah. And, like you said, "perception." Well, there's perception that will alter the meaning, but there's also the medium, right?

37:59

[A long, continuous, tinny drone that gradually grows in volume and begins to take over the conversation.]

Xuan Ye 38:02

Will also alter it. There's so many layers of that. And yeah, like your process and especially your new work, it shows... [The continuous tinny droning tone rises in pitch and is joined by staccato one-tone beeps that deliver a pattern, reminiscent of morse code. The beeps suddenly rapidly speed up and turn into a continuous note, joining the droning in an unsettling high-pitched ring. Both gradually fade out.]

Laura Tibi 38:58

Thank-you for listening to "Transmissions," a podcast of the Blackwood Gallery. The Blackwood Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the University of Toronto Mississauga. New episodes are released with each new image set between September 2020 and June 2021. For more information, including installation images, essays, and videos, visit the Blackwood website at blackwoodgallery.ca.