

# Julian Abraham “Togar”: Too good to be OK

Sep 23–Dec 11, 2023

**SculptureCenter**

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SculptureCenter announces *Julian Abraham “Togar”: Too good to be OK*, the artist’s first solo exhibition in a U.S. institution.

*Too good to be OK* continues and builds upon Julian Abraham “Togar”’s long term work with sound, ranging from percussive signals in urban spaces to shared communication through music, bands, and jamming. Sound has been both a central medium in Togar’s individual practice and a feature of his socially-directed and collaborative projects. The exhibition in New York incorporates the sonic elements of works first generated in other social and political contexts, and underlines a stance of global decolonial solidarity derived from the artist’s position living and working in Indonesia. With newly-commissioned musical instruments, audio works, kinetic sculptures, video, painting, and live events, *Too good to be OK* is Togar’s experiment with the “ongoing-ness” of his expansive form of artmaking. Moving forward, his work develops new sounds, recomposes itself as it shifts contexts, and distills ideas and methods from past endeavors to open the potential of new shared acoustic spaces.

Togar’s ongoing *OK Studio* (2020–) is the core of his exhibition at SculptureCenter. *OK Studio* describes both a physical place for music and events and a more theoretical space concerned with the function of art in imagining what to do with public space. Set up in SculptureCenter’s lower level galleries, it is a participatory environment that offers visitors the chance to “co-exercise, co-experiment, co-instigate, co-investigate, co-practice, co-produce, co-distribute” what can be learned through active listening. Since its informal beginnings during the 2020 pandemic lockdown at the Rijksakademie residency in Amsterdam, the project has organically evolved and transformed with each iteration, making the studio, in the artist’s words, “an instrument with its own potentiality.” At SculptureCenter, *OK Studio* will appear as an open, self-playing composition, with an instrumental system of automated ocean drums, shruti boxes, gongs, megaphones, and other devices, along with new ideas integrated into regular jamming and live programming within the larger timeline of the exhibition.

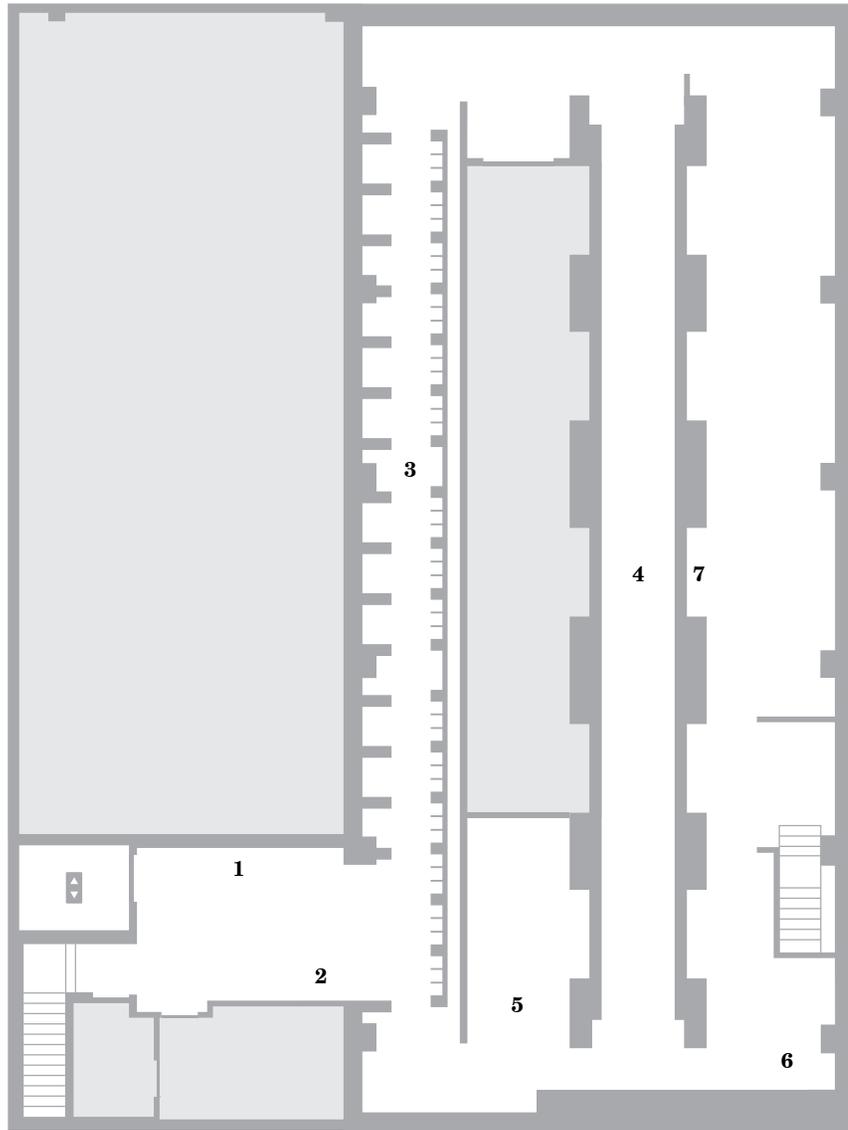
Other new and newly-realized works contribute to this larger sonic installation, including sculptures that deploy the signature percussive sounds used by some Indonesian food vendors to attract customers, and others that listen to the sounds of fermenting juices. For the exhibition, SculptureCenter has commissioned a new installment from Togar’s ongoing video series *Drummer’s Gonna Drum* (2017–), in which the artist visits various built and natural environments and drums on various surfaces. His new work connects the Dutch colonization of Indonesia to an acutely impactful moment in New York’s own colonial history. Togar filmed *Drummer’s Gonna Drum #03* on Run, a tiny island toward the eastern side of the

Indonesian archipelago. In 1667, Britain traded Run for the Dutch-controlled Manhattan, capitalizing on the soon-failed Dutch desire to dominate the nutmeg trade in Southeast Asia. Togar’s new video work highlights the interconnectedness of strikingly disparate places—two small islands on opposite sides of the world, one a fishing village and one now a locus of global finance—and the blunt colonial transaction that binds their histories together.

*Julian Abraham “Togar”: Too good to be OK* is a multifaceted, activated dive into the artist’s exploration of rhythms and systems, made elastic through experience exhibiting across international contexts. Initiating, supporting, and questioning the connections between environmental sounds and musicians, as well as the dynamics between musicians and audiences, *Julian Abraham “Togar”: Too good to be OK* invites the public of New York, in Togar’s words on *OK Studio*, “to be with it, play with it, sit with it, and move with it.”

**Julian Abraham “Togar”** (b. 1987, Indonesia) is a multidisciplinary artist, musician, social researcher, and pseudo-scientist. In his practice, Togar often considers how to function within his surrounding realities, resulting in work that combines his different skills and interests such as music, soundscapes, active listening, programming and workshops. Togar was recently a resident at Rijksakademie, Amsterdam. He also recently participated in the 58th Carnegie International (2022-23), documenta fifteen (2022), 17th Istanbul Biennial (2022), Triennale di Milano (2022), and the Sydney Biennale (2018), alongside group exhibitions like *Love Songs For The Savages*, De Appel, Amsterdam (2021); *Unorganized Response*, Auto Italia, London (2019); and *Pressing Matters*, Framer Framed, Amsterdam (2018). Recent solo presentations include *Ulah Tanah* at RUCI Artspace, Jakarta, Indonesia (2019) and *~IIINNNGGG~* at Cemeti Institute of Art and Society, Indonesia (2018).

# Works in the Exhibition



Lower Level Plan

# Lower Level

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>1</b> <i>Drummer's Gonna Drum #03</i>, 2023<br/>Digital video, sound<br/>7:59 minutes</p>   | <p>Signs, 2020–ongoing<br/>Acrylic on canvas<br/>Various dimensions</p>   |
| <p><b>2</b> <i>Can't wait for the sound / Looking forward for the silence</i>, 2023<br/>Ginger, sugar, water, yeast, vinegar, air lock, glass vessels, contact microphone, speakers<br/>Dimensions variable</p> | <p>OK STUDIO<br/>RAGADIGIOGO</p> <p>RIGHTLEFTRIGHT /<br/>RIGHTLEFTRIGHT /<br/>LEFTLEFTREPEAT<br/>FROM LEFT TO RIGHT FROM TOP<br/>TO BOTTOM</p> <p>ALL FEEDBACK GO TO HEAVEN<br/>NOISE HAVE NO PARTICULAR<br/>DISTINCT PITCH</p> <p>IN CASE OF EMERGENCY CALL<br/>ME BY YOUR NAME<br/>WE ARE THE MACHINES WE ARE<br/>RAGING AGAINST<br/>IVE ALWAYS BEEN A FELLA BUT I<br/>WILL NEVER BE A KUTI</p> |
| <p><b>3</b> <i>Acoustic Analog Digitally Composed #14</i>, 2023<br/>Bongo, gong, bowl, spoon, wood block, roof tile, canvas, microcontrollers, LED lights, solenoid motors<br/>Dimensions variable</p>          | <p>EARS HAVE NO SELF-DEFENSE<br/>MECHANISM<br/>EARS HAVE SELF-CLEANING<br/>MECHANISM<br/>SHARP ATTACK GENTLE DECAY<br/>ACOUSTIC ANALOG DIGITALLY<br/>COMPOSED<br/>YOU MAY SAY I'M A DRUMMER<br/>BUT I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE<br/>MUSIC IS A NORMALIZATION OF<br/>VIOLENCE</p>   |
| <p><b>4</b> <i>OK Studio</i>, 2020–ongoing<br/>Ocean drums, gong, shruti boxes, megaphones, servo motors, microcontrollers, speakers<br/>Dimensions variable</p>  | <p>ANAHATAHANA<br/>BISMILLAH</p> <p>WHAT YOU HEAR / IS WHAT YOU<br/>SEE / IS WHAT YOU THINK<br/>IS WHAT YOU READ / IS WHAT<br/>YOU KNOW / IS WHAT YOU<br/>FEEL<br/>IS WHAT YOU SHARE / IS WHAT<br/>YOU GET / IS WHAT YOU<br/>BREATHE</p>  |
| <p><b>5</b> <i>Ngaji Bunyi - Does Sound Matter? Lecture, Dec 2, 2018</i><br/><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25jvPcN9W7M">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25jvPcN9W7M</a></p>                          |   |
| <p><b>6</b> <i>Rocker's Gonna Rock</i>, 2021<br/>Digital video, sound<br/>37:08 minutes</p>   |   |
| <p><b>7</b> <i>Drummer's Gonna Drum #01</i>, 2017<br/>Digital video, sound<br/>5:55 minutes</p>   |   |

All works courtesy the artist

# Too good to be OK

In *Too good to be OK*, Julian Abraham “Togar” expands his long-term interest in exploring sound and its social relevance. His work raises two pivotal questions: “Is Sound Matter? Does Sound Matter?”—concerns that guide his exploration of sound as both a tangible, physical entity and a complex socio-cultural force.<sup>1</sup> Through an amalgamation of sonic explorations that blend into *OK Studio* (2020–ongoing), the exhibition’s central work, Togar explores the profound impacts of a medium that reaches beyond mere auditory perception.

Togar’s exploration into the social dimension of sound was triggered by ethno-religious riots in Tanjung Balai, close to his hometown of Medan in Indonesia. The conflict centered on a misunderstanding that arose when a resident commented on the amplified volume of the Islamic call to prayer known as the azaan, inadvertently causing offense to the religious sentiments of the local Islamic convention. The event prompted Togar to ponder the subjective distinction between “sound” and “noise.” In 2018, the artist embarked on a research expedition to unravel the complexities of this altercation by interviewing individuals from both sides of the conflict. His research revealed intricate social dynamics marked by a multifaceted web of local interests, politics, and power dynamics, prompting him to develop a keen interest in exploring the expansive range of sonic cultures within Indonesia and beyond, and the power of sound to critique prevailing social and political systems.

Drawing from his background as a musician and influenced by seminal works such as Jacques Attali’s *Noise: A Political Economy of Music*, Togar began to examine the potential of his music as a means to challenge entrenched political and social systems. Attali’s influential book, which explores how political forces have historically harnessed music to shape public opinion, enforce societal norms, and maintain authority, served as a catalyst for Togar’s introspection. Attali argues that noise, which he defines as disruptive and non-conforming sound, has the potential to be revolutionary. Contemplating how to leverage his role as both an artist and musician in service of dissent, Togar began integrating the transformative and disruptive capacity of noise into conventional musical structures and composition.

This synthesis finds its expression in Togar’s *OK Studio*—an installation that features a diverse array of musical instruments, including ocean drums, shruti boxes, gongs, contact microphones, and megaphones. While these instruments can be programmed to play

<sup>1</sup> Julian Abraham “Togar,” “Ngaji Bunyi - Does Sound Matter?,” YouTube video, 54:45, January 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25jvPcN9W7M&t=1051s>.

autonomously and follow a predetermined score, the political promise of the work emanates from its interactive nature. Acting as a literal studio, the work enables collective organization—allowing people to assemble around sound. While in residence with SculptureCenter from September to November 2023, Togar activates this aspect through periodic live performances, jamming sessions, and other gatherings, emphasizing the communal and relational dimension of the work.

To assemble, as argued by Judith Butler in her influential *Performative Theory of Assembly*, entails engaging in a relational, expressive, and unmistakably diverse performative enactments.<sup>2</sup> This process necessitates bringing together vulnerable individuals in a shared time and space. In the context of Togar’s work, assembly allows for the unrestrained potential to produce and respond to cacophony and noise—carving out a space not just to hear but to listen.

*Too good to be OK* bears an imprint of collectivity and conviviality, with the backdrop of Togar’s two-decade-long engagement with the Indonesian art scene contributing obliquely to *OK Studio*’s new iterations. Due to the changing political scenario in the archipelago, contemporary art in Indonesia experienced two distinct epochs, transitioning from the authoritarian New Order regime under President Soeharto, where even congregating in groups of more than five people without state permission was illegal, to the flourishing democratization of the “reformasi” wave sparked by a 1998 student uprising.

Following democratization, the late 1990s was characterized by grassroots artistic initiatives driven by necessity. Confronted with a lack of government funding and formal arts infrastructure, Indonesian cities witnessed a cultural transformation emerging from the bottom up. This movement, marked by its lack of hierarchy and an open-source ethos, gave rise to various collective initiatives across the islands. Individuals from diverse professional domains converged, sometimes creating a shared resource repository, akin to a communal “lumbung,” a term representing a rice barn where surplus harvest is stored for communal benefit.<sup>3</sup>

While there is an inherent political and social need for collaboration in Togar’s experiments with sound, a focus on the medium’s own qualities and materiality is not lost in his work, especially as he integrates certain experiments into larger

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 181.

<sup>3</sup> This concept was central to the recent Documenta 15 in which Togar participated and underscores the translation and relevance of such a communal resource-sharing model to the practices of artists. It is discussed in more detail in Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis’ interview, “Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life,” *e-flux* 118 (May 2021). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/118/395154/living-lumbung-the-shared-spaces-of-art-and-life/>

soundscapes. Notable to this line of investigation is Togar's *Acoustic Analog Digitally Composed* works, a new four-part series of which is on view in the exhibition. In this series the artist reproduces cacophonous sounds of Indonesian cities—notably the distinctive and, in Indonesian localities, instantly recognizable percussive rhythms used by street vendors as auditory “signs” advertising their specific food offerings. Togar transforms the sound of a spoon hitting a dish, for example, into a visual experience using automated sculptures programmed to activate at different times, lights, and shadows. By introducing a visual, shadow-puppet-like element to the sonic components of the piece (the viewer sees the sculpture's elements clanging in backlit silhouette), Togar taps into a fundamental aspect of human perception: our innate inclination to contextualize and understand the sounds we encounter. Unidentified sounds pique our curiosity, urging us to listen more attentively and uncover their source—a curiosity that endures until a visible and tangible connection is established. Further, the visual representation broadens our understanding of the material nature of sound as a relation—a connection between the source of sound, the ear, what one can physically see, and what one understands a specific sound to mean.

Similarly testing the possibilities of dividing sound, material, and context, Togar shows a new work titled *Can't wait for the sound / Looking forward for the silence* (2023), made from fermenting ginger in large glass jugs. Originally conceived with a collective in response to the surge of homemade and black-market alcoholic beverages in Indonesia in 2010, Togar's current presentation of these works at SculptureCenter shifts the artistic focus to the auditory dimensions of the project. The artist invites the audience to partake in the sonic journey of yeast converting sugar into ethanol and carbon dioxide. His exploration delves into various variables within the fermentation process—temperature, sugar levels, fruit varieties, yeast quantity, light intensity, and container dimensions. The auditory journey progresses from a piercing, intense resonance during the initial stages to a serene, mellower cadence after three to four days. In the context of the exhibition, these works also contribute to an ever-evolving sonic landscape, mirroring the physical transformation of yeast fermentation.

By contrast, in video works like *Drummers Gonna Drum #03* (2023)—part of an ongoing series where the artist visits various built and natural environments and drums on elements he sees—Togar encourages the audience to probe further into histories he's trying to excavate. In an earlier iteration of this work, for instance, the artist drums on the remains of the Bolwerken van in Amsterdam, a five meter high defense wall that enclosed Amsterdam in the 1600s before being demolished to expand the city. In doing so, he calls attention to forgotten strongholds that are essentially specters of

colonial domination. In this latest edition, specially commissioned for SculptureCenter and the artist's engagement with New York as a site, Togar captures footage on Run Island, a small island in Indonesia. Run Island shares a peculiar colonial history with Manhattan, as they were exchanged in a trade agreement between the British and the Dutch in 1667. By showcasing this work in New York City, Togar establishes a transnational connection between these seemingly disparate locations.

As a whole, *Too good to be OK* serves to cycle the sound-making ideas and methods within Togar's oeuvre into new uses. The evolving nature of the exhibition, driven by Togar's collaborative efforts, provides viewers and listeners with a deeper regard for the importance of sound, especially as it continues to grow and transform throughout the exhibition's duration. While visiting, the symbolic and literal convergence of the social and material aspects of sound leaves the audience immersed in a harmonious yet chaotic medley. As the collective sounds of all of Togar's works reverberate through the lower galleries of SculptureCenter, the questions of “Is sound matter?” and “Does sound matter?” are both asked and answered by the cacophony.

—Pallavi Surana, Project Curatorial Assistant

## Public Programs

*Julian Abraham “Togar”*: *Too good to be OK* includes a schedule of formal and informal programs to be held at SculptureCenter from Sep 2023–Nov 2023 with the artist present. These include performances, conversations, live sets, jam sessions, and films under the auspices of OK Studio, hosted in collaboration with fellow artists, musicians, new friends, and other collaborators. Confirmed programming includes:

### **Sat, Sep 23, 6–8pm** **Fall 2023 Openings**

#### **Wed, Oct 18, 7–9pm**

##### **OK Studio with Richard Nicol**

Richard Nicol is an electronic musician and founder of Pittsburgh Modular Synthesizers. He rejoins Togar and OK Studio at SculptureCenter, continuing a collaboration initiated in early 2023.

#### **Sat, Oct 28, 2pm–8pm**

##### **OK Studio**

Saturday: Film Program, Open Session, Album Launch

2pm – Program of shorts by Indonesia- and New York-based filmmakers, organized by filmmakers Ladya Cheryl and Devon Narine-Singh.

4pm – Open session. Join OK Studio for an afternoon jam session. Visitors are invited to bring their own instruments.

6pm – Performance and album launch by Zeke Khaseli

#### **Thu, Nov 2, 7–8pm**

##### **OK Studio with Christian Nyampeta**

Christian Nyampeta is an artist, musician, filmmaker, and writer.

Nyampeta works in New York, London, the Netherlands, and Rwanda, where he convenes the Nyanza Working Group of ARAC—Another Roadmap School Africa Cluster.

## On View Concurrently

*Tania Pérez Córdova: Generalization*  
Sep 23–Dec 11, 2023

*In Practice: Devin T. Mays*  
Sep 23–Dec 11, 2023

*In Practice: Marina Xenofontos*  
Sep 23–Oct 23, 2023

*In Practice: Isabel Mallet*  
Nov 2–Dec 11, 2023

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*Julian Abraham “Togar”*: *Too good to be OK* is the artist’s first solo exhibition in a U.S. institution. The exhibition is organized by SculptureCenter. Special thanks to Pallavi Surana, Project Curatorial Assistant.

## Sponsors

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