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Anna Raimondo: interview

Marrakech Biennale 2014

Marrakech

by HARRIET THORPE

Anna Raimondo is an Italian artist based in Brussels and working internationally. She describes herself as an artist working with listening. She used to call herself a radio artist, but now her practice has expanded to work with sound and the public space. I meet Raimondo in Marrakech to talk about her project *Here. Now. Where?*, created with artistic partner Younes Baba-Ali for the fifth Marrakech Biennale. The project involves hailing a taxi to take a journey through a menu of curated soundscapes.

The project in Marrakech is an offshoot of *Saout Radio*, which the two artists have been working on since 2012. “Both Younes and I work with sound, public space and radio,” says Raimondo. “Younes has a more visual approach – he’s a visual artist, I come from radio art – so we had this common field that we wanted to explore, not just as artists but also as curators. And why sound? Why radio? Not just because it was our common point, but also because we both believe that it’s becoming easier and easier to make sound and radio art. It’s very accessible, everyone can do it; with digital recorders, with the internet, with radio, and it’s the place to be.”

Saout Radio was born from a radio art workshop that Raimondo led in Rabat, where Baba-Ali was participating in a residency. The pair were invited to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to create an installation in the tunnel that links South Kensington underground station with the museum.

“We decided to do a listening selection called *Moroccan Mix*, which was a panorama of audible contemporary art,” says Raimondo. “We invited emerging and established radio and sound artists, or artists who wanted to work with sound on that occasion. We had six artists in the tunnel, and it was really interesting as people passed through, and had the

opportunity to sit and listen.”

The project continued at the São Paulo Biennial, then on an Italian radio show, then at another listening session in a contemporary art space in Brussels. “We really tried to spread it everywhere because that’s what it was about, finding different dialogues and infusions.”

Raimondo has worked across Morocco, in Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier, so the Marrakech Biennale was an opportune moment for *Here. Now. Where?* “From the very beginning *Saout Radio* was a platform for sonic and radio art in Maghreb, Africa and the Middle East. Over two years the project has taken many different shapes because it’s a resource and it’s curatorial, pedagogical and artistic as well.”

Sound art and installations have become common parts of exhibitions in museums and galleries, but radio art seems more of an artistic taboo, with added questions because of its fluid format. Who would broadcast it, where would it be playing, who would listen? I ask Raimondo how she came to be a radio artist. “I was a journalist and an activist using radio for a long time, then I started to travel a lot. I’m Italian, but I started to make radio in Spanish and then in French and, of course, I found the translation a challenge. Sometimes it was exciting, sometimes it was just very tiring. I started to discover the fun of making radio that didn’t use language at all – for example, soundscapes. Then I started to come back to the works in a very musical way to approach the narration of storytelling, and I became a radio artist.”

Raimondo is a passionate communicator and her voice rises and falls as she continues: “For several years, I was a radio artist, and now I say I’m an artist working with listening, because my feeling about my practice has expanded. So, what does it mean being a radio artist? Actually, what is radio? It’s a medium, but it’s a language and it’s based on different possibilities. You can narrate something and decide how to narrate that. It’s really a very rich language and, as an artist, you just decide how to angle it. There is a wonderful quote by Brecht about how radio could be the most democratic medium if there were horizontality between the listener and the radio. It’s a crazy interaction because you are not there and the listener might not be there either. I started to do the same thing I did using radio, but in public spaces using a ghetto blaster and my voice, screaming into the public space. I never left the radiophonic sensibility, but I expanded my practice to performance and sound installations.”

Raimondo tells me how she and Baba-Ali first came up with the idea of using the taxi for the sound installation. “We were in Dakar for a residency last year. Younes won the Dakar Biennial prize, so he invited me, and we both presented a workshop on sound and radio art. In Dakar, we always travelled by taxi and before that we had been in Marrakech, so

during that period we spent a lot of our time in taxis. Both Younes and I were intrigued by the idea of a listening device that is already in place that we could use. It's already a public and private space, a relational space, so it was clear that we wanted to work with the taxis in Marrakech."

The participating radio taxis are marked with the green stamp of *Saout* and, to experience the installation, you can phone a number to book a cab to your location. Once inside the listening device, the taxi driver will offer you a menu of curated sound compilations to choose from; eight playlists for the daytime and one playlist for the night.

"The main idea of the project is *Here. Now. Where?*. So, here we are in Marrakech in a taxi, but if we are listening we can be elsewhere. We did an international open call and got 300 applications. Then we had a jury of experts in Brussels and we selected 97 works." The chosen works were sorted into carefully curated compilations. Raimondo explains a few of the selections: "*Though climates and temperatures* evokes temperatures, landscapes, the strength of the wind, the glacier – that feeling that you are in Marrakech, but you can feel cold. *Toward imaginary scapes* is a collection of compositional and conceptual sounds that cannot be located on the map. Then there is *Here on the geographic map*, which is a collection of soundscapes – so, for example, we have Peter Cusack, Emeka Ogboh, Angus Carlyle, pieces that are sonic postcards or, as I call it, a 'polaroid sonor'.

"*There if you follow them* is about alternative storytelling and interactive works. Randa Maroufi is a Moroccan artist based in France and her piece is called *Tentatives de séduction*. She collects the way men speak to women in the street, like, 'Hey baby, you're so pretty', and she embodies this with the voice of a girl, with silences between one sentence and the other. It's interesting to see the reaction of people in the taxi in Morocco listening to this. For *In a soup of languages*, you can find works that focus on the musicality of language, and works, like stories or poetry, that are in a specific language."

Depending on what languages you speak and your personal experience of the world, every taxi ride will be a new journey. Communication is allowed a broader definition where language and sounds are meaningful, even though they may not be directly translatable. In a city where three languages, Arabic, Darija [a Moroccan form of Arabic] and French are spoken, what does Raimondo hope to communicate? "It's really about an aesthetic experience of listening, which for us is the most important thing. We really tried to make this an inclusive and participatory project. This was our objective. So far, we have had really good feedback, from different types of people, not just arty people. It does not mean that everyone appreciates it, but you cannot avoid listening."

We discuss the role of the taxi driver, who plays an important part in the operation – and success – of the whole project. "It was important for us to involve the taxi drivers in the

project and not just impose our sound and say, this is an artist's project. No, they are really part of it. We spent a lot of time with them, and this was an almost pedagogic moment. We closed our eyes and then we listened. I asked them about the piece they were listening to and then they each chose a selection. Each taxi is an ephemeral museum of sound art in movement, and the taxi driver is the mediator."

What about practical communication, discussing logistics and also artistic vision, how was this negotiated, I ask Raimondo. "We went with someone from the biennale who speaks Darija confidently to speak to the taxi drivers, which was a key mediation; I don't think it would have been possible otherwise. It was also very important to have French, Darija and Arabic, the Moroccan languages, in the selection. There are two works in Darija, and one work of a Moroccan speaking French with an accent. The taxi drivers loved these three works because they can feel them and approach the art. But in order to communicate it was always vital to have someone speaking Darija. That was one of the challenges of the project, but we don't expect the taxi driver to be a critic of the work, or to give an artistic lecture. Once he knows what it's about, he can really have his own discourse about it that probably won't choose the same words as a curator or a critic and this is the democratisation. Everyone can reuse, reinterpret, reappropriate, and, actually, art becomes a pretext for other things, possibilities of relations."

It is interesting to think about the types of spaces sound could potentially infiltrate in the public and private spheres. "For us, this is a pilot project. We really want to push this idea of the listening device – in Marrakech, it is the taxi, but in Casablanca, it's the tramway – a very silent place to propose sound."

So who sets the rules, I ask. Who owns the sound space in public areas? "I was living in London experimenting with that; with ghetto blasters each time I would go out, on the underground, in the parks. I think that sound is very inclusive, and really the pretext to set dialogues: you can really use it in a powerful way. It's about the localisation. That's the power of sound. You don't have to be there to install something, you just have to make a folder, send it over Dropbox, add some text and that's it. This is the power of this platform – you can spread it, and artists can spread it themselves. I was an activist, and I decided to leave the activism and become an artist – and it isn't the same at all. Of course, it's still me, so I have the same values, but I don't think the strategy of communication is the same. I'm very careful and it's very important to put the distance between that kind of approach, and even more now. I think there's a kind of prostitution of activism in art – everyone is an activist. With art, you question, you don't answer."

I ask Raimondo what's next for *Saout Radio*? "In a couple of months we will launch the web radio, which you can stream to listen. If people want to use it, they can just ask us. It

will just be sound art, but we are working on the idea of a platform for a more theoretical and critical approach. To work with curators and critics who are studying postcolonialism in sound art. At the moment, we are working on a documentary with the taxi drivers and artists from *Here. Now. Where?*. Then we will put it on our web radio, and we are organising radio sessions in Brussels and Morocco.”

- Anna Raimondo and Younes Baba-Ali are running a project titled *Fearless Radio* in association with KunstRadio based in Austria (http://saout-radio.com/pdf/Fearless_Radio.pdf; http://www.kunstradio.at/2014A/16_03_14en.html). Anna Raimondo’s solo show, *Beyond voice. Me, you and everyone who is listening*, supported by Lucia Farinati is on at Arte Contemporanea in Bruxelles, 23 April to July 2014.



Anna Raimondo. *Here. Now. Where?*, created with artistic partner Younes Baba-Ali for the fifth Marrakech Biennale. The project involves hailing a taxi to take a journey through a menu of curated soundscapes. Image 1.



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Anna Raimondo. Here. Now. Where?, created with artistic partner Younes Baba-Ali for the fifth Marrakech Biennale. The project involves hailing a taxi to take a journey through a menu of curated soundscapes. Image 4.



Anna Raimondo. Here. Now. Where?, created with artistic partner Younes Baba-Ali for the fifth Marrakech Biennale. The project involves hailing a taxi to take a journey through a menu of curated soundscapes. Image 5.



Saout Radio. Ici Maintenant Ou, 2014. Courtesy of the artists.