

RADIO ART ZONE



Interview from 24.04.2022 by Ilia Rogatchevski with Sarah Washington, who together with Knut Aufermann is the Artistic Director of Radio Art Zone. Extracts from this interview were published in the June 2022 issue (460) of The Wire Magazine, for Unlimited Editions on page 8. The original interview has been slightly revised and extended for online publication.

Ilia Rogatchevski: How did the idea for Radio Art Zone originate? What is the project's aim?

Sarah Washington: We first heard that the European Capital of Culture would happen in Esch about five years ago. Around the same time a community radio in Luxembourg (Radio ARA) enquired about membership to the radio art network Radia, which Knut and I co-founded in 2004. As we happen to be close-by we arranged to go and visit, and coincidentally they were celebrating their birthday by inviting radio artists we know to perform live. We met up with Sandra Laborier, the originator of the station's active interest in radio art, and during our first conversation mentioned we would like to propose a project for Esch2022. She said she wanted to do something radio-related too, so we agreed on the spot to work on a radio art project together and try our best to make it happen. It was an instant match, and felt like a productive partnership from the first moment.

Then it was simply a case of designing whatever project we desired and hoping that we could secure interest in it. One of my long-standing programming wishes which developed years ago in the period after leaving ResonanceFM, was to run a radio station for a year which featured only live work by a different artist each week. We realised of course that this would not be so easy, so we decided to distill the concept into an even better form which enabled us to draw up a programme for a radio which sounds different every single day. Initially we planned to do this for an entire year, but the realities of working within the Esch2022 framework meant that we were (luckily!) obliged to reduce the scope of our ambition, therefore we settled upon 100 days. I mean, who doesn't love a very round number?

Off the back of our success and experiences co-curating the month-long Radio Revolten festival in 2016, the concept this time was to attempt to step up a notch and offer the largest on-air exhibition of radio art we had ever been able to present, most likely that the world has so far seen. It's part of our determination to enable more people to become aware of what thousands of artists have been quietly working away on for decades, most typically with very little or no recognition or recompense. This is not a complaint, we are grateful for the many freedoms which this condition of invisibility fosters, which is why we have always refused to define the term radio art. To preserve openness, all we are prepared to say is that radio art is radio made by artists (and almost anyone can become an artist given the interest and conducive circumstances). We have refused to define it further for decades now, fearing that any particular canon may emerge and become fixated upon.

We saw a chance to commission work and thereby celebrate a substantial swathe of this rapidly-increasing pool of artists, which is thoroughly deserved and in a lot of cases long overdue. We also took the chance to stretch people artistically by requesting durational works of 22 hours in length, which would be sure to

bend minds and foster creative approaches, as well as allowing us to present a showcase of each artists own unique sound world. I tell them they got off lightly – it could have been a week! The overall idea is to demonstrate many of the techniques and spaces of radio as art form, and illuminate these further by presenting substantial new works.

Reaching as wide as possible an audience is something we always try to achieve, therefore we call upon our networks, such as Radia, to seek partnerships. Through our radio work at documenta 14 we happened to be in touch with members of ruangrupa, who became the curators of documenta 15. They have a strong interest in community radio as they create it themselves, therefore we selected our dates to run concurrently in the expectation that some sort of cross-pollination could take place. Their lumbung community radio project will be one of the partner stations for Radio Art Zone. Our media partner Resonance Extra will relay the whole 100 days across five cities in the UK. All our other partner stations can decide how much they would like to take, as they are free to dip in and out at will during gaps in their schedules or holiday breaks.

IR: Can you outline your curatorial approach to RAZ? (How did you choose the participating artists? Was it invite only or was there also an open call? What were your selection criteria? How long did it take to put everything together?)

SW: We initially drew up a long list of 400 possible artists who we have worked or are in contact with to present to Esch2022, in an attempt to demonstrate our ability to pull off such an ambitious project. Once we had settled upon the 100 day format, we set about drawing up a shorter list to work from. We wanted a mix of the known and the lesser known, the old and the new, both experienced and inexperienced sound artists and people from other disciplines. Naturally we had a fair idea about certain artists we knew would relish the challenge and be able to pull off such a feat. On the other hand we were committed to the thought that anyone could do it if they put their mind to it.

There was no open call, however a number of artists contacted us once they heard about the project, and we engaged a few of these after probing their ideas. We loved incorporating this random element as it threw up some new-to-us people, which was part of our curation strategy. We carried out a fair bit of scouting around online, as it was not possible to travel to seek out previously unknown artists by experiencing their work in person. Although we did manage to invite several artists this way, it was not easy to work out who would be best suited to the task. The process was only successful when we found stunning examples of an artist's work, or they demonstrated processes which we felt could be adapted or updated for Radio Art Zone.

We had to try it at least, as we always incorporate an element of discovery into our projects by drawing in interesting artists from other disciplines or the nearby surroundings, perhaps to make radio for the first time. There is however no substitute for meeting, or ideally working with, artists and experiencing their methodologies and personalities up close. Additionally when we reached out to them a few friends suggested artists working in particular places outside of our reach, so in these cases we borrowed from their first-hand experience and took people on trust.

The overarching concept was to draw on as many topics, disciplines and approaches as possible, from radio to installation work to performance to drama to algorithmic composition to spoken word and documentary to plunderphonics. In other words any type of sound or art that can be transformed into artistic form for radio. Whenever relevant we made suggestions to artists about potential content, but most of them quickly

came up with a fully-formed idea. We were totally amazed that only a couple of people declined the invitation overall, primarily due to the detailed way they construct their pieces. We tried to keep a few slots open as long as possible to incorporate any serendipitous latecomers, which is actually more satisfying than nerve-wracking as something always pops up at the last minute.

The entire process of designing and putting the project together took five years, although a lot of that time was spent languishing through one tedious and tense waiting period to another before we finally found out whether we would be selected or not, and if so, what the scope of the project could be given how much funding we would have to play with. (The budget was only decided at the very end of the process and a reduction was applied, which we were lucky enough to have restored by the city's culture department.) The signs were fairly good all along but the bureaucracy was painfully slow. Whilst trying to generate the necessary excitement in advance, we got sick of having to endlessly repeat that we were not sure yet if it would happen.

Once the go-ahead was looking likely (if still far from signed off), we prepared in earnest and it took a couple of years overall to settle on our selected artists. This was a process of allowing various impressions to drift in and out, continually revisiting specific ideas for contributors, and resting upon whatever seemed to best suggest itself over a period of time. Some programme slots were obvious from the outset due to particular artists needing to be represented in any such overview of both the current and historical scenes, others were much more elusive, only emerging after a drawn-out period of reflection and tuning-in. We did not worry about it overmuch as we knew that even at this substantial size we would not be able to incorporate everyone we would have liked to invite. We delayed some of the final decisions until it was getting a little uncomfortable, because it appeared to be important to allow the process to take its own time to percolate through us, and for that we needed to step out of our own way to a certain extent.

IR: What were the pieces / proposals that stood out to you most? Why? Any surprising entries?

SW: Through other Radio Art Zone participants we were lucky enough to get into contact with artists in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Haiti, which has provided great interest and excitement in the ways they are presenting their local situations and concerns and turning them into radio. Mega Mingiedi & Jaguar Ntumi operate their show out of Mega's taxi, instigating interactions with passengers and local notable figures to excavate the cultural, social and political histories of their city Kinshasa. This show will be in French, luckily our team by virtue of being based in Luxembourg is exceptionally multi-lingual, therefore we have been able to communicate with artists such as these who we may have not otherwise been able to consider engaging.

Jean-Daniel Lafontant presents the Easter rituals and social gatherings of Temple Na-Ri-VéH, a spiritual compound that provides shelter, food and services to the local community in Port-au-Prince. From the graphic descriptions he gave us of these in an online meeting, I am sure we will be deeply drawn into a completely unknown, profound and exhilarating experience. This will also happen with the Brazilian Clovis trickster dance which will be performed live in Esch by long-time co-collaborator Leandro Nerefuh along with his associate Caetano. I am also eagerly anticipating whatever magic will certainly be conjured up by resident artist Julia Drouhin both during her month-long stay and on our final day in her apothecary of the airwaves show which will close the programme.

I have also been taken aback by the artists who have decided to carry out endurance feats or intricate pieces requiring a great deal of production work, as in Ralf Wendt's live 22-hour walking show, Felix Kubin's



self-talking clock, Julia Lee Barclay-Morton and Viv Corringham's performative rendition of Julia's entire dramatic output, or the exquisite filigree wealth of riches provided by Xentos Fray Bentos in his show from 100 years hence. What we are asking of them is not an easy feat to carry out, so you would expect and be willing to embrace a lot of shortcuts, yet some have gone way above and beyond what could reasonably be expected. Such dedication to producing work is incredibly inspiring and praise-worthy.

IR: In what way(s) does your curation for RAZ differ from previous projects by Mobile Radio (e.g. Radio Revolten)? Has your approach changed in any way over time?

SW: Nothing has changed much over the years, it has always been about initiating the best project, big or small, for any given circumstance – or more rarely, creating the circumstances for a desired project. We do have some rules, like never to work with prima donnas... and that's because of the way we operate. We like things to work and we like to get them done with minimum fuss and bother. Every artist and project worker is on a level in our eyes, no matter age or experience, they command equal respect and admiration for their sterling efforts at making things happen.

In the best case we are able to establish mini artist-factories within our projects, leaving behind a wealth of new possibilities and opening doors to people who may have previously thought art was for other people. Art and life are very well integrated with us, and that only improves with time and experience. So I guess all that changes over the years is that we become more efficient and able to cut out more crap each time. You have to experience the specific problems art organisations cause before you can come up with manoeuvres to swerve, and later anticipate them. The most important thing you learn is to maintain as much independence as possible across every area of your projects.

While it is typically true that if you want something done well you must do it yourself, for large projects you must also find ways to get yourself into a position where you can bring the right people in to assist, who will get what you are trying to achieve and appreciate it. In the case of Radio Art Zone we struck gold with colleagues from our partner station Radio ARA, and everything flowed from there. The fact that we were together able to raise a budget to pay at least something to over 100 artists and groups, and to produce an event on the scale of an art biennial is a satisfying achievement. On top of that it is important to us that the entire project has the quality of an artwork in and of itself through the design of its form; it is a true privilege when you can find a way to carry out your precise vision. RAZ is a Matryoshka doll of artworks within artworks within artworks, as many of the artists are also inviting contributions from other artists within their 22 hour shows.

What is generally helpful too is that as artists ourselves we understand exactly how the artists work and what they need to know. That makes for a very flexible and dynamic work flow, hopefully minimising the potential for bad feelings. We attempt to protect ourselves and others as much as we can from whatever nonsense comes from forces outside our self-structured little universe. It is also important to emphasise the power of working as a curatorial duo, as it means you can better stand up to outside pressure, alternate the torments, and laugh things off a bit more easily. As well as bat solutions around, share the minor daily triumphs, and make the very best of each other's ideas.

But for events of these magnitudes you need a brilliant and flexible team of dedicated individuals who are each encouraged to play to their strengths. Plus it is necessary to build-in the ability to adjust to circumstances as you go along, because many things will change and not everything will work out as imagined. There is no point in forcing something that is not working: just switch tack, be prepared to



reallocate a task, or hastily drop a fruitless plan and pick up a better one. And don't spend too much time on easily solvable or non-essential issues. Stick to the big issues and doggedly fight for them. Not everything needs to be discussed with everyone, so you need a firm sense of when best to take decisions and with whom. The flip side of this is to try not to cut anyone out of something which concerns them, as that can easily happen by oversight. The larger the team the harder this becomes, so although we don't have anywhere near as large a team this time as there was at Radio Revolten, it feels very comfortable and manageable hovering around ten to twelve closely connected people.

IR: I'm intrigued by the informal kitchen / cooking on air format. How did this idea materialise? What do you expect to achieve with it?

SW: Well this is an example of something changing due to the result of previous practical experience. When we made a radio station for the São Paulo Biennial in 2012, we ordered a bed for our self-designed radio studio because we knew we would need it. Radiomakers and visitors alike used and loved that cosy platform bed, as we were working such long hours over four months, and the biennial building was giant therefore some people came to hang out with us and needed a bit of respite.

What we did not foresee was the fact that we would have a really hard time feeding ourselves each day, due both to the difficulties of the part of town we were living in, and the absolutely terrible cafe on site. Therefore this time round we immediately said: we need a kitchen because we will need to eat! We had already noticed how expensive food is in Luxembourg. So that's how the idea developed, as we then realised we can put our lunch on air to create a very social and dynamic community-focused space where we find out about the lives and loves of many local people as we visit their kitchens and they visit ours.

The concept for the programming is what I have come to call 'Direct Radio' (to borrow a cinematic term), whereby we do not intervene with the action – we simply raise the fader in the middle of a conversation and fade out 2 hours later. This is to facilitate relaxed exchanges – as opposed to the tension engendered by interviews and being passed a microphone – because those are the situations where the most interesting things often get said. We will not formally introduce the upcoming shows, although the visiting artists are welcome to come and cook with us and we will naturally discuss their work as it comes up in conversation.

The key is informality, and eavesdropping into extraordinary and diverse cooking situations, accompanying listeners as they cook for themselves at home and thereby also offering a direct sense of being part of the proceedings. We are always interested in fostering community, and this will be an experiment to see how much more people feel included than they would by simply listening in to accompanying soundscape. Either way it will work of course, as it goes along with our ethos for this project which is: Radio to Live By. Will some people start to time their lunch to eat with us?

IR: How many of the pieces were pre-produced? How many are live-to-air?

SW: 35 of the shows are live, or at least part-live, so that's a little over a third of the programme. Mostly the live works will be carried out in Esch, but there are also nine live streams coming in from around the world

IR: How did you approach the scheduling – randomised, conceptual, alphabetical, thematic etc.?

SW: The main thought about this was to spread things out which have similar approaches, either by sonic properties or theme, because another motto of the project is: a radio which sounds different every day. For



example each month will feature its own plunderphonic offering (although all very different in style), and environmental recordings show – birds, mushrooms, trees and rivers are all topics of interest for instance. Or star sounds, natural radio, satellites, aliens etc. Firstly of course we had to place all the live shows, which we decided to put mainly at weekends and midweek, and luckily most of the dates we initially pencilled in fairly randomly worked for people. There was of course a little shuffling around to suit various artists, but once this was fixed we could progress to the prerecorded shows.

You just have to dive in and start somewhere, but what surprised me was that this seemingly daunting process sorted itself quickly out over a couple of team meetings. We had a great tool which helped enormously – we created a giant wall calendar with moveable colour-coded notes for the shows, where you could see the whole project at a glance. This simple technique was invaluable in enabling us to switch things about according to any chosen criteria.

We staggered the workload as we knew we could not cope with receiving all the works at once; people were assigned different dates to complete works by due to the commissioning process being spread out over a year or more, and a few people had to delay due to personal circumstances. So we at least had a good idea about which shows could be programmed early and which later. There were a few shows which could potentially align with significant dates for the artists, therefore we tried our best to accommodate any wishes in this respect.

Naturally there were a couple of last-minute cases of serendipity when something dropped out or moved and we could make it available for another artist who it suited perfectly. We were so secure in our process that it did not even cause a stir when one of our two month-long residency artists suddenly cancelled, we immediately had an idea of someone else who would fit perfectly and managed to squeeze them in according to their availability so that they could join us at late notice. Therefore: nice and easy does it!

IR: What are the challenges of curating over 100 artists' work, with each piece being almost a day in duration?

SW: I can say that the quality of the artists was so high that most required minimal input from us. In fact we only needed to meet people for online chats if we had never met them before, or else there was uncertainty due to them being unfamiliar with radio and they required coaching, or someone requested a particular extra input. The stumbling block for a few artists was understanding that we wanted all new work to be produced, as several people initially offered playlists of existing works. We managed to steer people away from that for the most part, even so there will be a couple of such shows (for example showcasing large communities of artists).

What we learned was that although we prepared the most comprehensive FAQ imaginable based on our past experiences of what was most useful to know, it appeared that many people did not read it, let alone refer to it when they had even a simple question. For example, it was necessary to continually remind people that their shows start at 2pm and go until 12 noon the following day. Which I can understand as I suppose it did not compute very easily!

The rest of the challenge is the perspiration part – the sheer slog of receiving such long works and having to check them carefully. Of course we are not able to listen to each one in its entirety but we manage to quickly arrive at a good sense of the piece. It is fairly easily assess the files for potential technical problems, meaning that when we spot something we can request a repair or offer the assistance of our engineers.



A few participants were not fully (or at all) experienced with sound recording and therefore may have underestimated the advice to thoroughly test out techniques in advance, which occasionally necessitated some painful reworking. It takes a long time to train your ears to listen in two modes at the same time (not just to the material you are recording, but also to exactly how it sounds as it is getting recorded), therefore we have to take into account that some shows will feature a certain amount of sub-par technique due to featuring varied recordists, and the ambitious challenges people set themselves without fully knowing what they were letting themselves in for!

Luckily we are so far managing to address the toughest issues of content and quality control with the artists and come to a good understanding of each other's positions and requirements. I am sure though that there will yet be a small percentage of unfixable not-so-welcome surprises which will remain tough on our ears, but we absolutely have to accept that, if not embrace it, if we want to achieve the breadth of coverage and access we are seeking. It's an important impetus to encourage a wide level of participation which may shine a light on some new approaches to radio.

IR: Can you give any details of the workshops, youth productions and public interventions that you have planned?

SW: One of the workshops carried out with young people took place in advance, which was based around using extended vocal techniques with the artist Claire Serres, who will use this material as part of her 22-hour show. We have a show produced by teenager Echo Roe, our youngest programme maker, designed as a conceptual time capsule of American teenage life today.

Via a fruitful partnership with a local organisation Caroline Kraabel and John Edwards will offer an improvisation workshop to all-comers, and resident artists Julia Drouhin and Erwin Stache will carry out various types of workshops or masterclasses during their extended stays. We have left this part of the process deliberately open, to enable the artists to fit in with whatever situations arise on the ground.

Several artists will be found out and about in public spaces, most notably Ralf Wendt, who will walk the highways and byways of Esch broadcasting his encounters live for the entire 22 hours of his show. Jasmina Al-Qaisi and Marie Gavois & Michel Kloflorn will utilise a high street shop to entice the unsuspecting passer-by into engaging with their works; in Jasmina's case the public will encounter a series of her absurdist work personas. We have a radio flash mob which can be engaged by any visiting artist, or else they may utilise the radio sets as an off-grid sound system to set up anywhere they choose.

Konsthall323 will drive from Sweden and carry out performances from their car in various locations. Caroline and John will set up impromptu performance situations around town. I am sure there will be a lot of other things cropping up when artists arrive and figure out the possibilities. The really nice thing is that we can mostly house them in an artist residency run by the city (the Bridderhaus, where our studio is also based), which enables them to arrive in advance and figure out what they want to do given local conditions. A few artists will make extra visits in advance to scout locations or carry out recordings for their works.

IR: How do you measure the success of such a project? Do you see RAZ living beyond the 100-day broadcast?

SW: If the artists are mostly happy, plus one previously unknown listener is ecstatic and one is appalled, I will think we have done our job well. Of course that is a little facetious, as the real measurement of the joy this project brings will be happening day to day in the thousands of personal encounters which happen

both automatically and randomly at the sites of creation and broadcast. Simply the knowledge that we are beaming into ears around the world, that some listeners will have profound experiences and make discoveries through the project, is an achievement in and of itself.

On top of that, if anyone in the wider art world takes any sort of notice it would signal some sort of progress, although we have learnt that such interest in radio is typically fleeting or else pretty superficial. For whatever reason art institutions tend to have a bit of trouble with the idea of airwaves as a potential exhibition space (as opposed to a purely informational or entertainment space). We are attempting to reach out to at least make it more widely known what we are doing, primarily for the sake of the artists who are putting so much into this.

To further that aim we will produce a coffee table style art book about their work and radio art in general, which we hope will be something that could potentially sit in any museum shop for the curious audiophile to happen upon. Additionally, a day or two after the broadcast ends, the entire project will go live again, this time as an online gallery to enable the works to be continuously experienced. Much as I adore the ephemerality of radio, people deserve a chance to immerse themselves in this body of work, and the work should be allowed to accompany those interested, either wittingly or unwittingly, though the vagaries of daily life.

Addendum

A few sayings are emerging out of this project:

We say to the adventurous -

Radio to live by - leave it on for 100 days

And to the sceptical -

If you don't like what you hear today, you might like it tomorrow!

And here is a reiteration of our eternal answer to the "What is radio art?" question:

Radio by artists (and artists are anyone)

The beauty of radio art is that it is freeform and performed upon an endless canvas. (Hello universe!)