

# THE SOUNDS OF A LISTENER WITH A BAG

*Alan Dunn* introduces Radio Continental Drift

ARTIST CLAUDIA WEGENER, working as Radio Continental Drift, has been recording sounds across Southern Africa for the past ten years. In this feature, we present an audio interview Claudia gave as part of the international symposium *Radio as Art* in Bremen in June 2014, alongside her exclusive selection of images for *Stimulus Respond*.

Claudia was a founding member of the artists' group Foreign Investment (see our *Chaos* issue). Through performances such as *Good Morning Camberwell* (curated by Mark McGowan, London 2005) and *The Venice Oratory* (curated by William Furlong, Venice 2005), Foreign Investment used sound to explore notions of free exchange and the airwaves as a meeting point between publicly and privately owned space. Around this time, Claudia's own practice increasingly focused on sound and in particular her role as observer,





or in her own phrases, “an artist with a bag” or “a listener with a bag”. Translating observational writing into audio, followed by composing audio observations into broadcasts, projects such as ‘Street Writings’ and ‘NO-GO-ZONES’ were frameworks to bring voices and listeners on a more equal footing as “active listeners”. With workshops and joined broadcasts, these projects passed the microphone on to homeless people and black youths in South London.

Throughout her work is the image of the “artist with a bag”, the light-travelling nomad with microphone and spare batteries, part Alan Lomax in the 1930s recording American farms and prisons, and part Annea Lockwood’s sound maps. In 2005 Claudia began spending increased time in Africa, firstly in South Africa, living in Johannesburg and later in Durban, travelling across Botswana and Namibia, then also in Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

There is a soundwork composed around 2006 entitled ‘Radio Armed Response’ that I play to visual art students each year as part of my ‘A history of sound art’ lecture. We hear Claudia ringing buzzers and happily saying “Hallo, good morning, how are you?” over the background sounds of vicious guard dogs. “Good morning, I am collecting public opinion for a radio programme about private security, would you have a few minutes for me?” she continues determinedly. When a voice does respond, the accents tell us we are in South Africa, and specifically Johannesburg, and we are hearing intercom conversations. We eavesdrop on these short-distance broadcasts between the artist and residents of two suburban neighbourhoods, one in the wealthy northern suburb of Sandton, the other in Soweto. Gradually, the opportunity to speak, or be heard, or be recorded, unravels into reflections on security and gated and scared communities. It is *intercommunication* confessional meets prison phone. It is an economic and effective, but also chilling, soundwork, a very simple expose of a private closed-system broadcast system, then re-broadcast by the artist across ‘public’ webradio platforms such as ResonanceFM.

Over the past few years, Claudia’s recordings across the African continent have focused more and more on the female voice. “I wanted to listen to my sista artists and storytellers, since it’s them and their on-going activities I wish to join with my mic and “radio bag”... we’ve a long way before us towards a new “global information society”, which would truly deserve its name...”, she reflects and that she is “seeking beautiful



knowledge and how that is transmitted by the women in cultures with deep roots in oral traditions”. Where the recording process is important – it takes the voices and makes them permanent and repeatable, a cultural resource potentially ever-available to all global listeners - it is the broadcasting process that ‘gives voice’. It gives the voice distance, duration and resonance space. It gives it a route to potential new ears. In her interview for ‘Radio As Art’, Claudia reflects upon over seventy interviews with African women and the subtleties of who is listening, and how, when we hit the TRANSMIT button. Radio Continental Drift takes an understanding of webradio and mixes it with knowledge of the important relationship between community radio and taxi drivers in Africa. Concepts like “slow broadcast”, “hard-cover radio” and “interaction between listeners” tap and tune in to available distribution channels, super-locally and in Cyberspace. Radio Continental Drift is a long-term project and there is something reassuring about such an artist’s project that spans ten years; a sense of commitment and assuredness in decisions and providing some stability across changing times.

If you wish to experience for themselves how all of this might work, sound and look like you are invited to go on a journey of listening on the Aporee Radio Project, the All Africa Sound Map:

[www.aporee.org/maps/projects/all-africa-sound-map](http://www.aporee.org/maps/projects/all-africa-sound-map)

Interview:  
[www.soundcloud.com/mobile-radio/radio-as-art-conference-in-conversation-with-claudia-wegener-of-radio-continental-drift](http://www.soundcloud.com/mobile-radio/radio-as-art-conference-in-conversation-with-claudia-wegener-of-radio-continental-drift)

Website:  
[radiocontinentaldrift.wordpress.com](http://radiocontinentaldrift.wordpress.com)

Additional audio files:  
[www.alandunn67.co.uk/stimulusaudio.html](http://www.alandunn67.co.uk/stimulusaudio.html)