

**zoë irvine**

republicart-interview on *magnetic migration music (interference)*

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**raimund minichbauer:** in your project for *interference* you circulate envelopes in london, in which you ask people to send you coincidentally found pieces of audio-tape. you restore these pieces, copy their contents and then you work with this sound in different ways. you worked already a year ago, in a project on the context of the refugee camp sangatte near calais with found fragments of audio tapes<sup>1</sup>. was this your first project of that kind?

**zoë irvine:** it was the first focus for the *magnetic migration music* project. i had been collecting sounds for a year, although I had been seeing them for a lot longer in trees and on the streets. when i started collecting it was randomly, when i saw it; i never looked for it. i thought of the tape as somehow migrating so i thought it was obvious to go to a border, where tape can cross and maybe people cannot cross. it was around the time when there was a bbc documentary about the taliban - pre september 11 -; the documentary showed members of the taliban ripping tape out of people's car stereos, because music was banned, and hanging it in the trees. there were rows of trees with tape hanging of, and i thought this is something that this project has a resonance with in some way. the refugee camp in sangatte was a big news story at that time. so i went to calais, but it was only when i arrived that i realised that i had never gone looking for tape. i had always just found it. i arrived in calais on a grey evening and thought: what did i expect, how am i ever going to find any tape? if i would live there, obviously i would find it, but how on earth...? so i thought, ok., since i am here, i will search, if i find any, that's great, but i will make interviews as well and record sounds from the area. then on my first evening of cycling around, i already found a piece of tape, and in the two weeks i was there, i found some 18 pieces of tape, so there was a lot of tape in the end.

i also spent some time speaking with people who were transient in the area, people who were travelling, of which there were many, asylum seekers, but also tourists, and calais is also where all the cargo goes through. i went to the camp and tried to talk to people - i was not allowed into the camp, even though i wrote and asked in advance. it was quite difficult talking to people because they thought i was a journalist and "ah, you are going to tell my story and you are going to make a difference!", and i would say: "i am very happy to listen and record, but i am an artist, and my project will exist, but it is not going to be changing very much in the way you might hope, it is not going to be headline news." but many people did speak to me. it was quite difficult to speak to women, but i did find some, and it was an amazing experience listening to all these people's stories. i cannot really express what that was like, it was just extraordinary. many people took a small radio or a tiny tape player, as something that they took from home - because they couldn't take very much - and they brought some music from home. some of the tape that i found around that area had definitely come with these people, and was then broken and flapping around near there. for example i had a home made tape with someone's drumming and with very bad distortion, but it is a very beautiful tape. i have the feeling, it travelled very far.

i dealt with the material in two ways: i made a radio show, that was part of *ars alectronica* and i also broadcast in vienna on *radio orange*. i made half an hour's programme that was a mix of the recordings and my interactions with people. and i was making my website, the *magnetic migration music* website<sup>2</sup>, just presenting those tapes with a note, from where they came. it is just that, e.g.: "from the gates of the sangatte camp," and there is an mp3 to download, and you can hear what i found there<sup>3</sup>.

it was an emotional, tough trip, exciting as well. there were extraordinary things like the man who owned this really rather disgusting hotel where i stayed knew the border police. when i said what i was doing, he said: "oh, you have to go for a drink with the border police." and they were really tough, i was quite scared, really, really tough women; i ended up karaoke singing one evening with

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.magneticmigration.net/text/pasdecalais.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.magneticmigration.net/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.magneticmigration.net/text/sampleslist.htm>

the border police of calais. during the day i was sort of hanging out with the asylum seekers outside the camp and then in the evening doing karaoke singing with the police, it was just bizarre. and cycling around in a state of near sunstroke.

i am still in contact with one of the asylum seekers that i met there, who had a mobile phone. he was a teacher in iraq, he was persecuted as a kurd and he left. it took him over a year to arrive in sangatte and then he couldn't get to britain. many people want to go to britain, because they have some idea (they are told by the people traffickers) that they get the passport more easily or that they get benefits more easily, which is actually not true anymore. the amount of misinformation was horrible, when people said: "so, if i come to britain, do i get a house?" and being the person that says: "no, i don't think so.". the man that i met, is now in germany and will be deported back to iraq, because of the war. the war came, and now everyone says: "ok., iraq is safe, it's fine, you can go back." and of course, it is very problematic for him, because it is not so easy just to go back.

the mix i made has this strange juxtaposition of people - i also met tourists saying: "i come over here every month to buy tobacco." i always ask the same questions: how long did you take to get here? how much did you pay to get here? where are you staying? and where are you going? so, regardless if you are a tourist or an asylum seeker, all of those questions apply. the answers obviously went from: "oh, i drove through to kaiserslautern and..." to "i came from iraq to pakistan and from pakistan to greece...", you know, these extraordinary journeys, and people, who don't know how they got there, because they were taken by an agent. so, all different types of journeys were represented. the music that i found also represented those different types of people in a way.

**raimund minichbauer:** in which way did this coincide in one project, the migrating tapes and the migrating people?

**zoë irvine:** the migrating tape project continues, and that was a focus for it last summer, east london is a focus for it this summer. in a way *magnetic migration music* seems to migrate through different foci. and when i chose to go to that area, it was exactly because of migration and a kind of cliché of music crossing barriers that people cannot. it seemed a pathetic (in the sense of pathos) resonance to put those two aspects together, of moving people and moving tape, but it is not the only aspect of this project. that part of it is called *pas de calais*, and it is finished in a way. i am still very much interested in that kind of story, in the politics of that situation, but that's not really part of this project anymore.

**raimund minichbauer:** your background is in visual arts. how did you get to sound projects, have you changed completely to audio projects?

**zoë irvine:** more or less, but i find having some visual element quite useful, or making a publication that goes along with the audio-element, whether that be a website or an artist-book, and possibly film. - i studied painting in a college where william furlong was teaching. he is an established sound artist in this country. i ended up working for an audio magazine he edits, called *audio arts magazine* and he taught me to edit reel to reel tape. i did this as a job, when i was a student, editing tape, and i liked it, but it was not part of my practice. it was only when i was doing a masters some time later, that i realised actually i wanted to make a work in that medium; and i made a voice based work, an interview based piece of work. i enjoyed the process so much, that i realised that was what i wanted to do. also, when i left college, i had to try and make a living, and it was one of the few sellable skills that i had, and i transferred that skill to digital editing. i have been producing audio for five years now in that way and it has become the main part of my work.

**raimund minichbauer:** in the *interference* project the found tapes are on a map of london related to the different areas they have been found in<sup>4</sup>. so in a way the project developed somehow from migrating music to mapping an area?

**zoë irvine:** yes, it is just a different approach for the project, a different focus. *interference* is really based in east london, but i used the opportunity to incorporate greater london, and certain

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.magneticmigration.net/text/interference.htm>

libraries in different boroughs of london have agreed to promote the project and give out these envelopes, which is the main way of getting tape - i have not ever really tried to get anybody else to find tape before.

**raimund minichbauer:** so it is the participatory aspect that is new to the project?

**zoë irvine:** yes, although i have had certain friends that have spotted it and picked it up for me when they found some, before. but now it's getting people to participate. and i have been amazed. i thought it's a nice idea, but no one will do it. people really have done it. i was not completely sceptical, i didn't think so many tapes would come.

**raimund minichbauer:** is it easy to find tape in the streets?

**zoë irvine:** east london is full of it. it really is. i am sure, in your time here, as you walk around, you will see some. i have found some in vienna as well, and vienna is very clean. london is such a mess. it is much easier to find tape in messy places, calais is also a mess, so it is easy to find. britain generally is quite covered in crap, so it is easy to find this form of rubbish.

**raimund minichbauer:** what is recorded on the tapes?

**zoë irvine:** things that have come in, have been lots of rap, r'n'b, somebody found a really lovely recording of a muslim service, it could be in a mosque, somebody quite passionately talking and every now and then you can hear the word 'allah.' a while ago i found a piece just not very far from here, on a street. it was entirely burned out cars, just wracks of cars. and there was a big amount of tape hanging out of one of these cars. it was gangster rap of "i am going to burn your fucking car." so there are nice correspondences, that is something that i am enjoying about where something is found and what it is, and getting a sense of place through that. so that's what this mapping is about.

i also found lots of recordings of radio programmes. people seem to record the radio, play it in their car, it breaks, so they through it out. and also for the london project, i was thinking, what kind of sound would i like to mix with it? i started interviewing people on the street, if they had ever seen tape, how they thought it got there, etcetera.

**raimund minichbauer:** the project in calais has some political aspects already because of the place where you did the research. are there political aspects in the east london project too?

**zoë irvine:** not in such an overt way, but there are obvious things being pointed out by what i am collecting, and that is definitely a poorer strata of society that uses tape recorders and although london is very comfortable in a certain way with it's 'multiculturalism,' there are edges about that, and it is definitely a 'multicultural' tape-collection that i am making. the project also has some interrogation of copyright, because i publish this sound, and i don't have a copyright. i haven't quite worked out my position for myself in terms of copyright. i am interested in the development of copyleft and open source. copyright questions are being asked more regularly with this project, especially now that we will make a publication for the end of this project. i am not seeking the copyright for this material, it is trash on the street and i refuse to pay copyright for that.

the project also forms an intervention into mp3-culture: i noticed from reading my weblogs, that people who are looking for 'arabic rap' or 'spanish rock' plus 'mp3' land up coming to my site. they have no desire to look at an art project, they are looking for free mp3-downloads. and they end up at my download page. they probably download one, think: 'what the hell?' and leave it alone. but that is also an interesting intervention, that i enjoy in this project.

the london project is very much more to do with music, in a way, and i would like in the future to work with a musicologist and to try and identify some of the recordings and perhaps work out where they were made, and work out another layer of mapping again, tracing the next level back: where was that originally recorded? who originally recorded that? and then you've got another sense of another journey of that tape. when i get a bit more material, that will be the next phase.

**raimund minichbauer:** i would like to explore a bit more the participatory element of the project. the text on the envelope is very short about why people should do this.

**zoë irvine:** i think it either is an idea that catches people's imaginations, or it isn't. and it seems that with very little information and quite fast, people are either interested or not. i didn't want to crowd the envelope with information, so it simply says: "*magnetic migration music* collects and samples sounds from found audio tape. use this envelope to post in your fragments of found tape." all it is doing is alerting you to the existence of this tape if you haven't noticed it before, and gently saying: no hurry, but store these thoughts and if you come across any, post it in. it's not something urgent, but think about it, and i have one back with a little note on the back saying: "i never saw any before i got this envelope."

**raimund minichbauer:** did you personally do any kind of presenting the project?

**zoë irvine:** i did. well, the libraries are presenting these red cards promoting the *interference* projects and the envelopes. quite a lot of london libraries are doing that, which is great. then i went to some schools, which was very funny, because i never really explained it to kids before. they were like: "how do i play this game? what do i do to play this game?" - i am not sure, that i have got any from kids yet, but maybe in time.

i also made a radio show of tape found so far. it was on resonance.fm<sup>5</sup>. it must have been quite a curious radio show, because everything is very poor quality and mangled up. i just explained what *magnetic migration music* was, and then: "there is tape collected from haringay in north london," and eight minutes of "wrlwrlwrl" ...

**raimund minichbauer:** is the envelope a good strategy?

**zoë irvine:** the great thing about an envelope is - this envelope here is the size of a postcard and it can go in postcard racks, and it can go in a mail-out, it can go to a lot of places and it will last quite a long time - i have 5,000 of these envelopes. and they will just keep going out, and every now and then someone will send one back. although it's part of *interference*, which ends on sunday, it will just go on slowly as long as the envelope exists.

**raimund minichbauer:** what are you up to conceptually?

**zoë irvine:** there is a lovely book published recently, called *sound tracks*<sup>6</sup>, i think it is published under the category of geography, and it is about music and experience with place. i was quite inspired by that, also because of course these tapes are mobile, and have travelled from somewhere to somewhere, and potentially of course in a car or in a walkman as a moving sound experience. i like this filmic aspect, if you have a sense of the place, where it came from, or where somebody might have been listening to it, that supplies the visual so to speak.

**raimund minichbauer:** so, the basic concept behind the practice is still developing?

**zoë irvine:** yes, and it's only *one* project. i am working on several projects at the moment.

**raimund minichbauer:** what are the other main projects? could you just give a few keywords?

**zoë irvine:** i am working on a project in bedford, an area about one hour from london. it was the home of the british airship works in the 1920s. the r101, the biggest british airship, was built there, it was a very glamorous thing, a very luxurious travelling option like the titanic in a way and it carried a radio set for the passengers to listen to. i know the tracks that they heard, bbc london regional radio made a special radio show for the maiden voyage of this airship as it flew over the capital. they were of course the very rich and privileged on the maiden voyage, and that was off to karachi, at that time british india. but the airship didn't get very far, it got to near beauvais in france and crashed. the crash was also a very big media story, on the scale maybe of september 11 for british people of that time. it was a tragedy, even though there were only 50 people dead - a whole ideal had gone, it was a symbolic end of the empire, somehow. i got interested in this, the flying radio set and also the reportings of supernatural occurrences after the crash. people reported that they heard voices from the dead passengers and crew.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.resonancefm.com/>

<sup>6</sup> john connell, chris gibson, *sound tracks. popular music identity and place*. routledge 2002

i am making another piece this year about illiers, the village that proust based his childhood for *the search of lost time*. he visited this village three times, and then later in life he invented a whole village around this real village. in the 70ies this real village renamed itself illier-combray, taking the 'combray' from the book, it also renamed certain roads as well after the book. it's really not a particularly nice french village, but they made the best of trying to make the 'swann's way' etc. - i was interested in this village, i went there for two weeks with a friend of mine who is a photographer and an artist book maker. what we will do, is to make some kind of other projections. proust used the village to project his idea of the village, the village tried in turn to project that fictional village onto itself and now we will do the same - using this material to make something nostalgic in a way, to do with childhood and memory. what i seem to have recorded there was distance, distant voices, distant church bells, cars and mopeds coming from far to near to far again. i will make a composition out of this material, and helen will make an artist book of images.

so, all the projects are very different, but *magnetic migration music* continues, that has no endpoint, that just goes on and on.

**raimund minichbauer:** thank you very much.