

## Sounding the State of the World: Interview with Karim Rafi, Summer 2021

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### Recommended Citation

Brauer, Matthew. "Sounding the State of the World: Interview with Karim Rafi, Summer 2021." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 24.1 (2022): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4289>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 24 Issue 1 (March 2022) Article 9**

**Matthew Brauer,**

**"Sounding the State of the World: Interview with Karim Rafi, Summer 2021"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss1/9>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 24.1 (2022)**

Special Issue: ***Periodizing the Present: The 2020s, The Longue Durée, and Contemporary Culture.***

**Ed. Treasa De Loughry and Brittany Murray**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss1/>>

**Abstract:** Matthew Brauer interviews Moroccan contemporary artist Karim Rafi about postcolonial creation in the 2020s in "Sounding the State of the World." Beginning with Rafi's shift to remote performances during the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussion approaches confinement as just the latest in a series of crises in North Africa and the world. The repeated experience of crisis opens a conversation about the contemporary experience of time, broached in relation to modern Moroccan art history, which emerged from and against the conservative institutions of the French Protectorate (1912-1956). The interview touches on a range of distinctive concerns in Rafi's art practice, from sound installations to gardening, which he brings together in multimedia performances and hypermedia objects that register the cultural and political forces shaping art in the 2020s, while reactivating their radical potential for relation apart from capitalist commodification.

**Matthew BRAUER**

### **Sounding the State of the World: Interview with Karim Rafi, Summer 2021**

The scene opens on the white walls of an apartment transformed into a gallery, as a 3x3 grid of black-and-white prints overlays the bevels and panels of closed closet doors. Most of the space is filled not with framed art, but the immediately recognizable domestic objects in the form of house plants: a spider plant, aloe, and others. This was the stage from which Moroccan artist Karim Rafi broadcast his "Tele-performance" of *Humus Sonus Experiences* via Zoom and Instagram Live in November 2020. This is the scene of art in the time of COVID-19, where banal but intimate objects have acquired an amplified voice in both daily life and creative inquiry. Audiences tuned into Rafi's performance online or at the *Carbone 20 Biennale of Collectives and Artist Spaces* in Saint-Etienne, France, where visitors could hear *Humus Sonus* broadcast over speakers beside a grid of cactuses, shrubs, and other potted plants in a skylight, greenhouse-like gallery hosted by the innovative Rabat-based art space *l'Appartement 22*.

For Rafi, this performance is one moment in a series of experiments with the interactions between humans, flora, and *in silico* tools—electronics, themselves composed of basic earthly elements like silicon. In his portfolio, the artist describes the participatory broadcast as "surpassing neo-borders imposed by the global health crisis," identifying the emergence of a new political geography of COVID-19. Pandemic geopolitics interacts with the postcolonial nation-state and the neocolonial structures that continue to shape Morocco and its neighbors in the North African region known as the Maghrib, long after the official end of European imperialism in the mid-twentieth century. As Rafi asserts, the political and artistic necessity of passing through and across these new borders occasions new aesthetic forms "thought at the same time as a surface for dissemination and as a plastic hyper-media medium (sound \_ image \_ text)." Rafi uses the aesthetics of hypermedia to register the political and cultural contingencies of creation in the 2020s, while reactivating its radical potential for relation that has been subject to intensifying commodification since the dawn of the Internet.

Rafi's multi-media performance eschews traditional artistic materials. The piece's back-and-forth between digital and analog, natural and technological, organic and technological, is extended by dint of circumstances that forced a remote presentation by internet, rather than the face-to-face interaction initially envisioned. The play of material and immaterial is translated into the "virtual" realm of social-media technologies, underscored by the forcefully material conditions that impose a digital medium of diffusion.

The central question of this interview with Karim Rafi is, are the 2020s still postcolonial? The conversation sought to identify what is new in this particular assemblage of artist, artwork, and audience, relative to the history of modern and contemporary art in Morocco. Are the theoretical and practical questions posed by the artistic avant-garde in the decades following Moroccan independence still as urgent in the time of COVID-19, which is also the time of Amazigh activism, of the *Hirak* movement, of the decade after the Arab Spring, and the generations after the repressive rule of King Hassan II (r. 1961-1999), known popularly as the "years of lead"?

Two major issues have faced artists in Morocco and, indeed, across North Africa and the Middle East, since the early twentieth century: the issue of institutions, and that of mediums. In Morocco, the existing institutions of art education, practice, and preservation were developed under the French Protectorate (1912-56). The postcolonial state appropriated the museums and schools founded by the French, promulgating a new official discourse around these institutions without changing their basic operations. The colonial ideology of making a "useful Morocco"—useful to France and the French economy—served the independent Moroccan state just as well, and was therefore transformed into an ideology of prestige that valorized Moroccan heritage, as defined by French politicians and academics. In academic institutions, the disciplines of art history and art criticism remained fundamentally European and imperial. Postcolonial Moroccan artists therefore had to deal with an education system and an art market whose scientific discourses depicted them as marginal and subordinate. Finally, the very medium of painting—and painting was the primary medium that avant-garde artists used to summon a decolonial artistic modernity for Morocco—was itself suspect because of its European origin.

After 1956, when Morocco gained its independence from France and Spain, who ruled the country in two protectorates, the former in the majority of central Morocco and the latter in the far north and south (including what is now the Western Sahara, over which Morocco claims sovereignty), groups of activists and artists worked to craft a new national culture. As official state practice shifted toward national culture as a means of consolidating power, progressive, avant-garde actors established their own forums for articulating a different vision of national culture. One of the most significant, in terms of its impact

on the Moroccan cultural sphere over the long term, was the journal *Souffles* (later *Souffles-Anfas*, when published in a bilingual French and Arabic format). Contributors to *Souffles-Anfas* employed the Fanonian concept of national culture and Marxian notions of cultural and economic analysis to project their vision for decolonizing Moroccan culture. Among the contributors were artists from the Casablanca Ecole des Beaux-Arts, whose exhibitions and educational initiatives defined the early decades of modern Moroccan art against a colonial fetishization of naïve painting and a postcolonial exoticism catering to foreigners and the new national bourgeoisie. Although *Souffles-Anfas* ceased publication following the political arrests of editors Abdellatif Laâbi and Ibrahim Serfaty, the theoretical framework and guiding questions established by the journal, as well as the Casablanca school, still echo loudly today in Moroccan art history and practice within North Africa and abroad. At the same time, one may sense an uncertainty among cultural producers and their publics regarding whether project of national culture, never fully realized as imagined, still has the same currency in the present.

Karim Rafi is an artist whose work exhibits a nuanced attention to the experience of time, place, and relation, making him a provocative interlocutor for sounding the state of Moroccan art, if not of the world, in the 2020s. In June and September 2021, Rafi generously discussed art education, art mediums, the relevance of decolonization and the role of art history and theory, among other issues, with me over the course of two lengthy, free-flowing conversations via video call. Selections from these interviews are presented here, edited for length and clarity.

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Special Issue: *Periodizing the Present: The 2020s, the Longue Durée, and Contemporary Culture*. Ed. Treasa De Loughry and Brittany Murray.

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**Matthew Brauer:** *The idea for these conversations with you, Karim Rafi, came from watching the three "sonorous, poetic, and vegetal" performances of Humus Sonus Experiences on Instagram Live in November 2020. Though the work was supposed to be played in person, the forced change brought out another essential aspect of the piece. That's not surprising, since your work has long explored interactions between the organic and electronic or analog and digital, especially by means of sound and how sound relates to space and time. Your oeuvre invites us to rethink present experiences of crisis and historicizing discourses, such as those of art and art history. In Morocco, we find that these historical discourses thread between a sequence of crises, the COVID-19 pandemic being only the most recent after the political instability and repression of the "years of lead" under Hassan II (r. 1961-99), the 2011 reformist February-20th movement that was catalyzed by the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, the 2016-17 Hirak protests against the marginalization of Morocco's Rif region, and the long struggle of Amazigh activists.*

*Let's start in the present and work backward. Right now, how do you present yourself as an artist and your current projects?*

**Karim Rafi:** What I'm going to say is a little pretentious [laughs], but the question of art has always seemed reductive to me. I have a hard time with positions and roles when it comes to the quote "artist" unquote.

I would say I have an enormous appetite for learning because I feel I am extremely ignorant. I am profoundly taken with the idea of conducting experiments, not only in the field of art, vast as it may seem, but also beyond it. In that sense, I am much more fascinated by astrophysics and astrophysicists, whose every little discovery widens the field with more radical and complex challenges.

I have the same relationship with art, which I see as a place, rather than a profession. It's the area in which I am visible and identifiable, but it's not the activity that satisfies my intellectual appetite. I need much more: anthropology, mathematics, physics, astrophysics, politics, philosophy, movement, dance, noise, and botany. Art lets you navigate the world, presenting and representing life in its complexity, synthesizing and simulating with other-than-scientific codes of truth or objectivity. Art lets me express my own truth, my subjectivity, and gives me the freedom to write my own codes and laws. In the place I explore, you can be a gardener, a poet, an astrophysicist, an electrician, and a philosopher.

Right now, I am doing a lot of gardening. This activity, subject to weather and climate, in addition to other factors connected to the biosphere, like insects, animals, and chance, leaves me a lot of time to focus my research on other activities that captivate me, like sound and what we incorrectly call silence. Sound is everywhere, and it goes well beyond the field of art.

**MB:** *Health measures have required you to modify your sound works, like broadcasting online instead of performing in person. What did you experience with the change of format?*

**KR:** Freedom, primarily. The jumping-off point for my artistic activity in the 1990s was the internet as a space for critique. I am interested in the internet and digital media in terms of Bernard Stiegler's concept of *pharmakon*. The freedom of navigating the internet in the 90s, but something about that has been distorted by privatization and criminalization. Now, the passive and active surveillance of the cookie crumbs we leave behind produces bitter effects: paranoia, reality distortion, control, business, harassment, violence ...

But the Net as *pharmakon* is also the freedom to inform oneself and others, to organize and mobilize, to research, share, or reveal.

In 1998, I had developed a sort of blog forum with three programmer friends. We met in a bar where there was improvised music and other performances. Our idea was to create an experimental virtual space, with a physical extension in the same Casablanca bar. That led later to the creation of a real platform called "Théière" [Teapot], with a physical, democratic space for events and meetings and a virtual space that served as its gallery. In 2002 or 2003, the group fell apart due to the divergence between the initial founders' experimental and artistic vision, and others' more financial and event-based outlook.

For Bernard Stiegler, the internet, developed from military technology through capitalist commercialization, is "a new pharmacological milieu if there ever was one" the Greek concept of *pharmakon* being "at once a good and an evil, at once a remedy and a poison, as Plato said about writing, which is the technology of the rational mind that is, of Western spirit. The evidence for this pharmacology, for this ambiguity and hence for this fragility of spirit, imposes itself [...] in the form of a series of interconnected crises"

"Pharmacology of Spirit and that which Makes Life Worth Living," translated by Daniel Ross. *Theory after Theory*, edited by Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge Taylor and Francis, 2011), 299-300, 294.

COVID-19 confinement reminded me of the fragility of the world. I drew a parallel with the period of the 1990s in Morocco, when every expressive act opened a breach, and every breach became a place for freedom. Because of the cancelation of performances at the *Biennale Carbone 20* in Saint-Etienne, I said to myself, "I'm going to make the Internet once again into a place of direct critical expression and experimentation that will be my own."

Originally, there was a protocol for the public to participate actively in the Saint-Etienne Biennale performance, but the project was rethought with the aim of freeing it from any constraint linked to space. The broadcasts on Instagram and Zoom introduced constraints relative to sound and data fidelity, since there is a lot of compression, distortion, and data loss online. I had to work on the technical side first to maintain fidelity, but most of all to transmit the data in the most experientially free, interactive, and fluid way, creating the conditions for an immersive experience. That explains my choice to open the experience with a text about a dream. That dream describes a strange world to evoke the strangeness of our own world and its current situation. The global health crisis has transformed our world into a very small village where everyone is connected to everyone else. The virus—like on the web—embodies the connector. The sounds of the performance gain projected forms, images, and collages through the text that itself describes sounds. It's the idea of hyper-activity, a free, exploratory drift across sound\_text\_voice\_image.

**MB:** *Continuing backward through your recent projects relative to social and political crises, in 2016, the HIRAK movement erupted in the Rif region of northern Morocco, and was subdued by 2017-18 through the arrests of leaders and other police actions. In the aftermath, you performed Temps de révélations elliptiques [Time of Elliptical Revelations] at the Appartement 22 art space in Rabat in 2019. The next year saw the beginning of the pandemic and quarantine measures. How did you experience these moments of crisis personally and artistically?*

**KR:** I think that crises are really moments of revelation. Being aware of this means seeing and feeling the state of the world, even before crises occur.

In 2019, the verdict had been rendered on the activists of the *HIRAK* movement, but what the courts really condemned was the *HIRAK* concept and act of mobilization, which articulated the desire for citizen participation in public life, for responsibility and democracy, beyond the spectacle of political representation, parties, and identities in a pseudo-democracy.

In 2007, I had organized a counter-festival that I called "Slam Klam." It was an invitation to public expression, with a small stage for speaking, creating, and improvising. People participated spontaneously and enthusiastically, proposing their own ideas. This desire for democracy and participation revealed itself fully in the Arab Spring, but that desire is global. Movements and revolutions gestate a long time. That goes for other current crises, like COVID, which are global crises related to climate change and the over-exploitation of people and resources.

Getting back to Morocco, *HIRAK* was treated at first as an unimportant subaltern issue, a simple uprising or an emotional outburst. At a certain point, it became serious. It wasn't just the emotion inflamed by the death of the fishmonger Mohcine Fikri. That spark clearly demonstrated the desire for total democratic participation that was the real source of the action. And at every turn, the response to this desire was brutality. Such brutality has always existed, it is even characteristic of Morocco's arbitrary

*Humus Sonus Experiences* (2020-21) is a series of studies including text, images, performances, workshops, and conferences. The third study was prepared for [Biennale Carbone 20 in Saint-Etienne](#), but due to COVID-19 restrictions was broadcast on Instagram, Zoom, and in the physical space of the *Curating Radio, Curating World* exhibit presented by l'Appartement 22. This piece consisted of a collaborative performance combining spoken poetry, layered and looped sounds from non-musical instruments, and scenography of garden tools and plants.

*Temps de révélations elliptiques* is a concerto in 24 movements consisting of 24 sensors and infinite actions and interactions. Microphones and sensors capture sounds and vibrations in and around the performance space, which are then processed through a synthesizer. The piece was [first performed](#) over 24 hours on April 2019 in the Appartement 22 gallery, opened to the streets of Rabat, and then [rebroadcast](#) on RadioAppartement22.

Held in Fall 2007 and featuring foundational American spokenword group The Last Poets, the title of Slam Klam festival rhymes the name of the slam genre of poetry with the colloquial Moroccan Arabic word *klam*, meaning words, speech, talk, debate, or discourse. Moroccan media coverage noted the convergence of American and international hiphop culture with Moroccan forms like the sung poetry genre of *malhūn*, known as *ksida* in the colloquial language that is one of its hallmarks.

political regime, but its vocabulary has changed. Today, they talk about *bienveillance* [benevolence], especially in politics—at a moment when brutality is at its most intense! This form of schizophrenia is what I call "crisis."

I returned to Morocco in 2018, having broken ties with the country some years before. When I arrived in Rabat, strolling down the Avenue Mohammed V in front of Parliament, I noticed a large number of people begging and wearing badges that read: *diplômé mal-voyant (Bassir)*. They were *des diplômés handicapés*, people with university degrees who are blind or with other disabilities, who had state authorization to beg. That was the most brutal act I saw, a banalization of symbolic and physical violence. This violence was not directed only at these people with disabilities; it also falls upon everyone who looks away, who refuses to see and to act. For me, that other form of blindness expresses the state of the world. It led me to refuse an invitation from the Marrakech contemporary art festival to participate in a discussion about emergent aesthetics. How can you talk about aesthetics when the gaze and the conscience are suffering such violence? That also led to the performance "Bassir manil bassir \_ Blind who is blind" and the manifesto that I read at l'Appartement 22.

**MB:** *The manifesto describes itself as "post social struggle not because I no longer believe in social struggles but because of our disastrous situation." Is this an attempt to contrast the concrete situation in front of you and the desire for a different society with different types of creation and participation?*

**KR:** It's a reflection about what method is the most relevant. *Temps de révélations elliptiques* is an attempt to grasp a problem in its entirety, but at the same time, and always, it's a search for effectiveness, in the sense of being as sincere, direct, and just as possible, the least spectacular as possible. In that case, it was the manifesto. But there was also the "Wave Observatory," an enormous receiver, transmitter, and modulator in a reverberating space. When you enter or move around, the sound changes. I speak to power by treating it as blind and by being blind myself, sensitive to the slightest variation.

I say "post-social struggle," to draw attention to what is beyond struggle, which is the state of the world we share. Its fragility bares our own fragility as a species. Instead of working collectively for a more viable world, we are taken with power. In the manifesto, I repeat a mantra and pose a question: what will the world look like in twenty years? That's the length of a *Hirak* activist's sentence. The manifesto was read in 2019; in 2020, we were all confined. We are now perhaps at the beginning of another period that appears difficult.

To me, the real question is that of living together, not just as neighbors or humans, which is anthropocentric, but as the conscience of the complexity of the world and the place we grant to other living beings. I very much like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's theory that imagines the "omega point" or noosphere, the idea of becoming one with the universe, but not just through technology, as promoted by transhumanism. For Teilhard de Chardin, technology is a prosthesis and only thinking humanity through the prosthesis is reductive, if not reactionary. The central issue is recognizing that humans, in their totality, are a trajectory. It's with this aim that I call into question my own identity. We must create the conditions for realizing this human totality, which I think happens first through the need to restore the world.

Faced with this extremely complex situation and the commitment, creativity, and intellectual energy it mobilizes, I use the manifesto and photographs from this project to articulate the unfitness and backwardness of political systems inherited from colonialism and neocolonialism, to judge the mechanisms of domination, and to show them for what they are: obsolete.

Disabilityrights activists have been protesting in Morocco for many years, especially since the broad social movements of 20 February began amid the region-wide Arab Spring in 2011. Media attention has accumulated around this phenomenon [of highly educated people with disabilities](#) to whom opportunities are foreclosed despite their education, especially since a [protester died after a fall in 2018](#). This focus relates them to the broader category of "diplômé chômeur," the educated unemployed, of whom Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia is the most emblematic example.

"Are we not at every instant living the experience of a universe whose immensity, by the play of our senses and our reason, is gathered up more and more simply in each one of us? [...] Because it contains and engenders consciousness, space-time is necessarily of a convergent nature. Accordingly its enormous layers, followed in the right direction, must somewhere ahead become involuted to a point which we might call *Omega*, which fuses and consumes them integrally in itself."

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* translated by Bernard Wall Harper, 1959, 259.



**MB:** Temps de révélations elliptiques and Humus Sonus Experiences take up contemporary crises by means of sound. But you have been working with sound for a long time. What is your relationship to sound creation?

**KR:** My relationship to sound is connected to my conception of time. Sound helps me slow down. When thinking sound, I'm in a paradoxical inactivity, because my mind is active but it lets itself lose control and be overwhelmed, diverted. Every phenomenon of listening begins with the cessation of all activity: silence.

I conceive of sound as going beyond language. During my travels in the Atlas Mountains in the 2000s, I met Inhabitants [*Habitants*] who were struggling for their survival against local powers, institutions, and a whole repressive machinery of intimidation, all replaying a form of neocolonization. The Inhabitants were resisting. From a philosophical point of view, they were extremely modern; creative and combative, they had a council-based democratic organization where everyone had the right to speak, even children. By comparison, the local powers and their agents appeared backward, but they dominated through segregation, brutality, barriers, fences, and barbed wire ... all justified by a strategy presented as ecological: reintroducing and protecting the *aoudad*, or Barbary sheep.

Rafi uses the *Habitant*, humans and other beings who live in non-extractive relations to the earth.

At first, I was doing a kind of musicological project, sometimes recording sounds, sometimes taking photographs, but really I was living a profound, exhilarating political and poetic experience that was also greatly pragmatic and realist.

One day, there was an *ahidus*, a participatory poetic and musical ceremony that is very complex from a rhythmic point of view, with improvisational and spontaneous periods where everything still seemed minutely coordinated. There was a total poetic a presence, which is a political act.

*hidus* a circle of dancers around musicians and a poet, who direct the dance by performing improvised rhythms and sung poetry.

At one point, I was feeling tired and moved away from the place of the *ahidus*. At 500 meters or a kilometer away, the sounds still reached me, but they were no longer chants, words, and rhythms. The sounds had mixed, modulated, and transformed into sonic fields of a complexity hard to describe, whose acoustic beauty I'd never heard before. Stunned, I sat for a long time, until the early morning. Toward dawn, I looked around and saw tons of animals sitting next to me. They were other selves, neighbors, beings who were just as fascinated as I. In their fascination, I saw myself. They were listening. That made a terrific impact on me. I was no longer amid the representation, or over-representation, that we make of music. There was no longer music or poetry. There was only sound, that strange phenomenon.

Something trans\_formed with the distance, with the acoustic nature of things or of the place. There is always trans\_formation in displacement, in trans\_port, between the moment of projection and the moment of reflection. As an "artist," I project something that everyone receives differently. The return of my projection as a reflection leads me to reflect on my own actions and how to be just and sensitive.

I think we are afraid of sensitivity in our society characterized and programmed by and for brutality. Sound is gentle phenomenon, but it can also be extremely brutal, even a weapon.

**MB:** We are also in the habit of listening to sound distractedly, but your work asks and allows us to listen with care, like the subtle variations on birdsong in *Ce que disent les oiseaux* [What Birds Say].

**KR:** Yes. There is a reflective trilogy in *Ce que disent les oiseaux*. The first part was shaped by the gardening work that I experienced in Bourges, in central France in 2013.

The marshes in Bourges are like the bayou. You go out in a little boat, there are islets and swamps. I became a gardener there. It's where I got interested in birdsongs.

When I started the garden, I didn't want to use machines. I worked with a shovel, with very rudimentary tools that required physical effort. With the first scoop of upturned soil, I could see how rich the earth was with insects. I didn't dare go further. It was incredible. After, I worked with a garden fork and I learned my way around, learning with my neighbors, the Inhabitants: the insects and animals, the freshwater mussels, the coypus, ducks, swans, and others.

[Ce que disent les oiseaux](#) (2020-21) is a sound performance electronic, acoustic, and non-musical instruments birdsongs recorded from nature in April 2020 during the initial periods of confinement of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was [broadcast](#) on RadioAppartement22 in June 2021. In context, Rafi hypothesizes that, "From the bird's point of view, the viruses produced by Nature and attacking Men would be in reality antibodies that Nature produces itself to protect against the Virus of 'MAN'."

At first, I was afraid of the insects; I'm from the city, I wasn't familiar with them! You see huge ants,

bugs with all kinds of hair, sometimes I found Louisiana crawfish in the garden. All these beings make sound, they communicate and have rituals, habits, codes, and culture. My sound works are synthetic extensions of experiences and encounters with the world. In *Ce que disent les oiseaux*, I play the bird and human roles at the same time. *Humus Sonus* is a poetic and sonic assemblage constructed as a dream place, inhabited by beings gigantic and microscopic, living, conceptual, and technological. I use banal everyday objects to produce complex sounds by manipulating them and transforming their sonic nature. It's acoustic composting.

More recently, I discovered a David Attenborough video about the lyre bird. In the clip, the lyre bird imitates a camera shutter, a car alarm, and a chainsaw. The bird introduces the human into its universe by way of human extension in machines. It's rather striking what that set of sounds says about us. The lyre bird inspired the sonic objects I'm working on now, which are kinds of chaotic synthesizers.

**MB:** *Speaking of extensions and prostheses, how do you conceive of the relation between human hearing and the devices that make it possible to hear things that you want to make it hear, but are otherwise inaudible?*

A [clip](#) from a 1998 BBC documentary, *The Life of Birds* with David Attenborough circulates widely online. Dr Hollis Taylor of the University of Sydney [asserts](#) there are actually two birds featured in this clip, both of whom were raised in captivity.

**KR:** It's the question of transfer. You're searching for something: a feeling, an intuition, a contact, a relationship. Then, how do you render it, transfer it? I'm not fascinated by tools, but I know what they're good for because I try to see how they are made, whether they are electronic, analog, or whatever else. Does an object let me transfer the right idea or information? If not, can I modify it? I go from being a conceptual artist to an artisan. I grab a screwdriver, I open the machine, or I make it myself. The goal is not to make it seem like magic to the public. From a democratic perspective, I sometimes put on a workshop, for instance, to demystify the issue.

**MB:** *Such as the synthesizer construction workshops from Spring 2021.*

**KR:** Yes, and they're linked to the genesis of *Hortichronical Poetica*. Out of a bank of texts and a seedbank, I composed a compost of words and seeds. I tossed it places where there weren't supposed to be any plants, like the space between two buildings, for example.

The long-running experiments of *Hortichronical Poetica* (2013-20) inform *Humus Sonus*. Rafi's short video piece "HYPERLINK" ["https://vimeo.com/419253117"](https://vimeo.com/419253117) [Re ensauvagement](#) explores the seedbomb component.

The question for the workshop was to produce sound while keeping the same principle. That's where the idea developed to build a granular synthesizer, which lets you select small seeds of sound to make new sounds by transforming them, choosing bits of words, opening a phoneme and picking a fragment of a vowel, making something pretty complex and coherent.

Whenever anyone someone asked me, "What are you doing?," I replied, "I'm working on a post-capitalist and post-Marxist experience." Because, for me, it's not just about appropriating the means of production; it's a matter of rethinking the means and imagining other relations to production.

**MB:** *One piece that came out of this project is a potato transformed into a synthesizer component, connected with patch cables. Some may see this as an absorption of the organic by the digital.*

**KR:** The potato synthesizer is actually a matrix mixer that arbitrarily combines different electrical tensions. It's an ironic object that produces random signals. It's also a kind of lyre bird.

During my sound workshops, some participants were ranking instruments, "acoustic instruments, electronic instruments ..." The two are often opposed, but both are instruments that make sound! Some sounds are more pleasant than others, some timbres more pleasing, some frequencies more gentle or tolerable, but everything is produced by humans. What we call "natural" sounds in French are produced by artificial instruments that copy nature. Natural sound comes down to stopping making noise and opening our lateral sensors: listening to and hearing the world.

**MB:** *Your practices based in gardening and horticulture recall the notion of "care." Is transfer a practice of care?*

**KR:** I have a very optimistic nature and I believe in the perspective of care. If I spend so much time on each of my projects, it's because I believe that it may be the only way left for us to take. Care is the idea of taking time: taking time to listen to others, to nature, to machines. That posits the need for relation, because care happens first in a person-to-person relationship. It's positively viral.

I love the electric and electronic aspects of things. I love to see how energy circulates in objects, how we ourselves produce and circulate energy. The question is, what type of energy do we want to transmit? Art, too, can transmit an energy that respects the public, makes room for them.

In my artistic practices, "taking care" means giving time to time and sharing that time with the public, the time to feel, to listen and to listen to one another. It's in this perspective that *Humus Sonus* was conceived, first as an experience and as an attempt to turn confinement into a work of art.

**MB:** We spoke earlier about a feeling of exhaustion at the personal and popular levels regarding the state of the HIRAK movement in 2019. The word exhaustion has two meanings: fatigue and the possibility (or impossibility) of capturing the totality of an experience. How do you see these two meanings relating?

**KR:** Exhaustion is effort over time. It's also a transport beyond a role like that of the artist as observer. That's why I was saying about the machines I am building that it's post-communism and post-capitalism. The idea goes beyond appropriation or acquisition. How to produce them? Why design them and understand how they work? When I get interested in an object, I also look into the conditions of its production and what it represent economically, politically, and as a fetish. To understand is to investigate, to study is to exhaust.

Gardening—here we are in the garden again—is a physical and mental effort. I had to learn because I began from zero. So, I grab a gardening fork and I look because I want to see who inhabits the earth. I'm interested in the relation created through observation, as the observed is observed in turn. To me, capturing the totality of an experience means exhausting time step by step.

Politically speaking, exhaustion means constraint and discouragement. That reminds me of H  l  ne Claudot-Hawad's film about Tuareg poetry, filmed during a poetry festival in the village of Iferouane, near Agadez in the Nigerien desert. All the poets of the region were invited: there were warrior poets, merchant poets, poet poets. There was also a group of women poets who were to participate. Resistance, combat, and political issues of Tuareg nationalism and independence were on the lips of every male poet, always with the same schema. They exhausted the themes of political engagement, identity, struggle, courage, and cowardice. At first, the women poets refused to participate. The one time they joined in, they didn't sing or read any poems. They imitated the sounds of slaughtered cows and camels. They spoke in guttural voices. That stunned everybody.

**MB:** Are there artists working with media other than sound, perhaps in traditional media, who are working in the same direction as you?

**KR:** I always think about something Marcel Duchamp said: "Will go underground." What he meant about art and the market was that we won't recognize artists in the twentieth and twenty-first century, in their own time or in the future.

I have a lot of admiration for certain painters who don't lead the lives of traditional artists. For example, Mohamed Drissi painted carcasses, men in bars, prostitution, men with empty heads, bulging eyes, and oversized hands. He sold his studio, bought a boat, and became a fisherman, so as not to give into the market's power. A few years ago, I worked on a book about Drissi, commissioned by the bank Soci  t   G  n  rale. In the interviews we did, Drissi's partner said that if he sometimes painted landscapes, it was to sell them for money for food, at the price of a tajine or two. Those canvases were the only ones acquired by Soci  t   G  n  rale!

**MB:** How do you situate yourself in the history of modern Moroccan art, which begins with oil painting on canvas and easel in the 1960s?

**KR:** In my own bubble. [Laughs. My practice has no filiation. It's just as well because sound has never been used as the medium for producing an authentically localized aesthetic identity. Music has, of course, but not sound as art. I have seen how the Casablanca School's attempts at creating a local synthesis of modernity have slipped into the pure and the authentic. What was supposed to be a form of resistance becomes an aesthetic ideology.

My use of sound as a conceptual and plastic material frees me from obedience to any group or tradition and opens a singular field of expression. Through it I can visit and use any medium, because sound is the source of my singularity. This is a political and aesthetic position that lets me go where I want, when I want.

[Furigraphier le vide: art   t po  sie tuareg pour le IIIe mill  naire](#) is a 2009 documentary film directed Tuareg culture and language scholar and poetry translator H  l  ne Claudot-Hawad.

During a 1961 roundtable "Where do we go from here?" at the Philadelphia Museum School of Art, Marcel Duchamp concluded his prepared remarks by declaring, "The great artist of tomorrow will go underground."

Mohamed Drissi (1946-2003) was a Tetuan-born painter, where he began art studies that also took him to Paris, Barcelona, Brussels, and New York. In his studio in Tangier, he practiced not only painting and sculpture, but also metalsmithing, toolmaking, tanning, and tailoring.

**MB:** You took part in the Moroccan Trilogy 1950-2020 exhibition at the Reina Sofa Museum in Madrid (31 March - 27 September 2021). What narrative of Moroccan art did you see represented in this show?

**KR:** There were many very pleasing things and beautiful works. First of all, there was the surprise, as I said to the curators Abdellah Karroum and Manuel Borja-Villel, to have the chance to see everything that had been produced over a period of seventy years, organized and installed in a single space in Spain. In the silence of the museum, the pieces coexist in a democratic manner, gazing at one another and opening debate. There is a subtle dialogue between the pictorial and the symbolic, aesthetics, politics, and poetics.

I remember the conversations I had with museumgoers in Madrid: some people said, "We didn't think this existed over there," meaning in Morocco. I don't think it's a matter of ignorance, but rather of the popular representation of a country just a stone's throw away. It's the mental representation they have of art in general and of art history.

There are many holes in an art history that wants to be global. This show fills some gaps and points to new paths. With the benefit of distance, I would say it was a good first attempt at exhausting the subject.

**MB:** This art that, in its biggest exhibition ever, encounters the public's ignorance: what relation does this art have with society?

I found the unfamiliarity among the public of Moroccans living in Spain to be more problematic. Faced with their surprise, I was able to perceive with greater clarity the problems of art in Morocco. It's an art confined to galleries and private collections. There is a poverty of specialist literature and a void of critical and theoretical production. It's an art associated with luxury, with very few public museums. It's art instrumentalized as a sign, a sign of progress, development, propaganda, and identity, or as an object of speculation and social climbing. Between all these factors, the art is poor and collectors have beautiful safes. The public loses out in all of that.

At the same time, I see the emergence of new initiatives that seem promising, but are in need of autonomy. To be continued ...!

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Starting under the directorship of Farid Belkahia in 1962, the *Ecole de Beaux-Arts de Casablanca* shaped the direction of modern, postcolonial Moroccan art for decades to come. The "Casablanca School" refers to a group of artists affiliated with this institution, like Mohammed Chebâa and Mohamed Melehi, who also collaborated on influential early exhibitions.