Unmuting musical instruments held in ethnographic collections: towards a sound remediation?
Louis Petitjean

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the integration of sound in ethnographic museums displays as a possible way to deal with the mediation of musical instruments taken from colonised cultures. It examines museums' evolving approaches to decolonisation, particularly the incorporation of multi-sensory experiences that allow audiences to connect with heritage beyond visual displays. Museums like the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, the case study of the article, attempt to address historical erasures by working with artists to create installations that let musical instruments resonate differently. By shifting the focus from preservation alone to collaborative, sensory engagements, these museums aim to repair dissonant heritages, fostering inclusivity and rethinking representation within modern museology.

Questo articolo esplora l'integrazione del suono nei musei etnografici come strategia per ridare voce agli strumenti musicali delle culture colonizzate. L'articolo esamina l'evoluzione degli approcci dei musei alla decolonizzazione, con un'attenzione particolare all'integrazione di esperienze multisensoriali che permettono al pubblico di entrare in contatto con il patrimonio culturale, al di là delle esposizioni visive. Musei come il Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, preso in esame nell'articolo, cercano di affrontare le cancellazioni storiche collaborando con gli artisti per creare installazioni che fanno risuonare gli strumenti musicali in modo diverso. Spostando l'attenzione dalla sola conservazione all'impegno collaborativo e sensoriale, questi musei mirano a riparare patrimoni dissonanti, promuovendo l'inclusività e ripensando la rappresentazione all'interno della museologia moderna.

Opening Picture:

Fig. 02: The flutes and pipes reserve. Photo by Louis Petitjean.

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Ethnographic museums are undoubtedly going through a period of crisis. From the presentation of the ethnographic object,[1] to the discourse produced on the former acquisition methods,[2] as well as on practices of repatriation,[3] these museums face multiple challenges. To cope up with these academic and social critiques, some of them have undertaken renovations, in response to "a need to create and disseminate a multicultural and postcolonial image of Europe, fully integrated into globalisation and interpreted as a symbol of modernity, particularly in the former colonial metropolises".[4] Often moved by the need of pluralisation of voices in the museum, the ethnographic museum moves towards James Clifford's definition of the "contact zone",[5] i.e. an inclusive space for the co-construction of knowledge between the museum and the populations about which it produces a discourse. Thought to be in opposition to a museology inherited from colonialism and experienced as overwhelming for the populations it deals with, these museums now wish to respond to the imperatives of a decolonial museology[6] as means of repairing the past of European empires.

The new definition of the museum, proposed in 2019 at ICOM Kyoto and voted on in 2022 at ICOM Prague, attests of this large-scale paradigm shift. A museum is, or must be, "open to the public, accessible and inclusive" and "promotes diversity and sustainability"; in addition, "museums operate and communicate ethically and professionally, with the participation of diverse communities".[7] Anthropologists Joachim Classen and David Howes have described European ethnographic museums as *sensescapes*,[8] that can be defined as places of ongoing emotional renegotiation between the institution and its public. In those museums, erected in the second half of the 19th century, the only mode of access to the objects has been the sight, at the expense of other senses, and "within the museum's empire of sight, objects are colonized by the gaze".[9] These museums are experimenting with new ways of providing access to the collections, integrating the "new body of the visitor"[10] in a multi-sensory way, in which sound and hearing seem to have become more and more important.

One may speak of renovation when referring to a new architectural and scenography redesign, or of a redesign when referring to a new museography. However, this concept fails to include the question of the public, even though these redesigns or renovations are often thought of as responses to the social issues that museums are engaged in tackling. An extended renovation would therefore include a renewal of the intermediary practices between the institution and its public, in other words would redefine mediation. Some of those museums are therefore engaged in what can be called *remediation*, a concept developed by the American anthropologist Paul Rabinow and defined, in the museum case, as a collaborative and dialogical process through which certain practices within the museum are "reconfigured, modified, rectified and adjusted".[11] Inspired by Judith Butler's "politics of radical resignification"[12] and Michel Foucault's politics of discomfort, this method involves introducing alternative modes of representation into

the museum space, which can also sometimes make visitors feel uncomfortable.[13]

If we take the example of sound in exhibition spaces, the first observation is that sonic practices within museums have become commonplace, from audio guides to sound showers and listening rooms. Interest in the use of sound in exhibition spaces appeared recently in scientific literature with the emphasis on the fact that sound develops a sense of immediacy and participation for the public.[14] The work of museologist Julia T.S. Binter links this to the relationship of the public with ethnographic objects and focuses on sound agency in the context of the decolonisation of the museum, investigating how sound archives help to resist the "colonial aphasia" from which European museums suffer.[15] Music, for its part, is an art form that largely resists the traditional modes of access offered by the museum. According to its definition, it is brought into the world through bodily techniques, involving the voice or body percussions, or techniques requiring objects and knowledge about them. Yet *music* as a vast and moving social and anthropological concept has often been cut down, within museums, to the gathering and presentation of collections of musical instruments, often putting aside the theme of music practices.

This type of collection is particularly interesting in our case, because the process of remediation takes place in an original way. Often criticised for their silence, these collections and particularly those from non-European cultures, tend to be re-examined and to break new grounds.

They are now being rethought around a programme aiming at restoring their agentivity and their capacity to generate sound, which their existence in the museum has made difficult or even denied. In other words, *unmute* the instruments that the museum has forced into silence.[16] This can be done in different ways. It is often pushed by the institution itself, by collaborating with artists from source-communities negotiating an access to the music instruments. From then, and regarding specific conservation needs for each type of instrument, these artists either play them to symbolically re-sound them, either produce new form of discourses on them, notably through the use of contemporary art approaches.

Nonetheless, the process of re-sounding instruments often comes up against the demands of preventive conservation, which has been progressively institutionalised by ICOM through the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (IC-CROM) and the International Committee of Museums and Collections of Instruments and Music (CIMCIM) since the early 1960s. Even though music instruments museums were born in the second half of the 19th century, the recognition of musical instruments as proper *heritage objects*, and not as pedagogical tools for the music academies, has been a long process.

The CIMCIM was founded in Paris on 1st July 1960, at the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, under the leadership of Georges Henri Rivière (1897-1985). He defended the idea that musical instruments were an integral part of humanity's

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material culture and that museums should start treating them as such. Indeed, as the official history of the CIMCIM states, "musical instruments have not always been respected as part of our cultural heritage, but rather as a tool in the service of music",[17] often leading to deterioration or renovations that altered the instruments. The committee set up a think-tank on instrument conservation and restoration which led to the publication in 1985 of the *Recommendations for regulating access to musical instruments in public collections*.[18] The researcher Judith Dehail has shown how, in this process, the musical instrument has gone from being an "intermediary or tool for producing the authentic music of the past, to becoming an end in itself, whose materiality crystallises, and therefore documents, the authenticity of the past".[19] This also implies a broader distance with the instrument: according to the ideals of conservation, it must be touched the least possible, paradoxically reinforcing its muteness within collection storages.

What is at stake here is therefore the tension between, on the one hand, the need and the institutional organisation to protect musical instruments from time and destruction, so to speak preserving their "still life",[20] and on the other hand the wish to repair them symbolically by proposing a new way of mediating them. Without opposing the two binarily, we want to address how museum practices are entangled with social agendas as well as with its own functioning as an institution. By giving examples of *sound remediation practices* currently held in Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac (MQB) and in different Eu-

ropean museums during the recent years, this article will attempt to address this duality of sound remediation. It will touch on the different ways in which collections of non-European musical instruments can be repaired and investigate to what extent sound is a powerful tool for repairing ethnographic museums themselves, notably by putting their relationship with their own pasts and collection histories on the table. The exploration of the interactions between institutions and artists shall shed light on the complex ecologies of the museum and the effects they have on repairing processes. How can the museum provide access to musical instruments that have been uprooted nay imprisoned in analytical categories inherited from nineteenth-century colonial anthropology? How can it meet the demands of modern, critical museology in the case of musical instruments that have been silenced by history? Can sound be used to write new narratives in museums?

The study is based on ethnographic methods, relying on multi-sited observation within the walls of the museum and a total of six interviews. The first section of the interviews has been made with the museum staff, conducted between December 2023 and March 2024. The three profiles are quite different. Our first contact with the museum was made through an interview with a production manager, in the exhibition service department. The second interviewee is responsible for the sound collection of the museum and was thus a very important informer for the project. The third interview was made with the former director of the MQB auditorium, who worked within the cultural programme de-

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partment (live arts, cinema, conferences). She had worked a lot on the *Musée Résonnant* project which we will discuss later. The position of the researcher involved a regular presence in the museum. As being external to the workings of the museum itself, it rendered possible a comparison between observations made in the exhibition spaces with the internal discourse produced on them. The second section of the interviews, conducted from March to September 2024, was made with artists involved in "sound remediation" within ethnographic museums. An interview with the artist who created our case study, Youmna Saba, was compulsory. Yet in order to understand the larger scale of the phenomenon, two other interviews were conducted with artists working in different countries than France, with different institutional contexts, like Adilia Ying Dip in Brussels and Sacht Hoyt in Berlin. Acknowledging the fact that art works are not the creation of isolated individuals but result from cooperation between different artists, institutions, critics and audiences, who together make up the "art world",[21] it was necessary to multiply the points of views and complete them with observations, in order to grasp the complexity of an artistic project taking place in a major Parisian museum, involving various actors, intermediaries and interests.

After rapidly telling the place of musical instruments within ethnographic collections, we shall look at the new role given to sound in the MQB. The third part will focus on the artistic installation *La réserve des non-dits* by the Franco-Lebanese artist Youmna Saba, winner of the first sound residency of the museum.

Music instruments in ethnographic museums

1) Organology, museums and music instrument collections in contemporary history

The last quarter of the 19th century in Western Europe saw a great interest in non-European musical instruments, manifested in the building of collections and the opening of museums. For example, the Musée des Instruments de Musique du Conservatoire Royal in Brussels opened in 1877, following the donation of a large Indian collection to King Leopold II. In Paris, the Musée des Instruments de musique du Conservatoire had already existed since 1861, and the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro opened in 1878, initially comprising 150 instruments from Africa and Oceania[22]. At the same time, organology, the science of musical instruments, began to develop. This interrelated discipline of musicology enjoys a symbiotic relationship with museums,[23] which functioned as laboratories. These musical artifacts, preserved and exhibited, were mobilized by contemporaries as levers enabling them to build classification systems marked by the evolutionary paradigm, categorizing "specimens", "families" and "branches", largely marked by the epistemology of natural sciences. In 1878, Victor-Charles Mahillon (1841-1924), the first curator of the museum in Brussels, drew up the first major classification into four families of instruments, divided according to the way they set the air

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Réserve des instruments de musique: niveau JH

**Aérophones d'Asie ;
Cordophones et idiophones
d'Afrique**

Plus d'un millier d'instruments de musique d'Afrique
et d'Asie sont conservés au niveau JH de la réserve.
On compte environ 800 aérophones d'Asie, dont la
moitié sont des instruments à anches, simples ou
doubles. Parmi eux se trouvent les orgues à bouche
(une centaine d'exemplaires), type instrumental
spécifique à la zone Sud-Est du continent asiatique.
Une partie de la vaste collection d'instruments à
cordes d'Afrique se trouve également rangée à ce
niveau. Elle comprend une centaine d'instruments
à cordes frottées – les vièles – une centaine de
cithares et une soixantaine de harpes à chevalet et
de harpes-cithares, deux des formes selon lesquelles
la vaste famille des harpes se décline sur le conti-
nent africain. Cette section de la réserve consacrée
à l'Afrique conserve également une partie des
idiophones par frappement: les tambours de bois
et les xylophones.

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into vibration: aerophones, cordo-
phones, idiophones, membrano-
phones.[24] This fourfold classification
became the basis for the one still in
use today after its systematisation in
1914 by two German scholars.[25] Re-
cent work has shown that organolo-
gy, along with ethnomusicology af-
terwards, have played a large part
in the process of "primitivization"
of non-European music, defined as
the assignment of "certain musical
repertoires, carried by living popu-
lations, to an anhistoricity, a place
below history. These are distin-
guished from a 'modern' repertoire,
whose progress the comparative
history of music, and later musicol-

ogy, endeavours to describe".[26] Born
in the heart of imperialist Europe in
the last quarter of the 19th century,
this science relied heavily on coloni-
al and diplomatic networks to trans-
fer instruments to the metropolises,
where it was written.

In 1929, at the request of Georg-
es Henri Rivière, André Schaeff-
ner founded what will become the
department of Ethnomusicology
within the ethnographic museum,
which became in 1937 the Musée
de l'Homme. The Hornbostel and
Sachs typological classification was
applied to the instrument collection
of this museum.

In 2006, the Musée du Quai Bran-
ly – Jacques Chirac was created by
the merger of the collections of the
Musée de l'Homme with Rivière's
Musée des Arts et Traditions Pop-
ulaires. The museum's collection
of musical instruments now totals
10,000 pieces, most of which come
from the Musée de l'Homme's eth-
nomusicological laboratory.[27] This
brief detour into the history of or-
ganological classification is nec-
essary to understand the current
arrangements for the mediation of
these instruments at the Musée du
Quai Branly. In fact, the presenta-
tion still uses the "organological
mode",[28] using a label for each dis-
play case and explaining which ob-
ject class the instrument belongs to
(Fig. 1). Even if this mode of pres-
entation is not properly a colonial
reenactment, the profusion of ob-
jects in the museum was made pos-
sible by the very colonial context of
imperial France, and the pregnancy
of organological settings within the
museum dispositive seems to be
currently discussed, modified and
remediated.

Fig. 01:
An organologi-
cal cartel on the
glass tower.
Photo Louis Petit-
jean.

As a good witness of the contemporaneity of this process, the Musée de la Musique in Paris is planning to renovate its permanent exhibition space which until now has been called "*Les musiques du monde*" (World music) due to open in May 2025. In its *Projet Scientifique et Culturel* (2020-2025), in a section entitled "A museum in the present", the museum declares its desire to "think about Western music in a globalised world"; the three aspects of this renovation include a reorganisation of the display, an easier access to the collections which until now have been at the end of the museum's route and an emphasis on "the experience of the intangible within the museum and a more sensitive approach to the collections".[29]

2) Mute instruments in silent storages

Museums seem to have been a powerful tool to mute musical instruments. Scholars have even provocatively described them as "mausoleums, places for the display of the musically dead, with organologists acting as morticians, preparing dead instrument bodies for preservation and display".[30] If we take the example of MQB, these thousands of musical instruments collected since the 19th century are in full view for the museum visitors to the museum, housed in a huge glass tower that acts as the backbone of the museum. One of the few articles on the subject, written by Madeleine Leclerc, ethnomusicologist and director of MQB's musical instrument collections from the museum's opening until 2012, reveals a great deal about the initial ambitions for this glass tower. According

to her report, there were originally ten screens inside, connected to the outside by transducers that broadcasted musical extracts. The aim was "to create a link between the formal aesthetics of musical instruments […] and the musical aesthetics sought by instrument makers".[31] Today, this original ambition is not there, and the instruments are only accessible via organological labels such as the one shown above. On the top of that, Jean Nouvel's architectural project comprised this glass tower in the concrete structure itself and therefore it cannot be modulated. The tower seems to resist to a radical change of its display, utility and accessibility.

In contrast to the exhibition platform, this tower takes on a special museological form as it displays a part of the museum's reserves. The display of backstages, the *behind the scenes* of museums is a relatively recent phenomenon. It calls to another type of museological discourse: the revealing of what is not visible, what is hidden, what refers to the inner workings of the museum. However, we should not "take the media productions of institutions as descriptions of the work of collections management but treat them for what they are: selective and partial representations of the museum's activities".[32] The display of these musical instruments is inseparable from the institution that has given them heritage status and is part of the range of discourses it produces about its collections. Given that the museum does not have any ethnomusicologist in its staff since 2016, this staging of conservation no longer coincides with the reality of curatorial work.

Yet, there has also been a shift in the way museum staff perceive this space, as evidenced by the way they talk about it. During fieldwork, a museum employee explained that they were told not to use the originating term "silo" anymore, but rather "instrument tower", before using the term again later in the interview, by mistake, indicating that a lexicon linked to representations of this facility within the museum had become imbued and thus resistant to change.

As Youmna Saba puts it, "it was very beautiful to see all these instruments, but at the same time, it was very shocking to see them placed like that in this tower. There's something borderline violent about it".[33] As a whole, the public seems to be calling for more direct access to these collections and are expressing a form of frustration at the glass tower housing objects whose potential for sound they are aware of, but which are confined to being merely looked at. Eric de Visscher,[34] who has played a major role in the project we will discuss afterwards, states this:

> *"This inaudible of a collection of instruments is always there, we're always fighting against it and the public also asks: 'we want to hear the instruments, why don't we play them?' Or 'these are dead instruments!'"*[35]

Of course, forms of sound mediation for musical instrument exist in the museum, but that follow a direct illustrative approach. If a flute is shown in a display case, then the sound shower next to it will broadcast a recording of the flute in question, or of a similar flute. So, what can be done to give access in a different way to musical instruments that are fixed and rendered mute in their display case? Although there is no public survey as such on this question, the museum has been reacting for some years now by proposing an overall overhaul of the way sound is perceived and lived within the museum's walls. In short, MQB is trying to make a sound remediation.

Towards "resonating" museums?

1) New echoes within the walls

In 2020, the former Director of the Heritage and Collections Department, Yves Le Fur, launched an audit for a major project, the *Musée Résonnant* (resonating museum).[36] It has been led by Eric de Visscher, whose expertise today coincides with the up-to-date sensory and sound approaches in museums. Starting from the observation that the museum is a multi-sensory space and that its architecture is designed "more like a territory where the visitor wanders through spaces of very different sizes and volumes, and therefore with different acoustics",[37] Eric de Visscher has proposed solutions to redefine the place of sound in the exhibition area and to enhance the value of intangible heritage. In an approach rooted in critical museology, he has developed the idea that sound design can be a highly effective tool for developing new narratives in museums:

Fig. 03:
The virtual "manza balanga" to be found on RMCA's ReSoXY website.

"As something that is fleeting but that also is physical and spatial, felt in the body, and connected to concepts and politics of the voice, vocality, and memory, sound is suited for prompting questions, for destabilizing that which is thought to be stable, and for re-examining what we think we know."[38]

we have a lot of departments, and each of the departments is involved with a totally different budget and human resources, or even very, very, very different budgets. [...] No one has ever complained about it, as it's not visible [to the public], everyone, with their own resources, programmes very different things."[39]

The project is therefore to some extent a practical application of this theorisation of the power of sound within the exhibition spaces of the MQB.

This ambitious project is cross-disciplinary and wishes to include the museum's various departments: public relations, cultural development, heritage and collections, technical resources and security... It therefore needs a reconfiguration of museum practices and greater cooperation. Nevertheless, the lack of clear steering of the project between the departments leaves a wide degree of freedom and interpretation adapted to the human and financial potential of each. The departments that are already closely involved in the issue of sound, such as the media library, are very committed to the programme. This project is not without confronting the reality of differing budgets allocated to the departments, depending on their size and importance within the museum. As one member of staff explains:

"The most frustrating thing, the most complicated thing to manage, is that

In fact, the aim of the project is to extend into many areas of the museum. It also takes the form of a particular focus on the issue of sound for the public, which has taken the form of "experiments on the perception of sounds in the museum by and with the public", as well as an acoustic study "to find out how this building reacts to the issue of sound, as well as to noise pollution".[40] And finally, the most visible form of this new resonance of the museum is the setting up of a sound residency consisting of a series of *cartes blanches* given to contemporary sound artists. The *Musée Résonnant* is therefore a wide-ranging, shape-shifting project and refers as much to sound understood as a material reality and an aspect of human culture as to a lived experience in a museum.

The sound residencies consist of inviting sound artists and musicians to create a work with and for the museum. These *cartes blanches* are also part of a recent museum dynamic that outsources mediation through contemporary creation, calling on intermediaries to take another look at the collections. Faced with demands for restitution and the proliferation of critical studies

on the museum, the aim is to give back symbolic power to artists from non-European cultures, by letting them *take over* the museum and its collections:

> *"Because we are not able to return the objects, which are moreover most of the time not requested, the idea is rather to give a free rein to an artist [...], to make the objects or collections available for artists who come from those cultures."*[41]

The idea of a carte blanche given to a single artist also fits in with the museum's consideration of artists' self-representation in the museum, in a model that encourages them to invest the museum and integrate its various components into their artistic approach. It also brings into play the question of contemporary art at the MQB. Given the relative slowness with which major Parisian contemporary art institutions, such as the Palais de Tokyo and the Fondation Cartier, begin to integrate sound art into their collections, this program is also a way of positioning the museum in the context of the growing interest for sound art in the artistic field:

> *"Quite quickly, we decided that a residency program, in other words, a commission for works of art, but conceived from and for the museum, was a good way to build up a collection of contemporary works*

of sound art on the same model as photographic residencies."[42]

2) Sound exits the museum

Resonating museums seem to be a broader phenomenon than what is happening in MQB. Other forms of remediation of musical instruments collected during the colonial periods and rendered mute by their existence within the museum are sprouting.

Launched by the percussionist and researcher Dr. Adilia Dip, the project entitled "Re-Sounding the xylophone collection of Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA)"[43] (ReSoXy) is being developed in the walls of the RMCA in Tervuren, Belgium. It focuses on unmuting its xylophone collection, comprising 159 instruments, mainly collected between the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century. Deeply rooted in Belgium colonial history in Congo, as it was created in 1897 following the colonial part of the Universal Exhibition taking place in Tervuren, the museum increased its collections through great collectors such as Armand Hutereau, who picked up more than 600 instruments alongside with sound recordings and photographs during his 1911-1913 expedition.

Just like Quai Branly, RMCA seems to lack of "experts in-house that can repair the physical objects".[44] Therefore, the repairing process cannot be focused on the materiality of the musical instrument, but rather on the sound and the intangible musical practices. The process is the following: after having sound sampled the xylophones, they are

synthetised and could be replayed during live performances. This symbolically means that the sound is being freed up while the objects are still being captive within museum reserves.

For this project, the sound remediation does not only include the recording of the sounds of the instruments: it also encompasses a digitalised manza playable directly on the website (Fig. 3), a demonstration of a musical pattern extracted from RMCA's archive, various photos, a data record with precise information on the origins of the object (culture of origin, acquisition date and collecting method, collector and acquisition location), audio-samples downloadable freely of various audio formats, and extracts of the museum archive recordings. Digitalisation is therefore one way of dealing with the issue of the repairing museum by making accessible to visitors in and outside the museum: this digitalised manza is currently inside the exposition area of the RMCA.

At the very core of the ReSoXy project is the idea that by digitalising the xylophone collection, the museum could be a good purveyor of cultural information that colonial collects have sometimes deleted:

"Because we want to reach out to the communities, we want them to know these instruments again, because some of these instruments are not in use anymore. Especially the communities in Congo. But of course, it's difficult when the instruments are not in use, and it's already for decades in this circle of disappearance."[45]

Accueil › Collection de xylophones

Manza MO.0.0.14308

Jouer de l'instrument virtuel

Cliquez ici pour jouer en plein fenêtre

Cliquez sur les touches pour entendre le son du xylophone. Il fonctionne à la fois sur les ordinateurs de bureau et sur les appareils à écran tactile.

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As part of the project was the trips of the "re-sounder" artist and researcher to meet the source-communities whose ancestors were dispossessed of these objects. Dr. Adilia Dip explains that, when in Congo, all her work was what could be given back to the communities. This new accessibility of sound recordings, instruments and archives could therefore produce new music:

"*When I was in Congo and I needed something to show them. I could not just show them some old recordings made hundred years ago. So now I have an object to do knowledge exchange and then they might start to remember more, or they can create new music together.*"[46]

Therefore, musical co-creation is one of the tools museums deploy to

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repair their difficult histories. It can also take other forms.

Youmna Saba's La reserve des non-dits or sound remediation for MQB's tower

1) Making the unheard listened

The first winner of MQB's sound residency program was Youmna Saba, a contemporary Lebanese artist. Youmna Saba is a composer, virtuoso oud player and musicologist and her albums explore the relationship between electroacoustic music and the sung Arabic language. Her project *La Réserve des non-dits* (the Reserve of the Unsaid) won the selection competition for the first sound residency in the Quai Branly's carte blanche program. Her installation was on view from March to December 2023. The selection encompassed artists "from one of the four continents represented in the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac collections: Africa, Asia, America, Oceania"[47] that had to propose a project interacting with the museum and its collections. Whether "the museum as a place, the museum as a presentation centre or the museum as a centre for the conservation of archives and works",[48] priority was given to projects that made organic use of the museum, including a mediation and installation proposal. Artists could choose to base their work on the sound and audiovisual collection, the musical instrument collection, or both. Successful artists are given around six months to work and receive technical support from Le Fresnoy, a Tourcoing-based national studio for contemporary arts. Winners also receive finan-

cial support to develop the project, to the tune of €8,000, which "covers the copyright remunerating the winner's work, the entry of the work into the museum's collections and the delivery of the final work (digital file or any other format)"[49]. In addition, the various expenses associated with the production are covered by the museum (material costs, travel expenses, costs of using non-free sources, etc.).

Youmna Saba's project was based on the intuition that the instruments in the tower, despite their apparent silence behind the glass, nevertheless produced almost inaudible sounds generated by the circulation of air on the membranes. This is part of her artistic quest to question the audible and the inaudible. For example, as part of the Taïma project at the CNCM Césaré in Reims, she gave a concert in which she placed an oud on a chair in the middle of the stage and connected microphones to pick up the resonance of the strings and the cabinet, subverting resonance as a traditional problem in live mixing by transforming it into a musical element that forms an integral part of the work. With the same ambition, her project in the museum aimed to capture hidden resonances using small microphones placed at different points on the instrument. She created a bank of 139 sounds from recordings made in the glass tower's storeroom. These recordings are divided into three categories: "ambient" sounds, captured in the resonance boxes of certain instruments; "instrumental" sounds, captured by microphones placed inside the instruments; "optimised" sounds, reworked in the studio in post-production. The title of the work is a challenge to this glass tower, which

struggles to make its presence felt and refers to the silence emanating from the reserve compared with their dense and very diverse cultural histories.

2) Issues of accessibility

The sound project and its implementation for the visitor were conceived synchronously. The device was distributed over three areas of the museum. Mounted on the windows of the instrument tower and on three floors of the museum, three listening points could be activated by the visitor. As the tower is at the heart of Jean Nouvel's architecture, the listening points brightened up the exhibition route. A further five listening points were installed in the collections area to punctuate the tour with sound pieces. To make the artistic process more accessible, MQB's "boîte à musique" brought together personal notes from the artist and questions about the day-to-day realisation of her project. In the form of a diagram, visitors were provided with explanations of the artist's work that were not easily understood by simply encountering the sound works, which at first sight are rather unsettling because they are taking the form of rhythmless ambient music, unveiling sometimes dark and gloomy atmospheres. This contradicts what the visitor might expect from a sound mediation of musical instruments, namely an extract of their sound in a playing context.

Enhancing the value of the tower was a major challenge. Faced with the dual question of "how do we [...] make it understandable that we are giving something to hear and leave it to the public to activate what they

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Fig. 04: Front installation in the main hall. Photo Louis Petitjean

hear?",[50] the museum proposed a signage system in the form of a hand, suggesting a new way of "touching" the instruments on the other side of the glass, through listening. Visitors had to activate the device themselves by pressing a hand-shaped sticker on the glass wall of the storage room (Fig. 4). It was also necessary to highlight the tower within the museum route, which seems to hide its contents from view: of the three listening points attached to the tower, two are outside the collections area, one in the entrance hall, the other in the basement, in the educational and theatre areas. In other words, these are areas where the public does not linger. However, the absence of a tool to evaluate public use of the installation meant that it was impossible to know to what extent it really worked.

The superimposition of Youmna Saba's installation and the traditional mediation devices of organological cartels, as well as their upholding in contrast to the artist's ephemer-

al installation, invites to question the persistence of the organological mode within the museum's presentation of musical instruments. Regarding that, while she was working on the micro-sounds of the instrument inside the tower, she declares she had "forget" about organology:

> *"Is there a way to organize them differently? Or should we? Should we organize them or not? Because I perceived them completely... I completely forgot about organology when I was working in [the glass tower]. [...] I just looked at where I could place the microphone and listened, and that was that. Outside of all the projections, all the organizations and all the notions that we can place on these objects."[51]*

One way to cure instruments seems therefore to make them thinkable outside the classification paradigm.

3) Sound ecology of the museum

The conservation constraints at Quai Branly are quite strict, and the curators themselves no longer have direct access to the storerooms, having to go through the collections management to do so. Although recently, Pakistani and Cameroonian artists Ashraf Sharif Khan and Blick Bassy were able to play on some of the instruments in the collection, the access to the instrument tower is fairly restricted. To ensure that the artist respected this rule, Youm-

na Saba was always accompanied by someone when she was in the musical instrument storeroom:

> *"Sometimes it was the assistant director of the collections department. Youmna often talks about it. They really had an almost friendly relationship. It worked very well between them, even though you could imagine they had slightly different interests. [...] Sometimes it was one of the security staff who accompanied her. In particular, she describes the behaviour of one of them, who was a bit... You know, when you're nervous and you move your leg... he did this, and it created a sort of vibration. She picked up the vibration."[52]*

Initially intended as a means of ensuring that the artist creative process was in line with curatorial requirements, this "dispositive of control" has been distorted and is now part of the sound work itself. To create her work, the artist drew on the museum's complex *ecology*, ie. the network of links produced by the iterative interactions between humans and non-humans within it. In this respect, the collection of musical instruments is a boundary-work,[53] as it brings together actors from different social worlds and interests and calls, through its very materiality, for cooperation and interaction. This ecology is also revealed by this anecdote:

"The first thing the curatorial team told me was that sometimes in the silo, as the carts pass by, the gongs start to move. In fact, there's a lot of movement due to the metal planks, which sometimes create an orchestra of gongs. I recreated this phenomenon without touching the gongs. We just touched the shelf, applied a little pressure and the gongs began to move and bang against each other. I captured that and kept it as a composition."[54]

To finish with, the technical means of developing this project were also framed by the museum. The artist had to draw a list of her technical needs prior to her first enter in the glass tower. As she explains, the "gear has dictated the frequences I picked up. Therefore, if there had been other equipment, that picked up other frequences, the project would have been different".[55] The remediation is therefore unthinkable outside the museum socio-technical scope and framework.

4) Twisting patrimonialisation

To finish with, we mentioned above that the residency programme was part of the objective of bringing sound works into the museum's sound library. Again, the idea of the museum's patrimonialisation of the works can be traced back to the dynamics of assimilation that haunt ethnographic museums: "[Quai Branly Museum] wanted the sound bank to be in the museum, to belong

to the museum. And that, I think, is... No, at some point you have to stop".[56] To get around this, the artist insisted on registering the 139 recordings under the Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 4.0 DEED licence, which allows the work to be shared, remixed, transformed, used or copied in any format or medium, for any purpose, including commercial. This was for her, "the most important thing, for the future developments of the project".[57] It was negotiated with the museum's legal department, who initially objected on two grounds. One declared reason was the "desire to protect Youmna's and the museum's credit on the finished product, on the files"[58], and the other was that this form of licensing would allow the work to be reused for commercial purposes, thus indirectly allowing public money to fund music production that would enrich private interests. Yet, as one member of the museum commented, "given the nature of the sounds, I don't think we're going to make a commercial hit [...]. I don't think Beyoncé or Rihanna would take all this and make money out of it".[59] To conclude with the artist own words, she "did not repair anything, unfortunately" but managed to "put the sound bank in the Creative Commons. And this is a victory for me, to give access to something, something so ephemeral and so free".[60] On the museum's website, the artist justifies her approach by explaining what this free access to the sound art collection would be used for:

"A renewable and ever-expanding resource; an invitation to musicians and composers to explore this

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resource as a raw material for creation, and also to researchers to rethink these instruments in terms of their current state and behaviour, and to re-examine conservation practices and the criteria underlying research in musicology, organology and lute-making."[61]

Conclusion. Sonic discourse, heritage discourse

In this article, we exemplified one of the many responses of ethnographic museums to the question of their relationship with their objects and histories. Faced with institutional demands for restitution and writing of new narratives, these museums are developing alternatives, taking the form of new mediations. Sound is being increasingly considered as a means of providing access to visitors. Maybe because it doesn't *say* anything, sound infiltrates more easily the space of exhibition halls, allows a freer interpretation, and resonates with individual sensibilities.

In this respect, the example of the remediation of collections of musical instruments "silenced" by their conservation speaks for itself. The museum wants to give a free hand to another voice, perhaps switching legitimacy, to produce an artistic-cum-scientific discourse, one that moves away from the organological considerations that stored the instruments, symbolically and physically, in categories. These new voices aim at capturing their intimate life in a museum ecology that posits itself as a constant dialogue between humans and non-hu-

mans, between security guards and drums, between carts and curators, between publics and storage. Therefore, the development of sound practices seems to be a plausible way of dealing with the challenges posed by the decolonial agenda.

To go further, we can also say that *remediation* is a concept borrowed to the ecological and biological concept of *phytoremediation*, defined as "the use of green plants and their associated microbiota, soil amendments and use of agronomic techniques to remove, contain or render harmless environmental contaminants".[62] The parallel with the ecology of the museum mentioned before is relevant as sound remediation also uses the multilayered dynamics of an ecological environment, here the museum, to give an answer to the broad treatment of difficult heritage.[63]

However, we can see that the new way of accessing these instruments is also a new form of museum discourse, adapted to the current reflections of museums interrogating their relationships with the visitor senses, which does not resolve certain aporias inherent to the history of the institutions. The cross-century ghost of museum colonial assimilations, here for example in the case of the sound works, remains. Furthermore, with the relative absence of qualified scientific staff for these instruments, the collection could only be interpreted by artists proposing an aesthetic discourse, re-activating the longstanding critic on the aestheticization of collections of non-European objects. Conversely, some radical positions towards ethnographic museums, so to speak critical practices of unmuting, fol-

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lowing the approach of the artist Sacht Hoyt, are not interested in collaborating with museums, but rather using the museum as a means of producing engaged art. To conclude with Hoyt's own words:

"The thing is, [unmuting] is like going and having a drink with somebody who's in jail and making them feel like you've got some kind of a solution to take them back out into freedom. But you don't. [...] The only thing I can set free is the sound."[64]

Endnotes

1   Gruénais, Ferry 1990, p. 7.

2   Brulon Soares, Leshchenko 2018.

3   Bienkowski 2015.

4   Van Geert 2020, p. 137.

5   Clifford 1997.

6   Grewcock 2014; Bergeron, Rivet 2021.

7   ICOM website, https://icom.museum/fr/ressources/normes-et-lignes-directrices/definition-du-musee/.

8   Classen, Howes 2020, p. 199.

9   Classen, Howes 2020, p. 200.

10   Macdonald 1993.

11   Rabinow 2007, cited in Deliss 2020, p. 31.

12   Olson, Worsham 2007.

13   See for example the project "Curating discomfort" developed by the Hunterian Museum and the University of Glasgow, https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/about/changing-museum/curating-discomfort/.

14   Bubaris 2014.

15   Binter 2014.

16   See for example, in MARKK museum in Hamburg, the 2024 temporary exhibition « Un-Muting – Sonic Restitutions », https://markk-hamburg.de/en/ausstellungen/un-muting-sonic-restitutions.

17   CIMCIM website, http://cimcim.mini.icom.museum/homepage-2/cimcim-history/history-first-years, consulted.

18   Hellwig et al. 1985.

19   Dehail 2022, p. 131.

20   Dominguez Rubio 2020.

21   Becker 1982.

22   Leclair 2003, p. 2.

23   Dehail 2019, p. 783.

24   Mahillon 1878.

25   Hornbostel, Sachs 1914.

26   Mayaud 2018, p. 126.

27   Currently, the database mentions 9117 entries in the inventory with the mention « instruments de musique »,https://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/explorer-les-collections/base/Work/action/list?tx_mqbcollection_explorer%5Bclose%5D=1&cHash=177e964e8a5be6c85c9fb2f5cf80bbd2.

28   Gérard 2014.

29   *Projet scientifique et culturel du musée de la Musique de Paris* (2020-2025), Paris, Cité de la musique – Philharmonie de Paris, 2019, p. 38.

30   Bates 2012, p. 365.

31   Leclair 2007, pp. 30-39.

32   Kreplak 2021, p. 205.

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33   Interview with Youmna Saba, 23/05/2024.

34   Eric de Visscher is a trained musicologist and exhibition curator, former director of Paris' Musée de la Musique (2006-2017) and currently working at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, as part of the research project entitled "Sound in Museums: New Engagements, New Tools, New Audiences". See https://www.vam.ac.uk/research/projects/sound-in-museums-new-engagements-new-tool-new-audiences.

35   Remark of Eric de Visscher in the interview for the website *Hémisphère son, Youmna Saba dans la tour des instruments du monde* – https://hemisphereson.com/youmna-saba-dans-la-tour-des-instruments-du-monde.

36   The project is still underway at the time of writing.

37   Remark of Eric de Visscher in the interview for the website *Hémisphère son, Youmna Saba dans la tour des instruments du monde* – https://hemisphereson.com/youmna-saba-dans-la-tour-des-instruments-du-monde/.

38   Candela, de Visscher 2023, p. 57.

39   Interview with the responsible of the museum's sound collection, 13/02/2024.

40   Remark of Christine Drouin, director of Cultural Development, in the interview for the website *Hémisphère son, Youmna Saba dans la tour des instruments du monde* – https://hemisphereson.com/youmna-saba-dans-la-tour-des-instruments-du-monde/.

41   Interview with the former director of the MQB auditorium, 05/03/2024.

42   Interview with the former director of the MQB auditorium, 05/03/2024.

43   See https://resoxy.africamuseum.be/.

44   Interview with Adilia Ying Dip, 17/09/2024.

45   Interview with Adilia Ying Dip, 17/09/2024.

46   Interview with Adilia Ying Dip, 17/09/2024.

47   MQB, 2024-2025 call for the sound residency, p. 7., https://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/collections/toutes-les-collections/residences-sonores/appel-a-projets-residence-sonore.

48   Interview with an exhibition production manager, 02/02/2024.

49   MQB, 2024-2025 call for the sound residency, p. 7.

50   Interview with an exhibition production manager, 02/02/2024.

51   Interview with Youmna Saba, 23/05/2024.

52   Interview with the responsible of the museum's sound collection, 13/02/2024.

53   Star, Griesmer 1989.

54   Remark of Youmna Saba in the interview for the website *Hémisphère son, Youmna Saba dans la tour des instruments du monde* – https://hemisphereson.com/youmna-saba-dans-la-tour-des-instruments-du-monde/.

55   Interview with Youmna Saba, 23/05/2024.

56   Interview with Youmna Saba, 23/05/2024.

57   Interview with Youmna Saba, 23/05/2024.

58   Interview with the responsible of the museum's sound collection, 13/02/2024.

59   Interview with the responsible of the museum's sound collection, 13/02/2024.

60   Interview with Youmna Saba, 23/05/2024.

61   Extract from MQB's website, « La réserve comme ressource(s) »,

   https://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/collections/vie-des-collections/actualites/residence-sonore/residence-sonore-2022-youmna-saba.

62   Das 2018, p. 192.

63   Macdonald 2008.

64   Interview with Sacht Hoyt, 14/06/2024.

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