

Cable City Dance
Cable City Sea

Rossella Biscotti

18.11.23-25.2.24

Curated by Joana Hurtado Matheu.



Fabra i Coats:
Centre d'Art
Contemporani

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



Rossella Biscotti's work delves into the material and affective histories of the spaces we inhabit, unravelling systems of meaning and relational networks between the human and the non-human. Her practice, which interweaves film, sound, sculpture and performance, explores the functioning of ecosystems as open, shifting and polyphonic, as are collective imaginaries and the media by which they are conditioned, be they narrative or material. By bringing together art, archaeology, anthropology, environmental sciences, geopolitics and activism, she questions the uses and abuses of global power by revealing all that lives on the margins of official discourse.

For the exhibition at Fabra i Coats, Biscotti presents two large installations occupying two floors of the Art Centre: *The City*, a multi-screen projection of a Neolithic city, and *The Journey*, a sound piece set around the Mediterranean, accompanied by two respective sculptural works, *Trees on Land* and *Drifting*, which take us to an olive tree cemetery and to the currents of the sea. Between the two floors, another work connects them physically and conceptually from within the building's infrastructure: *A Conductor*, a recycled cable from a decommissioned nuclear power station, is connected to the Art Centre's electrical supply and provides power for the entire exhibition.

On the ground floor, the site of *The City* takes us underground to interpret, preserve, and archive the remains of a prehistoric city. However, this creates a void where there was none, while generating new layers of decontextualised meaning (diaries, boxes, digital databases...). Similarly, the ceramics in *Trees on Land*, made from olive ash and clay, speak of the void left by the incinerated trees and the bare land that remains after the fires which were started to contain the spread of one of the world's most devastating plant bacteria. Excavation as an interpretative opening meets extraction as a hole, a dislocation that we actively manipulate from the present. *A Conductor* is an example of the interests hidden in a material that the artist reuses to reconnect with society. By pointing out burning issues such as energy wars, nuclear power, environmental regulation and recycling, Biscotti creates a small short-circuit within the art institution: she appropriates the Art Centre's energy, illuminating and connecting all the works —here invisibly, whereas above appears as a labyrinth of tentacles. Against the weight and opacity of the underground, ancestors, roots, and cables are uprooted, relocated, and buried again in an archive or burned and transformed into new cultural, and thus political, signals.

On the upper floor, the imageless narrative of *The Journey* immerses us in the sea, expanding the acoustic and metaphorical range of the twenty-ton block of Carrara marble that is the origin of the work. The

artist loaded this stone onto a merchant ship and, after three days sailing between Italy, Malta, Tunisia, and Libya, threw it into the sea. This parable connects the exploitation of the Carrara quarries with one of the crucial points between Africa and Europe, through which thousands of migrants pass and die today, and through which fishermen and naval fleets have passed and perished in so many battles, from the Punic Wars to World War II. Two natural enclaves, the mountain and the sea, that live off destruction due to human action or inaction. The “journey” is therefore not only that of the stone, but of all of us following its path and the implications it points to beyond itself. Thus, here, the waves of the sea become sound and electromagnetic waves, revealing all the textures of marble extraction or a high-sea voyage (among them radio signals, birds, storms, engine vibrations, or the words of sailors and activists) to tell us that there is no silent matter or landscape. In the same room, immersed in the swing and flow of the sea, we find *Drifting*, a sculptural series that resembles plankton, an erratic body of microscopic organisms that float on the seabed and one of the planet’s main oxygen producers. These invertebrates made of blown air and Murano glass intertwine with the electric arms of *A Conductor* in a physical and ethereal dance.

Below, darkness and emptiness force us to sharpen our vision to search for traces of the hands of humanity and see to what extent we manipulate and transform our environment, whereas above, light and amplification of the most indiscernible kind invite us to sharpen our hearing, to make evident the myriad interests surrounding us, and at the same time, to devote time and attention to what has been forgotten or relegated to the margins. With this double critical exercise that takes us from the micro (archaeological remains, microorganisms, micro-histories) to the macro (scientific discourses, power structures, material constraints), and vice versa, Biscotti reveals what is usually unseen or deliberately overlooked, either because it is not perceptible, is deliberately hidden, or is minimised by the indifference of a broad majority.

Revealing the politics of visibility to point out the infrastructures and their invisible channels of information makes us aware of two things: on the one hand, the control strategies and the impact we have on our environment, that is, everything hidden beneath the apparent superficiality of these vast masses of land and water (or ash, marble, glass, air...); and on the other hand, how we make sense of our surroundings while ignoring the active role of material culture. Understanding the parallels between the community being unearthed and the one doing the unearthing, between the destructive action of bacteria and the fire used to combat it, between the waves of the sea and those of sound, between the energy

of plankton and that of a recycled cable, leads us to question our ethno-centric conception of the world in terms of heritage, energy or landscape, but also in terms of life and death.

Living in the world implies making it, creating it. What seems to us like an excavated desert and the vastness of the sea, Rossella Biscotti tells us, is also a constructed landscape that structures our experience and vision of the world. The lack of an absolute image or perspective that can unify the multiplicity of views and voices of these two spaces not only serves to reflect on the articulation of societies, present or past, but also allows for new perceptions of our relationship with the environment. And if our interaction creates our conception of the world, it can also change it.

Joana Hurtado Matheu

The City, 2018

5-channel video installation, 8-channel sound. 50 min.

Courtesy of mor charpentier, Paris

The City, a multi-channel video installation, produces a parallel view by contrasting, comparing and sometimes just juxtaposing a neolithic community that built and lived in one of the oldest known urban settlements and the archaeological community that has been excavating the site over a period of twenty-five years (1993–2018).

The piece slowly opens up the relationship between the archaeologists and the subject of their study by drawing on the artist's deep research of the Çatalhöyük archaeological site in Konya, Turkey and the hundreds of hours of footage shot during her many visits to the site. Biscotti worked closely with Ian Hodder, head of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, Professor of Social Anthropology at Stanford University and one of the key thinkers of the post-processual school, along with his international team, to help make sense of their methods as well as what they were excavating. Hodder, very much a believer in the subjectivity of archeological interpretation, has been putting his post-processual ideas to the test at Çatalhöyük since the excavations began in 1993. Based on an understanding of the site as a living community that brings professionals and local actors together, these concepts are reflected in the structure of the whole endeavour: choices like centralised project management teams, self-reflective and diaristic reporting, co-authorship and communal data sharing.

Biscotti observes how these methods were employed in the study of a neolithic community, itself undergoing radical socio-economic changes. Çatalhöyük is a fascinating and unique site; continuously inhabited for almost 2,000 years (circa 7500 to 5700 BC) and occupied by eighteen distinct groups, it had at its peak a population of nearly 10,000 people who shared a maze-like complex of interconnected spaces. Liminal urban forms where public and private were blurred, complex burial rituals in which the dead were buried amongst the living, and labour divisions in a non-hierarchical community all become topics of interest that are probed and questioned by Biscotti's camera. What we find seems to be a shockingly egalitarian society with almost no gender hierarchies. The site's abrupt closure on the first day of the second year of filming due to the failed 2016 military coup in Turkey is a pivotal moment documented by the artist. The process of departure —the personnel meetings, explanations, shock and disbelief, packing and act of leaving— is all witnessed.

The artist's interest in investigating and giving a visual form to these two parallel societies is developed through an associative, non-linear montage across the five video and eight audio channels.

The documentary film footage shot in 2015, which the artist refers to as “notes”, was intended as research material from which Biscotti would develop a script and produce the final film in collaboration with her camera team. The sudden closure of the site upended these plans and Biscotti could not continue with her script. The piece was then developed from the existing raw material to produce a new narrative and form, abandoning the documentary impulse and allowing for a more dialogical and probing approach—in a sense, linear editing becomes montage.

The subjectivity of the viewer is engaged as they are forced by the form and choice of material to create their own mental collages. The disconnect between the sound and visual channels also enhances this effect—the audio mostly provides concrete information about the location and the situation while the visual imagery dislocates this information— and a form of affective counter point is produced.

Bodies are lying prone, seemingly part of the landscape of the site, accompanied by an audio recording of a discussion revolving around a recent discovery; however, one can deduce that this discovery took place elsewhere at a different time. The aural textures of the archaeologists’ tools serve as a rhythmic foundation that both grounds the action and events as well as ruptures them. For sound is here also symbolic; it evokes the collective of archaeologists through recordings of various informal and personal conversations.

Exactly half-way through the piece we see, for the first time, a room. People sit around Hodder, who is presented as a responsible director, in a taciturn and tense meeting where he informs his team that due to the tumultuous political situation he has decided to shut down the site. The screens cut to black and we face a silent emptiness; a teeming bustling site is vacated. Visually, the scene is somehow evocative of mid-twentieth century science fiction film depictions of mysterious, unknown planets. It is a bleakness that stands in stark contrast to the visionary, optimistic prism the Çatalhöyük Research Project liked to present itself through. Utopianism interrupted by political realities, allowing material conditions and the power structures that lie behind the site to become visible. Sandbags stacked on sandbags completely cover the excavation site of the Neolithic settlement. All sound is muted.

A connection is suggested between the end of the neolithic community—the desertion of the proto-city by its inhabitants 7000 years ago— and the departure of the archaeologists studying it. Finally, an empty brooding landscape remains.

Supported by the Mondriaan Fund, Amsterdam and NEARCH Project.

Artist: Rossella Biscotti. Camera: Meryem Yavuz. Sound recording: Aykut Evin. Video editing & post production: Massimo Mosca. Audio mastering: Attila Faravelli. Production: Protocinema, Istanbul / New York. NEARCH Partner, Institute of Prehistory, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland.

Recorded on location at the archeological site of Çatalhöyük, (Konya plain, Turkey) with the collaboration and support of the Çatalhöyük Research team.

The artist would like to thank the Çatalhöyük team members who provided her with the explanations, notes and interviews for *The City* film, as well all the friends that have hosted her and exchanged ideas and knowledge, in particular Professor Arkadiusz Marciniak, photographer Jason Quinlan and curator Övül Durmusoglu.

Trees on Land, 2021

Hand-made ceramics, 200×200×60 cm each.

Courtesy of mor charpentier, Paris

Xylella fastidiosa, one of the most dangerous plant bacteria in the world, began attacking the olive trees in southern Puglia, Italy, in 2013, provoking a widespread epidemic that remains active to this day. Around 6.5 million trees have died so far, creating a desolate landscape that extends for millions of acres. A cure does not seem to be in sight. In 2014 the European Commission requested the eradication of all trees suspected of being infected to create a containment buffer zone. Farmers therefore started burning their diseased trees, in the beginning due to unclear and contradictory directives from the local government, and more recently to clear their land by getting rid of what has become an economically worthless commodity; the price of olive wood had dropped so low that it wasn't even worth selling it anymore.

Biscotti has been collecting the ashes of burnt olive trees (in the meantime, summer fires had also started to spread easily due to the highly flammable dry wood of the dead trees) over the last few years, organising them by tree and location, thus creating a sort of subjective mapping of the epidemic. She has produced large urns, one per tree, by mixing this ash with clay. Each ceramic vessel, thrown on the wheel and fired in an olive wood kiln of a traditional local workshop, has the GPS coordinate of the tree's position inscribed on its inside, connecting this new transformed object with its previous life. In the process of firing, the ash dis-

appears, leaving empty spaces and minute traces on the surface of the object which actually reflect the mineral composition of the ash, though they appear to the naked eye as blemishes or discolouration.

The plantations of olive trees in this part of Puglia were founded in the 16th century to produce “olio lampante”, non-edible burning oil that was exported to be used for the lighting of major European cities and later as burning oil for industries. In a sense, these were some of the first lands dedicated to the production and selling of energy.

The artist would like to thank Gianpiero Indino Ceramic workshop, Lucignano (Italy) and Francesco Petrucci.

A Conductor, 2012

Installation, copper from Ignalina nuclear power plant (Lithuania) recycled into a 192-metre, 5-wire, 125-A power cable.

On 31 December 2009, Unit 2 of the Ignalina nuclear power plant in Lithuania was shut down under pressure from EU regulators. In 2011 material from the site described as ‘unneeded assets’ was auctioned off as part of the EU-funded decommissioning process. Biscotti took part in two of these auctions, acquiring a few tons of industrial lead and 561 kg of copper cables. The copper cables were melted and purified to produce 291 kilos of pure copper that were used to make a new industrial power cable —what became the artwork titled *A Conductor*. The piece was then installed in the main electricity cabin at the Manifesta 9 premises in the city of Genk, Belgium, and used to supply electricity to the whole show.¹ Here, exhibited for the first time since, *A Conductor* is plugged into the main electric power outlet in the technical cabin of the Fabra i Coats exhibition venue. The recycled power cable, though invisible to the public, thus provides the energy for the entire exhibition, linking the two floors of the venue both conceptually and physically. It is a gesture which produces a friction between seemingly distant social processes that typically remain opaque to the citizenry and the spaces and audiences of art institutions, which here are materially and physically integrated and implicated into the complex life cycle of the productive system.

Commissioned by Manifesta 9, Genk.

Supported by the Mondriaan Fund, Amsterdam; CAC, Vilnius.

The artist would like to thank Studio Kevin van Braak for the coordination and production of the work.

The Journey, 2023

8 channel sound installation. 60 min.

The Journey is a long-term project that has taken several different forms and that is presented here in installation form for the first time.

In 2010 the artist was awarded a 20-ton block of marble from the Michelangelo quarry in Carrara (Italy). In 2021, this rock was extracted, transported to the coast and loaded onto a boat. The boat *Diligence* then set sail for three days on a symbolic route between Italy, Malta, Tunisia and Libya, and finally at a set point released the marble block into the Mediterranean Sea. The route, carefully plotted and followed on GPS, was designed by the artist to highlight and identify locations of interest in the Mediterranean: a 1710-metre-deep geological rift, several arbitrary nautical borders demarcating oil and gas concessions, areas of military operations, and even the migration path of a sea-turtle as it crosses the patrolling lines of the European Border Agency FRONTEX.

That three-day maritime journey, though invisible to the general public, was conceived of as a performance that was part of the programme of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels.

The sound recorded on this journey, beginning with the extraction of the marble in Carrara, then along the shores of Malta and Tunisia, and finally in the middle of the sea, is the starting point of the immersive eight-channel sonic composition presented here. It includes the hum of engines; the ceaseless sea churn; the songs of seafarers and fishermen; the unique rhythmic matrix and resonances from ancient amphorae. Over the duration of one hour, the piece channels the sway of a boat moving on the tumultuous sea, building in complexity and taking various digressions into different worlds of sound: for example, artist Rossella Biscotti with musician and sound artist Attila Favarelli recorded the historical boat distress drum beats on a percussion instrument and edited them to accompany the words of Tunisian activist Chamseddine Marzoug as he describes bodies of migrants attempting to cross the sea being found in the water or swept onto shore. Marzoug's description is recorded in a bleak desert landscape, a landfill where he had buried all the bodies he found, and in the background the sound of a banging fence that by accident shares the same frequencies of the percussive distress patterns recorded earlier can be heard; both signals are blended to become indistinguishable. *The Journey* is thus an elaboration of this dimension of listening, recording and composing.

Every presentation of the project adds a new chapter to this work. For example, in the performance, live guests were invited to present their reflections, poetry, or artistic interventions, shifting the immersive sound-

scape into an intimate dimension: voices, the reels of a Nagra, and the tools of a subjective research into the politics of visibility.

Produced by the artist and Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels in collaboration with Bozar, Brussels and the 8th edition of the Dream City Festival, Tunis within the framework of the project Between Land and Sea.

Performance at sea produced in collaboration with Blitz Valletta. Project supported by Mondriaan Fund, Amsterdam.

Photography of *The Journey*, performance at sea, 2021: Alexandra Pace.

Artist: Rossella Biscotti. Field recordings: Attila Faravelli. Sound editing: Giuseppe Ielasi.

In order of appearance: mariners on board of the *Diligence* ship and radio, Rico Gevez (mariner), Timmy Gambin (associate professor of Archeology, University of Malta), Enrico Malatesta (percussionist), Kais El Rais (former fisherman, El Haouaria), Inès Ben Cheikh (Co-founder and CEO Samaka, Beni Khiar), Chamseddine Marzoug (fisherman, activist and founder of Cemetery of the Unknown, Zarzis), Moez Goubaa (ethnomusicologist, percussionist), Khayreddine Debaya (activist / part of Stop Pollution Gabes).

Audio recordings realised in Ravaccione and Michelangelo quarry in Carrara (Italy); Valletta harbour and on the Gozo coastline (Malta); in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea while navigating with the merchant vessel *Diligence* for the performance of *The Journey* (20–24.05.2021); on the shores of El Haouaria, Kelibia, Beni Khiar, Gabes and Zarzis (Tunisia).

The artist would like to thank Daniel Blanga Gubbay and the Kunstenfestivaldesarts team; L'art Rue team, Blitz's curator Sara Dolfi Agostini; Youssef Ettourjoumene, Kristina Borg and Emna Lakhoua for the research in Malta and Tunisia; Catalogtree for the GIS route; PLO operations' manager Lewis Baldacchino; marine geologist Aaron Micallef; Anthony Gruppetta and Nature Trust Malta; Alarm Phone's activist Simeon Leisch; master mariner Ramon Espiritusanto, mate Vladimir Daniel Dalit, and mariners Javy Jones Torilla, Rico Gerez, Rene Bilal, Dennis Alcances, and Cesar Tayo; David Chalaiti for Tunisian-English translation; TBA21-Academy's curator Barbara Casavecchia; and Studi d'Arte Cave Michelangelo Carrara.

Rossella Biscotti & Attila Faravelli (Aural Tools)

The Journey's objects (Drum, Antenna, Amphoric Detectors, Black Box), 2023

Various materials, various sizes.

In this configuration of *The Journey* artist Rossella Biscotti and musician Attila Faravelli have reconceptualised some of the objects that had been played during the sound performance. These pieces have been included in this exhibition for the first time.²

Drum

During the field recording trip around Tunisia, musician and researcher Moez Goubaa played a traditional large drum instrument from the island of Djerba for the artists. Before radio was invented, sailors would play specific rhythmical sequences to send distress signals over sea. Someone from the shore would hopefully answer with the same instrument to allow sonic orientation. The drum's deep low sound travels far, especially across water. Even though the instrument is now solely played during wedding ceremonies and within musical contexts, it keeps exhibiting a rather 'functional' and unrefined tonal quality. The artists are building a version of it which is further devoid of harmonic nuances and where the unrefined depth of its sound is emphasised.

Antenna

The high seas are dense with electromagnetic signals of all sorts, as boats continuously exchange navigation stats with other boats and ports. The absence of physical mass such as buildings allows low frequency radio waves to travel unimpeded. As the *Diligence* crew kept tuning the radio to different frequencies inside the boat's cockpit, the artists were struck by the contrast between the presence of continuous radio activity and the apparent lack of human presence on the visible surface of the sea. Inspired by this feeling, they built an antenna for listening to the invisible electromagnetic fields that always surround us.

Amphoric Detectors

Amphorae played a pivotal role during the artists' field recording excursions; in Malta they met Timmy Gambin, an archaeologist studying a cluster of Phoenician amphorae that had been lying on the seabed enclosed in a complex sedimentation of shells, calcification, and salt for almost 3000 years. These objects and calcifications constitute a key resource for studying the Mediterranean's history. In Tunisia, small amphorae —similar to the ones on display here— are used for fishing octopi. The artists recorded several amphorae to investigate their sonic possibilities as one would explore a physical space, by concentrating on their material 'accidents', surface textures and specific resonances. The detector consists of a small microphone inserted inside an amphora di-

rectly connected to a loudspeaker. It thus becomes possible to stream in real time how the amphora resonates, while capturing the sounds in the actual exhibition space. Biscotti and Favarelli have also constructed two loudspeakers emitting the same sound, though the polarity of the wiring of each speaker is different. This means that when facing each other the sound cancels out unless an object is placed in between them. By positioning an amphora in between, one can hear its specific shape and texture as it interferes with the phase cancellation.

Black Box

Black Box is the only object in this display not related to sound. Built by a firm specialising in the development and implementation of technologically advanced telecommunications systems and infrastructure in the transport and defense fields, AIS and GSM-Satellite devices were installed in the ship *Diligence* during the performance at sea, to be later removed and kept as a record of all the information. Pointing to the technological surveillance and control of the Mediterranean area, these devices have been recording and storing any movement of the ship and its environmental surroundings (route, currents, winds, depth of sea, speed, navigational charts) including any communication activity through cellular and satellite networks and radio channels. The data stored on these devices has never been accessed.

Display design by Studio Gisto, Milan / Treviso.

Commissioned by Fabra i Coats: Contemporary Art Centre, Barcelona.

Produced by the artist and Fabra i Coats: Contemporary Art Centre, Barcelona.

Drifting, 2022–2023

Hand blown Murano glass, metal, laminate sheets.

Variable dimensions.

Drifting is a series of larval-like sculptures, reminiscent of enlarged and magnified aquatic organisms that make up plankton, which is usually carried by the tides and currents of oceans and seas.

Installed here to accompany *The Journey*, these works highlight the fragility of microscopic life and immerse us in the undulations of the sea by paradoxically relying on the lightness of air, suggested in this case by both the blown Murano glass that these pieces consist of as well as the reference to the little-known fact that plankton is responsible for between 50 % and 85 % of the oxygen released into the atmosphere each year.

Display design by Studio Gisto, Milan/Treviso.

Produced by the artist, Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ) in Ostend and Fabra i Coats: Contemporary Art Centre, Barcelona.

The artist would like to thank Gam Glass, Milan/Venice (Italy), glass blowing workshop Anfora, Murano (Italy) and production manager Rossana Miele.

A Conductor, 2014

5 original copper cables acquired from the decommissioned Ignalina nuclear power plant (Lithuania), silicate glass, electrical wire, metal. Variable dimensions.

A few cables purchased by the artist at the decommissioned Ignalina nuclear power plant in Lithuania in 2011 were not recycled like the rest and are here shown in their original form, though enclosed in a silicate glass and metal casing. Here the conductors are made visible, functioning as “bridges of electricity” inserted into the infrastructure of the space, connecting different points in the room. A dance of cables that touch the floor and rise above it, guiding the visitor and the surging electric energy of the art centre through a tentacular maze.

Display design by Studio Gisto, Milan/Treviso.

The artist would like to thank Studio Kevin van Braak for the coordination and production of the work.

1 First developed for Manifesta 9 in 2012, curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina, hosted at the former coal mine of Waterschei, Genk, Belgium.

2 *The Journey* sound performance was presented at Kunstenfestivaldesarts at Bozar in Brussels from 20 till 23 May 2023 and at Dream City in Tunis from 30 September to 02 October 2022.

Dates and Times

Tuesdays to Saturdays, 12.00 to 20.00

Sundays and Holidays, 11.00 to 15.00

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