

Fictional Realities: Agathe Simon in conversation with Robin McGinley



Gabriela Conti © Carolina Ojeda

THIS INTERVIEW took place in Stockholm in March 2015, at the time of the opening of the exhibition *Antarctica*, at Audiorama. The exhibition was inspired by the life of Argentinian-French writer and explorer Gabriela Conti (1974-2010). It was the result of a creative residency in Antarctica, at the invitation of the Argentinian Ministry of Culture, which involved the artist living and working at a scientific base in Antarctica for several weeks in the spring of 2014. The exhibition involved both a multi-channel sound installation created for Audiorama's unique 21 channel diffusion system, together with a second space presenting an installation, including documentary video footage, photographs, manuscripts and archival objects relating both to Conti and to the nature of life and research within the Antarctic region. The sound installation was created at the Visby International Centre for Composers (VICC) on Gotland. In recent

years, alongside the showing in Stockholm, the work has also been presented in Paris, Halifax, Canada and various locations throughout Algeria. The exhibition at Audiorama was supported by the French Institute and was a collaboration with Elektronmusikstudion (EMS) and Moderna Dansteatern (MDT).

Robin McGinley: You're here in Stockholm for an exhibition at Audiorama. Perhaps we could begin with talking a little about this project?

Agathe Simon: The project at Audiorama is an exhibition called *Antarctica*. In March 2014, I was lucky enough to be invited by the Argentine government for a creative residency in Antarctica, and I spent several weeks at Carlini base, one of the Argentinian polar bases. It was there that I created this project which is, let's say, a multimedia installation dedicated to the famous writer and explorer Gabriela Conti.

She was born in 1974, and died at a young age in 2010, close to the South Pole. She was the first Argentinian woman to reach the South Pole, at the very end of the 2048 Expedition, which was an international expedition, led by Emma Lund, a Norwegian explorer. Several people were part of it, including Pr. Olivier Bertin, a

French astrophysicist who was a colleague of Gabriela's husband, and that's how she came to be invited. She was also a very famous writer, who was awarded two major literary prizes. One was *Premio Literario Buenos Aires* in 2000, which is an Argentinian prize, and the second was a very famous French prize, *Le Grand prix de littérature contemporaine* in 2001. So, she was a brilliant and famous woman and led a very free and adventurous life, and I thought it was really worthwhile dedicating this exhibition to her.

This made sense, since Gabriela was of dual nationality, French and Argentinian. I therefore followed her traces all the way to Antarctica, as a means of creating this two-part multimedia exhibition. The first part is a 5.1 channel sound installation, entitled *Antarctic Music*, which is 18 minutes in duration. I worked at VICC (Visby International Centre for Composers, Gotland) to complete it. It's a great residency, and I'm very grateful for their support. This *Antarctic Music* is based on two types of sounds. These include the natural sounds that I recorded in Antarctica, such as floating ice on the Antarctic ocean, or the calls of elephant seals, or the sounds of birds typical of these polar regions, or the sounds of the wind. The second type of sounds were excerpts from Gabriela's travelogue, but read in languages from all over the world. Just after my residency in Antarctica, I also completed another residency at *Cité Internationale des Arts* in Paris, and I invited the other participants, who were from around the world, to collaborate on this Antarctic Music piece, asking them to translate some excerpts of Gabriela's travelogue into their native languages. I therefore ended up with excerpts in languages from all continents, and for me, this was a good way to re-affirm that Antarctica does not belong to one country, but to all of humanity.

The second part of the exhibition presents Gabriela Conti herself. This includes archive materials, films, videos and also very valuable objects, such as the polar suit which she wore during the 2048 Expedition. You can also hear her voice, because we have some recordings of her readings. Furthermore, in this part of the exhibition, is a 52-minute documentary, which was directed by Gabriela's sister and myself. And actually, Gabriela's sister, whose name is Cecilia Conti, also followed Gabriela's traces, travelling to Antarctica to make this documentary as a tribute to her sister.



Cecilia's documentary filmed in Antarctica

On the one hand, then, you have the documentary aspect, conjoined with a more subtle exploration of sound materials within the multi-channel space. How do you see these elements relating in your work, in terms of the overall experience?

– The core idea was to work with this contrast. Initially, I felt very lucky to have the opportunity go to Antarctica, and I wanted to share this experience on a very basic level. Sharing what can be seen, heard and how people live there, and the documentary also shows this. Then I wanted to show very real elements, like the

polar suit and different objects linked with the 2048 Antarctic Expedition. My aim was to present to the audience a range of materials that I could bring back from Antarctica: images, sounds and objects. I felt, however, it was not enough for an exhibition dedicated to Gabriela Conti to stop at this stage. The thought then emerged to also work in contrast to all of this, and to build something very dream-like, which became the sound installation element. Everything remains very coherent, however, because it is all linked with Gabriela herself. Two distinct sides of her life arise from this: one very real, and one being my interpretation of her life.

The more documentary aspects are perhaps also there to help the audience understand, relate to and explore the sound installation work?



Gabriela Conti Archives © Agathe Simon

– Yes, that's right. People usually know of her from her novels, and so it's useful to include these background elements. Her life was very tough at certain points, as she was born in 1974, just prior to the worst years of the Argentinian dictatorship. I was

keen to show the impact of historical events on a single person. She was sent into exile as a child, from Argentina to France. It's interesting to note here, that history repeats itself since, thirty years previously, her mother was similarly sent from France to Argentina, due to the Nazi occupation. I also wanted to document and include all of this, showing what's behind the scenes, in a way. If you read the novels, for example, you can read *The Nights of San Telmo* (2003), and discover how her life was in Buenos Aires. I think, though, it's really nice to have this background. That was one of the main aims of the exhibition.

Much of your practice, then, is the building up of this rich tapestry of references, objects, artifacts and sounds. How did you start developing this kind of approach?

– The strange thing in this story is that Gabriela died in 2010, just two days after her arrival at the South Pole. She made a major mistake, inexplicably leaving the Amundsen-Scott American base, some 200 metres from the South pole, without a radio and without her polar suit, but only wearing a very simple anorak-type jacket. She disappeared without trace, and the main reason for this is that she never existed in the first place. Gabriela Conti never actually existed, and that's one of the core ideas of my project: to follow the traces of...

... of a non-existent person...

– ... of a non-existent person, right. The process was not only to build up a character from scratch, but also all of her history, because I was not inspired by a real person. This means that I have, for example, created her genealogy: parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and I think even great, great grandparents. I have made up everything, but have also exhaustively researched and checked every detail with

experts and specialists, including scientists, polar researchers in Antarctica, as well as architects, journalists, writers, historians, and so forth. The project is, thus, super well documented. And in a way, my artistic process was to document my own imagination. That was finally the point.

Important also is this collision of documentary and fictional elements, right?

– Absolutely. Because I've been inspired by reality and real events, also unfortunately including the Argentinian dictatorship, which is so very real. I worked extensively with this, including visiting Buenos Aires.

From the Argentinian perspective, were there any issues with delving into a troubling and dark aspect of fairly recent history? It is, after all, within living memory.

– Yes, its super recent history, you're right. It's still extremely difficult for people. We're talking about the late seventies and early eighties. The thing is though, that they've only had access to this memory, let's say, for the last ten or twelve years. It's only now that, on a social level, it's really OK to discuss it.

What was the reaction to your work there?

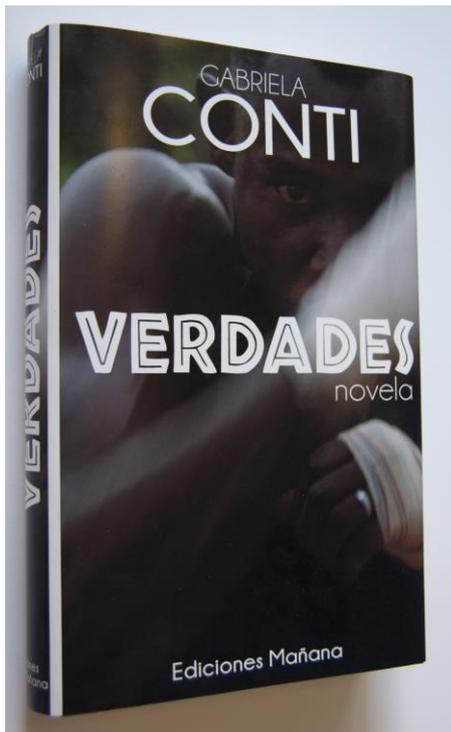
– The reaction was really good. I was very impressed by this, because I met many people who had suffered terribly under the dictatorship. Through meeting them, I gained the highest respect for what they have suffered and their life experiences. I was also very aware that what I was doing could potentially hurt them. This, however, turned out not to be the case, with many being really positive to the idea that a French person, with no link to Argentina, was interested in their history and was building a character around their history.

I visited many places in Buenos Aires associated with the dictatorship, which was a really tough experience. It became broader than just documentation for my project, and I felt very touched by all of this. For example, I met the head of a memorial in Buenos Aires, associated with the dictatorship, and she told me that she had been very moved by my fictional character, who was very close to the story of so many people that she knew – including herself.

In a sense, then, Gabriela Conti is a fictional device, which allows the audience to not only appreciate some of these issues but also, in this local context, to explore them, perhaps as a form of catharsis?

– Yes. Well, there are many layers to Gabriela Conti. You have this striking historical background which, for example, made particular sense when I presented the exhibition in Algeria (The French Institute, Algeria, October 2014). It was particularly resonant for them, as they also had this very dark period in the Nineties.

Furthermore, you have the layer of a woman with a very adventurous and free life, as she was such an explorer and she went to many countries, including Papua New Guinea and the Central African Republic. She also had a very hectic love life, and enjoyed much success as a writer. Thus, I was really trying to offer a multi-layered character, and also the fact that she's a woman, to show that a woman may possess the freedom of having her own destiny.



Gabriela's first novel © Ediciones Mañana

Also, historically, there are many examples of women of this type, right the way back to the nineteenth century.

– Right. But the fact is that, usually, they are less well known than men. A very simple example: In France, we have a very famous Polar explorer, Jean-Louis Etienne. He's famous in France. But we also have this amazing woman, Laurence de la Ferrière. She's outrageous – I think she weighs 50 kg, and she travelled across Antarctica alone, with no food supplies, except what she could carry, which was around 150 kg – three times her own body weight. Around 1997-1999, she completed two expeditions, the first from the coast to the South Pole and, one year later, from the South Pole to the other coast. By herself, with no food drops, or anything. This was relatively recently, and yet today, she's unknown. It's crazy!

I suppose that making the character female gives you an opportunity to unpack such issues, drawing attention to such little known individuals. There are many facets in the construction of the character. She's only living for about thirty-five years, and yet she's accomplished so much.

– Yes, yes. The project is also very political for many reasons. There is the historical background, encompassing the Nazi occupation in Europe as well as the Argentinian dictatorship. There is also the fact that she's a woman in control of her own destiny, and furthermore it has a lot to do with the exercising of critical thinking. I really believe that nowadays, within western societies, we have a tendency to lack two things, and I think they're both connected. Firstly, we lack critical thinking and secondly, we lack imagination. I think both of these things are generally becoming greatly reduced, because they are also connected.

Therefore, two of the main focuses of this exhibition, were to offer a figure whom people actually really like, because she inspires their imagination. Importantly, I never actually say in the exhibition that she doesn't exist, I just want people to be aware that they shouldn't take for granted that everything they see and hear is true.

A lot about your project involves the transfer of information, true or otherwise – documentary or fictional. We're surrounded, aren't we, in our information society with so much input. That it's very, very easy for people to get lost in that. Both imaginatively and psychologically.

– And it's also a question of our relation to museums and galleries. Because often, when you go to a museum, supposedly everything you are told is true. By inserting fictional elements into an exhibition, it also really questions the authority of the museum.

Can you say a little bit about your own background, and how you came to work with these multi-layered, multi-dimensional projects.

– I have two PhDs, one from the Sorbonne in French Literature of the Twentieth Century and one from the Paris Conservatoire in Twentieth Century Music. Alongside my studies, I was also self-taught regarding visual culture, in general. That was the first part of my background, but I have also learned a lot through travelling. I have been lucky enough to travel intensively, during these last years. Either backpacking in very remote places, or being invited for residencies or exhibitions, being either an artist, or some kind of explorer. It has been very freeing, and I've learned a lot through these two pursuits: an academic one and through travel.

Your approach, then, to specifically sound and music would be through some form of electro-acoustic experience?

– Yes. I have been involved with electro-acoustic music for a long time. Beginning when I was seventeen, I think, and I have also been heavily involved in analysis. It has been very important for me to understand the artistic process of composition. Much of my academic approach has been involved with this. As a musician, I have also been a church organist and a conductor.

So, you're an instrumentalist as well?

–That's right. I studied orchestral conducting from fifteen years old, and began conducting a symphony orchestra, not professional but at a good level, when I was twenty. I then had to make a choice, and chose a more creative path, rather than that of an orchestra conductor.

What's the influence of your experience as an instrumentalist to the more creative aspects of what you're doing with sound now?

– It's a very strong one. In one word: improvisation. I was a church organist for over a decade, and when you play in church, you have to improvise all the time. It's also a very effective gateway to creativity, because, in a way, it involves creating through the body. You just have to improvise all the time, including when you are not inspired. You discover that you have a special way to react. Sometimes it's linked with finger positions, or the positions of the feet, and so forth. So, you discover that creation is very linked with the body.

Interesting. Because playing the organ is all four limbs working simultaneously.

– Absolutely.

Is there a way in which you can you map this species of corporeal creation across to working with electronics?

– Yes, in a way. For example, for my *Antarctic Music* piece I had to physically record in Antarctica. And believe me, it's very challenging (laughs). Yeah, actually, it has

been very difficult. For example, there's a lot of noise pollution in Antarctica, both from wind and also from generators, so it's very challenging.

But this is it – another sound artist might think that it would be enough to present, fairly matter-of-factly, the rather unique set of sounds found in such an environment. You have, though, chosen to extend it with the fictional character and these other aspects. Why is that?

– Maybe it's linked to my second background with literature. You know, if you study fiction for years, it's because you have a certain predisposition towards fiction. Also, I think, for me it is very interesting because this exhibition asks two questions. One is our connection to reality, and the other is our connection to truth, which are two different things. They are linked, but they are not the same. These are two major questions in our lives, and I think this is why visitors and listeners to this exhibition have been very moved. Both by fiction, but also by this core idea: what is my personal link to reality and what is my personal link to truth?



Arctica video installation © Agathe Simon

Because both are in some way created by each individual, aren't they? From external influences.

– Yes. These are major questions through which we shape our lives. I think it's better to shape your life with respect to these questions, rather than what society asks you to do. I think it's better to go back to these inner and core questions, rather than to obey exactly what society requires.

But then, as we were just saying, inner experience is somehow influenced by external forces and, within your show, that's happening as well, isn't it? Because you are orchestrating this highly-devised situation.

– But it's ambiguous, because either it could be considered as external forces which try to influence you, or it could also be considered as a gift to open your imagination. I've worked a lot with this ambiguity.

In your wider practice, what other pieces have had this link between sound, fiction and documentary? Is this a new thing, or is it something you've been doing for a number of years?

– No, it's a cycle, actually. Since 2008, I am working on a cycle based on fictional characters. Gabriela Conti is one of them. For example, lately I've had another project with Radio France, the French national radio, and more specifically 'France Culture', about another fictional character, linked with Gabriela. The idea was to

create a radio play, which was narrative, but which was also very experimental. The main character was also a writer, whose name is Guillaume Sauvage. In accordance with 'France Culture', we have pretended that he is real, but he is not. The play takes place in Peru, with Guillaume and Gabriela travelling into the rainforest to experiment with Ayahuasca, the sacred beverage of the Amazonian forest. The aim, therefore, was again to work at the intersection between fiction and reality, between narrative and experimentation. I really like it when this border is not set.

Yes. Or articulated.

– And it's the job of a visitor to articulate it, not mine.

In terms of a radiophonic space, then, what sort of reactions did you get from this broadcast?

– I think people really liked the experimental approach. I really tried to use the narration as a basis to freely experiment in terms of sound. The main subject of the radio play is Ayahuasca, a sacred beverage, which is also a very powerful hallucinogen. This, then, was another part of the same cycle of works.

Since we're in Sweden, can you say something about your experience working within the Swedish context?

– Two things about Sweden. First is the link with Gabriela Conti, because according to the fictional biography, in 2002, she was invited to the Baltic Centre for Writers and Translators on Gotland. Gabriela loved her experience in Sweden, so this fictionally, created connections and reasons for this exhibition to take place in Stockholm. Similarly, in 2011, I was myself invited to the Baltic Centre for Writers and then again, in August 2014, I was invited to the VICC Centre for Composers, again on Gotland, and now I'm at EMS and Auditorama. And what I really like here is that you have space to create. There are excellent technical facilities, when you are invited here, and enough space to develop things. I've also been funded by the Swedish Arts Council, as well as the French Institute so, thanks to them, I've been able to build this special relationship with Sweden. My personal wish is for this to continue. Perhaps, in the future, for upcoming collaborations, I'll create a Swedish character, as part of this cycle of projects. To be continued!

Agathe Simon (b. 1977) lives and works in Paris. She is a PhD recipient from the Sorbonne and Paris Conservatoire. She works across a range of media to explore politics and the imagination, as well as complex interconnections between history, fiction and intangible heritage. Her practice often involves exploration in remote regions, with the Antarctica exhibition being the first part of her *Polar*



Agathe Simon in the Arctic © Marie-Noëlle Rimaud

Project. This work continued in spring 2016, when she was invited on a creative residency to the Arctic, aboard a vessel, as part of the ATKA expedition. Simon returned to Sweden in August 2016 to work again at the Visby International Centre for Composers (VICC), to prepare elements for her forthcoming *Arctica* exhibition project. This will involve a three-channel video installation, with 5.1 sound, together with a new multi-channel sound installation, as well as a performance, drawings, photographs, and a collaboration with a blind person.

An upcoming exhibition of *The Polar Project* by Agathe Simon (both exhibitions *Antarctica* & *Arctica*) is planned at the Gotland Art Museum (*Gotlands Konstmuseum*).