I travelled to Egypt in April and May of 2010. Although I’ve been interested in ancient Egyptian history and archeology for almost as long as I can remember, I had never had the opportunity to travel there before, making the trip itself the fulfillment of a lifelong goal. As a student about to enter the Museum Studies certificate program this fall, I had hoped the trip would offer many opportunities to visit a variety of museums and observe how a country with such a long history presents its extensive archives to the world. Also, as an extension of my art practice, I hoped to use the opportunity to make sound recordings in museums, tombs and temples, to add to my collection of the sounds of spaces that represent time, history and collection.

Travelling on my own to Egypt, I settled into some sightseeing (my first trip to the pyramids took place on the day of U of M’s commencement) then quickly began work on what would prove to be a most challenging and rewarding project: I spent four full days throughout my five weeks in Egypt making sound recordings of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. It became instantly apparent to me upon entering the museum for the first time that not only was it one of the most engaging museum experiences I had had to date, but that its sonic environment was equally fascinating. Opened in 1902, the current architectural structure housing the Egyptian Museum collection has changed very little in over one hundred years – and has had very little renovation work, making the experience simultaneously fascinating and tragic: moments spent admiring the museum’s once-beautiful skylights were pockmarked with observations of shattered panels of glass inside them; walking the museum’s majestic stone staircases was punctuated by a chunk of the stairs breaking off beneath my feet; seeing historic objects I’d studied in photographs for decades came hand in hand with spotting mould, dust and debris in nearly every corner.

But within this visual entropy was a profound beauty to me, just as the sound of the building’s use was equally beautiful: from the constant barrage of requests from tour guides trying to make a fast pound off of naïve tourists, to the buzz and crackle of seemingly ancient fluorescent light bulbs flickering their last breaths of luminescence, to the sound of janitors gathered in a corner to watch and laugh at a local Egyptian sitcom on a mobile phone, to the clunks and drones of the ventilation system that controls the climate inside the royal mummy rooms, the Egyptian Museum in Cairo is a vast sound world with its own rich history. When the collection is moved from its current building to its proposed new location at the Grand Egyptian Museum about an hour away in Giza, the current building will never again sound as it does now. The experience of sound in this space was so engaging that I made sure to record in every publicly accessible gallery (and even some places not open to the public). I am currently editing the eight hours of recordings I made there into a long form “sound map” of the museum, which will exist as both an historic document of the sound of this building and an aesthetic experience I hope will be as engaging as a piece of symphonic music.

Music was a definite theme of the trip, as my research activities of sound collecting were put to good use while performing as part of the 100Live Electronic Music Festival at the Darb 1718 Gallery in Coptic Cairo. One of Egypt’s largest electronic music events, the 100Live festival saw performers from various parts of Egypt joined by musicians and artists from Germany, Spain, and the United States. I was
lucky enough to meet and play alongside Jan Jelinek, a German experimental musician whose work I’ve admired for years. My set consisted of some pre-composed material as well as a set of unmanipulated field recordings from Egypt and elsewhere, mediating my sonic experiences of the past year into an impossible sound world. Hearing these field recordings on the massive P.A. system at the Darb Center was an amazing experience for me, and the reaction of the crowd was extremely positive.

I also spent a week in Alexandria, where I visited the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Built in 2002, the new library is the spiritual descendant of the original Library of Alexandria built by Demetrius of Phaleron during the reign of Ptolemy Soter in the 4th century BCE, an institution that once housed every book in existence. While the contemporary library’s own print holdings are somewhat limited in comparison (Sylvia Stavridi, the art librarian who gave me a tour of the building, seemed somewhat embarrassed at the amount of empty shelves in her collection), the Bibliotheca Alexandrina does contain a copy of the Internet. Archive.org, the organization currently dedicated to archiving the contents of the public Internet, has its backup server in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, and although I was unable to enter the room where the servers are housed, I was able to look at them through a glass wall and record the sound of their ventilation system. I made several hours of recordings at the library, and although not as extensive as the recordings of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, I’m confident that this source material will become useful in the near future, possibly as a component in my thesis project.

Working with Dr. Terry Wilfong, curator of Greco-Roman Egypt at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan, I was able to organize a private tour of the ancient city of Karanis, located in the Fayoum, an oasis about two hours outside of Cairo. There I met Ashraf Sobhi, an employee of Egypt’s Supreme Council of Antiquities and a specialist in Greco-Roman Egyptology. Ashraf led me on a tour of Karanis, a city once excavated by the University of Michigan in the early twentieth century, where I was able to make field recordings inside a pair of temples – which led to a military helicopter being sent in to check out what I was doing alone in the temples. I managed to get a few good sounds of the temple interior, but I made an even better recording of a helicopter circling overhead!

It was a happy accident that during my trip, Reem Gibriel (another student in the Art and Design MFA program) happened to have an installation in a group exhibition at Rawabet Gallery, a space controlled by of Cairo’s most prestigious contemporary art institutions, the Townhouse Gallery. Reem and I spent about a week together working on the preparations for her installation, and she was extremely helpful in introducing me to contemporary Cairo and the local contemporary art scene. Through Reem, I met Mohammed Abdullah, the Program Manager at local arts nonprofit Culture Resource, and Mia Jankowicz, the director of Cairo’s Contemporary Image Collective, who both spent time with me discussing the local arts scene as well as possible opportunities for residency programs in Cairo. Learning more about the contemporary art scene in Cairo helped balance my experience of Egypt’s ancient culture with a dose of the present-day reality that artists face in a country where arts programs are many but funding is few and far between, and it gave me a great admiration for how much the art scene there has been able to accomplish with limited resources.
My experience in Egypt was everything I could have hoped for: fascinating, frustrating, productive, challenging and eye opening. I accomplished many of my goals for the trip while stumbling onto many unplanned experiences that will inspire me for the rest of my life. Although I am still processing the experience, I feel it has left me with a greater understanding of my work as an artist and the impact of history on culture. I would like to thank the School of Art and Design and the Smucker-Wagstaffs for their generous support that made this trip possible.
Empty shelves, Art collection, Bibliotheca Alexandrina
Internet Archive server room, Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Performing at the 100Live Electronic Music Festival, Darb 1718 Gallery Center
Gallery tour, Contemporary Image Collective

Sound recording, North Temple, Karanis
Helicopter over North Temple, Karanis

“Visit Gaza” opening reception, Rawabet Gallery