

Radio as the voice of community, locality, interactivity and experimentation

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Abstract. Microradio emerged in Italy in the mid-1970's as a form of narrowcast transmission designed to support the local needs of communities and artistic circles. The revolution soon migrated to other continents such as Japan and the US. Micro_radio functioned in favor of the voice of plurality, the diversity of opinions, the cultivation of new methods of expression and the experimentation with the inherent characteristics of radio as a physical object and as a medium of transmission. Microradio assumed a new quality that was significantly differentiated from its initial role of legalized global propaganda. Today the advances of wireless spectrum technologies assist in the permutation of a phenomenon to a new medium and an even more dynamic use of "radio." Artists work with the radio spectrum in the context of gallery exhibitions, telematic performances, and live events such as free103point9's "Tune(In))" and "Radio 4x4" projects which aim to illustrate the creative potential of the transmission spectrum, among others. Radio transmission engages with material such as field recordings, live electroacoustic improvisation and the local voice and audience participation. It re-establishes the vision and the practice of the futurist Manifesto, Walter Benjamin's theory about interactive radio democracy, Brecht's radio plays and the German acoustical films

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of the 1930's, as elements of modernity. We conclude that radio can survive the challenge of the digital age if it surpasses the sterile limitations of its role as a medium for distribution of information.

Keywords: radio-art, radio installation, microradio, free-form radio, low powered transmission, telematic performance, experimental radio, mini-fm

1. Introduction

This paper examines the use of radio in the context of performance and installation art. It aims to establish a clear connection of the medium to its grassroots, as a tool of community, locality and interaction. The brief study of free-radio initiatives from the second half of the 20th century such as the Italian Radio Alice, the Japanese “Mini FM”, and the American Radio Free Berkley, WTRA and free103point9, demonstrates with clarity the point that low-powered radio (microradio) was used as a vital tool for survival, creative dialogue and organic re-construction of communities, neighborhoods and activist groups. Subsequently, it moved beyond the rigidity of content politics and propaganda of the commercial radio giants.

It is from that point on that radio vindicates the values of free-expression, re-contextualization and interaction with the everyday. Contemporary artists like Hildegard Westerkamp, neuroTransmitter, Max Neuhaus, Anna Friz among others place the radio visions of Futurism and the Weimar era in a new framework incorporating live interaction with the environment and the audience, physical performance and critical

participation. In that sense, radio reflects and re-establishes our relation with nature and life. Most importantly radio eludes the physical space of a studio and becomes part of a live performance in projects like free103point9's "Tune(In))" and "Radio 4x4" or merges with the public space in projects like Elvin's "Public Radio", Neuhaus's "Drive In Music" and neurotransmitter's "Branching to Broadcast" .

Finally, the spirit of free-form radio is apparent in projects that involve digital streaming technologies. The digitization of transmission puts into effect a challenging new spectrum of possibilities. When applied in the context of locality, community and site specificity, streaming and digital communication technology can solidify the argument that new technologies facilitate the mediation of dialogue and broaden the methods of accessibility and participation to the creation of an artwork. In that framework analog and digital transmission can co-exist and assist us in re-evaluating the relationship between artist-artwork-environment-audience.

2. Medium vs. Content

The sociopolitical turbulence between the labor-committed communists and the young leftwing radicals (Autonomists), which occurred in mid-70s Italy, gave birth to a series of low-powered free-radio initiatives, the most influential being Radio Alice in Bologna (1976). The mission of Radio Alice was to create a democratic and open source network of free interlocutors. The radio station would function as the communicational spine of the collective and would overlook the language and monopolized repertoire of mainstream and "institutionalized" media.

Radio Alice amplified and unified the voices of the demonstrators and the listeners by relaying all the activities without intervention or censorship. Franco “Biffo” Berardi, founder of Radio Alice, envisioned a functional system where listeners could mirror themselves but could also become part of it (Walker, 2001). Radio Alice’s account of programs included live phone-in coverage of street riots and demonstrations, experimental sound art shows, pure silence and radio static, cooking and yoga lessons as well as poetry and political discussions.

Inspired by the Italian free radio scene, Tetsuo Kogawa and other Japanese micro-radio luminaries picked up the idea of low-power, narrowcast transmission and developed a legal transmitter system. From 1981 onwards the “Mini FM” boom had established a new fashion of door-to-door communication between family members, members of a community or even between the clients of a coffee shop (Radio Komedia Suginami).

By the late 1980’s more than a thousand mini-fm stations were on-air. The sterility of the Japanese airwaves (2 radio stations in total in the 1980’s) and the abhorrence that the mainstream media would absorb and commodify the underground culture, prepared the ground for such a large-scale outburst of mini-stations. “Mini FM” responded to the need to express oneself freely and to be given the option to share ideas, experiment artistically and connect to a group of listeners. It provided new and creative ways of communication and distanced itself from the role of radio as global mediator of information. Testuo Kogawa in his account (1990) of the “Mini FM” revolution adds that, in many cases

unconsciously, the mini-station functioned as form of psychotherapy between people who for example never confronted an audience or couples who wanted to bridge their communication gap.

Kogawa (Chandler & Neumark, 2005) expanded the use of mini fm in the context of sound installation (multiple transmitter/receiver set-ups in gardens and houses), dance performances (dancers interacting with portable transmitters and creating sounds by the movements of their bodies) or performance art events like “Radio Party” (an event where the audience builds a transmitter and then uses it as an entertainment station for the party.)

In the US, DeWayne Readus, also known as Mbanna Kantako, founded WTRA, a low-powered mini-station that voiced the issues and concerns of the tenants of his project building in Springfield, Illinois in 1986. Since its launch, WTRA has fought for the emancipation of marginalized black communities and their protection from racist assaults and legal acts of crime. Kantako was prosecuted many times by the Federal Communications Committee (FCC) for unlicensed broadcasting. In 1990 he received a fine of \$750 that Kantako continues to challenge. Kantako took advantage of the portability of his transmission station and relocated every time the FCC knocked on his door. He renamed his station from WTRA to Black Liberation Radio and finally to Human Rights Radio. (Dunifer & Sakolsky, 1998)

Similarly to Radio Alice or the Japanese model of mini-radio, Kantako's project was a system of survival with an open member base that creatively contributed to the community dialogue. It also significantly and positively impacted local violence by giving the victims the ability to speak out about police brutality against African Americans. WTRA introduced the members of the community to the art of radio making and the empowerment of free expression.

Stephen Dunnifer's Free Radio Berkeley (San Francisco, 1993) stemmed from his long engagement with activist media and pirate radio. Dunifer had initiated a portable station that was fiercely prosecuted by the FCC resulting in a \$20,000 fine. Nonetheless, Free Radio Berkeley managed to legally reclaim its right to free speech and free-form expression². Broadcasting from all kinds of spaces (run down buildings, cars and hills), Free Radio Berkeley became a tool that nurtured the freedom of expression and artistic creativity.

People from all over the Bay area were producing programs about politics, comedy, activism, community, free speech, local music and activities that assisted in shaping the character and the identity of their city and community. To this day, Free Radio Berkeley is acknowledged as an influential and successful example of the Micro-radio movement in the US.

² In 1978, the FCC put into effect a legislation that banned any type of transmitter under 100 Watts. Free Radio Berkeley's struggle against the FCC's lawsuit successfully culminated in 1997 with Stephen Dunifer's court victory.

A few years later, on the other side of the country, New York-based artists Tom Roe, Greg Anderson and Violet Hopkins launched their own microradio station under the name free103point9 in Brooklyn in 1997. With a portable narrowcasting kit, free103point9 amplified the under-recognized activities and voices of the New York communities. free103point9 activities contributed to and were the catalyst for the formation of a growing artist community who mainly experimented with the creative use of radio and transmission in the framework of performances, installations and sound art.

In order to best serve this emerging community, free103point9 evolved from a micro-radio collective to a non-profit arts organization in 2002, with the mission to assist emerging artists and communities who work or wish to work in the field of transmission art.

All the works featured in this section affirm McLuhan's (1964) belief that "the mark of our times is its revulsion against imposed patterns". In that sense, free-radio offered a new interpretation of radio where the medium itself mattered more over the content, and where locality, plurality and creativity outgunned the model of global mainstream radio stations.

3. Rediscovering the environment

Radio asserts a sense of intimacy with its listeners. It assumes the role of mesmerizing the soul and leading a listener into a state of somnambulance and disembodiment. Or at least that was the idea many people had about radio until the beginning of the 20th century

when the Weimar Era Radio and the futurist radio manifesto “La Radia” emerged. Marinetti’s and Masnatta’s “La Radia” (1933) proclaimed a new fashion of radio-making that is aware of its surrounding environment and matter; it absorbs the commodities of everyday life and transforms them to a study through sound. The sounds of the city, the forest, the sea, the body, the sound of cooking and the inaudible noises of food digestion are brought forward. “La Radia” sought to exclude the dramatic clichés of the past and challenges the audience’s sensations with a radical change in content.

The radio of the Golden Weimar period in Germany (1923-1930) arguably followed a similar pattern. Hans Flesch, director of the Berlin Radio Hour, plotted a new genre of radio work based on the sounds of the environment, the city and everyday life. Acoustical Films (audio recordings made on the soundstrip of the film) were the first phonographic sound collages to be broadcast on the German airwaves. Film director Walter Ruttmann was commissioned to construct “Weekend” (1930) based on the sounds of the city of Berlin. Flesch’s rendition of radio art channeled the sound of life inside the broadcast studio just to recast it back out again.

Flesch suggested a system of mirroring the outside that recalls Radio Alice’s mission and is aligned to a more contemporary set of artists who dealt with the same issues. During the mid-seventies Hildegard Westerkamp’s Soundwalking radio shows reappraised the “Fleschian” model and suggested to the audience of Vancouver Cooperative Radio different ways of experiencing and re-evaluating their surrounding soundscape. Using the microphone as a lens, Westerkamp amplified the familiar yet ignored sounds and

commented on their impact to the perception and the sound-ecology of a place. Sometimes combined with book excerpts read on-air, the soundwalks formed an act of creative criticism and deep reflection on the issues of sound and the environment.

Bill Fontana's "Landscape Soundings" was a large-scale sound and radio installation for the Vienna Festival in 1990. Fontana used various types of transmitters to cast the sounds of nature and the river near Stopfenreuther Au (Danube) back in Vienna, mixed them with local sounds, and fed them to an array of speakers strategically placed to bridge the sound_space between the Museum of Art History and the Museum of Natural History in Vienna. The transforming power of sound refreshed the listener's memories of the places they have visited or they lived in, by triggering their aural sensibility. The soundscapes were also broadcast on conventional radio and soon gained great popularity. Similarly to Westekamp, Fontana raised issues of acoustic ecology and perception by sculpturally intervening to the obtrusive city sounds surrounding the two museums.

New York-based transmission art duo neuroTransmitter (Angel Nevarez and Valerie Tevere) offer another example of radio-architectural intervention to a set environment with their project "Branching to Broadcast" (in collaboration with Daniela Fabricius). Installed in Colonels Row (Governors Island, New York), "Branching to Broadcast" consisted of a small house built on a tree that hosted a microradio station. The radio assimilated the local soundscape and fed it back to a set of receivers placed in a variety of spots around the island. On a first level of interpretation the "microradio tree-house" makes up an unusual type of architectural intervention. Additionally, "Branching to

Broadcast” appoints the value of locality and low-powered transmission and the importance of mediating the hidden sounds of the airwaves as well as the activities of the surrounding environment to its native listeners.

Similarly, UK based, artist Simon Elvins explores the inaudible environments that surround us with his series of site-specific radio installations entitled “Public Radio”. Exhibited at 'Deptford Design Market Challenge', Royal Festival Hall, London, “Public Radio” used AM transmitters made out of discarded and everyday objects. With their earth connection attached literally to the ground and their aerial clamped on top of trees, poles and other objects high enough to access the airwaves, the transmitters were powered solely by the energy of radio waves. In “Public Radio”, Elvins’ background in communication design coalesces with his firm interest in sound and its primary role in shaping our understanding of everyday environments. More specifically, “Public radio” offers to its listeners a microscopic aural awareness of the radio waves that surround them.

4. Performing the airwaves

In all the aforementioned cases, radio transmission becomes an extension of the environment and assists in its magnification, re-interpretation and re-evaluation. In this section we examine artists that put radio in the context of performance. By performance we allude to projects that either require radio as an “instrument” or apply innovative methods in the process of radio making.

According to Walter Benjamin (2005) radio should become a medium through which the listeners cultivate a sound awareness of what they hear. Hence radio should reflect the audience and its interests. Radio should also provide its listeners with interactive engagement as part of a process of defining its content. American sound art pioneer, Max Neuhaus experimented with this concept in “Drive In Music” (1967/68). Neuhaus’s initial idea was to create a site specific sound installation where the drivers on Lincoln Parkway Avenue (Buffalo, New York) could trigger the perception of a set of custom sounds with the movement of their car. To realize this, he attached 20 low-powered transmitters on the tree-lines along a 600 meter distance. Each transmitter produced a specific continuous sound that overlapped with the others at specific points of the trajectory.

By having all the transmitters set to the same frequency, Neuhaus created an immersive soundscape whose content was primarily defined by the drivers’ tempo, directionality and “taste” of tonality. Hence, “Drive In Music” permitted an endless set of possible incarnations. Last, but not least, “Drive In Music” demonstrated to the drivers/performers with clarity how one can experience a space by interacting with it through sound.

Canadian radio artist Anna Friz uses multiple radio transmitters and receivers to perform in public spaces, galleries and other unusual locations. Friz describes her radio art projects as self-reflective. In that sense she extends Benjamin’s idea of “conscious participation in the making” to the level of conceptual engagement. “You are far from us” was performed in Radio Revolten festival in Halle, Germany in 2006. Designed to be a

solo performance for four transmitters and fifty receivers, the piece balanced the notion that even though radio creates a physical distance with its receivers, it opens up the possibilities of conscious and attentive listening. “You are far from us” explores the hidden poetry found between static radio signals, air and the space that contains them.

New York based non-profit arts organization free103point9 has been the driving-force for many radio and transmission art projects and events in New York. “Tune (In)))” (The Kitchen, New York, 2004) invited over thirty emerging and established sound artists to perform on four separate but simultaneous stages. Four transmitters (one for each stage) cast their signals inside the Kitchen Gallery where the audience was seated in a seemingly silent space. A fifth frequency transmitted the soundtrack to a video program of works connected to the concept of transmission. Equipped with radio headsets, the listeners explored the variety of stations hosted in the FM spectrum while tuning in to the five “Tune (In)))” radio stations.) Among the performers were artists like Ikue Mori, Zeena Parkins, Thurston Moore, Scanner, Tom Roe and Espers. “Tune (In)))” successfully and courageously affirmed the possibility of turning the radio spectrum into a venue, in and of itself, where the audience develops a cerebral affinity with performers via the FM dial.

Alternatively, free103point9’s “Radio 4x4” merges the physical and ethereal space in the process of creating a hybrid performance. Staged in more than 20 international events and venues, “Radio 4x4” involves four performers whose sound is amplified by using four low-powered transmitters. The four signals are transmitted separately in four frequencies picked up and amplified by a series of boombox radios distributed within the space. The

audience becomes part of the performance by moving around the space and mixing the different signals as determined by their movements and hence defining the final form and content of the work. Most importantly, “Radio 4x4” is open to as many different interpretations and unique approaches as its audience can conceive.

5. The Digital Age

Creative practice has always been stimulated by emergent technologies. In fact, art functions like an agent of convergence between experience and technology by extending our relation with and our understanding of them. Since its birth, radio has anticipated a cross-breeding with other media, forms of expression, and notions of perceiving the public life and environment. In many of the cases examined in this paper, radio intersects with activism, architecture, music performance, film, site specificity, interactivity, locality, reviving the Brechtian (1964) “network of pipes”; an ethereal place where the audience not only receives but also transmits, and a medium that aides public communication. Nonetheless in the digital age, the notions of locality and interactivity face a significant shift in scale and directionality.

From the early 1990s, the World Wide Web fostered the first experiments with webradio and telematic performances. Austria has presented a few exceptional paradigms of telematic performances with projects like Mia Zibelka’s “Space Bodies” (Chandler & Neumark, 2005) where a violin performance was augmented with the use of violin midi data streamed via the web and triggered with the use of telerobotic interfaces. Additionally, in 1992 non-profit organization TRANSIT (an outgrowth of

KUNSTRADIO) staged “Chip-Radio” a polyphonic telematic radio concert where four different performers (Andres Bosshard, Seppo Gruendler, Gerfried Stocker and Mia Zabelka) streamed their sounds simultaneously from four different cities in Austria, while interacting with each other. The locality of a performance expands from a room to a group of neighboring cities and the network covers up the distance in-between.

The internet has dilated the radius of transmission by diminishing the distance between the performers; a permutation of locality that Kogawa (1990) coined as translocality. The physical space that contains the action of transmitting (i.e. a radio station studio, a concert stage) is superseded by the personal space of the “transmitter” and in that sense it echoes the portability and adjustability of the micro-radio formulae.

6. Conclusion

The aforementioned projects exemplify in different ways the idea that the immediacy of telematic presence does not liquidate but enhances the notions of locality, community and interactivity. Digital radio-art has a strong reference to its analog predecessor, but it is bigger and faster in scale. Nonetheless, that does not mean that the unique properties of the old must die away. On the contrary, both the old and the new, share the same conceptual underpinning of locality, community, creative exploration and experimentation; opposing the model of mass communication and centralized media. McLuhan (1964) stated in reference to an artist, that while the new technologies have produced a plethora of new environments, the artist’s primary role is to enhance society’s

awareness and perception of these environments mainly because the artist has the expertise and the inventive vision to do so.

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