

Out There, Right Here.

by Alfredo Cramerotti, 2005

It is possible to make radio without technology, because radio is the idea to make radio and imagine technology. (Ralf Homann).

The radio broadcast is a concrete model of the construction and intermingling of the private and the public sphere. When we hear a radio voice speaking to us we first of all make a construction within our imagination and then relate that imaginary to our own reality. Imagination and its parameters form the central focus, reach and scope of the public domain. Thus, the use of the radio is never detached from its own social and political function. Recent initiatives which use the radio incorporate a notion of micro-politics common to some conceptual art practices of the 60s which today are defined as forms of 'art-activism'. The radio is a tool, and a mediatic weapon. It is a flexible, cheap, effective means to raise topics concerning both the particular and the universal, simultaneously serving local communities and transnational networks.

Ralf Homann, the director of the experimental radio department of the Bauhaus University in Weimar, and himself an artist, welcomes the return to radio – for instance, the 'tactical media' activities by the network Indymedia (www.indymedia.org) – and in an interview on nettime.org he stated "I prefer this technology because radio is a dancing media. Moving around the body is always better than sitting in front of a screen or being pinned down in a cinema seat." And with the analogue wireless radio, nobody can control who's listening.

In recent years, some groups used the radio as a medium for the production of a discursive public space through the act of dissemination and the embodiment of micro-political activity. These approaches and practices are particularly evident in the work of two collectives: *neuroTransmitter* (nT) from New York and *Ligna* from Hamburg. They both manifest an alternative and effective way of repositioning and re-articulating the notion of public space.

Dissemination

neuroTransmitter (www.neurotransmitter.fm) is a collaborative ensemble working with the possibilities of radio, propelling signals which simultaneously occupy the ether and urban space through transmission and on-site performance.

With the *com_muni_port* (from the words community+munition+portal), a portable radio broadcast unit created for short-range pedestrian broadcasting, they activate the local and function as a tool for the dissemination of information and public participation. This wearable broadcast device (FM transmitter, CD player, microphone, headphones, and mixer, all powered by a battery pack) sends off an invisible layer of audio whose radius moves *with* the user. Its portability allows for its use within political demonstrations and marches, by mapping audio frequencies within a city, conducting spontaneous interviews and broadcasts.

The activity of *neuroTransmitter* creates collaborations between transmitter and receiver, body, sound, and the socio-spatial landscape. The signal transfer generated by *neuroTransmitter* is a platform for sound transmission – be it sound sampling, D.J. sets, local sound choices, discussions of tactical media, interviews with shop owners and residents, or frequency recordings – it is a receptive discursive space, which can be choreographed in public frequency performances throughout an urban centre.

In their words: "*We imagine a network of micro-radio broadcast performers wandering through the streets of a particular area, creating and broadcasting a sonic diagram that maps urban space through on-site sound mixing, music, movement, and transmission. By circumnavigating between a multitude of broadcasts, the metaphor of diversity of position within a given social sphere is actualized. This movement can be filled with a variety of aural and broadcast experiences. It is of special interest that we engage specific histories or ideas that charge a particular space. Thus each performance is distinct and uses sound samples and original sounds that take into consideration the urban environment in which the com_muni_port moves through.*"

Re-appropriation

Ligna provides a second example of the use of radio as an instrument to construct and shape a public sphere that develops from their own private actions. Ligna is a radio activist group that organizes radio demonstrations and radio ballets in collaboration with the independent radio network FSK (<http://www.fsk-hh.org>). The activity of Ligna can be described as a sort of 'sabotage', a way of resisting social pressure by means – among others – of the radio. For their radio demonstrations, Ligna produces a broadcast consisting of a multitude of statements from diverse groups on the political situation in a particular place (for instance, a city like Hamburg), of recordings from recent public debates, of sound and music. The program is broadcasted in FM and listeners are invited to go out into the street and into department stores carrying portable radios; once there, they set their radios and scatter, strolling through the city.

As Wanda Wieczorek wrote on republicart.net:

"The radios are heard at mid-level volume, but wherever radio-carriers stay for a brief period, the attention of the passers-by is captured. In the course of the broadcast time, more and more questions are asked. Attempted explanations, conversations and discussions result. The conspicuous and inexplicable presence of the radio swarms clearly triggers irritation. It is left up to the radio-carriers themselves, whether they want to make use of this moment of irritation or not. The scattering is not a gathering. Unlike a demonstration, its effect is not the result of closing ranks, but rather of a good distribution in the space."

Ligna tested the strategy of scattering first with the radio ballets, conducted from 2002 onwards on different occasions and in different places. Several hundred participants gather in a public place 'in need' of re-appropriation (for instance, Hamburg's main train station). Over the period of an hour, Ligna conveys a set of movement instructions, carried out by the participants equipped with radios and headphones. "Sit down", "stand up", "hold out your hand in a begging motion", "turn around", "dance" and "wave good-bye to the departing train of the revolution". (W. Wieczorek). The mute choreography is quite impressive. Everyone in the place is simultaneously inside and outside this ballet (for a report, see http://www.glizz.net/artikel/artikel_12.php).

Out here, right there

The subversion of conventional ways of dealing with politics succeeds equally in the radio ballet, the radio demo, the micro broadcasting and the frequency performance. The radio here is used strategically, not simply reporting what happens in a certain context, as a journalistic use of radio would, but rather being an active part of what happens: 'when listeners become transmitters'. In their actions, nT and Ligna are never impartial: they produce consequences in real time – here and now – in an effort to move the audience's position from reception to participation.

In such activities, when the micro of the personal (one's point of view on – for instance – street patrolling, house prices, social provision within the neighborhood, medical services) relates with and reflects on the macro of the general (the policies of the current government, the influence of corporations and supranational powers, the sustainability of a local economy vs. the laws of the global market), then – precisely at this point – the private domain leaves the individual and enters the public area, where is not a "singular" any more but an indivisible part of a plural.

An activity like radio broadcasting, which is simultaneously capable of engagement and entertainment through the means of words, sounds, and actions, is a main tool for the production of a meaningful public sphere. It bridges and intermingles the two spheres of public and private, connecting one to the other in a mutual relationship. It is the concrete possibility to form alternative worldviews step by step with very basic tools.