

Re-Inventing Radio
Aspects of Radio as Art

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Radio as Exhibition Space

Doreen Mende

Listening to music is listening to noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that is essentially political.¹

—*Jacques Attali*

More and more often, established art institutions are hosting shows on the theme of sound.² To date, radio art has received little attention in this context. But in recent years, interest in this field has been increasingly reflected in small-scale conferences and exhibition projects, and in the founding of numerous free radio stations.³ Could radio technology provide a presentation space that reexamines exhibition strategy? Using the example of the *EAR APPEAL* show,⁴ I will discuss the relationship between the presentation of art in a physical exhibition space and the specific qualities of radio-based exhibitions, as well as an «Audio Culture»⁵ in contemporary art practice that argues in social terms.

If one goes back in time a little, then—in art from the nineteen-fifties through the seventies—Audio Culture plays a decisive role in artistic practice on a par with other media. It is no coincidence that Henry Flynt—philosopher, anti-art activist, and coiner of the term concept art—begins his «Essay: Concept Art»⁶ with the words: ««Concept art» is first of all an art of which the material is «concepts,» as the material of for ex. music is sound.» The dematerialization of the art object, in whose terms Lucy Lippard described art between 1966 and 1972,⁷ corresponds to the spirit of Audio Culture. The development of art in this period features a coming together of heterogeneous positions that are united by their in-

terest in the division between art and life. To name just a few examples: as a key figure in Fluxus and concept art, John Cage used sound and silence in his compositions based on the principle of chance; every detail of the surroundings became material for a composition whose objective was nothingness. In the fifties, Ray Johnson developed «correspondence art»—later mail art—as an artistic praxis that produces process, activity, and networking. From the early seventies, the dematerialization and placelessness of art became more differentiated thanks to the simplification of electronic recording technology. Christine Kozlov, another pioneer of concept art in the U.S., chose the tape recorder as a test setup in her piece *Information: No Theory* (1970) as a way of questioning the credibility of information in the dawning age of mass media.⁸ At the beginning of the seventies, William Furlong and Barry Barker founded the magazine *Audio Arts*,⁹ a programmatic format for sound recording as artistic practice and for the creation of a public outside of institutions. All of these are practices that push up against the boundaries of the institutional exhibition space.

Nonetheless, the white exhibition space became the matrix for artistic debate. The visible architecture became the frame of reference for the negotiation of territorial, contextual, and metaphorical boundaries between inside and outside. From the ideology of the White Cube, artists derived material for their examinations of the art institution in postwar modernity. Debate focused, however,

1 In Jacques Attali, *Bruits: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977). English version: Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

2 Sonic Boom (Hayward Gallery, London, 2000), Sonic Process (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002–2003), Anti Reflex (Kunsthalle Schirn, Frankfurt, 2005), and in particular the mediaspecific Sonambiente shows in Berlin (1996 and 2006).

3 Resonance FM (London), reboot.fm (Berlin, 2004), *Radio_Copernicus* (Warsaw and Berlin, 2005), Garage Festival (Berlin, 2004), Bienal Internacional de Radio (Mexico City), Radio Gallery (London, 2006).

4 From October 19 through November 18, 2006 at Kunsthalle Exnergasse in Vienna. Artists: Rashad Becker, Justin Bennett, Benjamin Bergmann, Elisabeth Grübl, Arthur Köpcke, Genesis P-Orridge, Ultra-red, Ruzska Roskalknikowa, Paula Roush, Mika Taanila,

Annette Weisser. Curator: Doreen Mende. *EAR APPEAL ON AIR* broadcast on *Kunstradio* on October 29 and November 5 and 12, 2006.

5 *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, was published in 2004. In the following, «Audio Culture» will be used to refer to artistic work with sound.

6 In 1961, Flynt spoke of conceptual art for the first time; the essay was published in 1963 in *An Anthology* by La Monte Young.

7 *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966–72*, edited by Lucy Lippard, published 1973, reprinted 1997, contains a bibliography listing interviews, documents, artworks, and symposium papers that make up a chronological index.

8 Susanne Neuburger, «...with their own intrinsic logic,» *springerin*, Theory Now issue (February 2006).

9 For more information on Bill Furlong and the *Audio Arts* project and archives, see Bill Furlong at <http://kunstradio.at/BREGENZ/KIDS/index.html>.

not on its visibility, but on a conceptual questioning of space-defining reality. Art became a seeing machine, an instrument for the analysis of that which takes place both outside and inside the institution.

After World War II, the technical perfection of radio technology increased and its popularity grew. This period was characterized by the arrival of a mass-media toolkit: the transmission of information in the form of electromagnetic signals from broadcaster to receiver allowed private homes to connect with the outside world at the push of a button: private space became the venue for public presentations. But the content changed, too. The range of themes grew to include audience participation and a focus on individual concerns: the public domain became private. Radio was just the beginning of this transfer.

The aim of the *EAR APPEAL* show was to bring an invisible element of reality into the exhibition space and to discuss links between audio and society without falling into the trap of a media-specific exhibition. Instead, the focus was on the possibility of portraying our society in audio, and on sound as a potential instrument for the control of individual actions. What interests me in particular about Audio Culture—following concept art—is its potential for analysis and placelessness combined with its rendering visible of social issues by using sound as



Mika Taanila, *Thank You For the Music*, film still, *EAR APPEAL*, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, Austria, 2006.

analytical and conceptual material. So when an exhibition focuses on the links between Audio Culture and society, then the presentation space must be conceived of and examined in terms beyond its physical architecture. Nonetheless, a museum-like exhibition architecture was necessary at the Kunsthalle as a counterpoint to the immaterial space of radio, in order to—drawing on the experience of nineteen-nineties artistic praxis—deal with institutional manifestations. A space-filling display system using grey partitions structured the exhibition according to a topological principle.

In addition to their pieces for the show at the Kunsthalle, several of the *EAR APPEAL* artists—Justin Bennett, Rashad Becker, Paula Roush/msdm, Ultra-red, and Annette Weisser—were asked to devise works for radio to be broadcast by *Kunstradio* on Austrian public radio’s cultural channel Österreich 1 (Ö1), while the show was running, and to remain available online as downloadable MP3s. *EAR APPEAL ON AIR* was explicitly part of the overall exhibition concept in that the series of radio programs was designed not as an accompanying program but as an extension of the exhibition space. The radio pieces all featured one of two aspects: working with found urban sounds or reflecting on the technology of the radio as a way of achieving an impact at the point of delivery in the external world. This created a concrete interrelation between inside and out that was put into practice and continued within the space of radio. What makes the presentation of Audio Culture on the radio significant? Assuming that the presentation of art consists of a complex mesh of spatial, technological, institutional, and situational conditions, the specific character of presenting Audio Culture on the radio lies above all in its placelessness, situation-specificity, and everydayness. A radio set can be installed in various places and remain switched on around the clock: a radio set can host an instant, immaterial, and transportable exhibition, just as hats, publications, and boxes¹⁰ have become exhibition venues. The inside and outside of the radio space are manifested in the radio receiver’s on/off switch. But making an exhibition also means creating a space characterized by selection

10 Robert Filliou, *Galerie Légitime* (1962); Seth Siegelaub and John Wendler, eds., *The Xerox Book* (New York, 1968); see also, Ina Conzen, ed., *Art Games: Die Schachteln der Fluxus-künstler* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1997).

11 Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000); translated into English as Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*: (New York: Continuum International, 2004).

12 From *érgon* (Greek) «work» and *onomatopoein* (Greek) «create a name.»

and presence. If, depending on broadcasting times, radio can be listened to on the street, in the car, at work, at home, or while jogging, then more than anything else, art becomes totally mixed up with the casual nature of everyday life. But this blending of art and everyday life is distinct from that activated by conceptual Fluxus artists like George Brecht and John Cage. Does art have a chance in the everyday white noise of radio if the listener does not have to give up his or her passive, receptive role? How can a «distribution of the sensible»¹¹ be both called into question and reconfigured?

In the context of *EAR APPEAL*, the brilliant *reading/work piece No. 1* by Fluxus artist Arthur Köpcke represented an important historical reference. Made as early as 1963, his instruction piece *music while you work*, part of his chef-d'oeuvre *manuscript* (1963–65), takes social norms to absurd lengths: *piece No. 1 music while you work* parodies BBC radio's Light Programme which, from the war years until well into the nineteen-sixties, was designed to increase the productivity of factory workers by means of animating, functional music: «Artistic value must NOT be considered. The aim is to produce something which is monotonous and repetitive» (BBC). In a version documented on video, Köpcke begins by sweeping a room to music coming from the radio: the text instruction requires that he interrupt his work whenever the music stops—so that neither the music nor the work can ever be brought to an end.

For his new sound installation *Ergonomatopoesie*,¹² Berlin artist Rashad Becker interviewed around forty working individuals to obtain an acoustic portrayal of what is understood by «work» based on the activities that typify professions ranging from trader through artist. After an introductory exchange, Becker asked the interviewees to reproduce the sounds of their work using their own sound-producing organs. Although it comes as no surprise, it is significant that the phonetic vocabulary is far less developed than the ability to portray working conditions using optically coded words. Woven together collage-style, the recordings of the onomatopoeias produced a space within the exhibition in which to think about the concept of work, which is as diverse as the sounds that buzz, rustle, and whistle around the space, triggered by the visitor's movements. Another striking thing is that the more neoliberal the structures of the work in question are, the harder it is to capture the notion of work, something which cannot be attributed solely to the phonetic inexperience of the participants. For his *Kunstradio* piece entitled *Radio kenn' ich nur vom Hörensagen–Ohranwendung in der Wertegemeinschaft*

(I only know radio from hearsay—the use of ears in a community of shared values), Becker edited the interviews and onomatopoeias into an experimental radio play consisting of sounds and distorted but recognizable language. Instead of commenting on the knocking, snapping, and hissing noises, the fragments of the original spoken passages all revolve around the transition from language to sound: «Do I make a sound like ...», «For a sound like ...», «Would I dress up for a sound like ...», «With a sound like ...», and so on. The radio piece cannot be separated from the work at the Kunsthalle. Whereas the latter achieves a sense of three-dimensionality using hypersonic directional loudspeakers—creating an auditory experience entirely different to that of listening to the radio, which the artist puts in context in a text in the accompanying booklet—the radio piece includes the level of everydayness that can only exist outside and in the immediate physical vicinity of the listener.

Both Paula Roush/msdm (mobile strategies of display & mediation) and the Ultra-red group (for *EAR APPEAL*, Dont Rhine and Manuela Bojadžijev) used the Kunsthalle as a meeting place and discussion venue. Generally speaking, radio took on the role of postproduction as well as that of publication and distribution.

After periods in London and Leipzig, London artist Paula Roush localized her *Protest Academy* in the show in Vienna as a vital structure for cooperation, exchange, education, and information-gathering about audio tactics that articulate social or political resistance. When does sound become information and protest? As the setting for a workshop and as an installation in the exhibition, visitors had access to the protest archive begun in London in 2005 containing newspaper articles, CDs with songs of protest and peace, an opera libretto, theoretical texts by Toni Negri and Gilles Deleuze, and a variety of projects and documentation by artists including Oliver Ressler, Temporary Services, and Melanie Jackson. For her performances and collaborations, Paula Roush used the archive, with entries divided up into the four categories «What are we doing? What's happening to us? What needs to be done? I prefer not to.» At the same time as being a collection of materials, the archive also acts as working material. On the radio, a record

13 From the Spanish: gathering, meeting. In the context of the anti-globalization movement, especially in Latin America, this form of political meeting has evolved where relevant social themes are discussed publicly on the basis of networking.

produced by Paula Roush and the artist Isa Suarez was played which brings together the contents of the archive in edited form. Like the archive, the four tracks on the record are ordered using the four categories, allowing the sound material to be presented in different contexts, such as live jam sessions or performances. Protest slogans can still be heard among the sound collages, but this reworking questions the degree to which information must be comprehensible if a praxis of resistance is to become effective protest.

As well as being the focus of research by Ultra-red into migration and its impact on social structures, *Surveying the Future* is also the title of the radio piece by the group for *EAR APPEAL ON AIR*. The radio piece is an edited version of an «*Encuentro*»:¹³ on October 21, 2006, Ultra-red theorists, activists, and artists organized a public gathering to discuss «What is the Sound of the War on the Poor in Vienna.» With Tania Martini, Roland Atzmüller, Jakob Weingartner, and Fahim Amir, Ultra-red explored various locations in Vienna like the Lugner City shopping mall, the Gürtel, or the Brunnenmarkt, which were presented at the *Encuentro* in the form of talks and audio recordings. The way the question was framed actively encouraged a differentiation of concepts and attributions. What is sound? What is war? Who are the poor?



Paula Roush,
Protest Academy,
installation and
intervention, *EAR
APPEAL*, Kunsthalle
Exnergasse and
Kunstradio On Air,
Vienna, Austria, 2006.

Both the audio recordings and what was said during the discussion were used by Ultra-red as analytical material to explore links between social structures and planned urban development. In a method of «militant investigation» devised and used for political analysis above all by the Marxist labor movement in Italy (Operaismo), the activation of debate and network-building are central elements in the artistic audio praxis of Ultra-red. The aspect of informal education, influenced by the theories and praxis of the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (1921–1997), as laid out in his main work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), also plays a key role. The piece by Ultra-red for *Kunstradio* uses radio technology as an instrument for the creation of a public. In addition, the radio also provides a place for the activation of communal learning that is negotiated on a collective level and which articulates critical awareness. The radio transports the public brainstorming session at the Kunsthalle back to the locations in question.

The transfer of content from the exhibition to the scene of the action—to concrete places in Vienna and, in conceptual terms, out of the institution—marks an important aspect of the overall exhibition concept, implemented directly via presentation on the radio. The British artist Justin Bennett, based in The Hague, has been working since 2003 on his piece entitled *Sundial*: in major cities like Barcelona (2003), The Hague, Rome, Guangzhou, Paris (2005), and Vienna (*EAR APPEAL*, 2006), over a twenty-four-hour period the same number of individual sound recordings were made, forming an edited acoustic panorama of the cities in question. But it is not so much about merely documenting a specific urban soundscape or making an interpretative study of the diverse connections between people in the city and their surroundings. Instead, in edited form, Bennett indexes the specific characteristics of the sonic environment of Kunsthalle Exnergasse as a kind of cartographic inventory, but without prescribing a definitive legibility. Transferred to the radio, the subjective city map becomes a piece of musique concrète.

EAR APPEAL commissioned a new piece by Annette Weisser on the theme of radio as a place of cultural production and cultural coding: in one of the old broadcasting studios at Austrian State Radio, she cooperated with *Kunstradio* to produce the audio and video work *Kanon* based on the old children's

14 «C-A-F-F-E-E, trink nicht so viel Kaffee. Nicht für Kinder ist der Türkenfrank, schwächt die Nerven macht dich blass und krank. Sei du kein Muselman, der das nicht lassen kann» (C-A-F-F-E-E, don't drink so much coffee. This

Turkish drink is not for kids, it weakens your nerves, makes you pale and ill. Don't you be like a Moslem who can't do without it). Set to music by Carl Gottlieb Hering (1766–1853).

song «C-A-F-F-E-E.» Instead of the original lyrics,¹⁴ Weisser sang and whistled, in a five-voice canon with herself: We Know What We Are By What We Are Not—a line taken from a magazine article about the «clash of cultures.» Various film sequences show the artist recording her voice parts, scan murals featuring idyllic Austrian nature scenes, or wander around the space, lingering on the décor and the control room window. The recording studio, originally built as a broadcasting studio in the nineteen-thirties, becomes a matrix for the construction of cultural identity and refers to the place where it is produced and duplicated. The daily broadcast of the radio piece made affirmative use of the way radio functions, at the same time as reflecting on it via the audiovisual feedback to the presentation at the Kunsthalle. In the exhibition space, then, we experience something like a double making-of: specifically, the making of the piece itself and, generally, the development of radio technology as a mass medium for the shaping of political opinion. Using the melody of a well-known children’s song, Weisser plays with the programmed recognition effect with which we are familiar from ubiquitous radio. But the cultural canonization is undermined by the rhythmic new lyrics, thus activating more attentive listening, something that comes as more of a surprise when listening to the radio than it does in an art space.



Annette Weisser, *Kanon*, video/DVD/*Kunstradio* broadcast, installation view, *EAR APPEAL*, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, Austria, 2006.

Radio is almost unparalleled among media in its ability to provide independent distribution strategies, distance from art institutions, and the positioning of art in the listener's everyday surroundings. Admittedly, in terms of exhibiting art, Audio Culture only indirectly leaves behind a visual work capable of being documented. We are dealing either with a process of transformation from sound to language, to image, or with the playing back of a sound recording which in a conventional exhibition space can only be presented in limited or altered form on account of the acoustic conditions, but which as a readymade (field recording) automatically triggers attentiveness. Contemporary exhibition practice in art features codes that cause us to perceive selectively and specifically. Radio lacks this very concrete and often-criticized frame of reference. In its historical evolution into a mass medium, radio technology is so strongly linked with everyday reality outside the exhibition space that the moment when the radio listener is called on to listen is far less precise than it is in the art space, when reading a publication, or on receipt of a Mail Art postcard. On the other hand, by removing sound from its original context as an *objet trouvé* and doubly recontextualizing it—that is, as material in an artwork and as radio art in an unspecified everyday situation—every sound played on the radio is institutionalized. In this light, radio as an exhibition space appears as impermeable as the physical space of the art institution. Is art really transported outside? Audio Culture in general and radio art in particular call for exhibition formats that manifest content, produce context, and bear in mind the institutional space of the radio.



Willem de Ridder, *European Mail-Order Warehouse*, 1965, installation for a photograph by Wim van der Linde: boxes with objects by George Brecht, Robert Watts, Henry Flynt, Alison Knowles, La Monte Young, and many others are piled up on a couch in Willem de Ridder's house in Amsterdam. Among them sits Dorothea Mejer, de Ridder's girlfriend at the time. The boxes as well as the print publications were designed by George Maciunas, who had appointed Willem de Ridder as chairman of Fluxus activities in Northern Europe. Under its director Willem de Ridder in Amsterdam, the conceptual shop *European Mail-Order Warehouse* offered and sold the same boxes as the New York FLUXSHOP Loft by Maciunas. Neither shop existed as physical sales room, rather both of them used postal distribution structures as instruments of display. The illustration shows a reconstruction of the *European Mail-Order Warehouse* within one big box by Jon Hendricks for the Fluxus exhibition of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, 1984. Willem de Ridder lives near Amsterdam. His website (www.ridderradio.com) obeys Fluxus principles even today: every week de Ridder replies live to questions formulated by listeners on the spur of the moment and/or based on their everyday experience. (Description by Doreen Mende.)