Sound

Radiodays
An Enquiry into Aural Space

Huib Haye van der Werf

Essay – November 1, 2005

The editors of *Open* asked Huib Haye van der Werf, one of the participators of the tenth Curatorial Training Programme (CTP) of De Appel Foundation in Amsterdam, to write a review of the project *Radiodays* that took place in April 2005. [1] The description of various projects sheds light on the reason why the curators in training chose radio as the medium, and also on the selection of the artists and the type of contribution. [2]

The results were not presented in the form of an exhibition as the public has come to expect from a curatorial course. For twenty-six days a wide variety of art projects and interviews with artists and curators were on air via radio and web stream. The aim was to find ways of testing the limits of contemporary artistic practice and its presentation by exploring the possibilities of showing art not visually but with sound-based work – in short, an exhibition on the air waves.

It was no easy task to make a selection from a project with so many divergent and remarkable contributions. Where was one to begin? Almost at once the idea was rejected of applying any criteria of content. Also to be avoided was reducing contributions to contextual fragments. Categorizing the many sorts of contributions (music, theatre, discussion, interviews, etcetera) was not very meaningful, as it would not do any justice to the meaning or urgency of the project. Yet it was precisely this refusal to categorize that made it possible to arrive at a concept for selection: by reconsidering the motives of the team of curators in undertaking this project and analysing the conceptual framework behind the medium of radio and the choice of programming, the formal and theoretical basis behind *Radiodays* became clear. The programme elements that related to this also determined the selection.

Creating a new space without any physical limitations in which curators and artists could experiment formed an important basis for the *Radiodays* project. Underlying the project was the question of how radio brings about an alternative relation between the audience that listens and those involved in the project, through the notion of the elimination of physical distance. The realization that radio stimulates the imagination – at a time when the visual is so dominant – was also an important underlying impulse behind many programmes and collaborations. Finally there was the fact that we realized that radio – especially in Amsterdam – is a highly political instrument with a history and an economic and political potential of its own and that this is an important factor for understanding the possibilities and implications of the project.

What follows then is not so much a detailed description of the different programmes of the *Radiodays* compilation for *Open.* It should be read as a review of the conceptual components that the team of curators regarded as important in realizing the project and giving it its significance.

Radio: New space

day 2, 2 April 2005

Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 217:57 mins.

Radiodays is not unique in its kind as Hans Ulrich Obrist explains in this interview. Both at a conceptual and practical level the complex history and context of radio requires that it is carefully deployed as a medium in order to show its importance and its implications for carrying out a radio project.

One important aspect in setting up a radio programme as an art project is the acceptation and exploitation of the specific character of radio as a medium. Obrist regards the French cultural channel in Paris as an interesting example of radio programming. It creates an opportunity for realizing new productions that are specific to the medium in conjunction with artists such as Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tirivanija.[3] This has resulted in an artistic practice and vision that provokes a discussion of the limits and possibilities of radio and deploys this in new artworks.

A second important factor in thinking about the medium of radio according to Obrist is the decision not to infiltrate existing structures but to devise a structure of one's own. He regards Radio Arte Mobile as an important experiment by curators; radio for them is a medium for creating a new and independent space. Radiodays also aims to profile itself in this way.

day 2, 28 April 2005 [4]

Interview with Suchan Kinoshita, 425:36 mins.

In 2004 as part of the ongoing project 'Doing Time', Suchan Kinoshita set up a radio station with inmates of the young offenders detention centre in Vught in Holland. For her, rather than proposing a structural solution, this was a logical consequence of the typical character of an art commission in a penitentiary establishment. In the interview for *Radiodays* she discusses what it is to operate within so strict and formal a structure as a prison. In this context much of the radio programming was carried out intuitively and informally with the inmates. A temporary meta-structure was thus created that literally goes beyond the walls of the walled complex.

The Physical and Non-Physical Space of Radio

In creating an independent space a discrepancy emerged between the 'physical' and the 'non-physical' space of radio. It is this discrepancy that functioned as the framework for the curatorial experiment – namely the divergence between inside and outside and the ability of sound to travel back and forth between these limits.

day 7, 8 April 2005

Raul Keller, *Jammer Station*, 46:11 mins.

The aim of Raul Keller's contribution was to test the specific properties of the medium of radio. He too wanted to achieve a technical and conceptual materialization of the divergence between outside and inside and the distance between them. His contribution made use of seven mobile phones. Mobile phones can transport the surroundings in which they are used to those where they are received – background noise and faint magnetic fields; all the sounds were polluted with signals and endless quantities of sonic residues from locations elsewhere and they were also complemented with Keller's own soundtrack. When all the phones were being used simultaneously an independent stream of pulsating signals was produced, which disregarded the limits of De Appel's premises. At the same

time this stream was aimed at the physical site of De Appel, defining and expanding it beyond its physical limits.

Radio: Bilateral Communication

In 1932 Bertolt Brecht wrote: 'As for the radio's object, I don't think it can consist simply in prettifying public life. Nor is radio in my view an adequate means of bringing back cozyness to the home and making family life bearable again. But quite apart from the dubiousness of its functions, radio is one-sided when it should be two. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication.' [5]

day 20, 23 April 2005

Your host is Guy van Belle (with Bojan Fajfric as special guest), 56:12 mins.

Brecht's advocacy of the medium radio appeals to Guy van Belle and Bojan Fajfric and they use the *Radiodays* web stream to create a network of producers who in their turn make contributions to an audio composition. They produced a composition that was broadcast non-stop via the FM transmitter. Through the web stream however, this composition could be simultaneously influenced and / or altered by producers elsewhere. This eventually led to a multilayered composition with a variety of overlapping sound structures. The result was a unique form of communication that eliminated the virtual distance between those taking part. Due to the virtually simultaneous expansion of the composition through bilateral interchange, the physical distance between the collaborators became purely theoretical.

Radio: Imagination and Sound-Based Visualization

In 1928 Walter Ruttman composed the radio play *Wochenende*, [6] the story of a weekend from the moment a train leaves the city until it returns, with lovers whose whispers are interrupted by the sound of the crowds of people in a station concourse. Apart from the fact that this was a technologically advanced production for the time, the work was an important step forward in the development of radio plays. It confirmed the fact that sound is an autonomous and important component that stimulates the audience's imagination; it was important due to the ever-increasing popularity of the visual idiom of the cinema. At a time when moving images were undergoing a huge expansion, Ruttman succeeded in conveying a specific location, situation and narrative without falling back on the typically theatrical conventions of the radio and, perhaps more importantly, without becoming dependent on the visible.

day 7, 8 April 2005

Derek Holzer & Sara Kolster, *Sonic Encounters*, 36:18 mins.

The non-visual recreation of a location and a specific context illustrates the superiority of sound over visualization. Sound requires a more active attitude from an audience, one that is the opposite of the more passive one of a viewer. The contribution of Derek Holzer and Sara Kolster is an example. They 'embarked' on a sound-based journey round the world.[7] By portraying environmental sounds and on-site recordings worldwide, while inviting their listeners to locate what they were hearing, a more active relation is brought about between the artist, the work and the listening audience, so that what one hears is 'seen'.

day 10, 12 April 2005

Lise Brenner & Colin McLean, *Radiodance* no. 2, 24:35 mins.

Lise Brenner and Colin McLean enquired more explicitly into the conditions of the non-visible. They made the choreography *Radiodance no. 2* [8] and performed it under the *Radiodays* studio on the first floor of De Appel. [9] It was the second time that this work was performed – the first was at OT301 and it was broadcast by Radio Patapoe in August 2004. The work tries to break with the traditional notion of dance as something strictly visual. By using props such as rice, paper, water and a microphone to record the dancer's breathing, and a soundtrack of the surroundings with steadily increasing volume, the audience was presented with an alternative form of performance. In it, visual movement was translated into a fascinating aural reproduction of that movement.

Radio: Politics and Commodities

Instead of being supported most radio initiatives are harried, persecuted and criminalized by local and national authorities. The freedom of expression of the broadcasting media has been curtailed right from the start. For some ten years now some half-hearted 'open channel' options have been broadcast under the supervision of a non-elected foundation (SALTO), but it all ended in a debacle when frequencies were auctioned off and sold. Gradually most of these initiatives have been forced off the air, although some have managed to survive as 'streaming' radio on the internet. [10]

day 2, 2 April 2005

James Beckett, *Besengue City*, 49:55 mins.

The artist and musician James Beckett was invited to make four productions for *Radiodays* . The first was a repeat broadcast of a selection of a radio project he carried out in Cameroon in 2002, where he set up a temporary pirate radio station with artists Jesus Palamino, Goddy Leye and Hartanto. Besides presenting a selection of field recordings and actual Radio Cameroon material, Beckett also explained the delicate political and social context of this radio station. Back live, in the studio of *Radiodays*, he compares these conditions with those of a radio project in Smart Project Space in Amsterdam, in an interview with Sagi Groner who was involved in the project [11] – one in which the programming consisted only of a beginning and an end date. In the time between the audience was invited to make use of the open broadcasting space for whatever purpose it deemed suitable. It was intended as a protest against the situation on the airwaves in Holland, where radio frequencies have been sold to the highest bidder in what amounted to a clearance sale of airwaves. [12]

day 23, 27 April 2005

LIGNA, *Interventionist Counter – Public, Part II*, 24:26 mins.

Because the commodification of public space – hinted at in veiled terms such as 'semi-public space' – has invaded the domain of air waves, *Radiodays* invited the Hamburg collective LIGNA to give a performance in the public space. The result was a confrontational and at times cynical anarchistic performance in which purchased frequencies were themselves deployed to reclaim the public space. Armed with mobile phones, radios and volunteers, Ligna ventured into two Amsterdam city-centre shopping malls – the Kalvertoren and Magna Plaza – and had a sit-in [13] to see how local security teams would respond. Upon arrival, they were confronted with their own unreasonably authoritarian behaviour by means of radios in the vicinity that broadcast their discussions with the activists; these were recorded on mobile phones and broadcast on the *Radiodays*'s FM frequency.

Radiodays Bonus Track

day 23, 27 April 2005

LIGNA, *Interventionist Counter – Public, Part II*, 59:03 mins.

As part of their first contribution to *Radiodays*, LIGNA again confronted the public unexpectedly with the medium of radio and its position in society. The report introduces itself as a voice on the radio that is everywhere and nowhere at once. This explanation concerning the future of radio and radio art was broadcast on portable radios carried by volunteers in Amsterdam's Kalverstraat. The radios were hidden in plastic carrier bags so that the public could not immediately locate the narrator's voice. Radio and its future, everything and nothing, everywhere and nowhere at once.[14]

For more of the programmes of *Radiodays* and further infor mation about the CTP Radiodays project in De Appel or about the programmes mentioned above, see www.radiodays.org.

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Footnotes

1. The result was 26 hours of radio programming – about six hours of new programming per day – with contributions from more than seventy artists and curators. The broadcasts could be heard in Amsterdam on 107, 4 FM (via a legal 'event-licence') and via web stream on www.radiodays.org. Rael Artel, Kathrin Jentjens, Claire Staebler, Jelena Vesic, Huib Haye van der Werf and Veronica Wiman formed the team of curators.
2. Recorded in Moscow by the CTP, on 30 January 2005.
3. A collaboration that also included the project 'Rirkrit Tirivanija: Een retrospectief (Tomorrow is Another Fine Day)', 2004–2005 in Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam.
4. The interviewers were Veronica Wiman (CTP) and Henk Slager (philosopher and director of the HKU Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Utrecht).
5. Bertolt Brecht, *The Radio as an Apparatus for Communication*, 1932.
6. The oldest work that formed part of *Radiodays* (care of Gelbe Muzik, Berlin). Unfortunately this work is not available on the compilation CD of www.radiodays.org due to copyright and licensing restrictions.
7. The work forms part of a joint online neighbourhood project that they have already been working for some time with the name 'Soundscape FM', devoted to the compiling and archiving of site-specific sound. For more information, see www.sound.scape-fm.net.
8. The dance was performed by Antonella Pugliese.
9. The first floor of De Appel was cleared so as to make a space facilitating all the artists' contributions instead of one where everything was defined during the period of the project.
10. Tjebbe van Tijen, 23 March 2005. Taken from www.netline.org.
11. Radio Threshold by Gregory Green for the exhibition 'Threshold' in Smart Project Space, 2002.
12. See also the interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in which he discusses the issue of the transformation of air space into a commodity article.
13. They blocked the concourse that gives access to the shops.
14. See also pp. 110–119.

Tags

Art Discourse, Public Space, Sound

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