Radio Art in a Gallery?

Hank Bull

BANFF, January–March 1992 – As the Walter Phillips Gallery had already produced a book of essays called *Sound by Artists* (Lander and Lexier 1990), the curators, Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander, decided to focus this second collaboration on artists who make use of radio, and to present the work as an exhibition. But how can radio be exhibited in a visual art space? What will the gallery visitor actually see?

Called *Radio Rethink*, the exhibition and its accompanying symposium was intended to assemble and reconsider the various approaches to radio art. Eight Canadian artists were commissioned to spend up to five weeks at the Banff Centre in Alberta creating new works for radio. The exhibition and broadcast of these works took place from 17 January to 13 March 1992. Rita McKeough, Rober Racine, Christoff Migone, and Hildegarde Westerkamp produced works for tape in the Centre's studios and presented them as transmissions before a live studio audience. Leonard Fisher, Dan Lander, and I produced performances and numerous live broadcasts. Christoff Migone, Patrick Ready, and Colette Urban produced sculptural installations. At the center of the space was a cylindrical plexiglass control booth broadcasting on a 10-watt transmitter, just strong enough to cover the art center and the small, mountain town of Banff. Visitors to the exhibition would often find a live broadcast in progress, to which they might be invited to contribute. The symposium and discussions were also broadcast live, thus extending the gallery as a kind of performance space beyond its own walls.

One piece that worked on several levels was *Its on Your Head, It's in Your Head* by Colette Urban. A set of six (fake) fur hats were outfitted with portable clock-radios and antennae. Each day at precisely noon, five performers would hit the streets of Banff wearing these hats while the sixth, back at the station, would make up a story. Hotels, shopping malls, even the hot springs were fair destinations for this team of whimsical radio guerrillas. The intention of the piece was to examine the frontier between private and public space, to reveal radio's often "invisible" presence in the public sphere. It posed the question: who controls the public soundscape, and who owns the airwaves? While the hats were not being used in performance, they were displayed as radio hat art in the gallery.

Another sculptural piece was Patrick Ready's *Radio and Beans*. This classic bit of pseudo-science set out to duplicate John Ott's experiments with the effect of electromagnetic fields on biological systems (see Ott 1973). Long strings were suspended from the ceiling in rows. At varying heights, little plastic bags filled with earth and sprouted beans were attached. Throughout this forest of some 500 bean plants were placed an array of electrical appliances–a computer, a TV, an iron, a space heater, and of course a radio. Needless to say the beans around the TV did not thrive. *Radio and Beans* offered the observation that radio is a physical as well as an

1. A live broadcast is in process at the gallery. A 10-watt transmitter can be seen on a shelf in the booth. Against the wall in the background is an antique antenna. (Photo by Cheryl Bellows)

aural medium, and that these fields, ceaselessly penetrating our bodies, can be shaped in a sculptural sense to carry more than music.

Other artists at the center were encouraged to participate. The ceramicists, for example, collaborated with musicians in the design and fabrication of clay drums, flutes, and trumpets, which of course were premiered in a radio concert.

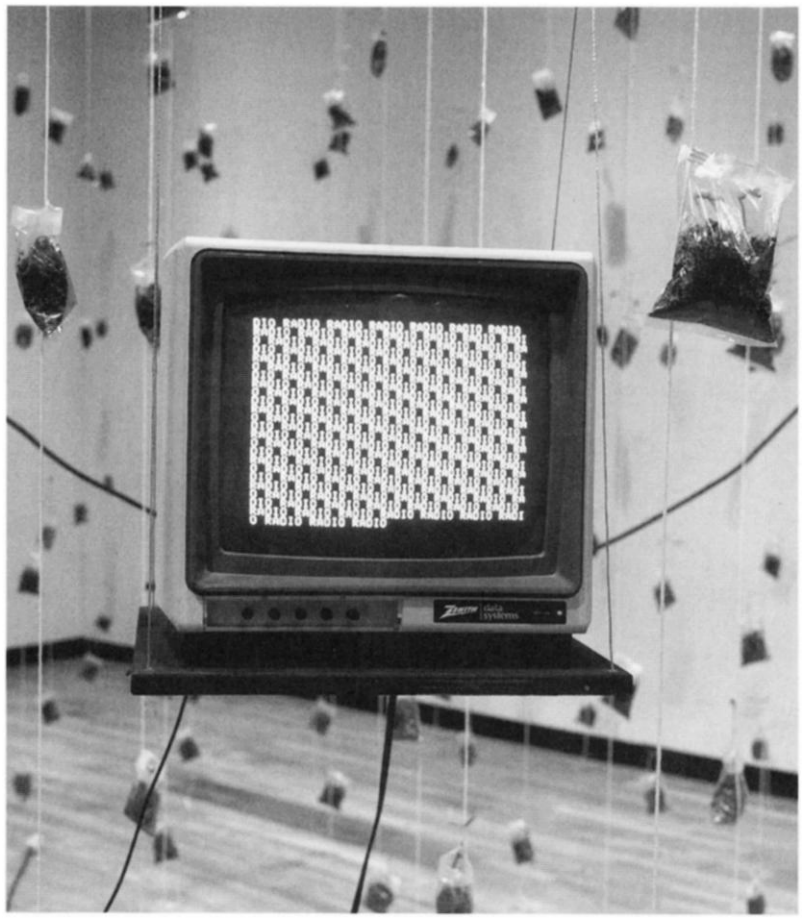
The station was inaugurated on Friday 17 January, as part of an event called Art's Birthday. Initiated in 1963 in Aachen, West Germany, by Robert Filliou, Art's Birthday celebrates the birth of art one million years ago (which the founders propose happened when someone dropped a dry sponge into a bucket of water). In the name of art a (paid) public holiday was declared in Aachen and the town made merry. Taken up by various network artists, Art's Birthday is now celebrated internationally every year. *Radio Rethink* chose the occasion to make connections to other network nodes using fax, voice, and videophone. The day started with long distance phone calls to Vienna and Paris, and continued with videophone connections to Interaccess in Toronto, the Western Front in Vancouver, and Metropophobia in Phoenix—all artists' centers who network with each other using videophone, e-mail, and other communications media. Hundreds of faxes were exchanged. A proper birthday party, complete with balloons, cake, and champagne provided adequate grist for two commentators on the floor, mixed with incoming phone calls and the voices of a number of children in the booth. At one point the kids took control of the mixer. The celebration continued live for seven hours without using any prerecorded material. Even into the night, a basket of crickets was left on the air, providing a felicitous wake-up sound for the following morning.

But the question of whether or not the station should broadcast continuously soon became an issue. The curators had proposed a radical alternative

2. In Colette Urban's Its on Your Head, It's in Your Head, *radio hats interfere with canned music in a supermarket. (Photo by Cheryl Bellows)*

to the normal radio format. This station might come on for two hours in the middle of the night or for two minutes at noon. In general it would transmit in the afternoon, during gallery hours. But it would not go on 24 hours a day like the seamless commercial wallpaper that offers no time for reflection; as Canadian poet Gerry Gilbert said, "Not only does money talk, it won't shut up." While acknowledging the value of this concept in theory, there were those who argued that radio's purpose is to develop a community and involve the listeners in the creation of the program. Surely there should be something to wake up to, a beacon to tune into, or no one will listen. What about the listener? In response, another question was posed: "Who is this mythical Listener, idealized in the imagination of every broadcaster?" Isn't the listener a marketing statistic, something to deliver to the advertiser, a cipher created by the broadcast; the bigger the broadcast, the more listeners created? *Radio Rethink* set out to subvert received notions of how radio might work, but it foundered when questions were reduced to an attempt to define radio art. And the definition of radio art, like performance art, is best given a wide berth.

Another debate rages over the essentiality of "live" radio. While some hold that live radio is best, others say the listeners can't tell. In fact the only proof a listener has that the transmission is live would be to call up the station and hear her own voice on the air. What is at issue here is the classic position mapped out by Bertolt Brecht in "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication" (in Willett 1964). Brecht pointed out that this so-called mass communications medium is in fact only a form of mass distribution, that the only way to liberate this technology from its totalizing effect would be to make it interactive—to let the listener talk back. In a decade when interactivity has become a buzzword and cellular phones abound, Brecht's theory is still at issue.



3. Will beans sprout this close to a TV, a radio, an electric iron? Pictured is Patrick Ready's Radio and Beans. *(Photo by John Blake)*

A symposium, held two weeks into the exhibition, brought these differences out into the open. Heidi Grundmann demonstrated how artists were first to recognize the disintegration of culture in an electronic environment. "The hollowness of concepts like author, work, object, original (knowing) sender and (learning) receiver, the dissolving of disciplines and media have been proclaimed again and again by individual artists and art movements. Their work has constantly been defused and undermined by the market, art history, and the museums, but now these concepts have been irrevocably built into the technological fabric of our society" (Grundmann forthcoming). Douglas Kahn gave a paper listing a number of early radio projects which either failed, were never realized, or were never intended as anything more than fantastic proposals. F.T. Marinetti's predictions of a worldwide electronic network, published in the *Gazetta del Popolo* in October 1933 as the manifesto "La Radia" are startlingly accurate today. Vladimir Tatlin's colossal *Monument to the Third International* (1920) was crowned with a radio station. But at the same time that these artists were beating the radio drum, they hardly ever went on the air. The two exceptions were Kurt Schwitters' broadcast of the sound poem "Sonate in Urlauten" on Sud-Deutsche Rundfunk in 1932, and Marinetti's 1933

Milano broadcast of sound poetry. Whether this lack was a problem of access, technology, or awe, the sad truth is that the real radio of the time effectively silenced the artists. "Without the loudspeaker, we could never have conquered Germany," said Adolf Hitler (Attali 1985:87). Artists didn't even begin to gain access to radio until the 1950s. It was also pointed out from the floor that Kahn's lineage excluded work done by Latin American artists, not to mention the rest of the world. Indeed there is much to be done toward constructing even a basic history of radio.

One of the more surprising images that emerged during the discussion of Kahn's paper, and one that kept coming back, was the analogy of radio waves and water. Indeed this cosmic, poetic vision of radio as ocean seemed to be what most interested Kahn in the writings of early radio artists. Hildegaard Westerkamp pointed out that infants floating in the womb become aware of the sound of the mother before almost anything else. The first nerves to function in the fetus are those that carry the senses of gravity, motion, and sound through the placenta. The ocean image helps to define radio and demonstrates at the same time why radio is so difficult to define. Radio space is all embracing; in this space distinctions founder.

Kim Sawchuk spoke the next night about pirates. In her case it was about grafting famous women pirates of history onto a group of feminist radio pirates in Montreal called Pomo Como (Post-Modern Commotion), sailing the high seas of radio. This was an exhilarating talk, which used the speaker's electronically treated voice, a second speaker, sound effects, slides, and musical clips to diffuse the authority of the single voice and create multiple "heres and nows." Sawchuk showed a slide of herself as a nine-year-old pirate. "I always wanted to bite into the ac cord."

Sawchuk addressed another vital concern of radio artists: the use of silence. In Sawchuk's words, "When John Cage does it it's art; when I do it it's because I can't find the volume control." Sometimes silence *is* a mistake. Most commercial and state radio stations have a limit for silence, someone said 18.5 seconds, beyond which a recorded message automatically kicks in. So silence can also be political. This was *Radio Rethink*'s intention in not transmitting around the clock, but only in specific, sometimes random, bursts.

Japanese media theorist and author, Tetsuo Kogawa, has turned to performance art as a lecture technique. He proposed the model of "polymorphous radio," in which everyone would have their own one-watt transmitter. In about 40 minutes, with components costing less than $50, Kogawa demonstrated how you, too, can build a radio station in your own home. As the transmitter went live, audience members rushed up to get the details. Plans were immediately run off on the photocopy machine. The sense of empowerment was palpable. But Kogawa suggests that the concept of "freedom" has become outmoded. Not that "'freedom' was an 'illusion' or that we have entered a 'new age of unfreedom.' Rather, it means that other concepts completely different in character from 'freedom' are emerging, and that those who like to be involved in anything viable cannot be bothered with such concepts as 'freedom.' [. . . T]he question in the age of satellite media is no longer whether or not something is 'free' but whether or not it is 'polymorphous'" (1992).

Here perhaps is the key to rethinking radio. As digital technologies continue to evolve at a vertiginous rate, many small networks emerge. In the 1920s artists dreamed radio. In the 1950s they finally got some air time. In the 1970s it took off and now everyone is their own autonomous media unit.

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