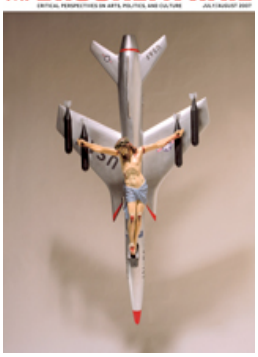
THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS AND CULTURE

July/August 2007

THE BROOKLYN RAIL



LOCAL EXPRESS
ART ARTSEEN
BOOKS MUSIC
DANCE FILM
THEATER FICTION
POETRY STREETS
LASTWORDS CONTENTS

Print

free 103point9: Ten Years of Transmission Arts

by John MacDonald

I'm standing in Williamsburg's Black & White Gallery with a portable radio in my hands and a pair of headphones fit snugly in my ears. My thumb plies the FM dial, leading me through New York's familiar Hot 97s and Z-100s, before landing squarely on 103.9 FM—one of two FM frequencies devoted to Tom Roe's gallery performance this afternoon. Suddenly my head is awash in a mishmash of transmitted ephemera—weather reports, private cell phone conversations, AM talk radio, Morse code, and distant, muffled drumbeats. Roe's sound collage and those of three other artists—two here in the gallery, one broadcasting live from Canada—are being transmitted solely over the commercial airways. This is "transmission arts."

Without my headphones on, the gallery is nearly silent—nothing but the chortles of a newly arrived crew of real-estate agents working the room. One of them—a broad-shouldered, beaming woman in her early thirties—appears at my side and shoves a business card in my hand. She introduces herself as Genie and suggests I call her to discuss my housing options. I shoo her away, shoving the card in my bag.

If I'd been foolish enough to call, my voice would have been re-transmitted live as part of the performance. Any gallery-goer tuned to 88.7—the frequency of radio theatre troupe 31 Down—on their hand-held radio would have heard my fumbling message. These were not real estate agents. These were transmission artists.

Transmission arts is a newly emerging form of sound-art based primarily on the manipulation of the live airwaves. It's also the singular obsession of free103point9—a non-profit organization and online radio station run by program director Roe, 39, and Galen Joseph-Hunter, 32, Roe's wife and free103's executive director. The organization is headquartered both in Williamsburg and at the upstate Wave Farm—a playground for transmission artists and fans spread over thirty acres of Catskills mountain land. The Wave Farm will be abuzz this summer in celebration of the organization's tenth anniversary.

Everything that free103 does—its gallery shows and performance festivals, its free-form radio programming, its workshops on transmitters and receivers—is informed by transmission arts. Beyond its obvious fixation with the airwaves, though, easy descriptions of the form can be elusive. (Roe has half-jokingly described free103 as "this non-profit arts

SPOTLIGHT

Uncontrolled Cinema

Williams Cole examines the work of Albert Maysles, who, along with his late brother David, Albert Maysles is one of the most important figures in American documentary credited with being one of the founders of what is variously called "Direct Cinema" or "Cinema Verite."

FEATURED CONTRIBUTOR

David Levi Straus

David Levi Strauss is the author of *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (2003), *The Fighting Is a Dance, Too: Leon Golub & Nancy Spero* (2000), *Between Dog & Wolf: Essays on Art and Politics* (1999), *Broken Wings: The Legacy of Landmines* (1998) and a book of poems, *Manoeuvres* (1980).

His essays and reviews appear regularly in Artforum and Aperture and he has written exhibition catalogues and monographs on the work of numerous artists, including Martin Puryear, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Carolee Schneeman, Alfredo Jaar, Miguel Rio Branco, Mike Bidlo, Raoul Hague and Robert Frank, Tim Davis, and Daniel Martinez.

David studied poetics at New College in San Francisco, is a founding editor of *ACTS: A Journal of New Writing* (1982–90) and editor of *A Book of Correspondences for Jack Spicer* (1987). He was also a recipient of the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in writing in 2003–04 and is on the faculty of the Center for Curatorial Studies and Art in Contemporary

exhibition gallery performance-based thing.") Free103's twenty-one official transmission artists produce an often bewildering array of media art. There's Todd Merrell's ambient shortwave radio pieces, LoVid's playful video collages, and Joshua Fried's danceable live-radio mash-up, Radio Wonderland. What unites these artists—and what lies at the core of transmission arts—is an obsession with the mechanics of transmission technologies and the creative potential they open up for artists who are willing to, as Fried puts it, "take technology off its throne."

Free103 co-curated New York's third annual Noise! festival this past May, further establishing itself within the city's community of avant-garde sound artists. And professors at Brown University and Columbia University have incorporated transmission arts into their lesson plans. Steve Pierce, the executive director of the New York Media Alliance and a professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (his class recently received a visit from free103 staff), describes Roe and Joseph-Hunter's work as "bringing back some of the wonder of the early days of radio, when anything seemed possible." In free103's former project space just off Bedford Avenue in south Williamsburg, Roe is sitting bundled in nearly the same outfit he wore two days ago at the Black & White Gallery—gray corduroy pants, a heavy red sweater (with elbow pads), and a green knit cap—except now he's got a thick scarf wrapped around his small, mousy frame. It's a bitterly cold February night and the thermostat—stuck to a small piece of wood and screwed to the wall—reads fifty degrees.

Sitting next to Roe, one can't help feeling that things have changed little from free103's early days as a pirate radio station. With the wind chill, it's probably below zero outside. There's a case of Yuengling Lager chilling just beyond the window. In the distance, the J train rattles across the Williamsburg Bridge. There are three local bands playing in the free103point9 Project Space tonight. Each performance will be videotaped and streamed live on free103's website.

Roe's story is deeply entwined with the subversive DIY spirit that animated the pirate radio movement of the 1990s. In 1994, Roe launched his first pirate radio station in Tampa's Ybor City, a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood whose abandoned buildings made it attractive to the city's low-rent-seeking artists. From the get-go, Roe envisioned 87X in much the same way he sees free103point9 today—as a support group for local artists. As Ybor City gentrified and its artists were forced out, Roe envisioned the airways as a way to return to his old stomping grounds. "We started thinking about how we could create a venue in the neighborhood even though we'd been forced physically out of the place," Roe says.

In 1997, two years after Roe arrived in Williamsburg, 87X was shut down by the FCC as part of a larger raid on Tampa's pirate radio community. That same year, Roe founded free103point9 with fellow activists Greg Anderson and Violent Hopkins, focusing all his energy on "micro-casting," the preferred term for illegal short-range radio broadcasting. Each weekend, free103 would set up shop at a friendly apartment or gallery with a modest collection of one-, ten-, sixteen-, or forty-watt transmitters. The flyers plastered around the neighborhood days before

Culture at Bard College.

Read his lastest article "Magic & Images / Images & Magic" in the current issue of The Brooklyn Rail.

promised forty-eight straight hours of free-form radio. If someone had to grab something to eat or (god forbid) sleep, the DJ would pop in a recording of a previous broadcast to keep the music rolling. While parties like these may have been "acts of civil disobedience," they were also a blast.

In 2000, free103 decided to go legit. Earlier that year, the Federal Communications Commission legalized low-power FM radio service. Radio stations could now receive licenses from the FCC provided they restricted themselves to non-commercial educational broadcasting and a 3.5-mile service range. With some of the movement's goals met, free103 dropped the pirate radio struggle to focus on, as Joseph-Hunter describes them, "the community of artists who were starting to think conceptually about the airwaves." When Joseph-Hunter originally got involved with free103, around 1999, she already had a strong background in arts a dministration, including four years with the video art organization Electronic Arts Intermix. With Roe's backing, she and Matt Mikas (free103's operations manager, until he left over a dispute with the organization this spring) guided free103 out of the legal netherworld of micro-casting, through the bureaucratic jungles of the non-profit application process, and into the arms of funders like the New York State Council of the Arts and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Free103 officially became a non-profit in 2002.

At the same time, other former pirates, notably Philadelphia's Prometheus Radio Project, were taking the opposite route—using their non-profit status to challenge the FCC directly in federal court.

As the late May sun streamed through the translucent warehouse windows of free103's new Berry Street project space, Roe explained, "We were already a crazy art station to begin with, so we just wanted to take that further."

A week later, Mikas told me over pierogis at Williamsburg's S&B Restaurant that the decision to go non- profit—a decision he played a major role in—was a big mistake. For him, what is essential to transmission arts—"the experience of the pirate radio movement, the experience of risk-taking, the experience of doing something illegal"—has been lost with the injection of foundation support. The form's legitimization has made it "anemic and ephemeral—a niche market for the fine-arts world."

Mikas' analysis overlooks the fact that many transmission artists, even those who consider themselves largely independent of free103's day-to-day operations, are working toward the same goals inspiring the most radical media critics. Their activism just happens to take place in a gallery or loft space. "We're very interested in the radio waves being a public space," says Valerie Tevere, half of the duo neuroTransmitter. For Fried—whose Radio Wonderland uses a Buick 6 steering wheel and a trunk full of software to transform live radio into club-ready sound collages—part of getting people to think critically about the airwaves is getting them to dance. "My fantasy is that someone's going to go home [after one of my shows] and they'll just start playing with the volume knob in rhythm and

all of a sudden it becomes something that they have more control of," says Fried.

Roe wants us thinking "about what is on the radio and what could be on the radio." Mikas wants us "working with the airwaves in a non-corporate, non-state model." Fried just wants us to "lose control and start dancing." I'm just glad I never called Genie.

John MacDonald is a graduate student in the Cultural Reporting and Criticism program at New York University.

Print