

Tune(In)) Radio Community in Microcosm **By Matt Mikas**

free103point9's *Tune(In))*, a multi-channel, site-specific, installation of live performance, sound, and video art using FM frequencies, engages listeners as active participants in the transmission process and challenges their preconceptions of social interaction in the performance space. By creating a social environment in which performance becomes both a private, personal experience, and a shared, acknowledged choice, the artists and audiences are each made aware of their dependence upon each other and the role of physical and ethereal architecture in the distribution of telecommunicated ideas. This creates an independent community as distinguished from the one-way cycles of production and consumption inherent to mass media.

Tune(In)) is the temporary installation of a model community, where artists and audiences co-exist with outside influences, yet maintains an identity distinct both in content and presentation. The FM bandwidth becomes the continental icon with its established city-states of commercial and venerable public institutions amongst which temporary autonomous zones of performance are placed as designated outposts of creativity. As the public congregates within the physical performance space, they are confronted by the lack of amplified sound and are instead made aware of the ambience of their own interactions. In this manner the role of the listener is made prominent by its juxtaposition as the actual shared audible content of the performers themselves. To access the artist's work an individual journey must be embarked upon, wherein alternate frequencies are crossed until the desired content is accessed. This momentum carries the audience across a gulf of common experience to an intimate contact with the artists who are communicating through avenues more readily recognized as being able to span greater distances than a live on-site performance would indicate.

To better understand the genesis of this microcosmic radio community a brief summary of some of the concerns relevant to the medium need to be addressed. That military and industrial uses of radio technology would coincide with entertainment purposes, led early artists and experimenters to envision more subtle and profound approaches. Filippo Tomasso Marinetti's futurist document, *La Radia*, was a manifesto linking the broadcast pragmatism of communication and music with aesthetic focuses such as interference, silence, and sensation. The conjoined union of opposites implied by this dialectic is in keeping with the Futurist doctrine of simultaneity and can also help explain the movement's juxtaposition of artistic expression with its

embrace of Fascism. In fact, this same juxtaposition is evident in the radio works of the American poet, Ezra Pound. Commissioned by BBC producer, E.A.F. Harding in 1930, *Le Testament*, and *Cavalcanti*, were two operas written by Pound specifically with radio in mind. Employing vocal dialects and sound montages, the productions were meant to engage the listener in the active use of their imagination.

The didacticism inherent in Maretti and Pound's approach to the medium is a direct result of the usages of radio set forth by the state and commerce at the time. Despite attempts at artistic applications, content had ultimately become influenced by the concerns necessary to access. In the post World War II period subversion of this paradigm was to be achieved in the case of content by acknowledgement of the totality of the broadcast spectrum. In his composition, *Imaginary Landscape #4*, John Cage used both the programming and its absence across the radio dial to create a random work independent of the composer and broadcaster alike. By the use of twelve radios played simultaneously as instruments the presence and amount of negative space on the bandwidth drew attention to the media itself rather than its various messages. Such an informed outlook on mass media would allow for more direct attempts at engagement to become possible as the final third of the century approached.

In his essay, *Radio Dada Manifesto*, John Corbett, places these engagements as a resistance to control. By positing that radio is a form of surveillance, he positions it as a construct which creates an audience in order to learn about and influence it. Such a realization of subtext in a given medium can allow for it to be manipulated by the artist much more easily. Limitations, oddly enough, can lead to expansions. Corbett cites the example of Ben Vautier's 1965 mail art piece, *The Postman's Choice*, as an example. This stamped envelope with different addresses on each side shows that exposing elements of limitation or contradiction creates a feedback loop that effectively removes the medium from its function and places it in itself as an art. It is just such an acceleration of a technology's applications which informs Transmission Art in general and *Tune(In))* in particular. The creation of uses for modes of distribution beyond their original and commonly accepted parameters brings a leveling of hierarchy and extends the approach towards interaction.

An interactive function for radio was espoused quite early on by Bertoldt Brecht. In describing his 1927 stage piece *The Flight of Lindberg* and its employment of radio both as metaphor and actual stagecraft, he made clear his intentions to alter the medium. He saw the need for technology to have democratic responsibility saying, in effect, that access and

participation in media, "A call for a kind of resistance by the listener, and for his mobilization and redrafting as producer." Such a utopian vision for a media community would have its methodology put into practice by the latter part of the century. Collective efforts in video, free form radio, and "pirate" radio would envision and enact media content in applications freed from the restrictions of state and commercial interests.

The counterculture of the late 1960s, in terms of opposition to the status quo, saw itself as an evolved and enlightened outgrowth of the industrial capital system and as such demanded and required new systems of production and distribution. The egalitarian prospect of the video camera created a relatively low cost avenue of access to a medium previously the exclusive domain of the broadcasting and film industry. The journal *Radical Software* envisioned the electronic image as extended from poetry and visual art and as a strategic format for documenting and validating diverse communities and grassroots networks. With the promise of cable television on the horizon it seemed that the democratic production and distribution of content could effectively challenge and change consensus reality. To the same effect, free form radio, broke with conventional molds of programming challenging the notion of demographics by infusing diverse musical genres and radical ideologies into unpredictable and motion filled sound spaces. However as the youth movement of the 1960s matured and began to fill the occupations of the previous generation, many such ideologies began to ossify. By the 1980's the artistic use of video became commodified as a promotional tool supporting pop music. Cable television provided limited community access while commercial interests still dominated the spectrum. And free form radio had proven commercially unviable for the media giants who owned the airwaves due to its unpredictable and potentially subversive content. Even the small amount of community and college formats that had emerged were, by the late 1980s, controlled by concerns dictated by either the market, the state, or both. In contrast, the utopian sentiments of independent media were best preserved by the so called pirates who seized control of the airwaves and created for the first time in the 20th Century a truly autonomous and readily accessible media.

The first pirate radio stations of the coasts of Europe in the early 1960's were differentiated from their land-locked cousins only in their progressive (for the time) content and lack of licensing. Their main concerns, however, were still commercial. In fact, it was their attractiveness to advertisers that led the licensed stations to successfully petition authorities to forbid onshore companies from advertising via the pirates. Another example of shipboard broadcasting

was Radio New York International. This station was set up on a foreign-registered ship anchored off the Long Island coast and briefly held a large profile in the late summer of 1987 until the Honduran government, which had registered the ship, granted U.S. authorities permission to board. The FCC then confiscated or destroyed the transmitter equipment. Such cat and mouse games have frequently been played between the authorities and covert or overt broadcasters consistently throughout the latter part of the 20th Century with either side gaining little ground. The relatively small cost of low-power transmitters makes access to the airwaves an easily realized goal. Sustainability, however, is another matter.

The challenge of democratic access to the airwaves became met by the strategies of the nationwide microcasting movement of the 1990s. Started by a blind African-American activist in Springfield, IL and a Gulf War protester in Berkeley, CA., the movement encouraged a critical mass of low power transmitters to take to the air. M'banna Kantako's Human Rights Radio and Stephen Dunifer's Free Radio Berkeley effectively launched the largest civil disobedience campaign in America since the Vietnam War as thousands of microcasters around the U.S. took to the airwaves. By attempting to overwhelm the FCC offices with court cases, this effort was met with some limited success. A watered-down Low Power FM program was implemented in 2001, granting a few licenses to mostly rural broadcasters. Yet free speech without government permission is still not allowed in the public parklands of the airwaves.

It is from this milieu of covert and overt tactics, community mobilization and sustained creative efforts that *Tune(In))* emerges as a strategic demonstration of a temporary community that can assemble to create an impact on a public audience without the need for a permanent presence. Much like the *Temporary Autonomous Zone* of guerilla poet Hakim Bey's ontological broadsheets, *Tune(In))* shares at least a kindred outlook with the rave community of the 1990s. The initial idea for *Tune(In))* emerged as a strategy to avoid police notice typically stemming from noise complaints. A "silent rave" would avoid such confrontations with the state. Likewise, *Tune(In))* proposes a way around the corporate and limited template of radio today.

The active mobilization of media into direct contact with the community is a guiding philosophy of the independent transmission artist. Beyond the generalized terminologies of "piracy" and "low power" which tend to have defined the independent FM broadcasting movement, *Tune(In))* emerges from the microradio community to call into question those

assumptions about the purposes of media. By proposing the process of transmission itself as an art, the *Tune(In))* program where multiple performances occur simultaneously in a shared “silent” space is at once both deceptively novel and subtly transformative. Unexplored issues of public and personal space become addressed and activated. The idea of an independent technologically based cultural network is made manifest. And performance becomes one with process. Yet the concept of *Tune(In))* is not so much about the happening itself but the workable hypothesis that new and interesting ways of adapting the machinery of mass media are still very much possible and as yet uncharted. It is in this way that the effects of the event resonate beyond the initial presentation and duration. The process is no longer about the product but its creation. Distribution is recognized as finite yet transmutable and creativity becomes an essential part of access. These ideas are initially presented in microcosm then resonate far beyond the actual transmissions. They spread out from their point of origin as new ideologies and calls to action. The image of a pebble dropped into a pond becomes the active metaphor for transmission arts, which seeks to give birth to new and expanding waveforms in the realms of discussion and activation of communications.

References

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