

Transmissions Between Memory and Amnesia

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Abstract

In light of constantly expanding digital storage capacities, improved delivery of customized multimedia content, and the possibility of digitally indexing almost all of the world's data, radio at first glance appears a glaring anachronism. However, an increasing number of "new media" artists are using this most ephemeral, un-index-able and "old" medium instead of or in addition to digital technologies. Through their deliberate use of an analog, aural, and dissipating material, these artists suggest that the struggle to listen, communicate, and remember is more meaningful than the total recall (chimerically) promised by digital technologies. In this paper, author and artist Sarah Kanouse presents two of her own recent projects along with work of several other contemporary artists who use the radio spectrum less as a method for distributing already completed audio projects than as a unique, public material for producing work existing in the liminal place between memory and amnesia.

Farming Waves

In 2005, the US-based arts organization free103point9 founded a residency program in support of its mission of “establishing and cultivating the genre Transmission Arts.”¹ The residency, which takes place at the organization’s rural campus, “Wave Farm,” is designed to support the creative exploration of the radio spectrum as both site and material for contemporary art. Wave Farm is notable not just because it is possibly the first retreat campus dedicated exclusively to the medium of ‘transmission’, rather than to music, composition, sound or new media art, but also because of the distinctly organic ring to its name. Wave Farm evokes a homespun, handmade metaphor: on the 30 acre property in the New York Catskills, radio waves are seeded, watered, weeded, and ultimately harvested by loving artist-farmers.

While artists have used radio since shortly after the technology’s adoption, free103point9 is the most visible and active group in the United States pushing to catalog, research, and theorize these efforts to establish the significance of transmission and radio art as distinct forms with their own histories and theoretical currents. This approach seems significant at a point in time when some artists are increasingly weary of the unfulfilled utopian rhetoric surrounding “new media” as an art and commercial form. While the transmission art promoted by organizations like free103point9 doesn’t preclude engagement with computer-networked technologies, emphasis is placed on the space, materiality, interactivity, and poetics of transmission as an ephemeral and physical form, rather than focusing primarily on what the transmissions broadcast or promoting the exhaustiveness, accessibility, indexibility, and apparent permanence of the digital archive. free103point9 calls its campus “Wave Farm,” not “Radio Farm,” encouraging a turn from thinking about ‘radio art’ as something *received via* the radio as apparatus to art *made from* radio waves as material. At risk of sounding like unreconstructed

modernists, free103point9 invites artists to think about what is irreducible about the transmission form, consider how that space has been theorized and utilized historically, and to create works both about and within those limitations.

This sort of attention to the implications of form remains open to critical engagement with the actually existing world beyond the art object or ‘art wave.’ Working within the specificity of the material form of radio has certain powerful implications for artists interested in issues of public memory. Over the last two years, I have been making work that hinges upon radio’s peculiar materiality and cultural-political status to perform counter-memorials to failed moments in American class struggle. This paper represents an attempt to introduce the sprawling and marginal history of transmission art with ideas about cultural memory both through critical analysis and an exploration of my work at that of other artists who use the ephemeral, unindexable medium of radio waves to raise, remark, and release moments in history.

On November 12, 2004, one day after the 117th anniversary of the execution of the Haymarket Martyrs, I strapped a 1-watt transmitter onto my bike rack and rode 27 miles. My path roughly reversed the journey taken by the US army in 1895 to occupy Chicago in order to quell a railroad strike that threatened to turn revolutionary and took me from the site of the famed ‘incident,’ over the streets of present-day Chicago, and besides some of the most valuable residential real estate in North America. The ride ended at the fort that had been built following Haymarket to permanently station troops within a day’s march of the city to ‘deal with’ any further labor unrest the memory of Haymarket might unleash. At the foot of martial statue of General Philip H. Sheridan at the heart of the fort, long since decommissioned and turned into a novelty luxury housing subdivision, I flicked off my transmitter. It had been noiselessly inscribing 103.5 FM with a distorted, mournful Internationale throughout the 3-hour trip.²

A few months later, I began traveling to unmarked sites of other labor uprisings and transmitting the same, distorted Internationale for two minutes of a not-so-empty ‘silence’ out of a suitcase.³ Both pieces transmitted over a frequency used by a Clear-Channel radio station, interrupting the broadcasts of present-day corporate capital perhaps for only a few square feet with a memorial to past opposition. My memorial used the same technology often employed on the strike line to educate passers-by, but as a monument doomed to dissipation, inscrutability, and failure, the slight, invisible action didn’t make heroes of the fallen, didn’t fix the narrative, and didn’t pretend that the story—of the massacre, of the battle, of the labor movement, of capitalism—ended any differently or better. Since I began experimenting with radio as a performative memorial, resonances between dissipating, invisible, energetic radio waves and partially-remembered events I marked have only increased. Using radio as a form for public memorializing requires reexamining and integrating ideas about radio as a public space with concepts surrounding transmissional ontology.

Interlude 1: The First Five Miles

On the night of August 23, 1998, Mike Pearson and Michael Brookes walked five miles across Mynydd Bach in Wales. Dressed in leather boots, leather gaiters, an embroidered waistcoat, frock coat, top hat and lilac gloves, Pearson carried a halogen lamp, radio microphone, battery unit, earpiece and receiver—the picture-perfect Victorian gentleman meeting the late twentieth century. Brookes wore a backpack concealing a radio transmitter which the two men used to relay statements made by Pearson to a radio engineer waiting in a relay car, who sent the signal via satellite to Norway, where it traveled over landline to a BBC studio in Aberystwyth, where Pearson’s voice was mixed live with a pre-produced radio drama/documentary. On the walk across the moor and in the broadcast, Pearson played the role of Augustus Brackenberry, an

*Englishman whose attempts in the 1820s to enclose 850 acres of this very Welsh countryside met with organized and violent resistance. The descendants of those resisters fanned out over the hillsides in their automobiles, listening to the bilingual performance (in Welsh and English) over the radio in the dark.*⁴

The history of thought about transmission space over the past century is episodic, partial, and idiosyncratic, and concerted attempts to draw together these threads began relatively recently, as a sub-section with new media theory, as part of an academic effort to theorize the aural within (or against) visual culture, or by devotees of eccentric modernist marginalia. The last decade or so has witnessed an explosion of critical and curatorial efforts to corral these threads into something like a field, but ideas about radiophonic space and materiality remains scattered, fragmentary, and, compared to the overwhelming weight of history that attends other art forms, refreshingly in flux. These diverse currents of thought all run in marked contrast to the overwhelmingly dominant corporate or state broadcasting model, in which radio is a resource, in theory a public one but which, like all public resources, is understood to be best managed by private or bureaucratic concerns, and on which cautious, professionally-produced content, emptied of personality, politics, and corporeality, can be inscribed. The moribund quality of commercial radio paradoxically “leaves the field open for resuscitations,” as Christof Migone wrote: “radio is dead, long live radio.”⁵

Given the brimming over of radiophonic possibilities, it is necessary to be selective about the threads engaged in thinking about radio as a possible memorial form. Two roughly two parallel and seemingly contradictory threads of thought in the history of transmission animate my exploration of radio as a material for counter-memorials. First, many leftist movements have long seen the democratization of communication as a paramount objective and have at times

taken the direct action of “seizing the airwaves,” to borrow the title of a well-known pirate radio handbook.⁶ These movements emphasize structural issues surrounding radio, such as ownership, access, and regulation, and call for the production of non-professional, community-controlled and radical content and the kinds of political engagements it produces. On the other hand, the second current focuses almost exclusively on the peculiar ontological status and phenomenological properties of the transmission with any critique of the dominant broadcast model usually made only obliquely. Before specifically identifying what might be useful from these divergent histories for the artist using transmission as a memorial form, I want to further elaborate these propositions and look at how and where they diverge.

If the commercial exploitation of the sexy figure of the “radio pirate” is any indication, the social propositions about radio are more familiar and have greater currency in the popular imagination, so I will start with them.⁷ Bertolt Brecht grasped radio’s potential as a tool for left social transformation very early. In notes on the technology dating from the late 1920s, he excoriated the way broadcasting was already so dominated by bourgeois interests that it could not result in anything of social or political consequence.⁸ At about the same time, he began exploring the use of radio in live performances, and these aesthetic experiments culminated with the publication of the foundational essay, “The Radio as a Communications Apparatus.” Animating generations of free- and community-radio activists, Brecht called for a re-orientation of radio from one- to two-way communication in order to “transform the reports of those who govern into answers to the questions of those governed.”⁹ Brecht’s vision for radio art was characteristically functionalist: he proudly proclaimed his own radiophonic work, *The Flight of the Lindberghs* to have “no value if it does not train.”¹⁰ He really did not conceptualize the medium in relation to its materiality or give much consideration to the possibilities for radical

political action residing in what contemporary radio artist Gregory Whitehead calls “the radio signal as intimate but untouchable, sensually charged but technically remote, reaching deep inside but from way out there, seductive in its invitation but possibly lethal in its effects.”¹¹

Interlude 2: 12 Miles Out

From 1964-1967, the notorious Radio Caroline blasted unlicensed broadcasts of independent rock n roll from a ship just off the coast of Britain. The offshore broadcaster was enormously successful, attracting more listeners within a few months of being on air than the entire BBC system and spawning dozens of similar stations until a bizarre murder emboldened the government to shut down the wildly popular radio “pirates.”¹² In 2005, the transmission art collective neuroTransmitter created “12 Miles Out,” an homage to these early unlicensed broadcasters who so revolutionized, for better or worse, what people came to expect of popular radio. The project encompassed an installation of radio antennas positioned to sketch a pirate radio ship on the walls of the gallery and a micropower broadcast of archival sound drawn from the Radio Caroline archives.¹³

Gregory Whitehead’s richly evocative, embodied language characterizes another mode of apprehending transmission that privileges its ontology while de-emphasizing structural concerns. For Douglas Kahn, radio cannot be reduced to sound that can be perceived: “sound existed at either end(s) [of the transmission], but in between there was nothing but silence, reduced to the trajectory of a signal.”¹⁴ According to artist Joe Milutis, that signal’s “most fundamental ontological feature is precisely [its] ability to break down ontological borders,” to pass through bodies whether listening or not, to crowd the minds of listeners with more voices than they can hear.¹⁵ The status of the physical in radiophonic space is, in fact, highly problematic: while invisible, radio waves are nonetheless material and exhibit tendencies both supernatural (they

travel over great distances nearly instantaneously) and profoundly corporeal (they are temporarily finite, and subject to dissipation and interference from other physical objects and electromagnetic emissions). Gregory Whitehead contends, “Radio happens in sound, at a perceptual level, but the guts of radio are not sounds, but rather the gaps between sending and receiving, between transmission and audition...radio is essentially a gap medium.”¹⁶ The split second between broadcast and reception matters very much even while remaining fundamentally inscrutable. For the ordinary listener, radio is uncannily simultaneous, producing a “disembodiment [that] meant that an [auditory] object or body existed in two places at once.”¹⁷

Interlude 3: Requiem for Baghdad

On April 13, 2003, Tetsuo Kogawa did what he does most every month: prepare a meal for visitors, set up a home-made transmitter, and improvise a composition by ‘playing’ the airwaves with his hands, performatively altering the capacitance, inductance, impedance, and interference of his micro-power transmitter. Coming three weeks after the US-led invasion of Iraq, the performance was one in which the cloud of danger and violence that hangs over all acts of messing with the electromagnetic spectrum was palpable. Kogawa wrote of the political ironies embedded in his chosen material: “While improvising, conceptually, I was thinking of a requiem for Bagdad since the modern war tries to erase all of horizons, physical or conceptual. In fact, the US Air Force used “E-bomb” to knock the Iraqi TV off the air with an ‘experimental electromagnetic pulse device of over two billion watts’. This was the totally opposite use of airwaves against emancipating and finding innumerable horizons of airwaves” (grammar and spelling original).¹⁸

Like the disciplined study of radio, the study of public memory is a newish field, paying

careful attention to the ways cultural memory is constructed, how it is felt, and how it mobilizes particular solidarities and political responses. While there is invariably an ideological dimension to public memories because they are constituted within—and are ways to contest—power relations, the politics surrounding memory would not be so complex nor conflicts so intractable were not intimate feelings also bound up in what is remembered about the past and how.

According to Pierre Nora, modern memory is archival and exhaustive: “it relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image.”¹⁹ At the same time, modern memory is not really memory at all—it is crystallized into *lieux de memoire*, where history is emotionalized, concretized, personalized, and ritualized because everywhere else emotive, communal forms of memory are suppressed by modernity.

If Nora is right and modern memory is exhaustive and material, radio—partial and immaterial—would seem to offer it nothing, especially in light of the digital archive that promises total recall and instant access to the contents of all the world’s archives and libraries, with precise if immaterial facsimiles. FM broadcasts dissipate, receivers cannot pick up yesterday’s transmissions, and radio as a material remains local, reaching only as far as its signal can be found. A radio memorial seems humble and self-effacing; it’s almost impossible *not* to overlook it, and special effort must be made to receive and listen to the transmissions. Using a material so intangible and frail for acts of memory seems a resolute refusal of modern, archival memory, but radio itself is deeply bound up in the modernist project of mastering space, time, and physics. Radio memorials therefore perform a series of illuminating reversals: flickering at the edge of comprehension, radio both suspends time and succumbs to it, brings a memory into recollection only to lose it a moment later, and raises, re-marks, and releases moments in history.

At the same time, radio, like memory itself, is as much always there as always absent; as John Cage observed, “all that radio is...is making available to your ears what was already in the air and available to your ears but you couldn’t hear it. In other words, all it is is making audible something that you are already in. You are bathed in radio waves...This radio [receiver] simply makes audible something that you thought was inaudible.”²⁰ Like radio waves, the past lingers in the present, just hovering beneath inaccessibility and endangered by the onward movement of time. In their invisibility, inaudibility, and temporarily, transmission memorials are especially adept at revealing what Nora says “is true of *lieux de memoire*: that without commemorative vigilance, history [will] soon sweep them away.”²¹

Moreover, radio’s persistent present-absence, the gap between transmitting and receiving, the impossibility of unaided reception mirrors what Andreas Huyssen has called the “voids” of memory—spaces pregnant and damning in their emptiness, spaces that materialize through absence an incommensurability of time and experience, spaces that speak silently and with authority on that which has been deliberately erased but for which there is no substitute.²² The ontological gap of radio takes on an alarming dimension—a testament to the impossibility of reconciling with the past, of cosmetically undoing past injustices and, by extension, it points to our powerlessness to reverse the effects of our own present actions. Radio’s dissipating, disjunctive, and self-effacing characteristics make it function quite differently from physical monuments, whose permanence tends to veil conflict and violence in “the stasis of monumentalized and pacified spaces,” as W.J.T. Mitchell observed.²³ The witness is left straining to hear what she is being told she cannot *really* hear, *really* understand, *really* encounter, that she is both moot and mute and left with the voids of what once was.

At the same time, radio is an inscription on what used to be called the ether, and there is unquestionable bravado about modulating the electromagnetic spectrum for one's own purposes. This is not solely—and never neutrally—a poetic act: as the political thread of radio thinking reminds us, electromagnetic waves, like public memories, are politically situated and hotly contested. Inscribing the airwaves as an act of memory, then, makes an oppositional claim not just for the public status of the radio spectrum but also, by extension, for the significance of the memorialized event in public culture. The consonance between radio's performative existence and the transmitted memorial both asserts centrality by appropriating the public airwaves and, by being subject to interference and immediately dissipating, poetically enacts its own marginal status in the public imaginary.

What Joe Milutis observed of radio could be said equally of public memory: “Many times the desire to reveal the invisible, immaterial, and essentially unrevealable substance of radio...takes the form of a struggle to manifest the radiophonic as reality itself, as part of our basic make-up. Even though radio's ethereal and vaguely metaphysical aspects might seemingly relate it more to superstition and false ideology than to true matter, radio is a thing of matter, even if it is a matter that struggles to be known, always to be suppressed.”²⁴ At the heart of the radio memorial is, in fact, this *struggle*: struggle to listen, communicate, and remember, struggle to place what would conveniently be forgotten in a tightly policed public sphere, struggle to bridge the gap between remembering and forgetting, transmitting and receiving. By performing the shifting and imperfect nature of public memory, the radio memorial foregrounds what is true of all monuments: that their significances shift with time, distance, and interference, that they are as much sites of forgetting as remembering. Unlike the monument, however, radio makes no pretence that memory could function otherwise.

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Notes

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⁴ Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, "The First Five Miles," (1998). A full description can be found in Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁵ Christof Migone, "Headhole: Malfunctions and Dysfunctions of an Fm Exciter," in *Experimental Sound and Radio*, ed. Allen S. Weiss (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001). Page 43.

⁶ Stephen Dunifer and Ron Sokolsky, eds., *Seizing the Airwaves: A Free-Radio Handbook* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1998).

⁷ The outlaw allure of pirate radio, perhaps nowhere more visible than in the 1990 Christian Slater vehicle *Pump Up the Volume*, remains alive and well. As of April 2006, www.pirateradio.com sells software to turn your Windows-based PC into an Internet-only broadcasting station. The site's eyecatching graphic is a cute, purple-haired, miniskirt and moon-boot-wearing cartoon character sporting headphones and an ammo belt.

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⁹ Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as a Communications Apparatus," in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, ed. Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000). Page 43.

¹⁰ Bertolt Brecht, "Explanations [About "the Flight of the Lindberghs"]," in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, ed. Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000). Page 38.

¹¹ Gregory Whitehead, "Out of the Dark: Notes on the Nobodies of Radio Art," in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992). P 254

¹² Peter Moore, *Radio Caroline, a History* [Web site] (2005 [cited April 19 2006]); available from <http://www.radiocaroline.co.uk/history.asp>.

¹³ neuroTransmitter, "12 Miles Out," (2005). Information available from neuroTransmitter's Web site: http://www.neurotransmitter.fm/12miles_update.html [cited April 19, 2005].

¹⁴ Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992). Page 21.

¹⁵ Joe Milutis, "Radiophonic Ontologies and the Avantgarde," in *Experimental Sound and Radio*, ed. Allen S. Weiss (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001). Page 59.

¹⁶ Allie Alvarado, *An Interview with Gregory Whitehead* (2005 [cited April 17 2006]); available from <http://www.free103point9.org/waveguide.php>.

¹⁷ Kahn and Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*. Page 20.

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²¹ Nora, *Realms of Memory*. Page 7.

²² Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, ed. Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries, *Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

²³ W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art: "Do the Right Thing"," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990). Page 890.

²⁴ Milutis, "Radiophonic Ontologies and the Avantgarde." Page 58.