



The Micro Radio Project

Kristen Roos

Wi: Journal of Mobile Media, Spring 2009

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.65968/PSXX1130>

Roos, Kristen. "The Micro Radio Project". *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*. Spring (2009). Web.

<https://doi.org/10.65968/PSXX1130>

The Micro Radio Project

Kristen Roos



Radio Art in the Expanded Field

In the essay “Cultural Confinement”, published in the October 1972 issue of *Artforum*, Robert Smithson writes on what he feels is a need for artists to create works of art that are outside of the gallery and museum systems.

Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is. Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called “galleries.” A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. (Fabozzi 2002, p.248)

Artists who were a part of this newly expanded sculptural field took into account their surroundings; *sculpture* was often created from materials found in the very place that the work came to exist. Although Smithson isn’t a radio artist, I mention his article

because it represents a moment in which site specificity took on a whole new dimension. The more recent emergence of a movement of site-specific sound and radio art can, in some respects, pay homage to artists such as Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, and Gordon Matta-Clark.

My radiophonic work, entitled the *micro radio project*, acknowledges the spaces that I am creating within; I am using these spaces as an aural palette from which to create what Marcel Duchamp may have called *musical sculpture*.¹ These sonic sculptures are created in the same way that one might categorize, cut and paste the sounds that one is confronted with on a daily basis, only in a much more concrete form. The micro radio transmissions speak of memory as a kind of sound collage, in which the sounds that enter our bodies are organized according to various themes in our minds. We are mixing and creating sound collage and microscopic sound sculptures on a daily basis—largely because sound is constantly entering and vibrating our bodies.

micro radio: process

The technical process of creating the sound collage I use for the micro radio broadcasts starts with gathering audio material from different environments using portable recording devices. After the audio is gathered, it is sculpted using digital sound software, and broadcast to mobile radios placed within the original field recording environment. William S. Burroughs' innovative techniques of tape cut-ups had a similar, although purely theoretical, use in *The Electronic Revolution*. Burroughs suggests using portable tape recorders to set up a kind of guerilla-media, where his collaged tape cut-ups would generate street happenings intended as direct social commentary.

The ephemeral moments created through the micro radio transmissions reflect their environments as small-scale broadcasts that temporarily create microscopic-media. This gesture references Tetsuo Kugowa's *Micro Radio Manifesto*,² which elaborates on Burroughs' *guerilla-media* techniques, theorizing further upon what it means to use a low-power radio transmitter. A listener must travel to these transmissions, rather than with larger more pervasive radio frequencies that travel to the listener. This creates a temporary community of listeners, and asks questions about the spaces that make up our aural urban environment.

Bertolt Brecht once prophesied on such uses of radio shortly after they started appearing in the family rooms of Europe and North America. In 1929, after the phonograph and the telephone were already in household use, Brecht wrote the essay *The Radio as Communications Apparatus*.³ This essay called for an interactive and creative use for radio, and spoke of communication and the audience that was being communicated to. If radio is *repurposed* into an interactive medium, or a *utopia* (the root for utopia being the Greek word *outopos* "no place"), this is the place in which the micro radio project exists, as a medium to support the socially disruptive techniques of Burroughs, as well as the sonic techniques of Pierre Schaeffer and Glenn Gould.⁴

Radio transmitters, unlike phonographs, and telephones have never been marketed for the public to use, and the ability to transmit has remained in the hands of engineers, and other professionals. Broadcasting corporations were established as soon as the radio made its way into the living room. The restructuring of *readymade* objects normally used to convey information in this way represents a central intervention on the part of my micro radio broadcasts.



Mall Broadcast

Repurposed, Readymade Radio

The radios I have used in the broadcasts have been purchased at second hand stores—*Value Village, Saint Vincent De Paul, and the Salvation Army*. I see these places as repositories for consumer objects, somewhere between the home and the landfill. By gathering from these spaces I am commenting on the flow of consumer items between Canada and the countries that create these items. A hypothetical map of this flow: a radio was made in Japan in 1985 using components built in Taiwan, and shipped to Canada to be sold at an electronics section of a department store. This radio is then acquired at a second hand store in 2005, possibly in a different city than it was first purchased, and possibly having gone through several changes of ownership. The total

amount of land and sea covered by the radio is astounding (two or three continents) as well as the total amount of fossil fuels used to ship it, and the human labor used to create it. The radios I have used in the *micro-radio* broadcasts are objects that contain this history, and are on the verge of becoming obsolete in the face of new possibilities of telematic technologies.

Radio therefore contains a certain character that speaks about both the past and present states of the media and telematic communication spaces, in addition to the ever-changing consumer market for these *readymade* objects.

Receiver/Editor/Transmitter

My micro radio broadcasts exist as moments in time, which explore the aural process of receiving sound into our bodies, and the montage we create with our minds on a daily basis. The use of the environmental sounds, along with the inclusion of the body, ears and minds of the participants, creates an effect in which the *author* and the *art object* disappear into the present state of the broadcast space. Each body involved becomes a *radio station* with a receiver, editor and transmitter in one.

Broadcast Descriptions

Construction Machine

A construction machine slowly rolls into a forested area represented by a chorus of birds—each individually captured on various field-recording hunts on Cortes Island. The machine stops momentarily, and continues by completely annihilating the natural landscape, and soundscape. The machine then gets to work building and constructing—

repetitive, rhythmic, and eerily melodic. Once finished, it moves on, leaving no trace of the sounds of the previous chorus of wildlife.

This piece pays particular attention to the sounds of the various construction sites that have been developed for the upcoming 2010 Olympics. I am interested in investigating the effects of global economic forces on the construction of social/public space, and the aural environment that exists as a result of these forces.

This recording will appear on a forthcoming CD commissioned by CRES Media Arts Committee and Vancouver Co-op Radio.

The Acoustic Commons

This audio collage metaphorically examines the issues explored at the “commons conference”—the commons and privatization—and reaches an audience at the very site that the audio was originally recorded (Victoria BC); this is an important location for the transmission of this work. In micro broadcasting this site-specific sound collage, I am using radio as a metaphor for the enclosure of the land, by temporarily creating a space on the airwaves that is an aural “commons” of sorts.

The speakers that appear in this piece were originally recorded at the conference “The Wars at Home, the Wars Abroad, Imperialism and the everyday” at the University of Victoria in 2005 – and appear chronologically – Chief Kim Recalma-Clutesi of the Qualicum Band, Richard Day, and Arthur Manuel.

Echo Location – The Parking Lot Broadcast

This broadcast is a live Echo Locations performance (Open Space, January 2005) that involved using sounds captured from downtown Victoria using cell phones and portable recording devices. This recording was broadcast in a parking lot on Store street in Victoria BC, Canada. Listeners were encouraged to arrive by car, and tune in on their car radios.

This recording also appears on the errant bodies publication – Radio Territories.

Notes

1. *Salt Seller: The writings of Marcel Duchamp*, contains sketches Duchamp made for a future aural sculpture in which the audience could step into, which he coined “musical sculpture.” Duchamp also defines readymade, quite poetically, in a speech he made in 1961 at the Museum of Modern Art—“Another aspect of the readymade is its lack of uniqueness [...] Since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and readymade products we must conclude that all paintings in the world are ‘readymades aided’ and also works of assemblage.”

2. In his *Micro Radio Manifesto*, Kugowa elaborates on what he means by microscopic radio—“Given the age of various global means such as the satellite communications and the Internet, micro radio can concentrate itself into its more authentic territory: microscopic airwave space. Why don’t you go to a radio station just as you did to theatres? Micro radio theatre could be possible. The airwaves cover only a housing space. That is enough. I have been organizing micro radio party. This is an attempt to change a space to a qualitatively different by a micro transmitter. Let’s start with your own familiar space. Change in a tiny space could resonate to larger space but without microscopic change no radical change would be possible.”

3. An often quoted example of what Brecht theorized on the potential of radio—“The Radio could be the finest possible communications apparatus in public life, a vast system of channels. That is, if it understood how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as to hear, how to bring him into a network instead of isolating him. Following this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers.”

4. In this three part sound collage for radio, *The Solitude Trilogy*, Gould used recordings of conversations with people from isolated Canadian locations to create what he called Contrapuntal Radio. Gould elaborates on his sonic techniques in an interview which comments on his control and manipulation of sound, “...every voice leads its own rather splendid life and adheres to certain parameters of harmonic discipline. I kept a very

close ear as to how the voices came together and in what manner they splashed off each other, both in the actual sound and in the meaning of what was being said.”

References

- Brecht, B. (2000). Radio as communications apparatus. In M. Silberman (Ed.), *Brecht on film and radio*. London: Methuen Press.
- Burroughs, W. (1989). *The job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Fabozzi, P. F. (2002). *Artists critics context*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Flam, J. (1996). *Robert Smithson: The collected writings*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kogawa, T. *Micro radio manifesto*. Polymorphous Space website.
- Milatus, J. (2001). Radiophonic ontologies and the avante garde. In A. S. Weiss (Ed.), *Experimental Sound and Radio*. New York: TDR Books.
- Page, T. (1984). *The Glenn Gould reader*. Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys LTD.
- Sanouillet, M. (1984). *Salt seller: The writings of Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weiss, A. S. (2001). *Experimental sound and radio*. New York: TDR Books.

Biography

Kristen Roos is an artist whose approach to creating sound art usually involves a translation, or change, from one state to another. He delved into electroacoustic music while completing an interdisciplinary undergraduate degree at Concordia University in Montreal . The micro radio project was initiated while completing his MFA at the University of Victoria, BC Canada. His sound sculpture, audio performance and radiophonic work have been exhibited in artists-run centers and festivals nationally. For more information, please visit microradio.ca.