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Expanded Radio Art as PhD Practice From Setup4 Magazine No 2 Radio Art

<http://www.setup4.de/ausgabe-2/themen-und-beitraege/magz-hallexpanded-radio-art/>

by [Magz Hall](#)

Radio After Radio: Redefining Radio Art in the Light of New Media Technology through Expanded Practice is the title of my PhD practice based research. This paper focuses on the extended boundaries of radio art, considering how radio art might be defined in relation to sound art, music, and media art. Mapping the shifting parameters of radio art in the digital era has prompted a consideration of how radio can be seen to be moving from being a predominantly shared "live" event to one consumed "on demand" by a fragmented audience across a multiplicity of platforms. I have been exploring the implications of this transition through my radio practice, which focuses upon the productive tensions that characterize the artist's engagement with radio technology, specifically between the autonomous potentialities offered by the reappropriation of obsolete technology and the new infrastructures and networks promised by the exponential development of new media. The radio installations outlined here - *Radio Mind* and *Numbers* - are individual works which form part of a suite of prerecorded works for *Switch Off*, a project that takes as its overarching theme the possible futures for FM radio. It incorporates elements from a series of eight "trace" stations, produced as a series of radio actions, installations, broadcasts, and interventions between 2007 and 2014.

Radio art is perhaps best understood as a branch of acoustic media art, one which is concerned with the interplay of the relationships between the radio broadcast and its reception. My definition of radio art is drawn from extensive research and draws on an expanding body of writing on the field by writers such as Dan Lander (1994), Kirsten Glandien (2000), Sabine Breitsameter (2007), Heidi Grundmann (2008), and Colin Black (2009). It is not sound art on the radio but rather art-works that address the radio medium in its material specificity, works created for the medium and which in some way destabilize or denaturalize the professionalized consensus of broadcast format and content. By revealing something of the stratifications of power which underlie the everyday production and consumption of radio, something of the medium's latent potential is realized.

My practice-based research has explored the rich history of radio as an artistic medium and the relationship between the artist and technology, emphasizing the role of the artist as a mediator between broadcast institutions and a listening public. The *Switch Off* project takes as its overarching theme the imagined futures of FM analogue radio when abandoned by sanctioned broadcasters in the United Kingdom, presenting future sonic possibilities of analogue radio after the "switch off." The body of the work is made up of eight fictive trace stations that offer possible futures for FM radio long after it has been vacated by public and commercial concerns. They employ differing types of radio art practice, which recall its past uses in order to speculate on its future. I have developed a body of work that considers radio art as event from a number of perspectives in practice: through broadcast actions, interventions, interactions, installations, micro broadcasts, and interviews.

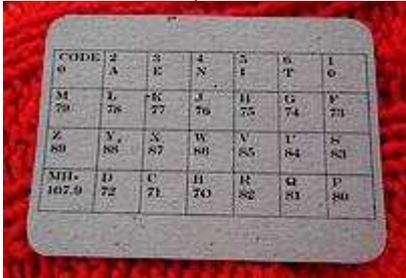
Radio Mind, installation by Magz Hall, Lightworks Festival, Grimsby, 2012.



Radio Recall, installation by Magz Hall, Old Lookout Gallery, Kent, 2013.



Numbers Code, numbers installation by Magz Hall, Sidney Cooper Gallery, Kent, 2012.



These eight speculative trace stations – *Radio Mind*, *Numbers*, *Lone Broadcast*, *Sound Train*, *Babble Station*, *Commercial Break*, *Radio Jam* and *Radio Recall* – are divergent radiophonic works in which fragments of familiar, strange, overlooked and unheard sounds coalesce with experimental drama, radio art and sound poetry. These fictional stations represent different aspects of how FM radio could sound in the future and form the basis for generating a loose dramaturgical structure. Each trace station functions as an abstracted self-contained narrative as well as forming part of an overall suite. This allows me to explore the boundaries of radio art practice and also the five recurrent facets of the experimental radio practice that I have identified through a literature review focused on the last hundred years of radio art practice. The five facets are:

- Performance
- Activist
- Soundscape
- Appropriation
- Transmission

As Geert Lovink pondered in 2011 "We can squat soon to be abandoned FM and AM frequencies. We haven't reached that point yet, and who knows if, and when and how digital radio broadcasting will really take over." I have taken this a step further for theoretical exploration as the trace stations consider and offer up fictional insight into who will be squatting or using the FM spectrum in the future.

Radio

Mind

I will outline two of the trace stations in this paper, starting with the spoof religious healing station *Radio Mind*,¹ which was inspired by contemporary religious pirate stations broadcasting in South London and by the use of radio technologies as an allegory for

religious experience in the early radio era. As such, *Radio Mind* investigated how the shifting terrains of the transcendent and the quotidian are represented through reference to and adoption of new communications technologies. Drawing on early twentieth-century experimental radio, Protestantism, and the powerful mythology of the radiophonic ether, notions of radio art and religious imaginary are brought into question. The title *Radio Mind* references an obscure group of early twentieth-century Anglican clerics who shared an interest in telepathy, psychic research, and psychology as paths of divine/human communication (Klassen, 2007).

In its realization *Radio Mind* also addressed how the territory of radio art can be expanded by micro broadcast interventions in conventional installation spaces by use of affordable technology. The installation represented a fictional religious cult's radio station, which was dressed as a religious chapel that was ornamented with evocative radiophonic memorabilia presented as religious icons. The work was first realized as a site-specific installation, broadcasting in situ via FM in the gallery space to twelve FM radio birds and through a vintage radio "altar piece" at the Old Lookout Gallery, Broadstairs, Kent (2011). The broadcast was also relayed outside the space on FM by its missionaries across the golden sands of this popular seaside resort.

Radio Mind traversed the historical and the fictitious realms, taking as a starting point the writings of Archbishop Frederick Du Vernet (1925) who broadcast telepathic healing via "law of divine vibration." The work took its name from Chapter Two of his 1925 book *Spiritual Radio*. The installation broadcast also drew on David Burliuk's seminal 1926 text *Manifesto, Radio-Style* by the founder the Universal Camp of Radio-Modernists in New York.

Radio Mind revels in the convergence of religious metaphors elaborated within these two divergent texts – Burliuk's pivotal pronouncement of a "radio age," with the goal of uniting all radio, and Du Vernet's expounding on the telepathic power of radio – and they became a point of departure from which to examine how the religious imaginary has informed the popular imagination. Cross readings with Burliuk have revealed a shared convergence with Viktor Khlebnikov's 1921 words: "The Radio of the future the central tree of our consciousness, will inaugurate new ways to cope with our endless undertakings and will unite all mankind." Parallels were revealed with contemporary New Age broadcasters highlighting the persistence of radiophonic metaphor derived from the 1920s.

Inspired by the fire-and-brimstone preaching of Christian pirate radio stations in South London, *Radio Mind* connects the powerful utopian potentiality evoked by reading between these two texts, both addressing radio as an emergent technology, to the present day juncture between analogue and digital media at the threshold of the proposed "digital switch-over."

Through historical research and free-associative practice, *Radio Mind* presented a playful form of radiophonic psychoanalysis of this territory, thereby broadening our understanding of the persistence of utopian metaphors of connectivity and transcendence. It also explored how the dream of collective becoming has been supplanted by one of networked individualism.

Radio Mind (2011-12) was realized as a site-specific micro FM broadcast installation at the Old Lookout Gallery, Broadstairs, in September 2011 and subsequently exhibited at the Burton Gallery, Kent (2011), the Lightworks Festival, Grimsby (2011), and the Deep Wireless Festival (2012). It was the winner of its sound commission funded by the Arts Council England. It has been broadcast on FM on *Radio Futura Portugal* (2011), *DAB Boat Radio* (2012) and *WGXC 90.7-FM*, United States, and also online via *Free103point9*.

Numbers

*Numbers*² is another of the eight fictive trace stations considering the possible future uses of the FM spectrum long after the analogue switch off. In part homage to shortwave numbers

stations, which have remained on air since the Cold War, the work presents a scenario in which the numbers stations move to FM as a tool of outlawed gangs, groups, agents and political movements. As the Internet becomes ever more heavily policed, *Numbers* considers how activists may reappropriate technologies considered obsolete as covert means. A series of micro FM transmitter broadcasts (through twelve radios) encrypted messages taken from the tweets from the Occupy movement. These tweets were heard as numbers from six voices played simultaneously on different radios around the space using three transmitters. Visitors were invited to write encrypted messages for future broadcast using the code provided.

The work predicted that numbers stations will move to FM and will remain there after licensed FM services are switched off, to be used by various outlawed gangs, groups, agents and political movements. Part of a running theme throughout this switch off has been to discuss the future of FM via its past, in this case connecting with the long history of political activists embracing and experimenting with radio since its inception, from the Futurists La Radia (1933) to "Free Radio" stations across Europe, such as Italian *Radio Alice* (1970's) or London's *Interference FM* (1999) to Occupy's *Mayday Radio* in New York (2012).

The Occupy movement tweets struck me as highly radiophonic material for this work and wholly fitting for artistic dissemination "The assemblies have a power that is dispersed and decentralized, with proclamations of uncertain, ambiguous authorship" (Whitehead, 2011).

Numbers considers that activists may be driven back to the past, and more covert means, as the Internet becomes heavily policed. This is a fictive prediction that is already being echoed in the real world. Activist academic Nina Power notes that "it seems increasingly important to organize actions against the cuts offline" (Power, New Left Project, 2013).

Numbers was realized as a surround sound micro broadcast and installation. The project used three micro transmitters and twelve solar-powered FM/DAB radios. The work was exhibited at LCC (2012), Old Lookout Gallery (2012), Sidney Cooper Gallery(2013), and University Galleries, Illinois State University (2013). A seven-voice mix was broadcast at the Addicted 2 Random Festival on Radio Corax (2013), and the Dark Outside (2013), a twenty-four-hour broadcast in the Galloway Forest.

These works are just two of the eight fictive stations which predicted fictional futures for FM³drawing on radio's resilience as a medium and produced during an intensive period of practice-based research completed in 2014.

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Notes

1 *Radio Mind* (2011-12) was realised as a site specific micro FM broadcast installation at the Old Lookout Gallery, Broadstairs, in Sept 2011 and subsequently exhibited at the Burton Gallery, 19th October – 1st December 2011. The Lightworks Festival March 16th, Annual International Arts Festival. Grimsby, UK it was Winner of Sound Commission funded by Arts Council England. The Deep Wireless Festival, Toronto, Canada 19th - 28th, May. It has been broadcast on Radio Futura 19-22 October (2011) 102.1 MHz — Porto, part of Future Places, Digital Media and Local Cultures. Radio Mind was broadcast on DAB Boat Radio 12-19 July (2012) and on WGXC 90.7-FM Oct 13th <http://free103point9.org/> (2012).

2 *Numbers* was a three channel FM radio installation exhibited at: LCC, University of the Arts, London, March 1st -17th 2012, The Old Lookout Gallery July 12-19th, 2012, Sidney Cooper Gallery, Canterbury, Kent April 9th – 27th April (2013) and the University Galleries, Illinois State University, USA 22nd October – Dec 15th (2013).

A mix and broadcast at the 'Addicted2 Radom Festival' on Radio Corax 10-12 July, [<http://a2r.radiocorax.de/random-time-radio-podcast>], Germany also broadcast as part of the Dark Outside 31st August [<http://www.thedarkoutside.com/>] twenty four hour broadcast in the Galloway Forest (2013).

3 The following works were conducted as dedicated 'trace' stations and together with the stations outlined will form the content of *Switch Off*. Eight trace stations were produced as a series of actions, interactions, installations, interventions and broadcasts the first action in the project was Feedback Fiesta (2007) a two hour feedback radio intervention broadcast live on Radio Reverb asking listeners to call in and make live positive feedback by putting phone next to the radio breaking a key professional broadcasting rule, for the Sonic Arts Expo in Brighton. All are documented on my practice blog found at magzhall.wordpress.com.

Radio Mind (2011) FM radio as home for religious cult. (outlined).

Sound Train (2012) FM as personal broadcast space. Live pirate broadcast action of the train journey soundscape broadcast on FM between Canterbury and London.

Lone Broadcast (2012) *emergency shipping distress calls fictional use for FM*. Radio installation at UntitledBCN, Barcelona, Spain, *womans emergency shipping distress call, possible use for FM*.

Babble Station (2012) This station imagines FM used for baby monitoring. Radio interaction and installation, recording pre speech childrens voices and sounds at the Whitstable Biennale, Kent.

Radio Jam (2012) sees FM radio as instrument in this case via a live internet radio networked interaction, V22 Gallery. London.

Commercial Break (2012) FM as commercial wasteland. Solar powered radio installation at The Old Look Out Gallery, Broadstairs, Kent. Intervention on Boat Radio, DAB rotated broadcast across Kent, Sussex, Hampshire and Essex, Installed at Lightworks International Arts Festival, UK (2013). *Commercial Break* (2013) a seven voice mix was broadcast and archived as part of MuseRuole: at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Bozen and part of a listening station at the Women's Museum in Meran, Italy.

Numbers (2012) was a three channel radio installation (as outlined above). FM radio future home for encrypted numbers stations. (outlined).

Radio Recall (2013) FM as community space. Five channel participatory radio installation recording, playing back memories of radio using donated radios at the Old Lookout Gallery, Broadstairs Kent and the Beaney House of Arts and Knowledge, Canterbury Kent (2014).

Weblinks

Magz Hall practice blog <https://magzhall.wordpress.com/>

Radio Arts radioarts.org.uk

Creative Research In Sound Art Practice (CRISAP), LCC, University of the Arts London www.crisap.org

Expanded

Radio

Research

www.expandedradio.org

www.canterbury.ac.uk/arts-and-humanities/cpbra/projects/unbinding-the-book.aspx