



Jon Brumit, *Pioneers*, 2007, site-specific public audio tour of Detroit using FCC-approved, commercial low-power transmitters (artwork and photograph © Jon Brumit)

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Take It to the Air: Radio as Public Art

As early as the 1920s, cultural critics and avant-garde types had already declared radio to be, if not dead, a wasteland of state and commercial interests that fed listeners an around-the-clock diet of trivia, consumerism, propaganda, and bad art. Yet despite objections about radio's commercialization and mediocrity, the allure of a communications technology in every living room proved too great to ignore. Bertolt Brecht experimented with radio in a handful of live performances and, in 1932, proposed that radios be transceivers, wired to permit both broadcasting and receiving, in order to "transform the reports of those who govern into answers to the questions of those governed."¹ Walter Benjamin, who wrote a series of radio plays for children in the early 1930s, agreed: "The crucial failing of this institution [radio] has been to perpetuate the fundamental separation between practitioners and the public."² And although they were far more interested in radical formal experiments with sound, time, and the voice, F. T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata also looked to radio for "the elimination of the concept or the illusion of an audience."³ Despite this initial enthusiasm for its formal and political potential, however, artists pursued radio as a medium only episodically, and the radio spectrum remained an unrealized and undertheorized social and aesthetic space.⁴

Today, many artists use traditional FM radio, newer technologies of wireless networking, and other parts of the electromagnetic spectrum to make work variously described as sound, electronic, or new-media art—much of it strikingly, hauntingly poetic. However, there is also an irreducibly public and political quality to "taking to the air" that channels Brecht and Benjamin through the legacy of pirate radio and microradio. Much of this work is illegal due to tight regulation of the electromagnetic commons, and the act of making it anyway enacts a claim on a virtual but very real public space that paradoxically is kept inaccessible by regulations justified through invoking the public good. The straightforward gesture of putting self-produced content on the airwaves—achievable with minimal technical know-how and at relatively modest cost—performs and defines "the public" in a participatory and often oppositional way. While the political implications of unlicensed radio have been thoroughly addressed by social-movement broadcasters and mass-media scholars, artists working with radio often bring to their work an awareness of the medium's material and formal properties that are often overlooked by content-oriented producers and critics. These formal characteristics, such as limited range and signal dispersion, combine with radio's inexorably public nature to make it a powerful medium for critical public art.

Constructing and Contesting the Public

Over the past fifteen years, the field of public art has drawn on perspectives from cultural geography, political theory, and urban studies to develop a more theoretically grounded body of criticism, in contrast to the advocacy literature that was so important in winning the genre funding, visibility, and (limited) curatorial and art-historical interest. Tom Finkelpearl defined the common usage of the term "public art" as what "is often sponsored by public agencies, usually exists outside of museums and galleries, and addresses audiences outside the confines of the art world."⁵ Despite the obvious utility of this pragmatic definition—some of whose

Audio and video documentation of the projects discussed in this essay are available on the *Art Journal* website at <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=2321>.

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

2. Walter Benjamin, "Reflections on Radio," *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 543. For more on Benjamin's radio plays, see Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002).

3. F. T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata, "La Radia" (1933), online at www.kunstradio.at/THEORIE/theorymain.html.

4. For a partial timeline of experimental artworks in radio, see Galen Joseph-Hunter, "Transmission Works: Selections towards Identifying a History," in *Wave Guide*, ed. Joseph-Hunter (Acra, NY: free103point9, 2005).

5. Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), x.

conceptual limitations Finkelppearl himself intimated—a growing body of literature has come to regard the idea of “publicness” less as a set of conditions of funding, display, and reception than as a discursive territory open to contest. While this literature is too extensive to review here, scholars like Rosalyn Deutsche, William Mitchell, and Miwon Kwon in art; Malcolm Miles and Don Mitchell in geography; Nancy Fraser and Chantal Mouffe in political theory; and Michael Sorkin and Teddy Cruz in architecture, not to mention dozens of practicing artists, have pointed to the political dangers of assuming that state sponsorship or outdoor display implies anything like open access or proposing a stable, undifferentiated public audience. Calling art—or anything—public is a discursive act that does ideological work. Normative definitions propose an idealized, homogenous public whose tastes, beliefs, values, and responses are expected to exist comfortably within the moral and political standards of the day. Commonsense definitions that equate publicness with state funding conflate the public interest with the interest of the government. In fact, ideas like the public interest or public good are hotly contested and continually in evolution. Both normative and commonsense definitions overlook this contestation as well as how certain groups’ interests, needs, and even existence are included or excluded when particular publics are constituted and defined.

In contrast to received or bureaucratic definitions, Deutsche proposes replacing the term “public art” with a more expansive vision of art that operates in what she terms a discursive public sphere. Drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas as well as his critics, Deutsche uses the concept of the public sphere to make clear that public art is not necessarily state sponsored, state funded, or even publicly sited. Indeed, the classic liberal or bourgeois public sphere arose in the eighteenth century to counteract the power of the state by engaging citizens directly in the issues of the day. Concretized in such idealized institutions as the English coffeehouse, Parisian salon, and newspaper opinion page, the classic public sphere was both a social and a deliberative space in which citizens could rationally discuss pressing social issues, reach a conclusion via argument, and influence political action. Following Habermas, Deutsche reframes public art from state-funded projects or publicly sited objects to a practice that “constitutes a public, by engaging people in political discussion or by entering a political struggle.”⁶ Attuned to critiques that Habermas’s idealized public sphere systematically “bracketed out,” to use Nancy Fraser’s phrase, the concerns, experiences, knowledge, and voices of women, people of color, the nonheterosexual, and the poor, Deutsche advocates paying close attention to the constitution of the public sphere and its inevitable exclusions.⁷ Deutsche writes that the democratic public sphere “is, from the start, a strategy of distinction, dependent on constitutive exclusions, the attempt to place something outside. Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence. The threat arises with efforts to supersede conflict, for the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its exclusions are taken into account and open to contestation.”⁸ For Deutsche, the best public art does not shy away from conflict, nor does it invite controversy for its own sake. Rather, artworks become public art by examining what is at stake in particular definitions of the public, proposing alternate visions of a public sphere, and being self-aware of the politics enacted by their choices.

6. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 288.

7. See Selya Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas,” in *Feminism: The Public and the Private*, ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65–99; Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 109–42; and Iris Marion Young, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York, Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1990), 300–26. For a discussion of how publics self-organize through discourse and time, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

8. Deutsche, 289.

Although artists using radio—the first virtual space of electronic communications—are rarely considered in light of other, more physical public-art practices, the unique legal and regulatory status of the radio spectrum makes evident the tensions, exclusions, and appropriations that scholars like Fraser and Deutsche have noted in other forms of public space. While regulations vary from country to country, the rough outline of how this officially public space became regulated in such a way as to become totally dominated by state or corporate interests is remarkably consistent. Following an early period of intense, unregulated amateur broadcasting on an electromagnetic spectrum widely viewed as a commons, governments worldwide began granting licenses for the right to broadcast on the public airwaves or reserving such rights for themselves. Although designed to reduce the very real problem of interference, the new regulations immediately outlawed access to the radio spectrum for thousands of independent broadcasters. In the case of the United States, the Radio Act of 1927 established the Federal Radio Commission with the explicit mission of restricting access to the airwaves “as public convenience, interest, or necessity requires”—ironically kicking the public off the air in the name of the public interest.⁹ The Federal Communications Commission succeeded the FRC in 1934, further codifying corporate dominance of the airwaves and enforcing “decency standards” that meant that only the most mainstream entertainment and political commentary could be broadcast. Much like the normative and commonsense definitions of the public critiqued by scholars of public space and public art, early radio regulations created political bodies that made political decisions in the name of a homogenous, generalized public, while keeping actual publics far from the transmitting towers.¹⁰

In this context, the choice to circumvent restrictions on radio broadcasts is an inherently political act. As the media activist John Anderson has noted, it is difficult to imagine how someone researching the equipment and technical skills necessary to produce her own broadcasts would fail to come across the information that what she is trying to do is probably illegal.¹¹ While some artists use legal, very low power consumer transmitters that run no risk of interfering with commercial stations, these devices are often used in ways that violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the law.¹² The decision to use a prohibited technology, or to modify a consumer one, is a political gesture at several levels. First, it represents a refusal of governmental authority to regulate public space and the ability of the market to stand in for the public interest. Second, it implicitly proposes a model of anti-authoritarian radical democracy that emphasizes the ability of small groups of people to learn specialized, opaque skills and produce media cultures that are politically, economically, and sometimes aesthetically distinct from those of dominant institutions. Finally, when the content and form of the broadcast reflect on the constitution of public and private as social categories, explicitly challenge the exclusion of certain people and stories from the airwaves, and use the language and self-reflexive strategies of art practice, unlicensed broadcasts become what Deutsche hopes public art can be, “an instrument that either helps produce a public space or question a dominated space that has been officially ordained as public.”¹³

9. Public Law No. 632, February 23, 1927, 69th Congress, “An Act for the Regulation of Radio Communications, and for Other Purposes,” section 4.

10. For a discussion of the politics of early radio regulation in the United States, see Robert McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928–1934* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), and *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communications Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: New Press, 1999).

11. John Anderson, presentation at Southern Illinois University, February 25, 2008.

12. In the United States, the Federal Communications Commission permits what have been called “Part 15” transmitters, named after the section of the regulatory code that describes them. This exception covers devices like baby monitors, cordless phones, and in-house transmitters that have a very limited effective range and present no possible interference for commercial broadcasters. Part 15 transmitters are defined by signal strength, measured in milliwatts, at three meters from the antenna. However, it is relatively easy to modify these units to increase their output power and to boost the range of the broadcast by attaching a longer antenna. See Title 47 Code of Federal Regulations §15. It is also possible to operate illegal, higher-powered transmitters in ways that do not interfere with licensed broadcasters, such as using an open frequency at least one channel away from another station. See Free Radio Berkeley’s pamphlet “Micropower Broadcasting—A Technical Primer,” online at www.scribd.com/doc/8336941/Micropower-Broadcasting-Primer.

13. Deutsche, 288.

Jon Brumit, *Pioneers*, 2007, installation view of site-specific audio tour of Detroit (artwork © Jon Brumit; photograph provided by Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, Leipzig Gallery of Contemporary Art, and Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit)



14. *Bad Neighbors* was created by Brumit as part of Neighborhood Public Radio's Radio Cartographies residency program, a collaboration with Southern Exposure Gallery funded by the Creative Work Fund. Another iteration of *Talking Homes* included *Lake Merritt Loops*, described by Brumit as a "drive-in audio collage" of field recordings of wildlife, wind, and trees in Oakland's Lake Merritt Park that were broadcast around the clock from microtransmitters installed in private homes in the area.

15. *Shrinking Cities* was a multiyear project mounted by Germany's Federal Cultural Foundation that explored the phenomenon of urban population loss in the cities of Detroit (USA), Manchester and Liverpool (Britain), Ivanovo (Russia), and Halle and Leipzig (Germany). The project involved artists, architects, urban planners, geographers, and anthropologists, and culminated in a series of exhibitions and books. See www.shrinkingcities.com. Following *Pioneers*, Brumit relocated to Detroit, and he currently works as curator of public engagement at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

Jon Brumit and Neighborhood Public Radio: Contesting the Public

From November 2006 to April 2007, Jon Brumit, working in residence with the radio arts collective Neighborhood Public Radio, equipped fourteen homes in the San Francisco Bay Area with the micropower transmitters used by realtors to inform drive-by house shoppers of a property's particular charms. Rather than gushing about granite countertops and his-and-her marble sinks, however, the broadcasts recounted true stories of public sex, burning trash, and the violation of other social norms. Brumit titled the piece *Bringing Down the Neighborhood* (a.k.a. *Bad Neighbors*), an entry in the *Talking Home* series of projects¹⁴ In early 2007, another iteration, *Pioneers*, was commissioned for the *Shrinking Cities* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit and had a radically different orientation.¹⁵ The twelve broadcast loops documented the efforts of people who remained committed to living in and improving their neighborhoods despite mass population outflows, environmental degradation, and systemic economic

collapse. Both broadcasts relied on people to tell their own stories in loosely structured and only lightly edited interviews that Brumit conducted, usually on site, and which retain a rough-and-ready aesthetic. Brumit also trained interviewees to use the transmitters, which were installed in the houses, apartments, reclaimed buildings, and storefronts where the stories took place. Maps were provided for the audience to navigate from one transmitter to another and listen to the project on car radios.

Taken together, these two iterations of *Talking Homes* suggest a public of a different scale and nature than that supposed by classic public-sphere theory. The project reversed the public/private divide on which the classic public sphere was founded by placing personal stories outside a living space and quite literally on public property. In *Bringing Down the Neighborhood*, the assumed appropriate topics for public discussion that undergird the classic public sphere are exploded as people recount stories that reveal—and revel in—the wealth of non-normative or simply petty behavior lurking just below the surface of a city. Like the narrator who recounts an evening of eavesdropping on a irritating woman's loud cell-phone conversation, only to realize that it is his prying and suspicion that make him the true "bad neighbor," the audience is forced into self-conscious voyeurism by the project. However, the localization of the broadcasts and the first-person narration produce a sense of guilty identification or commiseration more reminiscent of gossiping neighbors than the scornful humor of drive-time radio shock jocks. By making public the stories of a diverse group of people in Detroit, *Pioneers* reframes them from being atomized, private, or individual efforts to becoming part of a common struggle for neighborhood coexistence and sustainability in the most varied and meaningful senses of the term. The particularities of these people's lives—how they ply their trades, their individual hopes and dreams—cannot be bracketed from the arena of "common concern," not by the city of Detroit and not by the highly mobile and privileged audience visiting the city for the exhibition.

While pirate-radio die-hards might despair at Brumit's choice to limit his project to equipment approved by the FCC, the use of a commercial technology actually enhanced public engagement with the project. The unambiguous legality of the realtor transmitters—certified by an FCC approval sticker—emboldened participation by people outside the microradio subculture, whom Brumit recruited through a combination of cold-calling and friend-of-friend connections. Though Brumit was initially attracted to the act of repurposing the realtor transmitters (which inspired the title of the series), few observers could grasp this dimension of the project. More significantly, the out-of-the-box technology facilitated Brumit's collaboration with people hosting the transmitters, most of whom had no prior experience with radio. Participants could be given brief, accessible tutorials on radio technology and work with a reliable piece of equipment for the months-long duration of the project, with the consequence that the experience of putting one's story "on the air" and in public became second nature and trouble-free.

The limited broadcast range of *Talking Homes* is consistent with Neighborhood Public Radio's general ethos of smallness, site-specificity, and listener participation. The collaborative group, also known by the familiar initials NPR, was founded in 2004 in Oakland, California, by Brumit, Lee Montgomery, and Michael Trigilio to provide an alternative radio platform for artists, activists, musicians, and community

members. The group's name and logo spoof the ubiquitous American public broadcaster National Public Radio and point directly to how the artists' goals and those of conventional broadcasting differ. Since 1970, National Public Radio ("Big NPR" for short) has sought to be the gold standard of American radio journalism and on-the-air commentary. A nationwide network of subscribing public-radio stations broadcasts news programming originating from central production studios in Washington and Los Angeles, supplemented with regional headlines and concerns. In contrast to the international coverage promised by Big NPR, Neighborhood Public Radio (or "Little NPR") works at the scale of the urban neighborhood, or the territory that can be most readily understood through the daily pattern of lives and the movement of bodies through space.

Little NPR's transmissions share the characteristically limited transmission range and geographically specific content of many microbroadcasts produced on homemade and ultralow-power legal devices. In defiance of conventional broadcasting wisdom that holds that higher power and bigger audiences are better, the Japanese radio artist Tetsuo Kogawa has recast limited signal strength and hyperlocal content as assets. Reflecting on his own experiences working with micropower transmitters in Tokyo in the 1980s, Kogawa writes,

Radio could serve as a communication vehicle not for broadcast but for the individuals involved. Even if they have few listeners, these stations do work as catalysts to reorganize groups involved in mini-FM. Those who were familiar with conventional radio laughed at mini-FM because it had only a few listeners, listeners within walking distance of the station, and no consistent style. . . . [But] we tried to think about radio in a different way, as a means to link people together.¹⁶

By limiting the scale of transmission from the nation to the neighborhood, radio takes on an entirely different social life and begins to erode "the fundamental separation between practitioners and the public" that Benjamin found so problematic in conventional mass-media broadcasting models.¹⁷

While Little NPR's scale implies a more intimate and potentially reciprocal relationship with its audience, the sound of the broadcasts and the way they are made embody a very different vision of public radio. Big NPR emphasizes quality, professionalism, consistency, and unbiased journalism. By contrast, Little NPR's motto is, "If it's in the neighborhood and it makes noise . . . we hope to put it on the air."¹⁸ While providing enough training to members and collaborators to produce professional-sounding broadcasts if they wish, Neighborhood Public Radio's programs adhere to no standard format, length, or protocol and are broadcast episodically and for special events. Live and listener-produced programs in particular sometimes include unscripted laughter, disruptive background sound, unbleeped expletives, microphone handling noise, uninteresting commentary, awkward silences, voices that are anything but golden, and just plain weird sounds. Big NPR is public in the sense of being established by an act of the state and operating as a not-for-profit corporation—procedural criteria that echo pragmatic or bureaucratic definitions of public art. Little NPR, on the other hand, is public in an entirely different sense. It provides avenues for listeners to become producers and embraces an amateurish and inclusive approach that questions received and often exclusionary notions of quality. The chaotic—what Kogawa

16. Tetsuo Kogawa, "Toward Polymorphous Radio," in *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound, and Transmission*, ed. Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander (Banff: Banff Centre for the Arts, 1993), 287–99.

17. Benjamin, 543.

18. "About Neighborhood Public Radio," online at www.neighborhoodpublicradio.org.



Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga, *The Public Broadcast Cart*, 2003–6, shopping cart with audio mixer, low-power transmitter, laptop with wireless and streaming software, audio amplifier, six car speakers, and portable power inverter, as presented at Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria, 2004 (artwork and photograph © Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga)

would call “polymorphous”—quality of Neighborhood Public Radio broadcasts echo the diversity, discomfort, and instability that are hallmarks of a public sphere that openly embraces the conflicts and contradictions that create it.

Public Broadcast Cart: Public Space, Communication Space

A woman pushes a shopping cart through a public park. Far from muttering to herself, as stereotypes of shopping cart pushers might suggest, she speaks purposefully into a microphone, her amplified voice audible through the six speakers that bloom like flowers from the basket of *The Public Broadcast Cart*, a 2003 project by the artist Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga.¹⁹ A laptop computer with a wireless card and a homemade radio transmitter broadcasts her words to the Internet and to the park’s electromagnetic space, while an accompanying website explains the project’s technologies so that others can build similar carts.

Zúñiga’s project makes the site of the broadcast’s production public, not just the location of its transmission and reception, as the preproduced loops of *Talking Homes* do. *The Public Broadcast Cart* updates takes the classic figure of the soapbox public speaker and extends her voice into regulated communication space—not only radio but also simultaneously the Internet. Because his five-watt transmitter

19. *The Public Broadcast Cart* was funded by Franklin Furnace’s Future of the Present Fund and originally presented at Wireless Park Lab Days in New York City in September 2003. See www.ambiente.com/wifi/index.php.

yields signal strengths well over legal limits, Zúñiga openly challenges the regulatory regime that limits people's access to the airwaves. Yet audiences do not question the cart's legality; those who participate are seduced and engaged by the project's premise and never seem to consider that the broadcast may be outlawed. In the moment, confronted with the cart, communications regulations are simply irrelevant. In an era when the lone speaker on a square is as likely to drive away his neighbors as to attract a crowd, the unusual-looking object—designed to evoke flower sellers' carts—makes public speech an intriguing visual spectacle that is not only politically edifying but also visually engaging and fun.

The *Public Broadcast Cart* foregrounds and demystifies the technology that it employs in ways that align it with the pirate-radio movement and open-source culture. The equipment that produces the broadcast and webcast is made visible and explainable to passersby, while the project's website contains diagrams and a list of supplies to allow others to duplicate the cart. While the repurposing of a real-estate microtransmitter in *Talking Homes* was conceptually important to Brumit, few listeners had the means to understand what technology was in use and why. By contrast, Zúñiga's gesture of empowerment is amplified by his choice to allow others to build or improve on the platform he developed, borrowed as it was from the work of others who had gone before. This spirit of continuous sharing and tinkering directly animates the pirate-radio and open-source communities for whom a technology should be collaboratively produced, freely distributed, and readily modified by others.²⁰ The process of making a transmitter represents a refusal of the specialization of skills that makes technologies as inaccessible as the legal prohibitions on their use. Expanding the capacity of people to "grow their own" has been a significant area of emphasis for radio activists and artists.²¹

Zúñiga's decision to stream the broadcasts as well as transmit them adds a new dimension to the public space of communication representation by radio. Web streaming and radio transmissions are used in ways that are unique to each as a medium. Although not directly perceptible, radio waves exist in space and are subject to physical conditions—broadcasts have a certain geographic range, and transmissions are subject to interference by buildings, trees, sunlight, and other forms of radiation. By contrast, the Internet is a despatialized technology in the sense that any point in the network is theoretically available, nearly instantly, to any other—firewalls and low-bandwidth connections excepted. *The Public Broadcast Cart* is a mobile point of origin and reference for three different expanses of speech: the range of the amplified voice, the range of the transmission, and the potentially global reach of the web stream. In this way, the project is scaled beyond the local level of *Talking Homes* without devaluing the particularity, relationality, and human scale to be found in the city block.

While the content of Zúñiga's broadcasts varies according to who pushes and speaks into the cart, the project mounts a challenge to the normative ordering of both physical public spaces and the electromagnetic public spaces of communication. This challenge is both representational—in the sense that the person pushing the cart self-represents as a public speaker—and a form of direct action. Zúñiga's cart occupies physical and electromagnetic public space and claims both as sites for speech and action, without placing preconditions or limits on the content of that speech. In the United States, where, as the geographer Don Mitchell has pointed out, "time, place, and manner" restrictions have long lim-

20. See "The Open Source Definition" at www.opensource.org/docs/osd.

21. Many radio artists, including Tetsuo Kogawa and Neighborhood Public Radio, have taught or performed the building of a simple transmitter as a performance piece, while many organizations regularly offer workshops for building more complex and powerful transmitters. See Free Radio Berkeley's Summer Radio Camp, for example, online at www.freeradio.org.

ited both the kinds of speech and the speakers granted access to “the public,” urban public spaces have lately been given over almost entirely to consumption and surveillance.²² While mass assemblies have been met with increasing violence and attendant public reluctance at the same time that safeguards for media access and diversity have been weakened, Zúñiga invites his audiences to challenge both the norms for occupying physical public space and the regime of regulation that keeps them far from their own public airwaves. Homegrown electronic media like *The Public Broadcast Cart* can act as prosthetics that extend rather than threaten the political possibilities of physical public space, expanding the power and range of the individual or collective voice.

LIGNA: Uncanny Publics

On September 2, 2006, dozens of people entered Leidsestraat, Amsterdam’s pedestrian shopping street, carrying small, portable radios. Listening to instructions broadcast on the city’s last 24/7 pirate-radio station, the people began to perform strange gestures in unison—avoiding the cracks between pavers, jumping up and down, walking backward, or simply standing still with their eyes closed. These gestures—described as “10 Exercises to Get the City out of Your Body”—choreographed a new version of *Radio Ballet*, titled *I Am[not]sterdam*, by the art collective LIGNA.²³ The collective had staged similar group-listening performances starting with the original *Radio Ballet* at the Hamburg train station in 2002.²⁴ The soundtracks of the broadcasts typically include music, instructions for physically engaging the environment, and commentary on the urban commercial space and the intervention being performed in it.

There are several audiences for *Radio Ballet*: the observer, the participant-performer, and the viewer of the documentation. The observer witnesses the participant-performers acting in unison over a dispersed space. The group performs actions that stand in marked contrast with conventional public behavior but aren’t precisely objectionable; they manage to violate social norms in inventive ways that elude specific rules governing what can and cannot be done in a privately controlled and managed public space. LIGNA titled the Leipzig *Radio Ballet* “Übung in nichtbestimmungsgemäßem Verweilen”—an “Exercise in lingering not according to the rules,” as distinct from actually violating them.²⁵ The collective performance of conspicuously out-of-place behavior makes the violation of norms a notable event, rather than a mere curiosity of aberrant individual behavior. The apparently normal appearance of the performers further distinguishes them from the figure of the homeless person, whose threat to behavioral norms is neutralized by stigmatizing the individual and swiftly ushering him or her out. That all the performers are listening to portable radios or wearing headphones raises the disquieting specter of mind control. The absurd, smiling group walking backward in unison becomes something of a benign invasion intent on interrupting the flow of urban space, haunting it with the actions that its smooth, commercial functioning excludes.

The full dimension of *Radio Ballet*’s social critique, however, is not legible to the observer without access to the radio broadcast the participant-performers hear in their headphones. Alternating voices issue instructions for occupying and exploring the environment or comment on urban space and public behavior.

22. See Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003).

23. *Radio Ballet: I Am[not]sterdam* was sponsored by De Balie Amsterdam, with audio broadcast over Radio Patapoe and Radio Oer. The performance was in German, with English translation by De Balie. See documentation at www.debalie.nl/player/detect_1.jsp?movieid=98130.

24. Video documentation of LIGNA’s *Radio Ballet* in Leipzig is at <http://ligna.blogspot.com/2009/12/radio-ballet.html>.

25. LIGNA, statement on *Radio Ballet*, online at <http://ligna.blogspot.com/2009/12/radio-ballet.html>.



LIGNA, *Radio Ballet*, 2003, site-specific radio broadcast, Leipzig Train Station (artwork © LIGNA; photographs © Eiko Grimberg, provided by LIGNA)

Both instructions and commentary are delivered in tones that are politely playful, occasionally chiding, usually aloof, but never cold. A characteristic instruction from the Leidestraat event directs,

Please stand still for a moment. Close your eyes. What does the environment around you look like? Recount every feature: the streetlights, the design of the trees. And how does the pavement look under your feet. Answer this question for yourself. Don't cheat—keep your eyes closed! Maybe you can feel the shape with your feet. Try to follow the cracks gently with one foot, but keep your eyes closed. Are the paving stones big, or all they small?²⁶

Such directions for paying close attention to the texture of the city, engaging sensually and imaginatively with the environment, and bringing associations and memories to consciousness are broken up with commentary delivered in approachable, nonacademic language. Commentaries prompt the participant-performer to reflect explicitly on the codes and norms of public behavior that govern urban commercial space and the forms of surveillance that enforce them. For example, one interlude directs the listener to notice, "People with goals in their head are hurrying past. Others are hanging around, maybe waiting for somebody. But everybody here seems to have a purpose, and that makes him or her accountable. People doing things that don't seem to have a purpose are suspicious. Are people watching what you are doing?"²⁷ The broadcast fosters engagement with space that is simultaneously embodied and intellectual, sensual and critical, while revealing established norms to be dully arbitrary at best or, at worse, supportive of a monotonous, functionalist, and consumerist spatial code.

If Neighborhood Public Radio's critique of public space is implicit in its aesthetic, content, and choice of scale, LIGNA's critique is quite explicit, even didactic. Yet LIGNA's use of radio—and specifically its collaboration with pirate and "free" radio stations—extends its critique of physical public space to a subtler exploration of the status of electromagnetic public space. The decision to use radio as the distribution technology for instructions and commentary is more than merely expedient. Prior to initiating the *Radio Ballet* series in 2002, LIGNA had been broadcasting on Hamburg's independent radio station, Freies Sender Kombinat (FSK), for many years, and group members self-identify as media theorists as well as radio artists. The collective intentionally broadcasts its public projects over existing independent nonprofit or pirate-radio stations, bypassing state and corporate outlets and strengthening the connection of these outlets to experimental cultural forms. Yet LIGNA's controlled delivery of the radio commentary is almost ostentatiously authoritarian; instructing the participant-performers what to do and what to think seems to replicate the one-way directionality so deplored by radical forebears like Brecht. LIGNA identifies the bodies of the participants as shared producers of the work, however, engaged in an active listening that belies the unidirectionality of the broadcast itself. Only through active and collective listening can the normative ordering of physical public space—and by extension, the codes of broadcasting and listenership that conventionally structure electromagnetic public spaces of communication—become perceivable and contestable.

Like Zúñiga's *Public Broadcast Cart* and Neighborhood Public Radio's wide-ranging work, LIGNA employs the specificity of radio as a medium, though the group's

26. LIGNA, *Radio Ballet: I Am[not]sterdam*, 2006. Quotation transcribed by the author from video documentation online at www.debalie.nl/player/detect_l.jsp?movieid=98130. Performance originally in German, with English translation provided by De Balie.

27. Ibid.

collaboration with established free-radio stations gives its broadcasts greater range. Rather than operating on a very small scale, LIGNA employs radio's characteristic dispersal as both a formal quality and a metaphor. Looking to the early history of radio, the group identifies an uncanny quality then associated with the proliferation of identical voices in multiple places. Drawing on a 1920 text by Günther Stern, LIGNA connects this proliferation of identical voices and songs to the rise of identical commodities under then-ascendant consumer capitalism. But because Stern failed to assimilate radio's element of the uncanny, LIGNA identifies radio's proliferation and dispersal as potentially disrupting, should its disquieting and uncanny features be highlighted through choreographed public listening. The *Radio Ballets* can be seen as attempts to set free the radio uncanny and exploit the "uncontrollable situations" it can produce.²⁸

Embody the Airwaves

With the increasing popularity and listenership of network technologies for distributing audio content, such as satellite radio, web streaming, and podcasting, many people have questioned the continued cultural relevance of broadcast radio. These questions are usually framed ahistorically and in a determinist way that assumes radio to be an old technology of the mass-media facing inevitable replacement by new, better, digital, "personal" media. Occasionally, critics acknowledge the role of major broadcasters in ensuring radio's demise as a form of community media, through monopoly ownership and standardized programming, but it is usually seen as a *fait accompli*, not a terrain of ongoing struggle. Community media activists counter that it is only in the most developed countries that radio appears to be on the decline and argue that this simple technology—for which no literacy is required, transmitters can run on batteries, and listeners can assemble around wind-up receivers—is actually the most democratic yet developed. For artists using radio, the decreasing commercial relevance of the technology has actually liberated it for creative reinterpretation, the formation of new producer-audience relations, and renewed social function. The transition to digital radio will permit sections of the spectrum currently used for AM and FM transmissions to be allocated to cellphones and personal "smart" devices—a form of mass privatization that will generate an enormous surplus of discarded analog transmission and reception equipment ripe for artistic reinterpretation and re- or misuse.²⁹

The arguments about radio's waning cultural relevance very rarely consider its unique material properties; the ones I propose make radio a valuable medium for public art. As a form of radiation that is temporally bounded, geographically specific, and subject to mechanical and electromagnetic interference, radio transmissions are subject to physical properties similar to those that delimit the lives of all physical beings.³⁰ Yet radio is nonetheless imperceptible to the human body without technological assistance, allowing it to mediate between the realms of the lived and the imagined, the physical and the energetic, the felt and the known.³¹ Radio's dispersion—its ability to place a speaker in more than one place simultaneously—possesses a latent uncanny whose assimilation into the flow of daily life can be easily disturbed, as LIGNA demonstrates. Furthermore, because radio is an acknowledged commons yet subject to regulations that leave it essen-

28. See LIGNA, "Opening an Uncanny Space: Radio's Public," online at www.kuda.org/?q=en/node/444.

29. See Galen Joseph-Hunter, "Transmission Arts: The Air that Surrounds Us," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 31, no. 3 (September 2009) 33–40.

30. See Allen S. Weiss, *Phantasmic Radio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

31. For a discussion of radio's conceptual linkages with the ethereal and supernatural, see Joe Milutis, *Ether: The Nothing that Connects Everything* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

tially off limits, anyone who uses it must consciously confront rules governing access to and use of this electromagnetic public space. Even when those rules are ultimately respected (as they are in Brumit's *Talking Homes*), the particular way radio as a public space is defined and regulated is denaturalized and made explicit. In Deutsche's words, "its exclusions are taken into account and open to contestation."³²

It is no coincidence that the radio works I have discussed in this essay all take place in space and directly engage the bodies of their audiences. Brumit's *Talking Homes* project requires listeners to travel to distinct sites to hear the stories of those places; LIGNA's *Radio Ballet* asks participants to translate instructions carried by the airwaves into multiple, dispersed, "uncontrollable" actions on the streets; Zúñiga's *Public Broadcast Cart* allows a speaker to create floating radio transmission around her while simultaneously extending her speech to the vast world of the web. In these projects, radio is a prosthetic technology that transmits the physical world into the space of electronic communications and materializes the vast space of electromagnetic resources into something material and physically apprehensible. In so doing, it forces a confrontation with and contestation of the rules that govern and control the use of both spaces, positioning radio for creative interventions in manifold public spaces—not only those we inhabit with our bodies, as much of the best public art does, but also those we inhabit with our passions, our excesses, our energies, and our speech.

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32. Deutsche, 289.

