

TRANSMISSION ARTS



Early electromagnetic spectrum chart produced by Westinghouse Research Laboratories in the early-twentieth century.

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The Air that Surrounds Us

Galen Joseph-Hunter

When speaking about Transmission Arts in terms of contemporary media and conceptual art, quantifying the movement is an implicitly difficult charge. In simplest terms “Transmission Arts” is defined as a multiplicity of practices and media working with the idea of transmission or the physical properties of the electromagnetic spectrum (radio). Transmission works often manifest themselves in participatory live art or time-based art, and include, but are not limited to, sound, video, light, installation, and performance. Like the work encompassed by the genre, its lineage is anything but linear.

Influenced by Futurism in music, noise, speed, experimentation and improvisation with and about machinery and technology are all reoccurring areas of interest. The spirit of Fluxus is also frequently encountered when works are centered around the indeterminacy of spectrum content, whether it be manipulation of commercial radio in any present moment, or the harnessing of solar data to inform design and movement. kinetic art is also an obvious ancestor to transmission works that take sculptural form, and here, motion might materialize in the physical, aural, or visual.

Perhaps the most explicit predecessors are the media collectives that emerged in the 1970s to see a radical opportunity in video as a tool that might at long-last realize democratic cultural communication networks. In the following decades, artists’ experimentation with global technologies including telephone, fax, and satellite also aimed to put new communication tools in the hands of artists and the public. Later, in the 1990s, the Microradio movement empowered a wave of radio practitioners and activists dedicated to a specific cause: providing the public with licensed access to their own airwaves.

In 1997 then journalist and DJ Tom Roe, musician Greg Anderson, and painter Violet Hopkins formed the collective free103point9 in Brooklyn, New York. Aligned with the Microradio movement, free103point9’s activities in the early years were focused on providing local communities access to their own airwaves. At that time free103point9 principals tirelessly traveled around New York City rooftops, transmitter and antenna in-tow, microcasting local bands, community meetings, and other happenings to listeners in the event’s surrounding few block radius.

As a result of these activities, a notable community of free103point9 collaborating artists emerged who were interested in the act of transmission as creative expression, conceptually and formally. For these artists, microradio was not simply a distribution device, but rather an exciting gateway to experimentation with the entire (electromagnetic) spectrum. In 2002, free103point9 responded and evolved from artist collective to non-profit organization with the specific mission of establishing and cultivating the Transmission Art genre. Supportive of “radio art” and “creative radio” the “transmission art” nomenclature was carefully selected to encompass not only linear works made for radio dissemination, but multifaceted and interdisciplinary works created through the full radio spectrum in its broadest definition.

As a means to illustrate such efforts, free103point9 regularly presents a number of public programs engineered to demystify the architecture of the transmission spectrum. They include:

Tune(In))s are sound events designed for a virtually silent environment in which listeners experience multiple live performances in individual radio headsets as opposed to amplified ones within a performance space. Audience members encounter other signals on the FM dial as they navigate among the *Tune(In))* frequencies, thus considering the spectrum as a potential venue in and of itself.¹

Radio 4x4 is a collaborative radio transmission performance. Four simultaneous audio performances are separately sent through FM transmitters tuned to different frequencies and are picked up by radios positioned throughout a performance space and tuned to those four frequencies. The audience becomes an active collaborator in the performance, “mixing” the audio feeds by moving about the space among the four signals.²

Microradio Sound Walk is a multiple transmitter sound piece and walking tour of local artist-generated airwaves. The piece consists of multiple transmission stations situated along a loosely defined walking path tuned to a single frequency but with a limited range. At each station an artist creates a soundscape on a single FM frequency that responds to both the architecture and sonic phenomena of a specific space. Listeners with radios tuned to the project frequency proceed through the route in the order of their choosing; as they move farther away from one station and come closer to the next, the signal they receive will shift. This sonic progression maps the spatial qualities of an area’s local airwaves.³

The past, present, and future of Transmission Arts is the focus of this special section of *PAJ*. It features contributions from artists Joe Milutis, Max Goldfarb, Anna Friz, Brett Ian Balogh, Tom Roe, and Alexis Bhagat, in the shape of essays, sketches, documentation, fiction, and instructions. These works assist in establishing a genealogy of a genre. They demonstrate the diversity of transmission art practices and practitioners, and are unified by a continuous query into transmission as a mode for two-way communication rather than one-way distribution. (Sound works by contributing artists may be accessed via the electronic version of *PAJ*.)

The Transmission Arts section content begins with “Bottled” by artist and writer Joe Milutis. Disguised as a rebuking of what Milutis suggests would be a reductive history, he puts forth an expansive hypothesis of the genre’s possible—probable—foundation. Milutis focuses on the “message in a bottle” as a deceptively simple demonstration of transmission. The message, its journey on waves and its unpredictable and uncertain reception, encompasses the key elements that intrigue, excite, and haunt transmission artists and audiences.

Max Goldfarb’s *Deep Cycle: The Reincarnation of Herman Meydag* is a broadcast, installation, and publication featuring Mobile49, a retrofit emergency communications truck. The *Deep Cycle* project is responsive to the present energy crisis, considering a potential post-oil future. The project begins with the redesign of the vehicle’s internal functions and a transition to a renewable power system. The second stage of the project involves vehicle transport to its destination; during transit, live programming will be broadcast on FM and online. Upon eventual arrival at its site, modification of the vehicle will be completed for installation as a permanent radio emergency field station embedded in the rural landscape. Finally, Goldfarb will produce a book, part project document, and part operators’ manual for Mobile49. Included here are Goldfarb’s sketches in preparation for this multi-faceted project.

In her essay “Transmission Art in the Present Tense,” Anna Friz observes a cohesive thread in contemporary transmission art as work that challenges and disrupts conventional and limited use of the electromagnetic spectrum; the very act of creative transmission is not only an exercise in self-awareness but also asks the question of “who’s there.” Friz reflects upon transception (transmission + reception) as envisioned by Bertolt Brecht and a host of others who believe radio to be an intrinsically democratic medium, and suggests that contemporary practitioners’ work to achieve this vision aims to “de-industrialize communication” achieving resonance rather than radiation.

Brett Ian Balogh’s *Programmable Transmission Art Platform* is comprised of a low-power FM transmitter, Arduino board, and USB-serial module. This flexible and accessible device is intended as a tool for artists exploring transmission practices. Illustrated and described in pages included in this section, Balogh’s *Platform* will be available to artists through free103point9’s Dispatch Series winter/spring 2010.

Tom Roe’s *June 3, 2123* is a dark and comic radio play that counters the idealistic foundations of the genre with a dystopian apocalyptic vision. Through Roe’s omniscient narration, we meet radioman “Watt,” and learn of “solar storms” and frequencies gone awry. In a moment of clarity, Watt realizes that Morse Code might be civilization’s last chance. Roe’s narrative uses cosmic irony to predict a future consumed and doomed by transmission waves.

The section concludes with Alexis Bhagat’s *Instructions for Listening to Radio*. Bhagat invites participation from the reader with his instructional work and event score. An homage to work by Yoko Ono, John Cage, and Alison Knowles, here the art literally exists in both the conception and realization. Bhagat’s provocative exercise

demonstrates the viability of correspondence or mail art and Deep Listening (as coined by Pauline Oliveros) within the transmission art spectrum.

In 2009, television broadcast stations in all United States markets will retire their analog transmissions. Projections for radios' transition are currently forecasted for 2017. Consumer and commercial demand suggests that much of this abandoned spectrum will be reallocated for cellular phones and "smart" devices. With these evolutions transmission artists will have access to more and more technology suitable for re-configuration and re-use, yet simultaneously will be faced with a fiercely regulated palette with which to create. Illustrated and discussed in the following pages, transmission practices occur in active, live works that are at once both private and public. Uniquely complex, these works serve as activist assertions about public space even in their most poetic manifestations.

NOTES

1. *Tune(In))* premiered on March 1, 2003 at the NY Center for Media Arts in Long Island City, in celebration of free103point9's sixth anniversary. Since then *Tune(In))*s have been presented at the The Kitchen in New York, the Santa Fe Art Institute, New Mexico, and the free103point9 Wave Farm in Acra, New York. A forthcoming *Tune(In))* will be presented in connection with the Visual Art Peformance Biennial PERFORMA 09, in November at the World Financial Center Winter Garden Atrium in lower Manhattan. The *Tune(In))* concept was originally inspired by Chuck Stephens who suggested using a radio transmitter for a silent rave as a way to combat events being shutdown due to noise complaints.

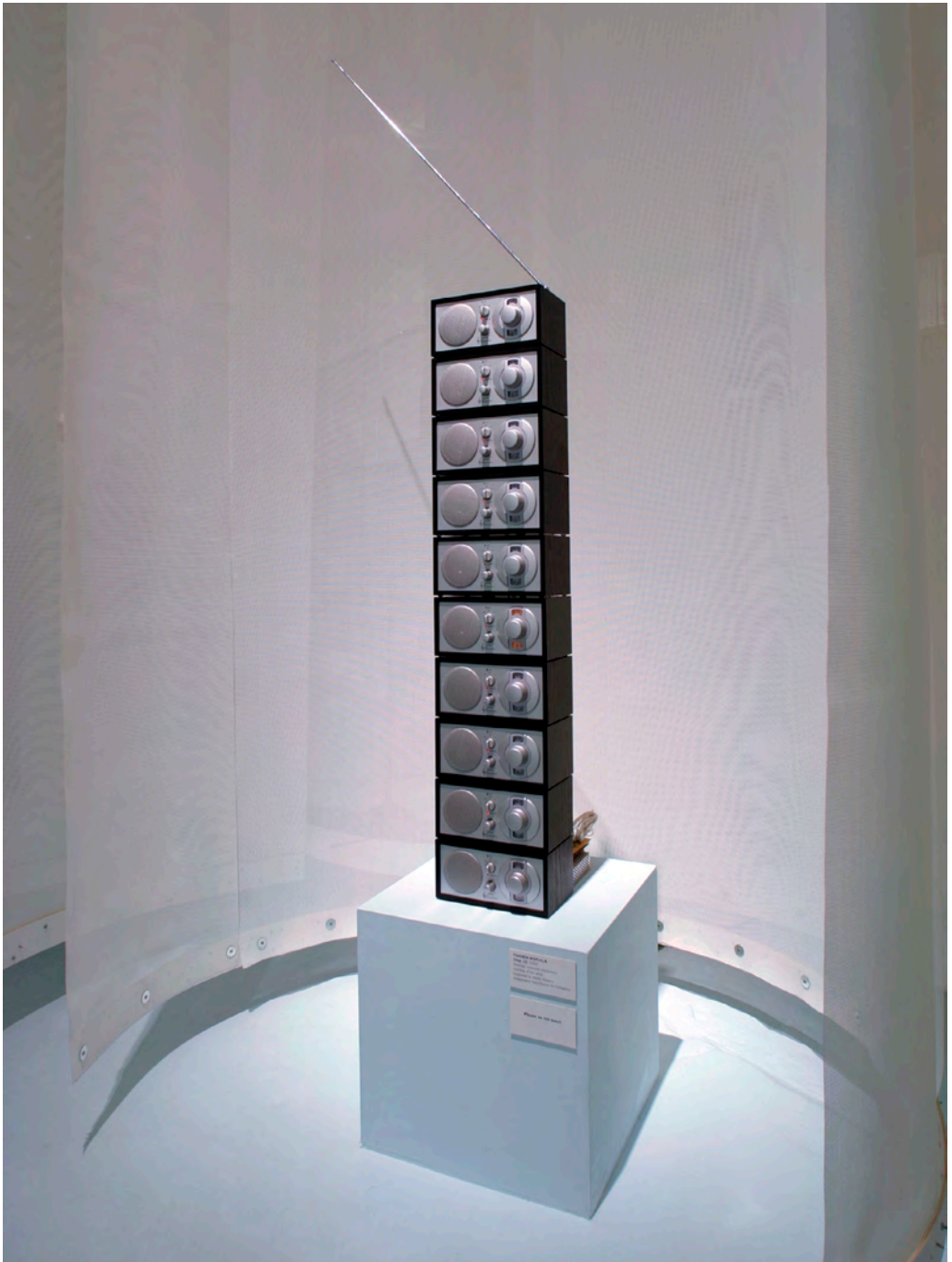
2. *Radio 4x4* was conceived of by free103point9 staff members in 2003. Since then, over twenty Radio 4x4s have taken place in the United States and abroad.

3. *Microradio Sound Walk* premiered in 2004 with, and conceived by, free103point9 transmission artists Damian Catera, Matt Mikas, Michelle Nagai, and Tom Roe. It was presented in conjunction with *Spectropolis: Mobile Media, Art and the City*, a three-day event in New York City that highlighted the diverse ways artists, technical innovators, and activists are using communication technologies to generate urban experiences and public voice. Most recently, in July 2009, a *Microradio Sound Walk* was presented at the Ingenuity Fest in Cleveland, Ohio.

GALEN JOSEPH-HUNTER is the Executive Director of free103point9, a non-profit arts organization active both in New York City and upstate New York. In 2008, the FCC awarded free103point9 with a full-power, non-commercial FM license. The station, WGXC, will be both a community and transmission art media project. free103point9's in-progress Transmission Art Archive project will map a genealogy of Transmission artists, works, exhibitions, essays, and more in support of the Transmission Art Genre. The first phase of the Transmission Art Archive will be a publication released in late 2009. The second phase of the project will be an expansive online resource and network in which artists are encouraged to self-identify their work within the context of Transmission Art practices. (www.free103point9.org)



Circular Spectral Analyzer, Cross Current Resonance Transducer (Douglas Repetto and LoVid), 2008. Circular Spectral Analyzer (CSA) fuses signal aesthetics and environmental functionality in a kinetic installation featured in the free103point9 transmission sculpture garden at Wave Farm in Acra, New York. Solar energy powers and tunes a short wave radio while driving the sculpture's motorized elements. The etchings and forms in the sculpture are interpretations of seven months of recorded solar data from seven different locations in NY State. Photo: Courtesy Laura Blereau.



Chop 10 by Tarikh Korula. Installed in the *Airborne* exhibition co-presented by free103point9 at the New Museum for Contemporary Art, New York, 2005. Exploiting the techniques of current commercial radio practice, *Chop 10* re-mixes a live, dynamic assemblage of commercial radio streams as a commentary on the current state of regulated radio. As *Chop 10* moves from one Arbitron-rated Top Ten radio station in New York City to the next, the hyper “scan” makes it impossible to discern any single station’s content, resulting in a jumpy, never-ending parody of commercial radio. Photo: Courtesy Matthew Spiegelman.



Studies for Radio Transceiver by Matthew Burtner. Performed during the *Spectral Garden* event at free103point9 Wave Farm, 2006. *Studies for Radio Transceiver* questions the nature of the radio medium and the role it plays in forming the content of a musical system. Photo: Courtesy David La Spina.