

# BOTTLED

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To talk about the history of transmission arts and limit it to the past one hundred or so years (coinciding with the electronicizing of a transmissive impulse) would be needlessly reductive. A sort of temporal provincialism. The art of transmission attends to more archaic, if not primal, origins and can extend to a future point unknown. However, in this short span of reflection, it would be equally perverse to extend the boundaries of transmission arts so that the term lacks termination, standing for both everything and nothing at once. Even though these all-or-nothing objects suit me fine, I will attempt some demarcation, enumeration, and qualification . . . although not, as brevity demands, elaboration.

For we could talk at length of Homeric *epea pteroenta* or “winged words” (but with preference for the rhapsodic event-space of Homer and not the authoritative texts or authoritarian culture generated by epic pique); we could talk of the always charged and dream-traversed space between gods and men, where variously angels and electromagnetic frequencies carried out their assigned calls (and the art of this space really “takes off” when the gilt letters of Annunciation paintings started to revel in their letterness and less in the golden aura of a message direct from God; thus was born concrete poetry); we could talk of mouth to ear, mouth to horn, horn to horn, mouth to air, finger to clay, and finger to key; of the vast weird interconnected transmission machines of the nineteenth century, of which the artistic side might include the penny dreadful, the serial novel, and the traveling medicine show (the other side of which—small pox on the Plains, forced labor in the Congo—just hints at what goes wrong even, and perhaps especially, when transmissions go right, a disembodied message causing people themselves to disappear in the loping wavelength gallop of time); and then in the limelit burlesque of History enter inevitably the Marconis and the Farnsworths, ricepowdered, backed by an avant-garde chorale of futurists and suprematists amidst the cricket chirp of amateurs sparking the gap, intoning rude cracks, as a panorama with an unsinkable ocean liner nose-up scrolls behind.

We could only then, albeit with a stretch, get into the Golden Throat radios of Cage’s new frontier, but also there would be more quotidian “artistic” uses of radio or television (to limit, yes) that, as befits the subject at hand, we will never hear of; with the ubiquity of these machines, imaginary landscapes are everywhere (New

York City is simultaneously the solution to and the problem of conceiving a truly diverse transmission art practice); we could speak too of amping the noise source in Claude Shannon's "Mathematical Theory of Communication," so that whatever engineering flaws compromise the perfect move from data source to its receiver become desirable evidence of the fraught and fragile congress therein; of mail art potlatch, beatniks riding rails, boatmakers, tape-droppers, and blog-pimpers. We could even ask the reader at the next funeral they attend to simply look at the faces arrayed. If it is a family affair, they will immediately sense a kind of intergenerational transmission art afoot (this, of course, brings to mind the soap opera), while other types of funerals—lonely or communitarian—might attest to a subtler transmission or embrace of the void, which faces and names smearing across space and time can't quite match in terms of dignity.

But I digress. What I would really like to talk about will take you a little further along, curious reader, than the shinplaster of proper names will. It is a simple device that may serve to contain all the rest, and its wide availability could provoke a revolution, and conserve the primal urge at the heart—with its "ear" and its "art"—of transmission. The "message in a bottle"—a product of a collision of two systems of distribution, and a retrofitting of one for the purpose of the other—is an incunabulum for any reflection you might care to have about the way in which one thing getting to another is never a *fait accompli*. Therein lies the art. With the message in a bottle you have, first of all, the message—secret scrap, abandoned analecta, indited vow, scream arrayed. You have its carrier—flagon, carboy, or pop-top—as well as the medium through which it is carried. Luckily, for our purposes, it is carried by waves which make, all told, the "message in a bottle" very close to radio, although the resemblance to radio need not be a strict requirement. But what does seem to uniquely characterize transmission art, which the art of the bottle and some radio art share, is the poetry of uncertain destination.

I imagine that perhaps this art took on its more romantic connotations in Venice, where a highly evolved bottle and glass industry of the Middle Ages met with a convenient system of canals, promising some uncertainty, but not total abandon, when a lady chose to set a bejeweled Murano flask on the fetid waters, her love inside to evade the less imaginative eyes of a jealous Doge. Closer to our time, when the bottle stood in for the comforts of home an adventurer might otherwise forego when setting out into the American west (an early etymology of "bottle" is something akin to "beau dwell"), we can imagine a specimen of these dubious cure-alls stopping an expletive and set flinging into Lake Michigan by a festive wanderer headed out to spend a life under the stars. Balms and balsams, bitters and boozes: a cosmos itself of bottles, their powers labeled, their intentions manifest, redirected to other ends, a last hurrah after final gulps, and destined for the seabottom.

Litter, you say. No, literature! For if we are nothing but transmissions, transmissions transmitting to transmitters transmitting transmissions within transmissions, then it is all we can do to carry on, or get carried away. The messaged bottle tells of a need to transmit, even when the machines of transmission don't line up in our favor, and

this excess of unofficial literature may hold future promise. They are ready-made for this literature: bottles hold within them the *spiritus* of the ancients, source of all poetry, since their emptiness is animated by the breath of a bottle blower. Much transmission art admits the layered and social and specific nature of any communications system, so the fact that the literal “inspiration” is coming from someone else should not make it any less respectable. What we are continually up against, however, is the force of standardization and the resulting homogenization of message. Is it merely a coincidence that the standardization of radio waves for increased efficiency of military and commercial operations in the beginning of the twentieth century coincided roughly with the automation of bottle making—giving blowers the pink slip and effectively taking the *spiritus* off the line? It becomes increasingly doubtful that anyone will pick up a bottle of which there are so many similar ones to be found. When the impulse to transmit pleasure to everybody pleases nobody much, the resulting litter has no hope of making it back into the pantheon of recycled human energies called the literary.

But which transmissions, their energies attendant, do we need to carry out? And it is this question that perhaps haunts the transmission artist at night, and impacts how we approach this project of understanding transmission art itself. Because the pace of transmission determines space and time (and transmissions themselves are composed of matrices of time, as when one frequency transmits its energy to or modulates another set of pulse-units), mere chronology would be a dull undertaking were we to decide to carry out a “history of transmission art.” The very question of history—what we decide to transmit and carry on into the future—determines the quality and energy of our space and time. How much is worth carrying on? Is the ideal transmission a very simple message: a ray, a pause, an “I am that?” Or do we need the vastness of our bibliographies to maintain the adventure? Can we put the whole of what matters in a straw bound carboy and set it afloat? Or do we need to catch the sense of whatever we can and let it resonate a bit before slipping once again into dead air?

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