

Radiophonic Cultures

Sonic Environments and Archives in Hybrid Media Systems

International Conference, 7-9 May 2018, Museum Tinguely, Basel

Radio, which developed over the course of the 20th century into a crucial form of communication, is currently undergoing processes of fundamental reorganization that can be summarized under the general heading “digitalization”. When considered under the much older term “radiophonics”, these processes unleash conceptual possibilities that surpass the simple scheme of economization or the acceleration of production- or broadcasting-forms. In May 2018, these conceptual possibilities are addressed with a conference entitled “Radiophonic Cultures—Sonic Environments and Archives in Hybrid Media Systems”. Tying in on the same subject matters the conference will be followed by the exhibition “Radiophonic Spaces” in October 2018 at the Museum Tinguely as well as a comprehensive publication.

Radiophonics as a cultural technique—as all radio avant-gardes have considered it—integrates the distinction between musical sound events and effects, noises, or sounds to produce a new concept of sound art. In the practice of broadcasting and listening using electromagnetic waves, noises—sonic components not notatable in conventional scores—become part of the composition. Thus, when understood in terms of radiophonics, both the defined limits of music and sound and the corresponding semiology and hermeneutics of criticism shift. In this way the cultural techniques of radiophonics also transform compositional techniques, which address not only the structure of music but also the spatial effects produced through studio techniques and broadcast structures. For this reason, the concept of radiophonics also provokes media-theoretical reflections about the production of collectives, connectivities, and historically-specific subjectivities. Radio is not solely and not simply a mass medium.

The “Radiophonic Cultures” Conference assumes that radiophonic art experimentally and self-reflexively negotiates the indistinct edges of what is defined as music, including sound spaces, archives, procedures in the studio, and listening cultures. Accordingly, central to forms of radiophonic composition are questions about acousmatic relationships between sound and sound source and among instruments, technical arrangements, and body techniques, and questions about communication- and power-relations implemented by the media. Last but not least, radiophonics points to the blurred lines between documentation and fiction in acoustic recordings, and thus to questions about whether experiences in media technology are real. In this sense, radiophonics would be understood as both an opening up of sound and radio, and as radio’s anaesthetic, its alien other.

In the space between these polar opposites, the history of radio has unfolded as a history of the technical, aesthetical, and political production of the future through experimentation, modelling, and experience. The production of futures—not only of the radio—is hard work. It is not without reason that there is no equivalent in acoustics for that which would be called “vision” in the visual realm. The radio has to be on air, to be at all.

Panel 1: Broadcasting or Microcasting: Creating Pluralities and Collectives

Since Bertolt Brecht's call to transform broadcast radio from a distribution apparatus into a communication apparatus, radio theory and practice have raised questions about the relationship between the imperceptible Hertzian spectrum and the audibility of radio, between instrumental and technical sound, and between sender and receiver, individuals and collectives. Meanwhile, the different technical, aesthetic, and political distributions have proved to be entangled in problematic ways: a central transmission that produces the masses through the media—i.e., broadcasting—is appropriated by the radio-aesthetic avant-gardes and with digital devices in particular to generate decentralized networks or even to strategically split up individuals listening to different radio sonic formats, such as sounds, news, or specific listening spaces. Individuals – or, as Gilles Deleuze called them, *dividuals* – can become multidimensional on the radio.

The first panel examines strategies for narrow- or micro-casting: how do sound aesthetics and compositions relate to radio apparatuses in current radio art and community radio projects? Which collectives, individuals, and distributions among them are critiqued, modelled, experimented with, or produced? Which particular potentials develop in connection with radio and radiophonics?

Panel 2: On the History of Knowledge of Music Listening in Radio 1920-1960

Historical discourse and developments in media technologies have always influenced the formation of listening cultures. The question of historical shifts in knowledge about and through listening is posed in radiophonic compositions in particular. These compositions must be contextualized by both the history of a shifting media landscape influenced by technological innovations and by the history of developing compositional techniques over the course of music history. From the start, listener expectations, listener typologies and statistics, new ways of listening, and listening-adapted compositional techniques were discussed for the radio-as-mass-media in diverse sources, in particular in the discourse centered on the medium-specific compositional techniques. Addressing the question of radiophonic composition, the panel will consider the concept of audience as, for example, the phantom of a diffuse mass toward which a composition is directed, and as a constellation that is assembled only in the radio transmission itself.

Panel 3: Archive Strategies: On the Future of Radio

According to the paradigm of 'liveness', broadcast and archive have long been considered as opposite poles. In radiophonic practices and under digital conditions, the limits between broadcast and archive become permeable. This is not only true for database-based audio platforms, which can be thought of as either 'asynchronous radio' or as 'live-archive'. This is generally true for the organization of digitally-recorded archives, in which acoustic objects are no longer just tagged in writing according to themes and motifs. Instead, these objects can now be archived and retrieved according to their sonic characteristics, and questions of provenance must take into account the forms and formats and media transformations of sound objects. An MP3 file can acoustically refer

back to its phonographic source and thus the difference between media technologies gives rise to new compositions.

Precisely this attention to the transformation of media objects in archives connects aesthetic methods of sound art with epistemological questions of archive theory. Artists who compose with archive materials transform both the archive and the archived. The panel thus poses systematic questions about the organization and the significance of the archive in the area of acoustics, as well as questions about the conditions of radio's history and stories. Which new approaches among critical archive strategies do digital sound archives offer when the usual limits and internal distinctions of such procedural archives become "leaky"?

Panel 4: Studio Procedures: Radiophonics as Poesis

Radiophonics connects recording technologies for acoustic oscillations with the transmission technologies of electromagnetic waves. This hybridity closely ties the history of radio to the history of electroacoustic music. The establishment of electronic studios after the Second World War at broadcasting corporations was not a coincidence: it rather points to the manifold links between radio technology, the history of technology and institutions, and the dynamics of the exploration and invention of new sound dimensions.

In 'radiophonic sound laboratories', experimental procedures of creating sound arise through cooperation and exchange among engineers, sound technicians, musicians, and composers. Reciprocal creative processes among individual actors—i.e. technical equipment, persons, and spaces—produce not only new sound aesthetics and concepts about designing sound, but also new technological, personal, and spatial arrangements. In these reciprocal processes, routine behaviors and individualized technologies emerge, and become new knowledge formations in radiophonics as a cultural technique. How do these processes work in concrete examples? How do specific arrangements interact with one another in the studio and how is a new sound aesthetic or concept developed? Do the courses of such circular causalities change when passing from analog to digital? How does one transform from an engineer into a composer or into a musician, or the other way around?

Panel 5: Radiophonic Realities: Fieldwork and Sonic Fictions

Since the early days of radio, the dimension of true-to-life or realistic reproduction has played a decisive role: on a technological level in the sense of "fidelity", following the ideal of a signal impaired as little as possible by media conditions; on a creative-aesthetic level in the sense of "realism" or documentary, and specific forms of reference to an "external", sonically-tangible reality. Both concepts, however, follow the "transparency" model found in relation with analog recording, presuming both an absence of code (Barthes) and a direct registration of the real on the material carrier. But how does this change with digital procedures where the code is constitutive?

To this day, both fields of technological and aesthetic “realism”—or rather the transparent transmission of a sonic reality—are relevant in sound artwork and, it could be argued, are interlinked: for example, they mix and overlap in the history of sound effects. This does not mean that the question of permeability between real and fictitious experience is about relativization of the factual; it is rather about the mutual dependency of the production of both reality and fictionality.

The panel discusses the reality effects in radiophonic spaces, their interplay with technological and aesthetic dimensions, and their techniques and discourses.