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Radio Art, Between Autonomy and Hybridation

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- 1 The idea that radio could be an art form appeared very explicitly in 1943, when Studio d'Essai was founded. Before inventing concrete music and introducing "sound objects" into the history of music, Pierre Schaeffer had laid down the terms of a specifically radiophonic art form, which he likened to cinema in his *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma* [Essay on Radio and Cinema], which was published in 1941-1942. He sought, within what he termed the "relay-arts", an aesthetic that would be able to elevate the mechanical arts above the "hodgepodge of the last twenty years"¹ and, maybe even of absorbing the "perpetual trepidation" and weakening of sensitivity that Paul Valéry had worriedly described in his 1935 essay *Le Bilan de l'intelligence*² [An Assessment of Intelligence] in the face of the rise of the media industries.
- 2 By inventing concrete music at the end of the 1940s, a genre based on fixed sounds, it could be said that Pierre Schaeffer sought to abolish the difference between music and noise in order to sanction a distinct field of studio music, emancipated from the hybridisations induced by the first explorations of radio art, which consisted in conceiving of an art of sound based on the interpolations between three distinct signifying regimes: speech, music and noise. In order to serve the purposes of their reciprocal associations, these three regimes could not yet be merged into musical objects. Hence a fertile combination of possible manipulations: the musicalisation of speech, the semantisation of noise, the musicalisation of music, the musicalisation of noise, the noise of speech, the semantisation of music. Schaeffer's ambition of creating a radio aesthetics has now been accomplished by certain art venues. At the beginning of 2020, the Phonurgia Nova association opened La Chambre d'écoute 2.0 at the Réattu Museum in Arles, asserting its historical responsibility: this "immersive audio room exclusively dedicated to audio-graphy" was inaugurated in the presence of Jacqueline and Justine Schaeffer, respectively the composer's wife and daughter.

- 3 From “*art radiophonique*” [radio art] to “*audio-graphie*” [audio-graphy], terminological hesitations in French are particularly glaring when set against their equivalents in the closest linguistic spheres. “In Germany, it was called *Elektronische Musik* and Tape Music in the United States.”³ Even today, the translation of “*arts sonores*” denotes a systematic complication in defining these kinds of practices, with the circulation of terms such as “sound art” in English and *Klangkunst* in German, in which the radio dimension seems secondary or inessential. These hesitations may testify to the awareness that the mediologic characterisation of these practices is reductive and that their consecration, through more “artistic” terminologies also performs a separation (in the Marxist sense). And many practices suggest that hesitancy is preferable to separation in these approaches, as the latter risks amputating them of various dimensions while concealing their necessary hybridisation⁴, because hybridisation is not an aesthetic principle. Even if there does exist a specific fertility in relation to in-betweenness. Thus, in a recent special issue entitled “*Art + sonore = art sonore ?*” [Sound + art = Sound art?] (ed. by Annelies Fryberger), *Circuit* magazine published an article by Karine P. Bouchard on electromechanical technologies within exhibition spaces. Christophe Kihm’s essay remarks on the tension between “a form of intrinsic coherence (which jeopardises the delimitations sketched by thematic division)” and “desires of totalisation (encyclopaedism, summarisation, genealogy, and so on)”⁵ that comes to light in the process which makes exhibition pieces out of technologically retro or anti-mainstream musical instruments.
- 4 By placing sound in an intermediate class, between theme and category, there seems to be a hope that it will be neither too much of one nor the other, so that it can take full advantage of the generic indeterminacy this situation brings about. It could be symptomatic that technologically retro musical instruments are now treated through a lens that is at once post-modern and disjunctive, through the idea of dissonance, for instance in the Autumn 2020 exhibition *Disonata: Art in Sound up to 1980* held at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, which focuses on the following areas: “Audiosphere”, “Social Experimental Audio”, “Pre- and Post-Internet”. Again, the fact that the term “music” is avoided is probably due to sound art not wanting to seem too artistic and/or because it is more political and/or because it arises from a crisis of expression produced and/or amplified by media technologies. By reading media archaeologist Jussi Parikka⁶ and reconnecting the artistic practices of sound objects – derived from sound broadcasting technologies – to a history of radio, of whose transgressive breakaways they are emblematic, it is possible, following Emmanuel Guez, to seek the source of the “repoliticisation of art” in these practices. Thus, in 2020, the Lenbachhaus⁷ in Berlin featured the exhibition *Radio-Activity: Collective Approaches to Art and Politics* (curated by Karin Althaus and Stephanie Weber), which posits Bertolt Brecht’s 1932 declaration as its programmatic origin. Brecht noted that the radio broadcasted Viennese waltzes and pretty stories instead of debates and explanations: “It was suddenly possible to say everything to everyone but, when you thought about it, you had nothing to say.” Hence Brecht’s project of allowing the public to listen to the radio, but also to broadcast their own programmes. The exhibition is extended through several web radios, *Radio Papesse*, *Radio Cashmere* and *Radio Vaduz*. Beyond the context of the exhibition, Brecht’s desire to “de-asymetrise” radio and to consider a concept of radio wherein listeners can also act upon what is being broadcasted is now at the heart of the *TT-node* project.

- 5 More recent sound experiments entertain contradictory desires for bifurcations and autonomy from the history of music. The ZKM | Karlsruhe Centre for Art and Media Technology, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and the Sztuki Museum recently published *Ultra Sounds: The Sonic Art of Polish Radio Experimental Studio* (edited by David Crowley), a collective work that explores the consistency of the almost-musical sound pieces produced in the studio that Dariusz Brzostek and Joanna Walewska-Choptiany termed a “laboratory”. Just as Pierre Schaeffer founded the Groupe de Recherches Musicales, the reference to experimentation and the spirit of research are recurring elements in the field of radio creation, as demonstrated by “Le Labo”, a programme dedicated to radio creation, initiated by David Collin for Swiss Radio-Television. From Poland to Switzerland, via Germany, Italy and France, comparative studies should perhaps be conducted, for instance between the aesthetics of Bruno Maderna when he frequented the RAI Phonology Studio in Milano and Karlheinz Stockhausen’s turning point when he worked at the Cologne Electronic Music Studio. This would be tantamount to recording the compositional gestures and mannerisms of a closed-circuit concert of nations⁸ as so many stylistic particularisms. Although this may be the stance that is most open to the idea of a Polish Touch, it would end up concealing the political dimension and the “anti-mass-media” charge that are to be found in these artistic uses of radio. Perhaps the most emblematically radical examples are, alongside *Telemusik*, which Stockhausen composed at the Japanese radio’s NHK Studio in 1965-1966, John Cage’s works with radio, such as *Radio Music* for one to eight radio-wielding performers, which premiered in 1956 at the Carl Fisher Hall in New York.
- 6 However, Sylvain Marquis identified “Digital Mutilations as a critique of cultural icons” as a “radio utopia for mind liberation, the enjoyment of an ephemeral sound magma, the infinite silence of an auditory auscultation of micro-acoustics: the international musical phenomenon that has been slowly emerging since the 1990s is admittedly indebted, in various measures, to Edgard Varèse and his action in history”⁹. Sylvain Marquis thematises this legacy as an individual will to resist conventions, to recognise that “musical activity becomes an act of radical differentiation and is fantasised as the creation of its own paradigm.” Although the analytical frameworks are evolving, the idea of “sound art” is now academically accepted. In October 2020 alone, Loïc Bertrand defended a PhD thesis entitled *Vers une archéologie des arts sonores* [Towards an Archaeology of Sound Art] at Paris 7-Diderot University, and Frédéric Mathevet entitled the synthesis of his work for his *Habilitation à diriger des recherches* at the Lorraine University, *Arts sonores et recherche-cration : les chemins de la plasticit* [Sound Art and Research-Creation: Paths to Plasticity]. Although the dissemination of sound via the Internet has become widespread, the expression “radio art” continues to circulate beyond the realm of Hertzian transmissions. In *Listen Up! Radio Art in the USA* (edited by Anne Thrupmann-Jaies and Regine Beyer), the practices that are discussed come from initiatives on the fringes of media production, even though the ways in which they are showcased draw on an analysis repertoire which is almost strictly aesthetic, which, in order to consecrate the practices’ autonomy, still risk missing the alternative force they represent, in a world saturated by an informational use of the media. But it is in the tension between hybridisations and autonomy that radio art is proliferating more than ever, and that these exhibitions, creations, broadcasts, programmes, installations, and so on, form an alternative network to that world.

NOTES

1. Schaeffer, Pierre. *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma*, Paris: Allia, 2010
 2. Valéry, Paul. *Le Bilan de l'intelligence*, Paris: Allia, 2019
 3. Christoffel, David. "Traduire", interview with Denis Dufour, *Les Annales de Métaclassique*, Château-Gontier: Ed. Aedam Musicae, 2020, p. 362
 4. Cf. Licht, Alain. *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories*, New York : Rizzoli, 2007
 5. Kihm, Christophe. "Art sonore ou art d'écouter ?", *Circuit : musiques contemporaines*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2020, p. 26-28 [Special Issue "Art + son = art sonore ?"]
 6. Parikka, Jussi. *What is Media Archaeology?*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012
 7. <https://www.lenbachhaus.de/en/visit/exhibitions/details/radio-activity>
 8. In reference to "La Muse en circuit" created in 1982 by Luc Ferrari.
 9. Marquis, Sylvain. "Depuis Varèse jusqu'aux arts audio : espaces d'un héritage", *Edgard Varèse : du son organisé aux arts audio* (ed. by Timothée Horodyski, Philippe Lalitte), Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008, p. 335
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AUTHORS

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A radio creator and musicologist, **David Christoffel** is the author and composer of numerous spoken operas. He is a radio producer for the RTS, and initiated the independent programme *Métaclassique*, which is broadcast by a hundred or so community radio stations, and whose *Annales* will be published by Aedam Musicae this Autumn 2020. He wrote *Ouvrez la tête (ma thèse sur Satie)*, which was published by MF in 2017, and *La Musique vous veut du bien*, PUF, 2018. He teaches at the Philharmonie de Paris, the CNSMD of Paris and Lyon, the ENSMD of Lille, Telecom Paris, the CNAM and the Universities of Poitiers and Evry.