Ilze Black

Interference: the art of the unseen city - sound, engagement, transmission.

[04/04]

As most of us walk through the city, we see an environment filled with buildings, roads, cars, people, dogs, lampposts, parking meters, trees and other urban detritus. All these things define our perception of the space through which we move. We automatically read our surroundings in terms of their physicality; we map our paths as a sort of urban slalom course of voluminous obstacles. What we so often fail to think about is the space in-between and above. We may notice when it is raining or when the air we breathe is polluted or smoky, but what we do not see is nonetheless around us. The emptiness of the void is an illusion. The reality is a complex matrix of invisible waves, existing on a whole spectrum of frequencies ranging from sound waves and light waves to radio waves and telecommunication signals, an inverted world of transmitted information and sound. The project Interference:Public Sound sought to explore this unseen realm and the vectors of disturbance within it, harnessing its energies and channels of communication and aligning it with other ideas of social, political interference and contemporary forms of resistance.

The result was four sound and communication arts projects each engaging with different human, environmental, and technological issues in East London. These projects all explored the potential for the use of old and new media and sound in arts to enhance creativity or preserve aspects of personal or collective memory. The origins of sound art lay way back in the early 20th century avant-garde with seminal works like Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo's 1913 manifesto "The Art of Noise." Marcel Duchamp often utilised sound in his visual and conceptual works and his Dadaist colleagues liked nothing better than an anarchic racket, but in general the story of art in the last century has been the story of the eye. It has only been in more recent years that sound art has attained a long overdue prominence in the work of artists such as Janet Cardiff and Bill Fontana.

While artists like Cardiff have received substantial exposure and critical acclaim there are many others working in experimental realms in a search for more diverse ways to engage with our imagination beyond conventional forms of image and representation. Composer and artist Graeme Miller who emerged from the Impact Theatre Co-operative in the 1980s has used radio in numerous sound works. His project "Linked", launched in July 2003, is an invisible sculpture concealed in radio waves along the three-mile route of M11 link road, running from Hackney Marshes to Redbridge in East London. Twenty transmitters installed on lampposts along the route continually broadcast hidden voices, recorded testimonies and rekindled memories of those who once lived and worked where the motorway now runs. The work harks back to 1994 when thousands of people were evicted from their homes to make way for the planned highway. This and other similar incursions into local communities and areas of natural beauty inspired direct action organisations like Reclaim the Streets to raise public awareness of the irreparable damage such projects caused to human lives and the environment. Miller's "Linked" communicates a more personal account of the events of 1994 as told by inhabitants of the demolished houses that is often critical of both the State and the protesters. From it we get an artistic perspective of a community who, as Professor Alan Read puts it, 'were only brought into being by their premature disappearance at the very moment they found themselves'. Those wanting to access this public art monument must collect a special receiver, either from a local library or from the Museum of London. Walking through this much-changed area of London the participant tunes into Miller's linked transmitters, their aural nexus sculpting the story of a vanished community from a historical and surreal juxtaposition of sounds and scenery of today.

If in "Linked" Miller employed a very low, local frequency that used the airspace for the creation of an permanent public artwork, "Radio Cycle," initiated by the sound artist Kaffe Matthews, offered a more temporary and open approach. The essence of the work was the dynamic interaction of an artistic idea

with the technological conception of open access and free distribution over the airwaves, in this case occupying both FM and WiFi frequencies and physical space.

A week-long workshop in the Bow Idea store http://www.ideastore.co.uk/ invited youth groups and other members of the local community to experiment in creating their own radio shows. These were recorded via the internet using streaming software and the free open source compressed digital audio format Ogg Vorbis http://www.vorbis.com/. Hosted by a server in Germany, these recordings traveled via the free2air WiFi community network, to be broadcasted live on 101.4 FM in the local area of East London. Learning to work with free sound editing software http://audacity.sourceforge.net individuals crafted sound pieces and innovative radio programs as well as drawing maps of the local area. In the final part of this multi-faceted art project cyclists rode through Bow and Bethnal Green with receivers installed on bicycles replaying these broadcast sound works.

Matthews work was a conception that looked back to Bertolt Brecht, Paul Hindemith and Kurt Weill's 1929 radio play "Lindbergflug", the stage performance of which saw Brecht install a radio and receiver on the same stage, asking listeners to sing along with what they heard on the radio, and so transforming the radio from a simple distribution medium to an interactive communicative one. "Radio Cycle" brought these long forgotten notions into the local environment of the East End of London, engaging with a contemporary arena of free broadcast media, cycling activism and free youth workshops, establishing a communicative circle in a way that was both active and playful. The Radio Cycle 24hour open studio attracted a diverse stream of visitors. Locals from varied backgrounds and cultures were able to indulge in and share their native idiosyncrasies, ideologues and cultural preachers had a platform for messages of understanding and respect, kids could pump the latest games, there were practitioners discussing physics and the relationship of new technologies to contemporary art practice, neo-radio hams, psychogeographers, hackers, radical urban cyclists and many more, all celebrating 10 days of free radio space.

"Radio20pwhitechapel" was a project developed by Kate Rich and the Bureau of Inverse Technology, an agency servicing the 'information age', taking the free radio idea to the web realm. The premise involved inviting people in London and New York to use the increasingly pervasive network of mobile phones to capture live data on the house sparrow, a bird that was as common as the pigeon in these cities up until the 1980s, but has now all but vanished. In London alone the sparrow population decrease has been measured at 94%. For reasons still not entirely clear the famed "Cockney Sparrer" has gone the same way as the Chinese, the Jews, the Latvian anarchists and so many other denizens of the old East End.

Radio20pwhitechapel, acting as a radio without authority, took on research in the public realm, trying to find out everyone's views, ideas, and thoughts on the possible reasons behind the disappearance of those little birds that had for so long been the inseparable companion of human society. A "sparrow line" was set up using a specially developed tool called an Uphone that allows a telephone message left directly on an answering machine to be broadcast online where one message after another is streamed out live. Calls were received from all around London, many pointing out the supposed luck of the sparrows. One caller mentioned a news story concerning the disappearance of two swans from the Regents Canal which resulted in the arrest of East European immigrants on suspicion of having eaten these royal-owned birds. During the re-broadcasting of these calls live on Resonance FM, Bureau agents called up police to enquire if they had any more information on the disappearance of London's sparrows and could it be possible that they had suffered the same fate as the swans in the hands of some undesirable immigrants. On this police didn't have much to say except to point out that while swans are all owned by the Queen and as such are protected, sparrows mattered far less from a legal perspective.

The Radio20pw project brought in a focus another element of current media art practice that not only stimulates our imagination but also offers practical solutions and free tools for everyone's appropriation. Radio20pw launched the DIY guide on how to build your own Uphone, published on the website http://uphone.org/equip.html. It is simple diagram with free downloadable software that can be installed on any phone number and used for a variety of purposes, whether it be to create your very own answering machine that plays your messages from home while you listen to them online from any part of the

world, or as a community tool for fast information delivery. These were examples of the creative potential of an open citizens broadcast system.

"Magnetic Migration Music" by Scottish artist Zoë Irvine was similar to this sparrow spotting project in the way that it challenged our daily interaction with the surrounding environment by focusing our attention on the dramatic changes in the urban landscape while at the same time positing questions of a more social nature concerning travelers, asylum and immigrant culture. The project invited people to collect the old audio cassettes or tape ribbon that have now become common urban debris, often found tangled in trees or on street corners. Envelopes were distributed in many public outlets requesting that the exact location, time, and finder of the tape be recorded. To great surprise of the artist herself, tapes and audio fragments were posted from all over London.

This collective mapping by locating discarded tapes, later restored and republished by the artist in a new sound art piece, revealed the multicultural identity of the population of London. This work harked back to the ideas of Fluxus artist Nam June Paik, whose 1963 piece "Random Access" featured bits of audio tape glued to the wall that could be played with a hand-held recording head, thus turning a reproduction medium into artistic source material. To Zoë Irvine, however, the medium itself is of less importance than its use as a communication tool to illuminate the mixed identities of the transient and immigrant population of the city. Listening to the diverse juxtaposition of sounds ranging from Turkish pop and Koranic readings to Vietnamese opera and Brick Lane Bangra is an experience that describes a multi-ethnic sonic landscape, the sounds of a real but diffuse community imagined as a Tower of Babel for the 21st century. All tapes are also now accessible on the net at http://www.magneticmigration.net/

All the works that formed part of the Interference project were explorations of urban sound and its manifold potential as a communicative, provocative and aesthetic medium. They allude to a sonic map of the city, a guide to an unseen landscape where words, voices, music and noise, all collide, a multi-dimensional forest of static where interference is a political gesture or an artistic act. William Burroughs described language as a virus, ever multiplying, breeding from itself. Similarly we can see the phenomenon of the city's rich living archive of sound, often disconnected directly from any specific source but existing in a many layered ever growing cacophony that somehow encapsulates the very soul of the metropolis.

Interference: Public Sound walked the void to discover that with the utilisation and development of diverse forms of technology of access there has never been a greater need to consider the invisible space of the city and politics surrounding it. Highlighting the public aspects of the various media in question and merging the boundaries between physical space and pure information, all the projects in one way or another created temporary autonomous zones where genuine experimentation took place and public participation flourished.

Ideas of free public access were stimulated by the use of otherwise closed or restricted spaces like the much regulated airwaves, or by suggesting new more open and innovative uses of the communication media surrounding us. Importantly all these works attempt an inclusive approach to communities of people not usually exposed to the products of the elitist, self-serving art world.

As physical matter, radio waves do not bounce off one another. They continue merrily on their way, propagating through free space forever, though attenuating in strength until they become undetectable. In this sense interference is always present.