

Alien Radio

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The first thing one notices when reviewing the catalog of works that the members of alien productions (Andrea Sodomka, Martin Breindl, Norbert Math) have created for radio is the crucial importance that this medium has had in their artistic development. They certainly do not operate according to the canonical practice of radio in its journalistic or all-music genres, but rather resort to the time-honoured tradition of experimentation in this medium, linked to the early creators of an art specifically intended for radio. Thus, it is hardly surprising that they should feel heirs to Marinetti's and Masnata's trendsetting manifesto (*La Radia*); that they have on occasion practiced post-fluxus actions and performances (by way of an example, their individual or collective contributions to *Art's Birthday Party* since 1999 could be quoted) and that they have developed an apt and fruitful alliance with electronic technology. Neither should we forget the interest that the great visionaries of technology and the world of automata have awoken in them.

It is at this stage essential to emphasize two aspects of alien productions' artistic trajectory: first, their inclusion in the outstanding generation of Austrian creators born in the 1960s, whose practice belongs to so-called electronic art. Second, and intimately connected to the previous aspect, is the fact that many of their works were developed by teaming up with other, not necessarily Austrian, colleagues. Due to its own production requirements, art that employs new technologies has long ago abandoned individual authorship to become a collective enterprise. However, the existence of the trio itself, and the perfect division of labour among its members, already gives evidence of what has been said. Furthermore, the artists are not only authors but quite often beneficiaries of ideas which they complete with their presence, participation, and decisions.

Finally, and given that in this article I essentially intend to talk about radio art, the close association that the members of alien productions have always enjoyed with the management of ORF's *Kunstradio-Radiokunst* programme,—originally in the person of its founder, Heidi Grundmann, and in recent years with Elisabeth Zimmermann, who is currently responsible—must be emphasized. Besides, *Kunstradio* is the context in which *On Air—Online—On Site* projects have progressively taken shape: projects to which the members of alien productions, among other artists both from Austria and other nations, have frequently contributed. This may also be the reason why their projects naturally unfold both as installations, performances and in the WorldWideWeb, as on radio; always beginning from a common trunk, which is deeply rooted in the debate about the role of the artist in the media and the role of the media and of technology in society. From these fundamental concerns they elaborate a discourse that in its formal articulation resorts to an aesthetic and poetics which is both personal and is related to their generation.

As we approach these works in their purely radio aspects, it becomes evident that for this trio of artists radio is more often than not a terminus rather than a point of departure for their ideas. Thus, it would seem appropriate to undertake an itinerary that sheds some light on the fundamental intentions of the authors; bears in mind their tendencies and productive strategies; and reveals their aesthetic and ideological references. To this end, I propose to consider three aspects, which I shall refer to as Themes, Materials and Techniques / Processes. Finally, I will refer to some of the most relevant works by this collective, so as to provide more detailed data and observations, if not evaluations, about them.



Themes

I have already mentioned alien productions' interest in automata: the fact is that their interest—taken as a recurrent theme in their production—goes beyond sheer curiosity about these pre-electronic devices, be they instruments such as the panmelodium; inventions as those devised by Sir Charles Babbage—in *Die Differenzmaschine* (1996)—or mechanical looms. In a superficial appraisal, it could seem that a substantial part of their work is oriented on an undeniable late futurist aesthetic. In fact, an interest in futurism and its aesthetic consequences could be suggested as yet another of their themes.

However, that interest cannot only be explained under the prerequisite that these objects are aesthetically further utilisable industrial waste. For example, their approach to the sound of machines such as mechanical looms in the piece *Arbeitsmuster* (2003) shows a marked socio-political interest, whereas in *Embedded Systems. A Housemusik* (1997), the use of an ensemble of food blenders calls forth another element: those sounds are symptoms of communication among machines, completely alien from human communication. The orchestration of noises from modern appliances is central to *The Well-Tempered Kitchen* (2004), which further illustrates their concern with materials. This interest in the interaction between languages and the language of machines can also be found in *xt* (2007), while data transfer is used as a metaphor for migratory movement in *State of Transition* (1994).

The attraction that historical avant-garde movements exert upon alien productions may not be underestimated. They have not only revisited Italian futurism's bruitist and radio postulates, but in *Schwittradio* (1999) they proposed, together with other sound artists and through another commission by Kunstradio, an appraisal of the figure and work of Kurt Schwitters. Their proximity, however parodistic, to fluxus' actionism has already been mentioned. Similarly, the live performance *Memory Loop* (2000) bears witness to their interest in the recent past of Austrian media art. Yet, in many of the quoted examples, historical reality is altered, if not directly reinvented.

Materials

Reference to materials in this context not only involves the sounds that comprise their works, but where they were obtained. Thus, going back to the previous section, mention should be made of both old automata and domestic appliances, the latter taken for what they are: ready-mades, "for which," in Duchampian fashion, "other thoughts" are to be found. The spoken word is another essential ingredient of their sound/radio discourse, as is made apparent by professional radio presenters in *Familie Auer* (1996), *Wortstaub Partikelwelt* (1999) or *Algebraische Muster* (1996); in *xt* by the authors' voices or in *Arbeitsmuster* through interviews with workers of a textile factory. Other equally rich examples of the use of speech can be found in *GATEways* (2000). Along with these, and beyond those already quoted, various concrete sounds enhance their works: urban noises in *Alien City* (1999) or in *Tempo Compresso / Spazio Sospeso* (1993); or sounds of birds and bird calls in the collective piece *RAPTOR remixed* (2009).

Techniques / Processes

When you listen to alien productions' radio works, you notice the way they are constructed in space and time. The spatial dimensions of the radio works are naturally relevant. They are also simultaneously installations (for example, *Arbeitsmuster* or *Wortstaub Partikelwelt*) or performances (*Die Differenzmaschine*, *xt*, *GATEways*). Occasionally they feature the use of video and/or the WorldWideWeb. Temporality is the result of transference between text and sound, which is achieved through the use of electronic technology for the transformation of audio (feedback, granular processing, loops, mixing), that has either been created in the studio or live. Quite often the result is a complex, textural fabric, a weft that unfolds in a long, gradually

evolving continuum where the semantic value of the texts almost miraculously manages not to lose its specific relevance without the musicality being pushed to the background. In these instances, the language of radio is borne in mind (even if the starting point or the terminus happens to be a performance, a concert or an installation) because radio is, due to tradition and accessibility, the ideal sound space to aesthetically embrace the heterogeneity of the sources and contents that alien productions usually use.

When I use the term process I intend to convey the idea that for alien productions, as for other artists of their generation, teamwork yields a system or tool that is almost as important as the actual result and, as a matter of fact, conditions it. This tool can adopt the shape of an artefact (*Embedded Systems*) or a telematic system that enables data exchange (*xt, State of Transition*) or the reception and manipulation of information (*Alien City*).

Interaction is a customary ingredient in these exchange processes, which has logically played a greater role in the case of those installations from which some of their radio pieces emerged, such as the aforementioned *xt, Embedded Systems* and *Wortstaub Partikelwelt*.

Some Representative Works

The first radio work in which all the members of alien productions participated is *Frozen Moments. Ungefähre Wirklichkeit* (1991), which is a radio remix of the performance series *Frozen Moments*. In relation to the piece, Andrea Sodomka states: "Radio (art) is narrated space in relative time, broadcast in absolute time." Consequently, "each layer of space-time holds all the remaining in its specific form: the real space / broadcasting space / narrated space (between reality and virtuality), real time / broadcasting time / historical time (between absolute time and temporal time), the spoken word / the word broadcast in space and time / the word manipulated by space and time (between signification and manipulation)." The frozen in *Frozen Moments* occurs as an interruption of the linear flow of time, which is perceived as a mistake in the time of the narrative. The final organization of the work follows a Fibonacci series.

In *State of Transition* we come across a new telematic event which involved live usage of radio and the Internet and was, in that sense, the first of its kind to grant the users of the latter medium, incipient at that time, interactive access. The artists participated from Rotterdam and Graz through the use of various kinds of telematic connections. Aside from alien productions, the participation of Gerfried Stocker and Wolfgang Reinisch, as well as that of Horst Hörtnner as system designer, should be emphasized. As I mentioned earlier, its theme was migration. The result is a relatively varied (if, in the long run) homogeneous magma or, to express it differently, a large entirety in which distinctive sounds are, in a manner of speaking, eroded by the rest.

In 1996, we come across two pieces radically different in character and approach: *Familie Auer* and *Die Differenzmaschine*, which in its radio version goes by the name *Algebraische Muster* (Algebraic Patterns). Produced by Kunstradio, *Familie Auer* gathered together a team of almost 70 people in order to create a radio serial that brought the daily life of a fictitious Viennese family, their dog and neighbours to the audience. Each episode, five minutes in length, was broadcast by Kunstradio in their usual weekly program. The serial remained on the air for over a year between January 1996 and February 1997 and featured in other media, such as the WorldWideWeb or a weekly newspaper, to say nothing of its version as an installation, featuring sensors, for the 1997 ARS Electronica Festival. On the occasion of this version, the then director of Kunstradio Heidi Grundmann wrote a long article that, among other aspects, illustrates the way in which the team voluntarily adopted rules in order to both carry out their duties and develop the different episodes. As the most important aspect, Grundmann highlights that *Familie Auer* served to explore the possibilities of interdisciplinary collaboration on radio with writers, sound and visual designers, actors, technicians, musicians, etc. Furthermore, she mentions how decisions about having a single melody or doing without explanatory texts were reached. Listening to some episodes, one realizes the way in which the commonplaceness of the radio serial, the stereotyped character of the voices or the use of

sound effects as conventional signs, laughter and clapping included, are exploited. And yet, a more ambitious plan can be noticed in the editing and in the way the interactive participation of the audience occasionally contributed to the unfolding of the serial. All these expressive elements are used in a context that expands the time-honoured practices of radio drama in an editing process that resorts to them as quotations, so that, according to Grundmann, this data bank was mined for the composition of each chapter by the whole team, sound technicians included. Within this framework, the members of alien productions occupied several different functions. Andrea Sodomka and Norbert Math, in collaboration with members of the staff, mainly dealt with composition; Martin Breindl, with online design.

Algebraische Muster, which emerged from a collaborative project with the composer Peter Mechtler and the writer Petra Ganglbauer, has a totally different character. Based on a modular idea, the piece was originally a performance that became a radio program, produced by Kunstradio and broadcast on November 21, 1996. Under the title *Die Differenzmaschine*, the original performance took place at Berlin's prestigious Sonambiente Festival that year. Here we find one of the favourite themes in our authors' trajectory: the world of automata. The texts are either quotations of historical writings by Sir Charles Babbage and Lady Ada Lovelace about the difference engine and its programming, or make reference to their biographies. The calculus apparatus planned by Babbage is set against the sounds of a panmelodium (a huge 19th century musical automata) that the authors recorded in the Prater in Vienna. In the piece, we are situated in a world in which Babbage's projects would have been materialized.

Apart from those aspects already mentioned in other sections, we should indicate that this piece inaugurates a line of work that will characterize subsequent alien productions' developments. This may be noticed in the treatment of sound elements, be they the sounds of the panmelodium, or of industrial metal parts that introduce the piece, or some of the radio presenters' contributions as they render the texts, as well as the general form and duration of the piece, which lasts over 70 minutes.

In *Embedded Systems. A Housemusik* the artists use the sound of food blenders and resort to humour when they state that, while the whole world is talking about an intelligent household, alien productions has already made it happen. The first time food blenders were used,—there were ten devices, controllable online—was during the event *Recycling the Future*, organized by Kunstradio. They also appeared in the 1999 *Art's Birthday Party*, and, of course, they were the point of departure for *The Well-Tempered Kitchen*, which emphasizes the serialisation of domestic life: an acoustic—or perhaps electro-acoustic—cookery is arrived at by using all the domestic appliances as instruments, with the help of electronic technology.

One of the most widely shown projects by alien productions, part of *Sound Drifting* during the 1999 ARS Electronica Festival and commissioned by Kunstradio, is *Alien City*. Both the images and sounds received by visitors of the web page hosting the piece were generated by the users themselves, who acted as feedback agents as they used a generative system, the *Sound Drifter* from Winfried Ritsch. Sounds from different cities were mixed and from time to time a different generative system took one of the parts to create a very subtle feedback between the virtual city and a real space. The neutral space of radio was one of the terminals of the piece.

To conclude, I mention *xt*, a piece created in 2007 in collaboration with Machfeld (Sabine Maier and Michael Mastrototaro). It uses the process of crosstalking (XT) as the point of departure for a piece in which error and interference in communication become part of the process itself. In fact, the authors' speech is the only material: through it they activate various technological devices, whose processes are also audible. *xt*'s structure is based on the four techniques of Xiansheng, a traditional Chinese performance art, originally derived from the imitation of another person's conduct and speech. As in so many other pieces of the artists mentioned here, we are faced by deliberately limited materials, which, by means of triggering clearly defined techniques and processes, take us beyond the original theme of the piece towards a sound result fully representative of its creators' unmistakable style.