The Familie Auer
A KUNSTRADIO Project.
A Collaborative Effort.
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Ö 1 KUNSTRADIO will celebrate its 10th anniversary in December 1997. Originally conceived as a weekly program featuring radio art on Österreich 1, the Austrian National Broadcasting Company's [ORF] cultural channel, the focus of KUNSTRADIO's activities quickly expanded to include conducting symposia as well as producing installations in public spaces linked by radio, multimedia and simultaneous telematic projects, international live radio and Internet projects, etc. KUNSTRADIO has been online since April 1995 at http://thing.at/orfkunstradio/. During the second half of 1997, all of KUNSTRADIO's projects and activities are being devoted to the theme "Recycling the Future"[1], including its contribution to the Ars Electronica Festival 1997, at which FAMILIE AUER will be one of the projects presented.

Over the 10 years since KUNSTRADIO began producing and broadcasting radio art, both art and radio have undergone fundamental changes in response to the pressure exerted by new digital communications technologies. But even 10 years ago, the days when families gathered in front of the receiver to listen together to a radio play or a football game were long gone. In the field of art, a new, radio-specific form of art had just received full official recognition: an audiotheque was set up for visitors to Documenta 8, in which Klaus Schöning [founder and head of the acoustic arts studio at the German broadcasting company WDR] presented the work of Ars Acustica in a comprehensive historical retrospective. It was not long before Ars Acustica was garnering such high praise even among previously skeptical radio drama directors representing the public broadcasting stations associated together in the European Broadcasting Union that the editors responsible for it were granted permission to form their own work group. It was precisely this long-overdue step which made it clear that Ars Acustica — like the traditional radio plays it was deconstructing, the so-called "new radio dramas of the 1960s — could only have matured to a state of high visibility and recognition within the framework of the European public [and Eastern European state] broadcasting systems or in similarly structured institutions in Canada and Australia. Klaus Schöning characterizes Ars Acustica as "art initiated and administered by radio" and points to the fact that works of radio art of such enormous significance for the history and definition of Ars Acustica by important artists such as John Cage were produced in Europe [at WDR] and not in the US with its totally different set of media policies. In large-scale installations, such as one by the American, Bill Fontana, this European "art initiated and administered by radio" repeatedly brought "the apparatus of radio into the public sphere" [Manfred Mixner], where it also listened in as well to the phenomenon of simultaneity.But radio art also had still other roots, most notably in the "impoverished" college and coop radio stations in Canada, the US and Australia, which lacked the means to put on highly complex studio productions à la Ars Acustica or to finance cable hook-ups and satellites for intercontinental sculptures. Performances employing [existing] forms taken from popular radio and film [Hank Bull/Patrick Ready, Vancouver; ts-ts-ts, Melbourne[2]], the hissing noise of the channel itself [G.X.Jupitter Larsen, Vancouver], unmanipulated natural sounds as the material of conceptual

radio compositions [Terry Fox, San Francisco], language and music as sculptural material [Lawrence Weiner, New York] and so forth, were presented at these stations even without access to major studios — and, it should be noted, without the specific context of programs with a national broadcast range and international remote feeds.

Several of the artists who got actively involved with the medium of radio were among those pioneers of telecommunications art who were granted an official imprimatur by the system of "graphic art" at the 1986 Venice Biennial. Since the 1970s, this art, which, has been calling into question concepts such as the traditional idea of authorship or the self-contained work of art as practiced by international network projects [telephone, slow scan TV, computer communication, fax] while, at the same time, taking as its subject aspects of media policy related to these new technologies [such as access to new communications media], became a virulent force in radio as well during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Highly diverse spaces and situations were linked up in live-projects that went beyond the contextual boundaries of art and into the context of everyday radio, in which not only the editors disregarded the artistic origins of their material and thereby overcame their "fear of entering uncharted territory" [Bill Fontana], but the audience did so as well. Or the listeners themselves became authors, many not having had the slightest idea that they were even taking part in an art project [Chris Mann, Wolfgang Temmel[3]].

No author/creator in our media society, still has control over how, in what context, and in which form his/her — probably fragmented and recycled — "work" will ultimately be received. Because, consciously and/or unconsciously, each of us has long since become a crystallization point within an ongoing, highly personal collage process. Whether we are channel-surfing on TV, watching the tube while talking on the phone, or simultaneously listening to music and editing a document displayed on a computer screen — we exist in a multimedia environment which we ourselves are constantly reassembling on various different levels of perception out of a stream of possible set pieces and fragments."[4]

The "collage-ification" of a wide range of spheres — public and institutional, real and in the media — with the help of communication and broadcasting technologies made possible the testing of a "distributive" concept of a work of art which had the overall effect of withdrawing not only the control previously exerted by the author who had now assumed the role of initiator, but also the overall view formerly enjoyed by the audience which had become co-author. The influence exerted upon interlinked live broadcasts — for example, by users surfing onto the Web site which had been set up in conjunction with the radio network — was only one of a variety of possibilities by which "remote/ distributive" artistic and non-artistic productions could be called into existence in an international matrix of interlinked and mutually influencing production spaces, paradigms and materials of the most diverse sort, and how such a network could be operated live during a pre-established time frame of, say, 24 or 18 hours [Horizontal Radio, 1995[5]; Rivers & Bridges, 1996[6]].

Thus, in communications art, context is a cultural fact. A playground is not specially created for the occasion; rather, a game is set in motion on the basis of the conditions of the public space. This framework of cultural interaction is modified by the active user — at least in the form in which it is perceived. Along with the artistic performance itself comes the "Art" of its usage, whereby "Art," of course, is meant in both senses of the word. [Translator's Note: Besides the English cognate, the German word Art here means manner, style or way.] Until now, the production of [aesthetic] information has usually been a private matter. The sphere of information, though, makes not only the data itself but also the process of producing data/information a public affair."[7]

One project which, in a quite unspectacular way, sheds light upon various aspects of the current state of radio art [as a part of communications art] and its history — indeed, over a rather lengthy period of time and by taking into account modern technical developments — is the radio and Internet project Familie Auer, based upon a popular mass media genre. It began as a lunchroom chat with author Lucas Cejpek sometime in 1995 — for KUNSTRADIO, a year highlighted by Horizontal Radio and the launch of KUNSTRADIO online. The idea was to develop a family situation series on radio and Internet. Al Bundy — a radio genre archetype who had made it on TV — surfaced as a potential model: parents, two teenage kids, neighbors, a pet — a Viennese "Married With Children." In the fall of 1995, a group of four writers[8] came up with names for the family members and sketched the lead characters with four traits each. Enthusiastic as a result of this initial meeting, they drew up a catalog of rules, including copyright conditions, for all writers and composers who might collaborate on the project in the future. At the first full staff meeting of all KUNSTRADIO writers who were interested in getting on board the Familie Auer project — as usual, with extremely diverse backgrounds and highly divergent ages — this catalog of rules including copyright provisions was immediately adopted ad acta and it was decided that teams would be formed on a rotating basis to deal with all the tasks which began to emerge in conjunction with a radio and Internet production. A single set of guidelines was established for the radio episodes: a theme melody unique to the show, no explanatory preface, a reference to the Internet address at the end of each episode, a cast consisting of a group of regulars, the creation of a "data bank" containing standard lines, sound effects, musical excerpts, laughter, etc. Within a short time, the cast became increasingly comfortable with improvisation, so that scripts which had already been finalized instead became — fragmented — clips for the "data bank," which the writing teams, working closely with the sound engineers in the studio, used as material for the "composition" of the initial episodes and which, in ever-changing and expanded form, remained available for future segments. In the very first month, the sound engineers already began to get involved as [co]authors.

The so-called "new radio drama" began (in the 1960s) with the process of "getting the author into the studio"[9] and with the technical feasibility of stereophonic sound … In a collaborative effort, as it were, involving writers, dramatists, theater directors, composers, filmmakers and graphic artists, a new aesthetic concept began to emerge … The dominant position of a verbally signifying language gave way to a balanced blend of language, music and sound, and led to the coining of an "acoustic language," articulating itself in a variety of idioms in order to harmonize heterogeneous acoustical material.[10]

Once a week from January 4, 1996 until the middle of February 1997, a Familie Auer episode averaging approximately five minutes in length was broadcast on Österreich 1, ORF's cultural channel. Each episode was produced by a team of writers, composers, artists and technicians. These teams were continually regrouping among a staff whose number grew in time to over 70. The "initiative and management originating from radio" was limited to organizational matters; no influence was exerted upon the development of the project itself — except that KUNSTRADIO made it clear from the outset that it was not interested in a traditional series of radio plays with no Internet component.

The self-definition of artists, writers, composers, media artists as well as technicians and producers involved in a project like Familie Auer goes through an almost turbulent process of transition. Co-operation, teamwork, interdisciplinary skills, relinquishment not only of copyright to the ideas one has contributed but also artistic control over the subsequent development of the project including all of its individual components — all of this had to be learned or tested. Nevertheless, the few Auer writers who adamantly refused to give up their traditional roles and resigned from the project because the loss of their accustomed control had become a problem for them can be compared to the much larger number of those who, for example, in accordance with the intention of the project as a whole, consented to waive direct credit even in the case of radio or Internet episodes to which they had made major contributions … One of the preconditions accepted by these writers was that each episode and every other step in the production process was only a partial aspect of a much larger entity composed entirely of fragments. This was not a matter of imposing a personal agenda or implementing specialized standards; rather, the point was to explore the possibilities in the media for interdisciplinary collaboration on the part of a coalition which was transforming itself and acquiring new facets with dizzying speed and which increasingly resolutely forswore more than token intervention by its individual members.

Familie Auer's homepage — a separate Web site within KUNSTRADIO online — was set up at the same time the first radio episodes aired in early January 1996 and was likewise designed by teams of artists, including some who worked on the episodes themselves. The site is still up and running[11]; it features "picture stories" [including Real Audio files], games, a Familie Auer Fan Club as well as sound files from the radio episodes, etc. A few writers with no previous Web experience worked closely with artists familiar with the Web to provide their own input into the site design. There were segments in which the outcome of the radio episodes could be influenced by online users.

In the world of contemporary radio, it is a borderline absurd undertaking to expect potentially interested listeners to consistently tune in to a weekly series whose episodes are slightly shorter than two pop music songs — and, as if this weren't enough, one with a starting time of 10:17 p.m. which normally indicates an "art" orientation, offers absolutely no explanation or lead-in, and in which narrative elements occur only in the form of quotations. However, using a media package including listings in print media radio program supplements, plus advertising on-the-air in radio, online on the Internet, and in public voice etc., Familie Auer achieved recognition even among those "culture-vultures" who had never heard a single radio episode or never happened upon Familie Auer's Web site.

Whereas the radio episodes vanished into the fleetingness of the ether every Thursday evening at 10:17 sharp, the Web episodes of Familie Auer can still be found at any time, the Real Audio files can be called up at any time, site visitors can take part in the games and send e-mail at any time. [Indeed, answering all the e-mail frequently proved to be too much for the Familie Auer team to handle, particularly since only a few of the artists involved had their own means of accessing the Internet.]

The telephone was, and still is, the only generally available, unprogrammed, participatory, personal and interactive communications medium — aside from face to face contact. Programmed broadcasting media like radio and television are universally available...but they are one-way systems in which a commodity — information, entertainment, services — is distributed to a consuming, or potentially consuming, public. ...With the telephone on the other hand, it is the service itself which is the commodity and the user supplies his or her own content...[12]

The Familie Auer project explores a wide segment of the spectrum ranging from "unprogrammed" to "programmed" communications media — from chat rooms to e-mail, call-ins to a live radio show, the voice box, game playing in the WWW, the pre-produced radio episode all the way to newspapers and the CD.

By late spring 1996, the Familie Auer staff — who had themselves developed into a kind of family — decided to install a Familie Auer public voice box, for which, once again, separate teams had to be established. It was also decided to produce and mail out a postcard containing the various addresses to get in touch with the Familie Auer.

A 43-minute-long live broadcast[13] at the end of June marked the half-year anniversary of the Familie Auer. It had several levels: for a time prior to the broadcast date, Web users and Auer public voice hotline callers were requested to send in texts from which the actors could develop new Familie Auer situations for the live broadcast and the episodes leading up to it. The material for the live broadcast was collected on two CDs [one of which features random mode playback] containing short segments from the previously produced radio episodes together with other brief sequences [e.g., laughter, musical accents] which can be accessed on a sampler, as well as the scenes played according to user texts which were stored in the studio's computer shortly before and during the live broadcast. During the show, the actors — adlibbing in character — took listener calls to the accompaniment of live accordion flourishes. The unique aspect of these listener calls during the live broadcast was that the callers played roles as well and thus became co-authors.
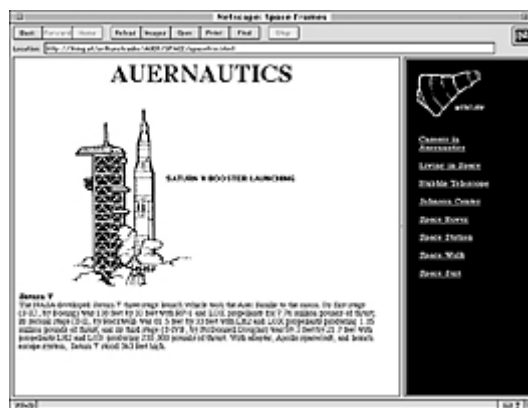
A second live broadcast at the end of January 1997[14] featured even more levels: there was a small live studio audience which provided laughter and applause, both spontaneously and on demand; Internet users once again had the opportunity to submit texts for the actors to work into the show; the listener telephone hot-line was also active, and, in addition, fans could check out the Familie Auer live chat room. The live radio mix [augmented by samples from previously produced episodes, "data bank" material as well as Internet sound files] could be accessed in Internet in Real Audio live mode [worldwide] and was complemented by video from a live Web camera.

A little over six months separated the two Familie Auer live broadcasts. During this time, technology[15] for the WWW underwent rapid development; a discussion arose over the issue of push media and pull media; Internet Radio became a well-established concept; the potentialities and definitions of Net.Radio and Net.Art were discussed. Beginning in September 1996, KUNSTRADIO itself staged more and more live webcasts — many of which had no connection to KUNSTRADIO programming on Österreich 1 — and which contributed to the definition of what Net.Radio could be...[16]

The Familie Auer is present online, on site and on-the-air at the Ars Electronica Festival 97. The Familie Auer "playground," however, is the setting for a thoroughly serious confrontation with a wide variety of issues in the fields of production and distribution.

To quote a publicity release:The focus of KUNSTRADIO's project office at Ars Electronica 97 is on the interdisciplinary development of projects and working methods suitable to the — until now, barely explored — context which emerges from the online, on-the-air and on-site link-ups of media spheres and physical spaces. For an entire week, on-site in the Design Center in Linz as well as at remote locations linked online with Linz and in radio broadcasts, an international team working under the motto Recycling the Future will take up the challenges posed by simultaneous, in some cases interactive, production in and for diverse, online-linked spatial and temporal situations.17 In having developed new production strategies befitting the diverse aspects of the new media mix, in which traditional radio — transformed almost beyond recognition — has been establishing itself ever more solidly, the background of the Familie Auer project thus raises some serious issues. [Incidentally, this media mix is usually interpreted as a "new sector in which to do business" and not as a cultural-artistic field — a view generally uncontested even in public broadcasting circles.] The production process in a sphere of activity characterized by an interlinked network of diverse media leads to a revised view of the telephone, radio, live broadcast, print media, CDs, the answering machine, etc., and to the discovery that transmission, communication, distribution and storage media that have heretofore been considered as independent can be regarded as diverse aspects of one mega-network, in which the computer becomes the Primary Medium [Wolfgang Hagen] through which all of these aspects can be orchestrated.

Radio still sounds like the old programmed medium, chock full of content presented in a sequence so tightly scheduled that you could set your watch by it, if that were still necessary ... And many radio programmers actually still do proceed according to the premise of works heard from beginning to end, upon the fiction of a program proceeding in precisely measured fashion and being received by constantly tuned-in listeners … Among the ever-growing number of programmed channels, however, radio is becoming undifferentiated noise from which a periodic ID signal streams forth announcing traffic reports and news; or "Radio on Demand," as fragments frozen in time which must first be collected together by listeners who have become users in order to be fit into that collage which is the everyday media environment each of us patch together for ourselves.Even the World Wide Web in Internet — its communications-enhancing elements having lagged far behind early utopian expectations — is already becoming, with its long downloading times, a background medium as well, and thus only one among many media asserting a merely sporadic/isolated claim upon our attention and making up a segment of our environmental collage. But regardless of how we interpret our side of the "coalition of technology and physiology" [F.A. Kittler] in order to somehow bring it into conformity with our image of ourselves, so that the other side of the coalition does not come to display what we will have become — we are registered solely as statistics, numbers on the "hit" counter, creditworthy or not.

1 The theme "Recycling the Future" refers to, among other things, artistic forms developed by the futuristic turn-of-the-century avant-garde, such as the collage, the "ready-made," etc., which have assumed decisive importance in the whole "Recombinant Culture" of the century now approaching its end, and which are also continuing to be used and adapted precisely by those artists (in a wide range of disciplines) whose work combines new and traditional communications media.

2 All the artists mentioned here may be considered as proxies representing many others.

3 Also see Im Netz der Systeme, Kunstforum, Ars Electronica catalog, 1989

4 H. Grundmann, Horizontal Radio, in:

Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, Mainz, 1996

5 See the Ars Electronica 1995 catalog as well as visiting http://thing.at/orfkunstradio/HORRAD/horrad.html

6 See the Ars Electronica 1996 catalog as well as visiting http://thing.at/orfkunstradio/RIVfiBRI/

7 Heimo Ranzenbacher in: Ars Electronica Festival 96 — Memesis, Springer, Wien/New York 1996, p. 434

8 Lucas Cejpek, Ilse Kilic, Margret Kreidl and Fritz Widhalm.

9 Aside from a few isolated cases, this process of "getting the author into the studio" was instituted programmatically for the first time in Austria in 1990 by the KUNSTRADIO project RP4, in which participants were invited to a workshop in digital radio Studio 4 where each was able to produce an individual project. Also see RP4, five CDs in a box by Helmut Mark.

10 Petra Maria Meyer: Die Stimme und ihre Schrift: die Graphophonie der akustischen Kunst, Passagen Verlag, Vienna, 1993

11 http://thing.at/orfkunstradio/auer/

12 Robert Adrian, Infobahn Blues, in: Medien und Öffentlichkeit, Rudolf Maresch ed., Boer Verlag, Munich, 1995 and Digital Delirium, A. & M. Kroker ed., New World Perspectives, Montreal, 1997

13 June 27, 1996, Österreich 1, 10:20 to 11:00 p.m.

14 January 30, 1997, Österreich 1, 10:17 to 11:00 p.m.

15 The roll played by artists — of which an ever-increasing number can be assigned to a new category: artist-technician — in the creative testing and exploration of the potential offered by the latest technologies has received virtually no official recognition, but has had considerable effects, for example, upon the development of know-how on the part of individual engineers who have collaborated on radio art projects and then gone on to apply the capabilities gained thereby in other phases of their broadcasting activities.

16 Visit http://thing.at/orfkunstradio/EVENTS/ eventfiframe.html

17 From this text, released several months prior to the Ars Electronica Festival 1997, it is impossible to tell exactly what form the KUNSTRADIO presence at the festival will actually take. Further details are available at KUNSTRADIO ON LINE at http://thing.at/orfkunstradio/; e-mail queries can be addressed to kunstradio@thing.at