

## **Josephine Bosma**

### **From Net.Art To Net.Radio And Back Again**

#### **rediscovering and enlarging the entire radio spectrum**

Webcasting has been one of those hot words on the internet the last year. The funny thing is however that it never got the attention or discussion that for instance hypertext did. It seems as if the term from the beginning was perceived as a balloon, a bubble of hot air, ready to explode and prove obsolete any moment. The reason for this is not its lack of potential. The reason is its lack of potential for the kind of market domination and power massmedia conglomerates like to have. Or in short, it is not as profitable as had been hoped. The goldmine many look for when it comes to undertaking on the internet is not one that easily shows its treasures. The internet is still about developing new paths, and these paths extend into the offline world most literally with webcasting. This makes webcasting one of the ultimate platforms for experimental artforms now.

When the term webcasting is used it usually refers to web-tv. As television is still the most powerful massmedium the idea of a possible crossbreed of television with the internet has triggered many to write quite shallow future scenarios. For the arts it is important to view the entire potential of a medium. With webcasting this means we have the possibility to reinvent all massmedia, like text or print, but mostly radio and television. They can be used in any variety and combination, supported and de/reconstructed by the internet. Webcasting is sound and vision, it is static and moving at the same time. It offers past (archives) and present (livestreams) in one take. When connected to the offline world, be it through radio or television or through performances and presentations in 'real space', the depth of a work created there can be unfathomable and dazzling. We have text, sound, moving or still images, real space with many electronic and connectable devices and the human body at our disposal. The audience does not necessarily have to grasp the whole of the work to appreciate it, it can take the work in chunks, during the actual proceedings of the work or afterwards. This means an artwork in this way does not have just one possible interpretation and it also means that a part of the work is as valuable (to the audience mostly) as is the entire thing. It is object as well as performance.

In a tactical sense radio is the most flexible and practical of the mass media. Taking it literally it can be even more effective than print: when working with it illegally, ignoring broadcasting laws, it is the cheapest medium with the greatest range\*. One should not let jurisdiction narrow one's understanding of the medium. It is highly mobile, the equipment for broadcasting is cheap and small. Television is in this respect perhaps closing in on radio, but it is not quite there yet. On top of this, in a space sound reaches an audience anywhere, even though its 'colour' changes with the movement of the audience/receiver through the space. One important reason for sound art now becoming more important is as Helen Thorington of New American Radio says: "It brings the body back". Sound does not just reach the body from any angle, it enters it, it touches it, inside and out, literally. This is an important feature in the bodiless society that shapes net.culture. Net.art makes art intangible and elusive, but net.radio makes radio visible and takes it back to its basic varieties, thus making it accessible again while also expanding it.

It is important not to confuse net.radio completely with net.art, as happens occasionally when my pleas for a more varied use of this medium are misunderstood. Net.radio is a medium and therefore its features can be discussed like any other tool. Art is another story. It is the combination of the two that is explored at Ars Electronica this year. Webcasters in general

can learn a lot from art and net.radio, but that is not the point now. What I maybe should add to make you understand my — personal — vision better, is that I often use the term net.radio for webcasting in general, trying to subvert the dominant visual aspect of it, in an attempt to make space for a more creative and innovative use of both radio and television through and on the net. Confusion intended.

A comment from Adam Hyde of Radio Qualia: "Net.radio is a PRACTICAL science, art can be for art's sake but net.radio has a more vital context — net.radio MUST respond to its environment and justify why it is preferred above other media if it really wants to be something other than merely an 'art project' ... otherwise net.radio = net.art"

What is radio, then? Everybody knows its mass media presentation. A broadcast bound to legislation which shapes its content and form, sent out from a central point, reaching receivers anywhere in the world. This form of radio is often misunderstood as being the only form of it. Radio however, like the internet, started as a military communication tool. It can be used for one to one communication, or it can be used in a closed circuit. It can be used to steer and control objects at a distance. It can even be used to send data from one computer to the next. Different wavebands and frequency ranges are used for all sorts of practices. Not only this literal variation of radio forms is possible. Within mass media broadcasting there are the choking and expensive authorship rights, the costs of hiring a frequency and the dedication of airspace to rarely surprising content due to laws of commerce and national security which very much determine our perception of the medium. Radio pirates or illegal stations have been able to develop more playful and interesting programming by ignoring legislation completely or partly. In Amsterdam, where one of the reasons some of the existing illegal stations have lasted up to fifteen years is their careful use of radio frequencies and good equipment. A long, practically uninterrupted ability to play with radio content has enabled highly experimental programs to emerge there, programs which sometimes told the listener to "throw their radio sets out of the window", or to turn off the radio, or listeners might ear-witness the actual hijacking of their favorite radio show by strangers entering the studio to take over the show.

I use these examples to show that radio and thus also net.radio do not need to be perceived or approached as public or 'audience friendly' media. It should be clear when we talk about an international net.radio network like Xchange, one of the groups invited for the OpenX part of Ars Electronica this year, that the term net.radio has little to do with the 'traditional' narrow definition of radio. Radio, being more than this narrow definition, is now used in the setting of the internet, plus it is used in the context of net.art.

Experiments with artworks for the internet or collaborative pieces that involved telephone line based networks of computers started in the late seventies, early eighties. These works were hardly ever designed to be entirely net.based, as it is called. They involved live performance or mass media like radio. They were public events in the sense of a set-up in front of an audience, inside a radio show or a combination of the two. The network, however, was an essential part of the projects. Computer networks have moved the approach and direction of art away from the influential centralised and hierarchical character of mass media. One could say mass media are the crude and undeveloped baby phase of electronic media, that have created a simplistic perception of and approach to art we are now moving away from. ORF Kunstradio was one of the first, if not the first, to support these works and take part in them. Later VanGoghTV included television in similar set-ups, making use of the increasing accessibility of television equipment and satellites. Both these names covered a varying group of people and artists on different occasions. The same can be applied to Xchange, which is in

this sense an even looser group. Xchange is a relatively young group, in that it has only existed for about a year now.

When looking at ORF Kunstradio, VanGoghTV and Xchange one can see an interesting development, which is no quality judgement whatsoever, but which nicely shows a movement of media art towards a more free, individual and varied phase, as a result of the development of cheaper and simpler technology. ORF Kunstradio, the oldest one, is a relatively small radioshow on an etherstation (ORF), which has expanded outside of its ordinary public broadcasting territory by taking part in performances, organising festivals and large events and by creating artworks themselves. Its 'net.presence' has been clear and effectively innovative ever since this radioshow entered the net. The deep involvement of ORF Kunstradio at the basis of net.art and net.radio would almost make one forget that its basis is, however, public broadcasting, radio in its most everyday use.

VanGoghTV did not have this kind of clear connection to any broadcaster. They were an independent group of artists that managed to use the existing networks of television, radio, telephone, computers and satellites to produce a series of networked artworks and broadcasts that were supported by existing mass media networks in many countries. Cheaper technology and early network individualism created a daring project that managed to reach and inspire many 'media virgins' because of their radical 'programs' and television presence.

Xchange, as in contrast to the two previous groups, started as a mailing list network of artists and radio makers, some of whom knew each other from conferences and net.art events. The physical basis of this group is the most diverse and so is the approach of their work. There is no or hardly any connection to mass media (not considering the internet a mass medium here), and the individual (outwardly public or maybe anti-public) aspect of the works produced collaboratively (mostly RealAudio loops between a variety of the mailinglist members at the moment — July 98)) is high. It comes closest to radio as pure communication, yet it is a communication ecstasy. Xchange is 'a method for communicating ideas', even more than it is a group.

Xchange consists of many groups and individuals, even more so than are ORF Kunstradio or VanGoghTV. These different groups have their own networks and approaches to 'net.radio', their own territory almost, both in the literal sense of the area they cover or work in, and in the sense of their approach to both art and the medium of net.radio. This means the perception and representation of net.radio depends on the specific 'dominant' approach at each venue. When Convex TV (one of the sub-groups, if one can use that term at all) from Berlin organises an event, it will seem different than when for instance Ozone (Riga, Latvia) or Radio Qualia (Australia) organises it.

Of course net.radio in the sense we are discussing it here (audio art in its entire variety in connection with the internet) has not been limited to the groups mentioned. Individual artists worked and work on it, like Jerome Joy from France, Tetsuo Kogawa from Japan, Joyce Hinterding and Zina Kaye from Australia ... to just name a few more or less recent ones. Not every one of them would consider themselves as making 'net.radio'. The context of the work and idea behind the work is very different each time, as the medium, or maybe we should say media, net.radio invites the use of a variety of artistic styles that is even larger than in, for instance, dance productions or painting. It is in fact layer upon layer upon layer of different media and discourses which provide a rich dish of possibilities for artists to indulge in. This indulgence often includes the traditional, common use of the centralised pre-fab or live broadcast show as well. The three groups I mentioned as examples would produce them and

still do (except for VanGoghTV), but there are many more of these 'stations'. These audiospaces on the net act as curator, producer and 'workspace' all at once, each having their own specialities. Usually the word 'radio' or the format is chosen with a big wink. One such station is Radio Lada, which has started in 1995 with the help of and inspired by ORF Kunstradio. Like ORF Kunstradio, Radio Lada is involved in projects itself and it organises a festival each year. On the net, besides the projects, it acts mostly as a curator, of audio or performance works on the net as well as of texts. According to Roberto Paci Dalò of Radio Lada the aim is to keep the selection of works limited and the set-up of the site simple, to give the works maximum 'space' and avoid overkill. It is very much like a gallery, yet does use the net well. It mostly presents the works of established artists. Radio Ozone (which was also the initiator of the Xchange mailinglist) started as a kind of curator as well, or as an open exhibition space for audioworks. All submitted work was accepted. With a quarterly presentation of the next 'issue' it was very much like a magazine. When the opportunity presented itself to have livestreams from their basis in Riga, Radio Ozone became a weekly radioshow that presents a determined program, plus it started to engage in the previously mentioned RealAudio looping. Pararadio from Budapest is also an internet-only enterprise. It too has a weekly show, which is in Hungarian, and involves chat 'on the side'. There is an archive of previous shows now, and lots of texts. It is very youth culture driven, is loosely based in a hacker scene and has no desire for public broadcasting whatsoever. There are many examples of very different and yet similar approaches in this traditional webcasting, from Convex TV, which approaches both radio and the internet in a conceptually radical art-way, to Backspace (from London) that plays with the medium in a very loose way in the setting of a rather 'open access' workspace, to Radio Qualia which, next to its announced radio shows, does experiments with a self-designed data base-loop that anyone can connect to their own website, amongst other things.

Databases will be more important in the near future. Several net.radio workers are building them. The first of these databases has existed since the beginning of 1997 — Radio Internationale Stadt (RIS) from Berlin. The concept of net.radio as a sample machine has been brought up many times, but little experimentation has taken place so far. Thomas Kaulmann, initiator of RIS, is now building a search engine on his site which will be able to search audio databases on other sites too, if they have the same basic set-up. As a fund of databases grows, and it looks as if software is growing with it both in variety and capability, the desire to involve them in net.radio set-ups of all kinds will grow.

Yet experiments with audio, performance and net.radio in the context of art or otherwise are no easy accomplishment. As Marko Kosnik, from the Ministry of Experiment in Ljubljana and involved in Extended Live Radio (XLR) which is the most physically separated group amongst the physically separated groups that inhabit the Xchange mailinglist, says, it cannot be emphasized enough what hard work it is to organise decentralised work, to get the people together at the right time, to have the hardware in place and working, and then to deal with the different layers of the work, both for the artists and the audiences.

Hopefully the complexity and depth of net.radio will be able to present itself at Ars Electronica this year. It is interesting enough to last longer than this year's hype, and firm enough to resist it.

\* A radio transmitter, even for shortwave, is about as expensive as a pc which can stream audio. The costs lie mainly in electricity to support the hundreds of watts necessary to reach any great distance. The costs connected with the data traffic a sizeable net.radio station generates are, however, similarly high. The question is how this might change in the future. The question then would be whether pc's become as portable and easy to use as radio equipment or receivers, how fast the costs of such pc's drop, and how legislation for webcasting develops.

