

Alessandro Bosetti

Arcoparlante

A DeutschlandRadio Kultur production 2009

Arcoparlante originates from a series of recorded fragments of disturbed radio broadcastings I recollected over the past few years.

The common trait of all those fragments is that in each one of them a voice is heard. Being the signal too disturbed it is impossible to understand neither what the voice is saying nor the language it is speaking.

The quality is sometimes so bad that even the gender of the speaker is unclear. Only sure thing is that human voices are heard.

Those recordings originated from my short wave radio receiver, an aviation radio receiver and several HAM receivers in various locations.

Being seduced by the ambiguity of those messages I eventually tried to transcribe them as faithfully as I could. I made phonetic transcriptions of what I believed to understand and most of the time a mixture of languages and nonsense emerged, probably already very distant from the original meaning of those transmissions. In March 2009 I had a chance to retransmit those fragments for several night hours on the middle and long waves of the German national radio station in Berlin and to engage in a "telephone" game with the numerous listeners that tuned in. While the MW and LW covered most of Europe an internet streaming was also available enabling participants from all over the globe to play and interact with our machinery.

I transmitted both the original fragments and the transcriptions read for the occasion by Michael Meilinger, a professional speaker from the radio station. Michael usually lends his official, low pitched and perfectly articulated voice to the newscasts, announcements and weather reports of the station.

"Telephone" is also known as Stille Post - silent mail - in German and with the slightly (or plainly, depending how p.c. you want to be) racist definitions of "Chinese Whisper" and "Telephone Arabe" in English and French. It is a widely known game where a sentence is whispered to the ear of the next players that successively whispers what he or she believed to have heard to the next. Usually the phrase transforms in very unpredictable ways.

I informed the listeners we wanted to play "telephone" over the radio and many responded sending over new transcriptions, by email, chat or reading them over the phone as well as sending recordings in mp3 format over the internet. CDs and further audio files arrived in the next days.

The broadcast started with the announcement ""Guten Abend ... wir spielen stille Post im Äther." ("Good evening, we are playing telephone on-air"). Then each fragment was aired, previously announced by its number. Each time we received a new version of one of the fragments we substituted it with the old one and re-transmitted it. We aired the recordings and we gave new texts to the speaker to be read. Producers Marcus Gammel and Ingo Kottkamp from the radio stations worked as a team answering phone calls and editing incoming recordings and texts assisted by two radio technicians while I was triggering the audio fragments on a simple max/msp sampling patch i arranged on my laptop. The whole process turned out being quite frantic, we barely had time to speak to each other, our communication consisted of complicity glances while each of us was running back and forth between the two studios trying to keep the game in motion. Out in Berlin we also had a few friends that had organized radio-parties and were playing with us while a taxi driver was offering free rides to anyone willing to play during his/her trip.

An especially exhausting *tour the force* it has been for the radio speaker Michael Meilinger that strived to read hours of apparently meaningless texts without giving up his official radio tone. I wasn't sure if he was enjoying it or not at all. I didn't ask. He had to work hard drastically deviating from his daily practice. I tried to keep some tension with him and avoid that some relaxation could lead him to adopt a more playful or theatrical tone. It worked. Nevertheless by the end of the whole process he came out of the speaker booth with a big smile on his face and I felt relieved. By the end of the night, overtired, we opened a bottle of prosecco to celebrate that strange moment and went home with about four hours of recordings. What did just happen ? I went home with a undefinable, somehow awkward, feeling and kept working on it, trying to understand its implications, until the piece was finally completed a few months later.

After that night I found myself sitting on a mountain of chaotic recordings and texts, all originating from the fragments i originally collected. I started diving into a reality that I've never experienced but that felt like an artificially and collectively generated memory. I investigated a strange sense of *sensucht* - of longing - while walking this hall of mirrors that the piece was gradually becoming.

... fragments of realities, chaotic and meaningful at the same time. Every person contributed a part of him-herself. Packages of life hanging in the words and existing beyond them. Those are the one we can hear, like sort of ghosts, and that's what's being revealed by your piece, the stories become one story, realities one reality that's soon exploding again with some new mysteries you bring into it ... you built a labyrinth and got lost into it. How appropriate ...
(email to the author)

I was surprised by how many narratives, although just sketched or incomplete, were emerging. I would have expected the message to progressively deteriorate,

rot, fall into pieces of complete abstraction. I would have expected a triumph of entropy. But meaning was naturally coming back in this collective process, far away people holding hands, *holding ears*. A nine years old kid - fascinated by science - once told me : "*what if entropy is your friend ?*". I had to think of it again and again.

A completely chaotic mass of phonetic debris would have been an easier material to work on as a composer. Abstract and fuzzy textures of static interferences. But something slightly more engaging was happening here :

... a beautiful line between sense and non-sense, sound and meaning, occurring, which I understand is important for you, or at the heart of the work. And also, how media, radio and language, function as kinds of filters, to generate or stimulate this process, this poetics.
(email to the author)

This piece is a tridimensional object. I kept track of what fragment all contributions belonged to and tried to make this tridimensionality evident and hearable into the time based, horizontal form of this sound piece. Some fragments of meaning made it to the surface, being it the most recent feedback, while other remained forgotten, buried under the other layers of translation. I tried to create a sense of perspective out of it.

Not just a spacial perspective but also an historical one, coming from the progressive deformations of older pieces of information. Those deformation happening while fragments and meanings drift away forging itself into memories.

There is something beautiful and desperate at the same time in our compulsive need of making sense out of abstract patterns. In deciphering the undecipherable, hearing voices in the sounds of nature or in the electromagnetic static noise of radio. So often we just ear voices out of the silence of our minds, as to say out of nothing.

"What if entropy is your friend ?".

I got lost several times in the making of this piece. The hall of mirrors, the labyrinth swallowed and spitted me out repeatedly.

" il n'y avait plus de pensées. je nageais, dissous, dans le délire dansant, effleuré de parfums, de sons, de soupirs, de mots, caressé de regards, allumé, entouré de`visages, de lèvres, de joues, de bras, de genoux, de seins, lancé et rejeté comme une vague au rythme de la musique." (Herman Hesse, "Der Steppenwolf" as quoted in an email to the author)

Did i succeed in making a 50 minutes long radio-play without saying absolutely anything ? Or am I just giving an as precise as possible account of some semi-hidden events, partially emerging from radio shades ? Sometimes I felt just like a compiler, I took care of those fragments and feedback and tried to have them reveal themselves with no further intervention. I had them show their inner connections without doing much else. Some other times I felt like an intentional facilitator letting

images, phrase constellations and sequences of sounds connect and solidify in my imagination only according to my poetic sensibility.

For sure I built another piece based on the "*stille post prinzip*", meaning the mirroring and filtering of my message through other people, other ears, other bodies. Apparently I cannot just sing my song, I have to send it through this chain of misunderstandings and pretend its not me the singer, the teller, the creator. Nevertheless I am striving to create. To sing. To tell.

I am not safe into this story ... and still .. I want it to have something to do with me.

Berlin July 4th, 2009.