THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF RADIO: 
ANNA FRIZ’S CRITICAL UTOPIAS

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1990s, the Canadian radio artist and scholar Anna Friz has been making ‘self-reflexive radio’, an artform in which radio is the source, subject, and medium of the work. This article explores Friz’s self-reflexive radio practice as it develops in relation to a language and an aesthetics of place and non-place. It maintains that Friz’s works enact an oppositional spatial strategy within supermodernism or informational capitalism (i.e. the Information Age). In an era in which information is considered to be the most valuable currency, Friz’s noisy, superfluous, and transceptive transmissions disrupt and divert the relentless, unidirectional information flows that dominate the airwaves. In particular, Friz’s works enact a critical and feminist radio utopia that recovers the lost ‘places’—the grounded bodies and the point-to-point networks—that are essential to radio communications, but that are too-often subsumed within contemporary informational exchanges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so none can be better than the other.
-Lucy Lippard

In her 1994 article ‘The Soundscape on Radio’, the Canadian soundscape artist Hildegard Westerkamp posed a number of critical questions on the relationship of radio to place that still await response. Decrying the fact that, ‘Most radio engages in relentless broadcasting, a unidirectional flow of information and energy’, Westerkamp pondered:

What would happen if we could turn that around and make radio listen before imposing its voice? […] What if radio was non-intrusive, a source for listeners and listening? Can radio be such a place of acceptance, a listening presence, a place of listening? [1]

The recent work of Anna Friz, a Canadian radio artist and researcher, answers Westerkamp’s questions in the affirmative. Through Friz’s work, these questions no longer appear to frame an unattainable ideal, so much as strategize a radical reinterpretation of radio that can be, and that is being, put into action.

This article explores Anna Friz’s radio practice as it develops within an aesthetics and a language of place, specifically showing that it operates as an oppositional spatial strategy within supermodernism or informational capitalism (i.e. the ‘Information Age’). During a period in which information is considered to be the most valuable currency, radio’s ‘relentless broadcasting’ can be seen as another structural mechanism within a vast system of flows that governs global political, economic, and cultural exchanges, and that determines the spaces within which these exchanges develop. In recent criticism, the supermodernist era has been theorized as a period in which space is shrinking [2], in which space is reduced to a transit zone [3], and in which places—points of local focus and attachment—have been supplanted by ‘non-places’—places to which people are unable to form meaningful attachments, because their social identities and their behaviors are reduced within them to informational transactions [4], [5].

Concepts of non-place or utopia are not foreign to radio discourses. In the first decade of its invention, radio was heralded as a technology that could be used to achieve spatial transcendence—as a tool with which to ‘overcome’ space. Friz, whose current research concerns the changing nature of what she calls ‘radio presence’, says that early radio was conceived as ‘an extraordinary connection between individuals across space’ [6]. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Futurist radio utopias—as famously depicted in the 1933 manifesto La Radia—sought to eliminate space [7]. In modernist discourses, radio was seen as ‘a universal language’ that could unite bodies and spirits—whether living, dead, or alien—across geographical, cultural, and even metaphysical boundaries [8]. As radio became increasingly regulated by nation-states, the dream of a transceptive radio—one that could link multiple senders and receivers—dissipated. In its wake, radio reemerged as a tool for state control, a mass medium, a unidirectional apparatus designed to establish the ‘voice of a nation’. By

1 A longer version of this text appears in the Radio Journal 5.2/3, as “Contemporary Radio Art and Spatial Politics: The Critical Radio Utopias of Anna Friz.”
the mid-century, radio functioned predominantly as a tool for maintaining, not disrupting, borders.

More recently, under the decentralizing pull of informational capitalism, the non-places of radiophonic space have reappeared, although under a different guise. The global exchange networks of informational economies have co-opted radio territories, transforming them into yet another transit zone that users can navigate in their relentless travels from one non-place to another. Like the highways, airports, strip malls, and computer terminals described by Marc Augé in 'Non-Places: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernism', radiophonic flows that service transnational interests work to displace radio places: local, community, and point-to-point networks [9].

In the context of informational capitalism, the politics of localization become critically poised to recover the rooted identities and grounded cultural expressions that are otherwise subsumed within global exchange networks. Anna Friz’s radio art reveals the hidden, localized places of radiophonic flows, the placed bodies that ground radio transmissions. Her practice draws upon a feminist philosophy, and enacts a critical spatial strategy with respect to dominant modes of supermodernism and informational capitalism. In a recent conversation, Friz hints at the underpinning of her nuanced creative philosophy: ‘We are radio’, she says. ‘Radio is us’ [10].

2. ANNA FRIZ, MODERN DAY FEMINIST TECHNO-PIRATE

Radio girls are pirates. We speak in a multiplicity of tongues, fracture the notion of a coherent internal space from which to uncover our own voices. We deploy its accidents and excesses to communicate multiple desires. -Kim Sawchuck

Born in Vancouver in 1970, Anna Friz is a striking example of what the Canadian media theorist Kim Sawchuck calls a ‘modern day feminist techno-pirate’ [11]. A full-time feminist, part-time gender-bender, and hardcore technophile whose obsession with sound gear borders on the fetishistic, Friz has made considerable contributions to addressing the ‘special invisibility’ of women in radio and sound art.

In Friz’s explicitly feminist repertoire there is Radio Free Women, a feminist talk-and-rawk show she hosted on Vancouver’s CiTR Radio between 1993 and 1995, and ‘Heard but Un-scene: Women in Electronic Music’, an article she wrote as a board member of the Montreal-based feminist art collective Studio XX [12]. In that article, Friz laments the fact that big-budget electronic music festivals, like Mutek and Elektra in Montreal, have ‘failed miserably’ to seek out work by women artists. She not only holds specific presenters accountable for this discrepancy, but more immediately, addresses the problematic theoretical and aesthetic undercurrents that drive these male-dominated scenes. Specifically, Friz critiques the liberatory and utopian rhetoric employed by self-styled ‘outsiders’ who fail to recognize their own positions of power and privilege within these worlds.

In sharp contrast to the glitch, clicks ‘n’ cuts, and microsound practices so heavily featured in these predominantly white, Western, male sound and radio art festivals—practices which claim to escape the hegemony of Western art music in their a-referentiality and minimalist aesthetic—Friz’s radio art is an unsettlingly intimate, evocative, and often grand affair. Drawing on her multiple talents as a composer, installation artist, and instrumentalist (Friz prefers instruments that ‘breathe and oscillate’ like the harmonica, accordion, and theremin), performance artist, and storyteller (she cites Laurie Anderson, Miranda July, and William S. Burroughs as her major influences), Friz’s practice not only breaks with popular aesthetic conventions in contemporary radio art, but also perverts conventions in radio broadcasting and scholarship. The multiple border-crossings in Friz’s work include a privileging of communications paradigms over the uncritical celebration of communications technologies, and a transmission practice that often develops in unregulated, contested, and illicit spaces.

In the late 1990s, Friz began creating what she calls ‘self-reflexive radio’, an artform in which radio is the source, the subject, and the medium of the work. These radio-about-the-radio works typically straddle complex narrative structures, making use of archival recordings, original field recordings, and instrumental and vocal performances by Friz and her collaborators. A single work will typically be reincarnated multiple times and in multiple formats, existing as live performances on radio, concert performance, and sound installation.

A modest sampling of Friz’s creative output from the last year yields a diverse panoply of projects: nice little static, a show of her original compositions that airs the first Thursday of each month on Toronto’s CKLN 88.1 FM. ‘The Chicken Apocalypse’, a toy-theatre performance Friz co-produced with the sardonic radio art collective The Church of Harvey Christ; ‘winter comes but once a year’, a live performance scored for text, glockenspiel, and weather, which Friz broadcast using a mobile phone from the shores of Lake Ontario to a gallery in Brooklyn; and Radio Free Parkdale, a pirate station she operated intermittently out of her home in Toronto.

Friz says of her current work in self-reflexive radio that she is concerned not so much with the mechanics of transcepcion—the ability to both send and receive—as
she is with transception as a critical paradigm for communication. Her inquiry therefore moves beyond technical considerations in order to reflect upon the evolving notion of network, the concept of wireless transmission in general, and the ontology of the sender/receiver.

3. CLANDESTINE TRANSMISSIONS: TRANSCEPTION, PIRACY, NOISE

Radio girls refuse to clean up the noise.
-Kim Sawchuck

Friz’s first major project in the vein of self-reflexive radio and transception ontology is ‘The Clandestine Transmissions of Pirate Jenny’ (2002), a work that has variously taken shape as live gallery performances, studio broadcasts (once on Austrian national radio), and live campus, community, and pirate radio. Friz describes the work as ‘the tale of a radio pirate and mutineer, transmitting from inside the black box of radio technology that is atopic, a Futurist nightmare of technological determinism in which she is imprisoned without contact with others of her kind’ [13]. In it, Friz tells the story of Pirate Jenny, one of the fictional ‘little people who live inside the radio’ who Friz would conjure as a young girl. Isolated inside her radio due to corporate downsizing, Pirate Jenny must incessantly service the voracious appetites of The Ears, anonymous listeners who demand a constant stream of Top-40 hits, traffic, news, and weather reports. In her few precious moments away from The Ears, Pirate Jenny sends out desperate SOS-es to unknown potential listeners, and begs for a response.

Girl: Are there little people who live inside the radio? If I leave the radio on does that mean they have to keep talking, even if no one’s listening? If I leave the radio on all night does that mean they don’t get to sleep either? What do they do when I turn off the radio?

Pirate Jenny: [static] This is Free Radio Relay on 49.850 MegaHertz. If you’re receiving this signal please respond. [static, bleeps, I/O technology]. This is Pirate Jenny on 49.850 MegaHertz. This is Free Radio Relay. Repeat this is not a regular broadcast. This is an S.O.S. Please respond. [bleeps, static]

Woman: In the early days of radio we were better organized. But slowly we became isolated. Gradually we evolved to fit the box so perfectly that leaving was impossible. So for nearly a century we served The Ears, but secretly strained to hear an echo of any of the others. [electronic bleeps]. I began to hear the sounds of other radios. I knew they were there but they couldn’t hear me. And so now, now I’ve adjusted my methods. [static, electronic instruments, theremin]

Pirate Jenny: This is Pirate Jenny on 49.850 MegaHertz. This is Free Radio Relay. This is a message to all the people in Radioland. If you can get this message, please respond. If you’re receiving [signal breaking, theremin, static]… please respond…[static]… please respond…[long instrumental solo]

In ‘The Clandestine Transmissions of Pirate Jenny’, Friz creates radio soundscapes out of the raw materials of communication, layering modified voices with intercepted signals, static, radio scanning, and noise. Messages are heard in various stages of development: as fully-formed signals, audio traces, and embryonic and aborted sounds. Signals appear and just as quickly disappear; input/output technologies are triggered and abandoned; sounds are approached and turned away; all of these are layered with waves of ambient sound, SOS-es, radar devices, walkie-talkies, and code. These materials—the sonic detritus of radio communications—provide the background for a network of desirous bodies whose voices illuminate the terra incognita of radioland. For Friz, the in-between places of the radio are not ‘dead air zones, but uncharted airwaves rich in meaning and potential—the habitat of the little radio people, the mythical offspring of radio technology’ [14].

It is significant that Friz reveals the ‘meaning and potential’ latent in these liminal radiophonic spaces not by broadcasting information, but by broadcasting noise. Noise, always a contested domain, what the philosopher Jacques Attali once called ‘a concern of power’, holds special meaning in an informational economy [15]. The presence of noise in informational capitalism designates the undesirable part of a signal, the part that dirts the waters of reception, clogging the arteries and passageways in a system of flows that requires unimpeded fluidity in order to function.

In classic information theory as conceived by Claude Shannon, information equals signal minus noise; and, according to N. Katherine Hayles, a message is, ‘an information content specified by a probability function that has no dimensions, no materiality, no necessary connection with meaning’ [16]. As it is often pointed...
out, the human part of this equation is conveniently left out of Shannon’s formulation. In ‘Pirate Jenny’, Friz reinserts the noisy flesh of humanity back into the equation, recuperating the real matter of communication: not sound or signal or anything else that can be translated into wave-formation, but, more fundamentally, the desire and the need for contact.

Pirate Jenny never broadcasts any ‘valuable’ or ‘useful’ information. Instead, in her self-consciously revolutionary way, she asks her accidental listeners, ‘Are you one of us?’ and instructs them to ‘broadcast only noise’.

In the same ways that radical performance and conceptual artists in the 1960s produced dematerialized art works that functioned outside the dominant economic logic of object production and consumption, Friz engages a radical model of communication whose dimensions do not fit within—and which therefore disrupt—the dominant economic informational capitalism. She writes, ‘Through these soundscapes, programming and noise cease to be binary opposites... the programming is noise, and the point is that noise is meaningful sound’ [17]. In the context of an informational economy, receiving noise transforms the passive ear into a critical one. The critical ear becomes a transceptive instrument, one that can receive ‘empty’ signals and reciprocate meaning. The transceptive ear supplies information where there appears to be none; it produces currency out of that which appears to have no value—and capitalizes on it. As Pirate Jenny says, ‘If you are receiving this message and can’t respond, please send more static’.

If as Lucy R. Lippard suggests, place can be considered to be ‘the locus of desire’, then placelessness can be thought of as a state in which the subject is emptied of desire [18]. There can be no place if there is no desire (for connection, for communication). In her radio art, Anna Friz reveals in the multiple points and places that make up networks of desire; she does this, in part, by refusing to clean up the noise.

5. VACANT CITIES: SUPERMODERNITY AND DISPLACEMENT

If place is defined by memory, but no one who remembers is left to bring these memories to the surface, does a place become no-place?
-Lucy R. Lippard

Friz’s self-reflexive radio art, while being centrally concerned with ontologies and paradigms of radio communications, is perhaps even more virtuosic in its consideration of place. Her recent work, while continuing along an aesthetic trajectory that reveals and resists the supermodernist production of non-places, also engages the idea that place is always in communication, and communication is always in place [19].

In her 2005 composition ‘Vacant City Radio’, Friz explores the absence of place as it emerges in relation to the absence of memory. Between 2001 and 2002, Friz collected soundscapes of empty, abandoned industrial sites from along the Lachine Canal in Montreal. Several years later, those sites were either completely demolished, or else renovated into pristine offices and condominiums for the upwardly-mobile. Friz combined these soundscapes of industrial ruin, captured in the prime of their decay, with sounds culled from the ‘lost cities’ on the shortwave dial. She explains that, as many transistor radios were designed with names of cities in place of frequencies on the dial, tuning into those stations now ‘often yields only static’ [20].

‘Vacant City Radio’ opens with the sounds of these static radio wastelands, followed by an archival recording of a voice that exemplifies what Francis Dyson identifies the male voice of authority that has long dominated radio transmissions [21]. The job of this voice is to recruit reluctant civilians to join in the cause of ‘progress’, which, in this case, is the demolition of historical buildings. ‘Surely obsolescence should not cause despair’, the voice asserts and assuages:

It is one of the results of rapid growth. The hammer of demolition will be sure to swing with determination. In this jet age, events move fast—faster indeed than we sometimes realize. But our progress is certain to be steady as we clear away the structures that block progress.

Michel de Certeau has written that, ‘Every site is haunted by countless ghosts that lurk there in silence to be evoked or not’ [22]. In ‘Vacant City Radio’ these haunted sites are simultaneously real, imagined, and networked. They are the imposing, modernist hulks of the Industrial Age—colossal, uniform, functionalist buildings designed for laborers that have metamorphosed into light, airy, supermodernist architectures enjoyed by yuppies and other mobile elites. Friz captures these architectures in transitional states, sounding out their histories and their potentials as they cross over from the ‘monumental industrial past’ to the generic present’ [23]. She does this in part by interacting with the spaces, by putting her body in active relation to them. ‘Instead of history’, Friz explains, ‘I encountered traces of spaces enabled by my own explorations through empty

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1 The architectural theorist Hans Ibelings (2002) describes modernist architectures as being characterized by functionalism, sameness, coherence, uniformity, geometric forms, high tech structures and materials, neutrality, and minimalism; claims that postmodern architectures are extravagant, expressive, ostentatious; and that supermodernist architectures are light, monolithic, abstract, formally reduced, massive, transparent, smooth, glassy, and sensational.
buildings or scratching across vacant frequencies. I encountered spaces through interference’ [24]. We hear Friz’s body as it moves through and articulates these haunted sites, her footsteps, actions, and voice resonating in, and altered through, her interactions with a sequence of diverse forbidden architectures.

The haunted sites of ‘Vacant City Radio’ are also the sites of memory which are literally paved over during periods of decline and displacement. When place disappears or turns into non-place, it takes memory with it. Memory, as it develops in relation to history, identity, and lived experience, is not required to pass through a transit zone. When supermodern travelers scan, surf or otherwise navigate non-places, they also travel through memories, histories, identities, and lived experiences; all of these are reduced to indistinguishable, mutable signals that make up endless informational transactions.

In ‘Vacant City Radio’ Friz evokes these ghosts of memory that lurk in non-places, transforming their silence into a deep, unsettling resonance, and wonders, ‘why should resonation feel so sublime?’[25]. I would suggest that this particular resonation feels sublime in part because it makes audible the recovery of place; it sonically reinserts what Lippard calls the ‘lure of the local’ into what has become a simultaneously personal, lived, recovered, and imagined geography [26].

6. TOWARDS A CRITICAL UTOPIA

The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation. The lure of the local is that undertone to modern life that connects it to the past we know so little and the future we are aimlessly concocting.

-Lucy R. Lippard

The feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have observed that the concept of space in modern Western cultures is associated with femininity, while time is associated with masculinity [27], [28]. They argue that space is traditionally constructed as passive and inert, and therefore gendered female, while time is considered active and therefore gendered male. Similarly, Doreen Massey has pointed out that, ‘whereas time is seen as fluid and provisional, space and location tend to be theorized as stasis and fixity’ [29].

If modernism can be considered a masculinist condition in that it manifests as a series of displacements—with the phallic arrow of progress moving through, demolishing, and replacing inert architectures—then supermodernism can be considered a hyper-masculinist expression in that it does away with space altogether, transforming it into a series of ‘placeless places’ [30]. In his study on contemporary networked societies, the sociologist Manuel Castells argues that information economies have profoundly transformed concepts of space. Under informational capitalism, he writes, a new paradigm of space emerges: a ‘space of flows’, which replaces an older ‘space of places.’ While places themselves do not disappear within this new spatial logic, Castells maintains, their meaning and their function become absorbed within the network of communication that defines contemporary life [31]. The architectural theorist Hans Ibeling finds similar resonance in supermodernist architectures. If place can be defined as a locale that has acquired meaning through human activities, he writes, then ‘non-places can be seen as typical expressions of the age of globalization’ [32].

In the context of supermodernism, Anna Friz’s radio practice can be seen to enact a critical, and specifically a feminist, radio utopia. Whereas Futurist radio utopias had sought to achieve the ‘immensification of space’ and modernist radio utopias had sought to attain universalism, Friz’s critical model of a radio utopia does not seek to overcome distance, but instead reveals distance, by highlighting the multiple points and places where communication occurs [33]. In a recent conversation, Friz says:

The early avant-garde believed radio would overcome distance and time, unite people across the world, embrace humanity in a kind of union through spark-speech. I want to emphasize the distance that I hear in the radio, because that dream of union is the most mortal dream, is where I hear the most humanity [34].

Thus, while Friz has in her arsenal explicitly feminist works, her practice at large develops within an implicitly feminist framework, by recovering a female-coded ‘space of places’ in a male-coded ‘space of flows’. In this way, Friz’s self-reflexive radio art recovers the distance that is so often maligned in communications theory and practice, but that is, paradoxically, necessary for communication to even occur.

7. CONCLUSION

The word place has psychological echoes as well as social ramifications. ‘Someplace’ is what we are looking for. ‘No place’ is where these elements are unknown or invisible, but in fact every place has them, although some are buried beneath the asphalt of the monoculture, the ‘geography of nowhere’.
'Placelessness', then, may simply be place ignored, unseen, or unknown.

-Lucy R. Lippard

Since the late 1990s, Anna Friz has produced a considerable body of radio art that refocuses the relationship of transmission to the production of place. Her work reveals networks of desire, identity, and distance as these are made audible in and through place: alternately lived, constructed, and imagined environments, each simultaneously grounded and wireless. Through her practice, Friz reconfigures the radio as a site of resistance: resistant to dominant constructions of space within contemporary globalized, supermodernist cultures, resistance to the politics of informational capitalism, and resistance to the uneven flows that these cultures and politics engender.

This paper opened with questions by Hildegard Westerkamp that posited a radical reinterpretation of radio as a 'placed' medium. It closes with questions by Anna Friz that suggest this place is grounded in networks of bodies and identities—that suggest that the place of radio is us. In her program notes on a recent radio installation, an immersive environment that uses four transmitters and over sixty receivers, Friz writes:

Rather than dream again of radio transmitting messages from those who have already passed, what communication might we be missing from those living around us? What nearly inaudible signals... might we hear if the radio was tuned to hear? What do people seek to transmit, in a moment between the intake of breath and the breath held, waiting, in tension?

She calls this work ‘You Are Far From Us’.

8. REFERENCES


Ryerson Embodied Architecture Lab, 2006, p. n/a.


[26] Lippard [18].


[31] Castells [5], p. 443.

[32] Ibelings [3], p. 66.

[33] Marinetti and Masnata [7].