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Tetsuo Kogawa: an experience in radio

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1 – From ‘free’ radio to social therapy, a Japanese story

Recently in France they celebrated – rather discreetly – the 30th anniversary of “Radios Libres”. Some might still wonder what was actually liberated, and as a matter of fact the gap between the French and Italian radio experiments in the beginning of the 1980s and today's mediascape of private and commercial radio stations might seem quite wide. Yet the issue of ‘freedom’ remained at the core of all forms of media(-based) and technology(-oriented) activism, and we see it cropping up again more recently as a central theme in discussions about free software and open data.

In spite of this, even as far back as the late 1980s Tetsuo Kogawa offered us a different way of looking at the issue. In *Towards a Polymorphous Radio*¹, he argues that any study of our presence in media and within different forms of communication must address our ability to change the relationship between transmitter and receiver, rather than only talking about the relativity of our freedom. In this text, he argues that this concept of ‘freedom’ is inherited from the French Revolution and is only relevant to issues from the first industrial era. In other words: an obsolete concept, by the time European Free Radio and Japanese Mini-FM had appeared, which he felt an urgent need to replace with a new approach. Kogawa explains that this dominance of freedom-orientated critique is responsible for setting the focus of questions relating to radio on the content rather than on the system itself. According to him, this has led the Free Radio movement to de facto ratify the technical and legal trickery which made radio a tool for the industrial age, a fundamentally asymmetrical technology directed toward the ‘masses’: one transmitter and enunciator for millions of receivers and silent listeners.

In his view, which is shared by European thinkers Félix Guattari and Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, radio could have been an opportunity to step into a new electronic age, to transform the paradigms through which technology and media were conceived: it could have allowed for a horizontal network of communication, wherein anyone would have been able to enunciate as well as listen. A fifteen year wait and the advent of the Internet was necessary, however, for such an idea to spread beyond a handful of writers, and was not without the issue of freedom coming back into play under different terms.

The Mini-FM and Radio Home Run

From his experience as a scholar, activist and founder of the Radio Home Run station in Tokyo, Kogawa gives an account of the specifics of the Mini-FM movement, as well as of an experiment in turning it into something more than radio: it became not only about broadcasting audio content, as ‘free’ as that might be, but also about creating a collective and social apparatus which would counter the conditioning of Japanese life. Following his account, a whole section of the cultural and social history of post-war Japan comes under the spotlight, from the student and social movements of the 1960s, through the long phase of political apathy during the golden age of consumerism in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the early 1970s, he started teaching at Wako University in Tokyo, “an experimental university

¹ Tetsuo Kogawa, *Towards a Polymorphous radio*, 1990 – <http://www.anarchy.translocal.jp/non-japanese/radiorethink.html>.

derived from the leftist experiences of the late sixties²”. Teaching Husserl's phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty, he “was deeply involved in organizing radical groups and networks among scholars and writers” and was surrounded by “theorists, activists and teachers”. During the same period, and as the student movement was starting to dwindle, armed guerrilla groups were beginning to appear in Japan. Like in western Europe, their ranks consisted mainly of students from those movements which had chosen the path of extreme radicalisation. While revolutionary talk was stirring up Kogawa's classroom, the “unfortunate accident of the [United] Red Army³” happened. “The radical activists (otherwise fighting against anything un-humanitarian) tortured and killed their own comrades and even buried the bodies.” From that point on, questions about the body and the individual became foremost in Kogawa and his students' concerns, trying to anticipate any problematic issues which might arise in their future radio experiments.

In 1982, he launched Radio Polybucket on the University campus, which would relocate the following year to central Tokyo with the participation of some of his students, under the new name Radio Home Run⁴. Like the other radio stations of the Mini-FM movement, it benefited from the “regulation of low power broadcasting initially [implemented] for wireless toys and gadgets”, which implied a short radius of transmission, roughly the size of a baseball field, hence the station's name. This legal and technical particularity determined the specific “communitarian” size of Japan Free Radio, which Kogawa himself would promote, coining the term “narrow-casting” in opposition to the industrial logic of “broadcasting”. If some were making strictly commercial use of the technology (shops or bars using it to promote themselves in the neighbourhood), in the case of Mini-FM, the relationship with the social space nonetheless imposed itself as a core factor, and the place from which the transmission originated had to be physically accessible by the listeners.

While he admits that Guattari's “interpretation on Radio Alice⁵ and Radio Tomato⁶ captured well this aspect of micro revolution”, it seemed to Kogawa that French and Italian Free Radio were “still in the frame of conventional radio”, having a “message to transmit” before being a “place” to build upon as a social resource. According to him, European and Japanese history should not be confused, even if there are similarities, particularly in the way they “confronted the hegemony of state radio” as a macro-system. In fact, he states: “monopoly alone did not motivate Free Radio (...) everything was fragmentary and the French situation of the eighties was very different”.

Contrary to historians who “like a synchronic approach to events occurring at the same time”, his analysis of the historical development of Free Radio focuses on differentiations, calling these their “futuristic aspect”, which is how “a given action at a given time is also a projection” of the desires and aspirations of a society. Through such a study, European and Japanese people involved in Free Radio history appear to have taken different paths, because if in the first case radio was about setting free voices which the authorities were keeping silent, in the second case it grew into an attempt to heal a society made sick by its own individualism. It also shows the extent to which the meaning of “freedom” changes in tone, because for the members of Radio Home Run: “it was not so much the transmission that needed to be set free, but ourselves”.

² Unless noted otherwise, quotes from Tetsuo Kogawa are taken from an e-mail interview, realized between september 2011 and september 2012.

³ Referring to the “Asama-Sanso incident”, during which the United Red Army (Rengō Sekigun) slaughtered twelve of its own members. This group is not to be confused with the Japan Red Army (Nihon Sekigun), which distinguished itself a few years later by carrying out kidnappings and hijackings.

⁴ Tetsuo Kogawa, *Towards a polymorphous radio*, op. cit.

⁵ Radio Alice started to transmit illegally in 1976 in Bologna, including Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi as one of its members.

⁶ Radio Tomato was created in 1981 in Paris by the CINEL – Centre d'Initiative pour les Nouveaux Espaces de Libertés [Initiative Centre for the New Spaces of Freedom], of which Félix Guattari was the director.

Social pathologies and alternative therapies

With this in mind, in order to better understand Mini-FM we have to look to the past, and to the maladies of Japanese society at the turn of the 20th century. After the collapse of the 1960s movements and the brandishing of arms by urban guerrilla groups, Japan endured what would be later referred to as a “period of apathy”. As Kogawa explains, “the movements were broken up twice: first by the police and second by the mass media. The mass media was not repressive, instead indulging members of the ‘affluent society’, to which every surviving minor movement was co-opted. A ‘culture of narcissism’⁷ was gradually developing, [...] young people de-fanged their political drives and found contentment in consumption and entertainment”. In a country where, even today, a communist or revolutionary past might be considered an embarrassment, the youth turned to the rewards of a very individualistic form of consumerism, which finds its most radical impersonation in the pathological figure of the “hikikomori”. Kogawa describes the hikikomori phenomenon as “a social scale of autism and Asperger syndrome” and “the terminal stage of Japanese ‘remote culture’”, which drives some people so far into the consumerist “ideal” as to cut themselves off from the outside world, and even sometimes to an isolated death. Starting with this figure, he developed a critical analysis of “*electronic individualism*”⁸ at the moment it was becoming widespread in Japanese society, and which he perceived as a “pre-symptom of hikikomori”.

From the technological and social conditions of its emergence, Mini-FM discovered its communitarian dimension and acquired another function as an alternative form of social therapy. This therapeutic aspect became crucial for the members of Radio Home Run, who all considered “themselves ‘hikikomori’ more or less”. Kogawa further specifies: “Therefore, the meaning of freedom for hikikomori was conceptually different from the freedom of Italian Free Radio. But at the same time this is what makes Radio Home Run close to Guattari's schizoanalysis⁹”. And as a matter of fact, it is again the connection with Guattari's ideas on social-therapeutic issues which we see developed through Mini-FM: “already in the eighties, the power system had begun to reconstruct itself as a therapeutic one. [...] The social realm became therapeutic nodes of state and every power system, as a control mechanism of individuals based upon conventional psychotherapy.” To these social prescriptions, “it was necessary to oppose other means of therapy, in the same way Guattari was opposed to Freudian-Lacanian psychotherapy. Hence Radio Home Run put a lot of importance on schizoanalysis and became more involved with artistic activities. We did not go into the ‘New Age’ and trendy forms of meditation. What we were looking for was a more radical freedom for ourselves and in creating new forms of social connections. This surpassed the form of radio”.

Beyond radio, then, the offices of Radio Home Run became “a meeting place for students, activists, artists, workers, small shop owners, local politicians, men, women and the elderly¹⁰”. Its’ programs started to resemble happenings, which “sometimes seemed stupid to the ‘ordinary’ people”, and when viewed from inside it became quite difficult to differentiate between the host, the listener, the guest, and the neighbour passing by to say ‘Hi’. The station might have been called a “*radio without an audience*”, its audio content might have been inconsistent, but in the end it did not really matter: the goal of the project became the creation of much-needed urban and social resources, and

⁷ The term is borrowed from Christopher Lasch, *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.

⁸ Tetsuo Kogawa, *Beyond Electronic individualism*, 1984 – <http://www.anarchy.translocal.jp/non-japanese/electro.html>.

⁹ To conventional psychoanalysis, which is based upon (Edipian) neurosis, schizoanalysis opposes a model that is constructed from the singular figure of the schizophrenic. For Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, “the unconscious does not hallucinate mommy-and-daddy, it hallucinates races, tribes, history and geography, always a social field” [personal translation], *L'Anti-Œdipe*, Éd. De Minuit, 1972.

¹⁰ Tetsuo Kogawa, *Towards a Polymorphous radio*, op. cit.

in staying alive on its limited scale. Confronted with the social autism generated by entertainment culture, it was necessary “to add such an entertaining aspect even to political action. Mini-FM was a good mixture”. Even so, Radio Home Run did not settle for addressing and broadcasting social issues, it also provided speech therapy and experimented with horizontal forms of communication and social interaction in the intersections of the vertical towers that made up its district.

Since then, relational modes and modes of communication between individuals have dramatically changed along with the mediascape. With the arrival of the Internet, the ways we reflect upon communication have evolved as well, but according to Kogawa, it is also because of the Web that we tend to forget about this “other function” of radio: “As early as the late nineties, people could broadcast whatever they wanted to using RealAudio. It seemed as if we didn't need Free Radio anymore. During the following decade, many Free Radio stations started to switch to net-radio. Actually, Internet radio meant lower costs and fewer regulations, even today, than the overcrowded airwaves”. Likewise, the “therapeutic” function of Mini-FM was eventually swallowed up by the reassuring presence of smartphones in everyone's pocket, which “means that the ‘radical’ aspect was forced to lie dormant. Albeit on a very limited scale, Mini-FM emancipated individuals from their social autism. Smartphones now legitimize such social autism as the status quo, without any emancipation process for individuals. Our autism is now co-opted into something ‘natural’”.

Today, Tetsuo Kogawa's reflections on communication in the digital age are enriched by years of Mini-FM experience. Therefore, to Kogawa, the Internet is “a medium that could ultimately dismantle our physical body”. In his view, these new modes of communication are still very interesting to study, as “virtual/augmented Reality is expanding beyond our still-ongoing face-to-face communication. When we re-evaluate Free Radio from the perspective of a function other than just delivering content, it should have expanded our reality and changed the way we feel. In that sense, Free Radio is still a pending question, a work-in-progress”.

2 — “*To think with one's hands*”, another form of radio art.

Simultaneously and since the collective experiments he carried out with members of Radio Home Run, Tetsuo Kogawa has patiently developed, over the course of twenty years, a singular approach to “Radioart”, for which he wrote a manifesto¹¹ in 2008. Although his activity as a performer and as an artist can be seen as very personal, even solitary, with his continuing commitment to the Mini-FM movement it nonetheless remains inseparable from his political and social activism and from his work as a theoretical scholar. Development of his tactile radiophonic art ran not only in parallel to political reflection and theoretical research, but as part of it. Inseparable and complementary, the political, philosophical and artistic dimensions of Kogawa's work show different avenues for further reflection, opportunities to think collectively, to think through language and to “think with one's hands¹²”.

Radioart

Étienne Noiseau described very concisely one of Kogawa's performances: “we can see him inviting the audience closer. Then taking a soldering iron and building a small FM-transmitter before our eyes, on a simple copper board using common electronic components. With this fully operational creation, along with other pre-assembled transmitters and receivers tuned in to the same frequency,

¹¹ Tetsuo Kogawa, *A Radioart manifesto*, 2008 – http://anarchy.translocal.jp/non-japanese/20080710AcousticSpaceIssue_7.html

¹² That mention is a reference to the work of Denis de Rougemont, *Penser avec ses mains* [Thinking with one's hands] (1935), Idées-Gallimard, 1972.

he then starts playing, physically, with the interference and wave pulses [so as to create] a noise sculpture from raw radiophonic matter by moving his hands near the antennas¹³”.

Interference, wave pulses, radiophonic noise... Mini-FM experiences have proven that the community and the social event brought about by the act of transmitting could become more important than the programs’ actual contents. The issue of the radio program – which Kogawa jokingly says “interferes with the carrier waves” – is more or less evacuated from Radioart. For him, it is about playing with the signal itself, working with the tactile nature of the transmission process and the radio waves themselves. In this respect his performances are singularly echoing a point which Theodor Adorno made about radio half a century before, and which he mentions in the terms of his participation in the “Princeton Radio Research Project¹⁴” on social reception of the radio medium in the USA. In 1941, and while radio was evolving mainly as an industrial means for the distribution of music, Adorno came to the conclusion that the newly popularized medium was not fit for musical reproduction, and that an art form which would do justice to radio had yet to be achieved, something which would make “radio playing the radio itself”. Yet for him it didn’t seem likely such an art form would exist, perhaps because his own research was leading nowhere, and he saw this as an opportunity to end his scholarship.

If the Radioart of Testuo Kogawa was a way of making Adorno's idea a reality, it had first of all to deconstruct the discourse which materializing radio as a media macro system, which in the 1940s was homogeneous. For Kogawa, as for Félix Guattari at the turn of the 1980s, the structural asymmetry of “broad-casting” – which establishes the equation “one transmitter for billions of receivers” – could no longer be considered inherent to radio technology itself, and had to be seen as the product of industrial ideology. In opposition, they would work on the idea of a horizontal form of communication, made from billions of enunciators, all of them transmitting and receiving signals. While in Europe the appropriation of radio technology, as initiated by Free Radio, was mostly focused on making repressed voices heard, it was also – even more so for Kogawa in the light of the Japanese experience – about the appropriation of the signal itself, which had to be made accessible on a human scale. This is why Radioart has to be measured using the scale of the body, and why it originates from the work of the hands.

Artist-becoming

“I think when you spend your time making something you become either an artisan or an artist.” For Kogawa, setting an artistic practice in motion implies a logical outcome. Good with his hands since an early age, he would soon be “fascinated by the simple combination of theory and practice” one finds in the process of building circuit boards and radio transmitters, “If you build a circuit, it can work totally, perfectly: practice meets theory”. This could have easily led him to a career as an “artisan or professional technician”, but as a teacher and researcher he followed another path, until his electronic skills found a home within the social experiments of the Mini-FM movement. At a time when the individual was physically confronted with his or her own media and technological makeup, Kogawa's transmitters were a way of questioning the social autonomy of bodies. But when the Radio Home Run venture started, their function was simply to make transmission possible. Yet the collective experience of Mini-FM and the encounter with Guattari’s work were already opportunities to think in terms of (artistic) creation and see the Radio Home Run transmissions as an “artistic activity”. In New York at the end of the 1970s, it was the discovery of what would later

¹³ Étienne Noiseau, *Tetsuo Kogawa ou la radio à mains nues* [Testuo Kogawa, radio with bare hands] in *Discuts N°3* and *Syntone* – <http://www.syntone.fr/article-tetsuo-kogawa-ou-la-radio-a-mains-nues-111949297.html>

¹⁴ Concerning Adorno's participation in the “Princeton Radio Research project” and his critique of the media, see: *Current of music, Éléments pour une théorie de la radio* [Elements for a theory of radio], Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2010.

be called “media art” which completed his artistic awareness : “my fresh encounter with ongoing experiments of this art that did not even have a name came as a shock, it could not allow me to be a mere writer and researcher. When I came back from New York in 1980, I started experimenting with media art. My old experience of building electronic circuits enabled me to join this area. At the time, there were few artists who were able to build circuits for installations and performances. So I enjoyed a favourable reaction in the experimental art scene in Japan despite being an inexperienced artist.”

While his recent performances confer an equal importance to transmitter technology and physical presence, matters of corporeality seem to have been central to Kogawa's thinking all along, from his initial teaching of Merleau-Ponty to the counter-therapeutic aspect he was observing in the Mini-FM movement. In retrospect, Radioart can also be seen as a long journey towards the “reduction” of radiophonic matter, so as to re-seat it on a human scale, a process for which the Guattarian notion of “molecular revolution” and Adorno's concept of “micrology” are the theoretical horizons. The collective work undertaken with Radio Home Run was already committed to the consideration of the size of the radio transmission, using the concept of “narrow-casting” in contrast to the industrial culture of “broad-casting”, thereby making space for the individual on the community-scale. With Radioart, the reduction goes on, coupled with performative actions which achieve transmission in proportion to the body, in proportion to the hand.

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On a theoretical level, Kogawa clearly expresses the need for action on the microscopic scale in his Micro-radio manifesto: « Change in a tiny space could resonate to a larger space, but without microscopic change no radical change is possible.¹⁵ ». For him, as for Guattari, the issue is about “micro-politics”, and the appeal of the ‘micro-’ is not only the result of a materialistic or pragmatic conception (the minuscule is not simply better or more practical), but is an opportunity for qualitative distinction: while the global is the domain of domination, uniformity and homogeneity, the body is the domain of the “diverse, multiple, and polymorphous¹⁶”, which permits working towards autonomy and social change. This qualitative shift appears in the same light as Guattari's concept of “molecular revolution¹⁷”: revolution is not the actions of the “people” as a homogenous and macro-historical entity, but as a potential of the multitude, an infinite sum that proceeds by couplings, arrangements, assemblages.

More than thirty years after Guattari's formulation of this concept, however, Kogawa remains aware that technological macro-systems have evolved as well. They have taken the shape of the network and of the multitude, they have become atom-like in order to increasingly infiltrate the private sphere, promoting technological individuation. Thus for him, the body is a battleground, because “nowadays every form of control invades not only individuals but also their cerebral space¹⁸”. Radioart, then, constitutes a space for experimenting with the body and its movements when confronted with technology. Here, appropriation as a principle is no longer sufficient, one has to arm oneself with a strong connection with the act of creation, invention and transformation: “One might think building a transmitter is a way of appropriating a conventional object to turn it into an alternative object. And yet the interesting things occur when its usage is distorted. Outside of an assembly line, making a cellular phone would be very difficult. It would be easier to hack the software, but we would still be one step behind the manufacturers. So appropriation always implies latency, recovery and new appreciation. I am more interested to see how the idea of ‘DIY’ can really

¹⁵ Tetsuo Kogawa, *A Micro-radio manifesto*, 2002-2003 – <http://translocal.jp/radio/micro/index.html>

¹⁶ Idem.

¹⁷ See: Félix Guattari, *La Révolution Moléculaire* [The molecular revolution], Éditions Recherches, 1977.

¹⁸ Tetsuo Kogawa, *Micro-radio manifesto*, Op. Cit.

be expanded into an actual form of creation: to what extent can we create the means for our technological ‘conviviality’?”

A philosophy of the event

His “micro-radio parties”, during which radio waves would flood one place for one night, were a way of creating new forms of “conviviality” that would avoid the entraining function of technologies. Kogawa is not satisfied with appropriating transmission technology; by literally taking it into his own hands he also applies it to generate situations that produce new gestures and new perceptions. His performances go beyond the repetition of technical gestures and the mere demonstration of skills, they are not the result of a scripted process but a space of indeterminacy, where the virtualities of transmission meet the possibilities of gesture. At the fringes of both engineering and dance, such open situations are only determined by the ‘forces’ involved: the body, the combinations of electronics, the fluctuation of radiowaves.

For Kogawa, a Radioart performance is not the product of a conscious scripted process which gives rise to form, but the coupling and confrontation of autonomous entities which have a life of their own. This is why his hands are not guided by his mind, they have a mind of their own, they have autonomy and specific properties, just like each of the components that contribute to the assemblage. Within that singular arrangement, that corporeal and electronic hybrid, each of these components is an “autopoietic module¹⁹”, or in other words: the cell of a body, permanently interacting with all the other elements of the modulation and transmission.

In his performances, he is pursuing a philosophical reflection which he has carried out his all life. By experimenting with transmission, it is the “plasticity” of ideas that is – literally – at hand : upholding Guattari's concepts, manipulating the “molecular”, creating “arrangements” and “machine couplings”... In the same way, Radioart performances explore the notion of the “event²⁰” as found in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, in as far as they are focused on “what is happening” rather than on “what is”, because they are working on the relations between things rather than on their substance. In a Deleuzian sense, Radioart cultivates an “event” within radio transmission, which can thus no longer be regarded as a determined function, but rather as a possibility of change.

For Kogawa, the body cannot be thought of outside of its technological becoming, without taking into consideration the ways in which it is “augmented” by communication prosthetics (computers, phones and all the everyday technology which supplements our perception) and by the information and energy which flows through it. If the matter has to be regarded as an issue of political attention, Radioart attempts to transcend the antagonistic relation between technology and the body, and replace it with a horizontal relation, in which neither the machine enslaves the body or the body enslaves the machine. As it developed, radio was indeed rid of its primary function, it no longer carries a message, instead transmission has become a pure event inside which the author has dissolved, and which stands committed to a new sensorium and a new corporeality.

¹⁹ Tetsuo Kogawa borrowed the term from Francisco Varela, for whom “autopoiesis” describes the ability of a system to reproduce itself while permanently interacting with its environment, on a cellular level. On this topic, see: *Lines of sight*, conversation with Yasunao Tone, Radio Web Macba – <http://rwm.macba.cat/en/linesofsight-tag/>

²⁰ For Deleuze’s concept of the “event”, see: François Zourabichvili, *Deleuze, une philosophie de l'évènement* [Deleuze, a philosophy of the event], Presses Universitaires de France, 1994.