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## Intimate listening and sonic solidarity. Radio in the works of Radio Earth Hold collective as a way towards the sonic turn

### Abstract

At first glance, radio may seem to be an example of dated technology, overturned by other, more contemporary media. However, the beginning of the 21st century brought an upsurge of radio-related artworks alongside an increased theoretical interest around the broader topic of sound in culture – in response to W. J. T Mitchell's 'pictorial turn,' the 'sonic turn' was introduced in 2004 by Jim Drobnick. In this article, I specifically focus on radio as a tool used in visual arts on the example of works by artistic/curatorial collective Radio Earth Hold, observed through the lens of 'transmission arts' – a term coined at the end of the 1990s, which recognizes the issue of transmission as political at its core. REH's works render apparent the potential of the radio voice to become authoritarian as well as to create an intimate experience of listening. By building upon the idea of 'sonic solidarity' REH touches upon political topics in a way that can profoundly challenge our thinking and encourage us to reexamine not only the role of radio but also the transmission and communication in or via art – which perhaps could be understood as a way towards the possible sonic turn.

**Keywords:** radio; Radio Earth Hold; transmission art; sonic turn; sonic solidarity; natural radio.

In 1992, in the introduction to his book *Wireless Imagination. Sound, Radio, and the Avant-garde*, Douglas Kahn diagnosed the area of sound in arts as being still an art-historical blind spot.<sup>1</sup> However, the beginning of the 21st century brought an increased interest around the topic of sound in culture, which could be observed in the

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1 D. Kahn, "Introduction. History of Sound Once Removed", in: D. Kahn and G. Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination. Sound, Radio, and the Avant-garde*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 1.

proliferation of both: the literature and the exhibitions presenting sound works and offering a critical reflection on that phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> These tendencies were noticed by Jim Drobnick, author of the book *Aural Cultures: Sound Art* who already in 2004 introduced a ‘sonic turn’ in response to W.J.T. Mitchell’s ‘pictorial turn’ proclaimed over a decade earlier.<sup>3</sup> Drobnick has pointed out how the sound “resonates in cross-disciplinary analyses” and has become a common ground for researchers originating from various fields including philosophy, anthropology, culture studies, literary studies, or art history.<sup>4</sup> In parallel to Mitchell’s reflections on the relationship between text and image, Drobnick has argued that sound – ungraspable neither by the methodologies created for text analysis nor image-based theories – requires creating new approaches. Even if from today’s perspective we could question whether the sonic turn has already happened (perhaps it is still about to come?), there is another important point related to Drobnick’s thought, which I would like to emphasize. Drobnick has argued against placing sound as a distinct realm, to be studied in isolation – in his view, it needs to be observed in relation to surrounding elements received with other senses.

Although my focus is much more narrow than the sound in art, the dynamics of changes within that field provide an important context for my discussion. In this article, I am specifically interested in radio as a tool used in visual arts on the example of works by artistic/curatorial collective Radio Earth Hold (henceforth REH). While radio may seem to be a dated technology, overturned by other, newer media, multiple artistic projects created during the last decade seem to indicate the opposite: the upsurge of radio-related artworks or initiatives in both: grassroots artistic practices and projects carried out under the auspices of the biggest institutions (the examples from the Polish art-scene include Radio Kapitał (Capital) hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw or the series of audio programs *Out Of Office* as a part of *Plac Małachowskiego 3* by Zachęta National Gallery of Art – both projects launched in summer 2019).

I am going to look at radio in arts through the lens of ‘transmission arts’ – a term coined at the end of the 1990s by Wave Farm – a collective originating from New York, which later developed into a bigger organization.<sup>5</sup> As explained by curator and executive director of Wave Farm Galen Joseph-Hunter:

Transmission artists embrace technology as a tool for the realization of the idea. Transmission art encompasses works in which the act of transmitting or receiving is not only significant, but the fulcrum for the artist’s attention.<sup>6</sup>

2 C. Kelly, “Sound and Art”, *Grove Art Online* 1996, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T079882> [accessed July 28, 2020].

3 J. Drobnick, “Listening Awry”, in: *Aural Cultures: Sound Art*, ed. J. Drobnick, YYZ Books, Banff, 2004, p. 10.

4 Ibid.

5 A. Friz, “Art on Autonomous Airwaves: Radio Art in Canada”, *Glissando* 35, no. 3, 2018, p. 88. See: <https://wavefarm.org/wf/about/mission-history>.

6 G. Joseph-Hunter, P. Duff, M. Papadomanolaki, *Transmission Arts: Artists and Airwaves (Art + Performance)*, PAJ Publications, New York, 2011, p. xi.

By placing the wireless transmission in the center of interest, it can broaden the notion of radio art and embrace a much wider spectrum of artistic practices not necessarily (or maybe even not at all?) happening inside a broadcasting studio, but including installations, live performances, etc. More importantly, by recognizing the issue of transmission as political at its core, this approach allows for observing various projects (both, the ones aimed at producing new broadcasts and the ones using pre-existing, archival sources) as parts of one bigger phenomenon, often related to activism and the issues of spectrum regulation, practices of surveillance or limitations in the access to a discursive public sphere for different social groups.

Radio voice has the potential to become authoritarian as well as to create an intimate experience of listening. Both of these aspects are rendered apparent in the works of the REH collective founded by Rachel Dedman, Lorde Selys, and Arjuna Neuman. Their broadcast *REH#1: The Colonial Voice* balances between curatorial and artistic practices; it presents the outcomes of their research but also offers a conceptualization of the link between the Palestinian and the Native American political struggles combined through the concept of sonic solidarity. Their approach hinges on the phenomenon of natural radio and the idea of acousmatic sound – a sound without a recognizable source, the disembodied voice of authority, often compared to the omnipotent voice of God. This voice appears in REH's research on the history of radio in Palestine, both as a tool used by the colonizer and as incorporated in resistance practices. Most importantly, rather than presenting finished products, REH's projects introduce the solutions which are opening up a wide mesh of further possibilities. They touch upon political topics in a way that can profoundly challenge our thinking and encourage us to reexamine not only the role of radio but also the transmission and communication in or via art – which perhaps could be understood as a way towards the possible sonic turn.

## Political nature of natural technology

In fact, nature was broadcasting globally before there was a globe. Radio was heard before it was invented, and radio, before it was heard, was.<sup>7</sup>

What I find fascinating is the self-contradictory tension between radio as a fundamentally state-controlled medium with broadcasts aimed at particular countries separately and its intrinsic impossibility to fit into dimensions demarcated by the national borders. Potentially emancipating capacity of radio to transgress borders and physical, architectonic barriers contrasted with its history as a powerful propaganda tool. This political potential can be observed in the example from the early history of radio (presented in an unacceptably brief version). Before radio technology became used for entertainment, it was mostly a tool for secret military com-

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<sup>7</sup> D. Kahn, *Earth Sound Earth Signal: Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2013, p. 2.

munication – still during the First World War the idea of broadcasting records and reading newspapers to keep the spirits of soldiers at the frontline was refused by the superior command of the German army as “the ‘abuse of army equipment.’”<sup>8</sup> However, in 1918, this valuable equipment, not so long before protected from any leisure use, was left in the hands of 190,000 demobilized radio operators.<sup>9</sup> The question of how they would decide to use it caused a legitimate concern for the state of the Weimar Republic (e.g. The Independent Socialist Party (USPD) very quickly registered their Central Broadcasting Bureau and obtained a broadcasting license). As argued by Friedrich Kittler, radio entertainment was introduced to counter that potential force accumulated in the tool that suddenly fell into the hands of common people:

For the simple purpose of avoiding the anarchistic abuse of military radio equipment, Germany received its entertainment radio network [...] Otherwise people themselves, rather than the government and the media industry, could have made politics.<sup>10</sup>

In this way, to maintain the state control over the radio transmissions, the military technology previously used for sending enciphered, classified messages between precisely defined points, was transformed into a global AM radio introducing the new logic of widely accessible broadcast for entertainment. The question, that remains valid today, is how this subversive potential recognized in radio in the early 20th century translates into contemporary reality? Perhaps the way, in which radio is used by contemporary artists can help us better understand more general characteristics of that medium.

Typically understood as a technology discovered and fully developed by humans, who subdued the earth, radio can be also approached from an entirely different perspective by focusing on the phenomenon of natural radio. It was heard for the first time by the assistant of Graham Bell, Thomas Watson, and other early telephone users years before the radio was invented. Similarly, the radio operators during the First World War were listening to it not knowing yet what the source of the sounds could be, which eventually led to further research conducted in the 1920s. Speaking of energies in arts, Kahn described one of the types of natural radio called a “whistler”:

Whistlers are generated primarily by the powerful, full-spectrum electromagnetic bursts of lightning. Lightning strikes globally between 100 and 200 times a second, releasing enormous amounts of energy that are teased out into signals traveling at the speed of light over great distances. They bounce between the earth and ionosphere and at times catch a ride into outer space on magneto-ionic flux lines before descending back to earth in the opposite hemisphere. Arching over the equator, whistlers are globetrotting signals, earth signals in the truest sense.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> F. A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> D. Kahn, *Earth Sound Earth Signal*, p. 14.

In short, except for radio as we know it in popular culture, there are also naturally produced radio signals traveling huge distances, which can be heard by the human ear with an aid of the right equipment. Thus, the receiving of signal suggests that someone else can be listening too but not necessarily that somebody is intentionally transmitting. According to Kahn, beyond the aesthetic qualities of these abstruse sounds, it was this almost metaphysical aspect that captivated Watson during his early studies on whistlers – he would even eventually call it “earth’s divinity”.<sup>12</sup>

This natural phenomenon was also used by artists. In the 1960s, American composer Alvin Lucier started incorporating the whistlers into his music. In visual arts, some remarkable examples can be found among the works of an Australian artist Joyce Hinterding. Trained as a gold- and silversmith, she understood the material and sonic properties of copper, brass, or nickel. Subsequently, she expanded her vocational training and studied electronics. Hinterding’s work *Aeriology* from 1995 was constructed of 20-30 km of wire (depending on a location) tightly wrapped around four columns pre-existing in the exhibition space. What may at a first glance visually resemble a minimalist sculpture turns out to function as a large-scale antenna receiving radio signals, which could be heard from the attached loudspeakers – hence, not connected to any external source of energy. The mechanism behind it is similar to the process which allowed the 19th-century telegraph to be powered by the ambient energy of the magnetic storm.<sup>13</sup> This is how it is explained on the artist’s website:

Like a classic transformer, *Aeriology* also transforms electrical and electromagnetic activity in the room and the surrounding atmosphere into electrical activity in the wire. This activity can be translated into sound or image or can be thought about as an alternative power source, gathering energy out of the air.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the installation is “literally plugged into the atmosphere,” which blurs the boundaries between the natural and man-made, material and the ephemeral, the stillness, additionally enhanced by the concrete, architectural skeleton, and the constant movement of bustling, vibrating energy.<sup>15</sup> *Aeriology* seems to shimmer with multistable meanings and although it is built of paradoxes, it grounds them or even renders them reasonable. Kahn highlighted another aspect of the installation, namely the embodied labor accumulated in the gesture of almost obsessively precise wrapping of the architectural structure.<sup>16</sup> As result, the installation challenges our perception of the surrounding environment and allows the viewer to position him- or herself differently in a world in which all elements, both animated and still, are

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12 Ibid., p. 32.

13 Ibid., p. 249.

14 J. Hinterding. *Aeriology*, <http://www.haineshinterding.net/1995/05/06/aeriology/> [accessed January 31, 2020].

15 Ibidem.

16 D. Kahn, *Earth Sound Earth Signal*, p. 249.

constantly resonating with each other. This perspective will be crucial for the Radio Earth Hold's projects.

## Radio Earth Hold

Both of the above-mentioned approaches, one situating radio transmission as inherently political and the second one presenting radio as a pre-historical, all-encompassing force, provide the context for the projects by REH. The founding members of the collective: Rachel Dedman, Lorde Selys, and Arjuna Neuman met in Beirut in 2013-2014. Their activities can be described as multidisciplinary and transnational in their very nature: Neuman, born on the plane, owner of two passports, describes himself as an artist, filmmaker, and writer. Selys, an artist born in Switzerland who studied in Berlin, Beirut, and Brussels also works with both text and images. Dedman, curator, writer, and art historian who spent several years working in Lebanon and Palestine currently holding the position of Jameel Curator of Contemporary Art from the Middle East at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Around 2016-2017, they decided to form an interdisciplinary artistic/curatorial collective, which combined research with artistic practices such as performative lectures, curated events or workshops, and radio broadcasts. Dedman has located their common interests, which triggered the first REH's activities within the "overlaps between North American and Palestinian practices as a way of thinking about solidarity and how these two struggles might have connections".<sup>17</sup> Referring to the Black Lives Matter as well as Native American movements and the Palestinian anti-occupation front, they kept a close focus on the idea of sonic solidarity, which already at an early stage has become the core concept for Radio Earth Hold.

As Rachel Dedman recalls, the inspirations which made her dive into the topic of radio were archival photos of the transmission towers built in Ramallah in the 1930s paired with an intriguing, coincidentally found object.<sup>18</sup> During the preparation for the show *Labour of Love: New Approaches to Palestinian Embroidery* (March 18 – December 31, 2018) at the Palestinian Museum, Dedman came across a pouch in a very peculiar shape, with cuts suggesting that it was designed with a very specific way of use in mind. It turned out to be a tool used by Palestinian farmers to carry small transistor radios while working in the fields. This discovery has sparked off extensive research on radio, which eventually took shape of *REH#1: The Colonial Voice*, the broadcast on and through radio commissioned for Palestinian Biennale Qualandiya International, which in 2018 was organized under the topic of Solidarity.

*The Colonial Voice* was released online on October 3, 2018, followed by Dedman's lecture at Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah (October 6) and culminating with a whole-day event on October 28 at Serpentine Galleries in London, entirely

<sup>17</sup> R. Dedman, video call with the author, May 29, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



**Fig. 1.** *Radio masts*, Ramallah, between 1934 and 1939. Negative 5 x 7 in. Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540.

broadcasted by the Comet Radio (London).<sup>19</sup> Organized around the topic of different sonic practices, among the invited contributors the event brought together artists as well as theoreticians and activists coming from various fields: Ultra-red, Daisy Hildyard, Sulaiman Majali, Sophie Dyer, Louis Moreno, and Dhanveer Singh. The day started with a workshop run by an activist group Ultra-red – it included, for example, the ear training during the militant listening sessions; the second, more theoretical part consisted of presentations and discussions and was concluded with a DJ-set in the evening. Initially, apart from their realizations, Radio Earth Hold was also planning to invite other artists and commission new works understood, broadly speaking, as anything that can be put on the radio. With the support of Serpentine Galleries, *REH#2: Sedentarized Sonics* was commissioned from Inas Halabi – an artist who was already working on the topic of radio and the political use of popular music in the Arab world, but focusing on the events of Black September 1970 (*The Authentic Bedouin*, project still ongoing). Yet, some recent REH's activities such as an ongoing reading group project *Weather or Not* with Sophie Dyer and Sasha

<sup>19</sup> Qalandiya International, *Qi2018 Program*, <https://www.qalandiyainternational.org/program2018> [accessed July 28, 2020].

Engelman, which started as a commissioned work, have developed into something different from the initially planned and led REH to shift their interest towards collaborations rather than curated commissions.

Thinking about REH's formal approach, Dedman situates *The Colonial Voice* both as an artwork and a piece of collective research that took shape of a radio broadcast. Although it functioned both as a broadcast transmitted via radio waves and a digital podcast, the distinction between these two forms of circulation remains important for the authors. As described by Dedman, the online podcast has a "timeless quality" which in this case does not necessarily work in favor of that solution. According to the author, "We like playing it on 'real' radio because it evades somehow the slipperiness of digital circulation".<sup>20</sup>

The live transmission is based on a quite different temporality which could be shortly characterized as "you tune in or you miss it" – it is embedded, precisely situated in time.<sup>21</sup> REH also favored the idea of broadcasting on pirate or grassroots stations as a way of distribution bypassing the official communication channels – so far, in addition to the first publication in Comet Radio in spring 2020, *The Colonial Voice* has appeared on-air in Radio Alhara. At the same time, if we think about the history of clandestine radio stations, in the context of Palestine, which I will discuss in the following section, radio has been very directly involved in politics and strongly associated with resistance movements.

## Jerusalem Calling

The long-awaited public radio (widely announced by the press already in 1934) was introduced to Palestine in 1936 in a form of the Palestine Broadcasting Service popularly known as 'Jerusalem Calling,' established by the British Mandate government. To paint the socio-political picture of the time, it is important to take into account the demographical statistics: especially the 1930s were the time of massive immigration with the population growth in Palestine from 750,000 in the early 1920s to nearly 1.9 million by the end of the mandate. A remarkable shift has also taken place in the ethnic ratio – from 83,000-90,000 at the beginning of the 1920s (about 10% of all inhabitants), the Jewish population increased to 530,000-550,000 by 1944 and was representing roughly 30% of the overall population.<sup>22</sup> The number of radio listeners can be only estimated on the basis of the issued radio licenses. Nevertheless, according to the calculations by historian Andrea L. Stanton included in her book *"This is Jerusalem calling": state radio in mandate Palestine*, even if we assume that one license stands for a household of three listeners (often it was many

20 R. Dedman, video call with the author, May 29, 2020.

21 Ibid.

22 A. L. Stanton, *"This is Jerusalem calling": state radio in mandate Palestine*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2014, p. 2.





**Fig. 2.** *Radio artists, Palestine Broadcasting Service, between 1936-1946, Jerusalem. Negative: 5 x 7 in. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540.*

more), in comparison to the press circulation, in 1946, PBS could reach more people than all the Palestinian newspapers counted together.<sup>23</sup>

Already at the moment of inauguration, the social division based on the ethnic origin was marked: in the PBS's opening speech, Mandate High Commissioner Arthur Wauchop assured the listeners that the broadcasts will maintain the cultural standards sophisticated enough for the European Jewish immigrants and at the same time will aim to educate the rural population of Palestine.<sup>24</sup> The goal was to "stimulate new interests and make all forms of knowledge more widespread".<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the core ideas for PBS programming implicated this oversimplifying division between the urban Jewish elite for whom radio should serve as entertainment and the rural working-class of Arabs who needs the radio's pedagogical function. As described by Stanton, the British policy in Palestine was echoing the colonial endeavors in India: in both cases "peasants" were perceived as a threat, a force which

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23 Ibidem, p. 12.

24 R. Dedman, L. Selys, A. Neuman, "Radio Earth Hold 001: The Colonial Voice", *The Contemporary Journal*, 2020, 3, p. 2.

25 A. L. Stanton, „*This is Jerusalem calling*": state radio in mandate Palestine, p. 4.

could carry a destabilizing potential if left “without modernization.” The colonial radio voice was therefore used to modernize them. According to Stanton, another impactful practice of PBS was the use of language which instead of presenting the idea of mutual interdependency, strengthened the vision of two completely separate communities.<sup>26</sup>

Speaking historically, as professor of New Media at the University of Bergen, who specializes in Sound Studies, Brandon LaBelle has put forward, the awareness of the potential existing in the ether has arisen the anxiousness to transform it into just another subject of colonial take-over.<sup>27</sup> Along the same line, the Palestinian radio with its broadcasts in English, Hebrew, and Arabic served as an additional element of colonial infrastructure: although both Jews and Arabs could program their transmissions, their actual contribution was limited to the choice of music and politically-neutral topics for the invited speakers – any polemical discussions about politics were strictly forbidden. However, according to Stanton, the idea of establishing a broadcasting station was widely supported by the “Palestinians of various backgrounds and political commitments”.<sup>28</sup> Analogically to the figure of a radio tower understood as a ‘monument to the nation,’ radio stations were perceived as one of the signs of the early 20th-century statehood. In this light, Stanton describes the position of PBS as paradoxical, serving at the same time for the mandatory goals of the British and securing the international recognition, which from the Palestinian perspective in a long run could have been used as an argument allowing for the negotiation of greater autonomy or independence.<sup>29</sup>

The first pirate stations, both the Zionist and the Arab, appeared already under British rule. Unsurprisingly, both were used for political ends. However, from that period there are more preserved records of the transmissions aired by Zionist organizations. In 1946, one of the most famous speakers for Irgun (a Zionist extremist organization) Geula Cohen was arrested live on-air and sentenced by the British to five years of imprisonment for illegal broadcasting.<sup>30</sup> The clandestine Palestinian radio gained power and its crucial role as the means of communication during the first Intifada, described by Israeli Police Minister Haim Bar-Lev as a “radio-led and -inspired” rebellion.<sup>31</sup> With the slogan “For the liberation of land and man” opening and closing most of the broadcasts, Al-Quds Palestinian Arab radio station started transmitting on January 1, 1988 (less than a month after the Intifada’s outbreak), and was called by its founder Ahmed Jibril “the political and spiritual guide of the uprising”.<sup>32</sup> The second important station: the Voice of the PLO-Baghdad (The Pal-

26 Ibidem, p. 20.

27 B. LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*, Continuum, New York 2011, p. 147.

28 A. L. Stanton, „This is Jerusalem calling”: state radio in mandate Palestine, p. 16.

29 Ibidem, p. 17.

30 R. Dedman, L. Selys, A. Neuman, “Radio Earth Hold 001: The Colonial Voice”, p. 2.

31 K. Nakjavani Bookmiller, R. J. Bookmiller, “Palestinian Radio and the Intifada”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 1990, 19, no. 4, p. 98, doi:10.2307/2537391, [accessed July 28, 2020].

32 Ibid., p. 97.

estine Liberation Organization) was broadcasting already in the early 1980s from various locations outside the Palestinian territory but Baghdad's station turned out to be equipped with the strongest transmitters allowing for the best possible reception of the signal on the West Bank. Radio became a medium with the power to validate information (which seems crucial for the organization of an uprising strongly relying on the tactics of common civil disobedience) – the political leaflets were read on air to enable the distinction between the genuine ones and the ones distributed by the Israeli forces to spread disinformation. At the same time, on a smaller, private scale, it was a tool for the families to pass the messages to the prisoners.<sup>33</sup>

After signing the Oslo Accords (1993) which allowed Palestinians to establish their TV, radio, or telephone networks, The Palestine Broadcasting Corporation was created and in 1994 it aired its first transmission from Jericho. However, the Accords granted control over the infrastructure and spectrum allocation to Israel, which made the whole Palestinian telecommunication system far from independent – the mechanism described by REH as a “part of an architecture of occupation”.<sup>34</sup>



**Fig. 3.** *Inauguration of the Palestine Broadcasting Service*, engineer Moshe Rubin controlling broadcasting, March 30, 1936, Ramallah. Negative 4 x 5in. Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540.

33 R. Dedman, *Radio Earth Hold: The Colonial Voice*, presentation, East European – North African – Middle East Forum, Biennale Warsaw, Warsaw, June 9, 2019.

34 R. Dedman, L. Selys, A. Neuman, “Radio Earth Hold 001: The Colonial Voice”, p. 1.

## Intimate listening

Radio as a broadcast technology was designed with the intent to conquer distance wirelessly, but is perhaps best suited to transmitting both distance and intimacy.<sup>35</sup>

The pouch found by Dedman became a significant object standing for the duality described in the quote above by Anna Friz: carrying the radio receiver into the fields was a way to maintain the wireless connection between remote places, but at the same time it could allow for a very intimate practice of listening. As sociologist Anne Karpf argued in the article published in 1979, in opposition to the TV sets mostly shared by whole families, owning an individual, often portable radio receiver was relatively popular.<sup>36</sup> This ability of radio to broadcast the voice which seems to speak to the particular listener – often in the cozy, homely surroundings – but at the same time, almost regardless of the broadcasted content, to transmit the feeling of contribution, of being a part of a larger group of listeners tuned in a particular moment, became an important focus point for Radio Earth Hold.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why radio turned out to be a tool largely practiced during the time of COVID-19 lockdown. To name just a few examples close to the REH context, in the Middle East, several artist-run online radio projects have sprung up during the pandemics: Radio Alhara from Ramallah and Bethlehem or Radio Karantina, and Radio il Hai from Beirut.<sup>37</sup> It is also interesting to observe how these projects were spreading, reinforcing the next ones and maintaining the connection between each other – as we can read on Radio Alhara's website: "The project is inspired by Radio il Hai Beirut and Radio Alhuma Tunis, which were in turn inspired by Radio Quartiere Milano".<sup>38</sup>

The lockdown conditions have helped to reveal an interesting quality of radio, directly related to its use in art. Dedman has pointed out the major difference in the circulation of the works which due to the circumstances were forced to adjust to the online forms of presentation – for many projects, (including works created with digital tools) none of the possible virtual expositions allows for showing the full potential but radio provides an entirely different alternative. While from the perspective of the viewer the online forms often do not allow for a real engagement with an artwork, radio transmitted digitally remains alive, making it remarkably easier to engage with. According to Dedman, radio offers a form that remains "intentional" no matter how distributed or how far from the source of the transmission the listener could be. Speaking over a video call, she said:

35 A. Friz, "Art on Autonomous Airwaves", p. 84.

36 A. Karpf, "Women and Radio," *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 1980, 3, no. 1, p. 42.

37 For more information in English see: <https://www.facebook.com/radioalhara>, <https://www.facebook.com/radiokarantina> [accessed July 7, 2020], or listen directly at: <https://soundcloud.com/radiokarantina?fbclid=IwAR3q2mTo6zNC3TGX3Eoscg5HZ-VuTSDQJj4CcS2wWSDO-rYFhw7Vr-neVmaU>.

38 Radio Alhara, <https://yamakan.place/palestine/?fbclid=IwAR249eTPZqalYePlcUrtQB6lDkd7DSavp09xrn-jTqHZiBTOZIT3jnyFBIA> [accessed July 7, 2020]

It's the medium that changes the least, or the work is least affected, when you listen online. Because that's entirely the point, you're intended to listen to it absolutely anywhere.<sup>39</sup>

In this sense, the technological transformations of how radio is broadcasted do not significantly affect how the connection established by the transmission is experienced.

Following Dedman's thought, the fact that the audience can engage with the artist from various places in the world produces this feeling of domesticity and global coalescence – it answers the desire to tune in globally and hear voices that are coming directly from other people. At the same time, some connection to the geopolitical context from which it emerges is maintained, expressed by the language of the broadcast.<sup>40</sup> Considering all these arguments, perhaps over the long haul, the COVID-19 pandemics can provide a completely new perspective on the radio used in art, transmission arts in general, or even more broadly speaking, how the connection between people is maintained.

## Sonic solidarity

Let's now return to *The Colonial Voice*. The broadcast starts with the spoken narration preparing the listener, or in this case – the patient, to enter an MRI machine. "Using radio waves, your body will be turned into a transmitter".<sup>41</sup> It already serves as a hint that rather than the traditionally understood medium, the radio will be approached in a much broader perspective embracing various mechanisms based on electromagnetic waves. As the narration develops with the historical overview of radio in Palestine, it leads to the description of the current situation: the whole communication system being under Israeli control, regularly used to remind the Palestinians that they can be surveilled anywhere, anytime.<sup>42</sup> Later it transitions to North America, describing the Native Americans' struggle of reclaiming their reproductive rights as a form of political resistance. As described by the authors: "We turn our attention to the acoustics, acousmatics and frequencies of both struggles".<sup>43</sup> This perhaps unexpected or at least unintuitive link is bridged by the idea of acousmatic voice which on the one hand can be applied to describe fetus' experiences in a womb, but on the other, can also be used as the commanding voice of the occupying power which hijacks the reminiscence of these prenatal sensations to build up its strength.

In the description published on Qualandiya International's website, there appear several questions fundamental to the whole project – they allow to understand

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39 R. Dedman, video call with the author, May 29, 2020.

40 Ibid.

41 R. Dedman, L. Selys, A. Neuman, "Radio Earth Hold 001: The Colonial Voice", p. 1.

42 Ibid., p. 4.

43 Ibid., p. 2.

how REH positions sound as an inherently political issue and see their approach to sound in the wider perspective:

How might natural radio and acousmatic sound—reverb without a cause, or echo without a source—offer a model for reorganizing relationships between the individuals and the world? What solidarity emerges from the recognition of our participation in the transmission of planetary sound?<sup>44</sup>

To tackle these questions, REH's research builds upon the scientific study which claims that hearing is the first sense that human develops – it allows for the first self-recognition at the stage when one is still completely interdependent, sharing the body with the mother. As Dedman, Selys, and Neuman explained it:

What we learn first about ourselves is precisely that we are not isolated selves, but co-extensive, inseparable, enmeshed and multiple. We can understand this formative sense-of-self – of being more than one and less than two – through the strange acoustic experience of the unborn child.<sup>45</sup>

These prenatal sensations of hearing both internally and externally, being a source of the sound and at the same time receiving sounds from an unknown source, can help to challenge our perception of one's position in the world. Likewise, referring to the phenomenon of natural radio, REH situates radio waves as an all-encompassing force facilitating the connection on the planetary scale, leading to a "Different way of thinking about an individual agency in the world".<sup>46</sup> This is where the concept of sonic solidarity comes from – perhaps this is how the sonic turn could look like in practice.

What I find additionally important, Radio Earth Hold's reflection is not only purely theoretical but can be perceived as a practical solution as well. Dedman has recognized the radio pouch as a particularly interesting object because it could bring the historical or theoretical knowledge on the radio "into life" – it could help to better paint the picture of how radio was experienced on an everyday basis. It brings together radio's ephemeral nature and its casual side related to the common experiences and memories. The description of the REH event on the Serpentine's website also aptly marks these two important qualities emerging from REH activities, however, adding the aspect of the space, in which it can be experienced: "The event offered an opportunity for Radio Earth Hold to share their research with the public, to reflect on its content and take ideas of dispersed, intangible, radio solidarity into physical, communal space".<sup>47</sup>

44 Qualandiya International, *Radio Earth Hold*, <https://www.qalandiyainternational.org/radio-earth-hold> [accessed July 28, 2020]

45 R. Dedman, L. Selys, A. Neuman, "Radio Earth Hold 001: The Colonial Voice", p. 5.

46 R. Dedman, video call with the author, May 29, 2020.

47 Serpentine Galleries, *Radio Earth Hold*, <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/radio-earth-hold/> [accessed July 28, 2020]

According to REH, one of their aims is to offer alternative perspectives allowing for rethinking the organization and our perception of geography and space – radio, as it is framed by REH, not only leaks through the nation-state borders but also blows up the scale of our thinking from the local, almost site-specific, into the planetary dimension.

Although in Palestine the gesture of transmitting a radio signal which flies across the border in an unrestricted way (especially in comparison to the regulations applied for people) is already charged politically, for the REH members themselves living in different places and their listeners spread around the world, tuning in via digital devices mostly, the place of origin of a particular transmission becomes less important. Rather than the local transgression of borders, the spatial and transnational aspect which REH puts forward is the connective potential even on the global scale. As Dedman said, “Rather than trespassing over local borders to render them arbitrary, the expansive nature of radio is where the feeling of transgressive solidarity comes out”.<sup>48</sup>

REH’s approach offers a perspective of borders thought differently – instead of the geographical territories demarcated on the land, it rather shifts the attention to the limits of the bodies as the transmitters as we move through the landscape. In this sense, REH’s projects can be seen as exemplary cases of transmission art, situating transmission as political both on micro and macro level. Perhaps in this way, borrowing vocabulary from Kittler, the subversive potential to “make politics” recognized in radio in the early 20th century can reemerge nowadays.

However, REH’s area of interest also stretches beyond radio itself. The forthcoming episode *REH #3: Pitch Blue* commissioned for the Sonic Continuum series curated by Sofia Lemos at Nottingham Contemporary was planned to premiere with the live performance in June 2020. Since it was eventually released, can we add a footnote here: Radio Earth Hold. ‘Radio Earth Hold 003: Pitch Blue’. The Contemporary Journal 3 (December 21, 2020), <https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/sonic-continuum/radio-earth-hold-003-pitch-blue> [accessed March 26, 2021]; setting off from *REH #1*’s the concluding point: radio understood as a pre-historical, planetary phenomenon, REH’s newest project shifts the focus point towards weather and meteorological processes in relation to sound and music-making. Sonic solidarity, however, as Dedman assures, remains REH’s consistent interest and the core concept that establishes a link between various areas of research explored in their broadcasts.

I asked Rachel Dedman very directly about her thoughts on why radio re-emerges as a popular medium in arts. In response, Dedman stressed the multiplicity of possible reasons, starting from a very simple one connected to the historical recycling of ideas – it happens relatively often in the art that at a certain moment in time old solutions or strategies need retesting and reformulating. However, reflecting on radio more specifically, Dedman suggested that for REH, the sonic realm

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48 R. Dedman, video call with the author, May 29, 2020.

seems less controlled and still evading the logic governing the visual regimes. She described it as the potential to exist as “a medium with a little bit of space.”

In our conversation, the comparison between the sonic and the visual reappeared also in another form. In the article published in 2013, Karpf suggested a link between the power of radio voice and the overbearingly present images: “It might even be that bombarded as we are today by images, the disembodied, invisible voice has become more, and not less, potent”.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, as a characteristic allowing for establishing a different relation of intimacy, Dedman has also pointed out the fact that radio in a traditional sense functions without any visual, countering the proliferation and ubiquity of the images constantly competing for our attention. As she stated: “It seems appealing at the moment when everything seems overwhelmingly attention-grabbing”.<sup>50</sup>

Along the same line, Dedman has put forward a quality which was rendered ostensibly visible during the COVID-19 lockdown: the fact that radio can provide an alternative in response to the endless online activities eventually causing a “push-back reaction” or an answer for “a need for something more physically constructed”.<sup>51</sup> Paradoxically, even if transmitted digitally, radio can create the feeling of presence that is more real or unmediated than other media. To describe this phenomenon, the choice of vocabulary becomes difficult – almost all the adjectives could be used between quotation marks since we know that digital radio is not *really* real, unmediated, or materially present but it sells an illusion *as if* it was. According to Dedman, radio “evades a sleek proliferation of the digital as a format of form.” In this case, I also understand ‘the digital’ as a category encompassing everything that gives an impression of being digital, rather than a strictly technical term.<sup>52</sup> With its innate intimacy *as if* the voice was addressing the listener directly, radio can hide perfectly well the fact that it also functions in the digital space. Perhaps in this sense, the need for a more direct connection (in art, but not only) woken up by the pandemic circumstances, can in the long run prepare the ground for the sonic turn to fully emerge.

In this part of our conversation with Rachel Dedman, two words were constantly reappearing: to evade and to escape. I would argue that it aptly sums up many attempts to theorize radio which leaks through various existing classifications and, as several scholars have already stated, requires an individual methodology. Transferred to the art-historical field, this inability to fit a phenomenon into the pre-conceived categories and the awareness of dealing with the case which opens more questions than it provides answers, work perhaps as a good concluding description

49 A. Karpf, “The Sound of Home? Some Thoughts on How the Radio Voice Anchors, Contains and Sometimes Pierces”, *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 2013, 11, no. 1, p. 65.

50 R. Dedman, video call with the author, May 29, 2020.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibidem.



of the whole Radio Earth Hold project that floats in between fields or genres, evading any fixed labels.

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