

RADIO_COPERNICUS

The German-Polish Cultural Encounters programme, proposed by Minister of State Christina Weiss, is set to begin in May 2005. The Federal Cultural Foundation has used this opportunity to launch the programme *Büro Kopernikus*. For over two years, cultural artists from both countries have been working together on joint projects which, in future, will lead to a more intensive, long-term cooperation. All the projects will take place outside the large urban centres and focus on current and specific needs and issues facing culture. Although *Büro Kopernikus* features traditional art formats such as exhibitions and guest performances, it will also develop its own unique forms and methods of representation. Sabine Breitsameter, professor for experimental sound design studies at the Berlin University of the Arts, is the manager of *Radio_Copernicus*, the German-Polish radio project in *Büro Kopernikus*. Stefanie Peter spoke with her about her project and the new fascination with an old-fashioned medium.

Peter There's been a recent surge of independent cultural radio stations here in Germany, and they're also becoming more common internationally. Is this a new «movement»?

Breitsameter I really think you can call it a movement – one that began in the 1980s and formed from a persistent interest in radio, radio arts and – most recently inspired by the digital webs and Internet – media arts, as well. In the past one and a half to two years, in Germany and abroad, we've been seeing a series of ambitious projects crystallise from this movement, projects which set high benchmarks for themselves. To begin with, I should mention the Berlin projects *Juniradio* and *reboot.fm* which have exerted tremendous energy pursuing their original goal of focusing on particular aspects of radio practice from every possible angle. These aspects include the concept of culture, organisational forms, technology and the effects of software development on the structure and content of radio. In a very productive and pioneering way, the projects have taken a critical look at our traditional cultural radio programmes and their principles, and not only in terms of content. In addition to this, *reboot.fm* has shown us once again what is happening elsewhere – for example, the radio station *Ligna* in Hamburg and *Ping.Fm* initiated by the Bauhaus University of Weimar. A number of ventures are also taking place in Dresden and other East German cities, most notably the *garage* festival in Stralsund which has been addressing the subjects of radio theory and practice for years. And let's not forget the «mother» of all independent art radio stations, *resonance.fm* in London, which first hit the airwaves in 1998. These are all attempts to produce independent radio with cultural content in a new or differently organised form.

Peter But what do people find so intriguing about radio?

Breitsameter There is certainly a cultural-political impetus driving people's interest in radio. Here we have a piece of equipment and publicly accessible space, both of which fall under legal, political and societal control. It's obvious that artists strive to gain access to and actively shape this regulated space. For artists, radio represents an aesthetic and political challenge, especially in a virtualised, media-dominated world.

Peter Radio in a «differently organised form» – what do you mean by that?
Alternative team structures?

Breitsameter For one thing, it implies that we – I almost want to say – «empower» artists to use the medium of radio and design it according to their own criteria. Not the other way around, where radio editors go out looking for artists and then tell them: We want you to make a radio programme, but you have to conform to the established rules of radio we've been using decades. Art radio is different – it's a free and public space which is meant to be artistically filled and exploited. Of course, a certain degree of quality is required – this is not the place for rampant dilettantism. During the past ten years, the digital webs have provided us a new perspective of radio. We've learned that radio can be a participatory medium. An exchange is not only possible because of the reverse channel we have in the Internet. New organisational forms are being tested which place radio in the centre of cultural life, making the medium accessible to literally everyone.

Peter Are these independent radio ventures really new, or have there been historical precursors?

Breitsameter No, as early as the 1920s, people were playing around with the idea that radio shouldn't only mean *broadcasting*. And in fact, in the beginning, radio stations and their listeners communicated over the same frequency. Before the First World War, people often used the airwaves as a kind of acoustic chat room in the United States. The very first German audio play, broadcast almost eighty years ago in October 1924, addressed the controversial aspect of this topic. It was called «Radio Magic» and dealt with how radio worked as a medium. The basic question it presented was whether radio art should enable broadcasters and the audience to communicate with one another, or rather, should only allow one to broadcast and the other to listen. And as history has shown us, the principle of «broadcast radio» has become synonymous for radio. Now, in this age of Internet, artists are recalling what radio used to be. The utopian visions of artists from days long past have suddenly gained new relevance. It's good to reflect on these early beginnings. And it's been happening more frequently as some artists have viewed the development of cultural radio in the last few decades with growing uneasiness. Through the years, cultural radio has been faced with more and more requirements, constraints, budget cutbacks and format standardisation which has prevented creative impulses from occurring. Of course, radio was originally a news-reporting medium, but cultural artists have always wanted to use it to realise their ideas. Today's independent radio ventures show that artists have no intention of forgetting the public space provided by radio. People are also rethinking the concept of culture. Some publicly-funded cultural programmes do nothing more than broadcast purely classical music. Now I love classical music, but if it's played around the clock, then obviously we're wearing out our cultural goods. However, contemporary art, and in particular, electronic culture and media art are hardly represented in the established cultural radio programmes.

Peter When and where did the media arts start incorporating radio?

Breitsameter The relationship between radio and the media arts is as old as radio itself. An important turning point occurred in the mid 1990s when the general

population gained access to the Internet. Through the Internet, people rediscovered radio. In 1997, the *documenta X* presented the project «Hybrid Workspace» which featured artists from every field, working with the Internet. The auditive capabilities of the Internet also played a significant role for fine artists who have always provided exciting creative impulses for the development of the radio arts.

Peter The radio arts have also developed in this way in eastern Europe. You participated in the *Macrophon* festival in Wroclaw (Breslau) in late autumn 1990. Do you still remember what you heard there? Did the event have an international character?

Breitsameter I was really impressed with *Macrophon* in Wroclaw. I was one of the jury members and had brought my radio art experience with me from Germany. A fascinating world opened up to me. It's important to remember that the festival was managed by the Polish state radio broadcaster in Warsaw, by a very dynamic audio play and acoustic arts department. Most of the visitors came from Poland, there were only a few radio people from Western countries. Wroclaw was still somewhat off the beaten path. *Macrophon* presented contemporary positions outside the mainstream and the conventional concepts of culture. Some of the audio performances were astoundingly radical and daring – hardly imaginable in Germany back then. That's when I first heard of the radio theory propagated by the Polish poet Tadeusz Peiper... «the machine penetrates art»...

Peter Peiper was a representative of the Polish avant-garde and was also fascinated by the phenomenon of radio. In *Radiofon*, a practically unknown essay Peiper wrote in 1922, he claimed, «The world is getting smaller, but people's field of vision is expanding, their range of hearing is increasing. Their perception of the world is changing. People are changing. And what about art?»

Breitsameter I think it's too bad that Peiper's ideas haven't been translated into German. He's a good example of supposedly old positions becoming very topical. The interrelationship between humans, machines and the media is a fundamental theme of today's media culture and arts. That brings to mind a key figure in the history of radio, Hans Flesch, a German radiologist and radio maker, whose ideas have hardly been acknowledged by scholars. He was the general director of the radio station in Frankfurt in the early 1920s before becoming the general director of the Berlin radio station. He was also the author of the first original German audio play of 1924, which I mentioned earlier. Flesch had thought deeply about every aspect of radio, the apparatus – its technical, aesthetic and social potential. Thanks to him, we're able to enjoy live radio today. Unfortunately, his thoughts on radio theory and practice haven't been academically reviewed yet. Now it's time to dig out his writings, as well as Peiper's.

Peter Audio plays and radio art have no place in Poland's contemporary, commercially dominated radio landscape. Even the legendary *Radiostacja* was radically converted into a commercial radio station three years ago. It was originally the voice of the Boy Scouts, but by the mid 1990s, it had become synonymous for progressiveness, pop culture, electronic music and the

cosmopolitan flair of a new generation. Now many people are investing tremendous energy in the Internet in an attempt to fill this void. However, these efforts generally take the form of short-term student radio projects. If you view this situation in Poland in context to the present fascination for radio which exists there, then you have ideal conditions for a joint German-Polish project. What are your plans?

Breitsameter We're developing a cultural radio station with a mobile transmitter. *Radio_Copernikus*, or *Radio_C*— that's our working title at the moment — will alternately broadcast in both countries for a limited time. We're planning on broadcasting in four or five cities – Wrocław, Stralsund, Warsaw, Berlin and Gdansk. The studio will be open to the public. A set editorial team will cooperate with cultural producers and artists on location in developing the programmes. *Radio_Copernikus* is an experiment which aims to meet high artistic standards. It will tap its strength from the independent cultural radio scene and will have to constantly gauge itself by what has already been achieved there. The new aspect of this project, of course, is the focus on German-Polish cultural encounters. *Radio_Copernikus* doesn't regard its listeners as «consumers», but rather creative thinkers who feel inspired by its artistic programme and who can also participate in it themselves.

Peter Which language will you be using in your broadcasts?

Breitsameter We haven't made up our minds yet. Either we'll have to internationalise our project from the start and try to do everything in English. Or we broadcast consistently in two languages, in German and Polish. We'll have to come up with creative options, maybe even experiment with artificially synthesised voices.

Peter It's amazing – no matter who you talk to in Poland – managers of broadcasting companies, directors of renowned music festivals like Warsaw Autumn, media artists, radio DJs or fine artists – they all respond enthusiastically when they hear about your project. The public yearns for radio broadcasting which goes beyond the conventional standards and formats. In respect to German-Polish relations, what can a joint radio project offer to the cultural dialogue between the two countries which symposiums, art exhibitions, publications and television broadcasters can't?

Breitsameter First of all, the airwaves metaphorically symbolise extraterritorial space. Broadcasting – in combination with the public forum of the Internet – enables the creation of an endless public sphere. Of course, there are terrestrial limitations to radio stations, and naturally, the requirements necessary to operate a station vary in both countries. But if we combine broadcasting with the Internet and enable a global audience to receive German-Polish art radio, I couldn't imagine anything more worthwhile.

BÜRO KOPERNIKUS PROJECTS [SELECTION]

In Gdansk (Danzig) and Leipzig, urban planners and art historians are developing an exhibition which will highlight the ambivalent reception of

modern architecture in their cities. For example, the Hanseatic port of Gdansk is alive with the architectural spirit of the Middle Ages. The consequence of this is noticeable in the impressive buildings constructed between the World Wars and the outstanding Polish post-war architecture, most of which has been allowed to fall into disrepair. This has now become a political issue among Poles who are concerned about preserving their historical landmarks.

- The *Mobile Academy* is attempting to closely examine Warsaw from within the city's <ghost quarters>. The project focuses on a heated debate currently taking place in Poland – the precarious state of public areas in inner-city districts.

- The Upper Silesian city of Bytom (Beuthen) is situated in the middle of what was formerly Poland's largest industrial region. Because the ground sometimes shifts beneath the mining city, cracks run down the sides of its buildings and houses. There are numerous artistic activities which take place in Bytom and the surrounding areas. Fine artists and musicians from Poland and Germany are attracted to the atmosphere of the location with its open factory complexes, subterranean topography and the miners' story-telling traditions. Currently, a dance theatre piece and a temporary *Elektropop-Club* are being developed there.

- Poland's vibrant theatre scene is alive and well in its smaller cities such as Walbrzych (Waldenburg), Gdansk, Legnica (Liegnitz) or Czestochowa. Visitors can experience a series of rebellious directors and playwrights who depict their personal view of Polish society today. Frankfurt am Main and Krakow are co-managing a theatre festival which will feature a selection of these productions.

- Two conferences will take place in Dresden and Gdansk, addressing the situation of art in Poland, its more recent history of reception and the restructuring of art institutions. The events, accompanied by exhibitions, are part of a larger cooperative project between individual art associations and galleries in Wolfsburg, Lublin, Oldenburg, Bytom, Gdansk, Zielona Gora, Karlsruhe, Krakow and other cities.

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