

BENJAMIN J. ALLARD

BROADCASTING AS COMPROMISE. RADIO ATELIER AND RE- SEARCH ART ON AIR

CHILDREN ASK QUESTIONS, amazed by the world; philosophers ask questions, inviting one to develop ideas; police ask questions, framing realities. Questions are never neutral: some challenge, others reinforce, and some estrange. To put into question is to uproot normality. Slip of the tongue, idiom, mannerism: language is itself a compromise. It speaks us before we speak it. The question marks an arena for censorship, for trade-offs and transgressions. An answer is the testimony of a compromise, neither true nor false but always circumstantial.

More explicit instances of compromise can be found in mediated interviews. With this backdrop, the confrontation of subjectivity as well as the contextual burst of statements are entwined, leading into *spectacle*. On air, we negotiate with a networked array of ideologies, infrastructure, time limits, personalities, and technologies. Sometimes we renew our agreements with a long history or we mark a diplomatic departure from it. Not all forms of media receive everyone in the same way, neither do all interviewers; the presence of the institution shaping the situation can be felt. There is power in conducting an interview whether you're the one

asking the questions or not.

In this essay, I will reflect on the radio interview and on how different types of enterprise affect, change and allow for certain possibilities—more specifically on what I call research arts, however vague this categorization might be. (For the purposes of this text, I have chosen to exclude hobby arts and art-making that concentrates on purely formal interests.) As a social organization constructed around sound, radio is a compelling media to consider as it evolves parallel to the tyranny of the image. It is analogous to printed publications: the voice bears resemblance to the written word as utterances are distributed. Radio is distinct in creating powerful intimacies across time and geography, given that the listener and the speaker have common language, codes, references...

I'd like to ground this discussion by sharing my own experience in Québec. Since June 2018, I have produced *radio atelier*, a weekly FM and web broadcast.¹ It's the cultural worker's show with a mandate to be relevant to the Montreal art community. We did over 85 hours of programming, a combination of interviews, original radio art, radio columns, and musical selection. I see this project more in the genealogy of documentary instead of contextualizing it as from journalism. This frame of mind frees us from the cadence of news and encourages us to think about futurity of what we're creating. It has served as an artist's network, as a way to continue long-term conversation, and as a pretext to forge new relationships. During the show, we discuss various artistic practices and we think through each other's concerns—it functions both as an echo chamber and a space for mutual determination.

We often receive artists eager to share their practices; we feel the lack of coverage and the need for these conversations. Asking questions, and more specifically interviewing someone for radio, marks a precedent and compels one to take a stance. As we edit with sounds and provoke thoughts through conversation, we

enter a negotiation, and everyone involved relinquishes a part of their autonomy. We bear a responsibility. Citizen-driven media produces the community as it reflects it. This provides the possibility for listeners to become producers, to hold an active role in how history will sound. Community capacity building requires learning in public and providing opportunities to create together. In this regard we are proud to present at CIBL, the 40-year-old independent radio station of Montreal. Its antenna, located on the Olympic stadium, embodies a fight led by mostly volunteers and amateurs to assert their rights to have a voice. Working with this station gives us with a great freedom to address topics based on our interest or those of grassroots organizations.

However, the station faces difficult times: we are slowly recovering from a major financial crisis where every employee of the station had to be laid off, we do not fulfill the CRTC requirements of 19 hours of spoken programming per week, we don't have a crowdfunding structure in place—all of which leaves producers with a lack of every resource imaginable. In the search for an alternative source of funding for my show, I have called many program officers in all governmental granting agencies in the arts. I was repeatedly told that they weren't able to fund the initiative as it was housed at a community radio station (someone even acknowledged that I would have more luck if it was independently done out of a church basement). To my knowledge, no funding is available for our initiative. Furthermore, it appears that funding is non-existent for communication about art (even most grants refuse press relations from eligible expenses). At this time, my show feels meaningful to the actors of the system while simultaneously being excluded from funding.

Small budgets and unpaid workers are common in the culture sector. Our labour of love still carves out an important space, closer to a co-op than to a structure that benefits only a few. Criticality suffers however, because the lack of resources

limits the ability to devote oneself to study, especially when dealing with the pace required to record one show per week. At least we can openly acknowledge this fact on air. As often as we can, we talk about working conditions and underrepresentation. We attract mainly producers from privileged positions; and while we do the work to be aware of our biases and to actively invite collaborators beyond our immediate circles, this lack of resources inevitably leads us to reproduce systemic exclusions—many don't have the means to give their labour freely.

Simultaneously, we provide a space for artists to discuss and critique oppressive structures, while at the same time reifying them. We don't pay anyone but we can discuss questions that aren't usually covered by the media and we devote much wanted attention to initiatives that too often go unnoticed. The show is like a sketch, a drawing room. Everyone who contributes has to find revenue somewhere else—conflict of interest adds up to time conflicts. What we call journalistic distance needs financial independence. The neoliberal economy is based on privatization and it is no surprise that counter-powers such as the press are right now either in crisis or outright complicit with dominant powers.

In Canada, we have publicly funded media, and it seems logical this media should be taking on the role of representing the diversity of artistic practices. But there seems to be a consensus in the arts community that we have been betrayed. Visual arts and other research practices are in large part absent in mainstream media—especially in French. *radio atelier* was born out of necessity. We strongly feel that independent media shouldn't be replacing the role of public broadcasting. This is why I have criticized and have advocated for the improvement of arts coverage at CBC/Radio-Canada.² Confronted by this effort, the directors have either said that it has been difficult to talk about visual art on the radio or that the community is doing a bad job of

press-relations (which isn't entirely false, nor should it be surprising as it isn't funded). A question that comes to mind—how is it more difficult to address visual arts than dance or cinema? I believe this stance is historically constructed and ideologically motivated, but I don't have the time here to go into details.³

But let's continue our little panorama of broadcasting options. As an alternative to community or public media, there is the possibility to use private platforms of algorithm selected user generated content also wrongly called social media. Of which I can only say a few words. In this day and age, people are used to transforming their lives into self-promotion narratives. It is not official unless it is shared through your network of predilection, where your followers, who reside in your own filter bubble, can like and share the content you produced while also generating profit for shareholders and targeted ads. These platforms are inescapable if you expect to *go viral*, or find any audience at all. These corporations decide what is acceptable to share, and choose to closely monitor for nudity, copyright infringement, and now what is deemed as disinformation. Even if my show is using these platforms, I cannot bear the idea of creating exclusively on them and calling this independence.

As much as we are compromised by our lack of resources, I have faith in community radio, in what it stands for—and participating in its survival is a compromise I am willing to make. It is my belief that traditional media has a lot to learn from artistic practices and that stages like *radio atelier* are useful for the artistic community. I consider that art also takes form from its moment of distribution and communication; it is shaped from a point of contact. We could also say that meaning is located within the public. So, I'm interested in the process of simultaneous disclosure and refusal that needs to happen when one discusses their work, when we become witness of our own creation, and when we answer another. This show has taught me a lot in terms of

accountability—how one lives up to their ideas and values. This inspires me greatly in what I describe as research practices. It is not about coherence per se, which is only illusionary, but about being mindful and engaging these underlying movements and negotiations. As you listen to my show, or any show, I invite you to be aware of these compromises. You might notice how choices are achieved in a balance, how the tone might change depending on the time left, or how it matters who is part of the discussion as certain ideas can only emerge in conversations.

Notes

1. You can listen and learn more about *radio atelier* from our website <https://radioatelier.ca/> (French only)
2. I joined the newly formed united front INVISIBLES and presented a letter about this question to Radio-Canada that gathered more than 10,500 signatures. We started a dialog with them in order to see how we can address this problem. "Pour une meilleure représentation des arts visuels à Radio-Canada." <https://www.invisibles-artsvisuels.com/petition-radio-canada> (French only)
3. I'm currently doing a research project on the history of audio periodicals in the art which will look into the restructuration of CBC/Radio-Canada to try to answer this question.

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