

**Maeve Connolly, 'Reverberations in Time and Space: *You Are Not Alone*'**

***Susan Philipsz: You Are Not Alone*, edited by James Lingwood and Brigitte Franzen, Cologne: Koenig Books, 2014: 82-84. ISBN 9783863354053**

Standing in the light-filled atrium of Haus des Rundfunks in Berlin, the site of Susan Philipsz's work *You Are Not Alone*, I found myself speculating upon the material and acoustic properties of this distinctive space, with its walls clad in small shiny ceramic tiles, and also remembering earlier encounters with Philipsz's work. I recalled moving through the everyday confusion of a bus station in Belfast, drawn by an unaccompanied female voice rising above the crowd and, some years later, hearing music as I climbed the stairs to the upper floor of a white-walled New York gallery, catching fragments of a 16<sup>th</sup> century lament emanating from tall trees in the parkland of Kilkenny castle and, most recently, discerning a composition for strings as I approached the end of a platform in what was once the main train station of Kassel. As these disparate memories of Philipsz's work cohered, I was struck by the complex interplay between loss, longing and evocation – and between memory and history – in her practice.

In an article that reflects upon the relationship between history and memory in contemporary art, Peter Osborne proposes that concepts of 'trauma', 'melancholy' and 'mourning' have become prevalent in art discourse, reinstating a 'metaphorically expanded conception of memory as the medium of historical experience'.<sup>1</sup> Osborne also suggests that, by comparison with history, memory is 'temporally restricted'<sup>2</sup> because it only enlivens the past in relation to the present. In contrast, he argues, the 'ultimate object of history – the unity of the human' can only be thought from the standpoint of a particular future. Consequently history is characterised by a utopian dimension, which links it to art and finds expression in an extension beyond the present moment and in the 'projection of collectivity beyond all actually existing forms'. At the same time, he acknowledges that such acts of projection are never free from constraint, as the experience of the present both regulates the historical representation of the past and shapes the imagining of the future. Although Philipsz may be interested in the operations of memory, she is highly attuned to the role of the imagination in projecting collectivity at different moments in time.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Osborne, "The Truth will be Known when the Last Witness is Dead": History not Memory', *After the Event: New Perspectives on Art History*, edited by Charles Merewether and John Potts, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) 203.

<sup>2</sup> Osborne, 205. All subsequent references to this text are from Osborne, 205-206.

These concerns find expression in the complex temporality of *You Are Not Alone*, which was commissioned by Modern Art Oxford and first presented at the Radcliffe Observatory in 2009. In this work, Philipsz draws attention to the persistence of sound in time through the form of the radio interval signal. These signals are short musical sequences, originating in the 1920s and 30s when broadcast radio schedules often featured lengthy pauses. Intended to function as recognisable musical signatures enabling listeners to identify stations while tuning, interval signals were generally played before the commencement of transmission and during breaks. Although they have not vanished entirely, the majority of the sequences gathered by Philipsz during the course of her research were produced many decades ago. Some are also associated with cultural and political contexts that now resonate with historical significance, such as Radio Normandie in 1939, Mother Vietnam in 1971 and Serb Republic Radio in 1993. Yet rather than focusing her research on interval signals that seem historically significant by virtue of their source, Philipsz instead responded primarily to the musical qualities of these sequences. She noted that despite their varied form and origination, many were characterised by ‘a sort of chime, like wind chimes, that can sound really beautiful – distant and melancholy’.<sup>3</sup>

Responding to these qualities, she recorded herself playing the selected interval sequences on a vibraphone. This percussive instrument is related to the xylophone but it incorporates motor-driven valves producing a vibrating effect that can be controlled and sustained. Transposed to the vibraphone, the already melancholy interval signals acquire an unearthly quality, which seems especially appropriate to the Radcliffe Observatory. This structure was conceived in response to an highly-anticipated astrological event, the Transit of Venus in 1769, which preceded its construction. Its form was also shaped by popular interest in the Tower of the Winds, an octagonal marble clock tower located in Athens, built in the first century BC and incorporating sundials and a wind vane. This time-keeping device subsequently functioned both as a Christian bell-tower and a place of worship for dervishes, and its design and decoration were documented by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett’s *Antiquities of Athens* (1762). James Wyatt was inspired by this source, so his design for the Radcliffe Observatory materialises an idea of the classical past that is specific to the moment of its construction. Consequently, this newly-built and highly advanced tool for scientific exploration was adorned with carvings of mythological figures. Images of ancient Greek wind deities and the twelve signs of the zodiac are still visible on the exterior of the building, which no longer functions an observatory and now houses the common rooms of Green Templeton College at Oxford University.

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Philipsz, ‘You Are Not Alone,’ in *Susan Philipsz: You Are Not Alone*, edited by Michael Stanley (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2010), 7.

This first presentation of *You Are Not Alone*, which took place in the autumn of 2009, involved a four channel recording of interval signals drawn from over thirty different radio stations and arranged for the vibraphone. Broadcast from separate FM transmitters located in the tower of Modern Art Oxford, the recordings were transmitted across the city to receivers located in the Observing Room on the second floor of the Radcliffe Observatory. In this room, which once housed scientific machinery, the transmissions were relayed to visitors through four speakers, positioned beside the large windows that look out over the city. Experiencing the work in this context, Joerg Heiser was reminded of popular melodies but also prompted to speculate upon more sinister uses of radio technology, suggesting that secret code information might have been hidden within interval signals during the Cold War era.<sup>4</sup> In a practical sense, *You Are Not Alone* transformed the Observing Room into a kind of ‘listening station’, focused on sounds rather than distant images. But Philipsz also proposed a conceptual parallel between the telescope and radio, by invoking Marconi’s notion of sound persisting in time:

contemporary cosmologists say that telescopes are like time machines, the deeper they can see into the night sky the further back in time they allow us to travel. [...] Guglielmo Marconi suggested that sounds once generated never die, they fade but they continue to reverberate as sound waves across the universe. I began to think about radio as a medium to tune into the immense range of sounds echoing across the universe and also as a medium to transmit sounds to distant places.<sup>5</sup>

This quote is specifically concerned with telescopes and radio as technologies that enable enquiry in time and space. But Marconi’s observation about the persistence of sound also makes it possible to think of the Radcliffe Observatory as a kind of time machine, enabling transport to earlier moments in the history of scientific thought.

The ‘time machine’ quality of *You Are Not Alone* was even more apparent at Haus des Rundfunks, where Philipsz’s work was installed over a period of several days in April 2011. Although it remains in use as part of a complex belonging to Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (RBB), this building has gradually acquired the role of an unofficial monument to broadcasting in Germany. Designed by Hans Poelzig, and opened in 1931 (a year before the completion of BBC

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<sup>4</sup> Joerg Heiser, ‘Lullabies for Strangers’, *Susan Philipsz: You Are Not Alone*, edited by Michael Stanley (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2010), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Philipsz, 7.

Broadcasting House in London) the upper floors of the atrium now house architectural models and documentary panels detailing the building's central role in German social and political history. Early utopian aspirations for the medium of radio as a technology of public communication are suggested both by its luminous interior and its carefully crafted brick exterior, which suggests substance rather than spectacle. These aspirations were, however, rapidly overtaken by the rise of National Socialism and, following Hitler's ascent to power, 'Reichsender Berlin' acquired a new function, eventually becoming the wartime Broadcasting Headquarters of Greater Germany. At the end of the war Haus des Rundfunks was liberated by Russian troops and even though located in the British sector, it remained physically segregated from the rest of West Berlin, surrounded by barbed wire and manned by armed Soviet guards until 1956. It then housed the station Sender Freies Berlin (from 1957 to 2003), which was to prove important in the early history of artists' television.<sup>6</sup>

In response to this context, Philipsz reconfigured *You Are Not Alone* so that the sound sequence opened with a vibraphone version of the final signal transmitted in 1990 from Radio Berlin International (located in former East Berlin) and ended with a version of the Sender Freies Berlin signal from 1975. By locating both the transmitter and receiver within the same atrium space, Philipsz also hinted at the dual identity and purpose of Haus des Rundfunks, as both a site of transmission and a place in which music was frequently performed in front of a live audience. As demonstrated by the architectural models, the building was designed around a large auditorium, located immediately behind the atrium and images of live performances feature prominently in the documentary panels that detail its history. These images confirm the symbolic significance of Haus des Rundfunks as a space of public gathering in which crowds assembled, serving as audiences both for live entertainment and for political propaganda. The mediated presence of these crowds, audible to those listening at home, would have been integral to the experience of 'live broadcasting' during the 1930s and 40s, and the creation of a sense of shared time and space. Interval signals were a way to maintain and extend this spatio-temporal bond between broadcaster and listener, in the absence of programming. Their vaguely disembodied sonic quality is appropriate to the articulation of corporate identity in broadcasting<sup>7</sup>, pre-empting the graphic idents and logos that were to pervade television in a later era. In *You Are Not Alone*,

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<sup>6</sup> Sender Freies Berlin broadcast Gerry Schum's *Land Art* on April 15, 1969. See Christine Mehring, 'TV Art's Abstract Starts: Europe, c.1944-1969', *October* 125 (2008): 62.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of television logos see Margaret Morse, 'Television Graphics and the Virtual Body: Words on the Move', *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998) 71-98.

however, Philipsz emphasises the ‘distant and melancholy’ quality of the interval signal, as a hopeful and open-ended communication rather than an assertion of presence.

Philipsz’s research also suggests that even if these musical sequences were designed partly to function as branding devices they could still be experienced in many different ways. The publication documenting the installation at Modern Art Oxford assembles relics of a specific, now somewhat arcane, form of correspondence that developed between radio broadcasters and dedicated listeners in relation to the interval signal. These radiophiles would scan frequencies for transmissions from distant stations, including services aimed at overseas audiences, submitting frequency reports to stations by post with the aim of receiving official acknowledgement postcards featuring the official logo.<sup>8</sup> It is possible that some of these listeners were expatriates or travellers seeking a connection with home, motivated by attachment to the seasonal, familial and national norms emphasised in radio programming.<sup>9</sup> But rather than focusing on the programme content they seem to have specifically interested in the technology of radio, and in the formal properties of the signal.

By situating broadcasting in relation to ideas of temporal and spatial journeying that are found in scientific exploration, and by attending to the political and symbolic significance of structures such as the Haus des Rundfunks, Philipsz emphasises the multiple, and sometimes fraught, ways in which radio has shaped the formation of collectivity. But her engagement with these formations is not wholly constrained by reference to the past, because she also uses the form of the interval signal to develop an exploration of ‘projection of collectivity beyond existing forms’, recalling Osborne’s account of the utopian dimension shared by art and history. So even though *You Are Not Alone* is integrally concerned with the evocative power of sound and music, and their capacity to communicate loss and longing, Philipsz’s work nonetheless remains strongly oriented toward the future. As a result it becomes possible to conceive of the Radcliffe Observatory and Haus des Rundfunks as time machines, and to imagine that the vibraphone melodies heard in Oxford and in Berlin coexist and continue, endlessly reverberating in time and space.

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<sup>8</sup> Some of these postcards, produced by Radio Peking, Radio Denmark, Rádio Nacional Brasília and ‘The Voice of Indonesia’ (The Overseas Service of Radio Republik Indonesia), are reprinted in *Susan Philipsz: You Are Not Alone*, edited by Michael Stanley (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2010) 34, 37.

<sup>9</sup> These normative aspects of broadcasting are discussed in Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach* (Cambridge, Mass and Oxford, Blackwell, 1996).