

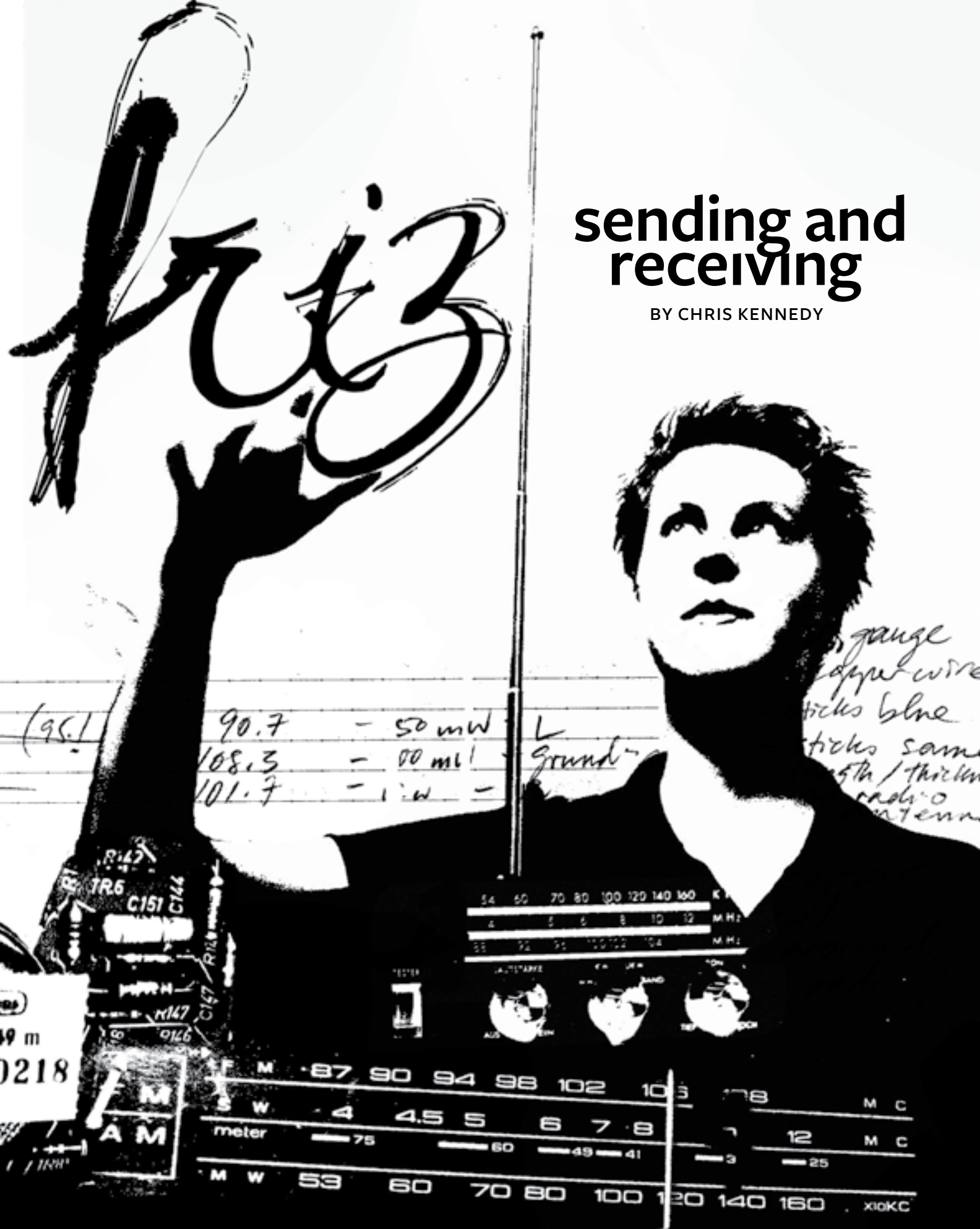
a breath in the
radio world

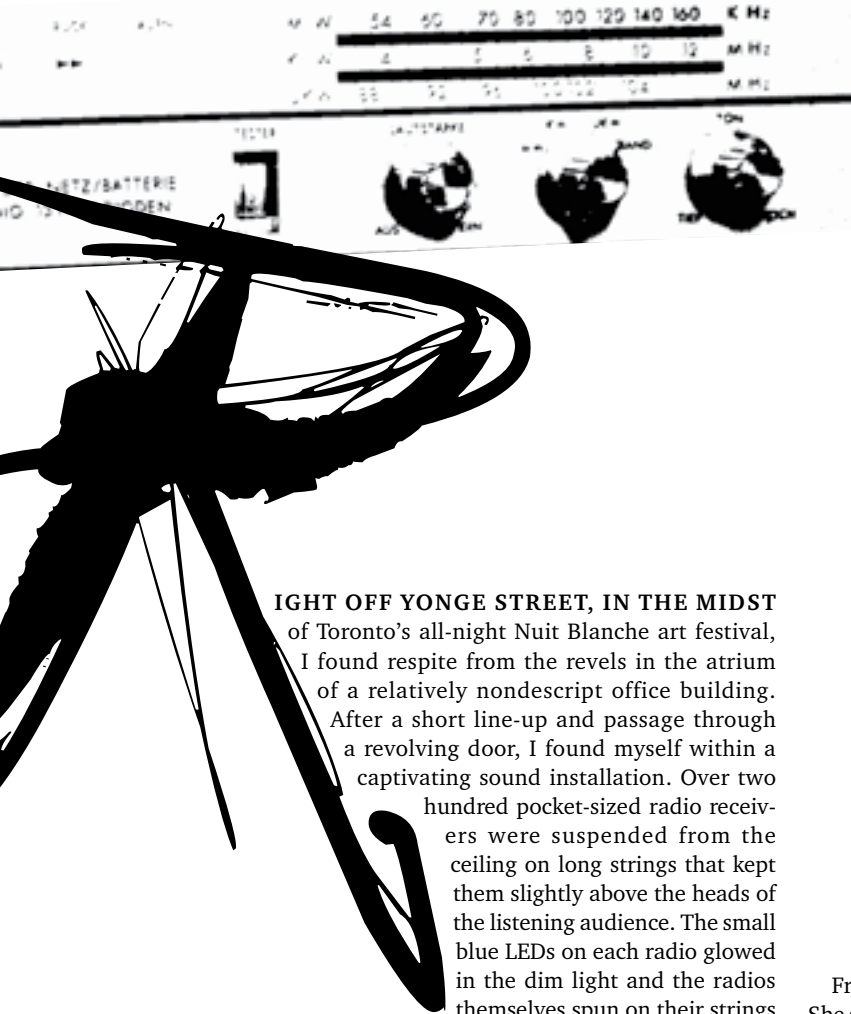
anna



sending and receiving

BY CHRIS KENNEDY





IGHT OFF YONGE STREET, IN THE MIDST of Toronto's all-night Nuit Blanche art festival, I found respite from the revels in the atrium of a relatively nondescript office building. After a short line-up and passage through a revolving door, I found myself within a captivating sound installation. Over two hundred pocket-sized radio receivers were suspended from the ceiling on long strings that kept them slightly above the heads of the listening audience. The small blue LEDs on each radio glowed in the dim light and the radios themselves spun on their strings

at different speeds, a visual manifestation of the circulation of currents caused by the building's air conditioning, by the movement of people into the space through the revolving doors, and by the cool October air carried in with them.

As the radios spun, they also mapped the invisible currents of radio waves carrying sound-artist Anna Friz' composed soundscape, mixed with static caused by interference from the larger radio transmission towers clustered around Toronto's downtown core. The resulting sonic experience was an elegantly woven mixture of composed breath sounds and white noise, distorted by momentary frequency bleeds from other FM channels. The movement of the audience below the radios both changed their aural perspective of the sounds and physically interfered with the reception of the radio waves by the receivers, allowing for more variables to affect changes to the composition.

This piece, *Respire*, is one in a series of varied works—installations, performances, and radio compositions—through which Anna Friz is reconceptualizing the relationship of radio to the community. She addresses this relationship on the larger social level through her understanding of the changing roles of sender (radio) and receiver (community). At the same time, she also teases out the material qualities of radio waves and their relationship to our own physical presence. As such, she challenges the notion that radio is primarily a means to communicate across long distances. Instead, she addresses the way the proximity of the listener creates a social and empathetic listening space.

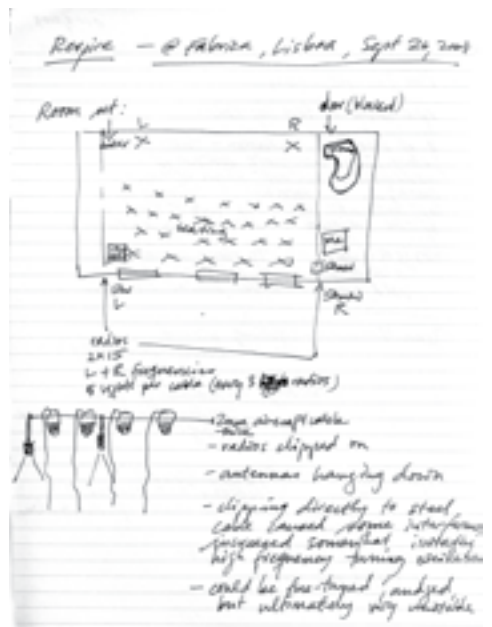
ON THE CD: *Respire* (excerpt)



Friz approaches sound art from a background in community radio. She spent the early nineties at CITR in Vancouver and hosted a weekly radio show from 1993 to 2006. With its roots in do-it-yourself politics and its emphasis on a local audience, community radio provided not just a technical learning place, but a theoretical background for a consideration of the social possibilities of the medium. As Friz recalls, "Once I actually had my hands on the tools of making radio in the studio, it just sort of flipped the relationship of senders and receivers, so I was able to be on both sides of it for a change. I began to see that radio was this medium that provided a set of interactions between people that were maybe a bit more complicated than it seemed on the surface."

These sets of interactions led to her interest in transception—a blending of the terms transmission and reception, coined by Bertolt Brecht, who in 1932 envisioned that radio transmission could enable more than a "mere sharing out" of information. Transception describes an interplay between sender and receiver, allowing the audience to participate in the production of meaning. While we usually conceive of a radio as a radiant medium, where a centralized government or industry broadcasts outward towards a large, anonymous public, Friz is particularly interested in how radio can be a *resonant* medium, moving back and forth between the sender and receiver, creating empathy and involvement.

As Friz describes it, the community radio model is, "about this interaction between a localized area where people play different sides of what's become a kind of two-way medium . . . That's where I first started thinking about resonance. Before we have to go and invent new devices, we could just invent different social formations around something like FM radio. And community radio does that very well. At its best, it is a very resonant medium where people really are transceptive; the whole circuit is the transception. It's not the radio device that's transceptive. It's not the device that sends and receives. It's actually the community that sends and receives amongst itself that becomes transceptive."



OPPOSITE PAGE AND TOP LEFT: Friz' sound installation *Respire*, mounted in a downtown Toronto bank lobby for Nuit Blanche 2009. TOP RIGHT: Process sketch from the original mounting of *Respire* in Lisbon, Portugal. LEFT: One of the radios used in *Respire*.

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WHILE FRIZ CONTINUES TO WORK on radio-art pieces through the more conventional broadcast spectrum, most notably with Brooklyn's free103point9 and ORF Austria, it is in her recent focus on sound installations that she finds an active proving ground for imagining community through radio. In her installations the audience is conceived as active listeners—moving around the space to encounter its sonic depth—and as subtle manipulators of the sound waves she is transmitting: because FM works by means of line-of-sight transmission, getting in the way of the signal weakens or blocks it. In a sense, the audience is a mappable radio community, conceived on a micro scale. By localizing her listening community through her installations, Friz is able to create an environment for testing the possibilities of the idea of transception.

The physical presence of the listener—to the point where they actually interfere with the radio reception that they are listening to—mirrors the embodied nature of Friz' sense of radio. In conversation, she stresses the material qualities of radio rather than its relationship to the uncanny, a distinction she addressed most humorously in her installation *Who Are the People in Your Radio?* Premiered at the Deep Wireless Festival in Toronto in May 2005, the piece broadcasts a

radio play detailing a moment of crisis among radio announcers via a 1950s vintage tube radio cabinet. By placing little dolls, designed by Jan Desrosiers, inside the radio cabinet as characters in the radio play, Friz was illustrating her childhood fantasy of little people in the radio, somehow generating the sounds that one hears emanating from the speakers.

Most of Friz' sonic material, however, comes from the realm of radio detritus, not the actual radio programming that we might imagine those little people performing. Her work exhibits a strong fascination with the sound of static, which she calls “the breath of the radio world.” While that description might lead one to thoughts of ghosts, Friz is quick to base this statement in reality. “What’s interesting for me is that [radio picks up] this potentially foreign place that’s not necessarily super uncanny—that’s not far away. It’s just this shift in perception that allows us to hear things that are happening around us. It’s actually really banal. So many of the great sounds

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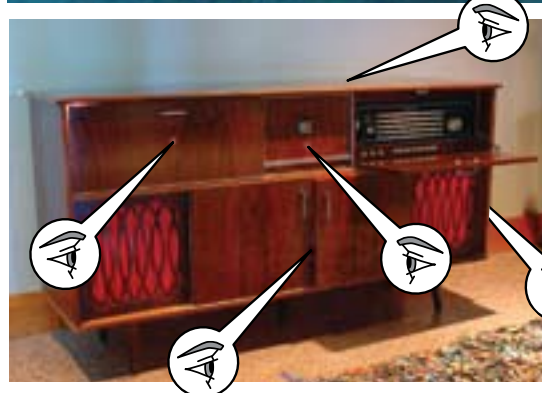


ABOVE: Performance at Von Krah, Tallinn Estonia, 2008.

TOP MIDDLE: Stereo-and-bar cabinet prior to set-up for *Who Are the People in Your Radio?*, installed at the Drake Hotel in Toronto for the Deep Wireless Festival, 2005.

RIGHT: The cabinet as installed, closed, with peepholes indicated by eye-drawings. **FAR RIGHT:** Close-up of a peephole through which viewers saw “tubeheads” inside. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** One of the “tubeheads,” which were designed by Jan Desrosiers.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Process sketch from installation *You Are Far From Us* at Radiophonie 07, Brussels, Belgium.

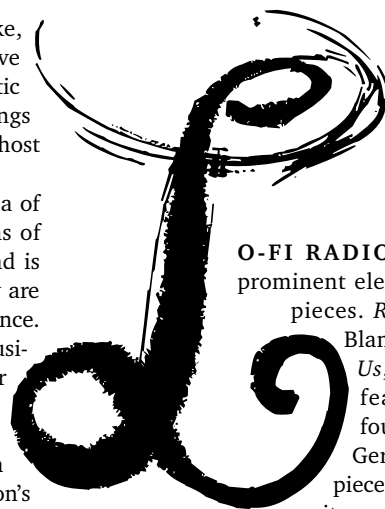
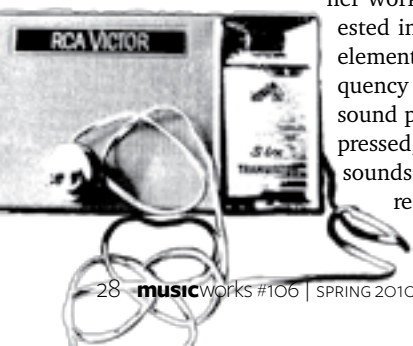


that I love from shortwave are made from boring things like, encoded digital transfer . . . or shortwave conversations that have been encrypted, and now I’m hearing them on some sympathetic frequency further down in the spectrum . . . Totally boring things sound beautiful, but it doesn’t make them uncanny. It isn’t a ghost world; it’s actually our world.”

The “breath of the radio world” instead returns us to the idea of an embodied, material relationship to the physical waveforms of the radio. Friz places great importance on the idea that “sound is palpable even if it’s not visible, and things are felt even if they are not objects.” Breath is a perfect metaphor for this invisible presence. This idea of breath also developed out of Friz’ experience as a musician. Outside of her manipulation of the radio bandwidth, her primary musical instruments are the harmonica, melodica, and the accordion, the latter of which features prominently in her live performances. For Friz, these are all instruments “where breath is really present”—even if it doesn’t directly produce the accordion’s sound. Friz explains: “Accordion is the first non-wind instrument that I played, but it’s powered by air and you still have to phrase things in a way to coordinate your bellows pumping. The only way I can do that and stay in tune or on time is to breathe with the accordion.”

There is another, practical reason why Friz’ combinations of static, breath, and air-powered instrumentation take precedence in much of

her work. As she explains, “I’m really interested in working with these different sonic elements . . . which do function in similar frequency spreads. And they also happen to all sound pretty good on little, tiny, super-compressed, lo-fi radios. I’m also trying to choose sounds that I know can be carried by these really small, ubiquitous devices.”



O-FI RADIOS ARE USUALLY THE MOST prominent elements in many of Friz’ installation pieces. *Respire*, the piece featured at Nuit Blanche, derives from *You Are Far From Us*, a pre-composed installation that features sixty-five such radios and four transmitters. Premiered in Halle, Germany, in 2006, it is conceived as a piece in five movements: inhale, suspend, witness, nocturne, exhale. Because of the

intensity of some of its material—sound excerpts from interviews with people who have witnessed gun violence—*You Are Far From Us* is designed with a composed trajectory that people are requested to sit through. *You Are Far From Us* again draws on Friz’ themes of the breath of radio and the relationship of a public media sphere with private space. Because the radio is often on in the background, mapping our domestic space into its programming grid and bringing news from afar into our living rooms, it is a ripe medium through which to explore our intimate relationship to the outside world. “My interest, in this piece,” Friz explains, “was to try to understand what it would feel like to empathize with somebody who was far away. And also to hear their physicality in the medium. In a way it’s the easiest thing to feel the body’s physicality when someone’s in crisis because their breathing is so audible and their emotions are so at the surface.”

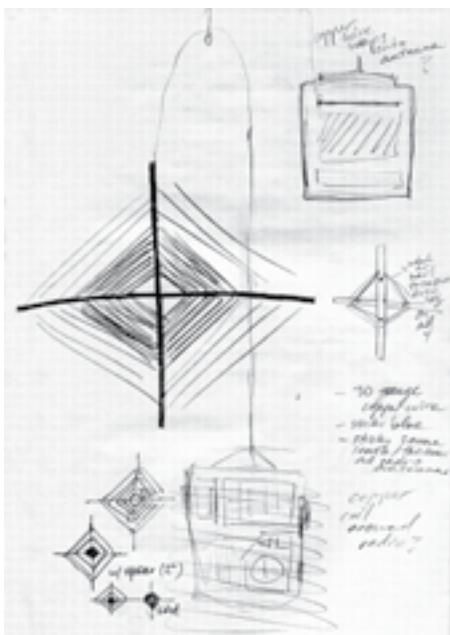


Y ITS VERY nature, Friz' most recent installation, *Domestic Wireless, Dust* had room to unfold in a much freer way for the listener. Directly

exploring the intimacy of radio within the domestic sphere of the bedroom, *Domestic Wireless, Dust* was designed for the Leona Drive Project, for which Friz was one of the organizers. The Leona Drive Project was conceived as a site-specific engagement with the idea of suburbia, and involved more than a dozen artists, who were commissioned to create installations in six soon-to-be-demolished bungalows in Toronto's northeastern neighbourhood of Willowdale. In a fascinating sense, the small bungalows held such specific memories that most of the artists honed in on the detritus left behind by the residents, rather than engaging with the idea of suburbia as manifested in the Yonge-Sheppard area of today—a very dense and multicultural neighbourhood from which Leona Drive seemed differentiated even to its dying day. The project thus became more a study of a specific historical moment than an examination of modern living in or near the city.

Domestic Wireless, Dust was one of the more eloquent projects that addressed the weight of the historical in relation to this particular location. As Friz states, "When we came in [to the Leona Drive houses], I really felt like we were poking around in these leftovers, this historical debris—this kind of utopian debris that was now really revealed to be mass production and banal." For the sonic element of the piece, Friz experimented with the idea of signal decay. "I imagined that signals didn't decay immediately, but that they might decay for a really long time, so that within the houses built in 1948, there might be some weird distant lingering little bits of debris and more audible things that were newer." She continues: "I had the idea to get up into one of the higher spots in the house and to assume that this was the depository, this kind of catch basin of signal. The idea is that the house is really actively listening."

For all of her previous installations Friz had to bring the radio environment into a space she couldn't alter. This installation is the first time for which she was able to actively change the space. She painted the walls a dark blue and buffed the wooden floor until it became,



ABOVE: Process sketch for emergency-preparedness radios with God's Eye copper antennae, for use in Friz' three-channel radio installation, *Domestic Wireless, Dust* (Leona Drive Project, Toronto, 2009). RIGHT: Emergency-preparedness radio.



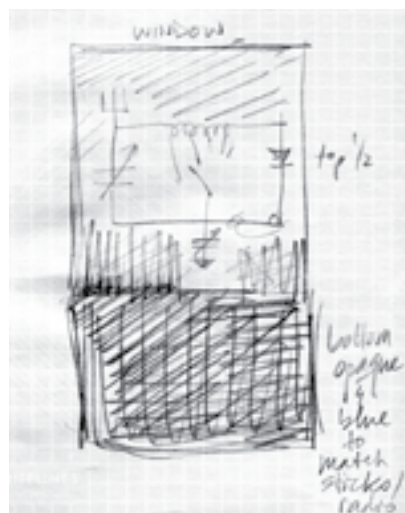
as she put it, "radiant," before hanging five emergency-preparedness radios in the room. The radios were equipped with copper antennae shaped like God's Eyes mobiles—an evocation of both the craft object so named and the early 1920s loop antennae of inventor Lee de Forest.

Friz used four transmitters to broadcast collaged sounds, this time incorporating the whooping and rumbling hums of VLF (very low frequency) electromagnetic fields and the digital *rat-a-tat-tat* stutter of wireless sound-captures alongside brief snippets from broadcasts that she imagined someone in the house might have listened to—including a 1948 CBC newscast, an '80s pop song, and a Hank Williams song. For Friz, the project resonated with what her fellow artists were doing. "People were pulling out wallpaper and finding things under the wallpaper. I thought, What if we were pulling away signal and finding more signal behind the signals?"

The Leona Drive Project as a whole found its most receptive audience in the local community. Many people came by who knew the neighborhood or were raised in similar mid-century suburbs. In a sense, their responses to the artwork modelled the active resonance that Friz talks about in regard to her work, where an audience can participate creatively as a community in relationship to the work. Still, Friz is quick to see the humour that the abstract nature of her work may provoke.

"People were pulling out wallpaper and finding things under the wallpaper. I thought, What if we were pulling away signal and finding more signal behind the signals?"





TOP AND ABOVE: Domestic Wireless, Dust installation. LEFT: Window sketch of the installation.

"I think my room was a little bit weird for a lot of people," Friz recalls, "because they open the door and then there's just this empty room with these five radios making this sound. If you walked into the drone part, the room is just sitting there, humming to itself. They're a bit like, 'Oh, this is a little strange.'"

Even so, Friz works to establish a connection with the listener in a way that retrieves intimacy and encourages empathy, which is definitely reinforced by a few minutes spent in the bedroom of *Domestic Wireless, Dust*. Her work with the idea of resonance and transection is a direct recognition of the importance of the listener within the medium of radio. As Friz herself sums up, "The DIY movement is very focused on everyone becoming a sender, but I really think that the listening part has to be promoted as much as possible, because listening is not a passive position, and it never has been and I think it's important to really recuperate that as this active thing to be doing. And in a circuit that includes something like empathy, then listening is the most important thing. Nothing else is possible."

Chris Kennedy is an independent filmmaker, programmer, and writer currently living in Toronto. He programmed film, video, and live performance for the Images Festival from 2003–06. His short experimental films have screened at film festivals worldwide. He holds an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute.

FYI: You can read more about listening and responding in Pauline Oliveros' article "Quantum Listening—from Practice to Theory (to Practise Practice)" in *Musicworks* 76.

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