

The Trans-Siberian Radio Project: Enacting Polymorphous Radio

Natilee Harren

Inhabiting the Trans-Siberian train, you become part of an odd culture where your relationship to the world is turned on its head. Rather than a life of rushing around the city, an insignificant pedestrian amidst a blitz of cars, bicycles, and other humans, you as a train passenger become one with Siberia's singular means of cross-country travel. The jerking, clicking, rushing and sighing of the train become part of your own bodily movements. It seems odd to walk towards the back end of the train – that which has suddenly become the *wrong* direction. Everything moves forward.

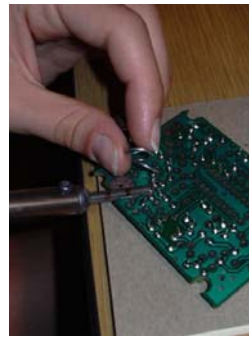
At the same time, there is a strange feeling of mental stasis within the train since there is nowhere to go. Sure, one is always in motion, but the most natural of human actions become impossible. Walking movement is directed in a strict, linear expanse by the train cars. Running is not appropriate. Everything looks the same. You can go to the next car, but the feeling is that you have not moved at all.

How to mark home in a moving container, one that through and through reminds one of its culture of impermanence, constant change and exchange (of staff, passengers, currency, cars)? How to establish for ourselves a temporary home in these unreal settings, which make it impossible for us to go through a day in any of the normal ways we know how?

The Trans-Siberian Radio Project looked for a response in media, specifically a medium of our own making, and more specifically that of radio.¹ The train cannot maintain connection with any of the communities through which it passes. One can catch snippets of AM and FM signals here and there or grab a newspaper whenever possible, but soon enough, with the passage of time and kilometers, the media becomes

1 The Trans-Siberian Radio Project, created by Natilee Harren in collaboration with David Rose, equipped the Capturing the Moving Mind conference with its own microradio station. Public broadcasting of the on-train seminars was made possible with low-power FM transmitters, and interested participants were instructed on how they could use this simple technology to create their own broadcasts. At night, Trans-Siberian Radio turned a train car into a nightclub, and to conclude the conference, hosted a final broadcast in the Dashanzi artists' district in Beijing to premier newly commissioned audio works by Scanner, Nathan Davis, and Angel Sánchez Borges. www.trans-siberianradio.org

obsolete and loses its grip on the train and on our present reality as passengers on it, until we come into the next station and grab a piece of home there. But those homes are fixed to the earth and we will always outrun them. We are fixed in motion, and so our media must come with us. We are our own, temporary spatiotemporal matrix.



With the *Trans-Siberian Radio Project*, we mark the space with a collective sound that is both created and received by us. The source and subject are wrapped into one. This is radio on a micro scale, created by transmitters that are fractions of a watt apiece. The oppressive metal architecture of the train forbids a mass broadcast to all conference participants at once, which was the initial desire and intention of the project. These circumstances forced us to adapt our mission to that for which our equipment was best suited: a model of polymorphous radio, as articulated by Japanese radio activist Tetsuo Kogawa.

Polymorphous radio recasts radio as a highly localized, short-range, listener-controlled media. Rather than creating a one-way relationship where a singular, inaccessible broadcast power relays information for a large group of people to digest, polymorphous radio multiplies the number of transmitters nearly to equal the number of receivers. Tetsuo Kogawa writes, "If you had the same number of transmitters as receivers, your radio sets could have completely different functions. Thus radio transmission technology could be available for individuals to take control of their transmission and reception ... Radio stations which can only cover areas within walking distance might already exist as a form of a particular unit of polymedia, a chaos unit. Polymedia are not intended simply to link smaller units into a larger whole: instead they involve the

recovery of electronic technology so that individuals can communicate, share idiosyncrasies and be convivial.”²

This folding of listener and broadcaster into one body, caused by fracturing a broadcast area into several, easy-to-operate mini stations, keeps radio from growing out of control or beyond its best use, which is to foster communication within a community, however unstable it may be. It is also accessible to all since microtransmitters can be purchased inexpensively or built with basic soldering. They are transportable (*The Trans-Siberian Radio Project* being an exemplary case), so a radio community can arise anywhere where basic short-range communication is desired. Schools, churches, malls, protests, campsites, parties, caravans, boats, festivals, etc., are all appropriate. Kogawa’s idea of microradio stations as chaos units may seem revolutionary, but in actuality it is simply a backwards-looking redirection to the simplest, first and best uses of radio. Not only are microtransmitters easy to acquire, operate and maintain, they are (often) legal and flexible enough to be adapted to any situation that requires organizing communication.

And so it is to no surprise that for the purposes of a conference taking place in the environment of the Trans-Siberian train (controlled yet always shifting, not-quite-modern, makeshift), polymorphous radio proved to be the only sustainable model.

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2 Kogawa, T. ‘Toward Polymorphous Radio,’ [<http://anarchy.translocal.jp/non-japanese/radiorethink.html>], accessed 6 October 2005.