



Something Like a Phenomenon: Two Audio Projects by Brennan McGaffey

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By Brett Bloom

I first experienced Brennan McGaffey's audio work while driving to the gallery for the opening reception of his project FM 89.5. My radio was tuned to 89.5 and was picking up a gnarled, rumbling sound that didn't make much sense to me. I was coming from a pirate radio station where I had just finished my weekly show of experimental, electronic music.

I was ready to condemn the project. My radio show and everything else the pirate station broadcast was created for a community. We were radically democratizing the use of radio. Brennan's project seemed like a cynical art gesture that operated publicly without considering whether the public wanted it or not.

I arrived at the gallery ready to have my expectations confirmed. I met Brennan and read his project description. Embarrassment quickly followed. I was very excited to have been completely wrong. Over the course of the next few months, after having conversations with Brennan and listening to his work, I learned a lot about sound, radio and audiences for everything from Citizen's Band (CB) to mysterious short-wave radio practices.

Two of Brennan's recent projects, FM 89.5 and Project Citizens Band, were broadcast over FM and CB respectively. Each project presented material that

confounded and expanded my expectations of what audio work is. When you hear this work it seems more like interference or coded material than experimental music or sound.

FM 89.5 used a 25-watt stereo transmitter to broadcast the audio work. With the help of local musician and composer Ernst Long, Brennan constructed tracks that functioned as "sound masking for road and expressway." Sound masking is the use of one sound to cover up another. The sounds encountered while driving a car are coming from several sources. There is the sound from the wind hitting the car. There are the sounds that the engine makes and those of the tires lapping the asphalt. Add to this the sound coming from other cars on the road. Several tracks were made taking all of these factors into consideration. Different tracks were made anticipating the varying densities of traffic throughout the day. The tracks were played at specific times during the day to mask the corresponding traffic noises. A separate track was made for rainy days. The audio tracks were played continuously for a month.

Project Citizens Band was also a series of transmitted audio tracks. Brennan boosted a CB so that the signal would "skip" onto short wave radio. This time Brennan broadcast what he loosely refers to as "mood" enhancement. Similar to FM 89.5, the audio was built around different times of the day. The first track broadcast at 8:30 am was appropriately titled "Morning Coffee." It is not the kind of thing you would immediately associate with "mood" music. It does not sound anything like the new age music that is intended to subconsciously expand your mind. Nor does it function like "Lite FM" radio supposedly transforming your work at a tedious job into a more pleasant experience. Approaching Brennan's work with fixed expectations leads to frustration.

Brennan takes the trouble to construct his own aural

phenomena in a strange reversal of John Cage's claim that every sound found in the world is music if you just know how to listen. The audio that he builds has some similarities to the minimal electronic music of contemporary musicians like Ryoji Ikeda and Bernhard Günter. However, Brennan's audio is stripped of the emotional content that you would find in these musicians' work. The audio has an odd indifference similar to that of the humming of a refrigerator. It is hard to listen to Brennan's audio on its own out of the context of the broadcast. This is crucial to understanding Brennan's intentions and his expectations of how others will respond.

Brennan's audio work frustrates peoples' attempts to consume it as entertainment. This is something that has brought considerable backlash to him from art audiences. The rigid expectations of gallery-goers obstruct their understanding of his work. For example, Brennan didn't provide radios for visitors to the gallery. His work was not audible within the space. This is not where he wanted people to experience FM 89.5. This project was intended to be heard in the car while driving around.

FM 89.5 started to make a lot of sense after I encountered it over several days under different traffic conditions. The work demands an attentiveness and way of listening that you don't use when tuned to a commercial, college or even pirate radio station. I had to learn how to approach the strange sounds coming through my radio. The effect of driving and listening to FM 89.5 often had some eerie results. On a couple of occasions a sound continuum between the inside and the outside of the car formed. It made me both giddy and uncomfortable. It aurally dissolved the car leaving me with a strong feeling of vulnerability. On other occasions the soundmasking worked and some of the road noise was cancelled out.

Hearing broadcasts repeatedly over several days and weeks and measuring those sounds against what you know and what you are experiencing in the moment is concretely different from the ways most people are used to listening to music. This work is open-ended and not conveniently packaged into a 3-minute standard format. Brennan is using the radio as a medium. He speaks enthusiastically about the early days of radio when it was unformed and open to experimentation. Radio quickly passed through this stage and adopted its modern day format. Radio is used as a means to a broadcasting end and not as an end itself. The slickness of radio broadcasting is numbing. It has such a grip on peoples' expectations that it creates a climate that stifles innovation and experimentation.

CB is a messier method of transmitting and receiving information. It has an openness you don't find in regular radio use. However, CB is not an ideal and democratic place for exchange. Transmissions are quite often ugly, sexist and crass. The decision to use CB brought Brennan yet another wave of backlash. People would frequently tell him that no one used CB anymore. It couldn't compete with the use of cell phones and had become obsolete. Spending ten minutes listening to a CB radio at any given time of day reveals that the opposite is the case. There is a lot of use and some various subcultures can be found there: truckers fighting off the loneliness of the road, maverick loners with rambling monologues, guys in their garages discussing their equipment and people trafficking in illegal substances.

Brennan chose to broadcast via a boosted CB radio so that the signal would "skip." CB is short wave but is kept local by restricting output. Potentially, the signal could travel around the country. Short wave radio has interesting subcultures and uses that have developed on an international level. There

are users that broadcast just to see how far they are able to send their signals. The recently deceased King Hussein of Jordan was an avid short wave user and was well known and highly respected in short wave and HAM radio circles. International audiences will continue to develop around the different uses of short wave. There is an entire subculture that has sprung up around numbers stations. If you didn't know what it was when you first heard it, you might mistake the audio transmissions of Project Citizens Band for a numbers station. This phenomenon is well documented by a four CD set called The CONET Project (available from Irdial records). Numbers stations have operated since the cold war. They are believed to be stations that transmit coded material to spies working in the field. Of course, governments deny any knowledge or use of numbers stations. The transmitters were tracked to secured military bases. The first channels consisted solely of individuals reading strings of numbers live over the air. Many stunning variations on this theme are documented: numbers stations use gongs, buzzing and computerized voices to send secret messages.

How is the audio for Project Citizens Band received and how does it affect those that hear it? Where FM 89.5 sought to change the acoustical space surrounding the radio, Project Citizens Band was developed to impact the psychological space. Brennan did a lot of research looking at New Age music and the claims it made to impact peoples' moods. What he repeatedly encountered were for him a lot of unjustifiable claims and nonsensical applications. How then can Brennan's audio function as "mood" music? A clue comes from a reference I first heard mentioned on the program "This American Life" broadcast on National Public Radio. A musician takes tonal readings of rooms as a beginning point for composing music. For example, when he measured his kitchen he added up all the sources of sound coming from

the room. There was the humming of the refrigerator, the beeping of the microwave as you keyed in the cooking time and the droning of the microwave as it cooked food. The musician measured the tone of each sound with a tuning pipe. He would then play all three tones on his keyboard to demonstrate their combination. Together they added up to make a chord in a minor key: a sound that usually has associations of discomfort and bad feelings. The musician would cross reference the chords of a room with guides he had where someone had actually tried to morally assess all the possible chords and combinations of tones.

This is only a blind stab at figuring out how Project Citizens Band could have effected the psychological space of a person listening to short wave or CB. Perhaps the project created an effect that shifted the tonal space of a room or car that someone happened to be in while listening to the sounds. This is not a satisfying solution and leaves me wanting a lot more. When I listened to the transmissions, they were never clean and clear. They were always encountered with a lot of interference. This did make them interesting to listen to, but made me suspect of how they could actually function as mood enhancement. I am uncertain about the impact the sounds have on me when I listen to the tracks on the CD. The main question that remains is how others encountered this work and what they thought and felt.

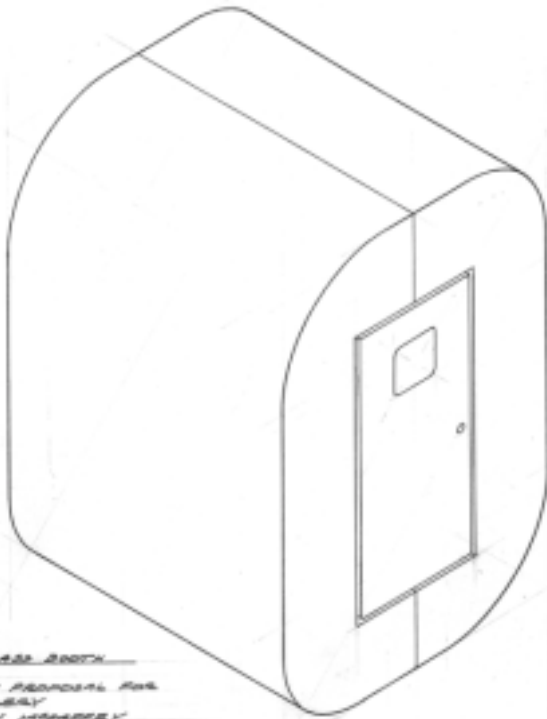
Project Citizens Band ran for one month, not nearly enough time for people to hear it repeatedly and form their own theories and responses. It took many years for the numbers channels to develop the following they now have. A local cab company used the channel, that Brennan chose to transmit Project Citizens Band on, to dispatch its drivers. You have to imagine that the drivers heard these sounds. I never once heard direct commentary on the transmissions.

It is common to encounter an enormous amount of interference on CB. Interference that wasn't continually imposing is easy to dismiss. Most people that use CB radio on a regular basis shrug off interference as well as the comments of belligerent users. If the project had continued for a year, then they would have had no choice but to respond in some manner. The decision to only transmit for one month put a damper on the kinds of responses that could develop. The standard art format of having an exhibit run for a month really limited how people were able to respond. It also limited the learning process of doing it for a long time and allowing a wide range of responses to occur. Project Citizens Band needed to go for a much longer time for it to be picked up and mulled over by those eager and willing to track it down and figure it out.

I can imagine a project like FM 89.5 going for several years. I am certain that people would come to it repeatedly perhaps by accident or while they were scanning the channels for something to listen to. They would share it with others and try to figure out exactly what it was. Eventually Brennan would hear how people were responding. Brennan's audio projects are a rich source of strategies. They serve as a guide for those seeking to work in an expanded manner. His work demands a different maintenance and support than what the art world generally has to offer. It is clear that his work would be received and responded to in ways similar to the subculture that has developed around numbers stations.

The use of radio as a medium is virtually non-existent. At the pirate radio station we truly believed that we were doing important community work. We unquestioningly adopted a format that was standardized long before our births. We hadn't even considered the uses that Brennan's projects posited. The radio station is now defunct and I am still not certain if it had much of an impact beyond an important yet

microscopic experiment in democracy. Even though Brennan doesn't see his work in terms of democratic experimentation, the implications of his ways of working are broad. Just the idea of taking something like radio - a medium that is overly standardized and regulated in a way that protects commercial interests and consumer culture over the interests of those working for more community based and individual concerns - is more than most people are capable of. Projects like Brennan's keep art interesting and vital and refuse the resurgence of the model of the artist working within closed-off, tightly controlled commercial structures.



FIBRE GLASS BOOTH
PROJECT REPORT FOR
THE BOARD
BRENAN MCGAFFEY
JAN 11 1999

Dimensions
H: 60" x 60"
W: 70" x 60"
D: 70" x 60"

Drawing of the fibre glass booth that held a 20 watt transmitter broadcasting sound masking tracks - by Brennan McGaffey, 1999.