

My Life in the Bush of Ghosts

INTERVIEW | CLAIRE STAEBLER | LAURENT GRASSO | CHRISTOPHE KIHM



RADIO COLOR STUDIO 1 2005
recording studio | De Appel | Amsterdam

CLAIRE STAEBLER: In 2005, the Curatorial Training Program invited you to participate in *Radiodays*, and to formalise the installation of a radio studio that would be present for a month at De Appel. What was your first reaction?

LAURENT GRASSO: I've always considered *Radiodays* as much more than just a radio project, almost as an invisible exhibition. You wanted to create a radio station, but you also wanted people to *see nothing*, and to arrive in an empty space. We'd just been to Rirkrit Tiravanija's exhibition *Tomorrow is Another Fine Day* at Boijmans Van Beuningen, where we walked around in an empty space listening to his pieces being recited. The question of the visible and the invisible has been present in my work for some time, and I think it was what intuitively attracted me to your project. I saw *Radiodays* as an exhibition that dealt with waves; the material it used was radio waves. My first question was: what will become of the space when we finally decide to broadcast – when things leave the space where they've been produced? And also, can the fact of having produced them constitute something visible?

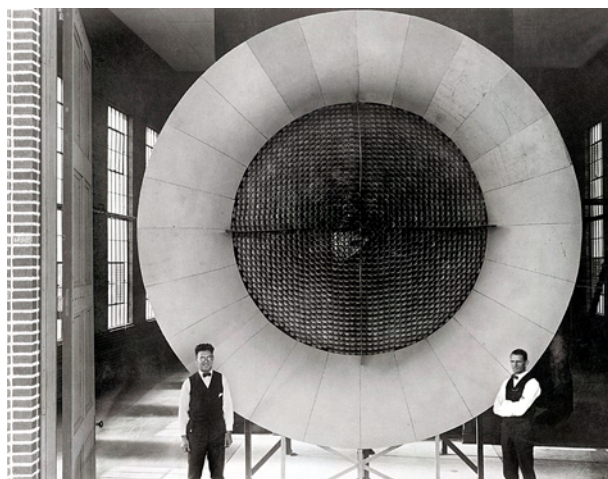
What was essential was that we should hear, not necessarily that we should see. Starting out from that idea, I tried to create a certain tension between what would and would not be shown. What remained was the fact of being seen through an opening, and the game that was set up between people on the outside of a box that made an activity visible – this being purely formal – and people on the inside, like dabs of colour moving around. For me, the project was an extrapolation of an idea already expressed in *Radio Ghost*, which consisted of creating a radio booth through which a film could be seen in a slightly reduced format.

CLAIRE STAEBLER: The work that you've just mentioned, *Radio Ghost*, had already examined the question of sound and radio. Can you tell us more about the context of this work, which dates from 2003?

LAURENT GRASSO: While working on *Radio Ghost* I was confronted once again with questions relating to installations. I've always thought about my work in terms of cinema, not in any competitive way but really as a source of inspiration, and I said to myself that in the end, for me, an installation is like an autonomous machine; which means that it's already functioning before the viewer gets to it, and it continues to function afterwards. It has no beginning and no end. Someone enters and exits, but this thing continues to "breathe" before and after the time you spend in it, and also during that time. So the viewer approaches something that's already operating, and he interferes, in a certain sense, with this autonomous operation. That's the first thing. The second is that these installations, these setups, allow me to project myself into another reality, and they also allow the viewers to project themselves into that which is proposed; but also, and above all, they can combine this with another mental construction – something that comes from themselves. These were the elements I used to construct *Radio Ghost*. And I continued to work on them with *Radio Color Studio* at De Appel.

CLAIRE STAEBLER: Are you looking to pin down, or give a representation – even mentally – to phenomena that don't have one? Talking about *Radio Ghost*, you've said: "This immateriality interests me, because the entities I want to manipulate are invisible: time, magnetic waves, allusions to other space-time frameworks".

LAURENT GRASSO: Like anybody else, when I visit an exhibition I like to feel displaced, sent off elsewhere, disconnected. I like to construct a situation, a space-time framework. In general I work more with slowness than with speed: slowing things down, slowing down the transitions, producing another feeling of temporality. There's always something hypnotic about my installations and films that helps me at a given moment to "block" the viewer, or rather to slow him down, to present him with *something else*.



CLAIRE STAEBLER: There's a whole set of myths and legends tied to technology and apparitions such as spirits. And these stories provided a source of inspiration for *Radio Ghost*, which you created in China? What was the point of departure for your "slightly abstract contemporary story"?

LAURENT GRASSO: In relation to my work, China has always been quite a silent place. I had no mental images of it, and as I like to make images in situations of absence, and to construct things that don't *give* much, it was interesting to find myself there. I looked for things – not things to show, but phenomena that could be a part of my research. At first I was interested in feng shui, and then I met a Chinese actor who began telling me stories about ghosts that appeared on film sets. The fact that paranormal phenomena could occur on a film set was the point of departure for *Radio Ghost*. What interested me was, on the one hand, the idea of the film set as a hospitable place for ghosts – or at least what were *called* ghosts – and on the other hand the coexistence of certain kinds of technology and paranormal apparitions. Plus I liked the fact that these things appeared, as though by chance, precisely in places where fiction was produced. It was like another, uncontrollable layer of fiction being added on. In Hong Kong, people live with the dead and the spirits. It's a dimension that's continually present; their lives are organised around it. Hong Kong, more than Beijing, is a high-tech city close to science fiction, but stories like this also have their place. I even found a kind of guidebook there, for ghosts and paranormal apparitions. It was like a map of the invisible. People there will go out of their way to see things that "don't exist".

CLAIRE STAEBLER: So, Christophe – writing about Laurent's work in one of your articles you used the word "capture", which comes from the Latin verb *capio, is, ere*, meaning both "to take in hand" and "to conceive in one's mind". In the light of what has just been said, could you comment on the current application of this term to Laurent's work, and in general?

CHRISTOPHE KIHM: In the sense that interests me, capture is linked to hunting. We never capture anything other than what we are trying to get hold of. Capture necessitates traps, or setups, which may in fact be sounds or images. These traps, in Laurent's work, are meant to capture things that are evanescent, fleeting, immaterial and invisible. But the question remains: how can they be made to capture the invisible by the use of a video camera? And by the same token, what traps can be used to capture spirits when recording sound? The other thing is that these instruments of capture function in two complementary ways, because traps are also laid for the people who enter the installation.

To capture things, you have to use cartography, which means laying a grid over space: the things we want to capture must be localised. But in order to localise things, we have to think of the grids as cutouts of space and time. That's the way we grasp objects. It's not by chance that the guidebook Laurent just mentioned proposes a spatial grid to localise invisible things. And the problem of localisation is even more difficult if the forms themselves are invisible. We've made devices, we've drawn maps for this purpose that date from as long ago as there have been phantoms to fascinate us.

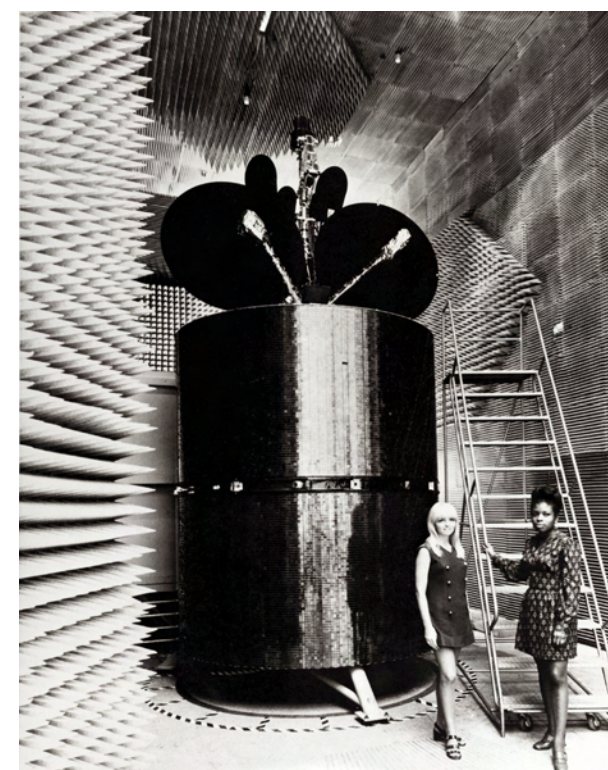
LAURENT GRASSO: To come back to the idea of capture in the cinema, and even in the documentary, there's also the idea of viewpoint. From what viewpoint is this or that action to be shown? In my recent work, questions of viewpoint, and of placing cameras and microphones in unusual places, have been crucial. I even had a fantasy about putting these instruments of capture in places that don't exist. I tried putting them in inaccessible locations, or in fictional places. With *Radio Ghost*, for example, there were ghosts, and at the same time the authorisation to fly over a city in a helicopter at an altitude that's normally impossible. How could I go ever deeper into reality so as to bring about, like a kind of surface, an extraordinary situation? And this can also be the situation on the ground. In *Missing Time*, I filmed static football players, and you could see that something strange was

happening, just by the camera movement. *Radio Ghost* was also like that: flying over things in a real way, and giving a viewpoint to something invisible.

CHRISTOPHE KIHM: What you might add concerning viewpoints is that they don't have to be either always *fixed* or always *moving*. They can change, and be determinate in a floating state. When a viewpoint moves, the world floats.

LAURENT GRASSO: That's exactly right: the idea is to construct a floating viewpoint, thereby creating a discrepancy in relation to reality. We move from one viewpoint to another, and that's also how we manufacture states of consciousness.

CHRISTOPHE KIHM: The reference to protocols of scientific experiments is present to quite a sensitive degree in everything Laurent produces. It has to do with quite systematically creating situations out of which things can emerge. There's no scientific *experiment* that's determined by blockages. In the actual process of an experiment, things are open, which leaves room for the unforeseeable. This is what allows experiments to take place, and in that sense it's open to contingency. The unforeseeable can only arise if we accept the possibility of accidentality. If

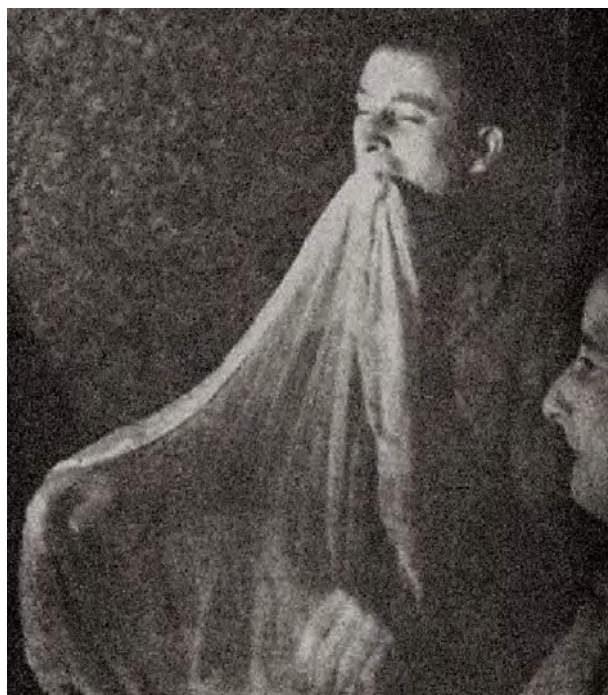


we don't create this kind of separation in space, or, in other words, if we don't recreate the conditions for experience based on the real by opening it up, then nothing's possible (to invert the title of one of Laurent's pieces).

LAURENT GRASSO: It's true that the hardest thing is to produce experience. Often it's of the order of a quotation or a retrieval. Many artists graft their work onto an environment, a situation, at a particular time, without taking it any farther than that. For me, it's useless to name things. *Radio Ghost* isn't a film *about* ghosts. What's necessary is to provide the conditions for experience. Afterwards, you can produce dreams and fantasies about all sorts of situations. The problem stems from the fact that the society we live in needs simple messages.

CLAIRE STAEBLER: And while we're talking about the production of experience: what effect did the 20th century's major experiments on sound, and its recording, have on music and art?

CHRISTOPHE KIHM: They produced all sorts of results, using different instruments. They date from before the invention of the radio, starting with the first recording and sound broadcasting techniques. It all began with the telephone... In 1920, Edison tested the phonograph in factories, thinking it could increase the workers' productivity (this being a precursor of musak, and background music). At around the same time, he designed a telephone to communicate with the dead! One of the first uses of sound recordings was as archives. The audio archives created in the 19th century made it possible to preserve the voices of the living. (It would be interesting, for that matter, to know how many dead people's voices we hear on the radio every day. We live in an environment where the dead are "alive", and are even more readily available than the living). Concerning the history of "spiritualism", we pass from the human channel (the medium



or sorcerer who summons up spirits during seances in which they manifest their presence through sounds) to instruments that measure frequency and intensity (microphones, magnetic tape), and thus allow us to hear spirit voices. In this way the dead make a transition from “dumb” to “articulate”, thanks to the technical evolution of devices for the reception of sound. We can now hear the voices of the dead.

CLAIRE STAEBLER: The research carried out by Konstantin Raudive and Friedrich Jürgenson involved the use of electronic apparatus to communicate with the afterlife, and record the voices of the dead. How and why did these experiments, which were scientific to begin with, result in artistic experiments?

CHRISTOPHE KIHM: Jürgenson and Raudive were in effect outstanding figures in the recording of dead people’s voices, though their techniques were different. Jürgenson used a microphone; but in fact it was quite by accident, while producing a documentary about bird song, that he came across interferences. In the background, he heard voices that made up a composite language. It wasn’t any *particular* language, more like high-speed gurgling. There were effects of acceleration and deterioration of language. One of two things: either there were several voices, or the spirits of the dead were in a confused state. There was an alteration

of consciousness, which meant that the words were quite disorganised: the spirits were relatively incoherent.

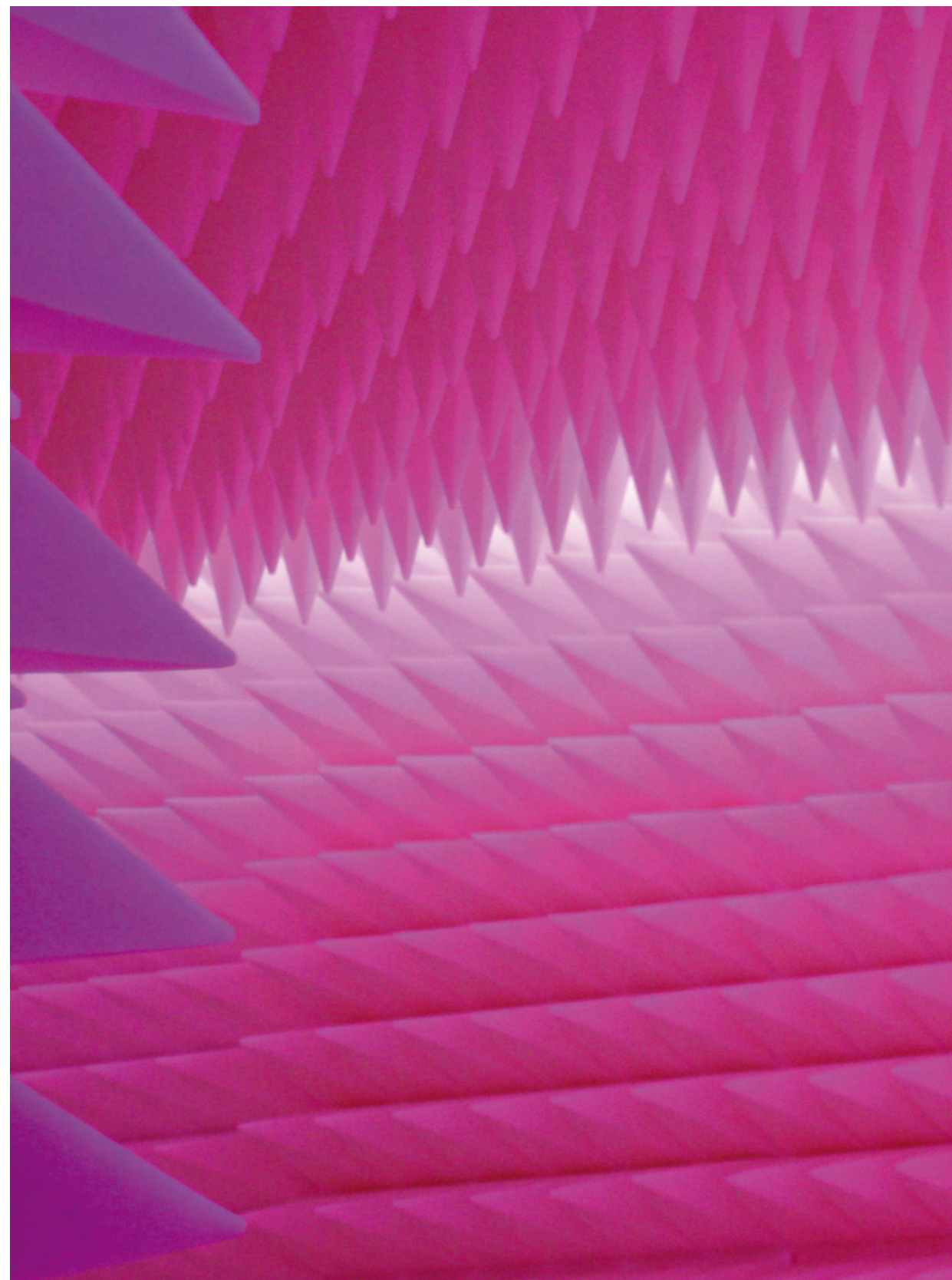
Raudive, for his part, used a radio, and it was when the signal produced what we call “white noise” (that is to say, when it is turned back onto itself) that he heard the voices of the dead. In Raudive’s experiments, the dead were in the radio, not in the real world. The technical apparatus was a tomb for the voices. In reality, the technique for capturing the voices was the saturation of white noise. By amplifying it to a certain level, you could hear what sounded like speech patterns.

Lots of people in the domain of art have used this technique. There is, in fact, a common strategem in art that consists of re-appropriating things and diverting them from their initial functions. In Mike Kelley’s hands, for example, Raudive’s technique might give rise to a “pop” object: the technical object that captured the presence of the dead would thus produce rhythms to make the living dance. There again, Carl Von Hausswolf has used white noise in a totally different way in his sound installations.

But to come back to this translation between the human medium and the technical medium, it may be noted that when artists “re-mediatise” a technique, as Mike Kelley does, they in turn become mediums. By this I mean that when the artist takes on a process of transmission between eras and techniques, he also takes on the role of a human medium. It’s an interplay of displacements and readjustments.

CLAIRE STAEBLER: How has the development of recording techniques modified artistic practices?

CHRISTOPHE KIHM: To sum up the situation, let’s take three examples. First there was Erik Satie, who saw himself not as a musician but as a “phonoscientist”. A musician composes music, a phonoscientist broadcasts it or reiterates it. At the end of the 19th century, Satie wrote a work in the form of a melody for piano to be repeated more than 800 times, which, if actually performed, would represent around 16 hours of uninterrupted playing! The effect was exactly the same as that of a closed vinyl groove. It was the first loop in the history of music. And Satie later produced what he called “furniture music” – a sort of musical wallpaper, or orchestral background music. With this second work, he was putting into practice the changes that had been inaugurated by the phonograph, and ways of listening to musical compositions.



Second example: the use of the telephone by Moholy Nagy in his “telephone paintings”, whereby he would order a constructivist painting over the telephone. His interlocutors communicated the coordinates of the work that was to be produced by means of a coded graphic language that took the form of diagrams and grids. These diagrams, these blueprints of works, were already a form of conceptual art. They also, of course, involved questions of electrical transmission.

Third example: the work on signals in the first installations by Nam June Paik, who, for example, connected magnetic tapes to television sets – a matter of dysfunction, incompatibility, transmission error, because the signal interfered with the medium itself.

All of these projects were linked to scientific experiments. Their “scientific quality” may be debatable, but they were related to experimentation, which is only possible insofar as the protocol permits the occurrence of unforeseen events. In this respect, we can talk about artistic “experimentation” in a non-metaphorical sense.

LAURENT GRASSO: We might wonder about what the pertinent artistic gesture might be today, and where we should be heading. It’s quite easy to create works without thinking about how they’re actually produced. But what’s the right position to adopt? A lot of attitudes are “pop”: quotations, displacements, etc. Many people even consider it natural to make reference to other artists, and for works of art to contain their own *modus operandi*.

CHRISTOPHE KIHM: We have to distinguish between an axe that’s used to chop wood and an axe that’s used to split somebody’s skull. How is it that a tool can become a weapon? What concerns us is – how are we to get from reception to capture? It’s in the structures where we work with a technical device that a tool for reception can become a weapon for capture. This is where the artist is fundamental, because he introduces himself into the structure so as to transform it, to turn it into something else. Laurent didn’t invent either the microphone or the camera; what he invented was a way of using them to construct traps, and thus produce images and sounds that open up possible worlds.

LAURENT GRASSO: In China these objects of reception (video and still cameras, tape recorders, etc.) had another sense: they were illegal. Transmission devices were forbidden, censored. This brought about a particular state of affairs, which was also a way for me to construct a certain setup. I always start out from a specific context, and it was the Chinese context that inspired *Radio Ghost*, in the same way that the post-9/11 Moroccan context inspired *Tout est Possible*.

CHRISTOPHE KIHM: To come back to radio, the development of a studio with highly sophisticated equipment is also interesting. On the one hand, signals can be received from around the world, and on the other hand they can be transformed and rebroadcast. This, in a sense, allows us to traverse worlds.



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