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scattered listening

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On a Saturday afternoon before Christmas 2002, downtown Hamburg is a glittering consume mile full of crowds of people carrying their precious purchases in their arms. They are loaded down with bags, boxes, packages, or - radios. Radios, loudspeakers and ghetto-blasters are being carried around everywhere as well. In addition, there is a garishly clad angel and pastors with squeaky recorders, a bicycle trailer with "alternative coffee" and lots of little police troops addressing the young people with radios. It is hard to say what exactly may be heard from the radios. One conjectures that it might be a patchwork of statements of all kinds, in many languages, of music and noises.

It is an unusual day in the city center, which certainly applies to this place, which has been exemplary in Hamburg for many years for its systematic policies of keeping order and of expulsion, for the surveillance and privatization of public space. Public space here in the vicinity of Jungfernstieg, Mönckebergstrasse and the city hall is to be used for consume and representation, according to the decision of the senate of Hamburg years ago, still led at that time by a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Greens. The current coalition of the Christian Democratic Union, the Schill Party and the Free Democratic Party is continuing this course with

a rigor that their predecessors would not have dared. Gathering places for citizens less inclined to consume or less representative are systematically reduced out of existence, political expressions are not tolerated, especially in the pre-Christmas season, when the sweet jingle of coins is expected after a lean year. Since the second week of November this year, quite a number of demonstrations have had to stop before the portals of the elegant boulevards of Hamburg.

Since Monday, November 4th, the political situation in Hamburg has clearly become more intense. Since the police cleared the Bambule wagon area in the central Karoviertel, too many people have felt themselves too rigorously confronted with the Law and Order course steered by the Conservatives-Schill coalition. Several hundred advocates of a plurality of ways of living have reacted with a wave of demonstrations and actions against the aggressive proceedings of the senate and the police. During the week of solidarity with Bambule more and more people have been mobilized with a lantern procession, bicycle demo, rally in front of a noble disco, round table discussions and further demos. The demonstrators are not only demanding a new area for the wagons. Their demands are more varied. The fundamental issue at stake is the defense of heterogeneous life styles. And it is a matter of opposing the authoritarian executive power of a senate that has no other response to the emancipatory, socially and politically engaged organization of this city than repression and ignorance.

Four weeks after the eviction, the need to articulate protest and political opinion has not diminished. However, another demand has been added. Until now, the up to five thousand people per demonstration have marched through windy, deserted traffic centers, accompanied by three thousand police in double rows and flanked by water cannons and clearance vehicles. And the demonstrations led again and again into "their quarter", the areas

of Schanzenviertel and Karoviertel, and stayed their among their own kind.

Back to Saturday, December 14, 2002, in downtown Hamburg. The demonstratively carried radios are here in response to an appeal from the Hamburg radio group Ligna. Since 1996, the radio group Ligna, by name Ole Frahm, Michael Hüners and Torsten Michaelsen, has mostly been broadcasting music on FSK (Freies Sender Kombinat - "Free Broadcaster Combine"), the Hamburg independent radio station. Today, though, the broadcast consists of a multitude of statements from diverse groups on the political situation in Hamburg, of recordings from demonstrations in recent weeks, of noise and music.

The three-hour program is now being broadcast on the street, at the Christmas market and in department stores; several hundred radio-carriers have gather in Mönckeberg Street, set their radios to 93,0 MHz Freies Sender Kombinat and scattered, strolling through the city. The radios are heard at mid-level volume, as small troops of police ensure the less than optimal volume, but wherever radio-carriers stay for a brief period, the attention of the passers-by is captured. In the course of the three hours, more and more questions are asked. Attempted explanations, conversations and discussions result. A plethora of small antennas are spied sticking out of jackets, bags and almost everywhere. The radios become a recognizable sign. The conspicuous and inexplicable presence of the radio swarms clearly triggers irritation. It seems unclear at first, whether there is a conspiracy involved or an important soccer match. It is left up to the radio-carriers themselves, whether they want to make use of this moment of irritation or not.

The scattering is not a gathering. Unlike a demonstration, its effect is not the result of closing ranks, but rather of a good distribution

in the space. Although the radio demo shares with its elder sister the necessity of collective/concerted action, the law and order policy procedures are not prepared for this kind of articulation. The scattering does not even come into conflict with the development rights of the consumers and business people, to which court decisions for a prohibition usually refer. Thus the police on duty remark somewhat helplessly on the volume of the radios and give a few poorly founded orders to move on. Even the wording of the noise protection regulations does not allow for plausibly founded interventions: "Radio and television appliances ... may only be used in such a way that other parties are not significantly disturbed." Most of the passers-by appeared to be more amused than disturbed.

Ligna successfully tested the strategy of scattering for the first time in May this year. The "radio ballet" conducted several hundred participants through the Hamburg main train station for an hour. Ligna's broadcasting studio in the adjacent Kunsthalle conveyed a set of movement instructions that were carried out by the participants equipped with radios and headphones. Sit down, stand up, hold out your hand in a begging motion - and turn around. Dance and "wave good-bye to the departing train of the revolution". The transference of forbidden gestures into the control space of the main train station only conditionally worked - most of the passers-by could not interpret the symbolism of the movements. However, the moment of irritation was successful, not least of all due to the widespread expansion and the uncanny impression of the mute choreography.

The subversion of conventional ways of dealing with political articulation was equally successful in the radio ballet and the radio demo. The prohibition sought by the train station management was not implemented, a minor victory for reconquering the space

of the train station that was being fought for on all sides. For this one day, freedom of speech and of art also applied to this place. For the radio demo as well, Ligna made use of sabotaging the repertoire of urban activity - in light of the somewhat helpless proceedings of the police, the inappropriateness of standardized methods is clear in the case of scattering. Ligna links the organizing function of the radio with the strategy of subversion here. The irritation induced by scattering leads to communicative discussions, and these remain the uncontrollable variable for Ligna, due to their unpredictability. The power of independent radio begins and ends with the listeners. This is the point where Ligna turns the course of events over to the decisions and political actions of the participants.

The strong resonance in response to the radio demo resulted, not least of all, from the role that the FSK has assumed during the Bambule demonstrations in the preceding weeks. The broadcaster's increasingly important position in the reporting and discussion of political events is essentially derived from the fact that it is not only an observer, but also part of the movement in the street in the sense of being a movement radio. Ligna speak of movement radio (a term derived from the pirate broadcasters and resistant Free Broadcasters of the 80s), when radio does not report on a movement in a journalistic sense, but rather is itself part of the movement, when listeners become transmitters. The term movement is in no way intended to indicate an organized homogeneity at this point. It is instead much more a question of asserting positions and voices on the radio, which are part of what is being reported.

The current situation in Hamburg is open - even the future of Bambule is not yet secured, and the urgent problem of closed homes, the retrograde traffic and education policies of the senate,

the demolition of social facilities will keep resistance very busy in Hamburg. What has been proven in recent weeks, however, is the tenacity of the demonstrators, radio-carriers and radio producers, who have not grown weary of expressing indignation, despite the overbearing police presence. This is, not least of all, one of the achievements of the many radio groups that multiply information on FSK, thus providing the necessary infrastructure for a movement in the streets. The method of the radio demo - and the development and testing of further alternative forms of resistance - is equally open to other producers and recipients. The scattering of political content in public space has only just begun.

Reports on the radio ballet in May 2002
http://www.glizz.net/artikel/artikel_12.php
http://de.indymedia.org/2002/05/21525.shtml

Ole Frahm on the current situation in Hamburg
http://www.nadir.org/nadir/periodika/jungle_world/_2002/50/sub08a.htm

FSK homepage
http://www.fsk-hh.org

Audio Portal for Community Radios including contributions from FSK
http://freieradios.nadir.org/