REMOTE PRACTICES: A RADIO STORY

by Anna Ulrikke Andersen

Season 3, Episode 7, 2022, Duration: 21:40

A response to the book:
Remote Practices: Architecture at a Distance
edited by Matthew Mindrup and Lilian Chee
London: Lund Humphries, 2022

Authors ……………………………………………………………………………………… Joan Ockman

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NARRATOR: In the house where I grew up, there was a secret room in the attic. To access this room, you had to press on the brown, wooden panels on the wall to open a secret door. There was no handle, and the attic was dark. The secret door was not visible to the eye, so you had to let your fingertips lead you and gently push at exactly the right spot.

GENTLE SQUEAKING OF WOODEN DOOR

I found the secret room fascinating, and my mum told us stories about why it was built and how the room was used. During the Nazi occupation of Norway during World War II, the room housed an illegal radio, where the residents could listen to broadcasts from the UK and abroad. The secret room was a space for resistance, where news and ideas from the allied forces, critical of the Nazi oppressors and their propaganda, would reach Norwegian residents.

GENTLE THEME MUSIC

When radio technology first became widespread, its inventors offered comprehensive manuals, such as *Practical Wireless Telegraphy: A Complete Text Book for Students of Radio Communication* (1918) by Elmer Eustice Bucher, which made the technology as widely available as possible. Radio technology is based on the premise that sound waves are captured by a transmitter. The transmitter transmits the signals as radio waves, which can be sent to a remote receiver over a specific frequency. As more and more people learned how to transmit and receive radio waves, the air soon became filled with messages, sent across land and sea. Eventually, it became a problem, and amateurs' signals sometimes blocked out the more important ones: such as when amateur interference complicated president Theodore Roosevelt's visit to a naval fleet off Cape Cod in 1906.[1]

HELICOPTER FLYING
RADIO INTERFERENCE
WHITE NOISE FADING

Soon radio space became controlled, and only certain messages could be transmitted. Controlling radio space meant that planes could land safely, the police could communicate, and the public could enjoy their broadcasts from the comfort of their homes. Messages could travel though space, over borders and through walls, bringing that which is remote into a private space of listening. I have elsewhere argued that radio technology could be a critical tool, because of the way that its technology offers the potential of sending messages across spaces, creating proximity where there otherwise would have been distance.[2]

The editors of the book *Remote Practices: Architecture at a Distance* (2022), Matthew Mindrup and Lilian Chee ask how remoteness itself could be a critical tool while considering remoteness in architecture historically, from new and unexpected angles. In 2021, a series of scholars came together, presented their work, and discussed related questions online at the *Remote Practice: Architecture in Proximity* conference, which took place on the 8th and 9th of October. The book

publishes the papers that were presented at that conference but it also allows space for the editors' reflections. Here, the many ideas and practices presented are considered to form several strands. Having been invited by *Site-Reading Writing Quarterly* to respond to this work, I pick up on some of these strands – the history and critical potential of remoteness in architecture – following the format of a radio script.

<u>RADIO NOISE FROM TUNING THE FREQUENCY</u>
<u>AIRPORT AMBIENCE</u>

<u>RADIO NOISE FROM TUNING THE FREQUENCY</u>
<u>BUSY TRAIN STATION</u>

<u>RADIO NOISE FROM TUNING THE FREQUENCY</u>
<u>SEA AMBIENCE</u>

<u>RADIO NOISE FROM TUNING THE FREQUENCY</u>
<u>GENTLE VERSION OF THEME MUSIC</u>

Although written, presented, and published in a time marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, where lockdowns and travel measures made movement and physical encounters dangerous, or at best difficult, several authors consider remoteness in architectural culture historically. Paul Emmons, for one, draws attention to how architects moved away from working on the building sites in the fifteenth century, a shift that coincided with the increased availability of paper. Architects could draw their designs on paper and did not have to be present in the same way as before.

<u>LARGE SHEETS OF PAPER BEING HANDLED</u>

'Only by being removed from the limiting view of the immediate site can one see the larger territory that encompasses the site. Remote practice makes the question of location more present,'[3] Emmons writes, underscoring the many benefits of remoteness in architecture. This emphasis is shared by Lisa Landrum, who outlines how architect Alberti embraced distance in the architectural design process. For him, being distant, including correspondence, reading and reflection, inviting both creativity and criticality.[4] Remoteness also affected the work of architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and is particularly evident in his designs in Japan, or we could also consider the way that the modernist architects comprising CIAM communicated their manifestos and ideas through *grilles:* images and texts combined in a graphic design format, disseminated with ease securing the widespread impact of this international group.[5]

To architects such as Wright, the notion of region was not fixed and static, but instead 'it exist[ed] in a continual state of becoming that evolves through design study'.[6] For Emmons, remoteness is 'one's connectedness to things rather than their physical proximity. Things that are nearby can be extremely remote,'[7] he argues. Understanding remoteness, thus, could help tackle the gap that might exist between groups, and aid us in understanding the various relationships that are formed between people, or between people and buildings.

<u>BUSY CITY</u>
<u>BUSY TRAIN STATION</u>

'I'm at the newsstand at Penn Station in New York, randomly browsing through the shelter magazines,'[8] Architectural historian Joan Ockman writes in her chapter. Here, she is drawn to an architectural project designed with sustainability in mind where, 'both the designer and owners are proud of the effort they are making to save the planet.'[9] The essay travels, through contaminated wastewater in China, and back again to the US and to a photograph of the then US president Obama visiting the production facilities of solar panels, an extremely popular technology, but one that is also difficult to recycle, eventually bringing forth a discussion of problems caused by capitalism in our globalised society. 'Global capitalism systematically obscured the environmental degradation and heavy lifting that continue to go on *somewhere*. Out of sight is out of mind,'[10] she argues.

To Ockman, remote practices are worthy of critique.
In the practice of writing, however, language can connect spaces that would otherwise be remote. Ockman uses her own experience of taking the train as a framework for her chapter, and invites the reader along on a series of journeys that ventures far beyond her physical body at the newsstand, or via the window of her carriage. Photographs in a book, texts she reads, or ideas that she was introduced to in the past, are included to offer connections and associations. In her chapter, Ockman's personal perspective becomes a narrative structure that opens up a critique of global capitalism.

Several other authors also ask how architectural practices are situated, and the makers themselves are prompted to reflect on their own positions in relation to their work and in relation to others. The Film Place Collective highlights how 'connectivity is possible under the conditions of "remoteness,"'[11] using filmmaking to tackle themes related to marginalised perspectives and possibilities for rewriting history; while Gabriela Aquije Zegarra explores a series of zoom conversations where eating and cooking take place, to consider the practice of eating as a site for critical engagement;[12] and Jane Rendell explores the spatial potential of texts, 'to explore the transitional possibilities that writing offers for "living with."'[13] In these examples, the way the text itself is constructed matters, as we move from one architecture to another, offering the reader an opportunity to reflect on their own position.

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COLD WINDS IN INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE
JET ENGINE TAKING OFF
ENGINE SLOWLY DISAPPEARING
SILENT INTERIOR SPACE STATION

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The book takes its reader through a variety of sites, landscapes, and spaces. Through various global leaps and perspectives, Nerma Cridge brings the reader into an extreme interiority, defined as interiors made in spaces that are extremely inhospitable, such as the polar landscapes of outer space. In these interiors, the 'relationship between actual distance and a sense of connection'[14] becomes evident. The harsh conditions of such locations, force the architects to think anew, something which can benefit us all. In hard climates, humans must spend most of their time inside, a condition which most of us experienced during the COVID-19 lockdowns. 'Many now realise how important the immediate interior spaces are and how significant the connection to nature is through even the smallest window,'[15] she writes.

There are no windows in the small, secret room in the attic of my childhood home. In the time of crisis, the residents hunched down, sitting on the floor of the confined space, to listen. Out of sight, and between the walls, remote voices would offer alternative information to that which was being presented by the government during the Nazi-occupation. In Norway, the COVID-19 pandemic has been described as the worst and most dramatic national crisis since World War II.[16] This crisis in not over. But just as numbers started falling after a rough winter in 2022, Europe faced another shock: the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022. Again, there is war in Europe, and again people must hide in confined spaces during air raids and fighting. The UN condemns the Russian tactics. And the information shared within Russia? War crimes are denied, being explained as fake news. Within this climate, what kinds of message are transmitted as resistance? Where does remote listening take place in this conflict?

Being asked to respond to the book *Remote Practices* and reading through its varied chapters, all tackling the way we might think differently about remoteness and architecture, also I started to consider the conditions and format of my own writing.

This radio-story should, ideally, be performed live and be transmitted by a home-made radio transmitter, received, and listened to on a home-made radio. The ideal conditions for listening would be in the small, secret attic room in the west wall at Oskleiva 34, 1772 Halden, Norway. Alternatively, any spaces that are being used (or have been used in the past) for the writing, reading, recording, transmitting, sending, interpreting, or listening to secret or illegal messages, either coming from a place of opposition or simply raising questions that are critical in nature, could be used for listening. What kinds of questions could arise from such a performance, tuning in with and building upon the strands set by the scholars whose work features in the book in question?

Thank you for listening to this radio report by Anna Ulrikke Andersen postdoctoral researcher at the University of Oxford, and author of *Following Norberg-Schulz: An Architectural History through the Essay Film.* Next week's radio story asks how critical spatial practices and site-writings, produced through such practices as filmmaking, exhibition design, and essay writing, could be used to explore architecture and place as experienced by people living with chronic illness. I explore Helen Keller's radio and how arthritis affected her hands. Stay tuned!

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[1] Gleason L. Archer, *History of Radio to 1926* (New York: The American Historical Society, 1938) 105.

[2] Anna Ulrikke Andersen, 'Architecture Beyond Sight: On Filming Blindness,' in *Forms of the Cinematics: Architecture, Science and the Arts*, Mark Breeze, ed., 178–89 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

[3] Paul Emmons, 'Greater Horizons: Origins of Remote and Global Architectural Practices,' in *Remote Practices: Architecture at a Distance,* Matthew Mindrup and Lilian Chee, eds. (London: Lund Humphries, 2022) 29–39, 33.

[4] Lisa Landrum, 'Winging it (with Alberti): Learning from Distance,' in *Remote Practices: Architecture at a Distance,* Matthew Mindrup and Lilian Chee, eds. (London: Lund Humphries, 2022) 53–9, 53.

[5] Emmonds, 'Greater Horizons,' 35; Noémie Despland-Lichtert and Brendan Sullivan Shea, 'You've Got Mail: Historical Precedents and Contemporary Relevance of Epistolary Architecture,' in *Remote Practices,* Mindrup and Chee, eds. 60–6, 62.

[6] Emmons, 'Greater Horizons,' 39.

[7] Emmons, 'Greater Horizons,' 39.

[8] Joan Ockman, 'Toward a Political Ecology of Architecture,' in *Remote Practices,* Mindrup and Chee, eds. 18–28, 18.

[9] Ockman, 'Toward a Political Ecology of Architecture,' 18.

[10] Ockman, 'Toward a Political Ecology of Architecture,' 23.

[11] Film Place Collective, '12/13/18/19: The Making of *Blind Spot,'* in *Remote Practices,* Mindrup and Chee, eds. 129–36, 129.

[12] Gabriela Aquije Zegarra, 'A Digital Table: To Eat (Critically) Together,' in *Remote Practices,* Mindrup and Chee, eds. 122–8.

[13] Rendell, 'Seven Studies for "A Holding' (23 March – 31 May 2020),' in *Remote Practices,* Mindrup and Chee, eds. 93–9, 99.

[14] Nerma Cridge, 'Extreme Interiority,' in *Remote Practices,* Mindrup and Chee, eds. 47–52, 48.

[15] Cridge, 'Extreme Interiority,' 47.

[16] Norges offentlige utredninger, 'Myndinghetenes håndtering av koronapandemien: raport fra koronapandemien,' 2021:6. https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/5d388acc92064389b2a4e1a449c5865e/no/pdfs/nou202120210006000dddpdfs.pdf