

I was using six watts when you Received me

How to Get Lost

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It's increasingly difficult to get lost. Satellite navigation and GPS, Google Earth and maps with street view on your phone: you'd have to be perverse. But by just talking and walking we manage it, follow Riccarton Road blocks too far, hold the paper map upside down and spend an hour at the wrong end of a guilelessly green Hagley Park looking for the Christchurch Amateur Radio Club van.¹ During that time we miss the International Space Station's² first passing of the day.

It happens anyway of course: 11.06am, Saturday 28 September. The low-orbiting station passes overhead approximately every two hours, regardless of who's watching. It has done so sixteen times each day for the last twelve years, while under construction and at an altitude upwards of 330km. The six astronauts currently aboard — Luca Parmitano (Italy), Michael Hopkins and Karen Nyberg (USA), Fyodor Yurchikhin, Oleg Kotov and Sergey Ryazansky (Russia) — possibly sleep as they pass over Christchurch and briefly intersect the line of a VHF radio transmission from the van in the park. Possibly, sublimely ordinary, they are washing their hair. Possibly they are awake and hear bells, hear *Zulu Lima 3 India Sierra Sierra*, a New Zealand accent spoken gruff through a beard, which makes the 'esses' excessively sibilant, like radio static, and ends with an upward lilt that renders the code slightly querulous... The astronauts don't reply, and probably, they sleep.

When we eventually locate the van it's a ship too, a square blue and white 1980s Nissan, stolidly earth-bound in the middle of the mown field. Metres from it is a generator, and a radio antenna which stands like a spectral parody of the kind of public sculpture it is not. On a table there are small handheld radios for visitors to the site. At 12.56pm, the time of the second passing, I turn one on to hear an interval signal³ of recorded hand bells and a call sign, first in Morse code then being read aloud as it is transmitted to the space station. Behind that, I can hear a segment from an archival Radio New Zealand programme, which is being broadcast to a radius of 2 km around the van.

It's a National Radio presenter, oak-voiced, reporting from the field during the 1954 Royal visit. I sit on the grass and the Queen ('in a beautiful little white hat be-feathered in blue... smiling alternately with serious glances') arrives at Christchurch's Lane Walker Rudkin Factory on Montreal Street with the Duke of Edinburgh ('relaxed and breezy, interested') to visit the garment-making machines there ('at present, knitting men's pullovers, let's pretend it's in Tudor Rose'), while high frequency radio waves leave the Radio Club's mobile unit for the ionosphere and the space craft.

Listening to two different generations of radio voices, punctuated by the bells and the blips of the transmission, I start to draw a diagram that connects the widely disparate geographical elements of the work: the National Sound Archive on Cashel Street,⁴ the temporary encampment in Hagley Park, and the uncharted vacuum of outer space. At the centre of the diagram, and of the sculpture project, sits the van and transmitter: a purposeful, itinerant monument, inhabited by amateur radio operators. Surrounding it in a circle is the public park, bisected by lines of visitors to the van, and overlaid with the archival radio broadcast — a series of dotted lines — and arcing upwards is the line of radio waves which reach the ISS and the astronauts and continue beyond, off the page and perhaps forever. Enveloping the whole is the Twitter feed associated with the project⁵; I draw a kind of cloud, thick with zigzags. It makes a clean equation on paper, completely dematerialised and spanning a vast stretch of space, and sits cleanly with Leach and Noble's stated desire not to add more *stuff* to a cluttered and broken post-quake city.

Largely immaterial, the work is held together by a sculptural logic which relies on displacement: the tenuous possibility of making a real connection to somewhere else — somewhere as distant as the past, or outer space —and the currency of sound as a vehicle for collective recall, and anticipation. It is both preposterously expectant and resolutely conceptual. Maybe, maybe there will be an affirmative reply to one of the call signs issued. A small community of believers arrive intermittently at the van in time for scheduled passes, but it's not a response they come for. Rather it's to listen to the still-present voices of a Christchurch that was, and to be part of a transaction with the farthest reach of inhabited space. They come to listen to the radio. They come to remember what it's like to get lost.

The 34 audio tracks created for *I was using six watts when you Received me* were subsequently accessioned to the collection of the Sound Archives Nga Taonga Korero. They form a lasting record of the 34 orbit passes and radio transmissions undertaken by members of the Christchurch Amateur Radio Club in North Hagley Park during SCAPE 7.

¹ The Christchurch Amateur Radio Club (CARC) is a branch of the New Zealand Association of Radio Transmitters, which represents some 4,800 radio amateurs across the country.

² Launched in October 2000, the ISS is a joint project involving America's NASA, Russia's Federal Space Agency, Japan's JAXA, Canada's CSA and the European ESA. Made up of ten structural units, it is the brightest built object in the night sky and at the time of writing holds its thirty-seventh expedition crew of astronauts.

³ An interval or tuning signal is a signature sound or musical phrase played before or during breaks in transmission. It enables the frequency to be identified by other stations, and helps listeners tune in. Radio New Zealand International's interval signal is a Bell Bird, repeated every three minutes.

⁴ Based in Christchurch, the National Sound Archive is a not-for-profit organisation owned by Radio New Zealand. It holds over 70,000 audio records, and is publically accessible for research. See <http://www.soundarchives.co.nz>.

⁵ Throughout the project fragments of the archival recordings were released as cryptic, often hilarious or caustic tweets. On 21 September the tweet came from a Jack Perkins Spectrum documentary on Hagley Park, featuring Gail and Debbie the Labrador: 'I said "you haven't seen a big yellow Labrador looking a little lost have you?" He just made an #indecent suggestion and exposed himself.'