Radio Equals: On Art and Advocacy
January 2015
Alison Cooley

I have heard claude wittmann's *Radio Equals* (the series of conversations he stages to talk with guests about equality) before. In the previous context, he spoke with visitors to the 7a*11D International Festival of Performance Art in Toronto. His interviewees were fellow artists, participants, writers at the festival. claude's focus, then, was having a conversation about equality in a way that felt equal, specific, bodily. claude and his guests talked through the sensations of equality, answering questions such as "how do you feel right now?", "do you feel we are equal, in this moment?", and "where in your body can you tell we are equal?" The process was deeply emotional, and broadcast to me through a small portable radio from a room not far away, it felt sometimes transcendent, utopian, ripe with the possibility of realizing equality for just a short while.

In an email, claude wonders to me if the intimacy that makes up *Radio Equals* is akin to the process of falling in love: that two people sit and explore an unknown dimension of their being, separately but together. Except in *Radio Equals,* the two people conversing do so only once, for a short time—with the knowledge their discussion (and its broadcast) will end. Each time it is something else, and as a listener, I am struck by my own always-naive attempt to pin the work down. Instead, each time I turn *Radio Equals* over (as if it were a small object in my hands) and feel its new facets.

I listen to claude wittmann's *Radio Equals* again, in late November 2014. He is speaking with the founders of FEAT (Fostering, Empowering, Advocating Together) for Children of Incarcerated Parents, broadcast online and by NAISA. I hear the slight gurglings of a phone line in the conversation, the distant and amplified sound of rain, a few cars. This iteration sounds more like an interview than his previous recordings— less a gentle investigation of the sensitive points of equality, more striving for something else. With conviction, a contention, a plea for consideration. An argument.

Is *Radio Equals* its own argument? (Not in the sense that anyone argues. I mean, is *Radio Equals,* as its whole, arguing for something?)

Equality has a way of being big and small at once. I did not think equality could be small before *Radio Equals*. When claude talks about equality, it is specific. Equality is not the things we might conventionally draw to mind when we ask what equality is or does: racist police, missing and murdered Indigenous women, income disparity, environmental injustice… a long sad line of lack in the relationship between individuals and the state. Concentrating on the manifestations of equality between two bodies together in space (between to voices on a short wave radio) claude slices his conversations down to a sliver, a fractured piece of the whole messy surface of equality.

It exists for a moment between two beings as a sensation of comfort, of vulnerability and wholeness.

First, this time, claude speaks with Jessica Reid, a co-founded of FEAT. Early in their conversation, they begin to discuss empathy. Empathy, and the act of translation: of one sensation of injustice to a new context. Jessica explains that she had been separated from her

father for 24 years, and had grown up without him in her life. When they finally reconnected, she began to relate to him her experiences, as an educator, of working with young children whose parents were imprisoned. Together, they founded FEAT.

Jessica describes her separation from a family member— the want for connection and the desire for support, the sense of understanding as a move toward advocacy. The longing for her father's presence as a longing not just inside her, but inside others. A resonance.

Children, she says, should be able to grow up knowing their parents. That is a question of equality. Though Jessica speaks with a smile in her voice, it is clear she feels this imperative deep in her being. The prison system is a barrier to knowing your family, she argues, when a loved one is incarcerated.

On a basic level, FEAT attempts to dismantle the physical barriers preventing children from visiting parents on the inside, organizing regular bus trips from Toronto to correctional centres in Kingston, Warkworth, Kitchener, and Gravenhurst.

This trip can be difficult, Jessica describes. It is tense, stressful. The experience of visiting a prison, in and of itself, is not particularly an incentive to return. In programming a bus which allows families to visit, Jessica says, FEAT attempts to provide relief from the anxiety of the visit: snacks, activities, games, stuffed animals. It's a restructuring, an easing of the most basic pressures: affording children and their parents on the inside a parcel of mental space upon which to build their connection to each other.

claude does not dwell on whether Jessica feels they two, in the conversation, are equals. Instead, he wrestles for a few minutes with the division between art and advocacy, the decision to work with FEAT as an artist, the difference between their two approaches to the same issue. "Working in galleries had made it hard to be who I was," he explains. "I felt that I had to go more into the real."

"Am I doing art or advocacy with you now?"

Jessica affirms something less concrete: "I don't feel it matters where you're coming from. You have a desire to support and relate."

Throughout the conversation, claude asks a few times that Jessica go slower. The pace is significantly faster than *Radio Equals* at 7a*11d, but underlying it, too, is the root of advocate speech: a steadfast belief, an argument, a conclusion, an impassioned stance, a promise of changing minds and changing the social conditions of being in the world.

Soon, just 20 or 30 minutes into their conversation, Jessica and claude say their goodbyes, Jessica hangs up the phone. claude and Derek, Jessica's father, begin their own conversation, one which turns slightly back to the body.

Derek describes, first, learning of Jessica's existence. "I can get very choked up," he says, "when I think of the fact that I wasn't aware of Jessica."

“Do you feel a loss of years?” claude asks.

“I feel a loss of shared experience,” Derek says. “We decided to build this relationship and this organization at once… to try to regain that experience.”

They discuss the realities of entering into a prison, of being on the bus FEAT organizes for prison visits. Derek describes the fear that can accompany visiting a family member— the sensation of “what is that person like now?”

claude, for his part, describes his experience visiting an incarcerated person: being asked to wait, forbidden to take a drawing he had made collaboratively with the person he visited (taking only a small piece of the drawing instead), being left in a cold room. “It is a place,” he says, “that polices behaviour.”

This policing of behaviour can impede visiting families, says Derek. And yet, visits help the reintegration of prisoners once they have been released. They build empathy not only among children and families that have had their loved ones imprisoned, but they build empathy in incarcerated people, too— the capacity to cope with a space designed to keep people docile and removed, regulated and afraid, the capacity to maintain a longing for something outside it.

As their conversation finishes, I think not only of equality, but of empathy, and of this longing for the outside. claude’s conversations with Derek and Jessica do not manifest the link between two equal bodies I have come to know as *Radio Equals.* They are quicker, more interview-like, more assertive, less exploratory, less tender. They harness the language of advocacy. But more than that: when Derek or Jessica speaks with claude, they are not two people in a small space conversing about equality, in an effort to be equal.

Instead, they are two people conversing with claude about equality who cannot help but surround themselves with the absent presence of prisoners, and their families. Advocacy is not only a relation which strives for equality, and asks that others do the same. It is also enfolding, presencing. It longs for the person who is absent (or maybe sometimes only for the ideal that is absent). It longs for something outside this world, something important, better. Something that does not exist yet. And it imagines it does.

As advocates, Derek and Jessica hold their connection to each other close. And they imagine that same connection exists for families, beyond the confines of prison cells and inconvenient geographies.

When I think about empathy and equality in *Radio Equals* this time, they converge in that imagining. In *Radio Equals,* claude wittmann imagines something outside the world, too. He asks that we imagine what it might be like for two people to commune with each other, listen deeply, feel the weight of equality, and the responsibilities that come with it, in their bodies. He imagines people find the sensations of equality familiar— he imagines, by extension, that we feel used to feeling equal, we are ready to feel it. Does the pace of the interview change it? The tone of voice, the smile, the argumentation, the storytelling of family separation? The shorter conversations? Are that, earlier, performance festival *Radio Equals,* and this, advocate *Radio Equals* so different? Is it in the voice? Or is it somewhere else? In the imagining, the wanting.