

Radio Equals

January 21, 2017, 3 p.m.

Conversation between claude wittmann and Julian Higuerey Núñez
Documentation by Alison Cooley

Radio Equals, initiated by claude wittmann in 2014, consists of one-on-one conversations about equality in as egalitarian a way as possible. The hour-long conversations are broadcast live in the gallery on select dates and at claudewittmann.ca/radio/radio_equals_TPW.html. They are not recorded; listeners are invited to be present in the gallery during the broadcasts. The conversations are designed as a relay, with each conversation partner inviting the next.

A writer is invited to document each conversation. What follows is documentation by Alison Cooley.

I have been thinking for the past day about something I wrote on Facebook yesterday to the effect of “I can’t think of a better way to spend this Saturday than listening together about equality.” I was thinking of what a bleak and crumbling day Friday was—how seized I am every time I think about Trump, how *Radio Equals* might be a tonic to this. But I have also been talking to claude about the disjunct between thinking and action, and felt immediately self-conscious about this post. Was I really suggesting that I’d rather people come listen to this conversation than go to the Women’s March?

So I am already thinking about action and reaction as the conversation begins. I am thinking about whether performance documentation is passive observation or can be a kind of event, an action unto itself, something with teeth.

claude wittmann and Julian Higuerey Núñez are sitting together in claude’s apartment and speaking into the microphone. The broadcast into the gallery begins slowly, quietly. claude and Julian introduce themselves, Julian acknowledges the Indigenous land that supports this conversation. There is no introduction to the project, other than “This is *Radio Equals*, we are speaking together about equality.” The parameters for what this conversation might hold are wide, indistinct.

Each struggle to say a few words of introduction about themselves—it is hard to decide what to say. Instead, they turn to another exercise: What happens when you look into someone’s eyes? claude says he starts to feel afraid of having nasty eyes. We giggle in the gallery and they laugh over the radio.

Julian begins to list his fears, “as a way to become vulnerable,” he says, “to have an honest and meaningful conversation.”

Julian’s fears are:

A fear of saying the wrong thing

A fear of saying something that is unintentionally hurtful to others

A fear of the appropriateness of shared language to convey meaning

That equality, however we define it, if we define it, happens in negotiation through language, and that the language we have can only go so far

claude is afraid:

That the time will go too fast
Of the desire to meet Julian today
Of being perceived as a woman

We can hear the sounds of people moving into the gallery, and for a moment claude and Julian are obscured by the entering, chatting, and shuffling of visitors as they join us. I have held this space for *Radio Equals*: when the conversations are not happening, this room remains *Radio Equals* space, even though the gallery cannot contain the fullness of this live project. Still, this small, dedicated space holds something—the possibility of togetherness and chance, that people can come in and out, can happen upon the project.

Julian notes that the two are speaking more freely now, with more animation. He says that although he and claude have only interacted in some small ways through the last few years, he has always thought of claude as someone who is very inviting. That the space between them is intimate and connected.

claude says “something happened right now that equalized something for me...”

I have listened to *Radio Equals* many times, over the past three years. Still, I am struck by this every time: as claude explains the specific, bodily sensations of the equality he just began to sense, I note the distance between my body and his. It is difficult to understand what is going on in someone else’s body. Is the throat opening up? Is the voice changing? Are the eyes softer? Is the chest more expansive? As claude and Julian describe the minute attunements of their bodies to an equal relationship with each other, I can’t help but imagine I am a doctor listening to a patient with mysterious pain: is it tight? Does it feel like an elastic band? Does it feel hot or cold? Is it gnawing? Dull? Sharp? Tender? Sour? What colour is it? Where does it hurt?

How to describe and put a name to the sensation of equality when the distance between our sensations is so great?

Sometimes, listening to *Radio Equals* feels like a therapeutic exercise, a series of movements around knowing the self better in the presence of another human. From these descriptions of the body, the conversation moves into another action. Julian describes a sense that he is still a little removed, still filtering his speech and behaviour. They decide together to try not to filter.

They close their eyes and count to three, then open them again to look at each other.

claude describes what he sees in Julian as “fuck off in a nice way.”

“Can you feel equal when you are just observing?” Julian asks.

I have been thinking about the ethics of observation since claude and Julian began listing their fears. Vulnerability can generate connection when it is held with trust, when the fears are known and acknowledged and not exploited. The same vulnerability that drew claude and Julian closer to each other makes me begin to feel that I know Julian well, even though we’ve barely spoken. There’s a pain in this. I’m aware that this listening has made me feel close to claude and Julian,

but also unknown. *Radio Equals* has asked that both speakers expose themselves, make themselves known, but I feel the ache of remaining elsewhere.

One of *Radio Equals*'s gifts can be that, for those who show up to listen, the conversation is a gift of honest, vulnerable conversation. In that way, it can be a model for any conversation—it can hold the potential that equality exists through (in spite of and because of) difference, disagreement, fear, imperfect language, strained bodies, care, generosity, and attention.

But fundamentally those who show up to listen remain unknown. We receive the gift of the conversants' exposure, their frankness, their warmth (or whatever qualities they bring to the conversation), but we don't become known through listening.

This is something sinister? I have felt the pleasure of drinking in others' self-disclosure, but what I feel now is mostly sadness.

At once, as an observer, I'm painfully aware that my documentation has the potential to overwrite the conversation. *Radio Equals* only happens live: there is no transcript, no recording. This document becomes the only trace of the first conversation, and the powerful capacity of this text to twist the truth of what happened is disconcerting.

As a few new listeners enter the gallery, claude begins to describe his attempts to find equality in his workplace, as a bicycle mechanic. He explains his relationship to his boss, the way they hold vastly different views on expertise, on God, on the need for someone to prove oneself to gain respect.

This is the other thing that can happen with vulnerability: you open up the possibility of someone wanting to care for you. Julian admits to wanting to care for claude.

"Why?" claude asks. Fundamentally, he says, just because you want to give care doesn't mean I need it. There is a danger in care, he explains: of the care being assumed, of the vulnerability being misinterpreted as a desire for care, of the kind of care you want to give not being helpful.

I want to hug claude and Julian in this moment, even though I have no idea if they'd want it.

If equality is a kind of linguistic negotiation, does it change in other languages?

claude experiments first, in French. He describes a language in which a past self operates, a language of being in relation to family, a fissure in his ability to identify with his father, a disassociation from his own existence as a man, and a sense of permission and limitation. "You're allowed to scream in french, which you can't do here—it's complicated."

Julian says there is a difference he feels is very powerful when he speaks in Spanish, "for sure." In Spanish, he says, he feels the weight of the things that built his identity, feels the weight of being in his family.

"How would you like to end this?" claude asks.

They try the same thing: closing eyes, waiting, then opening and seeing each other again.

I can hear both claude and Julian's breathing—I feel again that I am close but heartsickly distant.

Radio Equals is a project initiated by **claude wittmann** in 2014 and which has been given life by about 15 people up until now. Radio Equals aims at being a thread of bodies and minds exploring equality in process and content and it manifests sporadically as one-on-one egalitarian, one-hour long conversations about equality. The conversations take place in intimate settings, such as a sound booth in a performance art festival, a closed kitchen of a gallery, a home or an office and this intimacy is extended to listeners through the intrinsic quality of live radio, be it FM narrowcast and/or FM broadcast and/or live streaming through an internet channel (NAISA, CFRC, CKUT, Wikiradio UQAM, Radio Equals temporary live-streaming site). Radio Equals is not recorded or podcasted.

claude wittmann was born in Switzerland and now lives in Toronto. He works as a bicycle mechanic and performance artist. He is currently concerned by the (disem)power(ment) of art in triggering social change. claudewittmann.ca.

Julian Higuerey Núñez (1983) lives in Toronto.

Alison Cooley is a critic, curator, and educator based in Toronto. Her research deals with the intersection of natural history and visual culture, socially engaged artistic practice, and experiential and interpretative dimensions of art criticism. She is the 2014 recipient of the Middlebrook Prize for Young Canadian Curators, and her writing has been published in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *FUSE*, *Blackflash* and *Magenta*, among others. She is currently the Blackwood Gallery's Curatorial Assistant and Collections Archivist.