

## **Anywhere Out of This World**

a conversation in the vicinity of radio art

Gregory Whitehead and Manuel Cirauqui, Autumn, 2011

GW: You note in your essay “Thanatophonics” the loss of the varied haptic pleasures of manual tuning across an analog spectrum, and this is not just a matter for fingers, but also for thought. The confusion of signals to my ears always resonated with the confusion of tongues, inside and out, and made analog radio the most vividly philosophical of electronic media. The primal question for any radio listener - who's there - is made all the more vexing by the edginess of the space, with the porous or even miasmic slush of signals, suggesting and supporting a predisposition towards poetic drift, free association, and the sort of radical bewilderment that typically precedes some fresh idea. Walter Ong is surely right to raise issues of subjectivity and consciousness in relation to distinct technologies. It is impossible to speak "like a book" in a preliterate culture, for the same reason that the flows of thought when listening to a radio has only the most superficial resemblance to sitting around the fire, listening to the visiting storyteller. Yet at least for a moment in time, it seemed to my ears and nerves that analog radio offered a medium whose narrative flows seemed beautifully resonant with the firestorms of human neurology and the nuances of our own consciousness, so full of its own interference, resistance, pops, ruptures, slips and sudden, pure clarity. For me, the play is always the thing, and the elimination of the ambiguities such as noise, interference and slippage absolutely guts the space of play. I love to play with the dial, but I love even more the play that happens among the scraps, pulses, castaways, misfits and mongrels.

MC: The haptic experience of radio takes place on many levels. First and foremost is the level of the body itself as a resonating *site* for electromagnetic waves. As anybody can experience, the wanderings of a hand moving next to a transistor increase or reduce the hiss, and can even provoke a temporary switch from one station to another. This level of interaction is the primal level of that ‘play’ you mention, and coexists with other levels, going from the rawness of sound/

noise to the texture of voices and the deepest semantic layers of the radio message. You have certainly explored these various levels in your works, and I wonder to which extent they collide or jam, when it comes to 'storytelling'. In "Thanatophonics", I gave a special attention to hiss and the manipulation of interstitial tuning, since they appear to be the main poles for psychic research through radio from Raudive's historical sound excavations to contemporary radio-sweep devices. It is certain that, in such parapsychological framework, the question *who's there* takes an extraordinary importance even if we critically consider psychic radio as a discursive envelop to create a 'who', only to cover one embarrassingly bigger mystery: how verbal meaning is created by our senses when there is only random, non-intentional noise. That recurrent mirage constantly exposes the brain as a compulsive trickster; only we are incapable to find enough proofs for its trial. Now, coming back to the idea of play: analog radio is certainly the perfect toy for such play which I can't dissociate from disenchantment and I don't think it will ever fully disappear, just as the turntable, since its cultural meaning, the richness and continuity of its history overpowers any possible technical obsolescence. The lack of response to the question *who's there* triggers the play, especially since the question contains a number of others: what does it mean, in each case of radio contact, to *be there*; how do we recognize (or not) the voices and how do we place ourselves in a synchronic continuity with radio, which gives sense to the word 'transmission'. I would say that, in most cases, radio art implies an alteration of the fallacious 'transparency' of the medium. But does radio function, for you, as the doppelgänger of consciousness? Would you compare it to a convex mirror?

GW: Yes, the question of who's there is endlessly complex, because there is slippage along every boundary. Slippage of bodies, slippage of fingers, slippage of voice and thought, slippage of signal, noise, resistance, interference. That's why I have always been uncomfortable with any notion of radio art that focuses too exclusively on the sounding, or the sending out, because so much of the play takes place in the space of listening, within the consciousness of the listener, who can never be named or measured. The sound doesn't matter when the play is the thing, and

for the wireless imagination, the play is everything. Qualities of indeterminacy and ambiguity make analog broadcast the ideal medium for philosophical drift and free association. In pieces like *Dead Letters*, *Shake, Rattle, Roll* and *Bewitched, Bothered, Bewildered*, I invite the listener into an open and unstable play of associations, knowing full well that the structure is only meaningful if the listener enters into the flow, and takes it somewhere else, very likely to a place I could never have planned or anticipated, and the listener's experience of the flow will likely include all sorts of pulses and sensations that are not even in the broadcast, but in their own personal and social space, and will likely include interruptions, tune outs and random environmental noise. So the problems of the "there" in the "who's there?" are compounded even more by the vivid synchrony of every other elsewhere.

MC: I like your idea of storytelling persisting in spite of that overlapping of *loci* or, even more, being enhanced by it. Actually the storytelling element seems almost irreducible to me. Your statement implies a definition of radio-specificity, and could explain why your radio plays should be understood as a sort of 'raw material': symbolic and sound tools for a performance that is to be executed by the listener. The medium of that performance is, obviously, the old radio receiver. This detail might seem theoretically obvious, but it doesn't necessarily come to mind when one listens to your works *as* recordings, on cd or mp3 format, and imagines that they would sound alike on radio. How do your plays, originally conceived for radio broadcasting, coexist with these formats? Not only there is a time factor at work, based in the fact that listeners cannot have a control upon when and how the broadcasting happens. There is also an important formal aspect, since no cd or mp3 player is supposed to help distortion; you can't tune in or out of the track, you just press a button. Within the context of recording and replay instead of broadcasting and tuning, radio works tend to appear more as wholesome *devices* excluding the listener, than as materials for an experience that will only happen once, in many places simultaneously. Do you think they take a new meaning then perhaps, a misleading one?

GW: My favorite feedback from a listener took the form of a postcard from Nevada, someone who had heard a few minutes of *Dead Letters*, became fascinated, and pulled off the road, only for the signal to bleed off into country western music, and now he was contacting me in the hope of receiving a CD, so that he could hear “the whole thing”. I sent the CD, but I also assured him that he had already heard the whole thing, and beautifully so. If you don’t fight it, the quality of random and unpredictable access into the flow of a radio play is a profound and immensely valuable thing, as is the relative delicacy of the signal. I find it fascinating that in contemporary live meatspace theater, there is a quite powerful trend towards open kinetic experiences, where the performance is dispersed, and the audience is moving through space, choosing among many options along the way, a structure that is obviously very widespread within online narratives, as well. Radio plays possess that same tension between *poesis* and *kinesis*, but also have the quality of slippage, or an electronic miasma similar to Philip K. Dick’s “gubbish”, a sort of entropic muck that is always just one pulse away from the narrative. My most recent broadcast, *Potato God Scarecrow*, actually incorporates such gubbish into the flow, and the overall structure is inspired by the figure of the beaver lodge, that is the habitat for the creature who both creates and impedes the flow, who is also the figure for the radiophonic dramaturg, and the radiophonic listener. The listener in Nevada who then receives the CD has an entirely different experience, one that has a formal and sensual coherence, releasing many other ideas for contemplation. Yet for me, the defining moment of having to pull off the road, of having been in that sense “arrested” by the play, followed by the loss of signal into FM gubbish - there is the essence of the play. So why bother with any sort of narrative structure at all? Well, I’m constantly trying to puzzle out my own bewilderment within the chaotic flow, too, so the structure of the broadcasts is something like a philosophical offering of one possibility of how the ideas may flow together, though I have never expected listeners to follow that flow slavishly, indeed more deviations create more friction, and more friction creates more play, and the more play, the merrier. Radio art works that do not even bother to offer some sort of tentative offering of a story within the

noise strike me as lazy, or indulgent, and have nothing at all that “arrests” me, because they float forth nothing more than what is already there, and I’m left totally unmoved.

MC: Every listening session is a full unique play, and as Paul de Man would say, who could record a listening? Well, on the other hand, that listener you just mentioned really seems like a character of *The Loneliest Road*; although I guess his call was not the trigger for you to undertake that piece, right? I don’t know if that matters. Random causes match well with important works. And now I am going to say something apparently self-contradictory. If *The Loneliest Road* seems important to me, it’s because I think it totally succeeds to formulate a perfect allegory of radio itself. It works very well as a play, noise-clean, on CD. This doesn’t obstruct its radio-ness, even though I never had the chance to hear it as a broadcasting, not even driving through the desert in a Cadillac (I don’t drive). I would even produce this ‘boutade’: I think *The Loneliest Road* doesn’t need to be aired, because it already *contains* radio.

GW: Yes, no question about the allegory for radio, and in particular, an allegory for the fate of the radiophonic voice, floating somewhere in the riptide between *eros* and *thanatos*, everywhere and nowhere, intimate and untouchable, seductive and ominous, all the qualities that mark out the *ou topos* of radio. A lap dancer who is also a death dancer; a bone reader; the severed head of Orpheus; a living poet planting the masterpieces of dead poets, as a rhythm in the landscape; “a hungry raven in the sky, a wounded rabbit slow to die, bones piles in the sun, America has all the fun.” It happens that there is an actual physical highway that shares many of these qualities under the nickname of “the loneliest road”: Route 50, in Nevada, a road that vibrates with its own mythologies and phantasms. At first hearing, the play sounds like a fairly conventional public radio feature, a montage of music and interviews, and the familiarity is crucial to the eventual disorientation. This returns to your notion of the brain as a compulsive trickster; the familiar shape of a space seems to suggest we know where we are, exactly at the point when we are most disoriented. I have actually had this experience in sea kayaks, paddling through deep fog, when I

am sure I recognize certain coastal features and shapes, only to discover later that I was way off the mark; the illusion of familiarity is my worst enemy. Far better to admit to myself, okay, I'm in deep fog, I have no idea where I am, accept the condition of disorientation, stop paddling, and listen for the buoys.

MC: I think the most dangerous fog is the transparent one. In that sense, the world has not changed much since the times of Plato or the early Taoist philosophers. It is important that something call it poetry or art brings us back to our essential disorientation. (In that sense, art *has* replaced philosophy in the modern times.) The sense of hearing, more than any other, seems important in terms of orientation and disorientation. Not only because it is the 'home of balance', but also because it implies immediate recognition both in spatial and conceptual terms. I remember an early experience with hashish when I was a teenager in Northern Spain. I had ingested a nice amount of hashish powder with a yoghurt, a dose that supplied about eight hours of psychotropy that I essentially devoted to ramble, read and write (this last thing with very null results). One evening I was walking through an old street in this Northern Spanish town; it was all paved with very old stones; as I walked, I heard noise behind me. A vehicle was approaching. I immediately felt the tinkling and pounding of a carriage pulled by several horses. I turned around, full of excitement. But then, the lights of a big Mercedes-Benz blinded me. This auditory hallucination still seems very revealing to me, even though I quit smoking hashish many years ago. Nowadays I'd rather read Tchouang-Tseu, who says: 'Listen not with your ears, but with your mind; listen not with your mind, but with your breath'.

GW Oh yes, with your breath, above all in the rich yoghurt of bewilderment. If you shine a bright light in deep fog, you will actually see less. Better to listen for the buoys, and breathe with the buoys, then to squint in search of lighthouses. I have long been fascinated by the story of Metis, Greek goddess of the waves, raped and swallowed by Zeus, who suffered a rather severe migraine, cured by the birth of Athena, fully armed; Athena, who in the shape of a sea crow, would help guide Odysseus home to slaughter the craven suitors of Penelope. Metis was an

Oceanid, a Titan, daughter of Oceanus and Tethys, and possessed the strange and complex intelligence of the waves. For radiophonic inspiration (breath), I often return to my well thumbed copy of *Les Ruses de l'intelligence: La Metis des Grecs*, the brilliant study by Detienne and Vernant, navigating the deep trickster currents of the Western imagination.

MC: All variations of the air element seem to fit the moods of radio. I remember reading, probably in one of your manifestos, the expression 'radio gas' and immediately agreeing with it. We've just been talking about a certain 'steam'... I like 'radio smoke' too. It would be a funny exercise to provide examples for each of these categories and then, we could enter the subtle universe of radio smells. I would also agree with you on the idea of the aesthetic experience as a form of intoxication of the ordinary human sensorium, precisely to the extent that there is no more authenticity. What seems absolutely inescapable to me is our need of some essential metaphors if we want to name or even conceive the functioning of radio, maybe due to the vagueness, the spectrality of its very material. Some metaphors seem to literally expand along with the history of broadcasting, and we don't even need to talk about literature. But the key question for me, the ultimate suspicion, is whether we are or not *taking radio itself as a metaphor*. What do you think?

GW: I don't understand those many artists who conceive radio art, or the presently more fashionable term of transmission art, as the manipulation of raw phenomenal pulse, since in this case the pulse has very little to do with the medium's heart, which is very much in a poetic and philosophical realm; the uncanny otherness, floating, seeking, inviting. Such a deadly and seductive enchantment, and one so deeply rooted, in our consciousness of being human. Have we not always searched for voices in the wind, those voices that are at once intimate and detached, meant for us alone, and yet ubiquitous: the voices of the gods? Radio is a skull placed at the top of a mast, with the wind whistling through the holes, and when you hear it, you must write it all down quickly, and then you have a chance at grasping the poetry.

MC: The word transmission seems to be internal to the medium, be it radio or other, and at the same time it encompasses all media. Maybe that's why it lends itself to mystification. I have to say that I have but rarely come across the term "transmission art". It sounds a little bit manneristic indeed, and somehow romanticized. Regarding the myth of radio you refer to, my approach would rather be materialistic and 'disenchanted': I don't see radio as a skull, but a mask; I have no problem in including all possible mythological conceptions in this notion; and I would even say: every conception of radio *functions* like a mask. Your statement seems to imply that behind the mask, there's the skull. I would simply add a specular dialectic twist to it: behind the skull lies the mask. Did Nietzsche ever listened to the radio?

GW: Zarathustra is one of the great "shock jocks" of all time! Together with Captain Ahab. The mask has ruby red lips, and the skull is a singer of siren songs. You are right to guard against romantic mystification, since radio has the exceedingly material mission, every day, to guide lethal weapons to their targets, and to exercise command and control, the radiations of dispersion and oblivion. The lonely pirate voice, who offers stubborn resistance against the flow, is not emblematic of anything other than one possibility - and there's the loneliest road, again.

MC: What kind of lethal weapons are you referring to, and what kind of targets? And how far do you think the expression of resistance stands as the only possibility of resistance?

GW: Radio itself, as possibly the most lethal weapon of all, with its roots in manual telegraphy, the twitching finger that delivers both stimulative ecstasy and sudden death; the finger that delivers the sudden jolt of eros also pulls the trigger. It is so easy to forget that radiophonic space includes a graveyard of staggering dimensions, one that feeds its own supply chain, whether through Predator drones or the predatory drone tones of charismatic orators, stirring the masses towards homicidal or genocidal madness. As for the possibility of resistance, or an aesthetic of

resistance, certainly this has been one of my major preoccupations for my entire life since my very first audiotape, musical and literary experiments during my late teens and early twenties. During those years, I was strongly influenced by writers such as Deleuze, Blanchot and Habermas, as would be expected, but also by the playwright Peter Weiss, film maker Alexander Kluge and the poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger. I was fortunate to take two seminars with Habermas while he was a guest professor at Haverford College. His work on communicative competence and the development of an emancipatory consciousness made a deep impression on me; in fact, late one night in the Haverford library, I remember thinking, either Habermas is right about all this, or we are doomed, and this thought has found many echoes in my plays. Art can serve power, feed power, inflate and insulate power; or it can resist in the service of a utopian (no place) emancipatory aspiration, and such resistance flows across a wide spectrum. For example, when I first heard John Coltrane's improvisation on *My Favorite Things*, I heard a profound modulation within the spirit of resistance, far more so, say, than in the self consciously insurrectionary bravado of Peter Brötzmann's *Machine Gun*. The most fierce acts of resistance are not branded as such - they come from deeper places.

MC: I am extremely concerned about the meaning of the word 'resistance.' If we feel that we resist, *what* do we resist exactly? Is it through art that this resistance occurs at all? But allow me a roundabout. I'm living temporarily in a suburban house; not my house, a friend's house; from the window you can see the trees, etc. One of these mornings, while I read and reflected upon your last installment, the sound of an exasperating lawnmower was coming through my window. It was exasperating not only because, for completely different reasons, I was undergoing a period of allergic asthma, nor because I was trying to concentrate on something, trying to *tune* into something. For a '*sans domicile fixe*' person and a lumpen-intellectual, the lawnmower object in many ways represents the enemy. Soundwise, it is the absolute anti-radio but like the radio you loathe, it is a tool for torture. So, I was thinking of the word resistance. 'Resistance to what?' Resistance to lawnmowers and toxic noise, to allergies, to poverty, to memory loss. I have come

to a point where resisting and surviving become synonym terms. We could assume that *to resist is to survive without diluting* without diluting into whatever is hostile to our form of life. The paradox is, in many poetic cases think of Poe, Melville, Michaux, Cirlot, our neighbors under the lawn that certain forms of life are difficult or impossible to share or even to communicate. The *ou topos* is an *ethos* rather than a mere idea and that may account for the difference between actual life and the Venice (or the Whatever) Biennial. On the other hand, the only way art can relate to resistance and I don't say that it has or has not to is by the stubborn repetition of its singularity, its constant shift; that's the way it ends up representing the resistance of singularity *as such*. The music of Coltrane is a good example of that, although personally these days I prefer Bird for his obliqueness, for his *absence*. By the way, have you ever used jazz in your radio plays?

GW: Oh yes, jazz is always there, on my mind, or guiding my hands, playing the changes, trying to find the inner harmonic structure of an idea or a voice, and then turning it inside out to make it new again. Radio adventures like *Bewitched, Bothered, Bewildered* have a fairly clear jazz structure, in the fairly direct articulation of motifs, yet then riffing through poetic or historical jumps, turning figures like Che Guevara or Casanova into bebop jump dancers, slowly revealing their strange and unexpected affiliations, by way of your notion of singularity. I love the German word *Eigensinn* which means a kind of obstinacy, or self will, a refusal to play along in unison. One could write volumes about *Eigensinn*, and indeed Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge did exactly that, in their masterful *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, including an analysis of the remarkable story by the Grimm brothers, *The Willful Child*, left to die by her mother, yet her arm that refuses to stay buried, pushing up through the dirt again and again. Is this not “resistance” in your sense? That is why the broad cultural emphasis on collectively sanctioned or curatorially ordained formulae becomes so mind numbing and abysmal - such woeful bleats have been emptied of all willful *Eigensinn*. One could mention a long list of examples, though why bother, as there is truly nobody there! To my ears, and for my blood, la radia as a medium radiates *Eigensinn*, and thus

creative radiophonists must be equally as willful, like arms pushing through the dirt. Sadly, I can count such voices quite easily using the fingers of one hand.

MC: The case of that *willful child* stands as a perfect parable of resistance, indeed. The radio voice is blind, just like a hand finding its way out of a dense layer of asphyxiating dirt, yet never to fully reach the other side. This other side represents *pure life*, and as such is - say - a formal medium of hope. The voice has to come out - *anywhere out of the world*, as Baudelaire said - and I detect your idea of radio as *ou topos* functioning there in the most ostensible manner, since radio provides the medium to that utopian hope of 'trans-communication', although the body doubling by and through the discarnate voice is obviously never fully completed. Speaking through the microphone - a hole in the dirt, a channel - the body projects itself as a *specter*, thus we reach the idea of a resistance taking place by means of a desertion of the body. This is what I'm working on for that WCXR program, a sort of radio pamphlet entitled *Toward a Bodiless Resistance* - which, by the way, I understand as an extension of our conversation here. Of course, it is not unrelated to what is going on in Liberty Square right now. Have you been there these days?

GW: The collective bodies assembled in Liberty Square and elsewhere strike me as highly radiophonic in quality, and not just because of their innovations in human megaphone technology. The assemblies have a power that is dispersed and decentralized, with proclamations of uncertain, ambiguous authorship. The protests are hard to name, hard to locate, hard to map - and these are all strengths. Rather than distill the rather blurred and inchoate collective voice into a "program" the protests are actually concentrating on creating the sorts of processes internally that are have been throughly eviscerated in the official structures, and these internal processes and protocols will be a source of lasting strength, of the sort that dramatically changes lives. I would welcome the chance to help with the invention of Occupy Radio, and *anywhere out of the world* would be our motto.

MC: *Anywhere out of the world* - right 'here'. And with 'here' I point at the space where our transmission is taking place 'right now'. Where toward? As a publicly intimate dialog, it might be considered as a two-way transmission *rebroadcasted*, redirected on a 'third' channel. I've been thinking these days of your emphasis on the notion of *desperado philosophy*, nonchalantly outlined by Melville in that memorable passage of *Moby Dick*. If the basis, or the background, of desperado philosophies is the absurdity of life and the farcical sense of its real damages and gifts, we can perceive their practice as an attempt to revert farcical derealization into 'serious comedy'. Thus desperado philosophies seem to be, at least at first sight, pockets of theatrical (artistic/literary/aesthetic) resistance, pockets of *sense*, finding their *raison d'être* in their own exercise. However, *raison d'être* never succeed to provide entire intellectual satisfaction. One (as an 'atom of audience') expects the promise of the 'over and over and out', the fall of the curtain, to complete a *dissolution*: as if the artistic response could balance the world's reality deficit and bring the whole to a stasis. But the desperado agent's/actor's thirst arrives here only at its source, just as well as, for the artist, art is the *elixir of thirst*. The validity of this scheme notwithstanding, I am rather inclined to see the artist's vocation as that of a parasite on the wheel of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Hence my mix of fascination and narcissistic hatred for mosquitoes, flees, ticks, etc.

GW The notion of a desperado philosophy is *fogbound*, in the sense that one can never know for sure whether this or that perceived subject is a rock or a buoy. The best we can do as writers and artists is perform an honest navigation, with all senses open to the waves, and take things as they come. It is not so much the somewhat banal perception that life is farcical. Rather, that we have the intuitive sense that the cosmos has a bewildering spin to it that may not have humanity at the center; far from it! The desperado philosopher is (fog)bound by a certain stoic humility, yet always willing to take a chance and enter the flow, enter the play. Of course, the awareness of certain disorienting truths about the nature of the universe can easily disappear into a black hole

of nihilistic cruelty, but the sort of desperado philosophy that attracts me vibrates with positive *eigensinn*, fingers forever pushing through the dirt.