

Elements of Radio Art:

Gregory Whitehead in conversation with Jan Błaszczak of the Polish weekly, Tygodnik Powszechny

JB How would you define "radio art"? Is it the kind of art that is being prepared to be broadcast on air, or maybe compositions like Cage's "Water Music" that consists of radio sound - should that be regarded as "radio art" as well?

GW For my ears, radio art uses the materials and space of broadcast radio. The materials can be cultural and metaphorical, as well as technical; and the space can also be philosophical, situational or cognitive, and not just electromagnetic or transmissive. Water Music is a Cage composition that uses radio as an element -- not radio art.

JB Would you say that "radio art" shall be elusive, in the moment, or do you think such pieces might be as valuable, while prerecorded?

GW What (or who) is not "recorded", in some way? Even live broadcasts will have an element of prerecording: training, convention, genre influences. When Burroughs says "nothing here but the recordings", he may well be talking about his own subjectivity. Also, a broadcast of a recorded work will still have an element of sublime transience for the random listener, who stumbles across a signal, hears it for a few minutes, and then it is gone, untraceable and unnamed. The relationship between live and dead on air is very complex, and that complexity offers fertile ground for radio art.

JB Do you remember any particular piece that first made you interested in this kind of art?

GW During my childhood, I went to sleep each night with a radio under my pillow, listening to the free form late night raconteurs in the New York airspace, voices like Bob Fass and Alison Steele. The power and intimacy of lone voices, in the dark: there is the origin of my passion for the medium, and for the desire to explore the poetic and aesthetic possibilities.

JB Reading about different pieces for radio, I get the impression that many pieces have something in common with the tradition of mockumentaries. Do you share this perception?

GW Certainly, radio has a very strong presence as a medium for "the news". Ever since Orson Welles' War of the Worlds, this identity has provided a compelling "cover" for artistic play, no question. I like using documentary forms for fiction, and I also like using experimental fictive forms for documentaries. I am very happy that many people believe my plays are documentaries; and that my documentaries are plays. We live in a time when "facts" are (in fact) fabrications, and where the most perverse imaginings turn out to be true -- so artists really have no choice but to migrate back and forth across these boundaries.

JB While recording your pieces, the plot took you to various places (like Dead Letter Office) and brought you closer to various characters (like bugs) – I wonder how important is the audio-environment of the subjects you're presenting? Have your ideas often started not from the plot but from the particular soundscape of the potential topic?

GW It is very important -- but not sacrosanct, in the sense that I have no hesitation to manipulate or alter the soundscape, depending on the acoustic/poetic needs of the piece. Ultimately, radiophonic space is an utter fabrication, and being a slave to the "pure" soundscape is self-defeating and stultifying. That said, I love recording pure soundscapes, even if I decline to worship them!

JB I think it was McLuhan who said: "the medium is the message". I guess in case of radio this statement is especially accurate. Composing for radio you must be aware that your piece will sound differently in different places, on different devices, etc. – does it make radio art more free or even liberated from the author? Is this something you're thinking of while working on new pieces?

GW Oh yes. I completely embrace the lo-fi nature of the medium, and also the very "noisy" nature of the listening situation, namely that the listener is likely doing something else, like driving the car, or talking on the telephone, or taking a bath, or cooking a sausage. For me, that is part of radio's beauty, that you are also a kind of background interference, yet beckoning the listener to enter into the flow. This is also why I have long tried to make the case that radio art is not a medium of sound, but a medium of situations and relationships. Someone like Alessandro Bosetti, whose work I admire very much, is on the same wavelength: his compositions are full of sound, yet they are not about sound - they are about the complexity of communication, and

perhaps even the impossibility of communication. I can relate to that! Anna Friz is another important voice, exploring this idiom of ambiguous connection.

JB If radio is the medium, it enables communication. How important is that aspect in "radio art"? Do you think with such piece you communicate in a broader (or simply different) way than an avant-garde composer?

GW Well, here we would have to be specific, since there are many composers who are thinking and creating in an intensely radiophonic mode, just as there are radio artists who think musically. Radio art does offer opportunities for feedback, cross-talk, interactivity, but there are also composers addressing such things. Also, feedback does not have to be literal, or instantaneous. A postcard six months after a broadcast may offer surprising and essential feedback. Instantaneity has become a fetish in the age of the web, a fetish that diminishes the importance of time and interlude in any sort of lively dialogue.

JB From what I can imagine, I guess you're not the biggest "audio books" fan. If someone who has never listened to your pieces, asked if they're similar to "audio books", what differences would you indicate?

GW I have no problem with audiobooks, except for the fact that most of them are constrained by an unbelievably narrow aesthetic. I have often thought of initiating an entirely different sort of audiobook production that would aim to replicate acoustically the poetics of the text in a far more engaging and vivid way. There is also the suffocating convention of the "celebrity" reader, which is so tiresome and reactionary. An example here would be Ethan Hawke reading Slaughterhouse 5 --- shockingly bad, and terrible casting. Oh my, I would have such fun developing a different approach to that text, with a different voice, bringing it into acoustic space, in all its many dimensions.