

ANYTHING BUT PURE

A conversation about radio art, with Michal Mendyk, Wojtek Wralk and Gregory Whitehead for Glissando 35

MM: Have you been listening to radio recently? Did you find it interesting? Did you find it a satisfying experience?

Yes, I listen often, late at night, as a nomad, roaming shortwave and FM spectra, in search of something that tickles my ears; and if it is not there as signal, it is often there as a readymade montage, the strange and beautiful things that happen as a result of entropy and interference. Radio also remains my favored medium when traveling by car; the accidental discoveries, the local or regional accents, the odd and anonymous strangeness of unexpected others. Yet that too, I fear, is in danger of disappearing as everything becomes a copy of a copy of a copy in the infinity hall of neoliberalism. Very rarely do I stumble anymore across something that truly arrests me, makes me stop and pull off the road — and I miss that experience of a particular place grabbing me by the ears and making me stop and listen.

MM: In the early 90s you took part in creating the Cape and Islands Community Public Radio for a region cut off from National Public Radio station. What did you bring to the citizens of Cape and Islands? Could radio still provide similar values to our societies in 2018?

In 1999, I left Nantucket for the mountains, to a place not far from where Melville wrote Moby Dick, when WCAI was still in its infancy, though it is still known as one of the more adventurous public radio stations in the USA. Since moving here to the mountains, I have been an advisor to nearby WGXC, a highly unusual community

station with radio experimentation as an explicit part of its mission. That station is still young and somewhat fragile, though becoming stronger and more rooted each year.

I believe, against all odds, that broadcast radio still has a power to create extraordinary communities of listeners and polyphonous voices, outside the data mine, meaning outside the web of surveillance, tracking and marketing that blights social media. My heart is with these sorts of defiantly contrarian stations and of course with pirates and microcasters, who are everywhere: anonymous, and unnamable. To quote Melville: "It is not down on any map; true places never are." The Data Miners would love to silence broadcast radio forever, since radio space is so difficult to measure and exploit. So far, they have failed.

WW: And how is it to be American in 2018? Do You think that being an American artist means something entirely different than being an artist, let's say, from Poland? Different perspectives, different responsibilities, different literary and musical traditions? Judging from many of your latest works, one could guess that your American origins have become an important inspiration for your art.

Yes, in recent years, I have felt a strong need to explore some of the darker impulses of the American dream. That dream has always been fired by our insanely violent history, from genocide and the burning of witches through to slavery and an endless parade of imperial wars. Radio waves are complicit in the present shape of the nightmare: what are the implications of that complicity, for radio art? On air, we float within the riptide between radio Thanatos and Radio Eros. Does the rip let something else out into the air, or does it create a gaping hole, into which voices and histories disappear? Or is it nothing more than the gods, yawning at us?

In the end, national identity is irrelevant to the deeper human dilemma of how to live in relation to all other life, a dilemma shared by all of us, everywhere. For now, that relationship is overwhelmingly one of dominance and exploitation. How does art respond to something like the transformation of the world's oceans into plastic soup? I do not know the answer, but the question is present in my mind every day. You can say that the world is forever on the precipice of oblivion, the difference being that in the present, we actually have all the technologies and hubris to make it happen. For poets, composers and artists: where are we, within the rhythms of the Sixth Extinction, and within the resistance to those rhythms? Again, I have no easy answer, and everyone will make their own choice.

MM: A large part of music and sonic arts since 1945 has concerned sound separated from its source. Is most of your work about voice separated from its source? Or is it simply about words and their meanings? Good “Old School” Logos?

*I actually consider explorations of "sound separated from the source" to be Old School: the persistent hangover from Modernism, which eventually reveals a Logos that often dissolves into solipsism. How much more do we need to know about “sound separated from the source”? To my ears, we have been there, done that — many times over. Over my desk hangs a large poster for a 1985 performance by Tadeusz Kantor at La Mama: *Let the Artists Die*. The play had a powerful impact on me because Kantor explored the space of theatre while at the same time exploring the space of human lived existence. The same with a play like Weiss' *Marat/Sade*. All my radio pieces are about radio space and the poetics of radio in some way, yet they also make connections among other ideas, connections which are part of radio's infinite possibility, and part of our responsibility as artists in an entropic universe where everything is constantly falling apart.*

My most fruitful conversation with John Cage concerned mushrooms, not music. In order to understand the mushroom, one needs to understand the forest; to understand the forest, one needs to understand the whole world. It would have been very interesting to hear what sort of music Cage might have created had he foraged through the world of music in the same spirit that he foraged the forest. Yes, of course I am fascinated by the voice in and of itself, though let's keep in mind that the phenomenological voice only exists in relation to endless other voices, inside and out. Those voices have grain, texture, timbre, inflection, dialect: yet they also tell stories, stories that may shock, seduce, mystify or terrify. Such dense polyphony offers rich material for a radiophonic art form that modulates through literary, theatrical, musical, poetic and political spaces, all at the same time. A far cry from "sound separated from the source"!

WZ: It might be a bit conservative statement, but for me one of the still unsurpassed landmarks in combining theatre with sound is Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape". For me, this is the perfect example of how to use sound on stage, how to make it an integral part of a piece. What would be - if any - example to follow - for you?

Yes, Krapp and his spool. Absolutely. And the disembodied Mouth in Not I, pure radio in its own way, lipping the air. For live theater, it is essential to embed the soundscape within the dramaturgy, otherwise sound becomes decorative and passive. Beckett understood this, and not many have followed the lead. I worked with a number of choreographers in the 1980s, exploring bodies in relation to walkie talkies, radios, tape recorders and so on — lots of possibilities there. Cage and Cunningham come to mind, though their ideas of chance often dissolved into mere randomness, and that randomness often dissolved into tedium, for my ears.

Bones conduct sound and move the body, to be sure, yet ears are holes in head — and I want sound that engages everything, demands everything.

MM: You have mentioned Your work with body and choreographers. These are not typical “millieu” for most radio artists. Also, your "Bone Trade" piece exists as a radio broadcast, a short film and as a gallery installation. Does that mean that you work with specific ideas and meanings rather than with a specific medium? Is the description of your work as radio art is wrong?

I was drawn to radio in the 1980s as a way of exploring various literary and philosophical ideas, thinking that radio as a medium would be a digression, and that I would then move on to other media: books, films, theatres. Then, alas, I fell in love with the endless possibilities, and one digression led to another, and then another. I had, and still have, strong interests in live performance, and also in mixing the living and the dead, the live voice with the recorded voice. In that spirit, yes, there are plenty of other modulations in my work, having to do with writing, philosophy, resistance, music, history. We're living in a time when boundaries among disciplines are collapsing, and that can be discomforting to those who want there to be clear territories for inspection and policing, hence the impulse to build or rebuild walls, and not just in the art world.

MM: So would I be wrong if I said that “getting lost” or rather inviting the listener to “get lost” is an important and recurring strategy in Your work? “On the Shore Dimly Seen” is almost a pure documentary, while listeners may have the impression that they experience a kind of oratorio or ritual. On the other hand, The Bone Trade belongs to a cycle of “fake” radio interviews, all of which may remain quite credible for quite long time if you are not listening carefully. Is purely sound (non-visual) art specially useful for this kind of deception?

The Bone Trade was one of four pieces for a late-night BBC series called “Talk To Sleep” and was intended to explore the boundary between fiction and history, or between facts and dreams. I called them “anticipatory documentaries”, the idea being to inhabit language and ideas that were true to identifiable realities within the culture, latencies not yet manifest. The idea was not deception, not to fool, but rather to give voice to bodies that were out there, though not yet audible. I made a number of other pieces under the auspices of an invented Laboratory for Innovation and Acoustic Research, with the self-explanatory acronym: LIAR. All art lies, the important question being whether the inevitable fabrication of art digs into the heart of some buried or suppressed truth.

As for the ear/eye differences, the wrongly neglected media philosopher Walter Ong writes, “Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer.” That immersive quality of sound makes radio an ideal medium for migrating fluidly into alternative realities. The eye is a nerve in a socket; the ear is a hole in the head! Ong is essential reading for anyone interested in sound and radio, particularly his work on orality and literacy.

MM: In this context I would like to ask about the musical archetypes you use in your works, for example the use of “Fever” in “Lovely Ways to Burn”, or choral-like vocalizations in “On the Shore Dimly Seen”. Do you treat them as vehicles for very specific cultural meanings or rather like more intuitive, emotive gestures?

Here again, I make no claim at consistency; whatever the play requires! For On the Shore Dimly Seen, I wanted to use a sort of liturgical chant for the revoicing of the interview with Dick Cheney, to suggest that official justifications for torture have become a perverse kind of catechism. In Lovely Ways to Burn, I wanted the

bass line from the Cramps version of Fever to set the tone and vibe for the entire piece as it unfolds. Music is often used in radio pieces as either literal illustration of something or as decoration: I try to avoid both of these sorts of uses, and let music have its own integrity and autonomous semiotic presence within the flow of the play.

WZ: What is the starting point for your work? Do you start with an idea that you later transform into a script which is subsequently a basis for an audio piece, or do you think of sound and text together, right from the beginning?

Ah, that is a difficult one, Wojtek, since it changes with almost every piece. I may begin in the studio simply listening to a drone tone of some sort, or a fragment of loopy noise, and then from there a voice emerges, a persona, and then that persona takes me to some surprising idea. Or: Crazy Horse One-Eight began with the radiocast known as „collateral murder”, Apache helicopter pilots bantering with each other in search of permission to murder. So that piece begins in an existing historical transmission subsequently transformed and transvoiced into something else, some body else, as a form of commemoration and resistance. The Bone Trade, and all the other Host/Guest pieces from the 1990s certainly began with a scripted dialogue, yet that script would be radically changed in the course of voicing, all the more so since I was playing both voices. All elements: sound, music, voice, text, studio process and direction - all these are equally in play, and from the play, a final mix begins to emerge. What a radio piece sounds like or what information it conveys only becomes meaningful in relation to what the broadcast does within the space of listening, criss- crossed ad infinitum with feelings, sensations, thoughts, memories, dreams.

WZ: Having said that, do you imagine your script being directed by another artist? In other words: can your scripts be considered - and treated - as independent works of art or are they inseparable from (your) audio pieces?

*With pieces like *The Pleasure of Ruins*, *Nothing But Fog* or *Shake, Rattle, Roll*, there is no distinction between the text and the broadcast; they are one and the same. A few of my text-sound pieces have been remixed by electronic music composers, and I am fine with that; acoustic space is most healthy when there is plenty of rich, murky compost from remixings and recyclings. I've thought often of theatre or film versions for *The Loneliest Road* and *The Club* in particular; in those plays, there is a definite script, available for multiple treatments.*

WZ: Is sometimes the musicality of word and language more important than it's meaning? Do you imagine creating an audio piece in a foreign language, even a language you may not understand?

*My ear always gravitates to the relationship between text and musicality, both of which convey meaning. Sometimes that relationship is like a wrestling match; other times, a tango or samba. The first challenge for anyone interested in radio theatre: finding ways to permit language to fly off the page. Writing for the ear rather than the eye conjures an art form in itself. Very often, I trust my actors to further modify the written script in ways that suit their voice and their own idiosyncratic sense of spoken rhythm. Such freedom allows them to more fully embody the text and help it take flight. In a piece like *Pressures of the Unspeakable*, the richness and diversity of screams contributed by participants in the screamscape carries the play, with the more expository voices as secondary presences. *The Pleasure of Ruins* is all about the rhythm of a list and its variations. So yes, the musicality within all language ebbs and flows, and often beats at the heart of meaning, along with semantic content.*

MM: Have you ever tried to define what radio actually means for you? Do you think that broadcasting together with specific individual conditions of perception of each and every listener constitute radio art discipline? Or maybe every creative activity related to radio as technology or institution may be considered as radio art?

For my sort of radiophony, radio is a space. Radio art works with and plays with that space. Listeners are also present in that space, with expectations and desires for radio that then become available for radio art, to infiltrate conventional genres and take somewhere else. Some understandings of radio art limit the space to refiguring technologies of transmission; I prefer to include historical use, culturally embedded formats, political twistings and turnings, the nature of the voice and the ear, plus the slippery nature of performance and the body in such a wet, sloppy and miasmatic space. I am fine with projects that revolve around the technology of transmission, yet it is senseless to restrict radio art in any way whatsoever: let it all go wherever it wants to go! Radio art will frustrate purists because radio space is a place full of paradoxes, contradictions, contusions, riptides, bugs and growlers and melted muck: anything but pure.