

## **DRONE TONES AND OTHER RADIOBODIES**

Gregory Gangemi and Jason Quarles in conversation (2003) with Gregory Whitehead, for the forthcoming Chronoplastics book, SOUND GENERATION

GG: Can I just ask you to begin at the beginning, with your broad definition of radio art?

GW: Well, for one thing, taking experimental audio and then passively broadcasting it does not qualify for me as radio art. Radio art has to be some kind of event or performance or presentation --- a "play" in the broadest sense -- that deals with the fundamental materials of radio, and the material of radio is not just amorphous sound. Radio is mostly a set of relationships, an intricate triangulation of listener, "player" and system. It's also a huge corporate beast, and the awareness that you're working within a highly capitalized network. Finally, there is the way in which radio is listened to, frequently in an extremely low-fi environment, with people listening on a car radio, or they're in the kitchen and they're cooking and they're listening with only half an ear. To me, radio art comes to grips with all of that, it comes to grips with both the context of production is and the context of listening. That's why when I write about radio art I try to stress the idea of relationships, not because I don't love to play around with sound, but because cool sound is not enough.

GG: Is it the verbal content then that you think distinguishes radio art from more general sound art?

GW: No, I don't think necessarily verbal, but there must be a play of relationships. The call and response, the give and take. Sometimes literally, through feedback loops like telephone call-ins, but sometimes more deeply

buried within the structure of the broadcast, some way of acknowledging the fragile, weird complicity with a listener, who is always just one twitch away from tuning you out.

JQ: What are some of the historical references for radio art?

GW: A few scraps from Marinetti; a fairly extensive body of work in Germany, that derives from Dada and sound poetry; Glen Gould and his remarkable radio fugues; a handful of stunning works from Öyvind Fahlström, some Fluxus things. In America, the most incredible radio artists existed before radio was invented: I'm thinking about Melville, Whitman and Poe. Gertrude Stein is profoundly radiophonic, but never tasted the airwaves, as far as I know. There is Orson Welles, of course. And in the same vein, Jean Shepherd and Joe Frank, and even Laurie Anderson, who has a very radiophonic soul. There's a work by Sorel Hays which blew me away when I first heard it: "A Celebration of No". Gorgeous poetic documentaries in Europe from producers like Edwin Brys, Barbro Holmberg, Klaus Lindemann. People always say: what about Cage? And Cage did produce several remarkable radio works. But behind Cage is someone whose work is intensely radiophonic, even though he never produced anything for broadcast beyond a couple of interviews. Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp was the trickster par excellence, he was the grand trickster of the Twentieth century, He also had an astonishing sense for the erotics of language play, the position of the other in the presence of the thing spoken. And radio art has an intrinsically erotic drive, not the only drive, but it is always there. The eye is just a tough little organ, you can whack it with a hammer. But the ear is a hole in the head, a hole full of delicate flora and fauna that we spend a lifetime blowing out, then we go deaf and die. Sound is ultimately conducted by your skeleton, it shakes your bones, it's your bones that do as much hearing as anything else, and that is what explains the tremendous emotional power of sound, and the emotional power of radio, the potential for captivation and hypnosis, taking the listener into another zone.

JQ; Conduction ---

GW Exactly. At root, radio is nothing but a pulse, a throb, an electrical charge. All the best pieces that have jumped out at me over many years have been aware of that sense of pulse. The root charge, the electronic "free radicals".

And that can be registered in simple ways, not necessarily literal, it's really more a question of pace, the ability to tap into a kind of hypnotic tempo. To me one of the most powerful radio pieces ever is very simple, one man's voice with a few simple sounds in the background., Antonin Artaud's "To Have Done with the Judgement of God", essentially a prolonged cry from an open wound. I mean, he's literally being eaten alive by rectal cancer, while at the same time he's in an institution which is electrocuting him, so he's being charged and chewed. You can hear that in his voice, and it's an absolutely riveting rant that to me is the very essence of radio art, yet it's so simple. It's not a formula or a format, it's not something you could superimpose anywhere else, because it has to do with HIS body, and HIS electricity.

JQ: It seems like that pulse that you're sort of rendering is equally as important a source of information as any pre-planned semantic message that you would be trying to give.

GW: Absolutely. Particularly in this country, the most fundamental broadcast is the flat tone of the emergency broadcast system, it's that sustained unbroken oooooooo, and when you hear that it really gets your attention because we're trained to, its a tone that's played-

JQ: -disaster-

GW:.... before a major announcement is going to be made and its quite chilling. I've heard it a couple of times, unannounced tests, and it catches

your attention, this kind of sharp, very very tight frequency range tone, there is something very fundamental there, and like so many fundamental things, there is a hanging sense of dread.

JQ: I think of Tesla with like the static electricity thing and the hair standing up.

GW: Tesla, who of course was greatly influenced by Galvani's experiments, making dead frogs jump. The idea of making the dead come to life, in a way, I mean, that aspect of what it means to electrify, and the relationship between electricity and the nervous system, and the fact that we hear sound through a hole in the head, all of this ties together into an incredibly rich conceptual space, and when I say that radio art is still very much in the future, I say that because, compared to so many other materials, there aren't many people out there exploring it, just a few scouts that have gone out, and put little flags here and there. It's like the map is sort of there, but as a ghost image.

GG: -the limit sounds-

GW: Exactly. When you first draw the outlines of a map, but of course all the contours that you add, the relief, that sense of depth and all that, that's still to come. That's what makes working in the sort of marginal field of radio art exciting, the sense that there is still a lot of wilderness out there.

GG: There's also a part of radio that sort of resists the commodity quality of other types of music and sound recording, putting stuff on CDs, where a more saleable product is produced in the end. Radio can be tuned in or tuned out by anybody at any moment. Having done a radio show, you feel as though nobody could be listening, it could go totally unheeded by everybody.

GW: And I love that, the not knowing. There's something so wonderful about it, to me, I mean if you embrace it. To some people it's very discouraging, they think , well, why bother.

GG: But it has a whole other potential.

GW: To me it's so beautiful, you know it's that slippery question of who's there, is there anybody there? Are you out there? Are you listening? And then of course, as the trickster knows, once you open the question, the space for a question, then the seduction begins. In my longer pieces I always try to design them in a very circular way so that you can enter in many different spots and still get the basic idea. Or you can listen to the whole loopy adventure.

JQ: So do you try not to constrain yourself too much with story?

GW: Not a story that has a conventional beginning, middle and end. I mean conceptually it has a beginning middle and end, but one that can repeat, that can almost sort of like a wave form that's just waving waving waving waving. So if you listen to it, if it's a one hour program or play or broadcast or whatever, any five minutes, no matter where in the program you listen to those five minutes you get somehow that sense of waves of thought, there's a structure that's true to the medium. Now if you put that same structure on a CD where somebody's gonna sit down and listen, then it doesn't work, but the equivalent might be shuffle mode. On some of my works that have been released as CDs, I put ID points at different sections of the piece and then encourage people to play it in shuffle mode, allowing the chance of new associations to emerge when you listen differently, in a mutating sequence. Of course, I also write plays, and then there is whole other set of rules.

GG: There seems to be something about hearing a disembodied voice, that you don't know where it's coming from, and because of the fact that you use

a voice in a lot of your audio work, how do you see the psychological effect of the disembodied voice? The radio play or the radio voice has a strange power, on the one hand, to give a message effectively, and on the other to vex or confuse the listener.

GW: The disembodied voice, it's like this vibrating skeleton or some sort of phantom that's suddenly speaking that has a tremendous power over the human imagination, since we all desperately want to hear the voice of god, right, we long to hear that inner voice that is the voice of god, or maybe the voice of the devil. So the voice that's coming out of radiophonic space that can tap into that desire is very powerful. But I try to use that in a way that's constantly hinting to the listener that they're NOT listening to the voice of authority, though I will constantly play with the expectation for authority, because Americans are trained from a very early age that anything we hear on the airwaves has got to be the truth, that's the voice of authority. Orson Welles seized on this with his famous Martian invasion, which in turn provoked a wave of regulation of the airwaves, as the government need to restore the fiction of authority and authenticity. Then there was the master radio delusionist , Hitler, who had an immediate grasp of the tremendous power of the microphone, and the amplified voice, and who mesmerized an entire generation to obey the projections of his own apocalyptic myth. I'm astonished at what people will believe, just because it comes down the tubes. I mean if you think of the kind of news that you get on commercial radio, "You give us 22 minutes and we'll give you the world".

JQ: 10-10 WINS.

GW: What a fascinating arrogance, to say something like that as your tag line!

JQ: The pace of the shows on that channel ---- dizzying.

GW: Vertigo. So for me, to listen to those formats and those hideous delusional aspirations and those grubby commercial models in a way, and think of ways to get inside them and take them somewhere else, is very intriguing. To begin with the arrogance of absolute certainty --- the world in your ears ---- and then gradually bleed, minute by minute, into a nebulous zone where all boundaries, bodies, voices, themes and ideas blur into a each other, or into a fog of thought and feeling that is closer to some kind of lived truth. The voice of authority is part of what I call "radio Thanatos", the side of radio that vibrates with death, as weapons or as control over communities. Then there is "radio Eros", a radio of play, and attraction, a radio of productive illusion, a radio that brings ears together into some kind of fresh network. The best radio art hangs in the turbulence between the two. I want my next work to be a kind of navigational system for the turbulence, bewteen the scream and the laugh, perhaps, or between the horrific shudders of a sort of cultural Grand Mal seizure – for what else can we call the Age of Bush? --- and the stubborn insistence of some other vibe: eros, affirmation, call it what you will. Life?