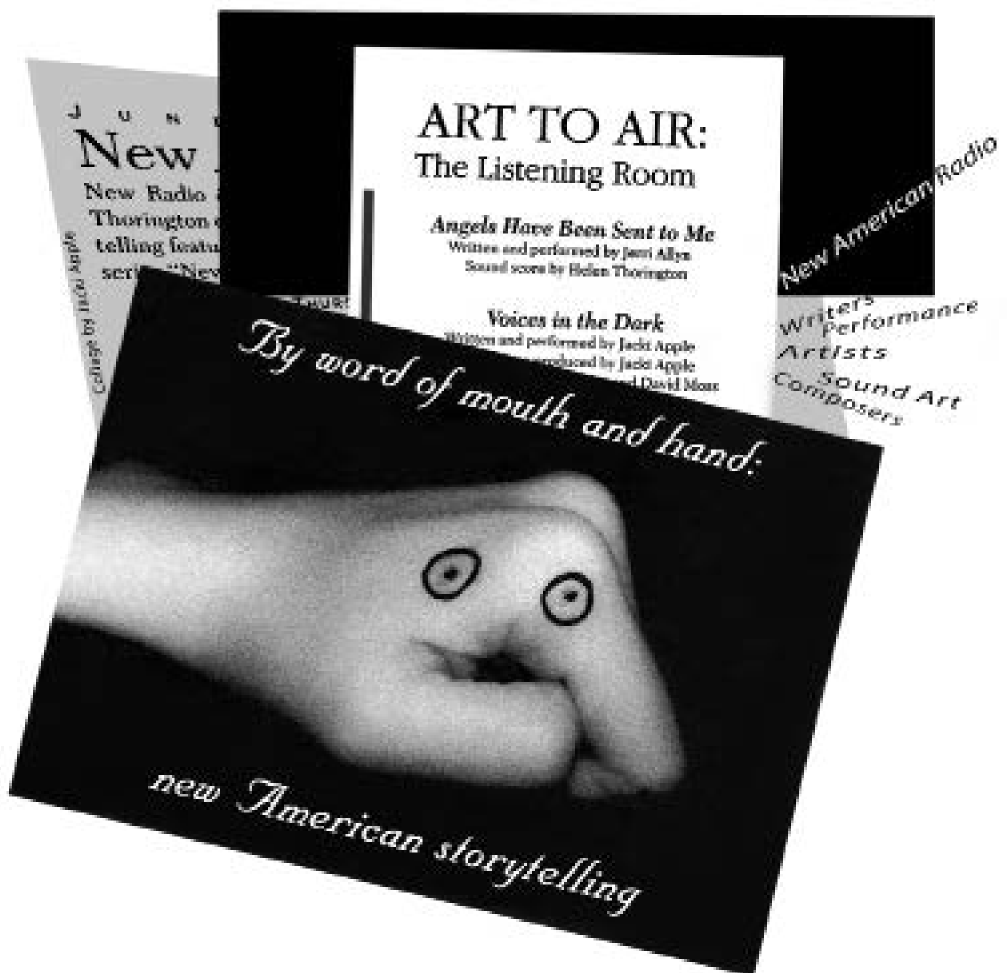
RADIO ART



The Making of American Radio Art

Helen Thorington

History is made more of crossroads, branchings and tangles than straight lines.
—Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

My generation grew up without television. We were a radio generation and our lives, by comparison with those who came after, were still relatively free of images of the mass media. But not the messages. Already thirty years into its development, radio had its messages for us and it delivered them well. We knew Quaker Oats was shot from guns; we wore Dick Tracy rings on our fingers; we coded and decoded endless adolescent messages; we drank Ovaltine with Little Orphan Annie or because of her. We flew "into the air, Junior Birdmen; we kept our heads up in the blue." We waved flags for Hudson High boys—we showed them where we stood. Jack Armstrong, all-American boy was our boy . . . And as evening fell, *The Shadow*, *The Green Hornet*, *The Lone Ranger* became our companions, slipping easily, secretly between us and our homework. Later, as night came on, *I Love a Mystery* reached out to grip our imaginations with its terrifying tales.

We couldn't let go. We took our radios to bed with us, some of us risking electrocution under the covers to go on listening as long as we could, until sleep or snooping parents caught us out. Radio was our technology and it was—the critics are absolutely right—revolutionizing our lives.

It is interesting now to think about that technology, and to understand that the question of how it would be used had already been decided in the twenty-six years before my birth. No chance at all to affect it. The technological progress and systems-building that were responsible for feeding my early years with stirring narratives of danger and single-minded courage had been made at the price of individual initiative and freedom in the ether. Diversity and idiosyncrasy had already been muted and screened out; the stories (whose advertising I remember

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now far more clearly than the stories) were the output of corporations and existed for commercial ends and to advance values consonant with consumer capitalism.

> And when you hear the radio announcer,
> you'll get your wings of tin.
> So remember, Junior Birdmen,
> and send your box tops in.

It was in the late 1970s that I responded to the lure of that old technology—its pulse momentarily as lively as in its youth—in that wonderfully new and doomed experiment, public radio. You wouldn't think we could be had twice in the same way. But there's little that can live in an environment of advanced capitalism and survive without at some point thinking large robust markets and instant audience gratification. And if you're public radio, founded to be an alternative to this kind of thing, you don't think these things without a lot of overdubbing about diversity, creativity, and innovation, even when the language is finally empty of all its meaning.

I was living in northwestern Pennsylvania, in a farming area, where radio was news—generally the morning newspaper read out loud—music (lots of it) and, for those of us venturing out of the cities for the first time in heady experiments with the land and community life, a kind of cultural reminder that there was a creative and a critical environment we'd left behind. Radio was something you listened to pretty regularly, and public radio was our network of choice.

Sometime after the thunderstorms and ghost-like utterances of my brief life in theatre, as I sat in my farmhouse with one of those now antique synthesizers, an EML 101, and my typewriter, I began to create short narrative/sound works that would for a time be aired by National Public Radio (NPR). I was captivated by the ambient spaces I could create for my text works using its oscillators. Later I would discover that, once processed or combined with additional recorded sound and/or improvised music, I could also create sound environments that evoked a sense of place and suggested a story. Radio seemed the perfect venue for this kind of work, and NPR, a new voice in the non-commercial field, seemed to hold out the promise of inclusion.[1] Despite early rejections, I persevered, and to my astonishment, my work was enthusiastically received and subsequently aired as part of NPR's *Voices in the Wind* series on June 24, 1979.

By 1981 the honeymoon with NPR was over and they were no longer airing my sound/text works. The career I had begun or thought I had begun in 1979 was caput. It became clear that if I wanted to pursue this work, I would have to start my own independent non-profit producing and distributing organization.

Thus in 1981 New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc. and a series—New American Radio—was born. New American Radio could only have happened in a system as loosely organized and mildly chaotic as American public radio. With a $15,000 grant in hand, New American Radio was launched in 1985 with the selection of five works: *Display Wounds*, a docu-fiction by Gregory Whitehead (New York City), *City in a Bottle* by John H. Rieger (San Francisco), *The Death of Ruth Tuck* by Scott Carrier (Salt Lake City), *The Adventures of Mary Flowerpot* by Pamela Barnes (New York City), and *Wolves at the Door* by Karen McPherson (New York City). It premiered on WKCR-FM in New York City on five successive evenings beginning April 17, 1986. Each of the five thirty-minute programs was followed by a half-hour on-air discussion with moderator Neil Straus, Regine Beyer, myself, and an occasional call-in, and was later transcribed, edited, and published in *EAR Magazine*'s September radio column.

In 1987, a brief window of opportunity opened. The panel reviewing applications to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's newly established Radio Fund comprised several who supported the idea of a national laboratory series where producers could explore and enlarge the concept of what radio is and where new talent might be developed for the medium. With their support two years later, in 1989, New American Radio launched a national weekly series of what we called radio art. With its artists using radio's tools and radio's arena of distribution during its ten years as a national weekly series, it built a body of uniquely American work that has been recognized and acclaimed by audiences and programmers around the world.

In retrospect, it was (or seemed) a propitious time. A number of people were already introducing artists to the radio public. Across the country, in stations from Madison, Wisconsin (WPR), and Boulder, Colorado (KGNU), to Philadelphia (WXPN), New York City (WNYC) and Boston (WGBH), and back again to San Francisco (KPFA), Portland, Oregon (KBOO), and Los Angeles (KPFK), programmers were airing new and experimental works. Charles Amirkhanian at KPFA (San Francisco) and Jacki Apple at KPFK (Los Angeles) were hosting and producing weekly programs featuring works they identified as "radio art." Don Joyce and Negativland were on air with their late-night freeform show, *Over The Edge*. Julie Lazar at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles was initiating her series, *The Territory of Art*, and Gregory Whitehead would soon become radio editor at *EAR Magazine*.[2]

From a critical perspective we made an effort to examine our position and to differentiate our programs from the regular output of the distribution system we were making use of. And we encouraged others to help us find a language with which to deal intelligently with this new work. Central to this undertaking

were the contributions of Douglas Kahn, whose examination of early twentieth-century sound arts pointed to the stifling effect of musical presuppositions on other realms of sound composition. Plus, his continuing interest in phonography made him one of the few academics thinking and writing about radio. Gregory Whitehead, whose prolific output spanned both radio and print, argued for an understanding of what the *radio* is in radio art. Jacki Apple, who perhaps better than any of us understood the radio art of this period as an extension of post-modern interdisciplinary art into the mass media, frequently found opportunities to write about it in *High Performance* magazine. Finally, my never-to-be-suppressed colleague Regine Beyer, who again and again dealt in a defining way with the early attempts to undermine or banish New American Radio from the public airwaves, and thus relegate its significant contributions to a specifically American form of radio art, to the never-never land of silence.

WHAT WAS IT?

From the start, New American Radio was an invitation to artists, in whatever discipline they found themselves, to explore the radio medium, to engage with it as an art context, and to develop work that, given the considerable constraints on the medium, would expand radio's notion of aural thinking. New American Radio extended its invitation to artists from all cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and aesthetic interests; and it included younger artists, whose opportunities within the public radio system were, and continued to be, tenuous and under-encouraged. Our intent with the first series, and with what we hoped would be additional series in the years to come, was to gain access to the national airwaves for artists, as many as we could support, so that an artistic exploration of the medium might begin. To this end, we encouraged participants to push at the limits of existing forms, to reflect on them, criticize, and challenge their unexamined assumptions, anticipating that their explorations would lead to the development of new ways of structuring and perceiving radio that would be truly unique. In a society where "commodity listening" is encouraged—i.e., a way of listening that encourages audiences to suspend all intellectual activity and to be content with consuming what they hear—the channels open to individual expression have become almost too narrow to navigate, and the artist's voice and vision becomes an intervention in the media landscape that makes all the difference and the only difference.

Between 1985 and 1994, New American Radio produced a considerable body of work with a particularly American character that explored the cultural, media, and sonic landscape, and encompassed a range of narrative strategies and structures that opened up the possibilities of radio as a creative medium and as a venue for art. While a majority of the visual and performing artists, writers, and

composers represented made a significant contribution to the New American Radio series, others, such as Sheila Davies and Susan Stone, contributed only a few works, but ones of great importance in their extraordinary convergence of materials and alternative forms, including history, fantasy, and fiction.[3] Still others, like Guillermo Gómez-Peña, have practiced their art in the medium without the help of a regularly distributed series, including pirate broadcasts such as *Naftaztec*, a radio performance intervention taped live at KPFK-FM, Los Angeles in 1994 during Jacki Apple's weekly show, *Soundings*. Among the works in the initial series that stood out for having taken non-traditional directions—and for having differentiated itself from anything resembling radio theater, both in its choice of subject matter and in the way in which it was presented—was Whitehead's *Display Wounds* (1986).

From the beginning, Gregory Whitehead was deeply engaged in the exploration of radio's space and materials. Versed in literature and cultural theory, he brought a highly original poetic, philosophical, and seductive voice to radio, employing language as both the vehicle for and architecture of an intimate psychological as well as physical space. In *Display Wounds*, he enacts the role of a "vulnerologist" or wound reader, a doctor who can read a wound and construct its voice. "Built from the deformative potentials of the technological environment," Whitehead wrote of this piece, "the theatre of wounds is a memory theatre inscribed on the surface of human flesh."[4] The listener is transported into this operating theatre, not through any narrative progression, but by suggestion. Led by the probing voice of the doctor and the occasional sounds of his instruments, we are drawn in and become implicated in the bodily condition and circumstance of the patient he examines. We are his interns. "No wound ever speaks for itself," he tells us as he begins his probe of the nasty cut in front of him. You hear the silence of the operating theatre, the scraping of bone. And then he is talking again, slowly, as he works, explaining what he is doing and why. Treating a wound, he tells us "is an interpretive process." As a vulnerologist, it is his goal to construct a voice for the wound. He must sense its emotion, the deeper nature of its experience. He must make it audible. There are long silences in which only the sound of the operation and of the doctor's brief responses to what he is seeing can be heard. Now and again, his brooding is punctuated by periodic selections from tango music. Finally, he speaks about the importance of giving voice to the wound, about how the wound is the physical repository of memory. The wounded want to forget, but if the wound is left unexamined, it may become deeper; it may even become genetic. A memory theatre without interpretation, he cautions, can give birth to monsters.

The idea for this work, as Whitehead notes in his brief online description, originated in his experience as a passenger in a near-fatal car accident on a dark road in rural Maine when he was sixteen. The accident involved eight people, each of whom suffered a wide range of serious injuries that, in Whitehead's words, "created a complex and multilayered woundscape." Subsequent early works created by Whitehead specifically for New American Radio include *Phantom Pain* (1989), *Lovely Ways To Burn* (1990), and *Shake, Rattle and Roll* (1992). In each, manipulated language becomes a surgical tool, dissecting the dark underbelly of the late-twentieth-century American psyche.

John Rieger's voice was distinctive, too. Rieger began his career in radio at the Pacifica station KPFA, Berkeley, where he produced documentaries for local airing, as well as feature modules for NPR. He also created soundtracks for experimental film and site-specific art installations. Beginning in 1985, most of his work was produced for his bi-weekly late-night radio program *Artifacts* on KPFA, a program he used to explore and develop what he called "audiographic" art and live "audiographic" performance.

> I'm interested in pictures, in sound-pictures, and I understand that as something different from stories or music . . . If you compare radio or audio recording to music you immediately notice that they get their material in different ways: a sound recordist receives something from the world, a sound image from something. Music is not interested in sounds that might represent the world—maybe Beethoven would evoke the sounds of a thunderstorm or a spring-day, but his primary interest in his materials was the timbre.[5]

City in a Bottle is an example of audiographic art. It takes its title from the story of Kandor, a city of Superman's home planet, Krypton, which was subjected to a shrinking beam and held captive in a large glass bottle. Both story and title provide keys to Rieger's use of more or less mundane sound images taken from his daily life in the Bay Area. He "rescues" these sounds from contexts in which they no longer excite interest or attention and removes them to a compositional context in which they can be heard afresh and the questions raised: What is this? Who am I in relation to it? *City in a Bottle* is an exploration of ways of talking with sound that frees it from the constraints it has suffered in journalism, drama, and music. A later and shorter work, *Windows* (1989), continued Rieger's exploration of ways of talking with sound. On one level, *Windows* is a work about the pure joy of opening windows and listening to what's out there. On another level, it investigates the question *What is the content of a sound recording?*—and finds that there is much more objective information in it than is usually thought.

BROADCAST INTERVENTIONS

In the second series of thirteen works funded by a successful application to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's Satellite Program Development Fund (SPDF), the programs we produced included commissioned works: Charles Amirkhanian's strikingly beautiful *Walking Tune (A "Room Music"for Percy Granger*); *Audiographs: Songs of the Tenderloin* by the Earwax group Marcos Kounalakis, Barney Jones, and Jim McKee; *Accusations* by Susan Stone; and *Operadio* by David Moss.

Audiographs: Songs from the Tenderloin (1987) is a radio documentary, or, as the artists called it, an "audiographic work," unlike any that NPR listeners could have heard at that time. Created by three Bay Area sound designers, *Audiographs* consisted of condensed and dramatized portraits of people living on the streets of San Francisco. Like Rieger's *City in a Bottle*, the content shaping the foundation of this work was rescued from the urban environment and re-contextualized. Only this time the recorded interviews with the city's homeless were re-situated in two alternating environments—the first in the original urban sites of the recordings, and the second within a composed musical score. Within the music, the edited and repeated voices become part of the rhythm,while the recurring beats of the music intensify the toughness and tenderness of the individual narrative reflections, and the pain, humor, and ethics that govern their lives. *Audiographs* presented the rapidly increasing condition of homelessness in 1980s urban America in an entirely new and very human light, and it might be seen as a radio art parallel to performance artist John Malpede's newly formed Los Angeles Poverty Department live theatre project on Los Angeles's 1980s skid row.

We called it a radio art series, a term first used in Canada a few years earlier, in order to distinguish the series' works from conventional radio drama, documentary/talk radio and music. But we also used it to include what Douglas Kahn called "new incarnations of established radio genres," such as experimental documentary, experimental drama, and new musical forms. But what we really wanted was true alternative forms, work that would stir the airwaves by creating new, artist-imagined sonic spaces and new contents for radio. By leaving New American Radio open to a great variety of work, we were saying that to find out what an artistic practice in radio might be, we first have to have artists practicing in radio. And we were saying that radio's space in the United States is, for the most part, artistically unexplored. From the point of view of the artist, radio, as Jacki Apple so aptly put it, "is an alternative space, open to all manner of art pioneers." Not necessarily accessible, but artistically open. New American Radio remained on air as a weekly national series for ten years, until 1998. Among the many works we commissioned and/or distributed during that ten-year period

were the following: *The Spark Heard 'Round the World* (1989) by Nick Collins and *Voices in the Dark* (1991) by Jacki Apple. Both explored radio space and various forms of communication, their languages, technologies, and cultural implications.

Nick Collins's *The Spark Heard 'Round the World* (1989) is a sonic portrait of the world as revealed through electromagnetic phenomena. Shaped out of the tremendous buzz, hum, and squawk of the international communications systems—commercial FM and AM, short-wave and long-wave transmissions, HAM and CB radio, public service bands, Morse code, telex and other coded signals—*The Spark* is a work of frenzied noise striving for communication that thickens into an almost tangible morass of sound, then loosens into sound patterns and light textures. The human voice does not direct us, it does not point a message, articulate a story or create a space. Rather, in this work, the voice is overwhelmed by the sound of the technologies humans have created in their efforts to "improve" their lives and communicate more easily. In the environment of communications systems, the originating voice is distorted, barely audible, while the transmission system itself is vibrant and amazingly alive.

The world of American radio that I grew up with and described at the beginning of this essay comes into play again in the era of *Star Trek*, in *Voices in the Dark* (1991), written, produced, and performed by Jacki Apple with additional vocals by Anna Homler and David Moss, and music by Ruben Garcia. *Voices in the Dark* is about interstellar conversations, radio waves, and sonic archaeology. It takes us on a trip into the cosmos, where old and new technologies interface and an audio archive of information is being "broadcast to the stars." Our narrator is out there somewhere. The skies are clear, and as she drives along in darkness, voices come to her through the car radio. They speak in "a language that sounds a lot like English," and what she hears is a vast repository of human (and perhaps other) histories in which "time melts and language dissolves into signals." "There's a buzzing, a humming in the air."

All these voices speeding through the universe, cultural fragments and pieces of memory that become "a cacophony of utterances, that shoot across the sky like meteors—words with wings—angels of deliverance, bearers of bad tidings, the rantings of madmen and fools, jesters, lovers and poets, voices in the dark . . ." It is a landscape of American broadcast space that includes Jack Benny, Alan Fried, John Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan, a space where "John Lennon is on the same wavelength with Khrushchev and Hanoi Hannah . . . (where) Johnny Carson introduces The Shadow, who is really Orson Wells . . . All these voices traversing the universe looking for a pick-up! Imagine gridlock in the big data bank in outer space." And what about the "sea of conversational debris, waves of sonic turbulence . . . jamming interplanetary frequencies"? Is there anyone

out there listening? And if so, how do they interpret what they hear? Do they distinguish between real events and people and media-generated events? "What is the difference between Dr. Spock and Mr. Spock?" one listener inquires. Are we perhaps the "they"? "We say we want to make contact with the Other," the narrator observes, but what we seem to be searching for "is a mirror image of ourselves." How will we cope with our first contact with alien life when we have not yet learned to deal with "otherness" among our own kind?

Like a number of other works in the New American Radio series, Apple's *Voices in the Dark* investigates something happening in the "now" of its time—in this case, the collapsing borders between history and memory and perception and experience as a result of technological intervention in our lives. One can look back to Whitehead's examination of the impact of technology on the human body and see that what Whitehead and Apple are telling us through their artistic work—the spaces they construct and the stories they tell—is that there are dangers embedded in the technological advances we embrace so eagerly. In Whitehead's work, the advance of speed and its deformative potential; in Apple's, the new communications technologies that have brought us to our present, a time of media overload, of "alternative facts," to the distortion of language and the failure of communication. Both works stand out as warnings we have failed to acknowledge. As Apple wrote in her 1990 proposal to the series, "We are all already operating in a new arena, inhabiting it without choice, and frequently without understanding."

RADIO AS TRANSMITTER AND RECEIVER

In the early 1990s, Jacki Apple and Gregory Whitehead, two of New American Radio's most prolific artists, came forward with works that involved their listening audiences in unaccustomed ways: Apple with the fourth and fifth works in her six-part series, *Redefining Democracy in America* (1991–1992), confronting the deep schisms and contradictions in an America in crisis [The text of *Redefining Democracy in America: Episodes in Black and White, Part 1* appears elsewhere in this issue]; Whitehead with *Pressures of the Unspeakable*, a work commissioned by The Listening Room, ABC Radio, Sydney, Australia, and later broadcast on New American Radio. Both interventions were made with an understanding of radio's potential as both a communication and a distribution medium. By inviting their audiences to participate in the media process, these works demonstrated radio's long denied ability to be both transmitter and receiver.

Apple's intervention into the radio distribution medium was more deliberately political than any work discussed so far. In *The Voices of America 1992*, she opened the radio medium to all of her listeners, inviting them to share in its power

by giving them the opportunity to speak directly and without interruption to a listening audience, not as consumers, but as producers and providers of the content. But Apple's project was not just an experiment in role reversal in which the consumer becomes producer. Using the "town hall" format, *The Voices of America 1992* was an experiment in media democracy in the rhetorically saturated media environment of an election year. During twenty hours of live broadcast time made available during April and May by Pacifica Radio stations KPFK (Los Angeles) and KPFT (Houston), each participant had three minutes to address their fellow citizens and describe their vision for the future of the country. They were asked to prepare statements in advance. "If you were running for President, what would you say to the American people? What should we aspire to and how should we realize it?" The dialogue was not between caller and host, but among a diverse community of listeners/speakers. The significance of the work was not just in what was said, but in the opportunity given the to listeners to speak, and the concurrent exposure of the participants' ability or inability to imagine and articulate a coherent reasoned position. Much of what was expressed came not from an intellectual analysis, but from an emotional place.

Apple's project was not just an experiment in media democracy either. Focusing on the coherence, conviction and sincerity of expression rather than on political ideology, Apple, the artist, restructured the raw material into a "dialogue" between speakers across the political spectrum, covering six general categories: government and politics, values and consciousness, education, the environment, race and all the issues surrounding it, and religion. The final edited montage was an orchestrated distillation that maintained the integrity of the original voices, thus revealing a collective meaning greater than the politics or prejudices of any individual or group. Perhaps its most profound message was in the discovery that what all these disparate people shared was a common desire to belong to something bigger than themselves, a yearning for community, and a struggle to find and act from the best in themselves.

The Voices of America 1992 is an important and unnervingly prophetic work, important not only in the clarity with which its original materials tell the story of where we were in 1992, but in showing how and why those divisions and anxieties have deepened and grown into where we are today. The scream is there in the materials Apple accumulated, in the inarticulateness, the fear, the hate. But coupled with it is a good loud whistle in the storm, a clearly heartfelt desire to contribute something positive to whatever is happening in this country and to whatever lies ahead.

So, what is this scream (screaming) that returns to us in the work of Gregory Whitehead's *Pressures of the Unspeakable* (1991)? Conceptually one of the more

interesting works considered here, *Pressures of the Unspeakable* was originally a live "performance" commissioned by The Listening Room, the arts unit of the Australian Broadcasting System, and then, as in Apple's work, edited into a thirty-minute piece for New American Radio in 1992.

As in his earlier work *Display Wounds*, Whitehead once again assumes the role and voice of the pathologist, this time investigating and analyzing psychological and emotional "wounds" as expressed in the scream. To develop the concept, and create it in a permanent form, Whitehead worked within the broadcast space and with the help of broadcast staff on-air and in print promotion. His intent: to get Australian residents to contribute their screams to him as Dr. Whitehead, head of The Institute of Screamscape Studies.

A major Sydney newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, printed an invitation to screamers on its front page. Invitations were issued on air, through the Listening Room and other ABC programs. An interview was arranged between Dr. Whitehead and Richard Ackland, the presenter of ABC's breakfast program, *Daybreak*. According to Roz Cheney, the director of Listening Room, Ackland did not know what was going on and enacted a fantasy for the listeners with Whitehead. No one asked if this was really true. Nor did they acknowledge that it was a performance. Recording equipment was set up (the screamline) in the Listening Room so that people could phone in with their screams twenty-four hours a day. Over a two-week period, this screamline recorded hundreds of calls from all over Australia. The Listening Room also set up a digital recorder and mic so that by arrangement anyone could come in and scream.

Dr. Whitehead did not speak with his contributors directly. Rather the screams that were donated (along with additional comment) were received via the screamline, recorded and kept within his "laboratory," to be organized, interpreted and combined as part of his institutional report on the "vast interior landscape" of the Australian screamscape. "The scream," Dr. Whitehead tells his passive listeners in the opening section of the work, "is often treated as some kind of insurmountable . . . impenetrable . . . obstacle . . . some pure white noise force that is beyond analysis . . . and unworthy of any kind of interpretation . . . but here at the Institute we hear the scream from an entirely other perspective. The scream is an opening . . . an entrance . . . an access point, entering into a vast interior landscape that has as its surface this highly nuanced, very individual psychic force to it . . ." We (listeners but not contributors) are privy to part of the doctor's interpretation, as for instance, the development of "various techniques for scream hermeneutics that would allow screamers to find their own rightful place within the national screamscape."

There is this curious mix. On one hand, willing and enthusiastic contributions of the screamers; on the other is the bogus doctor's slow and thoughtful interpretation of the categories into which the incoming screams fall, and their meaning. Finally, there was the national broadcast of the assembled report on screamland theory from Sydney's University of Technology, which solicited additional responses. Sometime later, the condensed thirty-minute work would be broadcast as a part of New American Radio by NPR stations across the country. In this case, the only participation possible would be through the way sound creates experiential associations in the subjective consciousness of the listener. However, when played in Los Angeles on Apple's program *Soundings*, the audience was given ten minutes at the end to call in and scream. Screams, it turned out, that were far more intense and emotionally loaded than the Australians.

But screams are not in fact the landscape of Whitehead's piece. Illusion is the geography here, and sleight of tongue its method. The message here is keep your ear on this guy. Allow him one slurred meaning, one extended metaphor and you're lost in a quicksand of shifting illusion, a medialand grown so vast and so persuasive that we are all, in one way or another, complicit in its continuance.

THE ARTIST AND THE POLITICAL ACT

> *Manipulation—etymologically, "handling"—means technical treatment of a given material with a particular goal in mind. When the technical intervention is of immediate social relevance, then manipulation is a political act.*
> —Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media"

This brings us to the broadcast interventions of Donald Swearingen and Don Joyce. As in Apple's and Whitehead's pieces, their art is a political act deconstructing and subverting the media system and content. However, Swearingen's texts are directly sampled from a vast array of on-air commercial sources and re-inserted back onto the airwaves in a recomposed form that exposes the underlying manipulative power and lure of the message. Joyce, on the other hand, extrapolates the advertising messages and transposes them into his own seductive vernacular style.

In Donald Swearingen's *Salvation at One A.M.*, the media-speak Swearingen manipulates is one of the most pervasive languages in our cultural environment. What draws our attention to it in a new way is its unremitting use. There is no reference here to personal feeling. No effort to establish a comfortable relationship with the audience by alluding to assumptions they share. There are only the messages of late-night TV—buy and be saved. Swearingen has compressed them, almost to the point of eliminating the air between them. And he has composed

them so they build, accumulate, repeat, amass, more and more of the same in breathless profusion, while underneath his music captures the pitch, echoes the rhythms and cadences to create a suffocating fog of sales-speak. There's nothing else to hear. Feeling, emotion, subjectivity have vanished.

There is no denying that somewhere a current of collective anxiety flows, both occasioning the hype and growing more volatile because its promises are unfulfilled. But while Swearingen's piece may imply the existence of deep social needs, it is not about them. We do not hear the real, the authentic pain of the literally millions who want, desperately and in whatever way possible, to be loved, to be wanted, to be a part of the social process. Those cries are absent. The artist understands very well the nature of our collective wishes, but the focus of his work is on their falsification and exploitation—the slick, polished enormity of it all. And his flawless manipulation and reconstruction of his source material make falsification and exploitation the geography—and the only geography—of the work. In Swearingen's work, there is no scream, only the shallow multi-colored oilslick of endless deception—buy and be saved, buy and be saved. It is brilliant, as perfect and unrelenting as its subject.

Where Swearingen's work presents us with a landscape of relentless cajoling and coercion, all of it remarkably similar, Don Joyce and the noiseband Negativland's 1991 production *Advertising Secrets* show us how that landscape is constructed. The work has an earlier feel to it, as if it assumed quite naturally the existence of an audience of like-minded listeners who would enjoy poking fun at that monster over there—the one lurking in but not quite filling the landscape. It is as if by exposing him we might overcome him. There is no such hope in the Swearingen work. I laughed during the Swearingen piece, but it was the relentlessness of the deception and its audacity—"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus"—that elicited my laughter and quickly turned it into something more nearly resembling pain. Nobody is thinking. Nobody.

Advertising Secrets has a lighter touch. There is humor in its juxtaposition of phrases, music, sounds, and texts, some of them downright homey. Its humor is more youthful, its landscape not so completely bleak, perhaps because it is peopled by recognizable characters. On the one hand, there's the typical American male, replete with all his vulnerabilities, his typical American dreams, his yearnings for money, a nice house, dignity in life, security in old age; on the other, the advertising instructor teaching his students how to prey on these needs. It's a jungle environment, kill or be killed, as the instructor frequently points out, so here, for your edification are lessons in how the killing is done.

RADIO ART LEGACY

The artists who participated in New American Radio did not enter a new medium to be a part of its mainstream. They came to explore the creative potential of the medium and in so far as possible to create work that was not then being created for that medium. The possibilities were open-ended. The artist might create work that combined forms that carefully craft relationships or call attention to relationships that are not currently perceived as significant. Or perhaps the artist's exploration would lead to the development of a different way of structuring, a way of perceiving that is an individual and distinctly different version of reality. African American artists such as collaborators Alva Rogers and Lisa Jones, Suzan-Lori Parks, Homer Jackson, Carl Hancock Rux, and Keith Antar Mason, whose voices had not previously been represented, brought alternative cultural perspectives, histories, aesthetics, and politics to the medium. For other artists, such as Bruce Odland (*Cloud Chamber*) and José Iges (*City of Water*), radio was a means to explore aural space and transform sonic language into imaginary visual narratives that portray a sense of place. Still others, Pamela Z (*Parts of Speech*) and David Moss (*Conjure*), investigated language itself as both form and sonic content.

For multidisciplinary artists such as Terry Allen, Rachel Rosenthal, Rinde Eckert, Shelley Hirsch, and Diamanda Galás it was an opportunity to adapt live performance works into radio art performances, or conversely, to extend their radio pieces into live performances and installations. In 1986, Allen's *Torso Hell*, Rosenthal's *Charm*, and Eckert's *Shoot The Moving Things* were originally broadcast as live radio art performances on Apple's *Soundings* in collaboration with *High Performance* magazine for subsequent distribution on cassette. The *Soundings/High Performance* series also featured David Antin's *The Archaeology of Home*, Mike Kelley's *The Peristaltic Airwaves*, and Noreen Hennessy' s *Girl Scout Diaries*. In addition, *Soundings* presented three more live radio art performances by Los Angeles performance artists: John Fleck's *Psycho Opera*, Anna Homler's *Pharmacia Poetica*, and Linda Albertano's *Goldminers of '86*.

It is impossible to sum up all the artistic directions taken in over three hundred original works, or to do justice to the numerous activities that took radio art outside of the broadcast space across a decade of community-building among artists who produced for New American Radio. But it can be said that the series succeeded in becoming the first in the U.S. to create a venue and a forum for artists who were interested both in creating work specifically for radio broadcast and in having their work nationally and internationally distributed. It provided a substantial production fee and a conducive environment for networking, intellectual exchange, and the development of a discourse.

For a full catalogue of artists and their works, as well recorded works, reviews and critical essays, see the New American Radio website: http://www.somewhere.org.

NOTES

1. NPR was formally incorporated on March 3, 1970.

2. *Ear Magazine* was a monthly music magazine devoted to new music. The magazine was published by the New Wilderness Foundation, New York, and was in circulation between 1973 and 1991. Helen Thorington and Regine Beyer served as Radio Editors from 1987–1989; Thorington, Beyer, and Whitehead co-edited the EAR Supplement, *Festival for a New Radio*, in 1987.

3. Jacki Apple, "The Aural Stage" (1991), *Performance / Media / Art / Culture. Selected Essays 1983–2018* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2019), 92–94.

4. https://gregorywhitehead.net/2012/06/07/display-wounds/

5. From a short interview by Regine Beyer, 1985.

HELEN THORINGTON is a writer, composer, and producer whose print, radio, sound, and web works have been published, broadcast, performed, and exhibited internationally. She was the founder and artistic director of New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc., the New American Radio series, and the *Turbulence* and *Somewhere* websites. She is the co-author with Jacki Apple of *The Tower,* a limited-edition artist's book and experimental fiction.