

An Interview with Gregory Whitehead By Allie Alvarado

*Gregory Whitehead is a playwright, audio artist, and producer of over 100 radio plays, essays and voiceworks, broadcast throughout North America, Europe, and Australia. He is also the co-editor of *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde*, and author of numerous essays on media, politics, and cultural memory.*

Allie Alvarado: I would like to know about your beginnings, when you decided to intersect art with radio and why.

Gregory Whitehead: Radio has always struck me as something of a wilderness, in terms of the enormous gap between creative possibilities and the actual history of creative radio. I was aware that there had been other explorers in the wilderness, from the very early days, but their maps did not strike me as being quite right. I had the impression there were all kinds of strange and fascinating nooks and crannies that had been missed, or even suppressed. Given my passion for music and words, and for fooling around with audiotape, radio was an obvious medium to pursue, but I've never had the idea of "making radio art" and then putting it on the radio -- my approach has always been to try to find ways of entering into radiophonic space, with an open mind, and with open ears, and then try to make something from it.

So, what excites you about radio is not just ideas about its content, but how it challenges other boundaries. Could you elaborate a bit on your idea of radiophonic space?

It's misleading to think about radiophonic space in sculptural terms, as a space to be "filled" with sound. Creative radiomakers very often get detoured into fooling around with sound -- which I love to do, too -- but rarely do such manipulations produce exciting radio, in themselves.

Radio space is more a series of cultural, social and political relations, to be engaged in some way. It seems heretical (and I have often been accused of the heresy!), but radio is not about sound. Radio happens in sound, at a perceptual level, but the guts of radio are not sounds, but rather the gaps between sending and receiving, between transmission and audition, or however you want to name the space. Radio is essentially a gap medium, which is one reason I like to think of Duchamp as a radio artist, though he never made a radio piece. Duchamp is the master of the gap -- and I have had many of my best radio ideas contemplating his deep, funny and resonant work at the Philadelphia

Museum of Art. Etants Donnés is an incredible radio piece, if you have the ears for it.

In a literal way, telephone offers one method to jump the gap, and talk radio makes a sad meal of the possibility. But the gap can also be jumped in other ways, coaxing listeners into a new kind of structure, or rhythm, or play of associations.

There are also so many ways to refigure the notion of the radio "host", and much of my work has revolved around that most difficult question of who is speaking, and from what position? And how to evaluate the status (truth? myth? fiction? rumor? nonsense?) of this voice, from out of the dark? Where does the voice lead us? To some fresh understanding, or to thick and murky oblivion?

How have you personally navigated radiophonic space from a creative standpoint?

Navigation implies that everything is somehow in control, and for me, that would be stretching the truth. Very often, I have had no idea where I was going with a project, it has been pure fog, but fortunately the most sublime things often happen when you have no idea where you are. But I have tried to drift across as much space as I can cover, sometimes crashing into rocks, reefs, growlers and ghosts: live to air performances and screamscares, with phone feedback; voiceworks of many tones and tactics; radio essays, often with radiophilosophical subtexts; radio plays featuring fallen shock jocks or renegade pirates; audio documentaries in the form of theater, or radio theaters in the form of documentaries; news reports from the imagined future; audio headaches and catastrophes.

Are there any aesthetic questions you consider while undertaking the manipulation of site-less sounds or spaces?

I am intrigued by "pure" radio -- the phenomenon -- but also by "dirty" radio, that is the pulse and content of radio as cultural artifact, whether it be a cryptochristian rantshow or drive time traffic reports, or Phil Hendrie's subversive ventriloquisms -- radio is not one space, but many (uncountable!) spaces, linked in complex ways, invisible and deceptive.

Recently, I have found myself returning to the Radical Radio beginnings of a lonely voice, out of the dark, in search of some distant other, the electrical moment of a completely unplanned synapse. The essence is not in the sound, or even in the sounding, but in the relationship, mouth against ear, darkness against darkness, and then, sometimes, the ear talks back. When it happens, it is a very beautiful thing. I'm thinking, for

example, of Anna Friz, in her character of Pirate Jenny.

I note that in recent years, the idea of radio art seems to have dissolved into various notions of recycling, or recontextualizing, existing radio waves, rather than coming to grips with radiophonic space as its own material, and its own zone of possibility. Some of these projects are interesting to listen to -- but to my mind, they begin from a standpoint of exclusion, and the acceptance of exclusion. As if radio is something "out there" that is forbidden, finished, and over, and can only achieve vitality through manipulation. That seems to be an enormous retreat.

How do the politics of making sound art that is transmitted on airwaves, free or otherwise, play into your projects?

The politics of making creative radio are similar to the politics of working in any other kind of public space. I've always been intrigued by the delicate relationship that I have with a listener who never fully planned to be "with me". They did not buy a ticket in advance, or even necessarily intend to tune me in -- the relationship begins as a random, chance event, and then slowly, there is the possibility of something deeper. I love all of the fragility and transience of the radiophonic voice, out of the dark -- unscheduled, and always just a twitch on the dial from silence. Tune out. Sleep.

My challenge to young radio heads is, thus, what can you make from something so delicate, and so deep? I know what you can do with loop-ware and fx plug-ins -- but what can you do with this strange, murky, seductive, deadly, erotic and dangerous circumstance, the odd fate of being on air? Let's get out there, in there, or on there, on the air, wherever it is, and shake it up.