



RADIO CULTURE

BY JACKI APPLE

Radio holds a unique place in American cultural history, and in the shaping of popular culture in particular. It is the bridge between the two halves of this century, the memory trace from one generation to the next, traversed by world leaders, sportscasters, crooners, comedians, cowboys, private eyes, and space travelers, voices imprinted into the American psyche resonating across time and space. Through high times, hard times, and a worldwide war—for three decades radio held a central place in our living rooms. Then it was superseded by television. Still, for another two decades it was a primary conduit for youth culture and its music (rock 'n' roll) and for a vast majority of Americans who were in their teens and twenties in the '50s and '60s, radio and automobiles were inseparable. Not surprisingly radio has continued to hold a special fascination for a generation of American artists for whom it has been an indelible part of their life experience and imagination, and between 1980 and 1994 many of these artists reconceived radio for their own time as a bridge between art and popular culture.

Although avant-garde artists have experimented with radio since its inception, it was the advent in the 1970s of non-commercial, listener-sponsored public radio on the FM band, including college and local community stations that opened up the possibilities of art on the airwaves, not simply as an isolated incident but as a viable alternative to rigidly formatted commercial radio dominated by advertising interests. This new opportunity was augmented by the revolution in both recording and broadcast technology and easy consumer access to sophisticated equipment and processes that rapidly changed the nature of production and distribution. Thus, in the 1980s, radio and audio artworks—sound art, experimental, narratives, sonic geographies, pseudo documentaries, radio cinema, conceptual and multimedia performances—confronted the politics of culture, subverted mass media news and entertainment, and challenged aural perceptions, infiltrated the broadcast landscape and acquired an audience.

Although these works encompass a diversity of aesthetics and styles, the artists share a sensibility radically different from that of their predecessors whose roots are in a European avant-garde tradition. It is a distinctly postmodern American sensibility of blurred boundaries between realities—a convergence of art concepts, forms and media culture, of history, memory, fantasy, and fiction, of public and private space. Unlike the Dada/Fluxus based sound poetry, *musique concrète*, and audio/radio art explorations of John Cage's disciples, contemporary American radio art of the '80s and '90s—from the most complex hi-tech studio productions to the raw energy of live and interactive broadcasts—is predominantly engaged in employing new narrative strategies and subverting media conventions. The result is a montage of performance art, poetry, politics, worldwide music, urban noise, manipulated nature, popular entertainment and advertising, vernacular speech, fractured language, all modes of talk, and an array of cultural voices from the mainstream to the marginal. These artists cross disciplines, raid all genres and recontextualize them into new hybrids. Their work reflects the socio-cultural complexities and contradictions of life in late twentieth-century America as it grapples with the problem of art as a mode of communicating ideas in a media-dominated environment.

The very phrase 'radio art' may seem like an ironic contradiction, an oxymoron even, given the nature of the mainstream broadcast landscape. But it is in actuality a paradigm for our time in which ancient traditions of aural culture collide with instant information access and retrieval in the global village of mass media telecommunications systems. From the artist's point of view, radio is an environment to be entered into and acted upon, a site for various cultural voices to meet, converse, and merge in. It may even be conceived of as a means of intra- and interplanetary travel.

If, in the general hierarchy of media, television has been a condo in the sky, than radio has been a basement apartment—a lot cheaper and easier to break into. But basement apartments also have a long history as the sanctuaries and fertile abode of revolutionaries, poets, artists, and inventors. In the early '80s visual and performance artists, composer/musicians, and writer/performers approached radio as an alternative art space, a performance arena, a distribution system, a public art forum, and they have since used it both as an art context, and an artmaking medium in itself with specific properties. In one sense radio art in the '80s and early '90s carried on the spirit of the original "alternative" spaces of the early '70s, those industrial lofts that were the spawning ground of conceptual and performance art. Both radio art and the ephemeral art of that period sought to wrench free from the commodities marketplace of the gallery and the elitist prestige of the museum in order to inhabit public space and public consciousness. These arts presented themselves as information and experience; a participatory transaction between artist and viewer/listener, as opposed to goods. In the materialistic '80s, art on the airwaves, spurred by a similar impetus, had far-reaching implications.

Radio art has operated on the aesthetic, perceptual, and conceptual frontier, marginalized not only within all the art disciplines it encompasses, but inside the system of distribution it has infiltrated. Like astronauts defying the gravitational laws of time and space, contemporary practitioners have crossed the borders from art-land to mass media-land throwing into question definitions of art based on context, while attempting to redefine the nature of the site of their activities and position their "product" in relation to its non-art counterpart. "Arty" journalism is NOT radio art, though journalistic devices may be employed by radio artists. Likewise, it is not traditional radio drama, though it may use dramatic

conventions. It is not, strictly speaking, music, though it may be composed entirely of non-textual sound. In addition, radio art investigates the nature of language itself—speech as culture, and sound as language—in an era when language has been corrupted by euphemism, double-speak, jargon, and propaganda. As an aural artform it reaffirms that it's not just what we say, but the way we say it. Given all these characteristics the entire enterprise is inherently political outside of the specific content of any individual work.

On one hand, radio (as a free, easily accessible, portable performance space) democratizes art consumption by making art available at the switch of a dial, and by sometimes engaging the listener as participant. Initially it was relatively easy for artists to simply walk in the back door and onto the airwaves (of public radio) unobstructed. For a brief time they traversed unmonitored airwaves like guerrillas in the night, beaming into automobiles across the urban sprawl. Foghorns in the foggy bog, they developed an audience—an odd cross-section of the populace scanning the broadcast band for a signal amongst the babble in Babel.

On the other hand, since the late '80s, public radio more than any other medium has been subject to extreme censorship both outside and inside the system, with audio and performance artists and writers caught at the center of the controversy over civil liberties, freedom of speech and cultural diversity, public access to public broadcasting, and who controls communications technology. From the point of view of those who own and control mass media, radio art may be perceived as anarchistic, unpredictable, uncategorizable, and therefore politically undesirable. The goal of the media artist is, after all, to communicate a different version of reality to a vast number of people, many of whom might not otherwise be exposed to it. Since the fluid composition of this audience does not adhere to marketing research demographics, the most effective way of suppressing this work is to declare that such an audience does not in fact exist, or that its numbers are too small to be of significance. In other words, to manipulate statistical data and apply marketplace prerogatives to so-called non-commercial public radio. Given the collapse of arts funding, the vagaries of cultural politics, and the seductions of cyberspace, radio art as such may well be on its way to becoming an endangered species, or a cultural form about to mutate and adapt to new technologies as artists seek to gain a footing in the uncharted territories of the digital superhighway and expanding telecommunications media.

What contemporary radio artworks share with the golden age of popular radio is the way in which they intimately engage the imagination of the listener. The sonic arts bring us into a different perceptual relationship with the world, and the complexity of the aural palette, with its ability to create a multidimensional reality rich in sensations and images, has endowed radio as a medium with a special capacity for transport. While film and video remain always a facsimile on a screen, and words remain bound to the page of the book, aural media both surround and penetrate the body. Radio in its most creative manifestations is the original holographic virtual space. Projected onto the visual field of the inner eye, resonating along aura pathways in the boom box of the brain, words and sounds become living presences. Think of radio as words with wings, Swedenborg's and Wim Wenders' angels descending to whisper in your ear, their breath caressing your skin. Thoughts are energy transformed into matter through the voice. The voice is the engine of desire that makes flying possible.

In the next century radio as we have known it may disappear, swallowed up by multimedia cyberspace. Or, as an obsolete technology relegated to the subculture fringes, it might exist only in pirate form, a weapon of the world's underclasses, a tool of artists, revolutionaries, shamans, and other questioning voices in our brave new tech world. While tapes may decay, and those that are not continually translated into the latest technology will become unplayable, the ideas can be preserved. Today radio is available on-line but is still trapped within the screen and the box. Tomorrow, no doubt, will bring us a portable digital technology open to all the voices of the world, and as interactive as a phone. Radio once again will be transformed.

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