As an artist, William Furlong established Audio Arts magazine on cassette in 1973, and it now represents the most substantial archive of original recordings of contemporary art. Furlong describes Audio Arts as, “a recorded space for contemporary art”. Working primarily in sound, his recent exhibitions include; An Imagery of Absence, Imperial War Museum, London, Sound Garden, Serpentine Gallery, London, and Thosell, ‘Intelligence, New British Art 2000’, Tate Gallery, London.


Through the voice he explores a range of issues and ideas including humour, gender, ethnicity, age, geographical location, accent, class, timing, wit, implication, innuendo etc. His sound works include installations for a gallery or other specific locations/spaces, CDs, and broadcasts. His works are usually ‘mapped’ or choreographed sculpturally into the space where they are to be realised.

Valérie Vivancos: First of all, William, I would like you to tell me about your practice as an artist.

William Furlong: As an artist I work primarily in sound. And the way in which I work is to record original material. I make recordings of authentic acoustic spaces, authentic voices and ambiances and then I bring those original recordings back to my studio and I don’t distort, I don’t put them through a computer in order to change the sounds that I record but I do move the sounds around sculpturally. I do juxtapose different sources of sound. I think it’s important to say at this point that I was trained as a visual artist and the way in which I work with sound is very much that of a visual artist’s approach and sensibility. I believe there is a distinction between the way in which an artist uses sound and the way in which a musician uses sound. I know that there will be overlaps but there are distinctions, which I think we can explore during this interview. So, as an artist, I tend to want to make works that refer and relate to a context, a space, to people, and I think sound is an extraordinary medium. It is an authentic trace of actuality of people’s lives, of people’s living spaces, of people voices. The voice is an incredibly rich medium, an incredibly rich means of communication because within the voice you have so many layers. Just to mention a few, you have, of course gender, you have humour, you have timing, you have innuenudo, you can have aggression, you can have humility, you can have power, you can have vulnerability... and I could go on and on... The voice has all these elements.

Vv: Do you mean the voice itself, or the things the voice says?

WF: No... It’s a good question... Absolutely not that! It’s the voice itself. When I make works I’m always interested in the sounds of the voice and what the voices are saying beyond those literal meanings. I know that there is a literal narrative that people can express using language but I’m not interested in that, really, I’m interested in how the thing is said, the humour with which it’s said, the innuenudo with which it’s said, the aggression with which it’s said, the vulnerability with which it’s said... All those are present, without actually having to do with what is being said...

Vv: The hidden connotations?

WF: Yes, you could say that... I think it’s a very rich way of communication, beyond what is being said, and often what is being said isn’t what is being said... it’s something else...

Vv: It’s interesting, because when you talk to deaf people, who can’t hear the voice, they say that facial expressions are more telling than the things that are expressed vocally.

It’s an exact equivalent to what I’m saying and as we know from politicians... the last thing you want to do is listen to what they say... but how they say it tells you what they’re saying.

I think that’s right, we communicate much more through the layer beneath the literal, both visually and ‘audioly’ than perhaps we realise... because when I’m sitting here, talking to you, I could be winding you up, I could be misleading you, I could keep telling you lies and you won’t know cause you don’t know me. But you will make judgements based on how I’m saying it and the way in which I’m saying it.

Vv: The delivery...

WF: The delivery...

Of course, you are familiar with concrete poetry, what do you make of its influence?

Yes, I think that concrete poetry is part of the history of the way in which I work, guess, because I work in sound, I work in words but it’s a difficult set of critical judgement, all of this, and that’s why there’s the need to be a lot more discourse written about these distinctions. Cause if someone asked me what I am doing and said ‘are you doing Concrete Poetry?’ the answer’s no. And of course, I’m working with voice and I’m working with words, and often they are very poetic and as we were saying earlier, I’m working more with how things are said than what is being said. Having even said that, I’m not so anxious in talking about this is the way in which it’s an elliptical conversation cause I’ll end up contradicting myself and some of the pieces I’ve given you are to do with words that are good to hear because they’re clear. I’ve done a project with the BBC which has to do with sound effects. But also we did a school’s projects where 8/9 years old who responded to that big project and I recorded them in order to make a piece and I asked them their names... and I’ve used this strategy in a number of pieces, where you ask twenty people their many though these collaborative?

WF: I should give you the catalogue... Well the other thing is I’ve always been based in London, but I’ve always travelled and gone to things like the Venice Bienalle, Documenta because I also had a full time teaching job so I can go for three days during the opening of the Venice Bienalle, or Documenta and meet dozens of artists and do recordings with them.

Vv: Is it where most of the recordings with international artists took place?

WF: Not only that, I mean a lot have been done in those places but the thing about London is that it’s been a brilliant place in terms of visual arts, as I’m sure Paris is but I know London well and I know that artists have always come through London. And there have been some good galleries in London and again, such as the Serpentine Gallery, Antony D’Offay gallery, have always understood the importance of Audio Arts has always made it easy and possible for me to meet the artists and to make recordings with them. And the Whitechapel, of course.

Vv: You started producing the Audio Arts tapes at a small scale, with very little means and this has changed through the years it has evolved into something more linked to the institution because of its historical value...

WF: To begin with, it was just a creative idea, an artist has in a studio, there was no strategy involved. I could say that it was a complete accident or a form of madness, I don’t know... But the, of course, nothing is an accident, really, but it seemed like the right thing to do at the right time. And to continue it was important too, because there have been things that started and stopped and started and stopped. But it wasn’t ‘premediated’, which is the word... it was purely a creative pursuit and I only did it because I was interested in art and I still am. And talking to artists is the most interesting thing to do...

Vv: By accident or a form of madness, I don’t know... But the, of course, nothing is an accident, really, but it seemed like the right thing to do at the right time. And to continue it was important too, because there have been things that started and stopped and started and stopped. But it wasn’t ‘premediated’, which is the word... it was purely a creative pursuit and I only did it because I was interested in art and I still am. And talking to artists is the most interesting thing to do...
names. It’s not that you want to hear that they’re Mary, or John, or Peter, but it’s the way they say it. So I’ve got all these children’s names in that piece called Burnt Cakes. And that was a question I asked about ‘what would the world be like without sounds, if you couldn’t hear?’ and one little girl (or was it a little boy?) thought about it and thought, ‘well if you didn’t have sound, you couldn’t hear an egg timer go off, and if you couldn’t hear that, and you’re cooking a cake, the cake might get burnt…”

VV: Hence the name...

WF: Hence the name, yes, I thought it was a brilliant, elliptical way of describing the world without sounds.

VV: It reminds me of having arguments through e-mails because the tone wasn’t there and the message was misinterpreted...

WF: Well I know there is a culture of sending e-mails where people can be quite aggressive, they would put in an e-mail what they wouldn’t say on the telephone but that’s what happens in an institution. I don’t work in an institution anymore (I mean university or college) but I’ve heard of what you are saying within the context of a national museum, where people send each other quite horrible e-mails and I’m sure it happens in the commercial world.

VV: I was just going back to what you said about the absence of tone with the words because in the written exchange, with letters, and even more so with e-mails because it’s done very quickly, you only get the words, you don’t get the delivery and it can be confusing...

WF: Well I often have talked about the difference between the recording of a conversation and then the conversation transcribed and put on a printed page and this goes back to me talking about the layers, which aren’t present in the transcript… And I’ve produced a recording of Marcel Duchamp. And if you transcribe that, just you don’t get the sense of that interview at all, because he’s using irony and wit all the time, and he’s saying the opposite, sometimes, of what he’s saying. Now if you transcribe it, you miss all that…

VV: You have to specify, in brackets...

WF: … Yes the trouble is the voice is very three-dimensional, four-dimensional even, it’s not a linear process of communication. Unfortunately our world has become that. We are a printed word culture, or we have been… ‘Put it in writing!’ is what is often said, cause unless it’s in writing, nobody accepts it as being authoritative. It’s a legal issue, that’s it. So the voice is not given its importance as a means of communication. The reasons for that: one is that there hasn’t been the recording technology available for very long in order to retain the voice. The voice is a historical record, actually, and what I’ve always thought about Audio Arts is, (not always but now it becomes evident), it’s like an alternative art history, all these interviews with artists and why they have been interested is because it hasn’t gone through a third party, which is the critic telling them what to think. They thought for themselves and said what they thought. But the recording technology allows the voice being retained for information and communication

VV: What came first, Audio Arts or the idea to work with the voice? Even though, as you were stating it’s very much linked...

WF: No, Audio Arts was a project that I instigated in the 1970’s because I was interested in the amount of discussion and debate that never got into art magazines, i.e. because they’re printed and they’re written. But, no, I started recording artists and making sound works, in a way, in the 70’s. How I then started to work predominantly in sound and the voice is because I spent so much time listening to tapes, editing tapes and listening to the voice, rather, and editing the voice that it became a natural thing, then, to do, to go on working with the voice and even, an early piece was about how everyone wanted their hums and errs taken out of their voice. I used to edit it out and throw them away but then, on one occasion, I kept them all for about a month, in a box, and I spliced them together and made a piece called humming and erring, which was very funny.

VV: Is it nonsensical?

WF: It is but, if you think about it, people ‘hum’ and ‘err’ when they’re thinking so I had this idea that an hum is like an audio equivalent to language outside of conventional speech, cause if you’re talking to someone and you say “can you explain why you painted that picture red?” the artist might say “hum…” but while he’s saying “hum…”, he’s much as you can...

VV: It’s funny you say that because, when you say that the fact that it’s going to be published gives you the motivation, it’s also the pretext for it and any kind of formatted dating, like ‘Speed Dating’ now, a 7 minutes conversation and you have to seduce the person you’re talking to...

WF: … Yes, it sounds terrific...

VV: … So if you ‘analyse’ it, was it for you a way to approach a world, that a certain form of shyness prevented you from approaching?

WF: Yes, I sure, it was! Going back to the dating thing, it gives me a pretext to talk to anyone, really, this, and otherwise it would be difficult, because you can’t just say to someone “excuse me, can I talk to you?”

You can, if you’ve got a purpose but of course the other person is interested because it means that what they say is going to have another life, it will be published and their name’s going to be on it… But going back to the shyness thing, it could be to do with that, sure. I’m sure that there will be people who write about Audio Arts and look at all that...

VV: … It’s not for you to comment

WF: It’s not, really… It’s like when people say, “Well you’ve done those hundreds and hundreds, maybe thousands of interviews. What’s the common denominator? What’s your policy, Bill?” Well, I never had a policy other than, well if that’s interesting, I’ll do it. I mean, there is a thread that can be drawn through it… But it’s for someone else to say...

VV: When you are in that mode of exchange, do you see yourself more as an observer, or a participant, or has that changed over the years?

WF: I think that, in a way, the answer has to be ‘both’. I have to be a participant, of course, because otherwise I can’t participate in the discussion. I have to also be an observer to make sure that it’s going somewhere, that it’s interesting, that the tape recorder is on and that everything is working. So, doing an interview, you have to think about a number of things at once and suppose you do the same in conversation… but if you’re recording, you’ve got a third thing you’ve got to make sure of, which is the tape recorder is switched on and that it’s recording, I mean things as boring and mundane as that...

VV: And what is your relationship to technology? I mean this might not be true but it seems that you were reluctant for some time to transfer the content of the tapes onto Cds, for instance.

WF: Well, it’s interesting that people say that… No, what has to be understood, in this context, is that I could set up Audio Arts as an analogue production before people really did much with it, anyway, and I had to learn all that from scratch, without any knowledge, and managed to do it, and get the issues out, and produce them. But there was an economic base to it, which meant that there was never any huge funds of money. I mean, that all I ever was funded for was to buy a decent tape recorder to begin with, so that all the recording are broadcast quality. With cassette duplication, unlike cds, unlike books, you don’t have to produce an edition. I’ve got a high speed duplicator where I can do three ninety minutes cassettes in two minutes. So in Marx’s terms, I had the ‘means of production’ on my kitchen table and to begin with I cut out the labels and stuck them on. So I had this whole thing under my roof. And when out into the world people thought it was a huge enterprise but it wasn’t, it was just kitchen table stuff. There were no hundreds of pounds to do this and thousands of pounds to do that. So being set up as an analogue operation and that meant: recording and transferring and editing it, I had all the kit to do it. Then, of course, the digital world came along and I knew it was the obvious way to go but to actually re-invent the whole thing digitally would have suddenly meant a lot of money, new knowledge (editing and so on…). So I didn’t jump into it immediately because it was working. Of course now we know analogue is history… I’m not anti technology. But there were practical reasons why it wasn’t appropriate to do. I’ve never wanted to bring in a company that would take it over because then it wouldn’t be the thing itself cause it is an art practice, at the end of the day.

VV: Yes, it is a practice with persistence, knowledge, determination and of course, it feeds itself and grows from its own experience. And now, as you mentioned, the Tate has acquired your archive and is digitalizing it to make it last.

WF: To make it last, and also to make it accessible. I get approached by
Vv: The interstice, the gap, has a modality, a meaning—the gap between constructed language and phonemes...

Wf: Yes and that's one example and I think it's a good example because it demonstrates how working with the early Audio Arts, which was interviews with artists and editing all that material, listening to it over and over again... Because, This is an important thing to say, that I don't do what a lot of people did, which BBC did, which is to transcribe the tape onto paper, and then edit it on paper, then send it to the person to have it actually edited and the tape cut. I tend to do it, again it reveals my background as an artist, which is through a process of reduction. I listen to, say thirty minutes, over and over again and I select parts that I want to keep and bits I don't think are that important in the interview. I mean the original master is kept, but this is a copy of that, that I'm talking about, and I can reduce it to twenty minutes and if I only want ten, then I listen to it again and I reduce it of another three minutes...and again... And after a while I become incredibly aware of the interesting things in a passage of a conversation, of the things that are repetitive, and things that we all do all the time, in terms of focusing and editing shorter versions, it happens. so you begin to become familiar to listening to all that in conversation

Vv: Could you trace back the steps of the Audio Arts adventure?

Wf: Yes, I've given you some of the steps and I think the first one was the fact that it caught on, that artists were responding to it. Sometimes people said: "how on earth did you get so and so to do an interview?" Well, it's because they realised it was a new possibility in terms of their work getting out into the world. I mean, Beuys who was very supportive of Audio Arts, realised here was the perfect medium for verbal sculpture, so we did a lot of things. So it started off, based on the idea of a lot of the most interesting debates and discussions in a particular period in the seventies were never reflected in the art magazines because there were no objects and artists used language as their object. So, the idea of a recorded context for language seemed to be perfectly appropriate. And then it went on and, of course, because it also was a context for performative work and experimental music because the experimental musical world didn't have an interest from the traditional music world, they didn't accept it as proper music and they wouldn't make records of this material because unless you could make 20 000 sales, no one's interested but audio arts just did it as one offs. So I worked with people like Michael Nyman and Gavin Bryars who worked in this field. Now, of course, they're famous—but we did things together... it was a natural process and then it just continued and a world of performance developed, and we did things, and the next important thing was to say “well, ok you have this medium of sound recording” and I started to consider it as a space for work, for art that had no other form other than the playback from the recording medium. It wasn't secondary, this is important, it wasn't a documentation. It was the fact that recordin became records of a sound That wasn't my interest. My interest was artists working with this medium, who hadn't been able to before because this wasn't available, as a primary medium. So I had projects like 9 words for tape slice sequence, which was like an exhibition, like a travel. And you weren't looking at documentation. You were looking at the thing itself.

Discography

Audio Arts
Since 1973 Furlong has been producing Audio Arts Magazine on cassette, which he describes as "a primary medium and 'space' for the articulation and dissemination of debate, theory and practice in relation to contemporary art.
Over some 30 years Audio Arts has become an unprecedented archive of recordings made with over 300 of the best known contemporary artists, musicians, curators and critics.
Source: South London Gallery
>>> Find Audio Arts Volumes

Downloads
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Bibliography

Song of the Earth - Artists, Land, Nature:
with Mel Gooding. Interviews by William Furlong
Harry Abrams (October 1, 2002)
>> More info about this book

Issues in Art and Education: The Dynamics of Now (Issues in Art and Education):
Tate Gallery Publishing (June 1, 2000)

Research Report 2001 Wimbledon School of Art:
Paperback. Published by Wimbledon School of Art, 2001

Research Report 2000 Wimbledon School of Art:
Paperback. Published by Wimbledon School of Art, 2000

Exhibitions

Selected Exhibitions and Presentations from 1967 to 1998:

1967
- New Contemporaries at the Tate Gallery

1969
- Northern Ireland Open 100
- John Moore’s Liverpool Exhibition

1973
- Founded Audio Arts Magazine, on cassette

1976
- "Academic Board" with Bruce McLean

1978
- "Art for Society", Whitechapel Art Gallery
- Modern Art Galerie (Grita Insam), Vienna

1980
- "British Soundworks", Franklin Furnace, New York
- Riverside Studios, London

1982
- "Live to Air", The Tate Gallery, London
- "British Soundworks", Franklin Furnace, New York
- "Audio by Artists", Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Canada
- "The Sculpture Show", Hayward Gallery, London

1984
- The Orchard Gallery, Londonderry, N.Ireland (L.P.Record)
- "On the Wall/On the Air", M.I.T., Cambridge, U.S.A.

1985
- "British Art Show", Australia
- The Foksal Gallery, Warsaw
- "Sound/Vision" Plymouth Arts Centre & Spacecex Centre, Exeter

1986
- "0782 272121 six works on the telephone", National Garden Festival, Stoke-on-Trent (Cassette Publication)
- "Anris" ICA public works, St. James’s Chruch, Piccadilly, London
  (Boxed cassette publication)

1988
- Interim Art, London (installation & 45 rpm record)
- "Accent for a Start" Newcastle upon Tyne; Bradford; Manchester, and Riverside Studios, London (Performance & LP Record)
- "State of the Nation" Herbert Gallery, Coventry
- "Media Exhibition" Stockholm, Sweden
- "Soundworks Exhibition", Triskel Arts Centre, Cork
- "Placement and Recognition", presentation at "With the Eyes Shut", Graz.

1989

1990
- "Radio Garden", Tyne International, Installation as part of the National Garden Festival.

1991
- "Process & Identity", commissioned by the Galerie of Contemporary Art, Leipzig for “Zone D”

1992
- "Radio Beyond", BBC Radio 3 - a 12 minute sound work commissioned for live European broadcast.

1993
- Roma Europa Festival, Rome, Electronic Arts Section - six sound works.
- "Time Garden", a new work for "HA HA contemporary British Sculpture in an 18th Century Park" (Killerton Park, Devon)

1994
- Lesezimmer II (Audio Arts in the 1970’s and 80’s), Kunstlerhaus Stuttgart, Munich, Vienna.

1995
- "The Oily Men of Mill Dam Bank" an installation and soundwork, Customs House, South Shields.
- "Uhmms and Ahs” CD new work for CD published Lara Vincy, Gallery Paris
- "Hearing is Believing": six soundworks commissioned for Broadcast, Liverpool.
- The Korean Bienalle, six photoworks from the Leipzig series.
- "Image, Sequence of Time", a commissioned multi-media work for the BFF congress, Schatten, Forbe, Licht, Stuttgart.

1996
- "Hearing is Believing" CD. A meal-time sound work.
- "An imagery of Absence", artist’s book, published by Galerie Stefan Rasch &Remmert Verlag
- "Absences/Presences", an installation concerning resonance, time and trace. Solo installation Ateliergemeinschaft, Münster.

1997
- "Life/Live", New manifestations in British Art, Musée de Art Modern de la Ville de Paris.
- "Identity & Location Walls of Sound", one hour broadcast for ORF, Austria

1998
- "Sound Garden", commissioned by the Serpentine Gallery, London.
- "Sound Corridor", a new commission; Sculpture at Goodwood.
- "An Imagery or Absence", Imperial War Museum, London