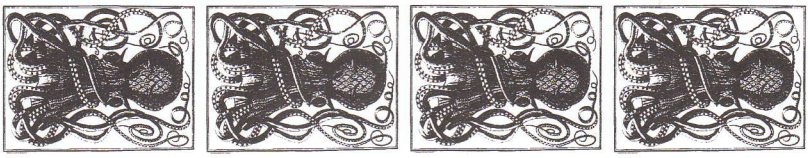
Radio Play Is No Place

A Conversation between Jérôme Noetinger and Gregory Whitehead

Gregory Whitehead

Over the past decade, writer/producer Gregory Whitehead has been exploring the multiple identities of radiophonic space. Live performance, taped documentary interviews, written texts, recyclings from other media, pristine nature recordings, phone banks, destroyed music, crossed circuits, and pure noise have all figured into his dramaturgy, resulting in a hybrid form that he calls the Theatre of Operations. Recent broadcasts have included *Pressures of the Unspeakable* (1992); *Shake, Rattle, Roll* (1993); and *Degenerates in Dreamland* (1995). Whitehead is also coeditor of *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde*, a selective history of audio and radio art published by MIT Press (1992). Below, Jérôme Noetinger, editor of the Grenoble-based audio arts magazine *Revue & Corrigée*, speaks with Whitehead about the past and future of radiophonic play.



NOETINGER: From your perspective, radio is more than just a vehicle for transmission of sound art: it offers its own autonomous space, its own material?

WHITEHEAD: Absolutely. I strongly believe that radiomakers must find ways to disrupt the boundaries of "sound art," most of which sounds very tired and familiar anyway. Radio happens in sound, but I don't believe that sound is what matters about radio, or any of the acoustic media. What does matter is the play among relationships: between bodies and antibodies, hosts and parasites, pure noise and irresistible fact, all in a strange parade, destination unknown, fragile, uncertain. Once you make the shift from the material of sound to the material of the media, the possibilities open to infinity, and things start getting interesting again. Each broadcast takes place inside an echo

The Drama Review 40, 3 (T151), Fall 1996. *Copyright © 1996 New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.*

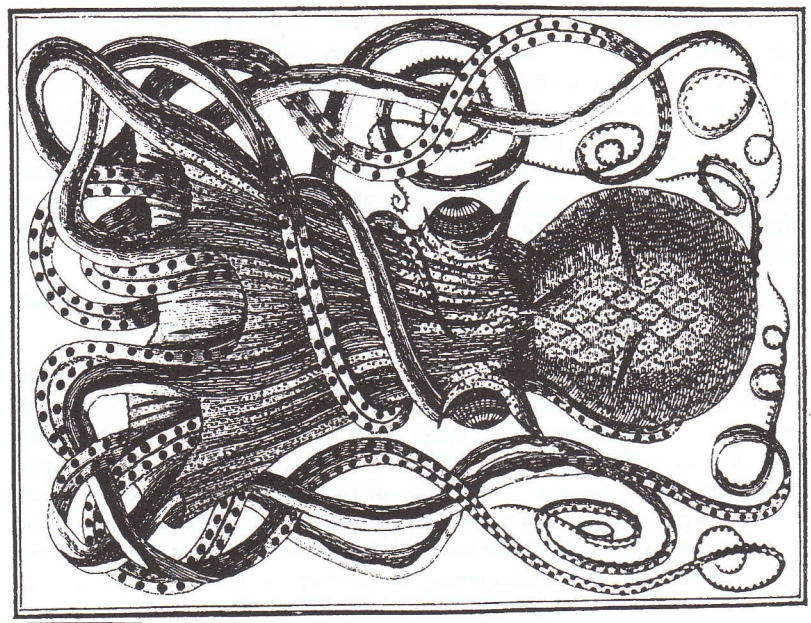
chamber of informations, histories, biographies, life stories—and inside the echo chamber resounds the most unnerving question of all, the ghost question: Who's there? Is anybody out there on the other side of the wall, on the other side of this broadcast? Of all the questions that have rattled around inside my head over the past ten years, that is the most persistent. So radio is certainly most captivating as a place, but a place of constantly shifting borders and multiple identities, a no place where the living can dance with the dead, where voices can gather, mix, become something else, and then disappear into the night—degenerates in dreamland.

NOETINGER: Does a radio work of this sort exist if not heard by an audience? What about the pure play of the radio waves themselves?

WHITEHEAD: Yes, this is the uncertainty that hangs over any broadcast. You cannot know in advance which kind of "play" you are going to transmit. Until, that is, you get something back: a phone call, a postcard, a shout in the dark. A censor. Or a silence. Is the circle completed, or does it gape open, only a theory? As for the "pure" play of the waves, radiowaves by themselves—I suppose one could make something interesting from such purity, but to my ears radio waves fascinate because they are so dirty, that is, the airwaves are so full of voices and bodies trying, in one form or another, to get into the ears of somebody else. Stripped of its raucous Babel of attempted and aborted contacts, radio becomes just another noisemaker, and we already have plenty of those. That's why I have never been impressed by various art-radio projects that simply play with or recontextualize existing signals: unless you are willing to electrify yourself and enter directly into the flow of relations, the Limbo Zone of transmission, then you're not really doing anything more than pushing buttons, and that just isn't enough anymore. On the other hand, the play *between* signals carries its own fascinations: When I was 10 or 11 years old, I would lay in bed with a shortwave radio under my pillow, slowly turning the dial, searching for the weird signals between the stations, composite voices, strange languages collapsing into each other. Years later, I learned of the theories of Konstantin Raudive, who believed that these between-zones were assembly halls for the voices of the dead.

NOETINGER: Many of your radio works have also been released on CD—isn't there a contradiction here? For me, radio means only one listening, and with a CD you can listen as much as you want. Maybe you are more of an owner with the CD than with the radio; and when you know you can listen only once, maybe you pay more attention.

WHITEHEAD: Do we really want to fix media identities so strictly? To my mind, what is interesting is the way media circuits cross, evading format borders, or putting them into question. In the Theatre of Operations, this becomes explicit in the attempt to incorporate the idea of "circuit" into the performance of the piece itself, implicating all kinds of materials and contexts—stick a needle in the brain, and spin those tunes. One story: a few years ago, a convict in San Quentin Prison contacted me for a cassette copy of *The Pleasure of Ruins* [1988]. He had heard it played on KPLA, in San Francisco, and could not believe his ears. So I immediately sent him a copy, and he sent a letter of thanks back, telling me that he and a few buddies were using it as an exercise tape. OK, I thought, hey, there's a direct, practical use I had not anticipated. Then about a year ago, by sheer coincidence, I met the lawyer who was representing him before the California Board of Appeals. I told her the story, and she laughed, asking me how well I knew prison argot. Not well enough, it seems, because then she told me that in San Quentinese, "exercise" means "masturbate." So here is an example of a complex circuit of communi-



1. *A proposal for the future of electronic media.*

cations running from radio to prison to telephone (calling the station) to post office to cassette to individual nervous systems. Such improbable and unpredictable circulations among institutions, media, and bodies are part of what gives life to a work, the transmission taking on a kind of itinerary.

NOETINGER: Why the frequent references in your work to Artaud?

WHITEHEAD: One of my first experiences with radio performance was a doomed attempt to give a simultaneous translation of Artaud's *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* [recorded in 1947]. Not just the text, but also the intense unearthly quality of voice, through all of its entranced and wild gyrations. Like the voice of radio, Artaud's voice is literally all over the place: talk-show, tirade, incantation, threat, confession, lament. Beyond that personal experience of Artaud inhabitation, I have always found the piece emblematic of a very compelling, stripped-down form of radio, a form of "poor" radio (in the Grotowskian sense of "poor theatre"), the direct confrontation of a body politic with the contusions and contortions of a body alone, one nervous system to another, a form that remains tremendously appealing to me. Of course, the prospect of such an electrified confrontation made the director of French Radio (a man named Vlad Porché), so nervous that he cancelled the broadcast, and it was not heard in France until 1973. I also hear *Pour en finir...* in relation to another emblematic work, Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* [1938]. From a war raging inside one man's brain, we switch to an alien invasion. Yet the experience of shock, and the sensation of airwaves suddenly "taken over" by The Other (Artaud: Le Mômo, who hails from the Bardo Zone; Welles: alien invaders from Mars) remains constant. Unlike *Pour en finir*, the Welles *War* became possibly the most notorious broadcast in history, creating panic in the streets. Nonetheless, it was also a kind of "poor" radio, a simple organizing concept surrounded by a few cheap sound effects and a small ensemble of improvising actors.

NOETINGER: You also have done live performances that then find a way into your broadcasts; another kind of circle?

WHITEHEAD: Here again, the key question: who's there? Since I give occasional presentations on issues of technology, language, bodies, brains, publics, programs, and so on, I had the idea of conducting playful exercises with the audience: learning how to speak backwards, the correct way to pronounce "prosthesis," how to speak like an analog degenerate, various conceptual singalongs, and so on. Recordings of these group exercises then become part of the archive for Theatre of Operations plays: one public folded back into another. In an intermedia concept like *Pressures of the Unspeakable*, the audience performs a different role, becoming "scream donors" to an answering machine "scream bank" located at the host station. These screams are allowed to accumulate over several weeks, then are assembled and intercut into a local screamscape, which is then broadcast, with phone lines remaining open. The grand acoustic icon of modernism (the scream) is set loose inside the pinball machine of the postmodern media. The eventual broadcast becomes a catalyst for more scream flow, that is, more calls. The circuit of broadcast and public response could continue, theoretically, indefinitely, though I'm still waiting for a station to permit me to test this. A search for the Last Scream. Once more, the idea of confounding and encircling public with private, immediate with distant, noise with silence, voice with technology, circling back again and again, piling up meanings as fast as old generations fade out, a spiral of communications transforming itself into an improvised community that is always in danger of spinning out of control, losing itself, the idea of The Producer also getting hopelessly and gratefully lost in the vortex, deep in the media screamland blues.

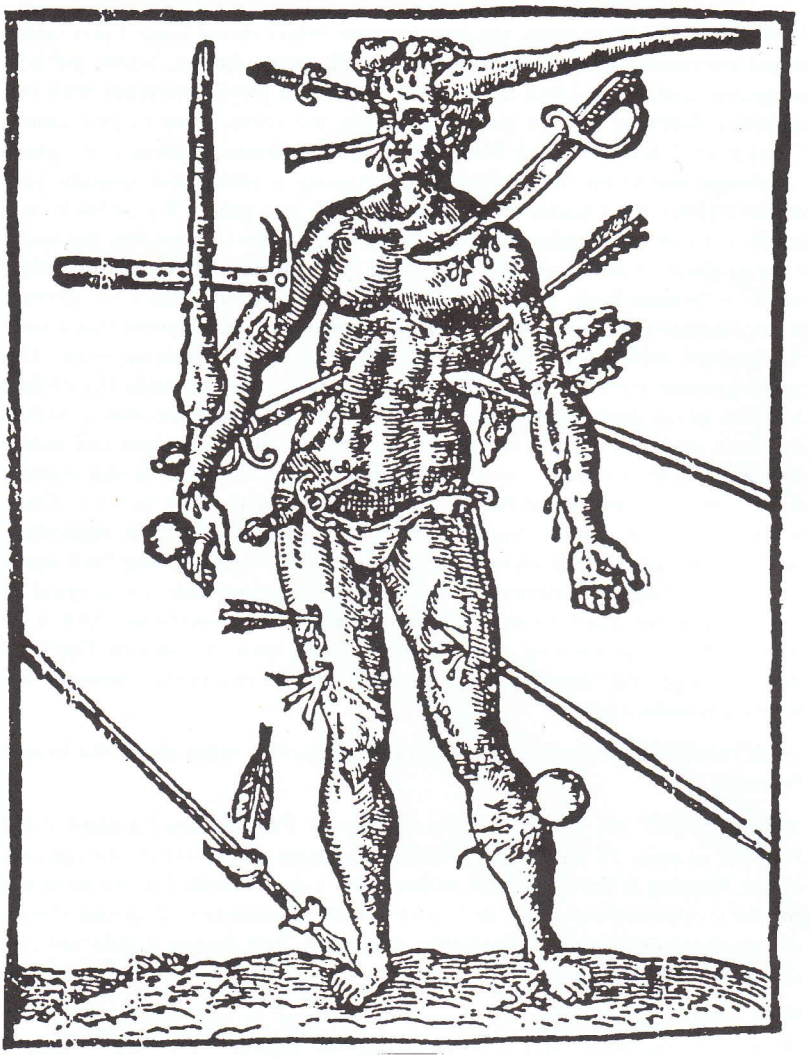
NOETINGER: You mention the Last Scream—but what about the Primal Scream?

WHITEHEAD: Ah yes, the Scream of Screams. I'm not sure I'd know it if I heard it, or even if I screamed it. Possibly the most primal scream we can ever know, hanging at the end of the millennium, is the electrified white noise cry of whole communities suspended on the brink of extinction. A primal scream that is also a death rattle. Or maybe, American Talk Radio, a different category of white noise.

NOETINGER: You often talk about "relationships" in your work: what about the kind of relationship McLuhan talks about with regards to the Global Village?

WHITEHEAD: Right, the glorious, glowing Global Village, which to my mind is sort of in the same elusive category as the Primal Scream. The problem with the whole constellation of ideas having to do with the electronic tribe—radio as talking drum, the wired society, the Neural Net—is that there is no necessary or automatic relationship between communications technologies and community. The slogan that "communication equals community" is only true when people are willing to work very hard to achieve it, and are then willing to fight to preserve the fragile community they have built. There is a utopian aspiration in all communication technologies, but the utopian side is counter-balanced and all too often cancelled out by the darker drive, the connection between information and war, between communication and the command or control over communities. This is the other side of Radio Utopia: *Radio Thanatos*, and I hear it more now than ever, whether in Sarajevo, China, or in the streets of Los Angeles. The root for "utopia" is the Greek *ou topos*, or "no place." And radio is perhaps the most powerful and destructive No Place ever conceived or conjured.

NOETINGER: You often use your own voice as the principle and sometimes only sound source: what is this "voice"?



2. *Wounds can bleed or they can sing: the difference is a matter of technique.*

WHITEHEAD: A question with several answers: To begin with, I've always been uneasy, or maybe just plain bored, with the phonocentric tradition of sound poetry, in which the voice becomes an onanistic fetish-object with which to explore the subjectivity of the one who speaks. To my ears, work in this tradition typically flattens out everything that is distinctive in an individual voice, all the things that do not add up to The Real Person, because in the saturated buzz-world of electronic media, our voices are inscribed with all kinds of "phonies" other than our own. The fact is, we cannot find our voice just by using it: we must be willing to cut it out of our throats, put it on the autopsy table, isolate and savor the various quirks and pathologies, then stitch it back together and see what happens. The voice, then, not as something which is found, but as something which is written. We may have escaped from the judgment of God, but we have not yet escaped from the judgment of the Autopsist—the truth is not in how your voice sounds, but in how it's cut. If we want to find our "real" voice, we must be prepared to figure and refigure. Such is the Postmortem Condition. Further, the problem of voice raises, inevitably, the problem of bodies, so working with voices of every cat-

egory and derivation provokes questions of politics at the most microscopic and essential level, a politics of positioning another's body. Fortunately, I soon discovered that the problem of voicebodies (and the hunger to become entangled with other voicebodies) could resolve itself into the pure pleasure of speech in ruins. That is, the prosthesis can be a twitching finger of ecstasy as much as the trigger finger of death. Wounds can bleed or they can sing: the difference is a matter of technique. And finally, voice in the broadest sense, or the position of the auteur. Here, I'm very attracted to the idea of establishing a concept, and perhaps a set of procedures, and then removing myself from the loop, letting the concept take on a life of its own. Along these lines, I've always liked the French word *animateur* with regards to the media, that is, the one who might breathe life into an apparatus, even as an artificial respirator, but who then withdraws. If you need to be in control from start to finish, then in a sense, nothing is happening.

NOETINGER: But also, the hearing of other voices in one's own head, as in schizophrenia, appears to occupy an important place, no?

WHITEHEAD: Well, schizophrenia has its acoustic double in schizophonia, the "split voice." Years ago, I performed a conceptual talk show in which I presented myself as the Director of the Broca Memorial Institute for Schizophonic Behavior. We invited listeners to call in and share with us their schizo/voices, the voices that they heard clamoring about in their heads. Amazing calls flooded in, people speaking in every kind of twisted tongue. Then one woman phoned to tell us, with evident relief, that she had for quite some time thought she was schizophrenic—but after listening to us, she realized she was "only" schizophonic! I have long been fascinated by the case of Louis Wolfson, a man at extreme odds with American English, his mother's tongue. His war against the acoustic oppression of the sound of this language is recorded in his extraordinary *Le Schizo et les langues*. As a defense against such acoustic tyranny, Wolfson became a magician of dissection and reassembly, stitching together a parallel language from the bones and organs of French, Russian, Yiddish, and German—a language of his own that would give him sanctuary from the crushing tonalities of hated American. To achieve this remarkable bit of psycholinguistic montage, Wolfson relied on two main resources. First, dictionaries, offering static and neutral raw material. And second, a resource that perhaps also offered him an alternative mother, the no place that may be the mother of us all: a radio.

Gregory Whitehead *is a writer, audio artist, radiomaker, and the director of* ***sea-crow media****, an independent production studio. Over the past decade, Whitehead has produced over 60 acoustic features, experimental documentaries, and earplays for broadcast in the U.S. and abroad. Author of numerous critical essays and fictive texts on subjects relating to language, technology, and the public sphere, Whitehead also coedited* Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde *(1992, MIT Press).*