

Holes in the Head

theatres of operation for the body in pieces (1993)

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From my earliest radio experience listening to a small transistor throb beneath my pillow in the dead of night, I have been struck by radio's profoundly split identity. Into one ear plays the happy folk band of RADIO UTOPIA, brainwaves and radiowaves mixed into a grand electromagnetic community: *I dream of a time when everybody on the planet lives, breathes and touches each other on air!* Whilst into the other ear, a different band marches on, the trigger-finger crash band of RADIO THANATOS, with its twisted carnage of countless broadcast aircraft rattling with great gusto, straight into oblivion.

In time, I have come to realize that the two bands are as inseparable as a pair of ears stuck on a single head, with radio's dreamland promise forever haunted by lethal ghostland interference. Incorporating the promise of universal communication bound together with the more immediate prospect of irreversible decay, the radiobody is a strange and unruly composite of opposites: speaking to everyone abstractly but no one in particular; ubiquitous, but fading without a trace; forever crossing boundaries but with uncertain destination; capable of intimate communion but charged with enough power to trigger sudden destruction. No surprise, then, that some of the more notorious early proposals for radio should be populated by so many zombies and aliens, limbo dancing, inside out: Khlebnikov's lightning birds, Marinetti and his pure organism of radiophonic sensation, Welles and his bellicose Martians, Artaud's body without organs.

If radio is to retain any cultural identity at all in the infomediate age of fiber optics and data highways, radio makers must find ways to exceed and disrupt the restrictive conceptual boundaries of "sound art". For while radio *happens* in sound, sound is no longer what matters about radio. What does matter is the endlessly intricate play of position, a play that unfolds among far-flung beings, for the most part unknown to each other: bodies and antibodies, living and dead, the scratched and the remembered, floating mouth and severed ear, screams and incantations, songs and parasites, all on parade, destination unknown.

What I propose, then, is a passage from the "theatre of sounds" to the "theatre of operations": a theatre for the body in pieces, for *organs without bodies* in search of a place to settle; a theatre born from (and for) *holes in the head*; an outcast theatre of crossed circuits and hot wires, offering both a sanctuary and a colloquium for our most committed schizophonic, the assorted monsters and marvels of the digital age.

Leaks

Successive generations of technology do not so much displace as *digest* each other. Marinetti understood this very well, and urged his Futurist comrades to *cook* the books so as to facilitate their digestion. Churning through several generations of media, such digestion is never complete: dissect a radio, and you will find the remains of a book; dissect the book, and you will find the remains of a larynx; dissect the larynx, and you will find the skeletal trace of a twitching finger, lighting a match and sending a telegram; take the prints from the finger, and there you will rediscover the origins of radio.

All the above stages of digestion do produce one thing in common - gas leaks, from one hole or another. What we usually classify as "interference"

is in fact the direct acoustic representation of leaking gas, the potentially explosive product of radiophonic digestion. This gas, a natural product of the radio body digesting itself (time decay through weak signal processing), is a key material for radio art, and is best stored in glass bottles with cork stoppers.

Example: In 1984, I conducted an interview with a retired businessman named Steven V.N. Powelson for inclusion within my radio docufiction Dead Letters. Powelson's ambition for the remaining years of his life was to become the first individual ever to recite by memory the entire Iliad in the original Greek. A curious ambition, given the status of the Iliad as a consensual transcription of group performance most probably enacted over several nights; now it would be recited by one individual in a book-learned dead language, through a single rapid fire endurance monologue. The idea only makes sense if you read backwards in time. Even more curious was his motive, "to achieve immortality by attaching myself to a poem that is itself immortal."

By having the whole text written into his own body at once, Powelson believed (and I suppose still believes) that he could essentially become one with the body of the text. But since there is no "original" recording of the Iliad, Powelson would memorize by listening to his own book-on-tape. Because the text is full of difficult tongue-twisters, he had to mouth the text as he read, training lips and tongue. In effect, Powelson was lipping (and digesting) *himself*, a novel form of auto-erotic behavior. Sometimes, the procedure gave him a serious headache. After all, the Iliad is one of the bloodiest war stories in the history of Western literature and Steven V.N. Powelson was an avowed pacifist.

Memorization is a form of self-inscription; drop stylus to perform oral recitation. Taking such a vast quantity of bloody text into a retired body already beginning to peter out does raise serious questions of

phonographic technique. Powelson described the procedures of his private memory theatre by way of analogy: Picture a row of leaky buckets, with each bucket representing a book of the Iliad. As each successive bucket was filled (perhaps with his own brain fluid), water in the other buckets would gradually leak out, and Powelson would then go back and fill them up again. As each new book added a new book/bucket, each step towards immortality put another hole in Powelson's head. And by airing his strange Iliad odyssey on radio, I could at least help bring the intermedia cycle full circle. War stories, holes in the head and the leakage of partially digested dead language - in this vocabulary, radio is perfectly capable of speaking for itself.

Needles

Sometimes when you try to talk about radio art in public, you get needled. At a (rare) conference on Sound & Art a few years ago, I presented a brief series of remarks about how radio is actually at its most lively when most dead. Since the living cast themselves out through the articulated corpses of advanced telecommunications equipment, the whole idea of "live" radio is nothing more than a sensory illusion. Electrical currents express dead labor before they give voice to anybody else: The more dead the transmission, the more "alive" the acoustic sensation; the more alive the sensation, the more "dead" the source body has become.

When I finished, a hand started waving at the back of the auditorium, though through the stage lights I was unable to see the face of its owner. So The Disfigured Hand said, somewhat urgently, *Hey Whitehead, you gotta believe... you gotta believe that it's better to talk to livin' people than to talk to dead people!*

The real problem, of course, is how to tell the difference, a problem that was very much in evidence during my own "live" broadcasting debut. The

program/performance centered around staging a fake New Age call-in show designed to allow listeners a live consultation with the renowned Dr. Vicekopf, chief language analyst at the Paul Broca Memorial Institute For Schizophonic Behavior. Listeners were invited to call in and offer their most peculiar linguistic behaviors for deep brain analysis. Our expectation was that everyone would realize right away that this was just a language game, and that we would end up mixing telephonic glossolalias into the World's Largest Take-out *WortSalat*.

Instead, we were confronted with a number of listeners who desired serious consultation; some, of course, just *heard* other voices ("they've been telling me I'm a schizophrenic - but after listening to you, I think I may be a schizophonic") but others described various forms of uncontrollable voices that would erupt from their throats at the most embarrassing times. Several were acutely aware that their language had become infected by the electronic media, that their language was in fact no longer their own, and often found themselves talking like cartoon characters or American Presidents.

Any committed schizophonic will tell you that those born into the dense saturation of the electronic media have no choice but to swallow an overwhelming quantity of pre-packaged lingual emissions, from down n' dirty drive time jingles to spotless digital recordings of Handel's Messiah. Sit-com patter becomes fused in the memory with the speeches of candidates and the numbing rhythms of traffic reports and weather forecasts. Needles are an inescapable fact of life for the schizophonic, and still amply animate the radiobody even if laser beams have made it possible to get off without them. As the possibility of public discourse collapses into communal lip-sync extravaganzas, perhaps the most direct form of radio art (and certainly the cheapest) is to simply get wired, stick a needle in the brain and *spin those tunes baby, cause you're a tightly twisted, roller derby brand a' wild thing!*

Shake, Rattle n' Roll

Every now and again, the quaint idea of radio as a kind of Talking Drum for the Global Village comes around for one more spin. In this romantic scenario, radio art is cast as an electronic echo of oral culture, harkening back to ancient storytellers spinning yarns in front of village fires. The idea has a seductive ring to it, and can be embellished in all kinds of ways, making room for everything from Finnegan's Wake to Street Rap: radio as Universal Language, Electronic Community, Planetary Boombox, Here Comes Everybody, *like let's just hang out and tell stories and maybe dance.*

Radio Talking Drum - a utopian transposition that loves to forget. *Most* forgotten are the lethal wires that still heat up from inside out, wires that connect radio with warfare, brain damage, rattles from necropolis. When I turn my radio on, I hear a whole chorus of death rattles: from stone cold, hard fact larynxes frozen in every stage of physical decomposition; from talk show golden throats cut with a scalpel, transected, then taped back together and beamed out across the airwaves; from voices that have been severed from the body for so long that no one can remember who they belong to, or whether they belong to anybody at all; from pop monster gigglebodies guaranteed to shake yo' booty; from artificial folds sneak-stitched into still living throats through computer synthesis and digital processing; from mechanical chatter boxes dead to begin with; from cyberphonic antibodies taking flight and crashing to pieces on air.

During November 1988, I had an infrequent opportunity to become abruptly and eternally united with my own metaphors. While en route to Australia, my flight, a Boeing 747 stuffed with tour groups, came very close to crashing on take-off from Honolulu. With stabilizing flaps damaged by metal bars that had broken away from the landing gear, the plane

barely lifted off the ground before it began to rattle violently. In the wake of each fresh plane crash, I confess to reading survivor accounts with intense curiosity, and keep voluminous files. Such accounts almost invariably refer to "violent rattles" moments before disaster, so as the luggage compartments sprang open above our heads, I felt certain that we were seconds away from rattling right into a burn unit. But the Qantas pilot immediately lightened our load by dumping thousands of liters of fuel into the Pacific Ocean, and we lumbered back to Honolulu airport for a surprisingly uneventful emergency landing.

Several hours later, in a typically incongruous late-twentieth century change of scene, I sat watching the surfers ride the waves at Waikiki, a Qantas complimentary cocktail in hand. I thought about other waves, *airwaves*, the risks of mechanical vibration. I thought about all the radio art transmissions that dump their fuel and make premature landings, about the countless audio aircraft that never arrive at their true destination, or that shake, rattle n' roll violently without coming to the climax. And after three or four more complimentary cocktails, I thought about the crash/rattled post-Rodez body of Antonin Artaud, thereafter resurrected as Artaud, Le Mômô.

When Artaud was finally released from his psychiatric internment at Rodez, his body had been thoroughly wasted by the nervous explosions of his mental illness, externally administered electroshock treatment, frequent insulin injections and a terminal case of (undiagnosed) rectal cancer. Convulsed by electricity, and with disease spreading inward from the anus, Artaud returned to Paris in 1946. From this time on, his vision of a "body without organs", with its promise of pure redemption, takes center stage. Artaud's desired new body, stripped bare, scraped clean and turned inside out, quickly assumed a pseudonym. Le Mômô: the pure energy of direct brainwave transmission, born from an occult synthesis of needles, electricity and a cacophony of irrefutable inner voices. Le Mômô: giving

voice to the prosthetic language of the *disembody*, the antibody, the radiobody. Le Mômomo: full of vocal flatulence, noisy jolts, black magic and bloody nothings.

In 1947, Artaud Le Mômomo gave voice to his final public pronouncement, To Have Done With the Judgement of God, a lacerating, scatophonic performance scheduled for national broadcast on February 2, 1948, but cancelled at the last minute by the Director of French Radio, one Wladimir Porché. The official explanation rounded up all the usual suspects - obscenity, sacrilege, anti-Americanism. But after listening to a tape of the broadcast, one suspects the presence of a deeper fear, the fear that Artaud Le Mômomo might yet reverse the voltage and wire countless brains to the shock treatment of his unearthly howls, jolting a million ears into the next world. As Le Mômomo himself writes: *The magic of electric shock drains a death rattle, it plunges the shocked one into that death rattle with which one leaves life.*

Pressures of the Unspeakable

I returned to Sydney in 1991, with a proposal for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Listening Room* program: to install a related form of public electroshock circuitry. A human screamscape, assembled from "donated" screams recorded on an answering machine housed within a fictive "Institute for Screamscape Studies". Everything that happened in, across or through the circuits of the Institute would become part of a citywide nervous flow, culminating in a national screamcast. In addition to framing the nervous system, the **telephone-microphone-tape recorder-radio** circuitry would also provide the key index for the acoustic demarcation of *pressure in the system*: distortion, the disruption of digital codes, pure unmanageable noise. The scream as seismic eruption, well in excess of prescribed circuitries, capable of blowing communications technologies not designed for such extreme unspeakables.

In time, lubricated by the jelly of discourse and publicity, the scream trickle soon became a flood, and the associated producer ganglia at the Institute began to feel the first effects of *The Pressure* on our own increasingly jangled nervous systems. Strange things began to happen as we listened again and again to hundreds of blown and distorted screams. As needles pinned wildly inside the studio, bones rattled inside the body, and the brain began to play curious tricks on the rest of us, our dreamlands turned into deep screamlands. At last, the narrative authority of Dr. Scream himself simply disassembled into pieces and he left the Institute to start a Rhythm & Blues band in Louisiana. Without him, however, the Institute then delivered a national broadcast montage of the assembled "report", which immediately triggered hundreds of additional post-broadcast screamline calls: objections, responses, counterscreams, reflections, wrong numbers, confessions, and bold polemics.

Finally, following a moment of absolute silence, the screamline was unplugged and the circuit of unspeakables was put to rest. In a last "memo", the Institute circulated a quote from one of the more remarkable nervous systems the twentieth century:

*When you are philosophizing
you must descend into primeval chaos
and feel at home there.*

-Ludwig Wittgenstein

The clinic of the production studio felt at times like a Room 101 of my own design, the psycho-acoustic descent into screamland chaos resounding through the rattle of my bones. Yet the variably magnificent, affirmative, ecstatic, violent, explosive, wounded and irrepressible nature of the materials, restored me, if not to my "home", at least to my real place. Beyond all forlorn attempts at reconciliation, RADIO UTOPIA and RADIO THANATOS had danced a mad jig together, and amidst the ensuing din there resounded at least the rumor of a future for a medium on the fade.

