

INTRODUCTION

WORDS WITH WINGS 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 Then it was superceded by television. Still, for another two decades it was a primary conduit for youth culture and it's 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 are 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 a number of them reconceived radio for their own time as a bridge between art and popular culture.

Ironically, in the 90s radio resurfaced as a cultural force in the popular television series *Northern Exposure* and the youth film *Pump Up The Volume*. In both instances radio operates as an intimate personal voice that poses philosophical questions about the values of the community. The unconventional structure and content of KBEAR's "Chris in the Morning" local community broadcasts, and a teenager's nightly home studio radio programs directly reflect the radio works produced by artists in the 80s and their incursion into mass media. In the former a small town artist/disk jockey's ongoing discourse is a radio "artwork" that mingles the daily life of Cicely, Alaska with art, literature, and intellectual and spiritual inquiry into the human condition. It is the voice of conscience and the community's cultural catalyst. In the latter a disenchanting high schooler's late night pirate interventions puncture the prevailing system when his alter ego "Hard Harry's" uncensored personal confessions, raunchy sex and underground rock and rap, turn into free speech guerilla politics that rally a population of alienated suburban teens into a motivated empowered community. 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 outside the body, 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 aural 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.

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, a whole panoply of broadcast interventions that 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 esthetics 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 and forms and media culture, of history, memory, fantasy, and fiction, of public and private space. Unlike the Dada/Fluxus based sound poetry, musique concrete, 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 with 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 majority have sustained bodies of work in the visual and performing arts, and they have brought that formal vocabulary to the works they have created for radio. Each has experimented with ways to tell a "story", introducing unconventional structures to traditional broadcast formats. This holds true in both textual and non-textual works.

Terry Allen

Jacki Apple

**Charles
Amirkhanian**

Sheila Davies

Earwax

Rinde Eckert

Shelley Hirsch

**Lisa Jones &
Alva Rogers**



**Don Joyce &
Negativeland**



**Keith Antar
Mason**

**William
Morelock**

David Moss

**Guillermo
Gomez-Pena**

**Rachel
Rosenthal**

**Donald
Swearingen**

**Helen
Thorington**

**Gregory
Whitehead**

Some have approached radio as **an architectural space** to be constructed sonically and linguistically; or as the site of an event -- **an arena, a stage**. Some used it as **a gathering place, or a conduit, a means to create community**. Other artists have employed **the media landscape itself as the narrative**, while others looked into the body as **the site and the source; the voicebox, the larynx become medium and metaphor**. Still others gathered **the sounds of the world** as evidence and constructed **maps of imaginary geographies**. The tape recorder and microphone replace the camera, capture moments in time, the life of a place in process; a journey is recalled and reconstructed, overlaid with new insights. Some transposed **a cinematic syntax** -- a montage of dissolves, quick cuts instead of fades, a series of close-ups, long shots, reverse angles. Others appropriated media genres and turn them inside out giving an appearance of veracity to interviews with **false personae**, and documentary authority to invented data; or the reverse, creating **musically structured works from authentic field interviews**. The diversity of ideas and forms of 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 hierarchy of media television has been the condo in the sky, 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 1980s and early 1990s carried on the spirit of the original "alternative" spaces of the early 1970s, 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 itself free from the commodities marketplace of the gallery and the elitist prestige of the museum in order to inhabit public space and public consciousness. It presented itself as information and experience, a participatory transaction between artist and viewer/listener, as opposed to goods.

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 artland to mass medialand throwing into question definitions of art based on context, while attempting to rede-

**speech as
culture**

**sound as
language**

**imaginary
geographies**

**media as
source
media
as site**

radio cinema

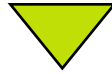
fine the nature of the site of their activities and position their "product" in relation to its non-art counterpart. Arty journalism is NOT radio art, though journalistic devices may be employed by radio artists. Likewise, it is not traditional radio drama, though it may use dramatic conventions. It 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 without walls, 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 guerillas 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.

In the 21st 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. Art and the artist have already been virtually banished from the airwaves, and most public radio programming, which is now either nationally syndicated, or thematically formatted can be revisited on-line; thus the purely aural mobile listening experience has been shifted to a frequently desk-bound audio-visual one. 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.



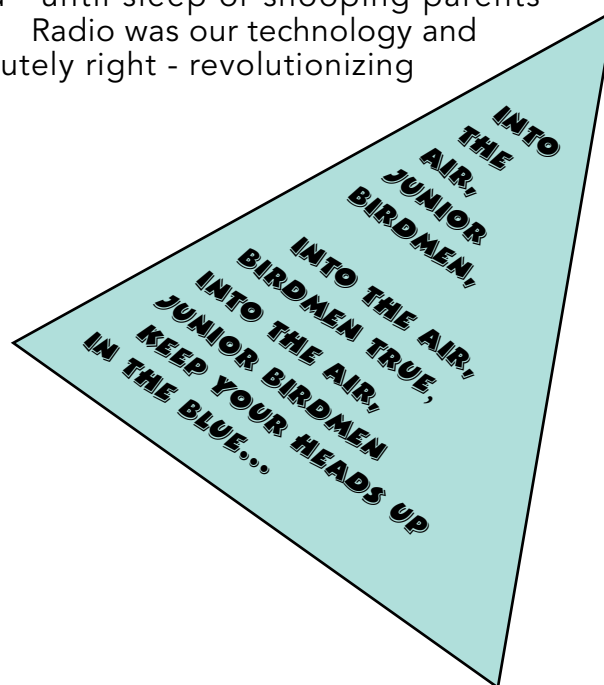
INTRODUCTION

1997: INTO THE AIR, JUNIOR BIRDMEN By Helen Thorington

My generation grew up without television. We were a radio generation and our lives, by comparison with those who came after, were still relatively free of the images of the mass media. But not the messages. Already thirty years into its development, radio had its messages for us and it delivered them well. We knew Quaker Oats were shot from guns; we wore Dick Tracy rings on our fingers; we coded and decoded endless adolescent messages; we drank Ovaltine with Little Orphan Annie or because of her. We flew into the air, Junior Birdmen; we kept our heads up in the blue... We waved flags for Hudson High, boys - we showed them where we stood. Jack Armstrong, all-American boy was our boy.....And as evening fell, *The Shadow*, *The Green Hornet*, *The Lone Ranger* became our companions, slipping easily, secretly between us and our homework. Later, as night came on, *I Love A Mystery* reached out to grip our imaginations with its terrifying tales.

We couldn't let go. We took our radios to bed with us, some of us risking electrocution under the covers to go on listening as long as we could - until sleep or snooping parents caught us out.

Radio was our technology and absolutely right - revolutionizing it was - the critics are our lives.



It is interesting now to think about that technology, and to understand that the question of how it would be used had already been decided in the 26 years before my birth. No chance at all to effect it. The technological progress and systems building that were responsible for feeding my early years with stirring narratives of danger and single-minded courage had been made at the price of individual initiative and freedom in the ether.

**And when you hear the radio announcer,
you'll get your wings of tin.
So remember, Junior Birdmen,
and send your box tops in.**

Diversity and idiosyncrasy had already been muted and screened out; the stories (whose advertising I remember now far more clearly than the stories) were the output of corporations and existed for commercial ends and to advance values consonant with consumer capitalism.

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It was in the late 70s that I responded to the lure of that old technology - its pulse momentarily as lively as in its youth - in that wonderfully youthful and doomed experiment, public radio.

You wouldn't think we could be had twice in the same way. But there's little that can live in an environment of advanced capitalism and survive without at some point thinking large robust markets and instant audience gratification. And if you're public radio, founded to be an alternative to this kind of thing, you don't think these things without a lot of overdubbing about diversity, creativity, and innovation, even when the language is finally empty of all its meaning.

I was living in northwestern Pennsylvania, in a farming area, where radio was news - generally the morning newspaper read out loud - music (lots of it) and, for those of us venturing out of the cities for the first time in heady experiments with the land and community life, a kind of cultural reminder - there was a creative and a critical environment we'd left behind. Radio was something you listened to pretty regularly and public radio was our network of choice.

Sometime after the thunderstorms and ghost-like utterances of my brief life in theater, as I sat in my farmhouse with one of those now antique synthesizers, an EML 101, and my typewriter, I began to create short narrative/sound works that would for a time be aired by National Public Radio.

NEW AMERICAN RADIO

My entrance into radio preceded - but only by a few years National Public Radio's self-imposed mandate to double its audience. By the time that announcement was made I was back in New York City, had started a not-for-profit organization -- New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc. -- and a series -- **NEW AMERICAN RADIO** -- that from 1985 on would commission and distribute the work of a growing number of artists interested in inserting their material into the mass media and reaching larger audiences than conventional arts audiences. At virtually the same time, Julie Lazar at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles initiated her series, *THE TERRITORY OF ART*, and Gregory Whitehead became *EAR* magazine's radio editor. Charles Amirkhanian was at KPFA, Jacki Apple at KPFK, and across the country, in stations from Madison, Wisconsin and Boulder, Colorado (KGNU) to Philadelphia (WXPB), New York City (WNYC) and Boston (WGBH), and back again to San Francisco, Portland, Oregon (KBOO) and Los Angeles, programmers still programmed new and experimental work.

From the start, **NEW AMERICAN RADIO** was an invitation to artists, in whatever discipline they found themselves, to explore the radio medium, to engage with it as an art context, and to develop work that given the considerable constraints on the radio medium, would expand radio's notion of aural thinking. Long before multi-culturalism became the buzz word of the public radio system and the almost single-minded pursuit of arts administrators, **NEW AMERICAN RADIO** extended its invitation to artists from all cultural backgrounds, perspectives and aesthetic interests; and it included younger artists, whose opportunities within the public radio system were and continued to be tenuous and under-encouraged. A number of these artists are represented in this book.

NEW AMERICAN RADIO was also an accident - something that could only have happened in a system as loosely organized and mildly chaotic as American public radio. It came into existence in 1985 with a series of five works, including Gregory Whitehead's *Display Wounds* and Scott Carrier's *The Death of Ruth Tuck*. It reappeared two years later with thirteen programs, among them Charles Amirkhanian's strikingly beautiful *Walking Tune* and Earwax Productions' *Audiographs: Songs of the Tenderloin*.

And then, in 1987, another accident. For a brief moment a window of opportunity opened; the panel reviewing applications to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's newly established Radio Fund comprised several who supported the idea of a national laboratory series where producers could explore and enlarge the concept of what radio is and where new talent might be developed for the medium; **NEW AMERICAN RADIO**'s application for funding was there; it was supported and two years later, in 1989, a national weekly series of what we called radio art made its first appearance. A wonderful fluke, an accident, a mischance, and looking back, a miracle!

That under the growing influence of audience research statistics within the public system, the door of opportunity slammed shut almost immediately, denying NEW AMERICAN RADIO the opportunity ever to direct the attentions and shape the perceptions of large sectors of American radio audiences, is a matter of history. Also a matter of history - and a much prouder history - is the fact that, supported by arts funding, NEW AMERICAN RADIO continued none-the less; and that its artists, using radio's tools and radio's arena of distribution, built during its ten years as a national weekly series, a body of uniquely American work that has been recognized and acclaimed by audiences and programmers around the world.

*A Presentation for the
Radio Roundtable
May 15, 1989
at the New England
Foundation for the Arts*

An artist does not enter a new medium to be a part of its mainstream.

*He or she comes to explore the creative potential of the medium
and in so far as possible to create work that is not now
being created for that medium; work that may be perceived
by gatekeepers and by audiences as different, far-out, weird,
perhaps even threatening.*

*It may be that the artist will create work that pushes at the
limits of the medium's forms; that reflects on them, criticizing and challenging
their unexamined assumptions.*

*It may be that the artist will create work that
combines forms, that carefully crafts relationships
or calls attention to relationships that are not
currently perceived as significant.*

*Or it may be that the artist's exploration will
lead to the development of a something - a way of structuring,
a way of perceiving - that is truly unique.*

*Whatever, the artist takes on the new medium to say and do
something in that medium that is individual, distinct.
She brings to it a unique version of reality.*

*Which is where the trouble begins;
and why accusations of elitism, of self-indulgence,
are so frequently made. And why gatekeepers fear
their audiences will tune out.*

*What a helluva nerve to enter a field in which others have labored long and well,
where ways of doing things are familiar and accepted, and pretend to do
something else. Who the hell do you think you are anyway?*

*But the identity question is the wrong question.
It is not who we are. And it is certainly not a question of
whether we feel ourselves superior to anyone else.*

*If a study were made it would probably find the same
proportion of superior feelings among programmers and
station managers as amongst artists.*

*Indeed if I remember my history correctly,
it was the brilliant observer of American
ways, Alexis de Tocqueville, who pointed
out that in a democracy everyone will
always find a way of feeling superior to
someone else.*

*It is not that.
The question is one of difference,
of alternative versions of reality,
which carries no value judgment at all,
and whether they will be allowed to challenge the medium's mainstream
and the power base upon which it is built.*

It is a question of difference.

*In a society where "commodity listening"
is encouraged - i.e., a way of listening that
encourages audiences to suspend all intellectual activity and
be content with consuming what they hear --*

*In a society where the national public sphere
and the principle and practice of public service broadcasting
are eroded and the channels open to genuine individual expression
are almost too narrow to navigate.*

*In such a society, in this society,
it seems to me that the difference
the artist's difference makes
is all the difference,*

and the only difference....

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In *Evolution of Sound Technology*, Rick Altman speaks of the early suspicion of sound in another young art form, filmmaking. He describes how as soon as the new art found the leisure to contemplate its own position, it felt compelled to differentiate itself from its renowned parent, the theater and the theatrical model dominated by sound and particularly dialogue.

While we, who were responsible for NEW AMERICAN RADIO, never found ourselves at leisure in the early years to contemplate much but the capitulation of the public radio system to the dictates of a handful of audience researchers and the difficulties this created for us in two very crucial arenas: funding and audience development, we did make an effort to examine our position, and to differentiate our output from the regular output of the distribution system we were making use of. And we encouraged others to help us find a language with which to deal intelligently with this new work.

Central to this undertaking were the contributions of Douglas Kahn, whose examination of early 20th Century sound arts pointed to the stifling effect of musical presuppositions on other realms of sound composition; and whose continuing interest in phonography made him one of the few academics thinking and writing about radio; of Gregory Whitehead whose prolific output both in radio and in print, argued for an understanding of what the radio is in radio art; of Jacki Apple, who perhaps better than any of us understood the radio art of this period as an extension of postmodern interdisciplinary art into the mass media, and who as a media critic has frequently found opportunities to write about it; and of my never to be suppressed colleague Regine Beyer, who again and again dealt in a defining way, with the early attempts to undermine or banish NEW AMERICAN RADIO from the public airwaves and thus relegate its significant contributions to a specifically American form of radio art to the never-never land of silence.

This book, certainly my contribution to it, is informed by the thinking of all of the above. But its focus is the practices and now no longer possibilities of American radio art. It is about the considerable work American artists did in the medium from 1985 to 1994; it is about the particularly American character of the work, and the possibilities it opened up or might have opened up for the medium. For, in the end this book is my/our tribute to a time already past, to an energy now completely blocked by the institutional environment in which it hoped to develop and flourish, but a confident energy that can redirect itself, and with considerable experience in the realm of the invisible, move on into cyberspace, where for a brief moment, another window of opportunity exists for the artist.

While the majority of the artists represented here contributed significantly to the NEW AMERICAN RADIO series, others like Guillermo Gomez-Pena have practiced their art in the medium without the help of a regularly distributed series; and still others have contributed only a few works, but those of such significance in the extraordinary convergence of materials within them - history, fantasy, fiction - and the alternative forms they develop as to be unexcludable.