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#64 something more and something else than words - February 2022

Light at the End of the Dial

Daniella Watson Hughes listens in to Radiophrenia, a festival of sound transmitting from Glasgow's CCA

Tuning in to the radio, a soft whisper greets me, '*Radiophrenia*—the light at the end of the dial'. When the reassuring phrase, 'reaching far to bring you near' follows on, I trust enough to don my headphones.

Based at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow, and running 24 hours a day, *Radiophrenia* puts out a fortnight of transmission compiled from a constellation of open call submissions, curated commissions and *live to air* performances. It's a cry (*or summons?*) to take solace in a deep feed of experimental music, spoken word, field recordings—sound works that resist taxonomy. RSVP an invitation to retreat from visual onslaught. I listen remotely from my home in North Shields.

Radiophrenia is a collective experience of ephemeral encounters. There is no playback and no way to know who else is listening. Expectations of replay, rewind and fast-forward are replaced by the certainties of start and stop. Choose a radio programme from the schedule or opt to drop in by chance. Alight on a musical phrase, traffic, glacial thaw or birdsong, a swallow. This widely cast variety engenders different modes of listening. I could take notes and learn something, do some ecstatic dance, submit to the story of a strange land, or enter a trance, my inner eye replete with conjured images. My understanding of each 'segment' will not be static. Some things will turn me off and some on.

It's before the school run when I first tune in. My chosen gesture for listening is stillness, a less iconic stance than looking or thinking, a posture poised with inner tension. I'm on pause and I'm a filter. My journey begins. The spoken word story constructs for me a landscape populated by genderless chords. Distinctive characters journey along a river which is also a frontier between two realms. Throughout Alessandro Bossetti's 'The River', words are displaced by sonorous beings—musical chords—that evoke both a land and complex emotions through musical harmony. Using binaural recording, pronouns are spoken simultaneously in each ear; he/she, his/her. These initial interruptions eventually blend into my experience of the narrative. At first, the chords are markers, like a bleeped-out swearword. The journey ends with their duration extended into a utopian wilderness, each becoming the landscape and events.

I get up to make a cup of tea and when I come back Claire Roussay's commission begins. The work 'from home to lowcountry' is a thirty-six-minute walk from her Texas house to her favourite bar, Lowcountry. An ambient chatter of voices, buoyed by summer air and peals of laughter, carries optimism over pearly swell of piano and organ. Voices are distant. Words condense and waft like clouds, happily undeciphered. Is there a heteroglossia—Mikhail Bakhtin's concept that a multitude of voices reside within each one? Universal ode to the joy of a bar where they lounge on red padded seats. The track puts me in a trance, I daren't move, daren't disrupt the euphoria. Cascade of aural flecks build to a gentle sonic boom in my heart. Does sound travel at the speed of love? Thwarted desire to repeat. I need to hear it again, need that feeling, and I understand the word *hit*.

Often transmissions are recorded binaurally with a heavy use of stereo and require close listening. My experience of ASMR and aesthetic chills is heightened by headphones. Straight into my ear canal, sound waves concentrate and condense unlike the way live music crosses the border of skin. Played through speakers, music is ambient calligraphy writing bodies, roping them in to the performance. We get the feels either way. Throughout 'lowcountry' my heart rhythm calibrates, and breath coheres, as though conducted by the piece. I imagine music infiltrating the flesh, spreading, trespassing, and finally escaping through frisson and piloerection. I am both witness to this surprise visitor and congenial host, like the character Roy Neary in the movie *Close Encounters* when the landscape shakes to the shudder of the extra-terrestrial synth-light-show. Profound conversation between sounds and my what? Nervous system, myofascia, soul? I listen now whilst writing this, distracted by rapid rhythmic hand claps, electronics—the anti-wisdom platitudes of Henry McPherson's, 'Intimacies', are whispered, rhetorical, 'how soon will you feel different?', and 'to end/where did we begin?'

Multidisciplinary Afrofuturist artist Nwando Ebizie's 'The Swan' is an invocation of radical possibility, fictioning an alternative society through ebullient dance music, praise and chant of urgent initiation—'give in to yourself'. Imagine our world remade by mythic personas. The outmoded and weary displaced by the drum of the new. With the light relief of being a channel, the beatific music moves me, and I acquiesce to its ritualistic messages. I am content.

The live-to-air work 'Seelonce' by Teresa Cos and Tom White, transmits via radio and video. A night time car journey, the damp thud of windscreen wipers and warm acceleration hums alongside a graphic score and improvised live elements with subtle, wind-like voices that ooh and ah. The accompanying streamed video amped up the idea of travelling alongside or being contained within the work. Interruptions from a commercial radio station playing tinny pop tunes underline the more visceral possibilities of transmission arts.

The *Radiophrenia* project has an open-endedness unlike anything to be found in material work such as painting or immersive sculpture. Vision can deceive, walled off in its world of surfaces. *Radiophrenia* occurs as an open system, a crystal palace full of interstices. I position myself within and without. The terrain of hearing is equally illusory, given the appearance of confinement within the skull: it not only consumes inner space entirely, but makes it seem infinite.

Daniella Watson Hughes is a writer who studied at the Universities of Sheffield Hallam and Manchester. Her writing has appeared in 2HB, Journal of Visual Culture in Britain, The Skinny and Untitled. Most recent publications are How Pam Felt Before Pam Fled (Nuts and Bolts) and gilt filters (OrangeApple Press). Instagram daniellamwatson

Radiophrenia was broadcast 24 hours a day from 7–20 February 2022.