

[published in Musicworks No. 53 Radiophonics and other -phonies (Toronto) Summer 1992]

Language is the Flower of the Mouth
with special guest the Radio Contortionist as flavor of the month

Being alive on radio is rare. Radio contortionist is a term used to describe the person conscious of the proverbial translation/treason role plays. The contortionist is in a constant search for their multiple reversions, inversions and perversions. The tactics the artist employs will hopefully have more than a trivial effect. These maneuvers delve into description, identification and intimacy. An essentialist retracing of the radiophonic body, from head to toe, via the tongue.

Is corpse and dust, shadow and nothingness
it is a corpse, dust, shadow, nothing more
'tis a corpse, dust, shadow, nothing at all
is corpse -is dust -is shadow -and is nought!
is dead, is dust, is painted nothingness
is dust, a corpse, a shade -is less than these
is but cadaver, ashes, shadow, void
inanimated dust, a thing of naught.¹

Eight translations, eight concluding verses, and just as many truths. What is the relationship of the original (es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada) to its others? Unease, distrust, kinship, attraction, estrangement, or (in)difference? Simply put, translation is a do and die proposition. If you do, you communicate but kill at least part of the original; and if you don't, you don't communicate and so you die. Translation, of course, pertains not only to multilingual shifts but also to homolingual and epistemological shifts. Communication from thought to word, out of mouth, then through ear to other brain, can prove to be treacherous navigation. The static that populates radio air implies a variety of (mis)understandings.

The disarticulation of the original is not to be regarded as sacrilege, but certainly as transgression. The triad transmission/ translation/ transgression, shares more than a prefix, it implies a common phenomenology: radio. This technology is one of the sites where the original has no origin, the word is tuned out of context and the air is the language nobody speaks.

Host: Hello.

Caller: Ya, what are you doing?

Host: Um we are projecting our voices through the microphone.

Caller: What?!

Host: To come in contact with your ear and then you come back in contact with ours again.

Caller: Ya, ya but can you play some music?

Host: (pause) No way. ²

The radio contortion is an attempt to debug radio of its seemingly inherent need to make sense. These are the rudimentary beginnings for the radio contortionist trying to fish out a new vocabulary without falling into the traps of transcription, where words are supposed to be only linear measure, where the emphasis is on how consciousness always makes sense of itself and its experiences. No mystery there. Here, however, we are searching for anything which eludes grasp, which is hidden and eludes your desire to pin it down. It's not only a question of speaking in different tongues, but also a question of speaking in the same tongue tuned to different forks.

Raymond Queneau in his *Exercices de style* ³ narrated a paragraph-long story 99 times in 99 ways. A brief story interpreted and rendered by tense, colour, taste, dream, permutation, exclamation, syncopation, hearing, apocope, alexandrine, anagram, homonyme, probability, certainty, anglicism, botany, vulgarity, comedy, etc. A literary tour-de-force which serves as inspiration to the contortionist. With a pliable body and an equally flexible medium, it is striking how radio has perfected only the act of repetition within an illusion of the new.

Radio belongs to a set of what Paul Virilio terms " ... transfer, transit and transmission systems, the transport and transmigration networks whose immaterial configuration reiterates the cadastral organization and the building of monuments."⁴ The plagiarists have identified similar scenarios to those outlined by Virilio. "Given the total colonization of daily life by Capital, we are forced to speak the received language of the media ... creating new languages [that] would reinforce the myths of originality. We aim to re-invent the language of those who would control us."⁵ Admittedly, radio is inextricably tied to a body cast in normative power structures. An art flourishing in those dead waters must acquire certain survival techniques. For the radio contortionist it's the awkward breath:

This is the length of a breath _____

_____in time. This is the length of a breath _____

_____ in space.

Yet another radio contortion: defining yourself in space and time by displacing air and counting what is left. And, this is just your basic breath, the possibilities entailed in exhaling without inhaling (or vice versa) are just some of the potential second steps.⁶

The radio contortion, with its ability to translate instantly in an expressive code rather than through a specific agenda of comprehension, is a relative to glossolalia (particularly Artaud's)⁷. If radio *is* a language (ie. a hypothetical situation where one could say: *I speak radio*) then one can imagine the structures commensurate with such status: dictionaries, grammars, alphabets, courses at the YMCA, maybe even a territory. Ridiculous perhaps, but striving for neologisms and exponential slangs does have merit. The translator/traitor would become the navigator of code confusions. The text of radio would become a lingua franca via a multiplicity of confusing footprints.

Being alive on radio requires knowledge of the "head carry" because it's *effective when towing the conscious (and panicked) listeners in the rough air. It accomplishes this by permitting one to lift the listeners head and preventing the air from dashing over their faces and up their noses; the head carry: a maneuver intended to instill a sense of security.*⁸ A contortion is by no means a safety feature, it's haphazard ground. The listener is the first to react to a contortion. "What is it?" mirrors the contortionist's "this is it." The dance begins with the tension/release exchange of sensory input. Children frequently utilize turnings, spinning around and disequilibrium, looking for sensations of vertigo and disorder as sources of pleasure.⁹ This is a pleasure grounded in the insecurity of its ground, a certain danger in the paradise of unbalanced inputs and dizzy spells. The contortionist isn't necessarily on the quest for pleasure but does relish in dialogues on one foot, tongue push-ups and breath mints.

Host: Hello.

Caller: Hello. I would describe myself as highly sexualized, perverted, computerized, audiophonic, loud, and obnoxious; basically very human.¹⁰

The spatiality and temporality of the radiophonic field inscribes an intimacy of experience. Measuring our bodies invisibly creates a sensual fiction, a poetic virtuality, creating a space where we can describe ourselves and still not know who we are. In the "Describe Yourself" program, strangers to radio and each other became intimate within a frequency. The nature of radio is auspicious for psychoecological investigations of the moment, for geographical mappings of the psyche. While the environmental soundscapes heard on radio are often evocative and do transport the listener, it is only through psychoacoustical environments that

the listener can learn how to drive. The talk show is such a space, although it is commonly formatted to a literal death, with the host as executor. In "Voices Inside my Head" the on-air host speaks through the voice of another in real time. The surrogate voice is the noise gate for the host's incoming phrases on the headphones.

"I look at this technology as a way to externalize the internal maps of the world that we all have."¹¹ Yet, the intimacy of the voice betrays a body out there, warm to the touch. "We are beginning to see what kind of relationship people are drawing between things and what kind of domains people have in their heads. Maybe that way we'll be able to understand each other a little better." This sort of alienated intimacy is not reserved for the radiophone, as contemporary technologies are all intimately tied to the constant redefinition of personal space. "The world that we have in our heads isn't just words. This new technology will allow us to externalize this in ways where the word is not dominant." In the invisible radio lexicon we find words in all their variants in emphasis; a living dictionary. "It might eventually be able to create a new vocabulary, a vocabulary of a leap, a vocabulary of a relationship. There's a whole grammar there that we have to evolve."

There's no language of radio, just tongues. It's a vocabulary afloat and unanchored, enamored with possibilities. The contortions have veered us in seesaw fashion towards a neology based on the old analogue maneuver and the translation imperative. Different tongues, different forks, it's what renders the trip tasty. The text of radio is the navigation through code confusions. The translator/traitor is the contortionist who utilizes the resulting confusing footprints as the basis for the lingua radia franca.

Christof Migone (September 1991)

This is the 3rd annual report of the Center for Telecommunication Contortions. The CRTC has offices wherever opened mouths have air to let out. Aside from its founding obsessions, the disarticulation of the original, the intimacy of disembodiment and the creative mapping of the radiophonic body, the Center is also seeking ways to implement memory REWind of dreams, and memory FastForward of desires on all cassette machines, as well as developing a belief that wires are the cause of all hums, hems, haws and howls. Christof Migone instigates these activities and is presently investigating doing radio stripped of transmitter.

NOTES

1. Margaret Sayers "Peden Building a Translation, The Reconstruction Business: Poem 145 of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz." *The Craft of Translation* ed. John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte. The University of Chicago Press 1989, p.19-23. The eight translators were Samuel Beckett, John A. Crow, Kate Flores, Roderik Gill, Muna Lee, Frederick Bliss Luquiens, B.G.P., G.W. Umphrey and Margaret Sayers Peden.
2. From *Breathing Exercises*, a radio program with Bruce Gottlieb, Christof Migone and a perplexed caller. This section appeared on the cassette compilation *Identification*, see///.saw tapes, Montréal 1990.
3. Raymond Queneau. *Exercises de style*. Gallimard, 1947.
4. Paul Virilio. *The Lost Dimension*. Semiotext(e) New York, 1991, p.21.
5. Karen Eliot. *Plagiarism: Art as Commodity and Strategies for its Negation*. Aporia Press, London England, 1987, p.5.
6. A tactic explored by Julia Loktev and Christof Migone in "We of Sound Mind and Body." To be published in an upcoming issue of *Offramp*.
7. "Glossolalia appears as one of the outer edges of language, as a moving threshold, as an uncertain border between sense and nonsense; it articulates the use of signs and the practice of voice, the social requirements of communication and the solitary pleasures of vocalization. Glossolalia is as fleeting as the voices that utter it, as opaque as the strings of sounds of which it is composed. It appears as a fuzzy object, without any consistency or history." From Jean-Jacques Courtine. "Glossolalia: the meaning of nonsense." *Art and Text* Number 27, 1990.
8. *Manual of Life Saving and Water Safety Instruction*, p.99.
9. Paul Virilio. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* . Semiotext(e) New York, 1991, p.12.
10. From *Describe Yourself on Danger in Paradise* November, 1990, CKUT-FM Montréal, produced by Christof Migone.
11. Henry See from an interview with Christof Migone for an episode of *Turning Point*, a radio series exploring and dissecting the new technologies.

Transcript from the *Description* program.

Caller 1: I'm suffering from on the air pollution.

Host: What can I do to solve that problem?

C: You can give me a frequency to identify with.

H: You have a cold

C: I have a very bad cold and I think my blood is losing all its warmth and I think I'm turning into some kind of reptile.

H: Can you describe your cough?

C: (coughs).

H: Do you realize you just transmitted your cold to all the listeners?

C: I'm very sorry, it's not a very pleasant cough.

H: Are you happy or sorry that you have such an effect on people?

C: If I truly have that kind of power over all these listeners I can play god and wish all kind of neat things.

H: Like what?

C: Like ... Ok, let's us all humans cease to exist!

Host: Hello.

Caller 2: I do enjoy your callers, but I did catch a cold.

H: That's unfortunate, but I guess that you believe in this radio thing then.

Host: Hello.

Caller 3: Hello. The lines have been busy and I have many many personalities that have been trying to get through for some time. We'd like to talk about androgyny, a being without specificity which is how I feel. I suppose that you can actually think of this show as counselling if you can change the angle in such a way that you could help people describe themselves.

H: I don't know if it's something we should strive for.

C: Do we want to explore ambiguity?

H: That and also the fact that this is not a show. It's nothing. It really is nothing.

C: Perhaps I'm just calling up to fill up the space between times.

H: Maybe.

C: Or perhaps I'm a lunatic?

H: I hope so. What happened to your other personalities?

C: The other one I brought couldn't hear itself. It became disoriented and displaced itself on purpose ... nice to be alone with one of me.

H: When you are just one? Do you still talk to yourself?

C: I don't know. There's so much peace alone that I never even contemplated that

H: What is peace?

C: Space without contemplation. It's easier to describe oneself in terms of the lack.

H: It's true. It's easier to know what you are knowing what you are not.

C: You can see what you are not. You can never see what you are.

Host: Hello.

Caller 4: Hello. Is that my voice? Talk! Talk!

H: It sounds like mine. I think your voice became mine as soon as you called.

C: How could that be?

H: Oh, some kind of relationship that began.

C: And does it end?

H: It ends as soon as you hang up.

C: Are you trying to tell me something?

H: I think so.

C: Should I be insulted?

H: You should be happy, angry, insulted.

C: Does that make sense what you just said? I don't think so. Are you nervous?

H: No. I don't think so

C: I think I know that you're nervous.

H: Ya. I think you know everything about me.

C: Only if I want to.

H: Do you want to?

C: Not really. You don't intrigue me. Does this thing ever end. Describe yourself.

H: I have knobby knees and a rib cage.

C: And a tattoo. I know all about it.

H: You do? Describe it.

C: We won't get personal now.
H: Why not?
C: I don't think it's the time or the place.
H: This is not a time nor a place.
C: What is it then?
H: That's what we are trying to find out. It's in between.
C: Is that where you are?
H: That's where I try to be, so that only few people can find me.
C: Who are you waiting for?
H: Somebody who can find a place and a time.
C: Your place and your time?
H: No. The place and the time.
C: Heard any good jokes?
H: Not lately.
C: This conversation is going nowhere.
H: I agree. Goodnight.

Caller 5: I called 'cos I thought that last one was so boring.
Host: I kinda enjoyed that one.
C: I thought that she was obsessed with you being nervous. The whole show reminds me of the Psych Ward at Bellevue.
H: Oh, you've been there?
C: In a professional capacity.
H: On the outside and on the inside?
C: Ya. They give you a little sticker that says visitor and you write your name on it.
H: And you stay there forever?
C: Only if it falls off.

Host: Hello.
Caller 4 (again): There's lots to say that hasn't already been said.
H: That's true. It's becoming kind of empty.
C: Does this ever end?
H: It's just you and me.
C: Strange. It feels like I've had this conversation before. Are you still you?
H: No. I think I've changed.
C: Grown over the last minutes have you?
H: No. I haven't progressed or regressed, just changed.
C: You bore me.

Caller 6: I would describe myself as subterranean, obscure, black, poetic, infrequent, defossilized, primary, unfulfilled, desiring, funny, frantic, myopic, skinless, untouchable, paralogic, incompetent, silent, freaked out, unfamiliar, dry, speckless, insincere, crazy, wanton, lustful, and completely selfless.

Caller 7: The wires. Hello.
H: Yes. What is your shape?
C: The wires. The wires for the electricity. It's the power. The wires. You know what I mean?
H: Ya.
C: When I stand near the wires and the tower of the powers ...
H: What does that have to do with you?
C: Interesting things. Short circuit feedback.

Caller 8: Yes. Hello. I want to talk about myself. You see I have this problem of being an immigrant and here in Canada. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know, but I am.here. Are you there?
H: Yes. Do you think identity is intimately tied to culture?
C: There are barriers. But culture I don't understand. I understand barriers.
H: Walls?
C: Yes. Cement sometimes. Maybe not.
H: Only the concrete?
C: Yes. Black and white is what I understand.
H: How do you define yourself?
C: Very hard thing to do.