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# AUDACITY

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BOOK REVIEWED: William Furlong, *Speaking of Art: Four Decades of Art in Conversation*. London and New York: Phaidon, 2010.

In 2010 it seems that almost every art institution, library, and university is recording, circulating, and archiving the voice of the artist. The audio/video conversation is now a means of extending the information available in a gallery show, and of preserving the memories of artists for posterity. Hosting conversations with artists is also, increasingly, a curatorial practice in its own right that signals the critical acumen, and at times the good connections, of curators themselves. It was not always so.

In 1974 when the British artist William Furlong founded *Audio Arts*, the concept of a cassette format magazine specifically aimed at recording conversations among artists, rather than formal interviews, was an unusual and possibly unique project. The archive of tapes, photographs, and ephemera generated throughout its life has been housed at Tate Britain since 2004, and *Audio Arts* is now “on hold,” as Furlong has put it. The publication of *Speaking of Art* thus functions as a capstone to its history as well as a means of introducing new international audiences to the project. Introduced by critic

Mel Gooding, who places *Audio Arts* in the context of late twentieth-century art practice, the book comprises edited transcriptions of forty-four encounters between artists and critics, arranged in chronological order. Individually they speak to the ideas, concerns, and passions of a wide range of artists, including John Cage, Marina Abramović, Joseph Beuys, Tacita Dean, Tadeusz Kantor, and Philip Glass. Collectively they document art’s themes, ideologies, and commitments over the past thirty-plus years. The book also shows (even in transcription) how the voice of the artist has changed and continues to change; how it is that artists stage themselves in interviews, even ones as equitable and relaxed as these, showing, at least for this reader, that the artist’s voice is an extension of the artist’s rhetorical self-construction, and an important part of creating the *idea* of the artist in the late twentieth century.

Since the advent of sound recording, audio has had a complex and fluid relationship with print. In the 1930s, the writer Ralph Ellison, one of the writers

employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to record lives in New York City, took down his informants' voices on paper, transferring the sound of speech to the printed record: "Ahm in New York, but New York ain't in me. You understand?"<sup>1</sup> Oral transcription constitutes a fluid, expressive, and at times controversial discourse in its own right, and what Ellison was recording in note form was not just *what* was being said but *how* it was said. Readers could listen to speech in print, aware of the presence of the voice. By the time Ellison and others were taking down voices on paper in the late 1930s, sound recording had long been "perpetuating the voices of the dead," as performance and sound historian Allen Weiss puts it.<sup>2</sup>

But it was in the post-war period, with its rapid development of audio recording, that a listening public began to develop, interested in the voices and opinions of people from all walks of life. A new idea of the voice had taken hold by the late 1940s, informed in the U.S. by the work of the WPA writers and their new interview techniques. Studs Terkel, whose oral histories of ordinary Americans began to be published in print in the 1960s, worked as a radio producer as part of the Federal Writers' Project from the 1930s, developing his own interest in the democratic voice of experience and later interviewing many musicians and artists for radio.

In the 1950s the recording press began to extend and transform the printing press. When young graduates Barbara Holdridge and Marianne Roney founded Caedmon records in 1953, their tag line was "Caedmon: a third dimension for the printed page." Holdridge and Roney wanted to make natural-sounding

voice recordings of poets reading their work, bringing the idea of the reading as performance into recording practice. The groundbreaking label that they initiated with Dylan Thomas reading his poetry went on to record the voices of Gertrude Stein, Robert Frost, and many others.<sup>3</sup> In 1957 the photographer W. Eugene Smith moved into his loft at 821 Sixth Avenue in New York, and he began to photograph and to record the voices of jazz artists in the process of making work, generating an archive now held online as The Jazz Loft Project. American radio had profiled musicians and singers in interviews since the 1940s. The legendary WYNC producer and ethnomusicologist Henrietta Yurchenko hosted a live Saturday night radio show in which she not only played American folk music, but also interviewed and co-hosted interviews, giving a regular slot and curatorial role to, for instance, blues and folk singer Leadbelly.

The history of the oral interview, and of its relationship to radio, is different in the UK. The British Institute of Recorded Sound was founded in 1955 by Patrick Saul, and as the British Library Sound Archive it now holds a vast oral history archive that includes many artists and musicians. The British art historian, David Sylvester, made a series of radio programs about artists, after visiting New York in 1960, and he supported the work of Richard Hamilton, a key figure in *Audio Arts* and in *Speaking of Art*.<sup>4</sup> However, Britain, with its more centralized institutional radio culture, never had the more porous and experimental radio culture that the U.S. had in the 1950s. It wasn't until the 1970s that experimental sound broadcasting and recording really took hold.

As recording technologies advanced, artists began to make use of reel-to-reel tape as a form of artistic intervention. In 1959 William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin recorded and distributed tape cut-ups of recorded speech, extending a practice that had begun using mass-produced printed material with Dada. Burroughs and Gysin—prescient, pragmatic, and rhetorical—moved the goalposts. Audio experiment blossomed and burgeoned in the 1960s as visual and music artists incorporated tape into their work, and artists began to consider how the definition of “artwork” could include recording and editing the voices of other artists. Sound recording was also among the means through which artists exchanged their work throughout their particular communities. Poets, musicians, and artists founded small, cheap printing and recording presses through which they published and distributed work that stood outside the mainstream mass market. Mail art also began to take off as a form and as a movement in the 1960s, and, in the early 1970s, began to extend to the cassette tape, often with the inclusion of visual and graphic art in the packaging and printing of the works. In the UK of the early 1970s, the pioneering work of experimental radio had not been yet been done, but a flourishing cosmopolitan art scene brought international artists to and through the UK, and to London in particular. Art was cosmopolitan in spirit, and British artists were part of collaborative art movements such as mail art and performance art. The importance of hearing artists speak about their work was matched by the importance of resetting the terms of art practice to include publishing, distributing, writing, and promoting art—art had dematerialized and the field was

open for new aesthetic forms and new critical forums.

It is this multi-faceted context that informed the thinking behind *Audio Arts*, which was founded in 1974. Furlong began working with recorded speech not as a social historian but as a sculptor, and he brought into his sound magazine strategies of engagement that emerged directly from his art practice. The generation of British artists to which Furlong belongs, educated at art school in the early 1960s, was informed by conceptualism and developed an expanded concept of the traditional artistic disciplines, including sound as medium and material within the redefined limits of sculptural practice. From this perspective, the new audio magazine was a sculptural work. From the beginning *Audio Arts* was also understood as an extension of the artwork into the critical realm, an idea central to the tenets of conceptualism. Conceptual art—as Dennis Oppenheim explains in his interview in *Speaking of Art*—re-imagined the artist’s work as an expanded field embracing the entire spectrum of the art process, focusing on collaboration amongst artists as a practice crucial to foregrounding the social production of art, and creating a renewed identity for the artist as witness and conduit for ideas.

In his prefatory essay “Audio Arts: The Archive as a Work of Art,” the critic and long-term *Audio Arts* collaborator, Mel Gooding, understands *Audio Arts* as “a conscious collaborative action,” taking its direction from Beuys’s concept of social sculpture, an ideology whose overriding dictum was “EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST.” Furlong took this into what Gooding calls “audial space,” mak-

ing *Audio Arts* an “imaginative intervention in the world” as a political act in its widest sense of being conducive to a culture of civility. As social sculpture it is a continuous work with many disparate elements, dependent on the collaborative sense-making intelligence of receptive ears and eyes. As such it is almost *anti-curatorial*, in something of the same way that Duchamp’s oeuvre and example might be considered “anti-art.” Furlong’s position as interviewer and producer was always non-interpretative, a stand that many artists working in the mid-to-late twentieth-century took (in part at least) from John Cage, who conceived of the artist as receiving medium, as witness, as listener to the polyphony and noise of the world. In Cage’s 1983 conversation with Furlong, Cage talks about his approach to art making as informed by Thoreau. Getting out of the way of sound, creating a non-intentional body of work, and allowing material to materialize or enter the frame in whatever way it will—all are seen by Cage to have their own political and social strength.

The conversation with Cage is not the only interview that seems to speak back to *Audio Arts* as an idea, and to the art-making concepts that have informed it. Furlong’s long conversation with Dennis Oppenheim (1981), in particular, explores the territory of conceptualism, and his conversations with Kantor and Beuys (1981 and 1985, respectively) each place art making within the social context of the post-war period in ways that touch on collective memory and the making of meaning, as well as the purposes and responsibilities of art at the end of the twentieth century. It is obvious, in this light, that the book should begin with a 1959 conversation,

recorded for a BBC radio series called *Art, Anti-Art*, between Marcel Duchamp, Richard Hamilton, and the art historians George Heard Hamilton and Charles Mitchell, later published in *Audio Arts*. Richard Hamilton, whose conversation with Michael Compton (1983) constitutes the sixth record, saw “tremendous relevance in Duchamp’s attitude to art,” as he says in the interview, having himself produced a typographic version of Duchamp’s *The Green Box* in 1960. This interview—like many others in the book—produces cross references to other conversations, and these in turn suggest strands of enquiry, possibilities for further reading and looking, building layer upon layer of intelligent, associative thinking.

Furlong was joined early in the life of *Audio Arts* by long-term allies, some of whom also interviewed alongside him. They included Lawrence Weiner, Michael Archer, and Richard Hamilton, and, later, a young researcher call Jean Wainwright, who undertook several of the last interviews published in the book. Wainwright went on to write a PhD on Andy Warhol’s audio tapes and to research the idea of the sound interview as a portrait. These and other interviewers are all collaborators, with the artists whom they interview, and with the project itself. Each of them brings a different approach—there is no house style—and each of them brings out a different, related set of themes and ideas in approaching the artist.

Not all the interviews focus on the conceptual. The idea of painting—its practices and its shifting territories—is a powerful strand. Philip Glass is represented here, as well as Shirin Neshat,

John Baldessari, William Kentridge, and Tacita Dean, all artists whose work has crossed formal boundaries and included time and performance. But there is no thematic grouping; the conversations are positioned like beads on a string, along a time-line, and it is up to us to find their correspondences. The selection requires active reading, moving back and forth between each record in order to become familiar with what is said and how it relates to the ideas and opinions of others. The book deepens on reflection and it reflects what was around—what was on in galleries, theatres, and museums, and what was in the flow during the last thirty-five years.

Among the many pleasures of reading books is the pleasure of the page itself. Unlike the cassette tape, the book can be marked with a pencil, its pages paused over. Books move at the pace of the reader's eye. They can be turned back, read at random, and visually illustrated so that, in the fluid movement between sound and print, *Speaking of Art* occupies a highly useful space. Not only does it open outwards towards the larger project of which it is part, but it also opens *inward*, quite literally by meeting in the middle, toward the intimacy of the vocal encounter among artists and with art critics. Today, when

we have so thoroughly moved into the realm of the oral, and when we have all become listeners, *Audio Arts* may function as both archive and guide to late twentieth-century art ideas, with *Speaking of Art* as a useful entry point. As archive, it surely represents one of the great creative sound projects of the post-war period, on hold—unfinished but complete. As guide, it might enable us to better understand that the poetics of audial space rest lightly on the idea of the shared conversation, not only as a means of preserving the ideas of the past, but as one of the primary means of informing the imaginative territories of the future.

## NOTES

1. Jill Lepore, "The Uprooted: Chronicling the Great Migration," *New Yorker* (September 6, 2010): 76.
2. Allen Weiss, *Breathless* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), xiii.
3. Sarah Parry, "The Inaudibility of Good Sound Editing: The Case of Caedmon Records," *Performance Research* 7.1 (March 2002): 24–33.
4. David Sylvester's interview with John Tusa can be found at [www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/sylvester\\_transcript.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/sylvester_transcript.shtml).

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