

# Book review

Sarah Washington (ed.), *RadioArtZone*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2023. ISBN: 978-3-7757-5515-3. doi:[10.1017/S1355771823000614](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771823000614)

One hundred years into the life of radio as a mass medium, it is still tempting to think of its endemic art as a witchy presence in our daily lives: as an unseen *Something* which works in alliance with hidden forces whereby it gains the mysterious potency to conjure up the unexpected: ephemeral voices and sounds punctuated by patches of pulsating silences, thoughts, voiced stories as well as social realities, and, paradoxically, palpable solid bodies made from words, and sounds and atmospheres.

Even though reason tells us that there is no witchcraft involved in radio practice, and despite the fact that we have been aware of the physics and technology behind the medium from the moment of its inception, it still feels as if it were coming out of the *silent void*, in Rudolf Arnheim's fitting description of 1936 (Arnheim 1936: 145–6). It is a void which favours 'the wonderful synthesis of technology and art by way of transmission' as Hans Flesch put it in 1930 (Flesch 1930: 117); a void which is brimming with creative potential and possibilities, which is uplifting to experience precisely because it drifts towards and through us like a gust of wind, takes shape in us and vanishes again. Not without, ideally, having left a feeling of excitement and belonging, which arises from the very fact that it has started somewhere in the remote recesses of another person's inner space or in a bout of collective imagination, to be shared with a larger listening public, consisting of a multitude of individuals.

As a communicative process, radio reception is very much alike to what Elias Canetti described as the alchemical mechanism which is at work in any successful conversation. Successful, in that it aligns the intimacy of *Self* with the immensity of *Other* to form a third exhilarating dimension which is, in our case, the space of radio art.

'Radio exists without us', editor Sara Washington aptly states in her introduction to the book *RadioArtZone*, and she goes on to say that 'all sorts of radio waves constantly travel through our bodies'. They endlessly wash around us and through us, thereby transforming us into swimmers in their currents, who pick up messages and meaning as if by osmosis once radio has been put to cultural and artistic use. The editor's aim at claiming

'communicative technology for the advancement of human culture, before we unwittingly consign ourselves to the bargain bin of history' (4). This socio-political aspect, too, is part of the magic of radio which mostly comes into its own in radio art.

In 2022, Sarah Washington and Knut Auffermann set out to offer the wealth of radio art to a larger audience, when they curated the project *RadioArtZone*. As appointed artistic directors to the Esch-Alzette-European-Capital-of-Culture-programme (<https://esch2022.lu/en/>), they devised an arts-event of epic proportion, by giving carte blanche to 100 radio artists and inviting them to produce a 23-hour piece each which was then turned into a radio programme lasting for 100 days (<https://radioart.zone>).

During this period of time, the contributors, in concert with their facilitators, managed to present the immense wealth the genre has to offer, and so to surprise their audience with new ways to enjoy a radio magic which by far exceeded the massively confined formats normally heard on regular broadcasting stations. The Luxembourg event was unprecedented in scale, in adventurous freedom and in its length of running time. In it the 100 contributions mapped the immense range of possibilities in radio art, first celebrated by the pioneers of radio mentioned earlier: its playfulness and seriousness, and its tendency to embrace pressing political and cultural agendas. The manifold results of their works for Esch-Alzette can still be listened to online (<https://radioart.zone>).

In addition to the onsite and online presentations of this vibrant project, Washington and Auffermann have now managed to root it in the analogue world, and by conceiving a printed publication of the fleeting stuff of radio art, they have contributed to the ongoing experimentation with intermedia representation formats.

Catalogues of sound art- and radio art-shows face the obvious problem of how to present the qualities of their subject without choking its very essence, the ephemeral. They normally do this by displaying evocative visual documentation of the shows, accompanied by descriptive curatorial texts as well as essays from the cultural history of sound art.

What distinguishes *RadioArtZone* from other accomplished publications is that it expressly strives to translate the very properties of radio into the physical reality of the printed page. And, indeed, it is impressive to witness the rigour with which the editors and contributors strive to find tactile and visual ways to evoke sound, and so to convey the evanescent and

immaterial, the poly-sensory and poly-artistic properties of last year's event onto the page. This book gathers and 'broadcasts' an impressive array of themes, subjects and formats; and just like radio art itself, it is at once multidirectional, multifaceted, multilayered, multivocal, open-spaced and bursting with ideas. The contributions address their audience in the form of small essays, of manuscripts of extended radio dramas, of personal statements, radio manifestoes, poetic condensations, of definitions of radio art, or accounts of radio history. They come as cartoons, and gestural drawings which, at times, surface in variations throughout the book. At other times, we discover ephemeral handwritten notes, as photos of light effects and of shadow-plays. Other entries describe their projects and the process in which they developed. One contribution drifts towards us in the shape of a song, which makes us want to hum along with it. By using a transparent type of paper here and there, the book itself seems to echo the light touch of sound impressions.

*RadioArtZone* vibrates with a refreshing mix of free-floating ideas, a scent of radio-archeology and

radio-utopia, thereby creating the effect, as if we had entered the representation of a *Wunderkammer* assembled by a collective consciousness.

This book is generous in that the contributing artists share their passions and show their creativity at work. It is a gift to novices and lovers of the genre alike. The overall effect is that it may not have been meant to be read at all, but rather to be looked at and "listened to" and walked through with your hands and thoughts and open minds. So that you can tune into its magic in your own time.

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## REFERENCES

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