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Interview with Helen Thorington

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Helen Thorington is Co-Director of New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc. (aka Ether-Ore), and the founder and producer of New American Radio and Turbulence.

Thorington is an award winning writer, sound composer, and radio producer whose documentary, dramatic, and sound/music compositions have been aired nationally and internationally for the past twenty years. In September 2003, she performed with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company at The Kitchen, New York. Thorington has also created compositions for film and installation that have been premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, the Whitney Biennial, and in the Whitney Museum of American Arts' annual performance series.

Thorington has produced three narrative works for the web including Solitaire, which combines game and storytelling; and she has played a principal artistic role in the cutting-edge net work Adrift most recently presented as a performance and installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City. She is also a seasoned speaker on radio and net art.



Helen Thorington: About four years ago I became aware of the failing radio system. I say failing but what I really mean is public radio was turning more commercial, looking more to the bottom line and the mass audience than it had in previous years. Stations were depending more on audience research and what audience research said, of course, was that the kind of work we do, experimental work, new work, would not command large audiences or bring money back to the radio stations in the amount that they thought was important. Generally the system began to spread the word that you should drop those programs that were not bringing in money. Slowly documentary and drama, experimental work, experimental music have all disappeared from the public radio system. So lacking access and combining with that the diminished funding for the arts in America I became convinced that I better look somewhere else. I began to look at the new media and I developed the Turbulence web site, where we commission artists to create for the web medium. At the same time I did an archive of the New American Radio series. You can hear audio excerpts, read scripts, some scores and artists' writings on radio and their experience in radio. It's a large site, and would be larger if I were able to keep up with it. A lot of material still needs to get up.

JB: You say you have been doing something similar to what ORF Kunstradio has been doing here in Europe for audio art in the States for ten years. What did you do before that, how did you get into audio/radio art?

Helen Thorington: I began my career as a writer. I was living during the seventies in a rural area. I was doing a piece for theater and I wanted to have music with it. I turned to some composers in the area and they created the music, but they were not willing to write it down, so I said: "Okay, I'll learn taping techniques." I went and learned taping techniques in a studio where there was also hands-on access to synthesizers. I became fascinated with the synthesizer. This was in the seventies, the early days for a synthesizer. I took one home with me to use in the theater, became enamored of it, started putting my written works to music, creating my own soundscapes. I became

involved with some dancers, like Bill T. Jones, a very well known postmodern dancer. I did some scores for him and then moved back into New York City.

Because of the kind of work I had been doing, combining my own writing with sound I decided to start a place where it would be possible to hear that kind of work. That is how New American Radio had its beginning.

JB: Was this inside an existing radio station?

Helen Thorington: No. I started a not for profit organization, raised funding, commissioned work and used the national public radio satellite to distribute the work to public radio stations around the country. This is something we could do at that time which is entirely foreign to Europeans. Most of the Americans I worked with either had studios of their own or access to studios. It is very common for Americans to have their own studio's. The artists were spread around the country so we never had the group feeling that you get from working out of a single place.

The artists we commissioned for New American Radio were from all disciplines, some from video, mostly from the performing arts and music, some from the theater and some who actually came from media art.

JB: But how did the actual collaboration work, did that all happen via this satellite?

Helen Thorington: When you have a country that is as large as ours and the artists spread all across it, you don't have a group. So we were all simply isolated artists working. When the work was complete they would deliver it to me. Now the trouble also with our public radio system is that there are hundreds of stations across the country. Not all of them take this kind of programming seriously. So some artists couldn't even hear what the other artists were doing. We never got that sense of a field, even in ten years. There was never a sense of a field of radio art in the country, just a lot of excellent work that was produced for our series.

JB: Did you happen to discover the Internet at the same time when the funding began to drop and that the radio stations commercialized more?

Helen Thorington: I actually turned to the Internet very deliberately. I got a small group together and we created a CD-ROM. I knew nothing about the technology at that time. From there I went to working with one or two people who helped me to set up the initial sites, both for New American Radio and for the Turbulence group. I learned my lessons. Turbulence has actually become a group of artists, because we have pretty much dealt with New York City Artists. They do come together on a regular basis. We know each other and view each other's works. On the other hand there are many artists across the country that are not with us yet. The need to work together is very important now, because the technologies change so rapidly and not one of us can keep up with everything. There is a sense of collaboration in this. If you need help with something, you can call.

JB: The Internet has not helped you communicate better between people spread all over the country?

Helen Thorington: No, except by email. Not the Turbulence site. This has worked well because it is a New York site.

JB: Are you now producing audio art especially for the net? Has it changed the way this radio or audio art is made?

Helen Thorington: My approach has changed, as an artist, certainly. I was initially enormously happy to be able to incorporate visuals in my work. I always had an interest, but had never done it. Initially I resisted the whole idea of radio on the Internet, primarily because my understanding of radio is of this wonderful, invisible, 'eyes closed' medium, in which it is the imagination you are touching in a very unique way. Now you get onto the Internet where it is visual and the finger works very rapidly, the user's finger, the interaction is of an entirely different sort. Interaction in radio is really between what the artist creates and how the user imaginatively interacts with it, which is what I think true interaction is.

JB: What kind of works can we find on your 'net', are there audio files as well?

Helen Thorington: New American Radio, as I said, has audio excerpts. It has scripts, some scores, artists' writings and it has a full catalogue of works and bio's and that kind of stuff. It's a real archive. The Turbulence site has

works by artists created specially for the web medium, and some of them make use of audio. Quite a few actually. I did a work called North Country for the web. We launched it April 1st. 1996 with RealAudio 1.0 (laughs). When I look back the site has actually become a sort of archive of technological developments of the last year and a half, two years. The first works relied on technologies that have long been superseded. By the time I got to do the second part of North Country I was using RealAudio 3.0, and now we are up to 5.0 I believe.

The Adrift piece which we will be doing tonight (Vienna, Recycling The Future, simultaneous with people of Fakeshop, Brooklyn. December 1997) is a networked piece between three environments: sound text and virtual reality. It is an interplay between these three environments. Each performance is different. We developed programming to make new things possible. At this stage I think we are just at the beginning of what might happen. We have had programmers develop Java applications that allow me to write text into a writing space or import it into a writing space, and then send it out to my collaborators. I color-code it for my collaborators, so that a word might be in red, that would go to my sound person or sound collaborator; yellow would go to the person working with the vrml environment, saying: pay attention to this word (which they don't have to do of course); and then they respond by sending back to me vrml and sound. As it happened in Linz, where we did Adrift the first time: I sent the text to them and they sent the rest back to me and then we projected it in the space in Linz. Tonight we are going to be working out of two spaces, doing two performances: one in New York and one here. I have my collaborator in sound with me here and my collaborator in vrml will be in the Fakeshop in Brooklyn New York, presenting the same performance to an audience there. It is a process work. We do work with pre-sets. I have some pre-set texts, Jesse has some prerecorded sounds, but each time as we perform this, we approach it differently. I throw some of my texts away; I move them around in a different way. Jesse uses his sounds differently, Marek uses vrml differently. But also each time we are using new programming. When I was in Linz, I just sent text. Now I send my voice as well and now the programmers have made an application for me that allows me to format my text, so that I can align it left or right or center. Besides this I can color code it, and determine how it is going to appear to you, whether it is going to pop up or fade in or scroll up from the bottom. This is brand new, it was not finished last night, and whether I will have it tonight is a good question.

Next in January we are going to add to this the ability for someone in one of the physical spaces that we work in, to input text, besides myself. The audience will be able to respond to the work. Later on in the year there will be another artist inputting vrml, so that there will be two vrml artists working. In April we'll be streaming video into the vrml part of the work. We have a wonderful crew of programmers, who have come on from the advertising world in New York City. They are apparently bored with the programming they have to do, so they are absolutely delighted to work on something very exciting and new. We are all working for free.

I am really looking forward to developing the whole work as a multiple performance, with some cohesion. It will not be just Internet, but multiple performances in a performance space where people are interacting, until we get a real net, that is happening in the physical space just as in the virtual space. How far can we go till it gets so confused that it gets uninteresting? I wonder.

The other thing I just want to tell you is that while it is a process-work, we also have been very careful to archive it, each performance. So we have fixed works as well. We want to keep in touch with where we came from.

JB: I am sure you see many people come and go in the sound scene. Is there anything that one needs, what are the specific things for people to keep working with sound if they do? Is there a difference between sound artists and other artists?

Helen Thorington: My initial reaction is not really to your question. I am convinced that sound on the internet is going to be more and more significant. It is, from my point of view, a grounding material. Sound is a way of creating space. You can create space with sound, so you can in this very immaterial (again: as in radio) area, locate people, temporarily, through the use of sound in a space, a geography. I think this is very important. While we are still geographical people and floating with our feet above the earth it's an instinct to be grounded somewhere. We are losing this sense, particularly in the corporate world where they are switching people around from one location to another. The sense of belonging to a community anywhere is sort of dissipating in our lives. That does not mean the need for it isn't there. I think sound is one way of creating a space that people can enter and feel that they know where they are, at least imaginatively.

So I think you will find that the sound arts will develop very well in this area, as long as RealAudio and other things keep developing.

The sound artists I know in New York right at this time are working largely in the downtown Manhattan area. There are some really fine improvisational artists, who have not moved yet into other media, now that radio is no longer available to them. They haven't moved into the new media area yet, but my guess is they will at some point. They are improvisational musicians. There is a whole group of them, who work out in performance spaces in lower Manhattan, excellent, excellent musicians working together.

JB: You said there is a difference in sound art from the States and from Europe. What is the difference?

Helen Thorington: I can't speak for the whole sound art field, but definitely radio art. In our heyday with New American Radio, radio art was developing as a cultural and social critique, where the spoken word and its message was as significant as the sound or musical sound accompaniment. In Europe it has always struck me that composers play a larger role and that what I would call electro-acoustic music is the European equivalent for American radio art. In the States there is some conceptual art, but there is also a lot of storytelling and different ways of storytelling. Terry Allen created a wonderful work for our series. He always called it radio play. But it was different from radio drama, although that is what he called it. He was I think one of the best writers and storytellers our series had. He also created all of the sound for his work. He is a country musician and a sculptor. Storytelling played a large part in our series. There were many artists who elected to tell stories. They told them with sound, they told them with words. I think that the point that I am trying to make is that they were all social and cultural and political commentaries of some kind. They reflected on our country and on what it was doing. Terry Allen's first work was called Torso Hell, about the Vietnam War. It is a bizarre, very violent piece. A woman by the name of Jerry Allen, who is a performance artist, dealt with waitressing, which sounds innocuous. But all of America's race and class conflicts were in those stories, and that is what she was dealing with in a fascinating and very human way. When I look back on the series, the first eight years, I could see that it was political and social comment, whatever form it took. Then it became, in the last years, more musical. That is a funding thing. I can get more funding for composing at this time and I cannot find funding for the spoken word.

JB: Can you tell us something about the new groups that are emerging, like Fakeshop?

Helen Thorington: There are quite a number of people involved in the internet in New York City and I think as a result of that we are beginning to see the development of performance areas specifically for web related activity. There are two of them with which we are presently associated. One is the Fakeshop. They do performances regularly, not all of them are internet performances. There are still some problems about getting the right lines into these spaces and the right equipment. There is a smaller space called Cyberhum, in Brooklyn, where they have already some very interesting musical exchanges with Japan. I forget what the instrument was, but someone in Cyberhum played an instrument in Japan, using ISDN lines. It's been mostly musical so far, but they recently became interested in us, wanted to enlarge their scope.

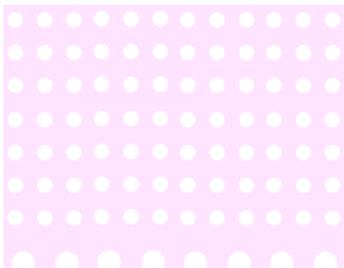
And now there's the Dumbo Art Center in Brooklyn, 10000 square feet on two floors. It's donated space, and the artists from the area are painting and fixing and running lines in to make all kinds of artistic activity possible, including Internet related work.

JB: What do you think about the European scene? Do you know anything about the developments here in audio on the net?

Helen Thorington: I have two impressions. One: I think your telephone monopolies have really prevented the explosions which we have had with thousands of people getting in and trying and doing.. I find a great deal of resistance in certain areas. Heidi (Grundmann) and I were both at the Literary Colloquium in Berlin last year and there was an enormous amount of resistance to what we were saying. This has been characteristic at virtually every place I have been in Europe talking about the internet and the world wide web for several years now. It is different here (Vienna) because you have Heidi (laughs) in a position in the ORF, actually having this long history and you have Bob Adrian. That's different, but you don't have the access we have and I think that's what makes the real difference. We have all these young people, generations now of young people who have just been brought up in this stuff or soaked in it, who make me look silly in terms of their knowledge, of how to operate on the web. Someone like my colleague Jesse (Gilbert) knows the UNIX system, he knows all about RealAudio, he can talk like a technician or a programmer as well as being a musician.

I am beginning to open the Turbulence site to guests now and I think the more people find out that they can get on the site without being commissioned, it will become more vibrant itself, more active, more turnover and more works for people to see, which will bring more people to it. But there aren't enough sites like that. There should be many more.

About audio art: I have noticed a lot of sort of new people popping up who are interesting. MassMoCA, which is the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, has been restoring old mill buildings in Massachusetts, huge brick buildings. They have started a sound festival for this next spring and I keep hearing about more initiatives in this area, so it is in the air. I am wondering where it is coming from. In music there have been many developments over the last ten years, but sound art has been kind of sleepy. All of a sudden the last few years I hear more and more about it. I am convinced it is that sound does something that the other senses do not do, and that is a need, a growing need. Sound addresses the interior man in a way that the other senses do not. Except for touch, but we



can't go round so easily touching everybody. It is the body coming back at you. It has been neglected and now it is going to come back. There is going to be a need for the things that sound can do and that visuals don't.



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