

Kevin Concannon, "Further Thoughts About the Territory of Art," *Media Arts*,
Spring 1987, p. 13.

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE TERRITORY OF ART

Kevin Concannon

One of the foremost qualities of radio as a medium is its ability to instantaneously multiply and displace geographically a live event. Before there was television, it was radio that brought home everything from the latest news to the evening's program at the concert hall. In its recent series of radio programs by artists, *The Territory of Art*, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art assembled artists from different disciplines and places and emerged with a group of programs that are all over the map, but for the most part share a common sensitivity to place.

The Ant Concludes, the opera by Lee Breuer and Bob Telson that kicks off the series, immerses the listener in the life of an ant colony where Afro-Caribbean music fills the air. Peter Sellars' *Zangezi* originally produced by its author Khlebnikov and the artist Tatlin in 1923 Petrograd, moves through the planes of time in a world of Khlebnikov's own creation. Other programs originate from prisons, the Great Wall of China, and a land of machines.

While many of the programs in *The Territory of Art* are distinguished by real or artificial locations, the series was pre-recorded for broadcast and, as such, any territorial connections it makes are subverted by the chronological distance inherent in the tape medium. Most of the programs reveal themselves as much made for tape as made for radio. Whatever intrinsic merit there may be to Ingram Marshall's *Three Penitential Visions for Radio*, it is nothing more or less than a tape music piece. *Miami Voices* records the lives of four local residents and is distinguished from traditional storytelling by its location segments from the Newport Beach Hotel with social director Irv Harris. The distance between the tape recorder and the radio receiver, however, supports a loosely, but ironically unifying theme of *the other* that emerges throughout the series.

Border-X-Frontera is a collaborative work by actor David Schein and performance artist/poet Guillermo Gomez-Pena set in a "juxtaland", a real state in a surreal situation. They conclude one of the best programs in the series with the words: "Live in your fear that you will become the other and never go home again . . . We proclaim the geography of the future." "Border-X-Frontera" is populated by crass tourists, rude border guards, Mexican hookers, and American johns. Far from being an angry political statement, the show maintains a quick and clever sense of humor. It also encapsulates some of the more successful and interesting approaches to the tape-for-radio format of the series. The issue of geography—radio's ability to connect places and tape's ability to collect places—are well utilized in this work about borders.

Pinny's Ghost explores the boundaries between imagination and reality. An Iowa farmer is tormented by his own nightmares, conjured up for this production with special effects and the disembodied voices of ghoulish creatures. Murmured echoes of unknown origin, owls heard through a storming wind, and whirring jets that seem

to threaten the listener's personal space place the listener within the realm of terror.

Prisoner, offers an intimate portrait of a convict in the California State Prison system. Inmate James talks about his life inside the prison and his hopes for the future in interview excerpts with artist Jonathan Borofsky. The program also includes music, narration, and Borofsky's recollection of a dream that he could fly.

The Exile of Breyten Breytenbach portrays that poet and painter recollecting his imprisonment for anti-apartheid activities in South Africa from his exile in Paris. After bringing up Breytenbach's frustration at not being able to make his art while in prison, the artist shows us his paintings: "The colors, as you can see, are primary." He then conducts a gallery tour of a surrealist exhibition. Later in the program, Breytenbach talks about the prison execution room that inmates see only at their hanging. Even though he had never been in it, its presence weighed heavily—so much so that Breytenbach claims that he could see it with his ears. Listeners long for this unusual ability themselves as they endure the studio and gallery tours. Whether or not this torture was intended to stimulate listener empathy for the exiled artist, it points to one of the borders inherent in the radio medium.

Miami Voices and *Texas Portraits* describe those places through the stories of some of their residents. The characters recollect, painting charming pictures that attempt to portray an America that is at once multicultural and all the same. Effie Hardeman, a one-hundred year old black woman from Texas, hammers home the universalist theme of these regionalist documentaries proclaiming that we are all God's children. Like many of the programs, these two play up radio's ability to transcend geography. The way that they transcend topographic boundaries has more to do with program distribution than any technological feature, however. It is the tape medium, and not radio, that serves those purposes within the individual programs, uniting real and surreal places.

While not all of the programs were available at press time, the majority of them exhibit this common concern with topography: borders, exile, prisons, and the nether regions of the mind. Several programs incorporate more than one language. *Zangezi* sets out to create its own universal language.

The Territory of Art delivers an audience to recording artists that radio is well suited to provide. To label the individual programs radio art would suggest that video art is the same thing as television or that records are the same thing as radio. Television and radio are both distribution systems; they come into their own as media when they offer live or interactive programming. Call-in radio talk shows and 24 hour instant news stations have more to do with the art of radio than artists' tapes or music programs because they take advantage of qualities particular to the medium. Beyond its formal characteristics, however, radio has developed other salient features due to a combination of technological and economic factors.

Kevin Concannon produces radio broadcasts about artists and writes frequently about sound art and phonograph records by visual artists. He serves as coordinator of public programs for the Neuberger Museum at the State University of New York at Purchase.

While television would seem, on the face of it, to be little more than radio with pictures, as distribution media they differ more profoundly. In any given market, there are relatively few television stations, generally grouped around three networks competing for the same audience. Radio, on the other hand, tends toward greater diversity in programming due to the greater numbers of stations. College radio stations rarely compete with commercial broadcasters, and the commercial broadcasters typically try to cultivate different audiences. Radio audiences are generally more specialized; listeners can tune into jazz, classical, new wave, talk-shows, or any other number of formats. Radio audiences can therefore be more specifically targeted than television audiences, allowing specialized programming to more easily find its public. *The Territory of Art's* great virtue is not simply its multicultural content, but the broad-based audience it is able to reach.