

Snap, Crackle & Pop; On Listening, Memory & Amnesia

By Nigel Helyer

Your words are preserved in the tin foil and will come back upon the application of the instrument years after you are dead in exactly the same tone of voice you spoke in then. . . . This tongueless, toothless instrument, without larynx or pharynx, dumb, voiceless matter, nevertheless mimics your tones, speaks with your voice, speaks with your words, and centuries after you have crumbled into dust will repeat again and again, to a generation that could never know you, every idle thought, every fond fancy, every vain word that you chose to whisper against this thin iron diaphragm. (Edison's Ars Memoria concept for the phonograph.)¹

Introduction

Broadcast media, recording and communications technologies have developed at an alarming pace since Edison proposed the phonograph as an acoustic *Ars Memoria*. A series of rapid iterations have overlaid and overwritten previous systems and *modus operandi* making it easy to forget the central role that radio has played within Australian communities ~ both rural and urban. The broadcast medium functioned as a form of entertainment, a mechanism for nation building and as a vital link able to transcend the “tyranny of distance”, be it real or imagined. My interest is focussed, not so much upon a technological trajectory but primarily upon the role that *listening* plays in establishing memory, situated within a geophysical site, to form *identity* and *place*. The corollary of this interest also lies in its inverse – the realisation that individual memory, as well as cultural histories, is extremely fragile and fugitive, evaporating under the pressures of technological and social change driven by the massive acceleration and saturation of media information.

Over the past few years I have become increasingly drawn to create a series of audio-portraits, manifest as sound installations, public sound works and radio broadcasts, woven from the patterns of listening and communication. These audio-portraits centre upon the nexus of sound, listening, location and memory, fusing the concept of soundscape with more narrative forms of orality.

This text will concentrate primarily on the recent *Wireless House* project, undertaken as a public-art commission for the City of Sydney, but will be contextualised by two “snapshots” of previous projects, *KelleRadioActive*, commissioned by the International Art Space Kellerberrin (IASKA) in Western Australia and *GhosTrain*, commissioned by ABC Radio National as part of their Radiophonic Residency.

Project snapshot_01 ~ KelleRadioActive

The first of these projects, *KelleRadioActive* was the result of a three month Artist in Residence, undertaken in Kellerberrin, a small rural community in the sweltering wheat-belt of Western Australia, a few hours east of Perth.²

The project developed an oral history programme that captured community experiences of listening to radio in the form of recorded interviews, discussions and even musical recollections that recalled radiophonic events from the past and the patterns of when, where and how people listened to radio in their homes, or used radio communication in the workplace.

The question that I posed to the community was beguilingly simple, “what did it mean to listen to radio?” My *modus operandi* was equally guileless, I became a collector of old (often defunct) radio-sets and simultaneously a collector of extensive oral histories. Bush communities never fail to surprise and Kellerberrin was no exception. I discovered the man who made all the original radio-sets for the community back in the 1930s. He and his father fabricated the sets from baking trays set with thermionic valves, his father supplying the cabinets and the pair installing the sets in outlying homesteads. Long-line antennae, dry cell battery banks and earphones were the order of the day, the families listening in, one person at a time to scratchy reports of distant cricket matches ~ with listening time strictly rationed to preserve battery power.

Even today radio reception in Kellerberrin is poor to non-existent and so I resolved to establish my own station with a low-power, mini-fm rig. A one Watt stereo mini-Fm local radio station (KRA 88 Fm) was mounted in a bicycle trailer capable of automatically broadcasting content, developed in the community, to the township. My pirate station was complimented by a gallery exhibition of period radios each modified to transmit audio via very low power Fm, and where visitors to the exhibition were given transistor radios as a means to engage with the work.

Isolated communities are generally less media-saturated and still rely upon (and enjoy) the vis-a-vis of oral communication, more recently extended via mobile telephony and VHF radio within work contexts. The KRA.88FM mini-Fm station acted as an acoustic mirror in the community, affording encounters with a wide gamut of voices and narratives; the exuberance of the young coexisting with the recollections of the elderly. For many this was the first time that their stories moved beyond the individual into a form of *public-address* to participate in a *sonic commons*.

Project snapshot_02 ~GhosTrain History and Amnesia

I'm very, very concerned about this construction of history as somehow divided from the present; there is a continuity, there always will be. It suits certain interests to construct the past as a foreign country which can then be commodified for exploitation, be it cultural, tourism of some sort, or redevelopment of sites to make them appear unique, however I dispute this 'discontinuity' view of the past. (Lucy Taksa.)³

GhosTrain focussed upon the Eveleigh Railway Workshops, once the largest employer in New South Wales, and in its day both a centre



“KelleRadioActive” installation detail, Tin Sheds Gallery USYD

of technological innovation and of working class political organisation. The site was closed by the State government some decades ago and has recently been repurposed as a cultural zone, mirroring the redevelopment of its sister site (the Redfern Locomotive Workshops) as a technology park.

The Eveleigh site is impressive on a number of levels; its robust industrial architecture, the simple repurposing of the site as a cultural space; set against the lingering knowledge that this was a site of labour ~ of specialised knowledge and skill and of a lifestyle all but forgotten in Sydney’s upwardly mobile affluent society.

When considering the changing socio-economic landscape of our cities our attention is drawn towards the more obvious physical features of the shifting usage of architectural structures and major environmental infrastructures. However in marked contrast, it is the transient elements that are the soul of living cultures, but these are difficult to seize upon and tend to be overlooked and quickly forgotten; erased under changing patterns of work and social usage. The iconic sounds that characterise a locale are one of the most fragile and difficult of these transient elements to recognise, evaluate and maintain, yet in essence they often hold the key to memory and identity.

As Lucy Taksa indicates, the construction of history is a premeditated political enterprise that creates a sharp divide between the plural voices and narratives of individuals (which generally go unheeded) and the singular, authorised grand narrative that is ‘History’. The *GhosTrain* project was therefore not so much about our experience of listening *per se* but about listening to the stories of a community that has been ignored. A *listening-in* to the silences of a location, not simply to a workplace, but to an entire culture that has been conveniently dismissed and transformed in a manner that erases all traces and renders it palatable and commodifiable. The acoustic ecologies of industrial landscapes are a prime example of our extraordinary collective capacity for amnesia. Closely observed, every location has a characteristic soundscape, in effect a sonic fingerprint, formed from a complex mix of smaller incidental sounds, punctuated by unique, keynote sounds that are site-specific and directly associated with the particular structures and activities found at the location.

GhosTrain is designed in three stages and aims to recognise the importance of the soundscape that once characterised the site and endeavours to reinstate specific elements of its acoustic ecology and the memories contained within oral history. The first phase, a series of five short broadcasts produced at ABC Radio National (Sydney), established contact with a range of ex-railway workers and interlaced their oral histories with commentaries from historians, architects and the like. This was in effect the research phase, collecting material and getting under the complex skin of the site.⁴

The second stage, currently under development, seeks to reinstate a soundmark within the main architectural space, in order to re-sound the acoustic ecology of

the site. The intention is to install a speaker rig that will broadcast the one o’clock siren (reputedly used by all the local shops to set their clocks). The siren will be followed by 30 seconds of a steam loco, shunting along the axis of the building ~ a simple sonic event designed to re-ignite people’s memory and associations and to honour those who spent their working lives in the Railyards.

The final stage is a form of mobile acoustic *Ars Memoria*. During my research it became obvious that many previous employees felt cheated of their working history, seeing the physical locus of their labours gentrified and none of the original meaning or heritage retained or represented (save for some well hidden brass plaques on the Redfern site). The mere restoration of bricks and mortar is senseless in this context. What is missing is an acknowledgement of the social and cultural histories told in multiple voices from the community and situated in the appropriate places. It is my intention to develop a location sensitive sonic cartography which will operate on 3G phones delivered as a download via the AudioNomad system. This will provide an open access platform that can be developed and modified over time.⁵

Re-Sounding the Wireless House.

An introduction to the Wireless House.

In 1930 Marconi, sitting on his yacht *Electra*, moored off the Italian coast, sent a radio signal to Sydney, Australia that activated a relay, switching on the illuminations of Sydney Town Hall. In 1933 a suggestion was put to the Glebe Council [Glebe is an inner Western suburb of Sydney] to establish a “Wireless House” in the public park on the corner of Glebe Point and Bridge Roads for the purpose of community entertainment. Commissioned in November of 1934, Wireless House was officially opened in February the following year with the installation of a wireless set donated by the local Grace Brothers department store. From then on the Wireless House operated on a daily basis from 10 a.m. until 10.15 p.m., playing a range of commercial radio programmes, musical shows, sports events and radio serials.

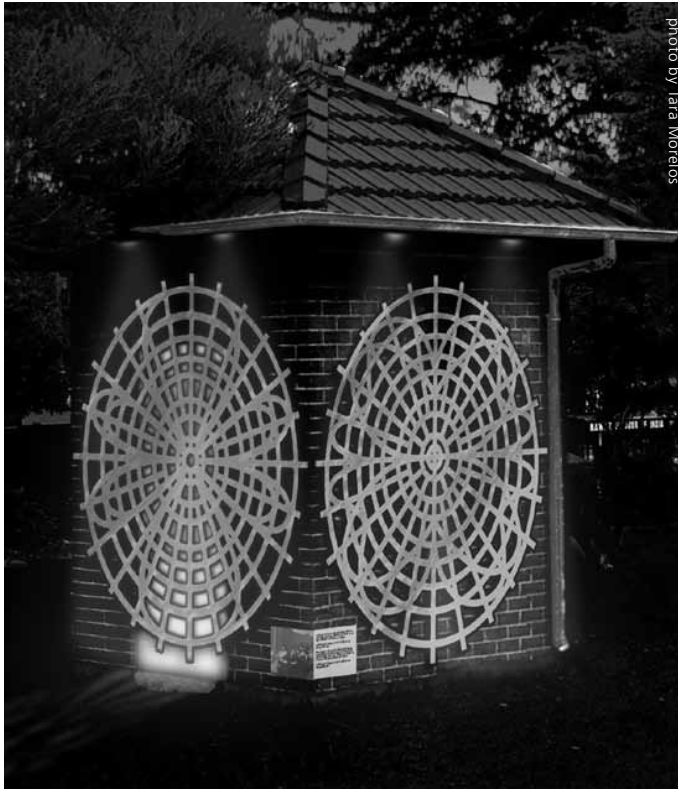


photo by Tara Morelos

Artists visualisation of the Wireless House project, Foley Park, Glebe, external night view

Radio broadcast was making considerable changes to Australian society during this time and as a domestic social event, entire family groups would gather around a radio set for communal listening, even taking turns wearing headphones and narrating the events to the rest of the group. However, during the depression access to radio equipment was restricted to those of comfortable means and the majority of Glebe residents were doing it tough.

The Wireless House was revolutionary in that it catered to large crowds including many unemployed, who congregated in the park to enjoy the daily programmes. The project, although recognised as a municipal innovation, attracted criticism from the church and sporting organisations (aka betting shops) both sharing concerns about a loss of patronage. The Wireless House eventually succumbed to accusations that it encouraged the unemployed to idleness and was ultimately decommissioned. The initial research indicated that the Wireless House ceased to operate in the early 1950s but recent oral histories recorded in the community confirm that it functioned (at a reduced volume) until the early 1970s and its closure was probably more a reflection of the ubiquity of affordable portable radios than any moral argument!

The intervening decades since the establishment of the Wireless House have wrought extraordinary changes in our attitudes to and acceptance of broadcast media and the fact that the Wireless House has survived intact, albeit mute, for over seventy years is equally extraordinary; however, this was all about to change!

In 2006 the City of Sydney ran an open competition for public art proposals along the axis of Glebe Point Road as part of a major upgrade of the suburb's infrastructure ~ I bid on the Wireless House site as a project and won a commission. Once again my approach was simple ~ the Wireless House would be resounded and would once again become *wireless*!

Re_Sounding, a strategy.

My approach to resounding the structure was threefold, a physical, sculptural treatment, an operational design and a content development and acquisition strategy.

The physical structure of the Wireless House is (to be polite) uninspiring but it was an unpleasant surprise to discover, upon my first meeting with the city's landscape designers that the house was scheduled for demolition (but I was advised, I could work with the concrete foundation slab!). This *fait accompli* more than rankled and so I set to work to establish if the Wireless House had any cultural significance beyond the local, that could be employed as an argument for its preservation, as it was obvious I could not rely upon its architectural merit! It soon became evident that the Wireless House was an unusual concept. The Sydney Morning Herald archives hold articles from 1935 hailing the structure as unique in Australian municipal history and none of my subsequent research located anything similar in Australia or abroad (save for propaganda kiosks and PA systems). Whilst this evidence still failed to budge the destructive intent of the planning department, a National Trust listing of the structure put the ball in a different court and secured the future of the House.

Sculptural treatment.

The physical treatment of the house sought to open up the interior of the building by removing the original speaker baffles that closed the two window apertures as well as the heavy steel door, replacing them with clear Lexan. Large web-like laser-cut stainless steel shields based upon the radiation pattern of radio antennae clad each wall, affording visual access to the house (whilst also securing the structure and its technological contents). The interior of the structure has been retained in its original 1930s colours and visitors can view the original wooden radio stand supporting a period cabinet radio, its dial aglow, whilst on the opposite wall a substantial internet router and antennae array declares the contemporary version of *wirelessness*.

Technical design.

The operational design reestablishes the original function of the Wireless House and its capacity to play audio over a small area of Foley Park, employing motion sensors to trigger the playback of audio content randomly selected from a large data base. The audio database is stored on a small solid-state computer that is programmed to select content for playback, control the hours of operation, monitor the volume level of individual files and so on. The technical system is otherwise conventional except for the audio drivers. Instead of standard speakers, which are prone to mechanical damage and require an aperture in the exterior surface of the built structure, the project employs *Solid-Drive* transducers bolted to the Lexan windows, effectively turning the entire window surface into a speaker diaphragm.

The second layer of public engagement returns the Wireless House to wirelessness by providing the site with a free park-wide internet hotspot, indeed this is the first City sponsored free internet access in an outdoor location and destined to become something of a test-case. The final layer of interactivity is reflected in the development of a comprehensive website sponsored by the City of Sydney as well as a community access content sharing website on POOL.⁶

Content acquisition and generation.

The most complex, and possibly the most rewarding aspect of the project has been the development of appropriate content and this

has followed two principal routes. Firstly the development of an ongoing partnership with the National Film and Sound Archive who have gone to great lengths to assist with the curation and digitisation of original radio content from the 1930s onwards. The second approach established a community based Oral History programme which not only developed audio and video documents but has proactively developed skills within the community by teaching recording, editing and computer skills and establishing additional content sharing social history websites.

Right from the start of the project it became crystal clear that both individual memory and community recall are fragile and transient. Our task was complicated by the fact that even a child of five attending the opening of the Wireless House was now approaching their mid seventies. The very social and economic conditions that provided the impetus to create the Wireless House also explained why there were virtually no records, textual or photographic, as certainly very few community members could afford a camera! Thus began a long, slow and often frustrating search for long-term residents who could recall the Wireless House and recount their narratives of life in Glebe, gradually revealing a collective memory of prewar politics and culture, narratives full of idiosyncrasies and inflections normally excluded from *official* histories.

Whilst back at City Hall work was apace developing a Wireless House website to function as a portal within the park and to provide a historical context to the project, we soon discovered that community contributions to the City site (as audio and video oral-history uploads) would simply run into a tangle of red-tape. We therefore opted to develop a parallel site housed on POOL, a collaborative open source, creative commons content-sharing site. Posting material as we worked functioned to explain to others in the community (and at City Hall) the benefits and value of this grassroots activity. Further, it demonstrated the need to initiate a deeper level of social engagement that involved empowering individuals with the motivation and the technical skills to make their own recordings and contributions to the web.

Community response to public art is typically conservative in nature and frequently downright hostile, principally due to a perceived lack of ownership and consequent failure to identify with the project. In the initial stages, the responses to Wireless House were no exception, with the community evenly divided over the long-term fate of the structure and the benefit of its revitalisation. Many of the more influential members of the community were happy to see the somewhat 'plain' structure (then used as a gardener's shed) demolished. However these views gradually began to shift after grassroots community research allowed the topic to be circulated, evaluated and eventually honoured as a unique part of an almost forgotten history. It is a commonplace that it often takes an outsider to point out the obvious in a familiar situation ~ and perhaps it is easier to be filled with enthusiasm for something which to others appears mundane. It was the oral history project together with the community training undertaken by my studio assistant Julia Burns that delivered a platform for the community to engage with its history and identity, focussing the content upon the Wireless House, allowing it to act as a conduit.

The morphology of the project therefore developed a central loci, the physical Wireless House structure, visibly transformed (as is the park in which it is situated) but surrounded by an ever growing cloud of content, drawn from the wider psychogeography of Glebe. This admixture of tangible and impalpable content has energised the suburb, providing a platform for celebrating and valuing their (almost) forgotten past ~ the City of Sydney's recent invitation to the launch of Wireless House casually ended with the line ~ "Refreshments available for the first One Thousand visitors".

© Nigel Helyer October 2009.

Endnotes

- 1 Edison conceived the phonograph plain and simple as a memorial device, a means to archive the transient voices of relatives as a sonic counterpoint to the family photo album. That the future of the phonograph (and subsequently radio broadcast) was to rapidly evolve into a commercial device driven by musical entertainment is with hindsight an obvious irony, but one that Edison both missed and was resistant to. Naturally we should not overlook the fact that Edison was partially deaf!
- 2 Artist in Residency October ~ December 2005; Exhibition, 3rd December 2005 ~ February 2006 Kellerberrin Western Australia.
http://www.sonicobjects.com/index.php/projects/more/kellerradioactive_at_iaska/
- 3 Lucy Taksa is Associate Professor, School of Organisation and Management, University of New South Wales. Excerpted from the broadcast GhosTrain, Station No.1. ~ History and Amnesia.
- 4 ABC Radio National Radiophonic Fellowship 2008; GhosTrain Broadcast as x5 'stations' on ABC Hindsight each week in May 2010.
- 5 Links to GhosTrain MP3 downloads ~ <http://www.pool.org.au/users/ghostrain>
General description ~ <http://www.sonicobjects.com/index.php/projects/more/ghostrain>
AudioNomad sampler ~ http://www.sonicobjects.com/index.php/projects/more/syren_for_port_jackson
- 6 Pool <http://www.pool.org.au> ~ use Wireless House and/ or Glebebytes as a search term. See also <http://www.hamishbeattie.com/WireLessHouse/default.asp>

NIGEL HELYER (a.k.a. *Dr Sonique*) is an independent Anglo-Australian sculptor and sound-artist. He is the director of a small multi-disciplinary team "Sonic Objects; Sonic Architecture" with an international reputation for large scale sound-sculpture installations, environmental public art-works, museum inter-actives and new media projects.

His practice is strongly inter-disciplinary, linking a broad platform of creative practice with scientific Research and Development in both Academic and Industrial contexts, and he maintains an active interest in critical and theoretical debates.

His activities include; the development of a powerful virtual audio reality mapping system, "Sonic Landscapes" in collaboration with *Lake Technology* (now *Dolby Australia*) and he is the Artistic Director of the *AudioNomad Research Group* developing location sensitive environmental audio at the School of Computer Science and Engineering at the University of New South Wales.

Nigel is an honorary faculty member in Architectural Acoustics at the University of Sydney and is a Professorial Visiting Fellow at the school of Computer Science and Engineering at UNSW. He has held positions as Visiting Professor at Stanford University, Artist in Residence at the *Paul Scherrer Institut* in Switzerland, and at the Tropical Marine Science Institute of the National University of Singapore. He was the Radiophonic Fellow for ABC Radio during 2008 and maintains active links with The Exploratorium Museum in San Francisco, and the *SymbioticA* biotechnology lab at the University of Western Australia.