

# Is There Really a Place on Radio for Experimentation?

*SevenSixOne – FourEightFourOne*  
Christof Migone on Telephone pieces  
(A2 Engineering sound)

"For this piece I called everybody in the world with my telephone number (but different area/country codes). Sometimes the number was not activated, sometimes the person answering, and I had no language in common, sometimes people insulted me and hung up once I told them the reason for my call. An exploration of the tenuous connection people with the same phone number but different area codes might have."

Christof Migone

[Christof Migone](#) is an artist, teacher, curator, and writer. He often works with language, voice, bodies, performance, intimacy, complicity, and endurance. He lives in Montréal and is the instigator of the Centre for Radio-Telecommunications (CRTC). He is the producer of "Danger in Paradise" (CKUT FM) and is a founding member of the [Association de création et diffusion sonores AVATAR](#).

He co-edited the anthologies *Writing Aloud: The Sonics of Language* (Errant Bodies Press, 2001) and *Volumes* (Blackwood Gallery, 2015). His writings have been published in *Aural Cultures*, *S:ON*, *Experimental Sound & Radio*, *Musicworks*, *Radio Rethink*, *Semiotext(e)*, *Angelaki*, *Esse*, *Inter*, *Performance Research*, *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Art*, *Sound Art (ZKM/MIT)*, etc. He obtained an MFA from NSCAD in 1996 and a PhD from the Department of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts of New York University in 2007. He lives in Toronto and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Arts at Western University in London, Ontario.

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### Transcription:

Hello. My name is Christof Migone and I live in Toronto, Canada.

I began by doing radio in the early eighties, like '83. The first or second year of going to university. And this was in Ottawa, Canada. And there was, at the university, a radio station and friends of mine were doing radio there. So I was pretty shy as a young man and it seemed for some strange reason easier to talk to a microphone as opposed to talk to somebody face to face.

I was really into punk music and all the politics around it. So, DIY practices, also various avant-gardes like Situationists and Dada and Surrealism and anarchy. And in terms of basically looking at the world and how fucked up it is and thinking of creative ways to survive it but also change it.

And as I got more familiar with doing radio, and I also learned how to edit tape — this was before there were digital tools — I became interested in experimenting with the medium that I was using, radio. I didn't consider myself an artist at the time. I didn't really have a concept of what I wanted to be or what an artist was. I was just exploring all sorts of things in my studies but I wasn't a good student at the time. I was more interested in the kind of social circles that were focused on radio and music.

And I started also writing poetry and performing a little bit, doing some graffiti art; I don't think I was good at any of these things right away. I mean, that would be strange. But I was learning. I was trying many different things. I moved from Ottawa to Geneva, Switzerland, in 1986, just for a year. Geneva is where I was born. And I did radio there at Radio Zone, which was just across the border in France. And that was a very interesting experience because the radio station was in an apartment, basically, in a network of radio stations in France at a time. Radio Zone had initially been a pirate radio station but was legalized by the socialist government of François Mitterrand and they had offices in Geneva, but they broadcast from France.

And I got quite involved there. I actually lived at the radio station for two months. I was basically the caretaker. And then I moved back to Canada in 1987. This time I moved to Montreal, where I had lived before, when I was in secondary school. And there I became involved at CKUT-FM, which is the radio station for McGill University.

And they had just received a government license to broadcast. And so because I had prior experience, I got involved and became part of the staff. Before that, I was always a volunteer, so I wasn't paid. Now I became a paid member of the team, I was there every day for many hours, for several years, and that was an incredible experience in terms of learning how to work together as a collective and also how to manage volunteers, how to do fundraising, how to deal with crisis, how to come to consensus, decision-making processes.

We got a computer early on and it wasn't fast enough to do any audio editing, but I started acquiring digital skills. But while I was involved at the radio station at that level, my radio show was called *Danger in Paradise*, and for 2 hours every Wednesday evening, ten to midnight, I developed different, kind of crazy, absurd concepts... that I think by then I had sort of a notion that this, what I was doing, was called Radio Art through a network across the country, and with some contexts all over the world, I knew that other people were doing this.

Two of my mentors, I should say I could call them, were Gregory Whitehead and Dan Lander. And they were slightly older and had done this for a longer time. But we met through different events that either they organized or I organized, and we started collaborating.

It gave me a kind of confirmation, to have colleagues. That the medium of radio was something that could be experimented with and it didn't need to only be playing back recordings, even if they were themselves experimental and then announcing the time and the weather and the traffic and the kind of classic radio formats, but that the radio itself could be used as an artistic tool or artistic medium.

So I tried many different things. There was something about the time slot and the fact that we were new on the FM band, that there was a core listenership to the radio station and, therefore, a core listenership to my radio show, which was quite small because what I was doing was quite out-there. But a lot of what interested me is to think of what Bertolt Brecht had said about radio.

His critique of radio was that it was an invention that had never been completed in the sense that it was technologically structured as a one-way communication tool. And for him, politically, it was important to note that the hierarchy of power, the relationship of radio to power, should be much more decentralized or horizontal. So, one way to implement that, or to experiment with that, is to open up the telephone lines.

And of course in radio you have call-in shows all the time. But the host and the people who are behind the microphone at the radio station usually stay in control. They determine when the caller can go on the air and for how long, etc., etc... I tried several ways of undoing that.

A lot of these experiments ended up appearing in my first CD, a couple of years later, called *Hole in the Head*, and the title piece was commissioned by New American Radio, which was run by Helen Thorington. That for me, in the early nineties now, so this was, I think 1992; it became more solid for me, this notion that I was an artist and specifically an artist working in radio.

One of the radio pieces using telephones that I think was the most coherent was *Sept six un quatre huit quatre un*, which is French for Seven Six One Four Eight Four One. And for many years this was my telephone number in Montreal.

The premise of this piece was that because this telephone number was so attached to me — I have never forgotten the number, still to this day — that it was part of my identity. It's like a passport number or Social Security number. What is particular about a telephone number is that it's specific to an area code, but, of course, the number itself without the area code can exist somewhere else and belong to somebody else.

So for this piece, what I did is I called every number in the world that had this number but a different area and/or country code. A lot of numbers did not exist. They were not activated. But some numbers that I called, I did reach somebody and sometimes they would answer, but they would not understand English or French or Spanish... Those are the three languages I speak. And that is an interesting moment just because where I'm trying to explain something, they're not understanding. And so that becomes a very short conversation.

In the cases where they did understand what I was saying and in the cases where they did understand the languages that I was speaking, I would explain my project and say, “well, because this number is so attached to me and it’s part of my identity, I’m calling you and perhaps we have something in common”. I was very transparent, very matter-of-fact.

Quite a few people did not like to be bothered. They did not like this idea, especially people in the United States. They were very aggressive in their response. Other people were still kind of confused after I told them this. So the piece at its core is this idea, and that’s why it is called... the title of the piece is my telephone number.

And it’s in French partly because it was part of a project that I curated called *Rappel*. *Rappel* in French, translated to English, means “callback”. That’s the “r” part; *appel* means “to call”. *Rappel* was one of the initial projects of a new artist-run center in Quebec City called Avatar, which still exists. So I was one of the founding members and this was one of the projects that we got funding from that kicked off this artist-run center.

And so there were several artists involved and they each explored telephone art, let’s call it, in their own way. One of the projects that I wanted to mention, because it has a nice parallel to mine, is by Chantal Dumas. And what she did is that she called all the people with the same name as hers that she could find (Chantal Dumas).

I think the telephone is an interesting tool because it’s so compromised acoustically in the sense of the frequencies, as a lot of people know, and it makes sense, that it’s tailored for the voice. So, you know, if you put music, if you play back music over telephone, you’ll get a lot of the frequencies lost, at the lower frequencies and the higher frequencies.

It’s a medium of communication and we communicate primarily in sound through the voice. I’m always interested in working with limitations, and that still is a strategy that I pay attention to. So I sometimes use antiquated technology or things that are quite cheap because they are antiquated or things that are very simple to use. I’m not a programmer.

I tried to think of the simplest approach. Often, I think that simple is different from simplistic. Simplistic is sometimes dumbing down an idea that’s not interesting, but something that’s simple is accessible but still has layers behind it. And I think that’s a nice kind of tension that I like to explore. So maybe a bit more about telephones and radio. I think that even though it doesn’t necessarily automatically mean that if you put, if you integrate the use of a telephone in radio, that you are actualizing Bertolt Brecht’s idea of a more democratic, horizontal type of radio.

It’s at least pointing in that direction. And I think that is something that is worth exploring still to this day, not only in the actual context of radio and telephones, but as a kind of general principle, and see how this idea of something that is more of a two way or a multi vocal or polyphonic kind of approach — because, you know, it opens up discussion — is something that I think is worth to have at least in the back of your mind.

It’s not always possible. And sometimes maybe it can only be a moment. Sometimes it can just be something that you mention at the beginning or at the end of a piece.

There's many ways of thinking through that, but I see the telephone and radio as being part of the same equation. In some ways, the radio is a giant telephone.

I mean, it's akin to this idea of the difference between broadcasting and narrowcasting. The telephone is a kind of narrowcasting.

Usually one to one, but sometimes you can have a conference call. So one might... it is kind of tempting to think of the conference call as a mini temporary radio station.

What's the future of radio? I think that question is a difficult one to answer, and I'm tempted to not answer it partly on the practical side, because of how radio has evolved in, you know, its relationship to podcast and Internet radio. It's no longer the same or perhaps it is the same, but it has tentacles. It's morphed into different entities that might not still have the name radio, but essentially constitute the same approach.

And perhaps with the same leaning that I was talking about earlier, where I am interested in using simple tools, I like to think of the present moment and things that are within my reach that are doable, as opposed to try to think too far into the future and to make predictions. You know, I don't know if I could have anticipated from the early nineties to now, the early 2020s, 30 years later, I don't know if I could have anticipated where we are now in terms of technology, but the problematics are the same. In many ways they are worse in terms of inequities, in terms of environmental concerns. What does or what can radio do? Radio in its multi forms, kind of the expanded notion of radio... Here I'm thinking of Rosalind Krauss and her notion of an expanded form when she was talking about sculpture. So an expanded radio is something that is no longer radio, but is still radio: a "Death to the King" or "The King is dead. Long live the King!" type of idea.

Yeah, it's a tough question. It's interesting to kind of ponder it and to inject some doubts into the question. I haven't done radio in a long time, in a strict sense, but I've always been doing radio, ever since I stopped doing radio. I mean, you might be able to tell that I like paradoxes and I like to contradict myself.

And I think there's something about radio that lends itself to that, because I am speaking right now into a microphone, into my tape recorder, and I'm sure it will be edited. But at least right now, in this moment, I can pause, I can think, the silences are part of my answer. And it's not therapy, although there is a bit of that. It's not a confessional, although there's a bit of that. It's a solo dialog. Again, the paradoxical idea, but I like it. I think there's an attraction to that, that kind of moment because it seems radically open in the kind of sense that bell hooks talks about. It's not quite a free-for-all, but it's rich with potential and possibilities.

And those two words, potential and possibilities open to the future, but they don't say what the future will be.

Is there really a place on radio for experimentation?



Collage made from the images:

(1) *Danger in paradise*, 1987-1994. *Danger in Paradise* aired weekly on CKUT 90.3 FM, Montréal, Wednesdays 10:00 to midnight

(2) *Hit Parade (Kitchener)*, 2013. Performance presented at the Between the Ears portion of CAFKA.13, Kitchener City Hall, 2013. Available [online](#)

(3) *Vex*, 2006. Installation based on a performance with Kim Dawn and Lukas Pearse at the Khyber Center for the Arts, Halifax, 1995

**Audio quotes:**

- Christof Migone. "SevenSixOne-FourEightFourOne" (1994) in *Sound Voice Perform*. Errant Bodies Press, Museet For Samtidskunst and Ground Fault Recordings (2005)
- "Entertainment Thru Pain" in *Saturday wackedness courtesy CKUT Thru Pain - Dj Gary Worsley radioshow*
- Christof Migone. "Muscle Soléaire 2" in *Hole in the Head*. Avatar / OHM éditions (1996)
- Christof Migone. "Kipiki" in *Hole in the Head*. Avatar / OHM éditions (1996)
- Gregory Whitehead and Dan Lander. "Here Comes Everybody" in *Various - Resonance Radio Issue*. London Musicians' Collective (1997)
- Gregory Whitehead. "If a Voice Like, Then What?" in *Tellus #11 - The Sound of Radio*. Tellus cassette (1984)
- Christof Migone. "Mary Maclane" in *Hole in the Head*. Avatar / OHM éditions (1996)
- Christof Migone. "Danger 1" in *Hole in the Head*. Avatar / OHM éditions (1996)
- Chantal Dumas. "Les Chantal Dumas" (1994-96) in *Various - Rappel: L'Art Téléphonique*. Avatar / OHM éditions (1996)
- Christof Migone. "Confession Me, Call 2" in *Hole in the Head*. Avatar / OHM éditions (1996)
- Christof Migone. "Henri Müller" in *Hole in the Head*. Avatar / OHM éditions (1996)
- Christof Migone. "Le temps compas 8" in *Hole in the Head*. Avatar / OHM éditions (1996)