

TDR



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PROVOCATION

A Lasting Provocation

by Matthew Goulish *and* Lin Hixson

\$12.00



Critical Acts

Dicking Around with Radiohole Toward Hyperreal Performance and Criticism

Steve Luber

Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee.

—Herman Melville (1988:571–72)

—Did you actually punch that whale?

—Hell! I'd strike the sun if it struck me! Be a pussy and find a priest or be a man, and stand up in a hurricane. More sperm!

—Radiohole (2006:3)

Introduction: *Bon Voyage!*

Entering the Collapsible Hole, a Brooklyn warehouse space, each audience member—including me—is greeted by Scott Halvorsen Gillette, who appears on a 15-inch video monitor atop a small card table: “Step right up, step right up!” Gillette, an original company member, moved to Vermont three years ago, but appears here, in Radiohole’s most recent production, *Fluke (The Solemn Mysteries of the Ancient Order of the Deep) or Dick Dick Dick*, thanks to iChat. There is a camera atop Gillette’s screen-head—“Hello!—oh you are looking beautiful tonight. Beautiful! Do you have a reservation? Good, good: put the money on top of my head”—and each person is greeted personally from 300 miles away. Gillette trusts you will make correct change from the fishbowl that is the box office. He is grating and overbearing, in a rush, but at the same time, we are welcomed into his homes, both the theatre and his house, where he is broadcasting. He

lets us in. He is there, but also here with us. Gillette establishes the box office itself as part of the performance, and, not being a “live” ticket-taking presence, immediately brings the audience into the mediated act of performance; like Gillette, we are a part of and apart from the piece.

Other than this unusual introduction, all else is in place for a typical Radiohole performance: wires, mixers, and general tchotchkes clutter the stage—a phonograph, a small video screen (upon which Gillette appears “onstage”), and mechanized moon are the most immediately noticeable. A large projection screen dominates upstage, its arts-and-crafts frame adorned with pasted-on seashells, starfish, and other aquatic paraphernalia. Posters adorn the walls, including various seascapes and a prominent portrait of Abe Lincoln that reads “DO NOT HUMP”; ropes hang from the ceiling; and fishing poles lay on the ground. It’s all part of Radiohole’s “trash aesthetic.”

Near the audience, there is another Radiohole signature: a tub of cheap beer, and, special for this marine extravaganza, a fountain of “grog,” all free for the taking. Radiohole performances aren’t just for the senses—they appeal to the dulled senses as well. After all, in order to join Radiohole on their strange trek at sea, the audience, too, must be invited to give in to the spirit of reckless abandon of the spectacle—to implicate itself in the performance’s actions.

Once Gillette’s telepresence has ushered everyone in, performer Maggie Hoffman comes

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out from behind the curtains and quietly scales a homemade crow's nest/platform, eight feet in the air stage right. She harnesses herself in, prepares her sound mixer, and leans forward into her microphone, whispering radio warnings to all present seafarers: "Low 48 North, 63 West, 982 millibars. Will drift East-Northeast" (Radiohole 2007:1).

Call them Ishmael.

Democratic *Fluke*

Radiohole, the Brooklyn-based performance collective, has become something of an experimental darling in the past few years. Founded in 1998, they are known for their messy, violent, and loud performances. They've also gained a reputation as "the drunkest, highest group in downtown theatre" (Hannaham 2000). Despite the favor of many critics, however, much of the writing about them has been disappointingly reductive, the precious language used to describe them seems to be a cop-out for a lack of journalistic vocabulary, performing a critical and artistic disservice to Radiohole and other experimental companies.¹ At worst, Radiohole has matured into the rebellious teenager of the performance community; at best, the group poses a significant challenge to the experimental performance aesthetic by creating impassioned, lyrical, and timely pieces equal to those of any group in New York.

Fluke, which ran from 11 to 28 January 2007 in this incarnation, takes Melville's *Moby-Dick*, or *The Whale* (1851) as their starting point, one of many referential source materials. But dig a bit deeper, and the piece is very much a consequence of the source-novel's history, canonicity, and influence. *Moby-Dick*, 150 years after publication, is known as much as an imagistic icon as a literary work. It has spawned many hackneyed literary spin-offs, films,



Figure 1. Maggie Hoffman broadcasts radio warnings to the ethereal abyss in Radiohole's *Fluke* (The Solemn Mysteries of the Ancient Order of the Deep) or *Dick Dick Dick*. *Collapsable Hole*, New York City, 2007. (Photo by Lisa Whiteman)

paintings, even operas.² The White Whale has become an icon of the relentlessness, insatiability, and impotency of desire and meaning. Ahab has become virtually synecdochal for American ambition and persistence. And, most tellingly, Ahab's first mate is better known internationally as a distributor of venti decaf Frappuccinos than literary allegory for reason and temperance. All of these significations that echo from the novel cross-pollinate and spread, and *Moby-Dick* approaches what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a deterritorialized text: "It is not space, nor is it in space; it is matter that occupies space to a given degree—to the degree corresponding to the intensities produced. It is nonstratified, unformed, intense matter, the matrix of intensity, intensity = 0" (1987:153). And precisely because the novel is such an explicit example of cultural mythology overtaking its source to create this "matrix of intensity," it is rife for Radiohole's plundering.

One of the few collective performance companies working today, the members of Radiohole do not begin with a source text, narrative, or moral. They do not have nominal writers or directors. Starting with kernels of

1. For example, *New York Times* reviewer Jason Zinoman wrote in 2006 of an earlier version of *Fluke*, "What's being pondered in this disjointed piece is anyone's guess," and, summing up the group, "Radiohole may be better known for its occasional nudity, beer-swilling, and despicable table manners" (2006). The review was then recycled, in some places verbatim, for an updated piece on 12 January 2007.
2. A cursory library search brings up books on American folktales, Romantic architecture, Calvinism, and 19th-century law and industry to name a few; films include a 1930 adaptation starring John Barrymore, a 1956 version starring Gregory Peck and Orson Welles, and a melodramatic made-for-TV movie in 1998 starred Patrick Stewart and, significantly, Gregory Peck; operas include Laurie Anderson's 1999 *Songs and Stories from Moby-Dick*, Rinde Eckert's 2003 *And God Created White Whales*, and Peter Westergaard's 2004 *Moby Dick: Scenes from an Imaginary Opera*. This is but a small sampling of the breadth of the novel's influence.



Figure 2. Eric Dyer drives golf balls off his remote-controlled whaling boat in Radiohole's *Fluke* (The Solemn Mysteries of the Ancient Order of the Deep) or *Dick Dick Dick*. *Collapsable Hole*, New York City, 2007. (Photo by Victor Morales)

personal intrigue, the members develop the concept, text, and direction equally, all working to get their individualized contributions in while ensuring that each bit fits within the whole. Their trash-aesthetic approach to stage design reinforces the found object—via—stream of consciousness writing method. Chalkboards on springs, tumbleweeds on remote-controlled cars (*Radiohole Is Still My Name*, 2004), Pepsi vending machines (*None of It: More or Less Hudson's Bay, Again*, 2002), guitars (*Bender*, 1998), and many, many buckets have decorated the Radiohole performance space. Further, their previous reworkings have explored film noir (*Bender*), the atomic bomb (*Rodan*, 2000), arctic exploration (*None of It*), and spaghetti westerns combined with, naturally, Guy Debord (*Radiohole Is Still My Name*). All of this results in a thematic hodgepodge of sensory impressions—beautiful chaos, conflict, violence—which resist any cohesion or unified

meaning; Radiohole performances are incredibly democratic.

Ergo, Radiohole's consideration of *Moby-Dick* leads to remote-controlled boats in which the performers navigate the stage, a Navy Seal workout video by official US Navy Seal Scott Helvenston,³ Led Zeppelin's 1973 "The Ocean," and ruminations on sex with seals. But the idea cropped up from the novel, whose simple beginning—"Call me Ishmael"—helps to situate a critical engagement.

Aside from defining the fortuitous period when Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*, which marked the formation of an American industrial identity and the US's status as a political and economic world power, the statement epitomizes an American ideal that is still cultivated: valuing simplicity, hard work, self-fashioned success, fueled by a radical individualism. It is no coincidence that only four years after the

3. In yet another disturbing layer of the performance, it turns out that Helvensten was one of four American soldiers murdered and hung from a bridge during the US's assault on Fallujah (Hoffman 2007).

publication of *Moby-Dick*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* became the paradigmatic text—the celebration of the self:

You shall no longer take things at second
or third hand....nor look through the eyes
of the dead....nor feed on the specters
in books,

You shall not look through my eyes
either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them
from yourself. ([1855] 1959:26)

The novel, as Whitman's text shaped the notion of the self, shaped the notion of "America"—just as America influenced Melville.

Nowhere are these philosophies more apparent than in the opening whisper: "Call me Ishmael." Significantly, it is not a semiotic turn, "My name is Ishmael"; nor is it some sort of Cartesian "I am Ishmael." It is an invitation, a welcome to the world that the narrator proffers to the reader. It is privileging us. It offers the reader one possibility—we *may* call him Ishmael. But we certainly don't have to. It is this acknowledgment of the reader's subjective biases that releases the text from a singular moment or geography into this plurality of significations.

While *Moby-Dick's* historical context and place within the canon are significant to its literary consideration, the book's concepts remain unnervingly appropriate for adaptation to contemporary culture and politics. In chapter 1, the reader is confronted with the following passage, at once poignant, prescient, and disturbing:

Doubtless, my going on this whaling
voyage formed part of the grand
programme of Providence that was
drawn up a long time ago... I take it
that this part of the bill must have run
something like this:

"Grand Contested Election for the
Presidency of the United States

"WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE
ISHMAEL

"BLOODY BATTLE IN
AFGHANISTAN." (Melville 1988:7)

However, Radiohole is not screwing with the text of the first 1851 publication, but rather with the *significance* of *Moby-Dick* in the early 21st century: an assortment of ideologies and cultural entities. Theirs is an America as Jean Baudrillard describes it: "The direct star-blast from vectors and signals, from the vertical and the spatial. As against the fevered distance of the cultural gaze" (1988:27). Counter to Baudrillard's typical theorizations of the simulacrum, he posits the "land of 'just as it is'" (28) as characteristic of the simplistic American aesthetic. What Baudrillard does not consider is that America has always already been his hyperreal nation-state of "vectors and signals": its expansiveness and overdetermination is both recognizable and critically available, but simultaneously unknowable; its wealth of identities gives way to multiple theoretical Americas.⁴ Radiohole's *Fluke* becomes a tangential reference to *Moby-Dick* via American epistemologies, another deviant vector, ensconced in the web of referential imagery, sound, smell, and subjectivities. The hyperreal America correlates with Radiohole's strong suit: an all out aesthetic assault. It is this assault—the references, sensations, and subjectivities—that establishes Radiohole as the quintessential American performance group.

"Get me some white whale"

Hoffman's radio warnings that open *Fluke* are abruptly cut off when Eric Dyer enters. He is Abe (Ahab? Abraham? Honest Abe?), and he explains the depth of his desire: "To me, that white whale is the wall the Man shoves me up against. Sometimes I think that's all there is" (2007:2). Gillette, now on the monitor above the stage, taunts Abe, "That's bullshit!! Be congenial!!" Is Gillette the whale? In any case, the conflict heightens and boils over in a Radiohole-original, call-and-response death metal song led by Dyer while he stomps on

4. In addition to Baudrillard, work like Venturi, Izenour, and Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1977), Sorkin's *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (1992), and Augé's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995) have all investigated various aspects of hyperreal America.

springboards with Hoffman and Erin Douglass: “Huh / Somebody get me some white whale!! / YEAH!!” (2).

Here is where the structures of the novel and Radiohole’s performance intersect: the individualism of one man’s struggle becomes the spectacle for all others implicated—the crew, the audience, and the industries we all serve. “Call me Ishmael!” becomes an epic narrative and cultural icon. Dyer bargains with the audience to involve them in the spectacle of the adventure, offering “Five dollars! I got an Abe Lincoln for anyone that brings me that wasted white whale!” (3).

When nobody takes Dyer up on his offer, Douglass, Dyer, and Hoffman become silent and proceed to pull up child-size fold-out chairs and TV-tray tables. They sit in the chairs and paint their eyelids white, fan them dry, and finally dot them with black pupils. They perform much of the remainder of the show with their eyes closed, yet (painted) open, a reference to a practice that sailors had to both ward off evil spirits in their sleep and appear awake while on watch.

With this abrupt shift in rhythm and imagery, the irony is not lost: searching for the “point” of *Fluke*, or any Radiohole piece for that matter, is as futile as Ahab’s search—not to mention any definitive notion of Ahab himself, the White Whale, or “America.” The infinite possibilities of reference do not exacerbate the

futility of the search for the characters, performers, or audience members. On the contrary, these possibilities enhance subjective readings by any audience member, no matter her or his relation to or familiarity with America, Radiohole, Melville, or seal sex.

Nowhere is this clearer than the group’s utilization of the Audio Spotlight, a disc-shaped speaker, employed by both commercial trade shows and the military, which throws sound in a focused direction. Douglass straps one across her chest and, sitting in her mechanical boat, begins to whisper secrets into a microphone. Depending upon where she points the Spotlight, perhaps you will receive the secret directly, perhaps you’ll hear a whisper, perhaps you won’t hear a thing. It is at this moment when it is clear that Hoffman’s messages that infiltrated the radio warnings at the beginning of the piece were filtered through the same system. (The mechanized moon is also a Spotlight, visually amplifying lonely secrets to the ethereal abyss.)

The idea of these secrets, and their varied effects and receptions, are pointedly tied in by the Audio Spotlight broadcast, as well as Hoffman’s radio warnings and Gillette’s disembodied presence. To extend this idea to larger constructs of character and theme, Gregory Whitehead’s “Out of the Dark: Notes on the Nobodies of Radio Art” reads Ahab himself as a radiobody, “one chilling prototype for the wireless persona: suspended between life and death, between redemptive dissemination and lethal degeneracy, *what is it made of and what does it want?*” (1994:256). Whitehead extends this character analysis to the larger discourse of radio art:

If the idea of radiophony as the autonomous, electrified play of bodies unknown to each other (the unabashed aspiration of radio art) sounds at times like it has been irretrievably lost, it is most likely because the air has already become too thick with the buzz of commerce and war, too overrun by radar beams, burning harpoons, wagging



Figure 3. Maggie Hoffman, Erin Douglass, and Eric Dyer paint their eyes “open” in Radiohole’s *Fluke* (The Solemn Mysteries of the Ancient Order of the Deep) or *Dick Dick Dick*. *Collapsible Hole*, New York City, 2007. (Photo by Victor Morales)

fingers, body brands, and traffic reports to think of anything else. (262)

Whitehead's acute commentary allows us to situate the radiobodies—of Ahab, Radiohole, the participatory audience—as hyperreal. The broadcast is there and not there, discoverable but intangible. One radio wave is exchangeable for another, just as one signifier is intermingled with innumerable other signifiers. By extension, via the Audio Spotlight, Douglass is not Douglass, then. Nor is she Ahab, nor is she the whale. She becomes all of these, a simulacrum without essence or rooting. The performers are all the characters and none. Just like the television space of Gillette, they are everywhere and nowhere.

Gillette makes the concluding remarks from Vermont: “Our tragedy was that we became fish. Freedom? A dream! Everyone aspires to it, or at least gives the impression of fervently aspiring to it” (2006:17). Although it still resists coherence, Gillette's speech does indeed bring many thematic elements together, a referential denouement. And as the performance ends and the audience begins to leave, Styx's 1977 “Come Sail Away” blasts from the speakers:

I look to the sea, reflections in the waves
spark my memory / Some happy, some
sad / I think of childhood friends and the
dreams we had / We live happily forever,
so the story goes / But somehow we
missed out on that pot of gold / But we'll
try best that we can to carry on.

The adventure is far from complete, but the soothing sounds of Styx frontman Dennis DeYoung's voice (there and not there) provides for some semblance of closure, bringing the hyperreal performance full circle: from early American literature to Virgil, to Navy Seals, to trade show technology, to '80s pop music. Discerning any type of coherence would be a fallacy; the bravest audiences and critics must surrender to profundity of the deep.



Figure 4. Erin Douglass sports the Audio Spotlight in Radiohole's Fluke (The Solemn Mysteries of the Ancient Order of the Deep) or Dick Dick Dick. *Collapsible Hole*, New York City, 2007. (Photo by Lisa Whiteman)

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Cargo Sofia

A Bulgarian Truck Ride through Dublin

Sara Brady

I walk east on the north side of the Quays. On my right the River Liffey pushes its notoriously filthy contents into the sea. I pass a lap-dancing club, then Marlborough Street—site of the Abbey Theatre—and finally the Custom House. One of Dublin's 18th-century colonial stalwarts, the Custom House more recently provides shelter for drug dealers on its steps. But at just 6:30 PM on Friday 4 May 2007—when the sun won't go down for a few hours—I'm too early for any shady characters. I keep walking along Custom House Quay and into the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC). The IFSC embodies the New Ireland: where a collection of run-down derelict buildings and crowded council houses used to be, there are gaudy new high-rise apartment buildings—which appear to grow up out of the surrounding water—enclosing a group of

commercial buildings housing major financial corporations, a few hotels, and some so-so restaurants ("bistros"; "cafés"; "wine bars"; and even a real, live "dance club").

The IFSC and the greater "Docklands" area that lead the Liffey through Dublin Port, the ferry terminal, Dublin Bay, and out to sea is the site of a theatre and performance mini-festival of site-specific work called "We Are Here 2.0." I'm here anyway, in front of the George's Dock arch, looking for my contact. I've been told by the Project Arts Centre box office (a producer of the festival) to wait for instructions. I notice almost immediately a not-so mysterious clue: near the arch a woman sits with a large, clearly marked sign reading "Cargo Sofia." So much for site-specific intrigue. I collect my ticket and spot my companion standing on the outskirts of the "funky-glasses crowd"—the term we apply

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