
Electroacoustic Ecology in Canada: Bicycle Orchestras and Radio Pirates

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Three installation/performances from "7e Printemps électroacoustique" (June, 1992)

The prolog to ZEITGLEICH states : *"no matter what the spatial or temporal point of their origin may be - they become zeitgleich... it refers to the practical problems of several sound installations taking place in one space and to the simultaneity of the reception by listeners/viewers of broadcast works."*

I was very excited upon hearing about the theme of this conference, sound-installation and media-composition in the digital age, as I find the combination of site-specific installations and electroacoustics a particularly provocative, expressive and challenging medium, and it is timely that we discuss the implications of sound in media installations.

I accepted Heidi Grundmann's invitation to participate in ZEIT-GLEICH not as a theorist in this field, but rather based on my experience as a sound artist and producer of works which attempt to explore issues in and pose ques-tions about the combination of installation art, electro-acoustics and acoustic ecology.

I am a composer by training, but have trouble accepting the concert hall as a performance space for the sound art which I create, and the sound art to which I listen. Since 1985, I have been exploring alternative sites, styles, attitudes and methods of composition. In particular, I have been interested in sound- based media installations, which combine two of my favourite themes: the environment and electronic media.

I believe in Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer's notion of acoustic ecology, which he defines as *"the study of the relationships of sounds with life and society"*. I also believe in the vision of another important Canadian philosopher and cultural theoretician, Marshall McLuhan, and his proposal for the harmonisation of electronic technology with contemporary society. I consider myself a child of both Schafer's acoustic ecology and McLuhan's global village and thus perhaps typically Canadian, as geography, linguistic duality and a culture of telecommunications define my inner map.

In 1989, in response to the growing world ecological crisis, I became involved in the environmental movement, at both political and artistic levels. A musician by training, it seemed most natural for me to become concerned about the sonic quality of our environment. I began by following in the tracks of composers R. Murray Schafer, Hildegard Westerkamp and Barry Truax, among others, of the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, whose objective was to *"bring together research on the scientific, sociological and aesthetic aspects of the acoustic environment"* and have since begun to articulate my own ideas on the soundscape and the role of the artist within it.

This brief summary of my creative projects and collaborations will give you an idea of my journey so far. From 1990 to 1992, I realised Marche sonore I - le matin du monde

(Soundwalk I - The Morning of the World), a French language radio work, which I realised in collaboration with radio producer H  l  ne Pr  vost, in which I ask the question "*What is acoustic ecology for you?*" and "*Can you describe what you are presently hearing?*". For over a year, I criss-crossed Europe and North America listening to and recording hundreds of people in living soundscapes and made a poetic collage with them. Composing "Marche sonore" helped me understand the notion of acoustic ecology from the perspective of the listener and how to use recording technology to better hear my immediate environment.

From 1991 to 1993, I realised another radio work, this time in English, called Revisiting the World Soundscape Project, in which I explored the history and impact of the research realised in the early 1970's by the World Soundscape Project. This project allowed me to interview the original members of the WSP (Bruce Davis, Peter Huse, Hildegard Westerkamp, Barry Truax and R. Murray Schafer) on how they viewed their work twentyfive years later.

In 1992, I directed the "7e Printemps   lectroacoustique", a festival of electroacoustic music on the theme of acoustic ecology in Montr  al. The "7e Printemps" presented experimental radio works, installations, outdoor performances, invented instruments, workshops and conferences. This festival became the pillar of my exploration of the relationship between electroacoustics and ecology, and is the subject of this presentation. Later, in 1993, I composed an acousmatic tape work called *Les voix de l'  cologie*, which is literally based on the book "The Tuning of the World" by R. Murray Schafer. In this work I attempted to bring the ideas of the book to life in music. In 1993, I also participated in the founding of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE), an international association of acoustic ecology activists, which was created at the first international conference on acoustic ecology at the Banff Centre for the Arts in August, 1993.

Industrialisation and new technologies have transformed the sound environment; new sonorities have appeared, have transformed our concept of hearing, and have modified aesthetic criteria in a decisive fashion. How does the concept of acoustic ecology harmonise with the practice of music and electroacoustics?

The notion of ecology has emerged recently in the domain of electroacoustics. A large number of artists from diverse disciplines explore and employ the soundscape in their work and show their sensitivity to this theme. Their interesting and timely reflections on problems related to compositional work expand the debate and nourish discussions on the quality and organisation of the soundscape in urban and natural environments. The specificity of their work consists in applying an attentive and analytical ear to sound phenomena and in the categorical organisation of diverse sounds to artistically expressive ends. Most of these artists consider their social engagement as a role that contributes to the balance and quality of sound forms in society.

I am interested in the role that the media artist can play in the ecological sphere, and inversely, the role that the ecological artist can play in the media sphere.

Canadian scientist Ursula Franklin speaks of the phenomenon of "cultural conformity" in which "the technology of an activity defines the activity itself and in so doing, excludes the emergence of alternatives". Are we choking under the pressure of electronic technology, incapable of controlling or directing it?

These are the questions I ask of my myself when I compose or produce a work on the theme of acoustic ecology. How does the work relate to our perception of the environment and how does the work help us to position ourselves in relation to the environment?

Quebecois ecologist Pierre Dansereau speaks of "a future which is unimaginable and which resembles nothing which has happened in history of humanity until now".

I believe the artist can become a conduit of collective memory and help us better understand our acoustic environment, which we rarely actually hear. Thus, in a situation of decontextualisation and transformation, the artist can propose new associations, acoustic games, poetic metaphors and pose fundamental questions on the nature of the coexistence of electronic technology and ecology.

In 1990, the Association pour la création et la recherche en électroacoustiques du Québec (ACREQ) asked me to organise a festival on the theme of the environment. I accepted their invitation to organise the "7e Printemps électroacoustique" on the condition that the event be held on the theme of acoustic ecology (the study of living sound) as opposed to the environment (our immediate surroundings). The festival was held in June, 1992, during the 350th anniversary of the founding of the city of Montreal by Europeans. The objectives of this event were to "sharpen the sense of listening of Montrealers", to "make them sensitive to the diversity of the soundscape in which they live each day" and to "create an event that takes place outside of traditional concert hall and that integrates itself with public spaces".

In this presentation, I will focus upon three projects produced at the "7e Printemps électroacoustique". All of these works combine sound-installation and media-composition in innovative and original ways and are in keeping with the theme and tone of the ZEITGLEICH Symposium. I hope they can serve as a model for future exploration in this field.

ORCHESTRE VÉLO (Bicycle Orchestra): mobile electroacoustic installations

The Bicycle Orchestra was first conceived in 1991 as a way of combining the bicycle as ecological mode of transportation with the notion of using recycled materials for the construction of invented electroacoustic instruments.

I proposed the idea to composer Michel Smith and sculptor Paskal Dufaux and they conceived, with brilliance, what was to become Orchestre vélo (Bicycle Orchestra), a seven piece mobile acoustic and electroacoustic orchestra. The first generation of the Bicycle Orchestra was very successful, serving to kindle the imagination and listening sensitivity of both the seasoned new music audience and the general public.

The Bicycle Orchestra was invented with the intention of using art as a means of intervention in an urban space, and as a poetic journey composed of evocative and participatory elements (the curiosity of a moving phenomena, the fascination of animated objects, the seduction of the bicycle and of sound emanating from a moving source, the attraction of an unusual performance space, etc.).

The project is inspired, among other sources, by the Italian noise artists, by American composer and instrument builder Harry Partch, by the acoustic ecology movement and by the traditions of Balinese Gamelan instruments and music. Each machine is constructed with mechanical objects armed with invented instruments, resonators and loudspeakers which project various electronic and acoustic sounds which explore the sonic, choreographic and theatrical interplay between each of the cycles, as well as the interplay between the cycle machines and the public.

The 1992 version of the Bicycle Orchestra was not completely satisfying, in particular regarding the volume and variety of sounds available. Thus, in 1994, Smith and Dufaux

conceived a new Bicycle Orchestra, which we named the Montreal Cycle Orchestra in May, 1994 and then in July, 1994, adopted our definitive title: "The KAREL Ensemble". This ensemble is much more complex and cohesive as sophisticated musical instruments and as provocative visual objects. The instrumentation of the new 10 part ensemble includes 6 amplified and acoustic musical wheel sculptures (bicycles, tricycles, quadricycles) and 4 amplified and acoustic trailers (2 tower trailers with multiple loudspeakers and DAT playback system, 1 percussion trailer with multiple loud-speakers and DAT playback system and 1 broadcast trailer (nicknamed "the Ball") with multiple loudspeakers which are drawn behind the wheel sculptures.

The music of composer Michel Smith uses theatrical language, sonic games and improvisation, all of which are synchronised with precise movements and gestures. This ritualistic performance, which combines primitivism with high technology, can be presented in various theatrical spaces, both urban and natural (parks, arenas, parking lots, playing fields, concert halls, etc.), the common element being a constant and dynamic interplay between audience and performers.

The sculptures of Dufaux use spherical and oval forms constructed with black metal, fabric and wood. The machines were carefully designed to function both as mobile sculptures and as musical instruments. Each machine is equipped with a lighting system which allows the creation of shadow plays and various choreographic possibilities and is hooked up with microphones (contact and dynamic), electronic processing and pre-recorded audio (on DAT). The musical instruments of the ensemble were designed by Dufaux, Smith and musician Jacques Marchand of Montreal.

DROIT DE CITÉ: public radio interventions

The second project I would like to discuss is "Droit de cité" (a play on words in French meaning both "right of quotation" and "right of citizenship"). This project was co-produced with the FM network of Société Radio-Canada (SRC), the Canadian French language national broadcasting service. The project was conceived by SRC producers Claire Bourque and Mario Gauthier. The project was intended as a form of public radio intervention and exploration of real time musicalization of an urban soundscape. Since we were celebrating the 350th anniversary of the City of Montreal in 1992, we decided to listen to our immediate environment and ask both local and foreign artists to make music with it.

The program note from the festival describes the project as follows: "For seven days, at different times, sound portraits of the city of Montréal were presented live on the FM network of Société Radio-Canada. Seven soundscapes were captured live from different locations in the city and trans-formed by artists situated in a production studio at SRC. These artists transformed the sounds into a musical product which was broadcast live, without warning to the audience, on the national network. As a result, radio became, for a brief moment, a giant ear listening to the personality of the city."

The seven portraits were broadcast from June 15 through June 21, 1992 at different times of the day and night within regular programs of the FM network. Each capsule was meant to portray a different geographical region and atmosphere of the city.

"Traffic", by Mario Gauthier and Claire Bourque, presented a sound portrait of the city and of its traffic networks at the morning rush hour. Gauthier and Bourque used pre-recorded sounds of highways, bridges and roads combined with a real time broadcast of the noisy highway dominated soundscape outside of the SRC building in Montreal. "Montréal suspendue"

(Suspended Montreal), by the Québec City sound art group BRUIT TTV, was an improvisation based on the sounds of bridges surrounding the city.

A series of microphones were placed on Jacques-Cartier bridge and broadcast to a production studio at the SRC where the musicians transformed the bridge sounds and added sounds from invented instruments and vocal sources. "La grande bouffe" (The Great Meal), by Jean-Pierre Côté, was a portrait both direct and stylised of the gastronomic and social life of the city at noon, with artist Rober Racine and musician Diane Labrosse hosting a lunch table conversation combined with pre-recorded lunch sounds from across the city and the Glass Orchestra (Toronto), performing on invented glass instruments. "Montréal sous la ville" (Montreal Under the City), was my contribution to the project.

My portrait was a sound panorama of the subterranean soundscapes of the city using a live set of microphones at a subway station mixed with pre-recorded sounds on tape. "Sortie St-Denis, Montréal la nuit" (St-Denis Outing, Montreal by Night), by sampling artist/composer Bob Ostertag and guitarist/composer René Lussier, was an improvisation on the Friday night sound-scape, with a focus on the state of homeless adolescents. A microphone was placed on this busy "night life" street and was combined with processed, sampled and guitar sounds. "Les ondes fantômes, Montréal inoui" (Phantom Waves, Unheard-of Montreal), by composer Ned Bouhalassa, was a celebration of the summer solstice with a multitude of short-wave radio stations mixed live. Over 20 short wave radios were scanned for over 2 hours and transformed in real time to create a portrait of the electronic soundscape of the city. "Montréal sacré" (Sacred Montreal), by composer Yves Daoust, presented a sensual portrait of Sunday morning in the city, with its calm and quietude and an implicit sacred presence. A microphone was placed in St. Joseph's Oratory where sounds of a mass were combined with pre-recorded sound-scapes from different areas of the city recorded on various Sunday mornings.

"Droit de cité" was an adventure never before attempted on public radio and produced a wide variety of reactions and comments. We assumed that this original project would be well received by the general public and in particular by the state radio authorities who co-produced it. However, surprisingly, the project seemed to disturb certain people, ranging from personnel at Radio-Canada through to the average "classical" listener. In particular, "Droit de cité" seemed to disrupt the regularity and purity of classical listening and thus broke a long-standing tradition of "fine" broadcasting of state radio. There was also widespread acclaim for this form of artistic experimentation with standard broadcast procedures which questions and challenges conventional modes of broadcasting. As suggested by Mario Gauthier, "this ambitious project had a very strong impact, as it modified the established relationship between listener and radio".

MUSICAL AND GUERRILLA INTERVENTIONS: moving voices and radios

The third project I will discuss is the musical intervention work of Montreal-based sound artist and performer Kathy Kennedy. Kennedy leads the Choeur Maha, a 30-voice women's choir in Montreal. She is interested in using transmission technology as a tool for composition in large public spaces, and is interested in issues of access to technology. Her intervention works usually occur in large public spaces, such as parks and public squares. The performers sing over a soundtrack which is broadcast by either a public or pirate transmitter, to which portable radios (ghetto-blasters) are tuned. Each singer carries a radio that picks up the soundtrack and each is free to move around in the space, using the blaster as his or her personal monitor. This use of radio technology allows for interesting choreographic and spatial design of large spaces by virtue of the performers as moveable electroacoustic installation

pieces.

Kennedy also uses radio and performance to create "Guerrilla Performances", in which the choir performs music in typically patriarchal sites, such as the Hydro-Québec building and the Justice hall. In this case, the soundtrack is broadcast by a personal pirate 1 watt stereo transmitter, which provides a much greater level of control and flexibility for timing. The intention is to bring music into spaces of power and privilege as a form of musical civil disobedience. This form of "un-invited" performance as well as the use of pirate transmitters is illegal in Canada, but is generally tolerated, as the intention is to point out the attitude and behaviour of the space's inhabitants. Kennedy is interested in the use of the ghetto-blasters radio intervention as a juxtaposition of the light, seemingly frivolous nature of radio along with its more resolutely subversive nature.

In 1992, the "7e Printemps électroacoustique" premiered "IDLINGO", a work for 30 female voices and tape broadcast on community radio during the day long installation event "Lafontaine Park as a Theatre of Sound" on June 14, 1992. The work is about the individual's need to articulate somehow his or her feelings and reactions in a technologically inundated world. "IDLINGO" combined choreography, music and text in a tightly knit 10 minute performance. At times, the singers moved freely throughout the crowd, each singing a private, individually chosen melody during a live improvisation by one of the choir members back at the radio station. She was, by a pre-determined set of cues, directing them as to where to go, and what to do. They advanced or changed direction based on certain key phrases in her monologue. Kennedy points out that we are often foolishly led to believe that technology can facilitate communication, when in fact, it should never be mistaken for human interaction in real time.

"IDLINGO", also has a tape part, also broadcast by radio. It is comprised mainly of radio distortion and other typically urban sounds (car engines, horns, and so on). These sounds are pitted against the lush, soothing qualities of both live and recorded female voices. A few hints of the vocal aspect are slipped into the soundtrack to give the radio audience a semblance of what is going on at the actual event. The polemic around the natural voice versus technological, synthetically-produced sounds could be read into the acoustical phenomena of the fragile, treble sounds of women's voices carrying further than the bass drones of industry. The opportunity and the ability for these women to go into the crowd was a uniquely empowering experience. They have now performed in both inviting and confrontational stances. It's also an especially intimate position for a singer to be among the audience, and a rare circumstance in choral music. In her collaborations with Choeur Maha, the performers control the sound source, but the public is generally more free than they care to believe. They can approach the singers, move away from them, and are often encouraged to sing along.

In 1994, Kennedy presented a new work based on "IDLINGO", which grew to a fold of 100 women, men, and children who surrounded the grounds of Montreal's Place des Arts, one part to each street that forms the city block. "Never/Always" is the title of this piece that describes the universal feeling of the individual's isolation within the generality of urban society. It was premiered on April 23, 1994 as part of the "Quinzaine de la voix" international festival of new music.

To conclude, I leave you with a quotation from my friend and colleague Dan Lander, of Toronto, who I recorded in 1992 during an interview for the "Revisiting the World Soundscape" radio project. Lander suggested the following simple and insightful thought, which I refer to time and time again:

"I feel that a possible solution to our problem is to slow down and stop producing so much."

We could return to a form of orality and talk to each other a little more. To listen, as opposed to always doing".
