

Canadasonic

Sound art was invented in Canada.

According to Alan Licht in *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories*, the term was “coined by Canadian composer/audio artist Dan Lander in the mid-1980s.”¹ That is, of course, a distinct claim from the apocryphal absurdity of my opening provocation. After all, naming does not necessarily coincide with the incipience of the activity being named. While the historical accuracy of Licht’s assertion is questionable, it functions as a useful point of departure, for it echoes R. Murray Schafer’s statement that “radio existed long before it was invented.”² In other words, slippage and fluidity are not only recurring characteristics of physical sound, but the related nomenclature operates with similar schizo-ontological and anachronistic confusion. Jonathan Sterne’s notion of a field of study which “reflexively *mind[s] sound*”³ is productive here for it emphasizes intersections without eschewing a critical stance, especially toward trite theoretical presuppositions based on the differences between the physiological functioning of hearing versus those of vision.

¹ Alan Licht, *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 11. Rahma Khazam’s “A Brief History of Sound Art,” *Volume – What You See Is What You Hear* 1 (2010): 6–9 also points to a mid-1980s Lander moment of origin. In Douglas Kahn’s “Sound Art, Art, Music” (from 2005 but recently reprinted in *Tacet* 3, [2014]: 328–47), he traces his own disinclination with the term “sound art” in connection with his friendship to Dan Lander in the period leading up to his 2001 book *Noise, Water, Meat* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press).

² R. Murray Schafer, “Radical Radio,” *Ear Magazine* (1987): 18–20, here 18.

³ Jonathan Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1–17, here 10. One could posit that I am replicating one of the entries in what Sterne calls *the audiovisual litany* (9) here by suggesting a correlation between the physical characteristics of sound and a descriptive theory. That is partly true, though I have avoided (and have no interest in) making that linkage in relation to a stereotypical critique of visuality.

Categorical delineations tend to ignore nuanced definitions, but artists are apt to be unperturbed by blurs. Correspondingly, Canadasonic embraces a panasonic approach, one which acknowledges and attempts to encompass, in the brief space allotted, the various streams of art forms and practices which incorporate and foreground sound, whether these call themselves sound art or not. Emblematically, Michael Snow speculated he could dub himself a “time-light-sound poet” in 1968.⁴ In other words, for the purposes of this text, the inclusion of media and visual arts, musique actuelle, electro-acoustics, acoustic ecology, communications, expanded cinema, sound studies, sound poetry, radio art, and performance art is not only strategic but also reflective of the intermeshing of a plethora of artistic and research practices. In short, sound art in the expanded field. All that being said, Lander’s editorial work on *Sound by Artists* in 1990 and *Radio Rethink* in 1994 did serve as a considerable coalescing and catalyzing force in the early stages of what has become, now twenty-five years later, a multilayered and multivalent scene.⁵

⁴ Michael Snow, *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 43.

⁵ Dan Lander and Micah Lexier, eds., *Sound by Artists* (Toronto and Banff: Art Metropole and Walter Phillips Gallery, 1990). Re-issued in a facsimile edition by Blackwood Gallery and Charivari Press, 2013. Dan Lander and Daina Augaitis, eds., *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound and Transmission* (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1994). A few years later, additional publications solidified the scholarship: Jim Drobnick, ed., *Aural Cultures* (Toronto and Banff: YYZ Books and Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, 2004); and Nicole Gingras, ed., *S:ON: Sound in Contemporary Canadian Art/Le son dans l'art contemporain canadien* (Montreal: Éditions Arttexte, 2003). These publications (plus the long-running magazine *Musicworks*) reflect a predilection not only for historicization but also for theorization of the art form – a persisting parallel current. They also denote the willingness of publishers to examine the field in a focused manner, in contradistinction to any of the major Canadian museums, thus far.

Listen! and Its Ramifications

The focus on listening as a pedagogical imperative with a sociopolitical agenda was advanced by the World Soundscape Project (R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, Hildegard Westerkamp, among others) starting in the late 1960s in Vancouver and percolates to this day.⁶ The corollary: a fostered awareness of the role sound plays in the everyday environment – in short, acoustic ecology. A caveat that haunts the acoustic ecology project – at least in its initial didactic (read moralistic) incarnation – is succinctly articulated by Lisa Robertson: “the concept of acoustic ecology [is] a direct expression of late capitalism’s division not only of labour but of labourer from consumer.”⁷

That being said, the original lesson still informs the compositional stratagems employed by artists, many of whom operate in a variety of territories and approaches at once, such as Darren Copeland (co-founder of New Adventures in Sound Art in Toronto), Andra McCartney, Magali Babin, and Hélène Prévost, to name only a few. The listener was also on Glenn Gould’s mind when he bemoaned the unrepeatability of live performance and dreamed of “issuing a kit of variant performances and let the listener assemble his own performance”; he follows with a prescient sentence:

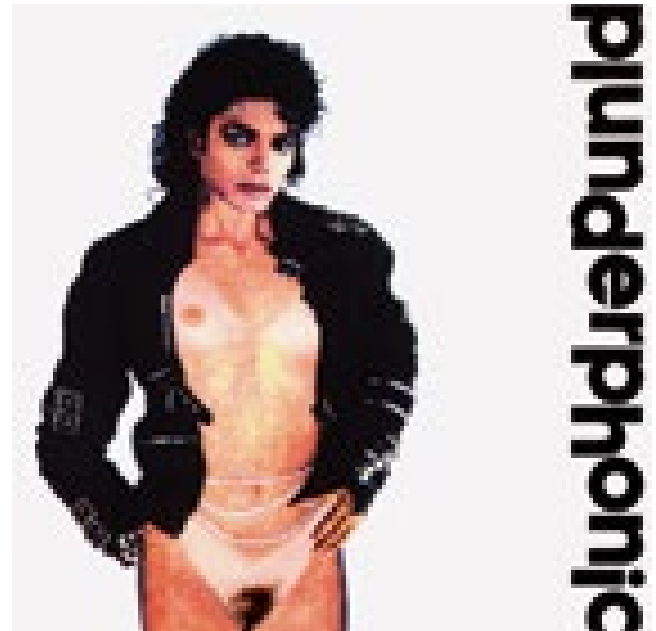


FIG. 1 John Oswald, *Plunderphonics*, 1989. CD jacket. The image is a cut and paste collage made by John Oswald.

“It would draw the audience in the re-creative process.”⁸ John Oswald’s notoriously censored *Plunderphonics*, ongoing since 1985,^(FIG. 1) could be examined through this filter – the artist as listener for recombining structures culled from the entire history of recording. The act of recording presumes a listening that accents the verb form of the latter – i.e. an activated reception, an active listening which injects liveness into the supposed deadness or fixity of recording. Recordings also manifest materially, and thereby become manipulable.⁹ With the faux ethnographic work *The Last LP* (1987), Michael Snow takes recording to one endgame of listening in relation to veracity and subterfuge (*What am I listening to?*).^(FIG. 2) A fascinating parallel work of deceit occurs in the slyly titled *Sound* (2001) by David Cecchetto wherein he manipulates a live performance by

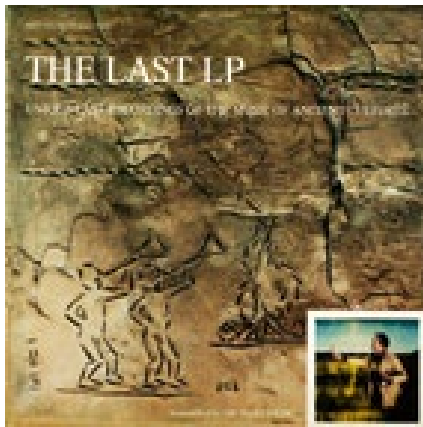


FIG. 2 Michael Snow, *The Last LP*, 1987. LP jacket.



FIGS. 3a,b Nataliya Petkova, *Geophonies*, 2011, sound walk tool. Steel, textile, radio transmitters.



FIG. 4 Jordan Bennett, *Turning Tables*, 2010, sound installation. Installation view Institut du monde arabe, Paris.



FIG. 5a The Nihilist Spasm Band, *No Record*, 1968. LP jacket.

tampering with the customary visual cues of a piano accompanied by a mic-computer-speaker rig, the latter of which is there just for show, yet is somehow “heard” by the audience. This piece also illustrates Cecchetto’s general intent to explore the idea of a “sound that isn’t sounded” and “sound [that] is never just sound.”¹⁰ These

notions will reverberate aurally with those by Raymond Gervais and Jocelyn Robert that will appear at the conclusion of this text. Documenting a non-performance, Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder in *Night Shift* (2012) sound out the invisible labour of repeatedly painting gallery walls white on an LP where effectively background becomes foreground – static yet always moving, sans denouement (*Why am I listening to this?*). Nataliya Petkova with *Geophonies* (2011),^(FIGS. 3a,b) and Douglas Moffat with *Montréal Phonographe* (2007) turn the stylus into recording devices in order to turn geographies into grooves (*Is the ground I walk on playable?*). Jordan Bennett’s

Turning Tables (2010) displays a functioning DJ setup all made out of walnut, oak, and pine, which might be deemed quaint Canadiana, until one hears Mi’kmaq being learned on one of the tree slices turned playable record: the perseverance of First Nations (*Can one rescue a language from being lost via recording?*).^(FIG. 4)

⁶ The lasting influence of Schafer cannot be underestimated, for instance the following three recent tomes on sound feature his writing as the intro piece (in first two cases) or in the first section: Mark M. Smith, ed., *Hearing History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (New York: Berg, 2003); and Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, eds., *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁷ Lisa Robertson, *Nilling* (Toronto: BookThug, 2012), 68.

⁸ Glenn Gould in Richard Kostelanetz, “Glenn Gould: Bach in the Electronic Age,” in *Glenn Gould: By Himself and His Friends*, ed. John McGreevy (Toronto: Macmillan, 1983), 134.

⁹ There is an abundant list of artists who mine the history of recording for both its material properties and its cultural aspects, including: Martin Tétreault, Dave Dymont, Daniel Olson, Ian Murray, Rodney Graham, Tim Lee, Charles Stankievich, Brian Joseph Davis, Pierre-André Arcand, Érick d’Orion.

¹⁰ David Cecchetto, *Humane-sis: Sound and Technological Posthumanism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 126.

¹¹ Mystery Laboratory, “Mystery Tapes,” in Lander and Lexier, *Sound by Artists*, 203. Also used as an epigraph by Jim Drobnick, *Aural Cultures*, 9. One would think however that the unknowable world would be even noisier, especially since one recurring definition of noise is sound that is uncategorizable.

¹² Notable other sound art groups *avant la lettre* include: Canadian Creative Music Collective (or CCMC) which began in the mid-1970s, current members: Paul Dutton, Michael Snow, John Oswald; Artist’s Jazz Band (1962–?); L’infonie (1967–1974).

Beyond and Between (Noise Voices)

“« listen » / The known world is a noisy ball.”¹¹ The poetic pithiness of *Mystery Tapes* (aka John Oswald) encapsulates the relationship of listening to an outside that is often beyond our control. In the case of The Nihilist Spasm Band, as they enter their fiftieth year of activity, the outside din is interiorized.¹² Based in London, Ontario, the band (including visual artists Greg Curnoe, Murray Favro, and John Boyle) have been resolutely saying *yes* to *NO (Canada)* for the past half a century.^(FIGS. 5a,b) Their brand of autodidactic noise and idiosyncratic instrument building has found ears worldwide. The enthralling racket is punctuated by Bill Exley’s anarchic pronouncements, for example, from *Destroy the Nations*: “Destroy the Nation! Let’s start with America! Canada is already dead!”¹³ Destroying language,



FIG. 5b The Nihilist Spasm Band in 1968, posing against the back wall of the York Hotel, the pub in which they played every Monday night for many years in the 1960s and 1970s. From left: Hugh McIntyre (bass), Art Pratten (Pratt-A-Various), Archie Leitch (slide clarinet), Murray Favro (guitar, drums), John Clement (guitar), Bill Exley (vocals, theremin), John Boyle (kazoo), Greg Curnoe (kazoo, drums).



FIG. 6 Rebecca Belmore, *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, 1991. Presented by the Walter Phillips Gallery as part of the exhibition *Bureau de Change*, July 12–September 28, 2008. Banff National Park, Johnsons Lake, 2008.

or at least perverting and subverting it, propels the sonic properties of the voice to the fore. The sound poetry of The Four Horsemen and Claude Gauvreau, for instance, furthered the European avant-garde tradition of exploring and exploiting glossolalic utterances through inventive scripts and powerful live performances.¹⁴ Voice also features prominently and poignantly in Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Voz Alta* of 2008 and Rebecca Belmore's *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* of 1991.^(FIG. 6) Both works stage voice at the center of a collective enterprise performing a spectacle of testimony. Both use oversize megaphones to cast wide and loud. Both impress through their scale even before they are heard. Voice is intimately tied to territory and *self-determination*;¹⁵ in myriad manifestations, it clamors claims through narrative or visceral outflowing, from Tanya Tagaq's melding of Inuit throat singing into hybridized soundscapes to Alexandre St-Onge's animalistic breaching of "xenocommunicative channels [via an] intensification of the molecularities of vocal utterance."¹⁶ In Lozano-Hemmer's *Microphones* (2008), the circuitry of voice/ear, speaking/listening merges through the layering of contributions by gallery visitors within the selfsame iconic mics.^(FIG. 7)

In the narrative-centric soundwalks of Janet Cardiff (and sometimes George Bures Miller), a similar *mise en abyme* unfolds, but the mobility injects a prosthetic extension to the experience: "The audio works as a time machine. Janet is beside/behind you talking to you, taking you with her into her universe."^{(FIG. 8),¹⁷} The time machine is of course the recorder/playback device, what Sterne terms to be "an extension of ephemerality"¹⁸ – which is itself an extension of Marshall McLuhan's foundational concept regarding the immersive role of media and technology.¹⁹ The energy required to enable exponential extensionality is arguably destroying the nation, and beyond. The artistic activities of the nervous membrane, to paraphrase McLuhan, jacked on the power amplification affords, are compromised as

¹³
The Nihilist Spasm Band, *No Record*, LP, Allied Record, 1967 (reissued on CD, Alchemy Records, 1996).

¹⁴
The Four Horsemen (1972–1988) were Rafael Barreto-Rivera, Paul Dutton, Steve McCaffery, and bp Nichol. Ron Mann's 1982 film *Poetry in Motion* captured their vociferousness: www.youtube.com/watch?v=84300bTVKHQ. Claude Gauvreau's 1970 appearance at *La Nuit de la poésie* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g5IXcFlwd0) had a resounding impact on Rober Racine, see his postscript "Étranges et Foudroyants," in Claude Gauvreau, *Étal Mixte et Autres Poèmes 1948–1970* (Montreal: Éditions de l'Hexagone, 1993), 239–43.

¹⁵
Phrase used by Jolene Rickard in "Rebecca Belmore: Performing Power," in *Rebecca Belmore: fountain*, ed. Cindy Richmond and Scott Watson, exhib. cat. (Kamloops and Vancouver: Kamloops Art Gallery/The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2005), 69.

¹⁶
Marc Couroux on St-Onge's *l'indécidable crowbar cosmogonique* (2010) from "PREEMPTIVE GLOSSARY FOR A TECHNOSONIC CONTROL SOCIETY (with lines of flight)," in *Volumes*, ed. Martin Arnold and Christof Migone (Mississauga: Blackwood Gallery, 2015), 61.

¹⁷
Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, "[untitled text]" in *Voices Voces Vox*, ed. Barbera van Kooij and Christopher Phillips, exhib. cat. (Rotterdam: Witte de With et al., 1998), 89.

¹⁸
Jonathan Sterne, "Lost Recordings," in *Traces*, ed. Nicole Gingras (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, 2006), 74.

¹⁹
Colette Urban's *Oh My* (2002), Jessica Thompson's *walking machine* (2003), Darsha Hewitt's *Personal Soundtrack Emitters* (2006) also expand from traditional soundwalks; in these works, they bypass recording in favor of mediated liveness – stuck in the here and now.

²⁰
Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Peter Zingrone (Concord, Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 1995), 94. "Electricity is in effect an extension of the nervous system as a kind of global membrane."

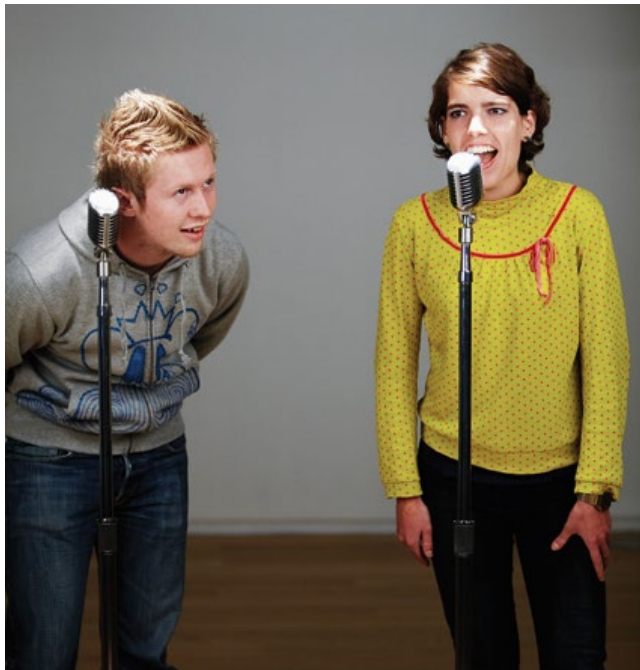


FIG. 7 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Microphones*, 2008. Modified vintage microphones, electronics, computers and loud speakers. Installation view Manchester Art Gallery, 2010.

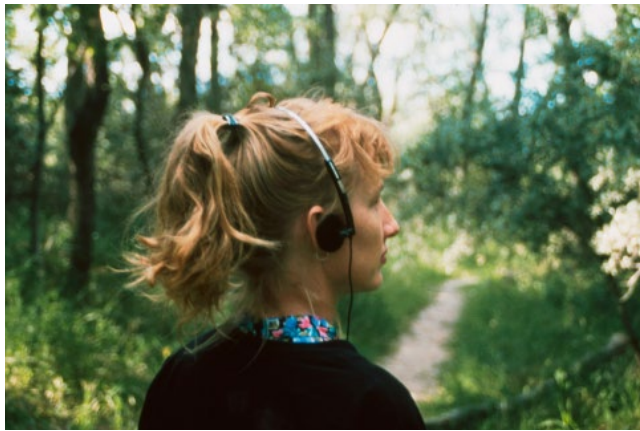


FIG. 8 Janet Cardiff, *Forest Walk*, 1991. Audio Walk, 12 min. Banff Centre for the Arts, Canadian Artist in Residence Program.

soon as the power is switched on and the mouth approaches the microphone.²⁰

From Coast to Coast
to Coast (to Border)
(Radiating Kinosonics)

Northrop Frye commented that Canadian culture is “obsessed with movement and transportation,”²¹ and while the sheer expansive geography of the country lends itself to such an observation, it must be considered in tandem with the technological advents that have accelerated and amplified such preoccupations. A considerable number of artists make this manifest through work which occupies space via a tangible temporal skew. In other words, they kinetically invest space – be it within the white cube, black box, or in the streets.

Jean-Pierre Gauthier’s *THORAX* of 2010^(FIGS. 9a,9b) presents a breathing exo-skeletal singing body electric.²² It all starts with air, and our breathing of it, everyday, all the time. Then it’s what you do when you move about, how you interact with objects and with others. Diane Landry’s neologism *mouvelle* fits aptly here for it combines (in French) temporality with movement and newness. The repurposing of everyday objects is a recurring method utilized by numerous artists to sound space:²³ Landry with keys, salad spinners, washing machines, kettles, shredders,^(FIG. 10) Marla Hlady with teapots, toys, cocktail shakers, rice balls; Béchar/Hudon with paper, glasses, fishing poles, cones;^(FIG. 11) Peter Flemming with garbage cans, bricks, buckets; Ken Gregory with fire alarms, kites, bottles. With *My Teeth are in Slivers* (1994), *In Bocca al lupo* (1991), and *Taking it to the Teeth* (1993), Rita McKeough peeled the familiarity of domesticity to reveal the violent tensions that sometimes pervade the home – “sharp rhythm of breath, in and out, perforates, punctuates space.”^{(FIG. 12),24} Formally, a lot of these works straddle the interstice between *performed* installations and *installed* performances. A germane sound-art-historical example of this would be the project by Martin Messier and Nicolas Bernier (with Jonathan Villeneuve), *Machine Variation* (2014),^(FIGS. 13a,b) which resembles an updated and perverted *intonarumori* on a gigantic scale – played from the inside, it engulfs the performers who fittingly engage it with FM Einheit-like

²¹ Northrop Frye, “National Consciousness in Canadian Culture,” in idem, *Divisions on a Ground* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982), 50.

²² A fuller discussion of this work in Christof Migone, *Sonic Somatic: Performances of the Unsound Body* (Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2012), 191–95.

²³ Of course, sound and the everyday need not be entwined together nor necessarily linked to usage of household objects. Works which merit mentioning in a broader category of sonic spatiality include David Rokeby’s

pioneering *Very Nervous System* (1986–1990), and various works by Steve Heimbecker, Diana Burgoyne, Adam Basanta, Diane Morin, Robyn Moody, Caroline Gagné, Annie Martin, Thomas Bégin, Manon Labrecque.

²⁴ Paula Levine, “Rita McKeough’s *My Teeth are in slivers*: A Calling from the Other Side of Trauma,” in Lander and Augaitis, *Radio Rethink*, 157. Anne Carson makes a pertinent declaration in her “The Gender of Sound” essay: “Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography” (in *Glass, Irony and God* [New York: New Directions, 1995], 130).

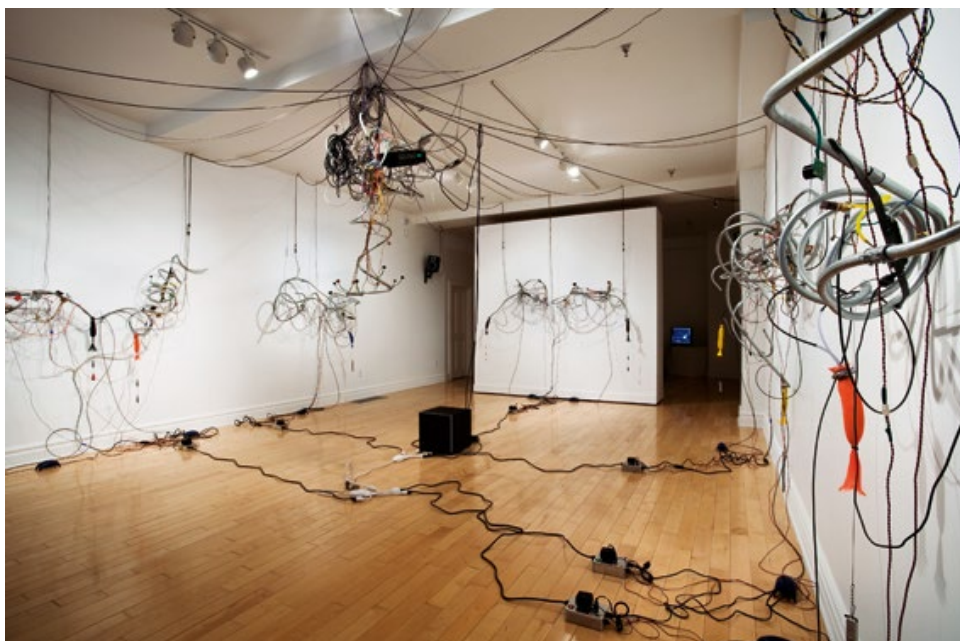


FIG. 9a Jean-Pierre Gauthier, *THORAX*, 2010, interactive sound installation. Installation view Action Art Actuel, Quebec.



FIG. 9b Jean-Pierre Gauthier, *THORAX*, 2010, interactive sound installation. Detail.

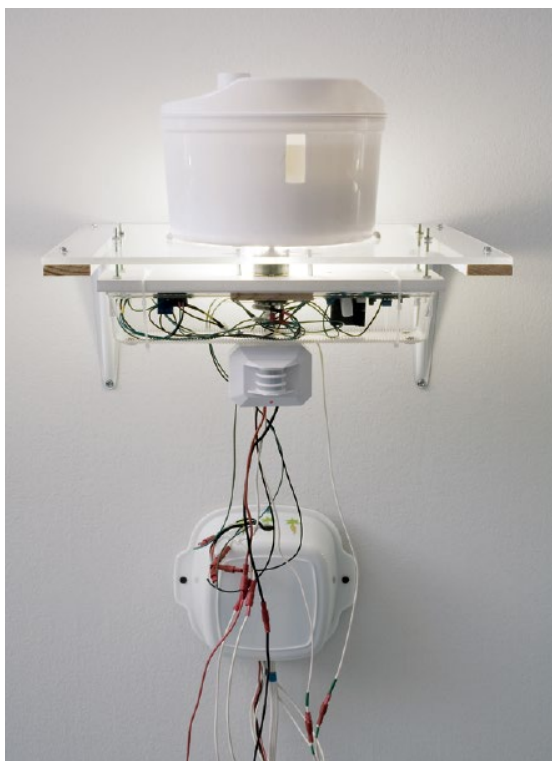


FIG. 10 Diane Landry, *Je ne trouve pas ma montre, elle ne s'est pourtant pas envolée / I can't find my watch, yet it hasn't flown away*, 2006, motorized installation. Salad spinners, selected objects, inkjet photographs, lights, timer switches, motion sensors, 6 objects: 90 x 36 x 36 cm (overall), total length: 536 cm.

FIG. 11 Béchard/Hudon, *La circulation des fluides I / The Circulation of Fluids I*, 2008–2009, sound installation. Wood, paper, speakers, amplifiers, audio interface, infrared sensors, electronics, cables, computer, 5.18 x 6 x 2.5 m.





FIG. 12 Rita McKeough, *Taking it to the Teeth*, 1993. Installation/Performance at Glenbow Museum, Calgary, January 1993.

FIG. 13 a, b Martin Messier
and Nicolas Bernier,
Machine_Variation, 2014.
Sound performance, 30 min.



fervor. Sound is part and parcel of this equivocal dance. One could posit that these strategies lie at the heart of the notion of *experiment* as articulated by Gordon Monahan in an interview regarding his seminal 1982 *Speaker Swinging*.^{(FIG. 14), 25} He advocates for “experiment” *tout court*, not as a qualifier of music. In that spirit and in continuity are the intersections currently explored by Sarah Peebles with entomology (apiaries in particular), Erin Sexton with alchemy and crystallography,^(FIG. 15) and Philippe-Aubert Gauthier with acoustics from an engineer’s perspective.

Radio involves the invisible kinetics of electromagnetic waves. Radio’s currents also activate the sociopolitical realm with the impact of its presence and liveness in localities as well as networks. Hank Bull recalls a pronouncement by General Idea that “artists, like Hermit crabs, can invade the dead forms of mass media.”²⁶ Radio is by no means the sole exhibition space for sound, but it is primed for it. Some may argue that it is its

own distinct art form, but the entwinement with sound art is undeniable. However, there are specific tactics beyond mere use of radio as diffusion vehicle that artists such as Anna Friz, Peter Courtemanche, Steve Bates,^(FIG. 16) Chantal Dumas, Jean-Pierre Aubé, Kristen Roos, Matt Smith, Emmanuel Madan, André Éric Létourneau, Eleanor King, and Martine Crispo regularly investigate. The Canadian radio art context continues to thrive; it should come as no surprise that it was at the center of Lander’s activities from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s (in addition to being active at Art Metropole – which was founded by the aforementioned General Idea in 1974).

²⁵ Gordon Monahan, “Speaker Swinging,” interview conducted by Robert Johnson in 1987, in Lander and Lexier, *Sound by Artists*, 141–45, here 145. “Rather than the genre of experimental music, *Speaker Swinging* deals with the reality of experiment.”

²⁶ Hank Bull in Candice Hopkins, “Hank Bull: From the Centre to the Periphery,” in *Re-Inventing Radio: Aspects of Radio as Art*, ed. Heidi Grundmann et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2008), 220.

²⁷ Raymond Gervais, *Via Charles Ives: La Symphonie Universe (via La Question sans réponse)* (Orford: Centre d’arts Orford, 2001), 14.

²⁸ Raymond Gervais, “From sound to image” in *Raymond Gervais 3x1*, ed. Nicole Gingras, exhib. cat. (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery/VOX, 2006), 59.



FIG. 14 Performance of Gordon Monahan's *Speaker Swinging* at the Music Gallery, Toronto, 1987.

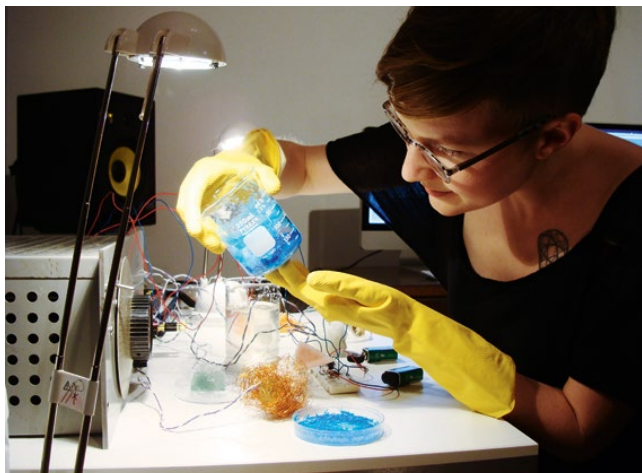


FIG. 15 Erin Sexton, *crystalline domain*, 2014, installation series.

Crisscrossed Ecologies

Experiments with broadcasting imply an institutional enabler – it is a governmentally regulated medium after all. The national broadcaster (CBC/ Radio Canada) has played a role here, most notably by producing Gould's *Solitude Trilogy* (*The Idea of North*, *The Latecomers*, and *The Quiet in the Land*) between 1967 and 1977; on the French side, at Radio Canada, Mario Gauthier and H  l  ne Pr  vost in their respective programs did considerable work between the 1980s and early 2000s featuring sound and radio art, as well

as experimental musics. However, support for experiments in sound have atrophied since and are now negligible. On the other hand, the country-wide network of community radio stations and key partners like the Banff Center, Western Front, and Avatar have been and continue to be fervent in their commitment to the artistic bending of the waves. The examination of the radio context prompts us to pay attention to the structural conditions that provide the means for sound art to thrive. Space is scant here, but at least an enumeration will identify some of the key players and give the reader a sense of the diversity of the scene. Festivals like Send+Receive (Winnipeg), Tone Deaf (Kingston), Sounds Like (Saskatoon), Deep Wireless (Toronto), Sound Bytes (Halifax), Open Ears (Kitchener), Sound Thinking/Open Sound (Vancouver), Mois Multi (Quebec City), FIMAV (Victoriaville), Mutek, Suoni per Il Popolo, Elektra/BIAS, and Sight+Sound (Montreal for the last four) provide much-needed cross-pollination platforms for local, national, and international artists. Artist-run centers and collectives are the backbone of the arts in general in Canada, those that have a particular (but not exclusive) focus on sound include the Music Gallery, Avatar, Western Front, Studio XX, Perte de Signal, Undefined, Centre for Art Tapes, Open Space, and Oboro. A number of curators (artists themselves in many of the following cases) have a predilection for



FIG. 16 Steve Bates, *Concertina*, 2011, barbed wire installation.

sound, including Nicole Gingras, Eric Mattson, France Jobin, Jim Drobnick, crys cole, jake moore, and Paul Walde. There is a notable concentration of sound art activities in the province of Quebec (and Montreal especially) that is reflected throughout this text: it is due to comparatively greater funding support by government agencies, but only in part – the reasons for this magnet-effect are manifold (and thus beyond the scope of this text).

Unsound Theories

“It is the listening not the sound that is rendered in space. It is the gaze which plays the music, in silence.”²⁷ The reversals in this quote encapsulate why Raymond Gervais operates as an apt *éminence grise* to track the evolution of sound art’s conceptual or non-cochlear dimension in Canada. For Gervais the incipient moment for sound’s conceptual turn can be traced all the way back to 1901 on Signal Hill in St. John’s, Newfoundland, when Marconi was awaiting to receive the wireless signal of the letter “S” in Morse code. The fortuitous sharing of that letter by the words “sound” and “silence” offers Gervais an endlessly rich set of paradoxes to mine.^{(FIGS. 17a,b), 28} It is in the referential capacities of images and objects that he stages this interplay: “works that would relate to sound, but without sound.”²⁹ This shift to the sonic potential of images seems a different type of investigation than the sound-centric video work done by *Le Révélateur*, Skoltz_Kolgen, Tasman Richardson, Nelson Henricks,^(FIG. 18) Ian Birse and Laura Cavanaugh, Gary James Joynes, Pascal Grandmaison, and Frédéric Lavoie, among many others.³⁰ Although, since Gervais precedes all

of these generationally, it could be tempting to ascribe a lineage or at least a connection. But the point is more to highlight the breadth of approaches, and to be sure, conceptual strategies populate contemporary practices in countless ways. With Gervais and interlocutors of his like Rober Racine, whose constellation of preoccupations consists of “silence, retreat, solitude, creation, meditation, infinity, night, time and invisible,”³¹ the approach is resolutely lowercase.

Lowercase suggests an apposite tone by which to describe the general constitution of sound art in Canada, especially in terms of its international profile. Without question, Canadian sound artists rove the globe constantly and garner deserving praises and successes (some have stayed expatriates like Robin Minard and John Wynne). And internally, sound art in Canada has reached an impressive maturity and diversity that is reflected in the sheer quantity of those named here – or left unnamed for lack of space.³² But perhaps borders, be they territorial or categorial, miss the mark: they counterproductively delineate where no such containment is needed. Perhaps through the lowercase effacement and erasure lies an uncharted expanse – one that we are fully immersed and invested in already. A plural space that echoes Jocelyn Robert’s insight that “in audio art, sound is secondary.”³³ The appropriate response, and pithy conclusion, here might therefore be, *in Canadian sound art, Canada is secondary.*

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Ibid.
30
By the same token, one could track a number of sound-centric choreographers, dance companies, film and theater directors (as well as the sound artists who work extensively in those contexts). A mix of these would include Michel F. Côté, Marie Chouinard, Louis Dufort, La La La Human Steps, kondition pluriel, Ame Henderson, The Holy Body Tattoo, Jacob Wren, Lynda Gaudreau, David Kristian, Nancy Tobin, and Alexis O’Hara.
31
Rober Racine, “Everywhere, the Invisible,” in Gingras, *Traces*, 57.



FIG. 17a Raymond Gervais, *The Theatre of Sound*, 1997. CD cases and text, 12.4 x 14.2 x 1 cm (each element). Installation view The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of the artist.

It bears mentioning that on the academic side, sound art as a distinct entity is comparatively late in coming to the fore, but its pseudo-parasitical presence in various communication, visual art, and music departments cultivates a fertile grounding in interdisciplinarity. That being said, both pedagogy and research (theoretical and practice-based) are active and growing. The work of Sterne at McGill (Mitchell Akiyama and Tim Hecker are notable recent PhD graduates of his), Jocelyn Robert at Laval, Christof Migone at Western, Jessica Thompson at Waterloo, Paul Walde at UVic, Matt Rogalsky at Queen's, Marla Hlady at UTSC, Lukas Pearse at NSCAD, Marcus Boon at York, Duncan MacDonald at Brock are just a few examples of where insertions of sound art into the academy are taking place. The newly minted Sonic Research Institute (Marc Couroux, David Cecchetto, Eldritch Priest) and its related Tuning Speculation conferences also provide a promising sign.

Jocelyn Robert in Christof Migone, "The Parachutist and His Piles," in *Jocelyn Robert*, CD-ROM (Québec: La Bande Vidéo, 2002), 8. The utterance has heightened paradoxical force knowing that it comes from one of the founders of Avatar and a prolific sound artist. Gregory Whitehead makes a remarkably similar statement: "Radio happens in sound, but sound is not really what matters about radio." (*Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992, 254).



FIG. 17b Raymond Gervais, *The Theatre of Sound*, 1997. CD cases and text, 12.4 × 14.2 × 1 cm (each element). Detail. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of the artist.



FIG. 18 Nelson Henricks, *Unwriting*, 2010. Four channel video installation, dimensions variable, 12 min.