

# Marla Hlady

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To stand in Marla Hlady's installation, *Waltzing Matilda*, is to stand enraptured. From two speakers the chorus sounds, tripping slightly over itself as it moves from Tom Waits, to the Pogues, to June Tabor, and three wigs on posts swing and circle, each complementing one of the choruses.

The familiar song, sung by so many illustrious people, speaks generically and personally to

attentive viewer can see that the movement of each wig is in synch with each singer, one soon loses sight of the system and becomes engulfed in the lyrical quality of the work. This is where Hlady excels, for she manages to perfect her system, and then to background it in favour of the art piece and its varied effects on each viewer. Most prominent is the initial response: one reacts emotionally, and simply feels. The ballad sound and the poetic visuals call us to stay and immerse ourselves.

This process is much more quietly intense in the newest work, *She Moves Through the Fair (Pipe*

create understanding. The process works beautifully, as the music holds us, and the longer we stay, the more pieces fall into place, and the more completely all of our senses respond to the work. We hear the story of a man watching his lover move through a fair, his love for her intense as he experiences her every movement and recalls her words of love and commitment. We see long copper tubes streaming out of a large wooden box into various, mostly straight angles — except that one crazy loop off to the side — ending in smaller boxes. Wires extend out of these. We learn that these boxes are all soundproof and that various speakers, microphones and audio and electronic equipment are hidden from view within the piece. We learn also that the song is a lament and that the woman we watch and hear about is in fact dead, so vividly alive only through the love that this man holds for her. Intrigued by the ability to experience so viscerally something that is gone, Hlady also felt this song to be an analogy for treating and experiencing sound as a physical thing. The artist asks, What happens to sound when it travels? How does it change, and how does it affect one's relationship to that sound and to the tune itself? What we are in fact seeing is a construct that alters the sound through the space it travels: Originating in the largest soundproofed box, the song travels down its copper tubes into microphones at varying distances from the source, and is then played out in a complex sequence onto the two speakers we hear in the room, a change occurring every two and a half minutes.

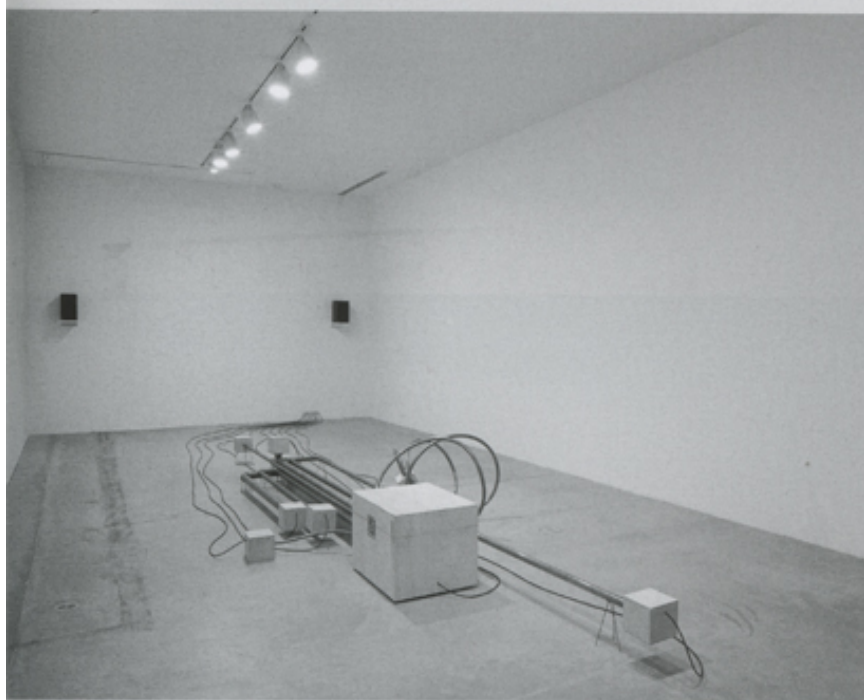
What is so fascinating in Hlady's work is the process that she allows the viewer to bring to it: the slow discernment of what we are seeing and hearing, of how the system functions, and then, putting that aside, the apprehension of the thing itself. How does sound change as it travels? What is our physical reaction to sound, to objects, to distance? What is this thing, both

exquisite and most ordinary, by which we are surrounded and bombarded, by which we communicate and become enraptured? What associations do we bring, and how is it that these most private associations can surface in response to sound?

*She Moves Through the Fair* invokes many of these thoughts. We hear a story that has a suddenly unexpected ending, so real was the figure of the woman described, as if in life and not through memory. We think of the passages and movement that connect us back to the conduits of copper, a warm and fluid metal that insulates and conducts. We wonder about soundproof boxes and how sound can be contained and released, and we consider all the various ways by which sound arrives at the ear and affects the whole body.

More playful than either of the other pieces, but instructive to Hlady's process, are the (untitled) Shelf Works from the Amusement Machines series from 1996. Mounted along the walls are small shelves, each holding two gadgety-looking little mechanical things. When we turn the switch they begin cranking, some emitting odd sounds intermittently, others continuously, whilst handles are turned, small pumps set in motion, the movement of all internal functions made visible. The mechanical chirping objects — a raucous cacophony of sounds fills the room when many people are present — could be constructs, but are in fact stripped down mechanical toys. Their original function impossible to discern, they take on a significance only by virtue of their internal workings and become sound and movement machines. Again, each viewer brings their own associations to bear, and yet, these objects stubbornly defy categorization and insist, finally, on being simply what they are in themselves. ←

Marla Hlady,  
The Power Plant, Toronto  
Summer 2001  
Curated by Xandra Eden



MARLA HLADY, *She moves through the Fair (Pipe whistle)*, 2001. Sound-proof box w/speaker (plasticine, egg cartons, plywood, hardware), copper pipe w/stands, microphones, speakers w/stands, misc. audio and elec. equip. Variable dimensions. Photo: Cheryl O'Brien. Courtesy of the artist.

each visitor. The three hairpieces twirling as in a ghostly dance, caught forever in the waltz that will not end, underline the aching beauty of the song. Odd, Hlady points out, that one can take the same chorus and words from a marching tune, change it to a ballad, and it breaks your heart.

It is the sound that interests Hlady, although the entire piece, an intricate functioning system, pulls together a hybrid of sound, sculpture, and technology to become an installation. While the

*Whistle*), completed for this exhibition. Where *Waltzing Matilda* is visceral in its lyricism and familiarity, *Pipe Whistle* is very still, both as a physical sculpture and in the subtle, low tones of the lament we then discern coming from two speakers. As we move toward the speakers, we slowly begin to listen, to hear words, to hear minute changes signalling its connection to the floor piece. As we listen to, hear, and make sense with our ears, our eyes view and slowly negotiate the sculpture to