

# The real art of noise

Adventurous artists are exploring the territory between the aural and the visual, SARAH MILROY discovers

TORONTO

The idea of silence in the museum may have at last come to an end.

Increasingly, museum- and gallery-goers are being asked to both look and listen to the art on display, as an emerging generation of artists explores a new territory between music and art that is known, generally, as audio art.

In some cases there may be no physical object involved at all, as in the prerecorded headset-guided walks that clinched the career of Canadian artist Janet Cardiff, a prize winner at the Venice Biennale this summer.

In other cases, such as the work of Toronto artists Marla Hlady (her exhibition closes Sept. 3 at the Power Plant in Toronto) and Daniel Olson (his show opened last weekend at Oakville Galleries in Oakville, Ont.), the work takes the form of sound sculpture, physical objects from which sound comes forth.

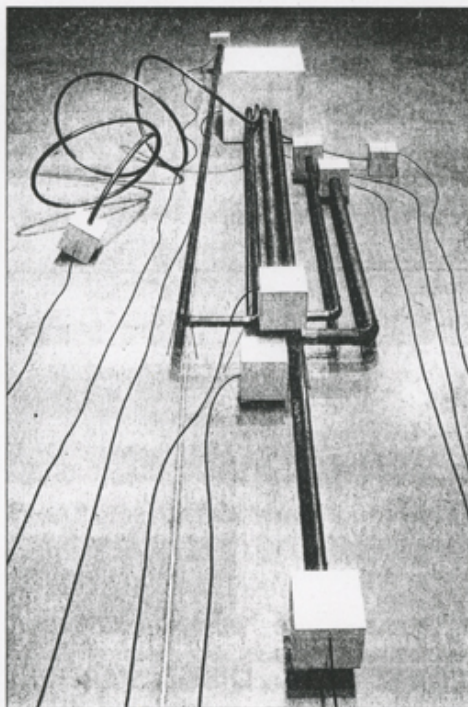
For a country its size, Canada is playing a notable role in the development of audio art, the roots of which go back to the early 1900s. Some see Glenn Gould's experiments with audio collage in *The Idea of North* as yearnings toward a new tradition of sound, and Canadian Michael Snow's use of sound in his film work since the early sixties has raised audio's role to the level of equal partner in the production of meaning, rather than leaving it to languish as a mere backdrop to the visual. (In addition to his more than 40 years of art and film production, Snow has had a long career as an experimental musician.) Other Canadian artists, such as Rober Racine and Rodney Graham, have at times made the scrupulous examination of musical structure the basis of their work.

As well, Canadian curators and organizers have contributed much to the discussion of the genre. One of the most significant books on the field, *Sound by Artists* (1990) was edited by the Canadian team of Dan Lander and Michal Lexier, both artists who have worked with sound. And this October, Canadian independent curator Ben Portis is staging the third annual No Music Festival in New York (an event which grew out of Portis's interest in the Nihilist Spasm Band, the London, Ont., pioneering "noise band" that initially included artist Greg Curnoe). The festival will bring together an international roster of artists who will explore the zone between audio art and experimental music. Graham and Snow, and American Christian Marclay are in the lineup.

So if an artist is interested in sound, why not become a musician? Many audio artists like to distinguish between music and noise, placing their allegiances firmly in the latter camp. Riding on the iconoclastic coattails of French philosopher Jacques Attali (whose *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* is a bit of a bible to audio-addictionists), they see music as rooted in a paradigm of discipline, mastery and control that mimics the social order. Noise, on the other hand, is random, democratic (everybody



A video capture from Daniel Olson's *Love and Reverie*, the painting *L'enfant au pain come alive*. Below, Marla Hlady's *She Moves Through the Fair (Pipe Whistle)*: audio art that is a metaphor for the bittersweet ironies of modern communication.



can make some) and subversively chaotic. The art world, it seems, is more up for this sort of thing than the music world, which is more tightly corseted by historical convention.

It's worth looking at the exhibitions of Hlady and Olson and hearing for yourself what all the fuss is about. Hlady has made a name for herself over the past several years

with her kinetic sculptural installations involving found objects (including Beauty dolls from the Disney movie) and her exhibitions of the innards of mechanical sound-making toys. Stripped of their external selves, the delicate guts chatter and squeak, click and squeal before us, eliciting tenderness in the viewer and dredging up memories of fleeting childhood so-

lance, despite the absence of fuzzy fur and heart-melting eyes.

A selection of these curiosities are included in the Power Plant show, but they are upstaged by two larger and more recent sound sculptures, one of which in particular seems to move the artist into a new realm of depth and proficiency. *She Moves Through the Fair (Pipe Whistle)*, which Hlady made this year, consists of a large organ-like object that lies on the floor. A group of copper pipes emerges from a large plywood box. Each pipe ends in a smaller wooden box from which a black wire extends, snaking across the floor of the exhibition space to the nearby wall. Two speakers, mounted on the wall, emit the tinny and faraway sound of the old Irish tune, a lament for a lost love who died before her marriage day.

The artist explains that the sound comes from within the large wooden box, which is soundproof, and from there travels along the pipes to their various terminuses and on to the speakers. As the sound quality shifts, we can tell that different speakers are picking up the sound from different places in the sculpture.

But what may come across on paper as rather complex and technical is in fact full of feeling, the humble human expression of emotion somehow held captive in this strange sculptural instrument of displacement. The work is a surprisingly moving metaphor for the bittersweet ironies of communication today, where we can be at the same time so near to each other and yet so faraway.

Hlady seems to tackle the conditions of the present in this ambitious work, but her colleague Olson casts his attention to the past to create his new work, *Love and Reverie*, the centre of his current Oakville show. It's a thoughtful journey into the heart of Ozias Leduc's famous painting *L'enfant au pain* (1892-1899).

Like Hlady, Olson is a connois-

seur of noises, prone to rhapsodizing about sounds heard and remembered. (A disciple of artist and composer John Cage, he confesses his fantasy is to record "a symphony orchestra with the microphones attached to the music stands so you could hear the pages being turned and the chairs moving.") Leduc's painting is a classic of Canadian art history (Olson says it was the first historical work of Canadian art that he could relate to), and it depicts a country boy playing his harmonica after a simple meal of soup and bread. We sense the music that we cannot hear.

In Olson's video recreation of the painting, he performs the role of the little boy (no mean feat for a 45-year-old). But, adding a twist, he performs the 21-minute piece in real time while sitting motionless in the boy's pose, slowly breathing in and out through the harmonica in long, droning monotone phrases. Duration, so often a feature of audio art, is torqued away from our conventional expectations; we end up with a real-time film that looks like a freeze frame, or is it just very slow motion? (It is not; a careful observer will catch the artist's little twitches and shifts.)

Of course, there is something inherently funny about this piece, as there is in so much of Olson's work. After all, this is a grown man dressed up in short pants pretending to be a painting. But the resulting image is luminous, spare and wonderfully calm, like the Leduc original, and the sound of the harmonica is hypnotic, like the slow chant of an Eastern religion. More than a century after Leduc painted it, it is sound that delivers us back to the still core of this deeply meditative painting, a place where language, and maybe visual cues too, could not have taken us. *Love and Reverie* is, in a way, a tunnel drilled by sound from the present to the past, and a brilliant example of where our ears can take us, if our minds free themselves to follow.

## Sound bites

Greatest hits from the Art of Noise:

**Erik Satie**  
*Vexations* (1893)  
A single sheet of music, composed by Satie, is to be repeated 840 times. Estimated performance time: 18 hours. Repetition, the quintessential mode of modernity, was Satie's diabolical muse, and he instructs the pianist that "it would be advisable to prepare oneself beforehand, in the deepest silence, by serious immobilities." Montreal artist Rober Racine has done the deed and lived to tell the tale.

**Luigi Russolo**  
*The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto* (1913)

An artistic treatise that embraced noise as the new condition of modernity, championing "the crashing down of metal shop blinds, slamming doors, the hubbub of crowds . . . and the absolutely new noises of modern war." It promoted the creation of the inofonauroni, specialized instruments developed to better evoke modern noise.

**Marcel Duchamp**  
*With Hidden Noise* (1916)  
A mystery sound device is concealed inside a ball of twine. Or is it?

**John Cage**  
*4'33"* (1952)

The performer sits in silence before the keyboard for four minutes and 33 seconds. In the absence of the expected sounds of a traditional recital, the auditorium and the world beyond its walls become the concert. As Cage said, the composer should "give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments."

**Robert Morris**  
*Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961)

Small wooden box enclosing a device that plays the prerecorded sounds of the box being made.

**Alvin Lucier**  
*I am Sitting in a Room, for voice and electromagnetic tape* (1970)

Using two tape recorders, the artist taped himself speaking a text (which begins, "I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now . . ."). This recording is then re-recorded on the other tape recorder, and the resulting tape is then played back, and recorded by the first. This process repeats back and forth between the tape recorders for an unspecified duration. Audio distortion eventually renders the text unintelligible, increasingly revealing the physical properties of sound and the resonant characteristics of the room over the "sense" of language.

**Laurie Anderson**  
*Song for Aamita* (1977)

Anderson replaced her violin bow with prerecorded magnetic tape, and attached a tape recorder playback head to the bridge. The sound of the tape dragged back and forth across the strings (with the recorded language playing in forward and reverse, depending on the artist's use of the bow) was amplified for the audience.

**Christian Marclay**  
*Guitar Drag* (2000)

The artist tied an electric guitar to the back of a pickup truck and dragged it down a road, recording the sounds of the instrument in distress. A surefire cure for the talent-show blues. Sarah Milroy