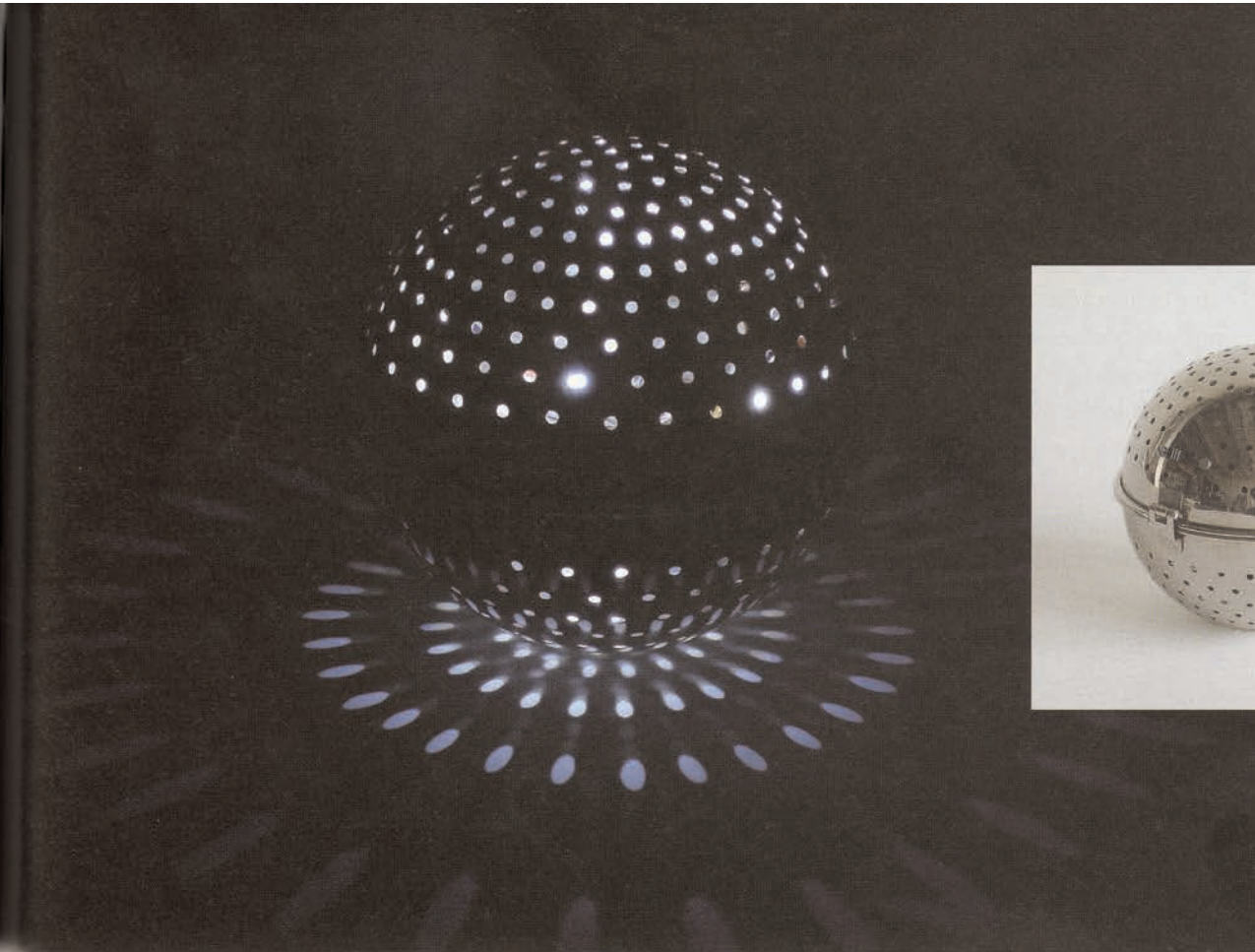


Sound Offerings

THE ART OF
MARLA HLADY

by Josh Thorpe





facing page: "Mixer Series," 2006; left: *Singer and Coffee House in Stereo*, right: *Icelandic Lullaby*, stainless steel, 2 audio components, LED lights, batteries, 2 motion switches, 9.5 x 3.5". Photos: courtesy the artist and Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, Toronto.

this page: *Soundball*, 2004, stainless steel perforated ball, miniature mono speaker, audio electronics, switches, LED lights and 4 AA batteries. Diameter approx 4". Edition of 10. Photograph: Christof Migone, Installation Dalhousie Art Gallery.

I've been wondering how to write about Marla Hlady's work. Her strange inventions offer the curious observer a fair bit of mystery, which I wouldn't want to interfere with, so what I'm going to do is take a subjective approach—by describing a handful of pieces and telling you why I like them. Let me give you a shotgun review of what Hlady's been up to for the last decade or so:

Amusement Machines, 1997–2000: The innards of various mechanical toys are attached in pairs to small shelves and activated individually. They twitch, whirr and ring.

Drumming Displaced into Different Sized Jam Jars, 1999: Two toy drummers bang away at plastic and metal drums inside soundproofed boxes. Lo-fi microphones relay the sound through lo-fi amps to lo-fi speakers inside jam jars, which colour the tone variously.

Waltzing Matilda, 2000: Three ladies' wigs spin leisurely on poles, accompanied (and controlled) by the chorus of three distinct versions of the Australian ballad "Waltzing Matilda."

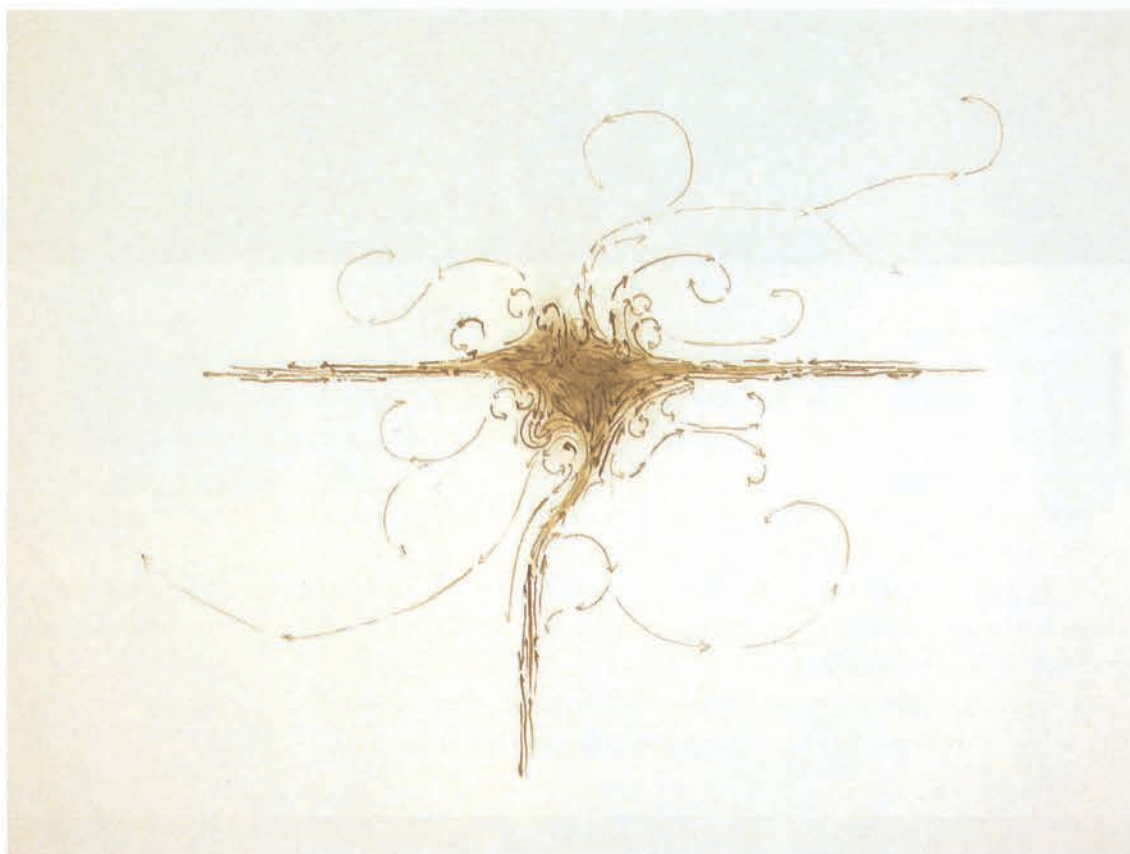


She Moves Through the Fair (Pipe Whistle), 2001: A recording of singer Ann Briggs plays in a sound-proofed box. The audio travels a maze of copper pipe (which adds colour and reverb) and is picked up by microphones in other soundproofed boxes. The effect of each pipe in series is heard from two speakers mounted to the wall.

Electro-magnetic Chihuahua-nod Machine, 2002: Video. Street scenes recede from the back of a moving car. In the foreground, a nodding toy Chihuahua bobs in response. It becomes clear the toy's bobbing and the car's driving are happening at two different times in two different spaces.

which varies inversely to the light outside, emanates from hundreds of irregularly placed grommet holes. In the awning, speakers play low water gurgles and the sounds of knocking oars.

Reading these descriptions, you might be tempted to call Hlady a sound artist. And it's true she has composerly skill, love for sound and great interest in creating unexpected musical situations. Whereas most people have but one or two ways of listening to music (over a stereo or headphones), Hlady offers her audience a huge range of conditions and media, most of which have nothing to do with traditional conceptions of fidelity to the source. But again, beautiful sounds



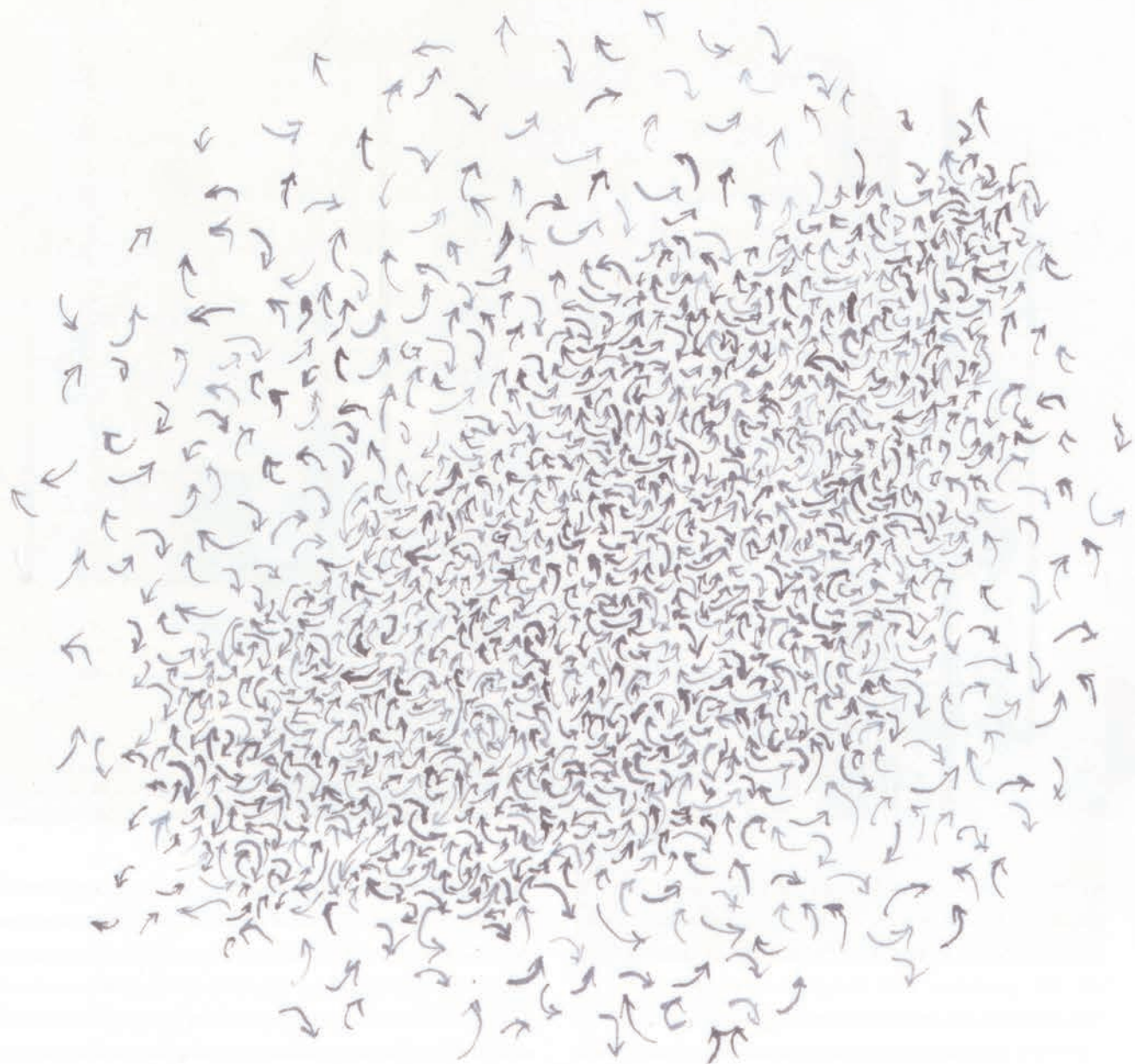
Proposition for tracing a conversation (no. 9), 2004, ink on paper, 22 x 30".

facing page: *The Shadow of One Sound Over Another (Iceland)*, 2005, ink on paper, 22 x 30".

Hum, 2003: Six ceiling fans rotate at different speeds. Attached to the end of one blade of each fan is a speaker playing someone humming. Wind is audible, and the spinning sound source causes noticeable variation in volume, colour and pitch—like some huge Leslie (a spinning speaker, commonly associated with the Hammond organ).

Wilderness Tourist, 2006: Two iridescent blue, fabric-covered forms float in the corner window of the Bay in downtown Toronto. A glow, the intensity of

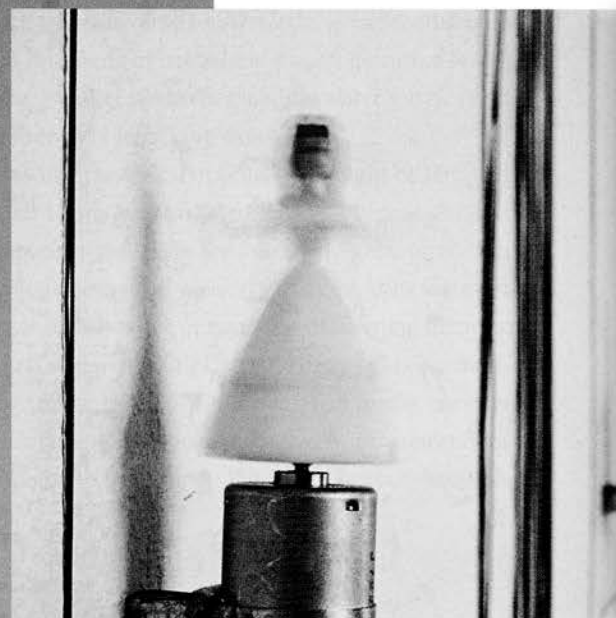
are only a fraction of what's going on in Hlady's work: her recent solo exhibition, "New Drawings and Audio Objects," at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects in Toronto, nicely reflects its breadth and complexity. One of two rooms in the gallery held the audio objects: two interactive, stainless-steel martini mixers and a sculpture involving two singing teapots whose lids wag. A wall of this room, and the entirety of the other, held radically different kinds of objects: ink-on-paper drawings, framed. I'll start with these. Hundreds of tiny



arrows in ochre or dark blue describe various larger forms. The arrows are elegant and brisk and curve to varying degrees. Their bodies are only a few millimetres long, their heads even smaller. They converge and diverge in swirls and rushes, interacting both individually and en masse, coming together to form a single shape.

Looking at these drawings is a temporal experience unlike looking at most two-dimensional art. First, it has something to do with the arrows. Symbols in general are too loaded with meaning for my taste, and the arrow is one of the worst

culprits; it directs, often urgently. Yet, by using it in such great numbers and with such ambiguous purpose, Hlady has managed to rescue the arrow from its own tyranny. It becomes both a pictorial mark and a destabilized indicator, gently showing possibilities. Look this way and you see a lot while your eyes wander. But these drawings don't end with the eyes, they go right back into the imagination and the memory. And they do this especially because of the title applied to each—*Proposition for tracing a sound*, which complicates the drawings far beyond their initial appearance. They



Beauty, 1992, sensor units with timers housed in stainless steel boxes, electrical wire, motors, plastic Walt Disney figures, electronics, variable dimensions.

facing page: *Wah-wah teapots (landscape for Alvin Lucier)*, 2006, porcelain teapots, audio electronics and electrical motors, microprocessors, custom cabinet.

are “propositions,” according to Hlady, because, she says, “I want to offer the viewer the chance to determine the sound.” This offering is not surprising, because Hlady admires work she calls “generous,” work that gives you plenty of information and plenty of room for your imagination to roam.

So these drawings are walking contradictions—static, two-dimensional forms representing the three-dimensional, invisible, temporal phenomenon of sound. Unlike the spectrogram, these drawings measure nothing and correspond not to any rational descriptive model, but, rather, to one improvised by the artist and conjured by the viewer. And then, something lovely happens—the specific attention of trying to imagine a given sound suddenly expands to become a greater reckoning with representation itself, and also with the desire involved in trying to reify the immaterial. Suddenly I’m faced with a wonderfully unstable view of the history of art, iconography and my own eyes, ears and knowledge.

On a shelf are the two stainless-steel drink *Mixers*, 2006. I lift one (as it turns out, I never make it to the second), which weighs a pound or two and is cool to touch. When I tilt it, sound and white light trickle out of several tidy holes in the metal. You have to keep tilting the thing to get it to play, but with each tilt you’re as likely to turn it off as on. That’s because

there are two mercury switches inside that can both activate and deactivate two separate audio tracks. And the switches are positioned slightly differently, so the stopping and starting of sound and light are hard to predict and impossible to master. The two tracks consist of a boy’s serenely singing in Icelandic, recorded on a recent trip Hlady took to Iceland. (She likes the loose mix of cross-references among Iceland, the ice you’d find in a normal drink mixer and the white light that comes out of hers.) At first I had trouble with the *Mixer* because it’s easy to see it as a fetish object. It is made of polished stainless steel and we are meant to put our oily hands all over it; it is full of associations with class, pop culture, consumption, drunkenness and eroticism, and it emits beautiful, androgynous sounds—if you coax it patiently.

Hlady readily admits to “machine lust,” which I not only don’t share but barely understand. Lucky for me, though, whatever sense of desire I feel is thoroughly confused by the complexity of these associations and by the interaction itself. I’m left alone with my consciousness to reckon with space, time, form and desire as materials in themselves. At this point, I notice that space, time, form and desire as materials in themselves are some of my major interests. This happens largely because of the unwieldiness of the relationship between the



mixer's appearance and its abilities. What other objects are this unknown and unknowable? Who's to say next time you rub a martini shaker, an adolescent with a magic voice won't pop out? Is observation of the objective world sufficient knowledge to predict it? What else is waiting around the corner?

Wah-wah teapots (landscape for Alvin Lucier), 2006, consists of teapots, which are off-white and decorated with a brownish pastoral scene, and sit about 18 inches apart on a wooden serving table. Fragments of Ry Cooder's slide guitar (from the opening scene of *Paris, Texas*) crackle inside them. The lids move in changing rhythms, filtering the sound within to create a wah-wah effect, occasionally stopping for a few moments. The reference to Alvin Lucier is straightforward: he is a hero for the use of acoustics in experimental music and sound art. His body of work includes several pieces that enclose amplified sounds in objects, including teapots, in order to change them.

In addition to the lush slide guitar coming from the teapots, you hear a train and a hawk's shriek; Hlady didn't take the Cooder straight, she recorded it as played over a boom box while walking around Toronto's High Park. Each teapot plays back different parts of the raw material, and each splits and randomizes its material, using a different microchip. The



result isn't collage but, rather, an ever-changing, compressed, filmic soundscape. The teapots are placed perfectly to create a rich stereophonic experience for the listener willing to get up close. But the clatter and squeak of the wagging lids happen just often enough and loud enough to interfere constantly with the sensuality and romance of the recordings. The table on which they sit is butternut. About two-thirds of the way up, the legs are girdled by a groove deep enough you might imagine the tabletop to be floating. And each leg ends in a caster, which makes the whole thing rollable, not that I, or anyone else, actually pushes it anywhere. It is, after all, conspicuously anchored to the wall by a power cable. When I asked about the casters, Hlady said, "As a sculpture, it engages more delicately with the floor. It's lighter and has no set location. It's how I would hope to find the piece, coming to it as a viewer." *Wah-wah teapots*, like the other work, is hard to put your finger on. And it's really very funny for it. It's two landscapes in two singing teapots—one for each ear and eye—on wheels.



Waltzing Matilda, 2000,
installed at 80 Dundas Street
West, Toronto, wigs, machines,
various mechanical parts,
painted Bondo on Styrofoam),
painted wood cabinet, misc.
electronics, stereo and
speakers, music, audio
cabinet, dimensions variable.



When we were talking, Hlady said she was interested in “systems of understanding.” That feels right—if you take “system” without the restrictions it can imply, but, rather, as a set of connected or related things that form a complex whole. To get into Hlady’s work, the recognition of these systems is crucial. But equally important is the recognition that these systems are slippery, subjective, almost living things that exist within the imagination of the viewer.

In the *Wah-wah teapots*, there seems to be a conversation taking place between Ry Cooder and Marla Hlady, Texas and Toronto, the pastoral drawing and the urban setting, the sexy soundscape and the clamouring lids, the two hawks (one in the film and one we hear in High Park), and the twin pots themselves, as competitors and collaborators. But like friends conversing rooms away, you get the murmur of this conversation, not the words. And it reminds me of the writer Harry Mathews. To illustrate his interest in writing’s syntax over its subject, he randomly replaced all the nouns in Kafka’s *The Truth About Sancho Panza* with other nouns, claiming that the resulting text, which destroys the semantics but preserves the structure and flow of the original, is a more faithful and interesting translation than most. (See his essay “For Prizewinners” in *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*.) What I’m trying to say is that Hlady’s work is hard to get hold of. But in such a way that it is

funny, helpful, sweet and full of possibilities for adventure. It is unknowable and fleeting; you don’t get to keep it, yet it stays with you.

But what stays with me are not ideas, they are memories of possibilities; drawings that came alive in time, produced psychedelic shifts in isomorphic and metaphorical representation, and pacified the oppressive capacity of the arrow; sculptures that bypassed specific fetishism to flesh out, complicate and neutralize the sting of fetishism itself; and a lush, wacky parlour game of technological, filmic, domestic and natural systems—a generous, idiomatic koan.

So, if on the surface Hlady’s work is heavy on technology, consistently presenting us with amplified sound and invented or modified machines, for me the work is not about these artefacts of modern culture; it only collaborates with them. The medium of Hlady’s work is my body and my mind—structures of sensation and cognition, grist for my own mill of subjectivity. If I let the work be these things, it can become a magical relief from the drearily rational, purposeful, teleological life we call the real world. It can be like letting a genie out of a lamp. ■

Josh Thorpe is a Toronto-based writer, artist and musician. He runs a small press called Off Cut Press and has a CD out on Rat-drifting.