




Marla Hlady in her Toronto studio, January 2013



SEEING SOUND

MARLA HLADY and the art of noise

BY SHANNON ANDERSON • PHOTO MIGUEL JACOB

Marla Hlady hears sound differently than most people do. She has a keen perception for all sounds—from the most carefully orchestrated songs to the most incidental background noises—understanding their nuances in a way that is only possible for someone who has focused on sound for many years. As she's quick to point out, this isn't a skill that always works in her favour. On a visit to Hlady's studio, the conversation immediately turns to the surrounding noises. She directs attention to the clanks and bangs generated by the furnace and circulating through the air ducts and plumbing, sounds that you or I might just ignore. For Hlady, given her ever-attentive ear, they serve as a constant source of disruption. It's her one gripe with this large studio space, situated in the



basement of her open-concept home in Toronto's Junction Triangle area.

Hlady has made work about the nature of sound since the mid-1990s. Her sculptures, which tend to have a deceptively utilitarian aesthetic at first glance, engage viewers in experiences that explore and challenge our auditory perceptions. As Hlady puts it, she allows viewers to “see sound” by “taking the everyday and unpacking it in a way that's surprising.” My first encounter with Hlady's work was at the Power Plant in Toronto in 1994, in a group exhibition called “Naked State: A Selected View of Toronto Art.” She exhibited *Beauty* (1992), a kinetic piece wherein a series of toy figurines (all duplicates of the princess Belle in the Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*) twirl around in response to tripped motion sensors spread throughout the room. The hum created by the spinning motors is just as prominent as the visual aspects of the piece. As Hlady's practice has evolved, the visual elements in her work have become increasingly practical, in the sense that they serve as a method for structuring the sonic elements.

Fast forward to 2001. Hlady is showing again at the Power Plant, this time in a solo show that features *She Moves Through the Fair* (*Pipe Whistle*) (2001), a piece made specifically for the exhibition. Within a rather pragmatic arrangement of unadorned boxes and pipes, a recording of Anne Briggs singing the folk song of the same title issues from a soundproof box and travels along various lengths and widths of copper pipe, creating striking variances in resonance that pull out the most haunting and sorrowful aspects of this song about lost love.

Hlady's practice tends to involve a labour-intensive, ambitious approach. Take *Playing Piano* (2006–08), for instance, a piece that Hlady points to as a significant moment in her practice. She consulted with a player-piano expert to create an “exploded view” of a 1928 player piano, then rejigged the piano to play as slowly as possible, incorporating such modern machinations as photocopier parts and resonating speakers. The piece pays homage to the history of prepared pianos, and Hlady's careful alterations to the way we see and experience the instrument's sonic qualities bring the beauty and complexity of its inner workings to the fore. And, as

with *Pipe Whistle*, the musical component is slow and resonant, creating a melancholic mood that crops up again and again in her oeuvre.

Over the course of nearly a year, Hlady and I meet in her studio, speaking about these earlier works and about the current works-in-progress. There are rarely any actual sculptures present. Instead, floor plans, site photographs and sketches make up the bulk of what I see, and, from what Hlady describes, she's been venturing into some relatively uncharted waters (sometimes quite literally). This last year has seen a significant shift in her work, although not necessarily by design. Three major projects have led her to call this her “year of doing site works.” First, she took on two back-to-back solo exhibitions, at Oakville Galleries and Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center in Buffalo. For both projects, she took over the entire gallery, creating kinetic and sound pieces in direct reference to the particularities of each environment. And this past summer, she travelled to the archipelago of Fitjar on the west coast of Norway for a residency where each artist was delegated a different island on which to create a site work. All of this for an artist who rarely makes works that are specifically tied to a particular place—while she is always mindful of the environments in which she's asked to exhibit, her preference veers toward sculptures that can be reconfigured for various locales.

Oakville Galleries' Gairloch Gardens site, constructed as an estate home rather than a gallery, has a distinct past with which to contend. For more than 20 years, artists have made site-specific projects that address the building and its history, but none has approached it from Hlady's sonic perspective. It was all the little peculiar noises emanating from the rooms—the humming of the boiler, the fits and starts of the radiators, the beeping of the security system—that her installation highlighted with a series of sculptural interventions. Visually, each construction was precisely scaled in relation to particular rooms in the gallery. But sonically, the exhibition was highly fluid, as sounds crossed over from one piece to the next. In one case, sound flowed through viewers' bodies, if they stood on a false floor in the central gallery that steadily vibrated from bass speaker drivers that carried up sounds



Playing Piano 2006–08
 Player piano, electronics
 and machines, logbook, player-
 piano roll and surface-
 resonating speakers mounted
 to the piano's soundboard
 Dimensions variable
 Installation view at YYZ Artists'
 Outlet IMAGES OF ARTWORKS
 COURTESY JESSICA BRADLEY GALLERY
 PHOTO PETER MACCALLUM

OPPOSITE: **Walls** (detail) 2012
 Wood, paper, custom machines,
 portable record player parts,
 piano strings with contact
 microphones, audio components
 and electronic and electrical
 equipment Dimensions variable
 Installation view at Hallwalls
 Contemporary Arts Center
 PHOTO MARLA HLADY

from the basement, including the rumblings of the boiler room. Hlady amplified the inner workings of the building as if revealing its very breath.

In the solo exhibition at Hallwalls, Hlady played on the location's peculiarities as well, this time addressing the gallery's two moveable walls. Hlady made kinetic scale models of the walls (at a ratio of 1:5) that operated almost like a series of musical instruments working in tandem to create an orchestra of constant, changing sound. One wall was reconceived as a small sheet of wood attached to a revolving contraption whose speed was controlled by the spin of a record player sitting on the base of the structure. Amplifiers captured the sounds generated from this spinning action, and also the sounds

made by the record, playing in reverse. The other wall was reconceived as a piece of white paper made to roll along the length of a lever that raised and lowered the paper so it strummed across a set of piano strings. As the two instruments moved at varying speeds, their sounds rose and fell. At times, the spinning wall moved so fast that the floor began to shake, and the noises escalated to a near-aggressive pitch. Just when you expected something to fall off its axle or shatter, the machines slowed down.

In Norway, Hlady's residency culminated in a weekend festival of site-specific projects spread out across Fitjar's small islands. Inspired by the region's traditional folk-fiddle music, Hlady collaborated with musician/



Beauty (detail) 1992 Plastic figures, motors, sensors and timers in stainless steel, wire and electronics Dimensions variable PHOTO MARLA HLADY

composer Eric Chenaux to create *Smedaholmen Tourist (with Amplifiers)* (2012), a soundscape fashioned in part from the tunings of Norwegian Hardanger fiddles. Hlady describes the resulting melodies as simultaneously joyful and sorrowful. The sounds from the two artists' performance expanded across the island and the ocean's edge via three floating amplifiers/buoys positioned in the water, and an amplifier at Hlady's side. At first glance, these sculptural components looked like something you might pick up at a local Home Depot. They were crafted from bright-red Pelican cases and battery-powered amps—the kind, Hlady notes, often used by buskers (she was intrigued by the idea of placing “rural buskers” into this serene natural environment). Over two days, Chenaux played his hollow-bodied electric guitar with a small violin bow to generate a sound that evoked a hurdy-gurdy or Highland bagpipes, while Hlady sat next to him on the rocks, holding a speaker that emitted the sounds of Chenaux's guitar. She continuously swung the speaker in a circular motion to create a sound similar to the tremolo of a Leslie speaker in a Hammond organ.

For Hlady, these projects have presented significant challenges. “Site works are ferocious,” she says. “They're great for forcing you to think differently and work differently, but I feel like they kick you in the head a little, because they can be so particular and, in the end, can you ever show the work again?”

With so many exhibitions under her belt, it is clear that Hlady is at the best moment in her career to take on those challenges. Early on, she became wary of spending too much time on the technical components of her work, learning to recognize at what point research and experiment become forms of procrastination. As a lecturer at the University of Toronto Scarborough campus, it's a lesson she teaches her students: “At a certain point, don't let your technical inabilities stop you from making—just pick up something, anything! And get to playing with your ideas.”

Hlady credits this attitude to the influence of other artists, particularly Kim Adams. The Toronto-based artist, who is widely celebrated for his elaborate railway model-scale sculptures, taught her how to be more relaxed with her work when she was employed as his studio assistant. For Hlady, it's always been local artists who have the most effect on her work. While the foundation of her work owes much to the study of the big names in the sound-art world, including John Cage and Alvin Lucier, she firmly believes in giving credit to the musicians and artists she sees on a regular basis—from musicians Martin Arnold, Allison Cameron, Linda Catlin Smith and Stephen Parkinson to her partner, Christof Migone. “I never would have been the artist I am without conversations with these people,” she says.

As one of six siblings, Hlady grew up in a small hamlet on the Columbia River near Nelson, British Columbia. Her home was built by her father and mother, and was situated between the town's main road in one direction and a river in the other. As she describes it, there wasn't much more in between. Her exposure to art was limited to the occasional encounter with local crafts or pottery. Her mother raised the family and her father was a technologist in mechanical research and development with a knack for devising clever contraptions. Hlady tells about a time when her father decided to seed a lawn, and she and her sisters provided dead weight on a device made of a big wooden beam and ropes, which he had created to flatten the ground. Today, Hlady describes those years with a colourful nostalgia, but, at the time, it was a limited world whose edges felt too close for comfort. She “rebelled,” she says, by becoming an artist.

Interestingly, however, a strong connection to site has rematerialized in her recent work. In retrospect, there is a link between the curious contraptions engineered by her father and her kinetic, bodily engaged sculpture. But there are clear differences, too. “I'm very structured and methodical,” Hlady says, “but I have this side of me that's willing to throw the match on the pile and see what happens. And my structured, methodical side looks at that side as my irrational, erratic, unpredictable and completely untrustworthy part of myself. But it's the side that I think creates a nice balance to the structured side; it's the side that made me an artist and not an engineer.”

Drawing is a key component of Hlady's practice as well, and I am including some of her drawings in the group exhibition “Circling the Inverse Square” at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery this fall. Looking at the drawings of a sound artist might seem like an oxymoron, but, for me, they are the key to going deeper into Hlady's sculptural works. They offer insight into how she *sees* sound. Although they stand out in her practice for their lack of actual sound, they embody her incredible sensitivity to perception. She requires a near-meditative level of concentration to execute them. The recent drawings depict events that unfold over time, placed within a penciled graph, while the works in her earlier *Conversation Series* (2004) are about holding a moment still and attempting to describe the shape a conversation takes in your mind. Hlady's work is as much about showing us how to hear sound as it is about making it. In this, it resonates with the words of the American experimental composer Alvin Lucier: “Careful listening is more important than making sounds happen.” ■



**Smedaholmen Tourist
(with Amplifiers)** 2012
Sound work and performance
in collaboration with Eric
Chenau. Battery-powered
amplifier buoys, speaker and

amplifier, wireless transmission,
bowed guitar and pre-
recorded sound. Dimensions
variable. PHOTO JUUSO NORONKOSKI