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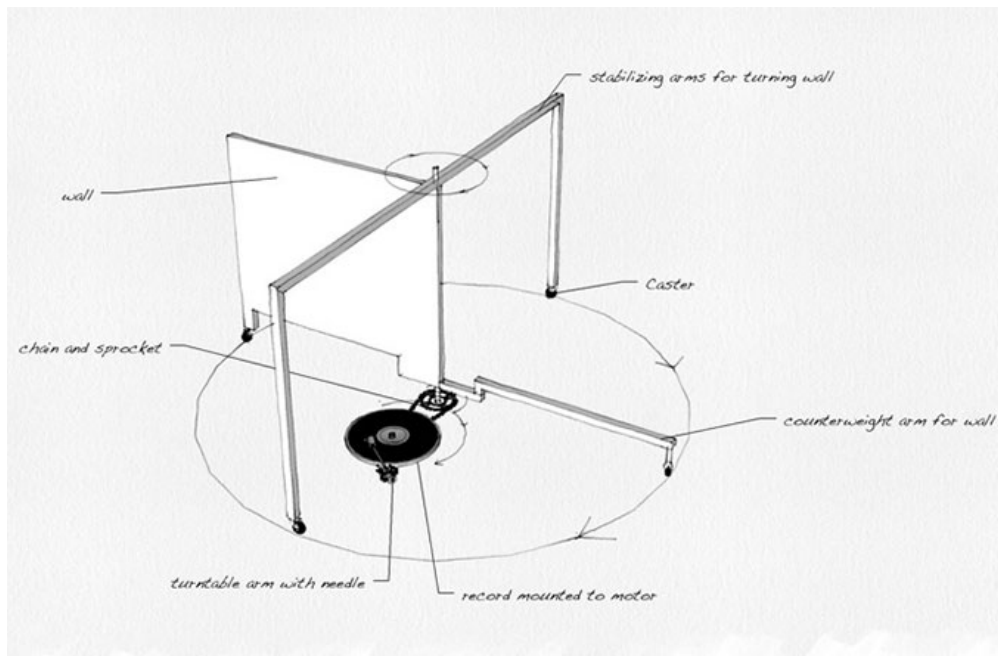
## Artist-in-residence Marla Hlady's installation at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center

by Jack Foran

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A schematic drawing of part of Marla Hlady's installation at Hallwalls.

### Walls

Toronto-based artist Marla Hlady's exhibit currently at Hallwalls comprises several distinct components: a dozen or so minimalist paintings/drawings; a half dozen or so idiosyncratic electronic music boxes; and two site-specific sculpture with sound works based on the unique moveable walls aspect of the Hallwalls gallery space.

Both sculptures incorporate scaled-down versions of the gallery walls. In one case, the sculptural "wall" is mounted on a metal superstructure on casters that turns around a pivot point connected by a chain and sprocket device to a turntable record player that supplies musical accompaniment. (Well, sort of musical. The recording is of drumming by a single drummer, played extra slow and backwards.) Meanwhile, the casters supporting the revolving superstructure trace and mark out a circle on the plywood sculptural base echoing the huge metal arc inlaid in the gallery floor, the track for the oversize caster supporting the swing end of the heaviest gallery mobile wall.

The other sculpture is in the form of a railroad crossing type lift gate, to the horizontal bar of which the "wall" element—a large sheet of heavy grade paper in this case—is attached so that it slides back and forth along the bar as the gate is alternately raised and lowered, and so doing bumps and scrapes across some taut strung wires, supplying more questionably musical sounds.

So how is all of this art? Not a question with an easy answer. But the paintings/drawings, dating from a few years back and not specifically related to the sculptural works, may help elucidate.

These are all composed of a single motif, hundreds, thousands, of tiny arrows, directional indicators, faint, delicate, with long tails and short. The paintings/drawings are in several different series. One, called *Sound-Space-Time*, seeming to portray sound events, ordered chaos bursts of tiny arrows in various directions and often lovely patterns, with a centerpoint, and toward the periphery, dissolution or decay of the energy impetus. One, *Propositions for Tracing a Sound*, including further possible sound bursts and several more or less regular and consistent dense arrays of tiny curlicue arrows. Walls of sound. And one *Sound Compositions*, which are essentially conceptual musical scores, not in the classical musical score vein, on treble and bass clefs of five lines and four spaces, but in a more John Cagean and ilk notational vein, indicating a more chance-driven (than typical classical) and libertarian (excuse the unfortunate political resonance—it's not about unshackling free enterprise predators) composition. The compositions are on graph paper—classical music notation staffs are just graphs—and the arrows, long and short, are in regular beautiful patterns proceeding left to right—just like classical notation, just the way we read, text or music—across the page.

Which is to suggest that the sculptural works are part of the artist's long-term exploratory project—sometimes hit or miss, and more thought-provoking than definitive of much of anything—about fundamental ideas about the interplay or potential interplay of tangible and visual art, painting and drawing and sculpture, and sound, music, implying also time. And more fundamentally, about ideas about chance and control. Substantial tacit homage to John Cage. (One of the artist's earlier pieces featured a prepared player piano.) Visual representation of the chaos of sound. Notation to capture and control chaos. But respect chaos, the freedom principle.

Last month in this space, in a piece on what high school art teachers teach in teaching art, artist/teacher Brett Coppins described this somewhat nebulous object (or objective) as helping students to “ask the questions that have no simple answers, or no answers whatsoever.” This description applies to Marla Hlady's art as well.

The music boxes, another work from a while back, are also about chance and control. Each box contains a fragment of a song, or song and rap, by Nina Simone, that is activated, that is, made to sound, by the box being picked up and turned this way and that by a human participant, who might thus determine experimentally what movements of a given box, twists and turns, may or may not produce sound. A further-phase aleatory option could involve several participants deploying the music boxes simultaneously.

Similar but different, in a phrase the artist herself uses in describing her art.

The Marla Hlady exhibit continues through February 24.

—jack foran