Hildegard Westerkamp

Vancouver

## *Radio that Listens**

## Introduction: A Soundwalk

Put aside one hour and go for a soundwalk in your neighbourhood. Do nothing but listen. If you are walking with someone or several people, let them know that this hour is spent in silence with each other. Listening together to everything.

Open the door of the building in which you live, step out and listen.

**Sound example 1**: Creaky door, waves[1]

Let us walk together and listen. Stop and listen.

**Sound example 2:** Footsteps

Think of a favourite spot in your neighbourhood and listen to it.
Now let us listen to a few sounds from Vancouver.

**Sound example 3:** Canada Place, Vancouver harbour ambience

Let's not speak to anyone. Let us move on and listen.

Listen
for voices
while walking.
Listen
for pauses.
Listen.

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*   A lecture presented at Talking Back to Radio – Radio als Zuhörer – Artyści zmieniają radio. Radio Workshops, Installations, Interventions, Internet Performances, Concerts and Symposium Wrocław, Poland, December 6-11, 2005.

[1]   All sound examples are available on the website: http://pracownia.audiosfery.uni.wroc.pl

What sounds in your home town indicate a specific time of day?
Here are such sounds from Vancouver. Listen.

**Sound example 4:** Mix—Sound signals, time of day
Listen for hums and motors
for birdcalls
and for pauses between the birdcalls.

Listen for echoes.

**Sound example 5:** Echo under parabolic bridge

Bang on other objects that make interesting sounds—such as Henry Moore's sculpture called *Knife Edge* in Queen Elizabeth Park in Vancouver.

**Sound example 6:** Henry Moore's sculpture *Knife Edge*

Hear your breath
and its rhythms
your footsteps
and their rhythm.

Stop for a moment and listen to your thoughts. Let them pass like the sound of a car. Follow your thoughts until you cannot hear them any longer.

Hear
the pauses
between sirens and horns and airplanes

The sounds of different seasons.

**Sound example 7:** Soundwalking—mix of excerpts, beaches and parks
Sounds of clothes
and of wind.

Listen
into the distance

Stop
listening
for a moment.

**Sound example 8:** Soundwalking—mix of excerpts, shopping malls
Listen as you return home

Did you hear the sounds
of this walk
of this time
in your life?

## Radio That Listens

In his article *Radical Radio,* Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer suggested that radio is not new. He writes:

> It existed long before it was invented. It existed whenever there were invisible voices: in the wind, in thunder, in the dream. Listening back through history, we find that it was the original communication system by which gods spoke to humanity. It was the means by which voices, free from the phenomenal world, communicated their thoughts and desires to awestruck mortals. The divine voice, the *Ursound*, infinitely powerful precisely because of its invisibility, is encountered repeatedly in ancient religions and in folklore… In those days there was nothing but religious broadcasting…[2]

Later in the same article, he goes on to say:

> What I am urging is a phenomenological approach to broadcasting to replace the humanistic. … Let the phenomena of the world speak for themselves, in their own voice, in their own time[3].

In the mid-1970s, two events coincided that changed my ways of listening and my understanding of sound: my involvement with the World Soundscape Project (WSP), and the founding of Vancouver Co-operative Radio. The first was a research group at Simon Fraser University led by Murray Schafer, and it opened my ears to the sounds of the environment and enhanced my understanding of the soundscape. The other provided an opportunity to organize and broadcast these sounds and thus "speak back" to the community with the sounds of its own making. Both made me reflect on sound design, composition, radio, acoustic ecology, and how we hear and listen. Although all this happened thirty years ago, the ideas seem just as relevant now, if not more, and their

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[2]    R.M. Schafer, *Radical Radio*, [w:] *Voices of Tyranny, Temples of Silence*, Indian River: Arcana Editions 1993, s. 131–132.

[3]    Ibid., s. 142.

application even more urgent to the survival of our world. That is why I want to tell you about it today.

In public soundscape workshops offered by the WSP, I had taken groups of people on soundwalks, where we did nothing but listen to the acoustic environment. From that experience, the idea emerged to transfer this soundscape listening practice to the medium of radio. This was a rather unusual proposition at the time, challenging traditional broadcasting as well as listening habits. The programme was called *Soundwalking*. Without knowing it at the time, I was attempting to create radio with a phenomenological approach to broadcasting, similar to what Schafer later suggested in *Radical Radio*. Such radio listens through its microphones to the world, to human voices, to the environment. Indeed, when we listen to such radio, we are listening to a "listening medium".

*Soundwalking* was a weekly, one-hour programme on Vancouver Co-operative Radio from 1978 to 1979. With tape recorder and microphone in hand, I went into environments such as the quiet winter landscape of nearby mountains, where my footsteps, my voice, and the snow falling from trees were the loudest sounds. At other times, I went to a shopping mall, a factory or a park, the harbour, or Henry Moore's metal sculpture called *Knife Edge*, at other times to a residential area under the flight path, the beach on a foggy day, or simply walked through the streets of Vancouver. It was the first attempt at a programme that listened "into" the community of Greater Vancouver. It did not report about it. It brought the community's soundscape into listeners' homes, and *vice versa*, placed listeners' ears into their community's soundscape. The radio listener was partaking in the microphone's discovery of the soundscape.

As you heard earlier in some of the short excerpts and mixes from the *Soundwalking* programme, my voice forms the link between the place and the listener who is not physically present. Sometimes, the voice comments on what is being recorded, while at other times, it talks about aspects of the place or situation that the recording cannot or does not reveal, and still at other times, it acts as a carrier for thoughts emerging in the recording process. But the voice is used sparsely, as a type of punctuation, or an anchor in the seemingly random flow of environmental sounds. It helps to place the listener's ear more squarely inside each specific soundscape. This in turn, in my intention, would create a heightened awareness, or at least a curiosity in the listeners about their soundscape and their own ways of listening.

Often the microphone itself, moving in search of sound or trying to find a specific sound, became the linking element between environment and listener. No words were necessary, for example when the microphone recorded the chaotic soundscape of a gaming place, and then acoustically focused on the sounds of one game by moving close to its loudspeaker. The movement of the microphone itself spoke clearly enough to the listener.

The experience of "being out there", walking, listening and recording, creates a sense of immediate engagement and simultaneous reflection. Not only does it constitute a different way of participating in the life of the environment, but it also creates a fresh perspective, offers new information, and is a very inspiring way of getting to know a place in more depth—an activity that is perhaps particularly relevant at this time in our world. As Rachel McCann says:

> Movement through time and space is arguably our most fundamental mode of interaction with the world, and information technology has irrevocably changed this experience. The internet collapses time and space, bringing us images instantaneously from around the world. We are at once connected to and disconnected from everything as we google toward a piece of information as if rocketing through a wormhole[4].

When bringing the soundwalking recordings into the studio, we bring the lived, embodied experience that we had in the field into the studio. And *vice versa*, we hope that the broadcast in turn encourages the listener to turn off the radio and "go out there" to experience the environment in a new, embodied, lived sense. Thus, *Soundwalking* wants to encourage lived interaction with the world, the community. It does not want to create an addictive relationship between listener and radio, where the listener cannot do without this medium's sound as a continuous background, like with all commercial radio, whose survival depends on its ability to "touch" listeners through advertising, and preferably without their awareness.

Neither the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (the CBC), nor any of the private, commercial radio stations would accept a programme like *Soundwalking* for broadcast. It would not fit into their pre-determined formats, and would severely disrupt their programming flow and rhythm. To broadcast the rhythm of ocean waves creates a different pace for listening than a three-minute piece of rock music; likewise, to broadcast the sounds of a shopping mall several days before Christmas into our living rooms followed by footsteps in a quiet snowy landscape has a different effect on the listener than broadcasting advertisement promising a happier Christmas with a larger pile of gifts.

Vancouver Co-operative Radio could make room for a programme like *Soundwalking*, because the majority of those who founded Co-op Radio wished to make audible what is regularly ignored in the commercial media and the CBC, and this could include *Soundwalking*. The station represents itself in the following way on its website:

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[4]     R. McCann, „*On the Hither Sides of Depth*": *An Architectural Pedagogy of Engagement*, „Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology" 2005, nr 3 (16), s. 17.

> Co-op Radio is a voice for the voiceless that strives to provide a space for under-
> -represented and marginalized communities. Co-op Radio aims to increase com-
> munity participation by encouraging examination of the social and political con-
> cerns of the geographic and cultural communities of British Columbia… Our first
> priority is to provide a media outlet for the economically, socially or politically dis-
> advantaged. We provide news and perspectives that are not otherwise accessible
> – information that is not covered by the conventional media or perspectives that
> challenge mainstream media coverage[5].

Co-op Radio as a non-commercial, co-operatively-owned, listener-supported,
community radio station, wanted to do something that no other station was
doing at that time—to involve the community in the making of radio, so that
its sound would embody the community's voice. The community would par-
ticipate in the creation of radio's sound. Thus, any listener could also become
a radio maker, and these radio makers would then be increasingly active listen-
ers because of their immediate involvement with the station. Resonance thus
created between community and its radio station has the potential for partici-
pative listenership—that is, participating not simply as more active listeners to
broadcasts but also to the community's life.

> As a member-owned co-operative, Co-op Radio does not have one owner – we
> have approximately 30,000 owners. Since we do not accept commercial advertising,
> we remain accountable to those who matter most, our listeners and members. By
> becoming a member of Co-op Radio, you become a part-owner of your own media
> and have a say in how the station is run[6].

The continued existence of community radio must be desired by the commu-
nity. Thus, community radio can never talk at its listeners; it can only care for
them and their ears, respecting their rights, and enticing them to participate in
one way or another in the making of radio's sound. And this of course was the
perfect framework for a programme such as *Soundwalking*.

But one of the most challenging struggles at Co-op Radio and many other
community radio stations was and still is between those who want to use radio
as a mouthpiece for their political messages and those who think of radio as
a medium for creative expression. In the worst case, those with the political
message simply produce boring, dogmatic radio, and those experimenting with
the radio medium produce empty experiments with nothing to say. The ideal,
of course, is situated somewhere between those two extremes.

Radio art is an opportunity for creative expression, not a vehicle for va-
cuous experiments or unimaginative dogma. It is a freedom, not propaganda.

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5    Vancouver Co-operative Radio, http://www.coopradio.org
6    Ibid.

"Dead air" on commercial radio is terrifying silence. It means the loss of listeners and thus the death of radio. Silence for the radio artist means the birth of radio-making possibilities. It is like the desert, where there is nothing: when we listen to this nothing, we always hear something. Ideally, radio art comes from that place of nothing, and lack of preconceptions. Community Radio was (and still is in North America, despite the above-mentioned struggles) the best place for radio art, precisely because in the majority of cases it approaches its programming from a place of the least number of preconceptions.

But, it is still relatively unusual to hear environmental sounds or soundscapes on the radio, because their different rhythms challenge even Co-op Radio's broadcasting ideas, both in format and content. Although the sounds may be familiar, they constitute a new sonic world on radio. This type of radio--making is another form of listening 'into' the world of our daily life. It presents the familiar, but because it comes to us artificially, through a loudspeaker, second-hand so to speak, framed in space and time, and therefore highlighted, presents daily life from a new acoustic angle. It is radio that assists us in listening to who we are as a society, as individuals.

Radio that listens. Imagine radio that instead of numbing us to the sounds, strengthens our imagination and creativity; instead of manipulating us into faster work and more buying, inspires us to invent; instead of fatiguing us, refreshes our acoustic sensitivity; instead of making us ignore thoughts and surroundings, stimulates listening; instead of broadcasting the same things again and again, does not repeat; instead of silencing us, encourages us to sing, to speak, and make radio ourselves; instead of merely broadcasting at us, lets us listen through it.

In conclusion, some thoughts about radio, soundscape and ecology. Ecology implies balance. Acoustic ecology implies a balance between sound and silence, a balance between listening and soundmaking. In Canada, we have potential for such balance: we have community radio stations that offer great numbers of airwaves which can be designed with an ecological consciousness; we also still have vast stretches of land not yet dominated by noise. We are not cluttered with limitless noise, not cluttered with culture. Compared to many other countries, we have room to move about, physically and psychologically.

This context made way for the idea of *Wilderness Radio*. Bruce Davis, member of the WSP in the 1970s, envisioned:

A radio service which "listens in" rather than "broadcasts out"…Microphones will monitor the ambient acoustic activity of a specially chosen protected wilderness environment… In providing observational access to a wilderness environment without significantly altering it in any way, the project would be unique; large numbers of people could experience the place without destroying it by their very presence. This radio service could, as an educational tool, begin a process of positive feedback

between man and his natural environment that conceivably could alter for the better the perceptions and orientations of whole groups of people[7].

*Wilderness Radio* has never been implemented. Thirty years later, this idea seems even more relevant, and certainly technologically more feasible. It would also create a counterbalance to the vast amounts of radio and soundscape art made nowadays that speaks mostly through the sounds of urban existence.

Like many other countries these days, Canada is a country of immigrants who have brought and continue to bring many languages, religious and political views, and cultural customs. But, what happens when we as immigrants come to a new place, speaking our language before listening to our new country of choice or refuge? Inevitably, we would impose an alien voice. And, more significantly, this is perhaps what happens when existent media in countries with new immigrants are not willing to lend them an ear and let them speak through the microphones? Most radio on the North American continent behaves in such a way: it speaks before it listens. It engages in relentless broadcasting to an audience conditioned through years of exposure to not listen. From that perspective, radio and ecology seem like a contradiction in terms. What would happen if we turned that around and transformed radio into a listening medium before it could impose its voice onto a new environment like an alien? What if radio was that non-intrusive, that silent?

We know from recent experience what happens on a larger scale, when a powerful nation occupies a new land, a country, in such a way: broadcasting, and indeed, forcing its message onto this new place before listening. We also know on a smaller scale, that when a person creates a space to listen to us, are we not then also willing to listen to them in return? And, don't we then listen to ourselves through that listening presence? From that place of acceptance? Can radio be such a place of acceptance, a listening presence, a place of listening? Radio that listens? If yes, then as Schafer says,

> Radio would begin to ring with new rhythms, the biocycles of all human life and culture, the biorhythms of all living creatures and of nature[8].

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[7]    B. Davis, *FM Radio as Observational Access to Wilderness Environments*, „Alternatives" 1975, nr 3 (4).

[8]    R.M. Schafer, op. cit., s. 141.