

# *Sharing Experiences Towards the Possibility of an Electroacoustic Ecology*

By Andra McCartney

**A**s I write this article, I am crossing Canada by train. Here I am even more aware than usual of my dependence on technology in order to do my work. I search through the cars for electrical outlets, and watch my battery level dwindling. Yesterday, while charging up the minidisk in the lounge car to do some more soundscape recording, I heard a group of urban twenty-somethings talking about the isolation they felt from their daily lives on this trip. They spoke of the comfort of a Walkman to avoid boredom and assert a connection to home through music, and wished that VIA Rail provided music in the bar car. Then the conversation turned to the problem of musical choice, and how one person's preferences might dominate the sound environment.

As an acoustic ecologist, I am concerned about the way mainstream popular music blankets almost all acoustic environments. One of my joys of the last day has been scanning the radio dial, and hearing mostly snow or white noise, like the snow that surrounds the northern Ontario track we travel on. This is one place that is not dominated by an American top forty sensibility, and like Murray Schafer, I am glad of the predominance of snow in this environment.

But still I search for the outlets. My concern about excessive machine noise, amplification, microwave immersion and reliance on computer technologies does not stop me from working on this laptop and carrying a microphone and recorder to most places I go. It also does not prevent me from making radio works and multimedia installations that radically split sounds from their home environment, creating schizophrenic experiences. My practise is intimately connected with technology, and I want to believe that it is possible to use electroacoustic technologies to bring people closer to their sound environments, even while playing back sounds that are from far away. I want to believe in the possibility of an electroacoustic ecology. In the balance of this article, I will describe my current practice, and leave you to question whether this is indeed possible, or whether I am dreaming.

My work with sounds usually begins with recording the practice of everyday life: walking in the neighbourhood, travelling, working in the garden. I do these recordings in textual form, writing journals. As well, I use microphones and either DAT or minidisk technologies.

While recording and monitoring on headphones, I have an amplified perspective on my surroundings—at once closer to the environment as everything is amplified, but also separated from it as my experience is mediated by the microphone's perspective. It is

interesting to imagine having ears in other parts of my body, and to try to hear from there. I have worn microphones on my belt, my boots, and extended them to the end of their cables above my head like antennae. The kind of microphone also affects the interaction I have with other people in the place. When I wear the binaurals on my headphones, I resemble some kind of demented cyborg insect: people tend to look away politely, no doubt thinking „poor thing, she must have lost her mind!“ When I wear microphones elsewhere on my clothing, they are less conspicuous, and people might think that I am listening to music. When I carry a larger stereo mic in my hand, people often ask if I am videotaping. It is odd for many people to see a lone audio recorder with a microphone.

This is not an innocent encounter. Using focus and perspective, it is possible to alter the dynamic hierarchy of sounds within a place. The microphone's ability to amplify allows me to discover and focus on the subtle sonic emanations of very small sounds, those too quiet to be heard normally, to elevate them into hearing range, to change their social place in a soundscape, to make their previously-masked sounds audible. I use the microphone to construct a particular experience which may alter the social places of various sounds, and within which my motion is traced as I go.

Then I take these sounds, select excerpts of them, process some of them, re-combine them with the texts and sometimes with still photographs, and mount them on websites or install them in galleries, often far from the original place of recording. People may experience these schizophrenic installations in the public spaces of computer labs or art galleries, or in the privacy of their living rooms. I hope that even though the sounds are shorn from their moorings, their recontextualization through these processes of reflection will carry enough meaning to keep them afloat and connect with aspects of the local sound environments of my distributed audiences. I hope most of all that visitors to my installations will find sustenance there, an acoustic appetizer to inform their own practices of acoustic ecology in their daily lives. While suspicious of the way computer technology encourages me to slice and dice sounds to conform to bandwidth restrictions, I am hopeful about its potential of creating virtual communities as well as of its possibilities to share experiences.

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