

Andra McCartney

“Reception and reflexivity in electroacoustic creation”

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Reception and reflexivity in electroacoustic creation

Dr. Andra McCartney

Since the mid 1990s, I have been developing an approach to the analysis and creation of electroacoustic sound art which features reception and reflexivity studies as important aspects of the work. My reception research is combined with other approaches such as musical analysis and cultural studies, with the intention of investigating the aesthetics and practices of the electroacoustic community. More recently, my artistic practice has also begun to learn from reception studies, to feature audience interaction as an integral part of the work, thus becoming recursive or reflexive in approach, with audience responses influencing the direction of each project. I am attempting to integrate the insights of reception studies with thinking about electroacoustic creation, interweaving these two areas that are generally regarded as distinct and separate.

As with Rob Weale and Leigh Landy's Intention/Reception project (Landy 2006; Weale 2006), I encourage listeners to engage with electroacoustic work, and in turn I think about the meaning of their responses. Landy says that the Intention/Reception project is intended to help people find means to listen to, appreciate, and find meaning in electroacoustic works. In addition, the purpose of this research is to investigate the extent to which familiarity contributes to access and appreciation and the extent to which intention and reception meet in the very particular corpus of electroacoustic music. (Landy 2006: 29) The Intention/Reception project aims to investigate how listeners can gain greater access to and appreciation of electroacoustic music, how they can come to a better understanding of the aims of the composer, and how the composer's intention and the listener's reception meet.

My research focuses on this relationship between composer and audience, but from a slightly different perspective. Through my background in communication and cultural studies, I am interested in how the electroacoustic community is constituted as a culture, in what kinds of interpretive routines are acceptable within electroacoustic music, and in how aesthetic discourses are established in this community. I use reception studies as one element in an analytical toolbox that also includes gestalt analysis influenced by composer and theorist James Tenney, discourse analysis of electroacoustic texts and CD productions, and participant observation through my role as an electroacoustic artist, as a way to try to understand how that culture functions, and more particularly how aesthetics are gendered, including how open that culture is to feminine or feminist approaches.

More recently, in response to some of the very thoughtful interactions that have happened through this kind of research, I have begun to extend my thinking into what might be called dialogic reflexivity in artistic practice. Following the work of conceptual artists such as Alison Knowles, whose work is well known through the New York Fluxus movement, I want to make a shift from thinking of art as defining an artistic object, to that of defining subjects (and by this I mean both audiences and artists) through their interaction using the artwork as catalyst (Robinson 2004: 101). I am thinking of electroacoustics as a potentially dialogic practice, in which the electroacoustic artist and the audience can learn from each other in the process of creating a work, in which the audience has the possibility to become more actively creative through the process, and the artist can learn more about listening.

These reflexive ideas about electroacoustic creation were greatly influenced by a reception project that I undertook in the mid-1990s, focusing on public and private reception of the electroacoustic works of six Canadian composers: Paul Dolden, Diana McIntosh, Wende Bartley, John Oswald, Hildegard Westerkamp and Pascale Trudel. Their works were played for experienced electroacoustic composers, for music students taking courses in electroacoustic composition, and for members of the general public who had little background in electroacoustic composition. One of the areas of response that intrigued me

in particular was the range of attitudes of listeners towards sonic manipulation of sound sources. Among the composers and music students, works were often dismissed as simple-minded or uninteresting if sonic sources remained recognisable. However, among the general public and occasionally with some composers, the manipulation of certain sonic sources was sometimes understood as ethically suspect, or even feared. For example, listeners were asked to listen to Hildegard Westerkamp's *Moments of Laughter*, a piece involving the recorded voice of a young child. Some listeners expressed a concern that the composer might alter the child's voice and make it sound robotic or machine-like, de-humanising the child. The composer did not manipulate the child's voice in this case, so the reactions of listeners could be dismissed as simply misunderstanding the composer's intent and process.

But if these responses are considered in relation to ethics, the concern about manipulation indicates an important difference in values that is worth further thought, about what manipulation as an aesthetic value means about the relationship between composer and sound sources, about whether composers hesitate to manipulate some sources but not others, about what the range of listener responses might be to processes applied to sounds, with ethics in mind. It is important to note here that responses to Westerkamp's *Moments of Laughter* were especially controversial, reflecting perhaps an anxiety about the transgressive potential of broadcasting domestic, private sounds in the public sphere.

My interest in sonic manipulation as an interpretive routine in this reception study arose for a number of reasons: it emerged consistently in the open-ended responses provided by listeners, and it has a particular interest to me as a soundwalk artist. My performances and installations maintain links with the place and situation of recording by keeping the sounds recognisable with a minimum of digital processing. I consider the art in my work to arise less from the construction of an abstract sound object and more from the evocation of experience as well as the space this can open for dialogic subjectivity. Let me show you an example of this.

In 1999-2000, for a millenium project, I recorded soundwalks on a regular basis throughout the year, from the end of my street to my house, about a five minute walk. Half way through the year, I moved in Canada from Toronto, Ontario, to Montreal, Quebec, so the street changed while the practise remained the same. The following year, for a group sound art show at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I assembled the recordings on CD, made up a logbook in which I asked the audience questions about their relationship to sounds of home and neighbourhood, and invited listeners to respond to the work. There were three questions for listeners to consider: What sounds surround your home? What sounds remind you of home? What sounds constitute an ideal home? The CD player was positioned in the gallery next to an armchair with headphones, intending to remind listeners of a living room space.

This project has several features that characterise much of my recent work: a focus on a particular place, a historical dimension provided by repeated soundwalks over extended time in the same location, a consideration of related themes (in this case, home and migration), and an attempt to engage in dialogue with an audience.

The soundwalk is relatively unedited, and reflects the length of time it took me to walk down my street. It is typical of many of the recordings in the work in that sounds were not processed. The textual description recounts the experience of the walk from my perspective. The listener comments below converse with my work, and begin a dialogue between the visitors. Listeners focus on different elements of the soundwalk, depending on their experience. One person comments on the streetcars and suggests an ideal streetcar ambience in New Orleans, which I have not yet experienced but intend to. Also there is a difference of opinion about the sounds of children playing. One listener says that they like

the sounds of children, whereas another says they would prefer the sounds of knives clashing in the shower. My work on Westerkamp's *Moments of Laughter* (2000) included harsh and even hostile responses to the sound of a child's voice being projected in a public sphere, and the knives in shower response is another example of that complex emotional response to an everyday domestic sound.

On pages not associated with particular sound pieces, the conversation sometimes became more abstract and more related to particular artists and art practices. Some listeners refer to the less than ideal gallery setup, where bright lights interfered with the semblance of a home-like intimacy, and the playback equipment was not adequate. This is a frequent complaint with sound-based installations in galleries that are designed for the showing of visual art.

The three artists discussed on this page by visitors seem to be mentioned almost in passing, as people run into casually or heard in the car. Yet they are thematically related. All three share a similar interest with audience interaction, a direct and significant relationship with my work. Composer Martin Arnold says "For me, experiencing art is co-creative with the maker." (1985: 29), articulating an active role for the audience. Vito Acconci, an architect and performance artist influenced by Situationism, made work such as *Seedbed* (1972), that intended to create a situation of reciprocal exchange between artist and audience. Adrian Piper's work, including her soundwalks, is the most clearly connected to my own. She believes that art should be accessible, and can enact social change, that museums can shift from being zones of tranquillity to engage more directly with life on the street (Sokolowski 2001). The discussion on this logbook page led me to do further research on the practices of these artists, which has contributed to the refinement of my own practice, by thinking about different ways to work with audiences and to integrate the responses of audiences into the work.

At the bottom of the page is a response that is particularly satisfying. One listener expresses a desire to go out and walk, and intimates that they might pay more attention to their own creative practices as a result of engaging with this piece. This directly addresses my desire to encourage creativity in the audience.

I have attempted to push this idea of artist-audience interaction further in more recent work. One installation, made collaboratively with Don Sinclair, an interactive artist from Toronto, aims to include creative input from listeners in two ways: through their mixing of soundscapes using motion sensing as a method of making gestural contact with the sound, and through the direct recording of sound with a microphone, with resultant sound files immediately integrated into the piece. These interactive computerized processes will be combined in our installation with more traditional forms of response such as live discussions and logbooks. I continue to use various high and low-tech interactive interfaces to encourage reflexive awareness and audience creativity through sound art. At the same time, I continue to think about the extent to which reflexive practices can challenge current conceptions of what an artist or composer is supposed to do, and the role of the audience in the artistic interaction.

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