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### ► To cite this version:

Andra McCartney, David Paquette. Walking, listening, speaking - The soundwalking interactions project. *Ambiances in action / Ambiances en acte(s) - International Congress on Ambiances*, Montreal 2012, Sep 2012, Montreal, Canada. pp.189-194. halshs-00745020

**HAL Id: halshs-00745020**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00745020>**

Submitted on 24 Oct 2012

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## Walking, listening, speaking

### *The soundwalking interactions project*

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**Abstract.** *This paper discusses the Soundwalking Interactions project and details its various research themes and activities. It presents the soundwalking and archiving processes used by the team as well as the design of an interactive, sound and video-projection installation project.*

**Keywords:** *soundwalk, listening, acoustic ecology, audience response, sound*

Soundwalking Interactions (SI) is a research-creation project directed by Dr. Andra McCartney in the department of Communication Studies, Concordia University. The project involves faculty members, graduate and undergraduate students as well as soundwalkers and sound artists from Canada and abroad. Its main objective is to question the dynamics of soundwalks and sonic works made from soundwalks, through the establishment of spaces of dialogue in which participants' experiences and reflections become central. These communicational spaces emerge from individual and group soundwalks followed by live performance, online representation and networking, as well as from the design of an interactive gesture-based installation focusing on relationships among sounds, movements and collaborative performance. Soundwalking Interactions has been funded since 2009, first by Concordia University, then by FQRSC (Québec).

SI was developed by McCartney as an extension of previous work on soundwalking, soundscape composition and audience responses. Her research work on the sound environment of the Lachine Canal (2005a) and extensive collaborative work with soundscape composers and other sound artists (2000, 2005b) led her to deeper investigation of the communicational processes that take place in soundwalks and creative activities based around them. The research team includes Dr. McCartney, Prof. Don Sinclair (York University) as well as Concordia graduate students David Paquette, David Madden and Caitlin Loney. This paper will present two kinds of interactions investigated by SI, soundwalks and performances, and will describe some of the previous walks that took place in the neighbourhood surrounding the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montreal, Canada.

### **Soundwalking practices and participant interactions**

The primary object of study of the SI project is the practice of listening during soundwalk activities. Soundwalks, which are used both as exploratory and compositional exercises in a range of research and artistic contexts (Paquette & McCartney, 2012), can be described as walks whose primary objective is to listen and reflect on the sound environment found in a specific location. Walks vary in style and approach; for instance, while soundwalks organised in North America are often silent, being highly influenced by the early methodological work of the World Soundscape Project (Schafer, 1977), other approaches such as the commented walk encourage discussions during the walk (Thibaud, 2001) or in the case of the electrical walk (Kubisch, 2003), provide technological means to enhance the listening experience.

### *Listening to locations and people*

Since 2011, we have organised more than a dozen group soundwalks, mostly in Montreal but also in Vancouver, Toronto, Sackville, Kuala Lumpur, Buenos Aires and Grenoble, primarily in highly urban areas. During this time we have developed a design, style of presentation and archival process that encourages participation and establishes spaces of discussion both local and global, through the use of sound and image recording, editing and montage in an online environment. Soundwalks are designed through the preliminary exploration of a specific urban site, exploring the richness and variety of its sonic environment, taking into account the role and importance of particular sounds and ambiances and thinking about ease of access for people taking part.

Participants, who may or may not live in the area which is being investigated, are first introduced to the practice of soundwalking and are encouraged to conceive of listening as a framework that can be both analytical *and* playful; depending on how one understands their relationship to their environment and the particular role or interpretation of sounds heard, listening can for instance be political, ecological, social, aesthetic, or historical. It can be musical, if we hear the melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, and timbral qualities of environmental sounds, and if we think about how to improvise with those sonic forces; it can be affective if we attempt to link the emotional histories it creates or recreates; it can be topological if we challenge ourselves to construct sonic map-scores of our surroundings and notice the perceived origin of sounds and how they reach us, their overlap; it can also be mnemonic, poetic, sensual, philosophical, and more. By highlighting the wide range of possible audibilities, we can offer participants a multitude of potential perspectives while leaving the door open to their own singular listening attitudes.

Soundwalks are then performed on a semi-established path. This path picks its way through sonically-rich areas, with various surfaces to walk on and architectural and landscape forms to resound. It is open to change based on the sound events of the moment. While the area has been well scouted in advance, the route changes with the weather, and the sonic occurrences of that time. Participants are encouraged to take the lead at any time, either to guide the group to a specific location or to modify the pace of the walk. While these impromptu lead changes remain fairly infrequent in larger groups, they often result in interesting discoveries, and lead to further discussions on how previous knowledge of a place affects listening and walking patterns. Post-walk discussions employ an open-ended format in which participants are invited to speak about their listening experiences, as well as their experience of the walk itself, group dynamics, walking pace and directions. While team researchers who are present do become involved in the discussion, they attempt to draw out others about their listening experiences (beginning with “what did you hear?”) and explore themes raised by the participants, rather than focusing the group’s attention on particular aspects of the sound environment or a specific method of interpretation.

### *Extending discussions*

During all group walks, a researcher records the entirety of the walk as well as the following discussion on a mobile sound recorder. Still images, less of a priority for us, are sometimes taken by a researcher at the time, sometimes at a later date (if the researcher is working alone) or sometimes images are given to us by other participants on the walk. These media are then incorporated into our research blog. After listening to the recording of the group discussion, and highlighting parts of the soundwalk that were the focus of commentary, an excerpted version of the soundwalk is edited together. This excerpted soundwalk piece is then montaged with a small number of still images, often moving in close-up and moving slowly to evoke a tactile effect and slow the motion of the eyes. This montage is then placed on youtube for online access. This way, the dialog established at the physical site of the soundwalk is extended online, facilitating additional connections between participants and

potentially with other people who possess a particular sonic knowledge of the location. Participants will sometime comment on the editing or montage (sometimes privately by email rather than on the youtube page), and some people partake in the exchange well after the walk. In addition, comments are often made on the Youtube videos by people who have little or nothing to do with the area in question, but comment on the soundwalk because of a common interest in an aspect of the sound. For instance, with the Balance-Unbalance soundwalk that took place in the area near the Canadian Centre for Architecture, someone commented on the traffic sound, from the perspective of a resident living right next to the Decarie Expressway, in another part of the city altogether.

## Sound, space, movement

In parallel to these soundwalking explorations, McCartney is developing, with Don Sinclair from York University, an interactive installation based on movement-initiated soundwalk excerpts and video-projection. The installation consists in a space delimited by four loudspeakers and divided into 16 equal squares, each of which is linked to a sound file which is from a few seconds up to about two minutes in length, excerpted from a soundwalk. A ceiling-mounted webcam detects certain kinds of movement, and modulates corresponding sound files. The pattern used by the motion-detecting algorithm (coded in Max/MSP) is also projected on a wide screen to provide visual feedback to performers. Various sonic aspects of each file, such as volume or speed of playback, are determined by the way people move in the space. Up to four participants may perform simultaneously; solos, duos, trios and quartets. These performative possibilities lead to different ways of interacting in the space, using gestures that evoke the experience of the soundwalk.

The space of performance is linked to the larger locality in which it is situated through the selection of sound excerpts to be played, each sound coming from previous soundwalks. Excerpts must be selected and transferred to the AV matrix, before any performance becomes possible; then, these same sounds are re-created and re-contextualised, leading to an ever-changing soundscape resulting from coordinated movements of the group. In the performance, just as in traditional soundwalks, our perception of the sonic environment is actively shaped by our movements, our interactions with the group and the surroundings as well as the degree of attention we give to each sound. There is never any one leader in this reactivated soundwalk, but rather a constant flow between participants as they explore the internal possibilities of the sounds, movements through the space, and the larger sonic context created and experienced by all performers.

The creative process leads to a “heightened or enhanced level of physical and aural awareness” (Kennedy, 2011: 7). Rounds of discussion take place during the performance, allowing participants to describe their choices of movements and combinations, as well as the challenges imposed by the system of motion detection.

In June 2011, McCartney and Sinclair worked with choreographer Susan Lee in Toronto, to develop a dance work based on a soundwalk taken by four dancers, the choreographer, Prof. Sinclair and Prof. McCartney, in a linear park near the centre of the city. Because this was a small group of creative practitioners, it was easy to encourage different people on the soundwalk to take the lead at various points, creating a truly improvisatory experience that followed the sonic ideas of the walkers. The following day, we listened to the recordings as a group, to select particularly evocative moments on the walk and to discuss what made them so evocative. This phase was followed by extensive rehearsals, where the dancers worked on the choreography, and Prof. Sinclair further developed the installation technology to suit their interests and needs. The dancers commented that they felt more of a connection with the place, and a deeper understanding of their gestural interpretations of place, through this work. They also enjoyed the sense of agency they had through working directly with the

sounds to create the soundscape, finding this level of dancer agency unusual in collaborative work.



Figure 1. Design workshop for interactive installation, Montreal, November 30, 2010. Photo: David Paquette

## Themes, collaborations

The main research themes of walking, exchanging and thinking about our relationship to the sonic environment are found in each of the events and activities held by our group. In addition to soundwalks and the design of the installation, we have held performance events and research meetings to make connections with specific artists and scholars. In April 2011, we organized *Sleepwalking Kuala-Lumpur <-> Montreal*, an evening presentation of performances and recordings from sound artists Andra McCartney, Kok Sew Wai, and Kathy Kennedy; as well as researchers Lisa Gasior and Sam Thulin. The event was the result of previous collaborative soundwalking work by McCartney and Kok Sew Wai, which took place both in Kuala Lumpur and Montreal. Vocal improvisations and research-creation texts were also performed over soundscape compositions and video projection, thus furthering the creative exchange between performers.

Soundwalking collaboration with sound artists and musicians including Hildegard Westerkamp, Victoria Fenner and Rainer Wiens also are taking place throughout the project. Furthermore, we are currently organizing *Résonances de la Fontaine*, a site-specific musical performance in collaboration with composer-violinist Malcom Goldstein, to be held in the Parc Lafontaine in Montreal in May 2012. The performance will bring musicians and recordists to the park and encourage them to create short improvisational works based on the sonic characteristics and content of the park.

The neighbourhood comprising the Canadian Center for Architecture and the Concordia SGW campus, home of the 2012 ambiances Congress, has been extensively explored by the SI research team over the last few years. We have held a number of soundwalks in the downtown and Atwater market sectors during events such as *La Semaine du Son*, allowing us to develop an increasing knowledge of the various acoustic environments. The wide diversity of ambiances encountered between the center of the city and the southern sector, drastically divided by Highway 20, offers a large number of potential soundwalking paths travelling through inside and outside public spaces.



Figure 2. A soundwalk led by Dr. Andra McCartney in May 2007 (photo by Derek Lang)

## Conclusion

The practice of soundwalking reveals the intimate connection among inhabitants and their urban environments by highlighting relationships between movements, sounds and spaces. By offering alternate models of soundwalking and by extending the possibilities for dialogue between participants and researchers, *Soundwalking Interactions* attempts to understand the processes of negotiations and interactions that shape our daily urban experience. It also makes use of notions of improvisational and creative listening to complement existing scholarly work on walking, audience responses as well as installation art, communications and acoustic ecology.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the *Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture* for its financial support of the Soundwalking Interactions project. We would also like to thank all participants and collaborators, and research assistants.

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