

The Idea of North

Heather Anderson

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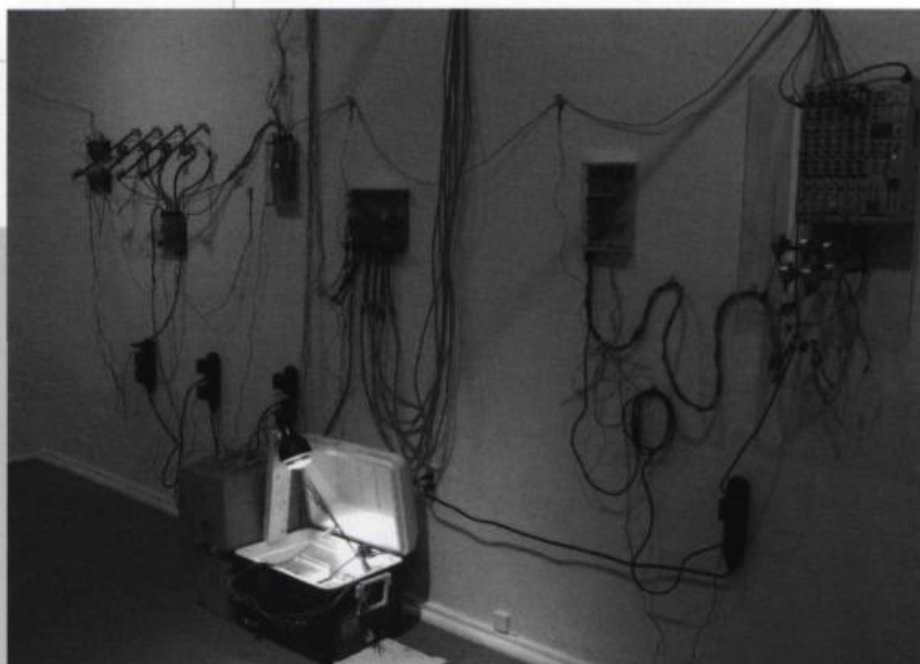
Heather ANDERSON

"What is the tone of a place?"

Glenn Gould explored this question in his 1967 radio broadcast *The Idea of North*. Set on a train bound for the Canadian North, Gould's experimental documentary employed a technique he termed "contrapuntal radio" which "tuned in" to multiple voices to interweave various perspectives on the North. Gould's radio piece served as a touchstone for the project *The Idea of North*, a series of three exhibitions aiming "to redefine the North as more than a geographic position, exploring the concept and cultural mythology of 'North' (especially as it exists in the imagination of those who live below the Arctic Circle) as a metaphor for the locality of sound."¹

Artists from Canada, Iceland, Norway and Sweden were invited by the Canadian, Icelandic and Norwegian curator(s) "to consider, in an abstract or concrete manner, the relation of sound to locality and the concept of North."² Three distinct exhibitions involving different configurations of artists and works took place at Galleri F 15 in Moss, Norway (June-July 2005); Klink and Bank in Reykjavik, Iceland (June-August 2005); and in Halifax at Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Eyelevel Gallery and Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, with a performance hosted by the Anna Leonowens' Gallery and an audio walk departing from the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (January-February 2006).

For the Halifax edition of the exhibition, Canadian curator Rhonda Corvese expanded the curatorial parameters, proposing that the sixteen artists present "works that addressed locality and sound and/or the concept of North."³ This concurrent specification of "the concept of North" and openness to any work addressing "locality and sound" was not consistent with the curatorial focus stated in the catalogue essay's first paragraph to explore the concept of "North" "as a metaphor for the locality of sound." All the discourse



surrounding the exhibition emphasized "North" as a concept and all works could be seen to engage with it—however obliquely—except for Toronto-based Tasman Richardson's *Destro my Tokyo* (2004), which as the sole work lacking any resonance with "North," was a weak and awkward inclusion. Presented as a video projection in a separate room at Eyelevel Gallery, *Destro my Tokyo* fused an ear-blasting drum-and-bass soundtrack to a rapid "image-track" of Japanese visual culture, including the iconic Godzilla and Akira. The result was not much different than a music video. While this work might have fit Corvese's wide-reaching proposal for work addressing "locality and sound," the accommodation of this work

undermined the exhibition's coherency.

Yet intriguing constellations of works did form around the latitudinal zone under consideration. Video and film works that took "Northern" sound as their subject were Swedish artist Liv Strand's *Pipeline* (2005) and Kirstín Björk Kristjánsdóttir's clever playback of an Icelandic love song in *Romantic Undead* (2005). Several larger-scale installations were presented at Dalhousie University Art Gallery and Saint Mary's University Art Gallery. *Sound Barrier* (2006) by Norwegian artist Maia Urstad comprised a ten-metre-long and two-metre-high wall of stacked boom boxes and transistor radios. *Sound Barrier* sectioned off a diagonal space where gallery visitors

could retreat from the sound of other installations to encounter a striking display of what are largely now out-dated consumer technologies. A pre-recorded composition of radio buzz, static interference, Morse code and fragments of FM and satellite radio transmissions emitted from speakers scattered throughout the electronic wall, building over several minutes. Yet the pre-programmed "from-the-ether" audio didn't quite live up to the expectation of the impressive structure.

In *Sonic Defrost* (2006), Montréal-based Jean-Pierre Gauthier wired a pile of gallery objects and furnishings to generate sounds such as drumming, stuttering and tapping. This mechanized network responded to melting icepacks stroked by a temperature-probing "hand" connected to switches and mixers. The electronic components were elegantly displayed on the wall making visible Gauthier's remarkable engineering and the relationship between the audio and the ice. Similarly wall-mounted computer electronics and a spectrogram displaying sound levels foregrounded technical elements of Norwegian artist Jana Winderen's *Hard Rain* (2006). A web cam detected the movement of gallery visitors within discreet zones, triggering audio tracks of the sea, rain and wind. Moving actively within a floor area defined by four large speakers, one could conjure a

Jean-Pierre GAUTHIER,
Sonic Defrost, 2006.
Photo: Steve Farmer

Maria HLADY, *Sound-
ball*, 2004-2005.
Dalhousie Art Gallery.
Photo: courtesy of the
artist.

sublime storm as the natural sounds were processed through audio filters to become beastly roars. When visitors' activity subsided, a gentle soundscape of lapping waves resumed. For a number of artists in this "exhibition about sound and site," the medium of sound was one material element of the work among others. The installation *Sweet Red Blood Dripping into Starry Snow* (2006), by Icelandic artists Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir & Ragnar Kjartansson, comprised a grand piano, captivating projected video images (each with distinct audio), mirror reflections, lights and dollar-store toy swords, shields and beads strewn across the plastic covered floor. While these elements might be conceptualised as having created the "site" within which a haunting love song from one of the videos conjured a northern mythology or romantic tale, the description of the work as a "sound installation" seems to artificially privilege sound over the other media with which the artists skilfully work. Similarly, the absurdity of *Moment/Monument* (2006) by Icelandic artists Sirra Sigrun Sigurdardóttir and Erling T.V. Klingenberg was achieved via the totality of its components—including a video of a tongue licking a mirror and an actual, stiffly posed taxi-dummy cat seeming to repeatedly utter "creee-ate" into a microphone.

Canadian artist Marla Hlady's works were sound objects that gallery visitors could pick up and activate. Hlady adapted metal kitchen/bar containers to create three series: *Soundcan* (2003), *Soundball* (2004-5) and *Mixer* (2005). Gently shaking an adapted martini mixer, one could hear sounds Hlady recorded in Iceland, including a child singing an Icelandic lullaby. A bluish light shone through tiny holes, invoking the glitter of the northern sky or light on snow. Picking up a *Soundball*—resembling a giant tea ball—one could hear a musical composition. As sleek objects emanating sound and light these curious works were alluring. But the decision to present twelve works for which the audio pieces spanning the last three years were as diverse as *Music for Two Prepared Bicycles* (after John Cage) and *Whammied Percussion*, made the objects begin to feel predictable and less interesting individually—a more precise curatorial selection could have avoided this.



Soundroom (2005-6), by Halifax-based artists Stephen Kelly and Eleanor King, exemplified Corvese's concept of an audio work that is both "itinerant" and "site-specific." For the Norway exhibition, Kelly and King had created a walk for the grounds of Galleri F15 based on sounds a tourist visiting Halifax might encounter, such as the casino, bagpipes and the ocean. For the Halifax *Soundroom*, the artists transposed sound recordings of their summer experience in Norway onto a walk that led participants along Halifax's touristic waterfront—typically deserted in winter. The first time I donned the audio-wired earmuffs and followed the walk it was unseasonably warm and busy; my second experience was bitterly cold, accentuating the contrast between my visual surroundings and sounds of summer fun in Norway—including the Changing of the Guard at the Royal Palace and swimming. I became a dislocated tourist in my own city, even if it did require a certain suspension of disbelief. However, the decision to make the

Halifax version of *Soundroom* available at the Eyelevel reception desk—because Eyelevel Gallery is located at a distance from the audio walk's route—devalued the work's site-specificity.

One of the most unexpected responses to the exhibition's theme was Montréal-based Christof Migone's *Pass* (1994 - ongoing). *Pass* involves Migone silently passing single pages containing a word, sentence, or image counter clockwise to participants sitting in a circle. As the pages circulate, they trigger unpredictable conversation. Migone modifies *Pass* each time that it is presented; for the *Idea of North* he introduced references to Gould's broadcast. *Fram Forward* (2005) by Canadian artist Dana Samuel also had an element of the unexpected. As if the radio signal had suddenly tuned into the past, listeners of CKDU community radio periodically heard excerpts of a fictional correspondence between 19th century Norwegian arctic explorer Fridtjof Nansen and Canadian inventor Reginald Fessenden, who had been developing radio

technologies around the same time as Nansen's expedition to the North Pole. The work was also presented on a radio with headphones in the gallery space.

Of course, many people imagine "North" as perpetual winter. For *Brrr* (2004-6), Liv Strand recorded the sounds people in Sweden and Halifax make that express feeling cold. While the work was rather literal in its engagement with North, the piece was poetically located in the vestibule of Eyelevel Gallery. Swedish artist Stephen Cuzner's *Northern Head*, presented in Eyelevel Gallery's Room Audio B, commenced when the visitor shut the door to what is also the tiny bathroom and pressed a button. Through small speakers encircling the listener, Cuzner's voice—set to the tempo of a drum machine—explained that the locality of sound perception in the brain means that the idea of North is all in your head.

A handsome catalogue, which features a DVD on its cover and an essay by curator Rhonda Corvese, accompanies the exhibition. ←

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NOTES

1. Rhonda Corvese, "The Idea of North," *The Idea of North*, exhibition catalogue (Halifax: Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Eyelevel Gallery, Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, 2006) p.13.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Heather ANDERSON is a writer and curator currently based in Ottawa.

Asdis GUNNARSDOTTIR & Ragnar KJARTANSSON, *Sweet Red Blood Dripping into Starry Snow*, 2006. Photo: Steve Farmer.

Jana WINDEREN, *Hard Rain*. Detail. But Alert at Dalhousie Art Gallery, 2005. Photo: Sym Corrigan.