

## Research in Brief

# Soundwalking and the Bodily Exploration of Places

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**ABSTRACT** *This article explores the use of walking and soundwalking as research practices and artistic performances, and presents the current work of the Soundwalking Interactions research-creation project. It includes a review of historic and contemporary discussions of walking and soundwalking, and an analysis of the various models of soundwalks used in acoustic ecology, urban design, and performing arts.*

**KEYWORDS** *Soundwalking; Listening; Walking; Research-Creation; Sound Art; Methodologies*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Cet article explore les divers usages et caractérisations de la marche et de la marche sonore comme méthode de recherche ainsi que pratique artistique, et présente les travaux du projet de recherche-cr ation « La marche sonore comme processus d'interaction ». On y retrouve une revue des diff erentes approches historiques et contemporaines envers la marche, ainsi qu'une analyse plus sp ecifique et approfondie du d veloppement de la marche sonore dans le contexte de recherches en  cologie sonore et en design urbain ainsi que dans le cadre de performances artistiques.*

**MOTS CL S** *Marche sonore;  coute; Marche; Recherche-cr ation; Art sonore; M thodologies*

### Introduction

Soundwalking was born from an interest in the immediacy and the adaptability of walking in the context of qualitative research. It was also born several times, through approaches that were sometimes academic, sometimes artistic, and often-times somewhere between the two. It has been of particular importance for acoustic ecology and contemporary performing arts, two disciplines that will be highlighted. In order to understand the soundwalk and its development, we must first understand the action of walking itself, especially that which has become integral to the study of everyday situations and environments, and the relationship between walking and listening. Thus, after an initial historical overview of walking, we will then shift our focus to soundwalking as it has evolved from its early use as methodological tool for the qualitative study of places, to more recent artistic approaches to walking and listening. Finally, we will examine an active research project that attempts to define and enlarge

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the role of soundwalking in our understanding of a walker's relationship with his/her surroundings, history, and culture, through the use of a wider range of interactions and forms of collaboration with soundwalk participants, as well as the design of an immersive, interactive installation piece that brings a soundwalk perspective into an intimate performance space.

## Walking

Walking as a method of inquiry can be found in a wide range of approaches; geography, philosophy, architecture, acoustic ecology, and performing arts (Butler, 2006). Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, "the art of Walking," as Thoreau (1862) called it, fascinated writers, poets, and philosophers, and quickly became acknowledged as a creative, reflexive, and sometimes subversive, act. Of particular interest is the figure of the *flâneur*, which finds its most iconic representations in the successive writings of Poe, Baudelaire, and Benjamin (Perraton, Paquette, Barrette, 2007). Benjamin's (1999) modern *flâneur*, an "observer of the marketplace" (p. 427) who "feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes" (p. 417), creates through his (or her) exploratory walks a unique image of the city that unfolds both through the present and through the loaded past of memories, histories, and history.

The *flâneur* is a tourist as well as a detached observer, "both resistant to and seduced by the new commercial culture" (Solnit, 2001, p. 200). The figure is quite representative of long lasting debates on reflexivity and objectivity in qualitative research; as Benjamin (1999) brilliantly puts it, while the city may appear to the *flâneur* as a landscape, something that can be grasped from a distance and with hindsight, this landscape never fails to "[close] around him as a room" (p. 417), thus pointing to the impossibility of extracting oneself from the researched environment. The relationship between the walker/listener, other walkers or listeners, and their physical and cultural surroundings will act throughout this text as a fundamental structure to be examined and discussed in a variety of methodological contexts.

The *flâneur* of Baudelaire and Benjamin was primarily masculine; his entitlement to visit and comment on public spaces was never questioned. He could disappear in the crowd and remain anonymous. But in fact, as Linda McDowell (1999) observes,

a range of individuals and particular social groups are excluded from the widest spectrum of access to public spaces and arenas, either on the ground of their transgressive behaviour ... or, alternatively, on the grounds of their need for protection. (p. 150)

As *flâneurs* and researchers, soundwalkers may be confronted with issues of spatial and temporal access. McCartney and Gabriele (2001) have discussed

[The] risks associated with the ways in which we choose to move through the soundscape by remaining intimately connected to the places we are in, [and how] those risks are further intensified, further complicated by our gendered bodies. (p. 14)

While the use of mobile devices, such as sound recorders, may induce feelings of vulnerability because of the "willingness to hear in an unfamiliar way" (McCartney &

Gabriele, 2001, p. 14), their ability to document every encounter or conversion may at the same time empower soundwalkers.

If the walking practice of the *flâneur* was reflexive and immersive, that of the Dadaists was mostly dissident. Their “‘visits-excursions’ to the banal places of the city of Paris” (Careri, 2002, p. 21), for example, were conceived of as a rejection of the institutional confinement of the arts. The walk became an ironic pointer, a metaphor, but also a deed that could reveal “the unconscious zones of space” (p. 22). Situationist theory furthered politicized walking through the practice of the *dérive*, during which

one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. (Debord, 1958, p. 2)

The *dérive* emphasizes the intimacy of the relationship between walkers and their surroundings, and opened the way to alternative mappings of “an experience of space that was actually terrestrial, fragmented, subjective, temporal and cultural” (Sadler, 1998, p. 52).

In 1979, Jean-François Augoyard wrote *Pas à Pas* (translated in 2007 as *Step by Step*), a thorough study of the daily movements of urban walkers, through which he follows each and every one of their decisions, reactions, and reflections, as they created what he calls a walking rhetoric:

Fundamental figures of walking rhetoric, synecdoche and asyndeton emanate from lived sensorimotor experience ... The near and the far as well as the high and the low exist in a relation of heterogeneity; for, in conformity with the power of the body, everyday rhythm proceeds from the interval [écart], from rupture. (2007, p. 133; his translation)

Augoyard doesn’t consider walkers as *flâneurs*, but as creative shapers of their surroundings; walking appears not just as a reflexive or practical activity, it also reveals the agency of those who decide to take a different route, a detour, a simple stroll, or even a straight path. The rhetorical nature that Augoyard attributes to these contextual movements became a primary feature of later works by researchers from CRESSON<sup>1</sup>. For example, sonic effects (1995) are methodological and analytical figures that represent complex urban sonic situations (such as reverberation, drone, filtering, anamnesis, ubiquity, et cetera). These effects are common contextual properties, perceptual traces that result from all components (physical, psychological, cultural) of the experience of urban spaces (Augoyard & Torgue, 2005). They are extensions of walking figures into the realm of listening, an extension that will continue with the synesthetic concept of ambiances.

These figures of walking resonate in the work of Michel de Certeau (1984), who asserts that they “compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces” (p. 93). It is on this forgotten productive practice of walking that de Certeau bases his analysis of the decay of the concept-city; for him, it must not be comprehended through its great narratives and spatial organization, but rather through the “swarming activity of these proce-

dures” (p. 96), these tiny, unstoppable movements that ingratiate through every street, every place and every neighbourhood. Bodies become meaningful through the spatial choices they make; rather than acting as anonymous end users of urban spaces, they recompose their surroundings at every step and every stop. It is important to note, however, that even the most banal walk is generally rhythmicised by the place, culture, relief, and time it goes through. Walkers never fully escape this “ongoing mapping of space through repetitive, collective choreographies of congestion, interactions, rests and relaxation” (Edensor, 2010, p. 70). It is this fundamental rhythmic presence that is at the basis of Henry Lefebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis* (2004).

### Soundwalking

Around the same time that Augoyard was researching walking practices in the Arlequin neighbourhood of Grenoble, members of the World Soundscape Project (WSP) were using soundwalks to explore the sound environment of villages and cities, both in Canada and across Europe. The primary functions of soundwalks, according to Hildegard Westerkamp, are “orientation, dialogue and composition” (McCartney, 2000, p. 4). During the various case studies produced by the WSP, soundwalks were designed to complement quantitative methodologies, and to provide a first acoustic impression of studied places. At the time, R. Murray Schafer (1974) proposed to distinguish between a listening walk, “a walk with a concentration on listening” (p. 17), and a soundwalk, which is scored (see also Wagstaff, 2002). This distinction has nevertheless been replaced in public walks by the more standardized practice of the guided soundwalk. For Westerkamp (1994), the new experience of soundwalking and the large number of recordings gathered quickly transformed into creative material that shaped her creative practice<sup>2</sup>. Walking acquired, through its central role in her early radio production work (Westerkamp, 1994), an additional creative power of narrative representation. By recomposing sonic environments, soundscape artists emphasize their existence and features, while transforming them into “dwelling places; both places of exile and places to emigrate to” (Foreman, 2010, p. 9). According to Westerkamp (2002), the creative process begins during field recording: “[t]he mere comparison between how our ears listen and how the microphone picks up sounds in the environment, brings alerted awareness to the soundscape” (p. 53). The reflexive process that shapes walking attitudes and creative processes results from changes in the auditory perspective of the recordist, for whom walking, stopping, turning around, or accelerating their pace all become potential compositional techniques.

Soundwalks have become, over time, public exercises of awareness, and are organized all around the world. A public soundwalk is usually designed as a guided walk during which participants are silent, and it generally follows a pre-planned route designed to “[encourage] active listening among a wide audience” (McCartney, 2012, p. 32). These three fundamental features shape the relationship of participants to their environment, and establish a power relationship between the leader and all other participants. Indeed, presenting the soundwalk as a way to increase the sonic awareness of participants runs the risk of predetermining their supposed limited sonic knowledge and competence. Furthermore, the fact that participants are oftentimes inhabitants or users of the place explored (which is not always the case for the leader), combined

with the impossibility for them to influence or modify the course of the soundwalk, or simply to comment “live” on their experience, may cause the walk to be perceived as outside the control of participants, and only based on the priorities of the leader.

There exist, however, some alternatives to this model. Commented walks, for instance, have been designed by Jean-Paul Thibaud (2001) to “complement ... the usual metrological surveying techniques used in urban acoustics” (Tixier, 2002, p. 83). In these improvised walks, a researcher accompanies a single participant through a location. The participant is encouraged to describe what they perceive and experience throughout the walk. Both the sound environment and the comments are recorded for further analysis. This method highlights the sonic knowledge of the participant, and allows them full freedom of movement, pace, and soundmaking throughout the walk. Similarly, the work of musician and artist Viv Corringham (2003) incorporates sonic experiences and memories of inhabitants. In her *Shadow-Walks*, for instance, she first proceeds by walking with inhabitants of a particular location through meaningful paths, to listen to their sonic account and memories, before walking by herself though these same meaningful paths, while performing vocal improvisations. Corringham’s documentation of her walks takes a variety of forms, from photographs and maps, to audio walks, and audio recordings accompanied by found objects. Another form of soundwalking, which was designed by the Audiotopie group in Montréal, uses headphones and portable players as well as visual indicators spread around a neighbourhood to guide participants virtually. The *Berri Uqam Accessibilité Universelle* route is followed individually through the use of recorded directions as well as by finding posts that correspond to specific tracks on the portable player. By combining pre-recorded sounds, effects, and voice with the actual sounds that surround participants and leak through the headphones, the project creates an enhanced walk that again provides the audience with a certain level of control over their pace.

Other forms of sonic walks have been created by a variety of artists. Christina Kubisch has designed, starting in 2003, “electrical walks” in which participants may hear, through special headphones, electrical fields emanating from electronic devices they encounter. As early as 1991, Janet Cardiff began her long and thorough exploration of audio walks using binaural microphones. Her walks, played over headphones as well, are filled with stories told by Cardiff herself, dialogues with other characters, as well as prerecorded soundscapes and effects that blend with the real sound environment of the walk. Cardiff’s work operates by investigation and revelation; through her work, she often “prompts acts of imagination that return to us the ability to identify and creatively associate” (Fleming, 2005, p. 289).

### **Soundwalking**

The *Soundwalking Interactions* (<http://soundwalkinginteractions.wordpress.com>) research project aims to address the issues of agency, improvisation, and the role of participants in soundwalks, as well as to explore alternative conceptions and approaches to soundwalking. The project explores multiple processes of interaction created by soundwalking: interactions among audiences, sound environments, research contexts, movements, media, senses, and places. Since the start of the project, public soundwalks have been documented through sound recording, still photography, and some-

times video recording, each followed by an open-ended discussion during which every participant may intervene on any topic relevant to the walk. Finally, a new entry, which consists of an edited version of the walk, accompanied by a short video, is created and posted on our research blog (<http://soundwalkinginteractions.wordpress.com>). This process allows us not only to document the progression of our project, but also to extend possible exchanges in time and space. Since they have been shortened and are supplemented with visuals, the soundwalk entries that are posted become relevant not only to those who took part, but also to anyone familiar with the place that was explored or interested in doing walks in similar types of places. As an experiment in representation, one walk (McCartney, 2011) comprises no image, only sound, and has no written description or identification of the location recorded. The unknown sound document is a mystery that leads listeners to listen for recognizable sources, voices, intonations, and ambiances, and thus to interpret the soundwalk in their own way without direction.

Geographer and architect Pascal Amphoux (1997) has also made extensive use of this methodological process, inspiring naïve or reactivated listening through the use of de-contextualization. Inspired by the early work of Palo Alto researchers, such as Gregory Bateson, the practice of reactivated listening makes possible a “fresh” or naïve listening attitude toward sound recordings coming from known environments by presenting these edited excerpts in a different location, without identifying (at first) their origin. *Soundwalking Interactions* events often include a listening session in which soundwalk recordings from various locations without contextual information are played for audiences, who then discuss what they hear in these recordings and how they relate to their own experience.

While individual or duo soundwalks lend themselves to all kinds of improvised activities, larger groups are more complicated to work with in this way (e.g., who will comment; who will lead?). Over a long time frame, it is sometimes possible to divide a group into smaller sub-groups that can try out variations of soundwalks, incorporating their own ideas, and then return to the larger group to discuss listening and interpretation strategies. This can be combined with recording of soundwalks and performance/installation representation of soundwalk experiences.

In collaboration with Professor Don Sinclair from York University, an interactive installation is being designed for *Soundwalking Interactions* in which participants affect sounds through their bodily movements. This work, conceived as an extension and amplification of the activity of soundwalking, allows us to further question the relationship between bodily movements, spatial exploration, active listening, audience participation, and the role of place (as both a physical reality and a sonic representation). Participants move through an imaginary grid made of 16 squares, surrounded by four loudspeakers. Each of the squares is linked to a sound excerpt from a soundwalk, activated and transformed by bodily movements traced by a webcam located on the ceiling, above the movers. Participants can also observe visual traces of their movements as picked up by the webcam and projected in abstract form on a large screen. All sound excerpts used in the installation come from recorded soundwalks done in the vicinity of the installation, leading to an interactive representation of the sound environment through move-

ments and juxtaposition, broadcast over the loudspeakers. The physical exploration of the grid and attentive listening for combinations and key sounds encourage participants to “dance” with sounds. As Kathy Kennedy (2011) observes, “the notion of field recordings takes the listener immediately into the realm of ‘place,’ creating an illusory world of cause and effect” (p. 6). By giving the opportunity to participants to interact directly with sounds and encouraging them to move, to listen attentively to everyday sounds played in a creative context, and to be aware of their sonic interaction and bodily negotiations with other participants, the installation acts as a creative re-interpretation of the practice of soundwalking within a circumscribed space.

Longer time frames for soundwalking activities can lead to much deeper insights about approaches to listening and possibilities for collaborative interpretation of the soundwalk experience. With a choreographer, Susan Lee, and four dancers (Tracey Norman, Bee Pallomina, Shannon Roberts, and Jesse Dell), it was possible to use a longer time frame to involve everyone through creative listening. In this walk, Andra McCartney began by leading, but then retreated to watch the group and observe in which direction it tended at different moments. She then encouraged others to take over leadership. This shift in leadership and direction created a feeling of flocking that was later referenced in the improvisatory structure of the dance. The group halted part way through the walk to exchange listening ideas, then continued. The next day, the recorded soundwalk was posted online for download. The group gathered and listened to the whole soundwalk, pausing after every ten minutes to discuss what was heard. On the basis of this discussion, sound excerpts were edited for the dancers to use in the installation. After the first rehearsal, the choreographer asked for more sounds to be generated, based on the desires of the dancers and the needs of the choreography. Lee designed a choreographic structure that gave room for improvisation in gesture and movement within scored moments of 45 seconds to 1 minute in length, creating a piece in five gestural sections that lasted around 16 minutes. Movements were linked with the experience of the soundwalk and the attributes of the sounds. In the space of the installation, dancers walked behind each other, sometimes embracing each other, leading and following, circling and pausing, sometimes to listen with eyes closed, articulating the space and the sounds through staccato gestures and changes in tempo, moving closer to each other and farther apart; all of these motions translated into swirling colours and shapes on the projection<sup>3</sup>.

The installation relies on a bodily exploration of acoustic possibilities within a circumscribed space. The exercise also reveals relationships between bodily movements and the sense of place. Edward Casey (1996) describes these interactions as a tripartite configuration. The first possible stance is to be immobile, and thus, in one unique place (if we cast aside Casey’s example of being still, yet transported by something or someone else; see also Thulin, 2011). In the case of our installation, this could result in silence (or alternatively in loud sound), as well as the absence of visual traces on the screen. Movements inside a given place reveal its shape and boundaries. Participants explore the space, activating each sound voluntarily or by accident, returning to the most appealing, disturbing or evocative sounds and mixing them. Movements become progressively more confident, musical, gestural. Finally, a movement between

different places creates “genuine transition and not just a transportation” (Casey, 1996, p. 23). Since the borders of each assigned place in our installation are revealed sonically, participants’ awareness of what is inside and what is outside of their “place” relies on a synesthetic attention and memory stimulated by the temporary character of each sound and its abstracted visual representation, and thus of each spatial boundary.



Photo credit: David Paquette

As the project unfolds, we are experimenting with further possibilities of interaction. In January 2010, Andra McCartney took part in a soundwalk in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, accompanied by artist and scholar Kok Siew Wai and an undergraduate class



Photo credit: David Paquette

from Multimedia University (MMU). The walk was led by a faculty member from MMU who was familiar with the area, its rhythm phrased by traffic patterns, and the demands of keeping a large group together. At one point, half the group got lost and we used cellphones to find each other. While in Malaysia, McCartney was interviewed by

some of the Multimedia University students (Rashid, 2010). After her visit, she kept in touch with students through *Facebook*, and put up an excerpted version of the soundwalk on *YouTube*<sup>4</sup>, using social media to stay connected over distance of time and space. The publication of the interview in a student magazine some months later, as well as the commentary on the *YouTube* video, allowed for a more extended conversation over time through diverse channels of communication.

The walk was recorded (sound and video), and led to a second one, this time in Montreal, in April 2011. Pieces based on both soundwalks were then presented by McCartney with short vocal narratives, including song and speech, during a public event in which the two researchers (McCartney & Kok), accompanied by artist Kathy Kennedy, also performed a vocal improvisation inspired by a video and sound montage created by Kok and McCartney. The performance<sup>5</sup> provided a chance to creatively revisit the Montreal walk and allowed for a larger interaction with the public through an open session that was sent by teleconference to Malaysia. This presentation was then included on the Soundwalking Interactions blog, providing further possibilities for connections with international audiences, and taking advantage of the possibilities of social media for global sharing of ideas and experiences.

## Conclusion

*Soundwalking Interactions* evolves simultaneously through walks and other kinds of movement, as well as through listening to places, people, and to opportunities to establish channels of communication between soundwalks participants and researchers. By opening new relational possibilities and proposing alternative soundwalking practices, it attempts to reinforce the pertinence of the exploratory walk in a number of fields, such as urban studies, gender studies, communications, geography, and architecture. There exist important but promising challenges to studies of walking practices, such as the growing use of mobile communication technologies, the constant struggle to minimize environmental effects of transportation through urban planning and economic measures, as well as the increasing attention given to accessibility and disability in urban centres (Thomas, 2005). Soundwalks will undoubtedly prove invaluable to investigate the impact of these transformations on the daily perceptions of users and inhabitants, while providing people with a convivial forum for discussions about bodily experiences of places.

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## Notes

1. CRESSON (Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbain) was founded in 1979 by Jean-François Augoyard and Jean-Jacques Delétré. It is located in Grenoble, France. Its team members comprise philosophers, architects, urban planners, geographers, and engineers.

2. For a thorough analysis of Westerkamp's compositional process, see McCartney (2000).

3. Video documentation of the piece can be found online: <http://www.yorku.ca/dws/lachine2/SI-30-11-2010-A.AVI> ; <http://www.yorku.ca/dws/lachine2/SI-30-11-2010-B.AVI> .
4. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpPJoRBHcYE> .
5. See: <http://soundwalkinginteractions.wordpress.com/2011/07/22/sleepwalking-kuala-lumpur-video> .

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