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Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

LISTENING IS ACTION: A SOUNDWALK WITH HILDEGARD WESTERKAMP

LUIS VELASCO-PUFLEAU UNIVERSITY OF BERN AND MCGILL UNIVERSITY

I. COMMENTARY

Soundwalking with Hildegard Westerkamp

Through listening, we experience places, space, and time, creating connections with ourselves and with other humans and more-than-humans. The sound work *Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp* [a link to the work and transcript appear below] explores these connections within Hildegard Westerkamp's path as a composer, her thinking in the field of acoustic ecology, and her use of recording technologies in her compositional practices. It was created as part of my Marie Skłodowska-Curie research project **ONTOMUSIC**, conducted at the University of Bern and McGill University, which explores the relationship between compositional practices, political thinking, and ethical concerns in the work of living composers.

The material of *Listening is Action* consists both of Westerkamp's soundscape compositions and my recordings of the time and spaces I shared with her in April 2022. For four days, I listened to her thoughts and recorded our conversations at her home and during our soundwalks¹ in and outside the city of Vancouver, which is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.² Together, we visited and listened to the places she used to go and record more than thirty years ago, such as those now called the waterfront, Kitsilano Beach, Spanish Banks, and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The recordings she made in these places were the sources for some of her

soundscape works released in 1996 in her album *Transformations*,³ such as *A Walk Through the City* (1981) and *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989), compositions to which I have an aural connection as a long-term listener.

When soundwalking and revisiting those places with Westerkamp in 2022, I used recording technologies to create an archive of the present-day sounds of the places, as well as capture her memories of the humans and more-than-humans that inhabited and sounded them in the past. Each of her words was situated in both time and space. Westerkamp was there with me, talking about the past while listening to the present and thinking about the future. A few months later, I used these recordings as materials in a similar way to how she had previously used hers, to create a sound work in which I mixed her soundscape compositions from the 1980s with my own field recordings and her memories. Like Westerkamp, I let the sound materials “emerge” and “bring about the essential structures and sound development” of my work (Westerkamp 2002, 54). Her voice from 2022 and her soundscape compositions from the 1980s led the narrative, creating a new “musical assemblage” (Born 2005): a hybrid space in which the boundaries of sound materials, compositional intentions, authorship, and time are blurred. *Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp* explores the “network of relationships” created by sound (Solomos 2023, 19). It aims to provoke a reflection on the performative dimensions of technology and listening, and how we can use them to mediate subjectivities, time, and places.

Listening, Experiential Knowledge, and Radical Relationality

The title of my sound work *Listening is Action* draws on Westerkamp’s thinking and artistic practices. She considers listening a deliberate action that creates “an entirely new experiential knowledge” (Westerkamp 2019, 47), which can be used both for rethinking our relationships to the world and as a point of departure for new scholarly collaborations in the fields of acoustic or soundscape ecologies.⁴ Her approach to listening is rooted in and connected with the work of Murray Shafer and her fellow members of the World Soundscape Project, but also with the work of other composers, such as Pauline Oliveros’ sound practices and Deep Listening philosophy. As Westerkamp has written elsewhere, a *Sonic Meditations* workshop led by Oliveros in the late 1970s at the artist-run centre Western Front in Vancouver was a foundational experience that changed her “listening perception and meanings of music and performance” (49). For both Oliveros and Westerkamp, there is an ontological relationship between listening, knowledge, and action: “listening is directing attention to what is heard, gathering meaning, interpreting, and deciding on action” (Oliveros 2022, 30).

Listening is Action also references Hannah Arendt’s concept of action, the idea that “one can only act with the help of others and in the world” (Arendt 2018, 242). For Arendt, freedom coincides with action, and to act is to begin something in the world. However, actors cannot control the *result* of their actions: the result of any action “has the character of a story, which continues for as long as people continue to act, but the end and the result of which nobody, not even the person who began the story, can foresee or conceive” (242). People only can control the *performance* of their actions, which “remains directed toward the constantly renewed actualization of freedom, with new

beginnings constantly flowing into what has once been begun" (242). The result of listening is unpredictable and can disrupt the ways in which humans make sense of and inhabit the common world. Listening is political since it allows actors to participate in the co-creation of new narratives (Thiele 2009) and non-representational knowledge that drive them to new actions.

Listening is a relational and political action involving humans and more-than-humans. It involves and provokes particular ways of feeling and being in the world. As Sarah Amsler asserts in a recent article advocating for an "interbeing relational sensorium," "just as certain ways of being require and foster certain ways of listening, certain ways of listening allow us to sense and relate with certain ways of being" (Amsler 2023). Through listening, we experience the interconnectedness and vulnerability of our common world; and as Margaret Werry points out regarding how Arendt's thinking can be useful for considering the rights of more-than-humans, "we exist in a web of relations that enable us to build a world together as well as destroy one another" (Werry 2019, 11). Through listening we can understand and experience the radical relationality that links humans and more-than-humans in this world; "the fact that all entities that make up the world are so deeply interrelated that they have no intrinsic, separate existence by themselves" (Escobar 2020, xiii). Listening fosters our experience of radical relationality and, at the same time, initiates something new in this web of relations.

Engaging with Critical Listening Positionality

This commentary is an opportunity to engage in "critical listening positionality" (Robinson 2020, 10), and reflect on ways of listening, contradictions, and silences. Listening positionalities involve specific politics of listening (Bassel 2017) and ethics of listening (Shah, Singh, and Gibbons 2021). During our conversations, Westerkamp's thoughts were situated in both time and space, as we engaged in some of the contradictions of her work. She said that, because the Vancouver Co-operative Radio valued the voices of marginalised people, they aimed to "give voice" to these unheard voices in the 1970s. This was meaningful for the people working at the radio since, as Julie Reid points out, "having a voice relies on the prerequisite of having that voice matter, to be heard and listened to by others" (Reid and McKinley 2020, 4). But is "giving voice" enough to bring about fundamental changes? Westerkamp pointed out in our conversations that today she thinks about agency in a different way and that, to be consistent with her ethics, it would have been necessary to build relationships and collaborations with those communities.

Westerkamp also talked about the importance of listening to Indigenous voices which have been quashed for too long in Canada and all over the world. However, she recognises that she did not include Indigenous sound epistemologies and knowledge in her soundscape compositions from the 1980s and 1990s, even though she was working on the ancestral and traditional lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. As Westerkamp acknowledges elsewhere, she took too long to open her ears to these voices:

That there was a profound cultural and social silence of indigenous voices and expressions, or to say it another way, that the indigenous presence had been

relegated to specific places and contexts in the Canadian societal landscape, only dawned on me gradually when I was not such a new immigrant anymore. It was quite shocking to discover how long it took me—this immigrant of European descent, who thought she was so progressive—to open my ears, my entire being, to this cultural presence that had been silenced for too long. (Westerkamp 2019, 54)

A necessary step in learning to listen to Indigenous knowledge and contemporary struggles is to recognize their ancestral presence on their territories, acknowledge the illegal dispossession and displacement they have experienced (Barman 2007; Baloy 2016), and challenge “settler colonial forms of perception” enforced through processes of oppression and assimilation (Robinson 2020, 14). And we need to go a step further. In order to avoid any kind of appropriation or misrepresentation, it is essential to build meaningful and long-term collaborations with Indigenous thinkers and, in a dynamic of “reciprocity of thought” (Todd 2016, 19), acknowledge and incorporate their theoretical contributions in our work. The omission of Indigenous knowledge in Westerkamp’s soundscape compositions of that time is a contradiction that is also present in my sound documentary. For example, Westerkamp’s reference to the sounds of barnacles in *Kits Beach Soundwalk* would better illustrate the radical relationality and interrelated existences of humans and more-than-humans if we included the knowledge and referred to the relationships that Indigenous populations have with them.

Considering the act of listening as a means of co-construction of knowledge in the field of acoustic ecology, Westerkamp highlights our collective responsibility to create the conditions for reconciliation and decolonization: an atmosphere of mutual respect in which we can truly listen to indigenous “deep-seated knowledge of how best to live in a respectful relationship with the natural environment” (Westerkamp 2019, 60). In this way, listening is also the act of recognising “what others *have to say*,” and recognising that “they, like all human beings, have the capacity to give an account of their lives that is reflexive and continuous, an ongoing, embodied process of reflection” (Couldry 2009, 579–80).

I argue that listening is a disruptive ongoing action capable of creating meaningful narratives and sensorial knowledge.⁵ It is our responsibility as composers to recognise and include in our sound works the accounts and perspectives of people with whom we share places, time, and knowledge. As Arendt asserts, “the actual space of the political comes into being along with the stories that action generates” (Arendt 2018, 243). Paying attention to how these stories emerge and create embodied knowledge of relationships and events is at the centre of performance philosophy. Listening is an essential action for imagining and creating new, plural, and unforeseen realities. Soundscape compositions can mediate and let these realities emerge. *Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp* is an invitation to do precisely this, while listening more attentively to the multiple voices that inhabit our environments, so we can evolve our relationships with ourselves and the wider world.

Acknowledgements

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The author would like to thank *Performance Philosophy* editors and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

Notes

¹ Hildegard Westerkamp defines a soundwalk as "any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are" (Westerkamp 2022, 216).

² We acknowledge the inherent rights and jurisdiction that Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh hold to their territories.

³ *Transformations*, empreintes DIGITales, IMED 1031, 1996. Months after I finished my sound documentary, I happened upon the CBC *Ideas* episode "How opening our ears can open our minds: Hildegard Westerkamp", hosted by Paul Kennedy and produced by Jennifer Schine and Nicola Luksic, in which Westerkamp addresses similar issues (see Kennedy 2017). As I listened, I was pleasantly surprised by some similarities to the form and sonic content of my work, linked to Westerkamp's narrative and the use of her works *A Walk Through the City* (1981) and *Beneath the Forest Floor* (1992).

⁴ See Westerkamp 2002; Pijanowski et al. 2011; Solomos 2023.

⁵ This perspective further evolved during my research with survivors and families of the victims of the Paris Bataclan terrorist attack. Their listening practices in the aftermath constituted an active way to connect their past with their present in order to allow self-continuity and recover an ongoing narrative of life (see Velasco-Pufleau 2021).


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II. SOUND DOCUMENTARY

Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp



Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp
Luis Velasco-Pufleau

13 days ago
#radio documen...

Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp. Luis Velasco-Pufleau, with Hildegard Westerkamp. <https://soundcloud.com/luisvelasco-pufleau/listening-is-action>

The sound file of the documentary is available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7679234>

Notes on the sound documentary

In the sound documentary *Listening is Action*, the composer Hildegard Westerkamp engages in a conversation with Luis Velasco-Pufleau at her home in the city of Vancouver, which is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam), *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish), and *səlilwətał* (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. She talks us through her first field recordings and her soundwalking practice, her work at the Vancouver Co-operative Radio, and her participation in the World Soundscape Project, all of which started or took place in the 1970s. Furthermore, she takes us on soundwalks at places she used to go and record more than thirty years ago, such as those now called Kitsilano Beach and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, and that constitute the sources for her soundscape works *A Walk Through the City* (1981) and *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989). This sound documentary is an invitation to listen more attentively to the multiple voices that inhabit our environments in order to imagine new, plural, and unforeseen realities.

Documentary map

1. Introduction [01:05]
2. Kitsilano Beach, Vancouver [02:45]
3. *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989) [12:08]
4. Kitsilano Beach [13:13]
5. Excerpts of *A Walk Through the City* (1981) [from 13:51]

6. Recording technologies in the 1970s [14:41]
7. Vancouver Co-operative Radio [15:41]
8. Ethics of listening [19:08]
9. Politics of recording [19:29]
10. Pigeon Square, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside [22:37]
11. Excerpts of *Beneath the Forest Floor* (1992) and *Cricket Voice* (1987) [from 22:47]
12. Murray Schafer [24:43]
13. World Soundscape Project [27:16]
14. Listening *is* action [29:03]
15. Credits [30:51]

Sound Documentary Credits & Acknowledgements

Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp was recorded in the city of Vancouver, which is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. We acknowledge the inherent rights and jurisdiction that these Nations hold to their territories.

This sound work was part of the research project **ONTOMUSIC**, led by Luis Velasco-Pufleau and conducted at the University of Bern and McGill University. It was financially supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. **101027828**.

Credits:

Narrated by **Hildegard Westerkamp**

Producing, recording and editing by **Luis Velasco-Pufleau**

Music by **Hildegard Westerkamp**

Mixing by **Christophe Rault**

Lead voice by **Chanda VanderHart**

Transcript

[SOUND OF WAVES RECORDED AT KITSILANO BEACH IN VANCOUVER]

[EXCERPTS OF CRICKET VOICE (1987)]

Hildegard Westerkamp:

My name is Hildegard Westerkamp. I am a composer. I live in Vancouver. The kind of composition I do is mostly based on the recordings I make of environmental sounds. Most people call what I do soundscape composition.

Chanda VanderHart:

Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp

Hildegard [whispering]:

When there is no sound, hearing is most alert.

Hildegard [at Kitsilano Beach, Vancouver]:

Right now, I'm sitting on Kits Beach on a windy, sunny day. April 15th, 2022.

Kits Beach [Soundwalk] is a kind of an interesting piece because it just came out of nowhere for me. There was no commission, there was no plan, nothing. One evening I was just here on the beach, without a tape recorder or anything, just walking, thoughtful. And I come to this particular area here, where there's a bunch of rocks. Right now, the tide is high and they're almost covered. But at that point, the tide was a bit lower.

It was a calm evening; it was dark and the water was flat. Not like now – right now it's windy and it's chopped up. I heard these strange clicking sounds and I got very excited. So, I decided to just go back home as quickly as I could, got my tape recorder and recorded those sounds. I recorded these sounds and then... this text came to me:

[KITS BEACH SOUNDWALK (1989)]

Hildegard [at Kitsilano Beach]:

My voice-over was not recorded at Kits Beach, not like I used to do it in the soundwalking show, where I would go out and I would have this voice-over telling the radio listener where I was, and it was part of the field recording. In this case, I transferred the experience of making those field recordings into this more compositional environment, and I wrote that as a text.

Hildegard [whispering]:

When there is no sound, hearing is most alert.

Hildegard:

When I started all this, it was in the seventies. We were all so excited about the technology that we could actually record the whole world. That was completely new. We had portable equipment. My first portable cassette recorder was a Nakamichi, big machine, heavy, but we could carry it around and we could walk around and record everything.

[EXCERPTS OF A WALK THROUGH THE CITY (1981)]

Hildegard:

The original soundwalking idea, there was no idea of recording soundwalks. It was more like you just open your ears to the environment and you learn from that. When I converted that idea to have a radio program called Soundwalking, then of course you get into that question of what can you record, what can you broadcast? Right?

The Vancouver Co-operative Radio was a leftist station. The ethics there were and the politics there were that we were the kind of station that would give voice to the voices that did not have a voice in other media.

I remember when I was recording on the square outside of Co-op Radio, called Pigeon Square, which was sort of a small triangular park with benches and a few trees. Some of the alcoholics were sitting down there, singing and drinking.

[VOICES FROM THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE]

I just placed myself on one of those benches with my microphone and they came up to me.

One [of the] ethics in my mind was that I wasn't going to be a reporter who sticks the microphone into their face. I was just here to record, and they used the microphone as a mouthpiece really, to say things that went on for them. Some were complaining, some were making long speeches, but saying something, expressing something. And it felt for me at the time that it was a good thing.

[EXCERPT OF A WALK THROUGH THE CITY (1981)]

Hildegard:

When you say the ethics of listening, it's also about the ethics of recording, right?

[EXCERPT OF A WALK THROUGH THE CITY (1981)]

[FIELD RECORDING AT PIGEON SQUARE, VANCOUVER]

Hildegard:

Thinking politically, that if the CBC is giving me a commission in the contemporary music context, I would like people of that audience to hear what's going on in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. So, it was a political decision, it was a social decision.

Hildegard [at Pigeon Square, Vancouver]:

We're on Pigeon Square right now, and we are in front of this totem pole; and the totem pole at its base has a kind of a philosophical thought written. These words down here read: Sing your song, friend. Tell your story...

A man at Pigeon Square selling stuff:

I'm sorry...

Hildegard:

It's okay. I'm just reading the words down here.

The man at Pigeon Square:

Would you like to buy that?

Hildegard:

No, thank you.

Tell your story. The map we inherited isn't any good. The old roads mislead. We need a new map.

I just want to tell a story. I used to hang the microphone out of the window from the studio as the introductory music of the show for soundwalking. And so, the really clear, repetitive thing every Sunday at the beginning of my show was: this traffic stopping at the traffic light, the voices from down here – more apparent when the traffic stopped – then the traffic starting, sirens, and usually a lot of seagulls like we heard them, not many pigeons.

[EXCERPT OF A WALK THROUGH THE CITY (1981)]

Hildegard [whispering]:

When there is no sound, hearing is most alert.

[FROM THIS POINT TO THE END: EXCERPTS OF BENEATH THE FOREST FLOOR (1992) AND CRICKET VOICE (1987)]

Hildegard:

I was studying music in Germany, but also here in Vancouver. During my studies in Vancouver, I heard a lecture by Murray Schafer. He was a guest lecturer from Simon Fraser University coming over to the other university. And that lecture was kind of covering new music, but it was also

covering his travels, soundscape and noise issues, composition. He had organized it in a way that was structurally very unusual for the time. In a sort of Cagean manner, he put stands on different parts of the stage, and each music stand had a different topic. And so he would walk back and forth. You know, I came from a fairly conservative background in Germany, classical music upbringing. And here I was in the audience, and he was this guy walking back and forth on stage, seemingly randomly. It was, of course, a composed talk. And he had staged my future colleagues from the World Soundscape Project in the audience, and they seemingly interrupted him. They got up in the middle of his talk and said things like: "How many airplanes have you heard today?" "What was the first sound you heard this morning?" "How many birds have you heard today?" And it was just this sort of ear-opening experience, all surprise in terms of ideas, but also in terms of the composition of that talk. And I came out of that talk like my ears had popped open in ways I had not experienced and just never forgot that experience.

It kept accompanying me. But one day I just thought, I've got to phone Murray Schafer and see whether I can work with him because I was so fascinated. I called him and he invited me to come up to Simon Fraser and we had a long conversation, and a few weeks later I was hired.

That was at the stage of the completion of the Vancouver Soundscape Project, where we had explored Vancouver as a sonic environment. Vancouver from the soundscape perspective, really one of the first studies that approached an urban environment from the listening and sound perspective. Then he was writing *The Tuning of the World*, his book now titled *Soundscape*, and I was his researcher there with the other colleagues from the World Soundscape Project.

I learned everything. We learned everything we could about sound from all perspectives, because we also wanted to be able to speak to other scientists. That was Schafer's vision: we need to work together. It was based on the idea that we have an ecological problem with the soundscape, we have noise, we have to deal with this issue. And the really revolutionary idea was that we weren't fighting noise, but we were making a point of listening to it and trying to understand it through perception. And that was a very new idea at the time.

All the anti-noise fights and studies were fighting noise, that was what we used to call a negative approach. As we said, we took a positive approach. We said, okay, let's open up to it, let's listen to it, and let's see what our perception can tell us. Along with all the studies that were done about noise as well, viscerally begin to understand what's going on in our sound environment.

We have the power as composers and musicians to learn to design the soundscape in a way that it's more humane, perhaps, or less damaging to living beings.

Personally, learning to listen like that, something very profound changes in terms of your relationship to the world. We need to learn to listen to the environment, learn to study the sound environment, be in touch with scientists, architects, different professions, so that we can actually recognize that there is an issue and make changes.

In this time of climate change, the pandemic, it is beginning to make even more sense that we need to learn to listen and create a new relationship to the environment. And listening can really be an agent for changing relationships between who we are and how we live inside this environment, how we take care of nature.

There is an agency in listening. Listening itself is an action that has its influence on how we live and how we act in life.

[CREDITS]

Chanda VanderHart:

Listening is Action: A Soundwalk with Hildegard Westerkamp

A sound documentary by Luis Velasco-Puffleau

Listening is Action was recorded in the city of Vancouver, which is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. The authors acknowledge the inherent rights and jurisdiction that these Nations hold to their territories.

Narrator voice: Hildegard Westerkamp, recorded by Luis Velasco-Puffleau, on 14th, 15th and 16th of April 2022

Soundscape compositions Hildegard Westerkamp:

- *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989)

Excerpts from

- *Cricket Voice* (1987)

- *A Walk Through the City* (1981)

- *Beneath the Forest Floor* (1992)

The compositions are part of Hildegard Westerkamp's album *Transformations*, released by empreintes DIGITales in 1996.

Original idea, additional field recordings and composition: Luis Velasco-Puffleau

Mix: Christophe Rault

Lead voice: Chanda VanderHart

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Biography

Luis Velasco-Pufleau is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellow at the University of Bern and McGill University, as well as an affiliate professor at the Université de Montréal. As a musicologist and musician, his research focuses on the relationships between music, ethics, and politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He is also interested in exploring the political dimension of sound communities, aural memories, and wartime sonic environments. He is the editor of the open access research blog *Music, Sound and Conflict*, an editorial board member of the journals *Transposition* and *Filigrane*, and a member of the *Swiss Young Academy*.

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