

WHEN CANNONS ROAR THE SOUNDS OF THEIR SURROUNDINGS

Ashok Mathur

One of the more memorable images of the 1960s counter-cultural revolution was the placing of flowers in the barrels of guns, signifying both the potential for peaceful resistance and the absurdity of military muscle in the face of social change. Sculptor and conceptual thinker Matthew Walker has taken this to a new level in his massive Device for the Emancipation of Landscape, a cannon constructed of wood, concrete, vinyl and metal, weighing in at more than a tonne and measuring two metres in diameter. Its beautiful craftsmanship is matched by its power, but unlike a traditional weapon that might catapult heavy iron shot into the sides of enemy warships, Walker's

fence /crowd control barrier, positioned up on a hill and strategic point such that bystanders are not inundated and quite possibly injured by the sound explosion. And while the intent is much different, the listener will be aware that this very act is a type of violence in itself, and that the state, in Canada and globally, has indeed weaponized sound systems in recent years, often to intimidate or disrupt what it considers to be entrenched dissidents – remember Oka and any number of circumstances, military and otherwise, where intense sound is used to deprive the targeted group of sleep in preparation for a ground assault.

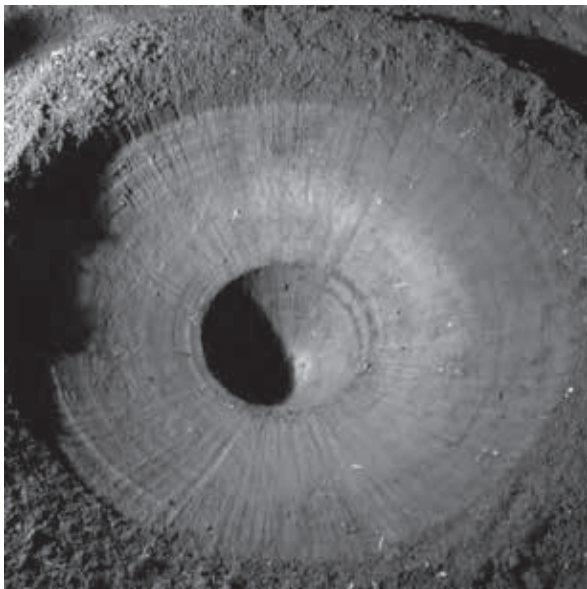
But what Walker has accomplished here is to create an experience for viewers/listeners who will undoubtedly reimagine what they know of the War of 1812, certainly as a nation-building enterprise. Its expansionist logic, aggressive Great Lakes naval tactics, and formation through imperial and colonial powers, led to (and from) land speculation, shored up by a growing mercantile class, and precursing the industrial movement marked by one of our major nation-asserting myths, the building of the railroad. But those experiencing the pastoral sounds emitted from the Device for the Emancipation of Landscape will be asked to remember that Hamilton, now a city of industry, was once a wetland, and that while Walker is firing such soundscapes from recorded material, his is really a project of temporal and aural displacement. Two centuries ago, the call of wetland birds and buzz of insect and amphibious life is precisely what a person would hear standing on this self-same spot.

The device itself is an ingenious inversion of a traditional cannon, the grandfather of mass destruction weaponry. Walker employs a parabolic reflector that collects, then realigns soundwaves and creates a cone of sound of significant magnitude – yet because of the physics of sound and construction of the device, the volume for those standing beside or behind the cannon is barely audible. The sound is directed, 'fired' at a target, which is much different than the random flow of audio as we are used to. Is this, then the sounds of history, of nature, fighting back? Or perhaps we make a perspectival leap and think that these sounds, rather than mimicking colonial aggression, are simply asserting (and re-asserting) a presence, much akin to the mode of resistance employed by many oppressed or colonized communities, whose very act of self-assertion is an act of resistance. And through this all, as listeners we must ask that all-important question – who is the intended audience: a general public yearning to reconnect to their histories, an industrial complex that

has overrun natural environments in the name of progress, or maybe even national interests who would glorify war even as its deleterious consequences are always and ever apparent? It is far too simplistic to suggest that Walker or his device are launching a call to return to an era of the past. But the role of the artist in our social scene is not to suggest policy, but to provide a clarifying lens – or, in this case, a re-tuned ear – to the current reality.

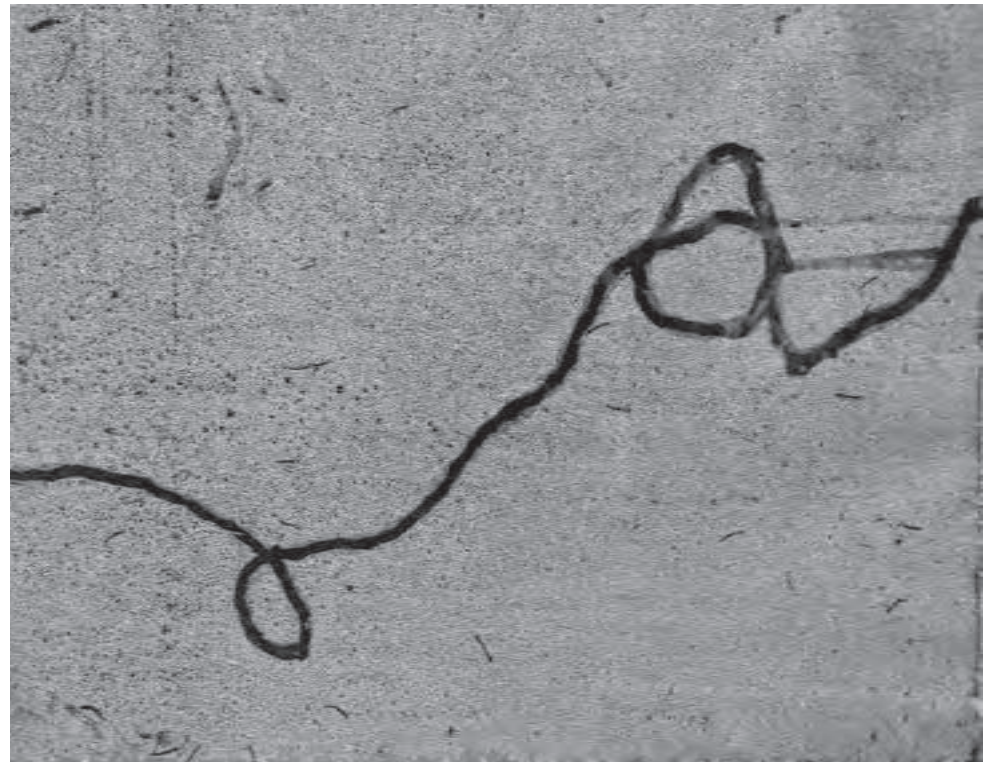
The local landscape and its fauna played a significant role during the 1812-14 period as the region was still largely an isolated, loosely populated, forested landscape. Thus, the thematic exploration of the broader contexts brings the region's geography and natural voices into the 1812 commemoration and provides the background content for a discussion of local history that is formed out of the period. The audio is packaged into 10-minute tracks that are fired in co-ordination with the event's Parade of Sails, a naval tradition of sounding cannons from shore in response to ships arrival at the harbour. Subsequent to the opening ceremonies, the cannon is fired at appointed times throughout the weekend from its set up at the centre of the commemoration grounds. Incorporating shoreline sounds to evoke Macassa Bay (Burlington Bay/Hamilton Harbour) before it was opened to the Lake, this intervention opens up a discussion about the natural state of the bay during the war and before the development that was generated shortly after.

More than two decades ago, and partly in response to the aforementioned Oka crisis, artist Rebecca Belmore designed a similarly grand scale audio project, a wooden megaphone entitled *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, with the artist's stated intention to locate Aboriginal voice on the land and to hear the voice of protest as an aesthetic and poetic one. Today, Walker's Device for the Emancipation of Landscape poses a similar frame, rejuvenating sounds of the land that have given way to urban and industrial noise. And yet by giving voice, quite literally, to the sounds that once pervaded the landscape, the artist opens up new ways of seeing, new ways of hearing, and perhaps new ways of understanding the places we inhabit.



device outputs sound, not artillery, and its purpose is not aggression but a radically alternative reconsideration of colonial history, geography, and the fabric of our social identity.

Ironically, in its current manifestation, the cannon's 'target' is conventional and befitting its historical purpose – the tall-ships that are visiting the shores of Lake Ontario as part of a period re-enactment and commemoration of the War of 1812. But sailors will be subjected to a different barrage as the cannon will project collages of field-recorded sounds Walker has made in natural environments, the aural assault constituted of sounds from wetlands and wildlife. Walker initiated this project in 2012 when the device was aimed at an armouries building in downtown Hamilton, which sits in a location that was once a vast wetland. But at this stage, it is aimed at tall-ships as they arrive at Hamilton Harbour for the commemoration. "I very much consider it a cannon in that it is 'fired' and has conceptual targets, mainly of colonial, cultural or environmental interest," Walker says, noting that the volume produced can be so loud that he has to implement a 'safe-firing' zone replete with security



Images courtesy of the artist

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