



Volume 17
Issue 2
2023

Artist Interview
Boundary Loss

Jonathan Kawchuk & Suze Berkhout



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In this interview, Jonathan and Suze discuss their research-creation collaboration within the *Frictions of Futurity and Cure in Transplant Medicine* project. As a sensory ethnography of solid organ transplant based in Toronto, Canada, the Frictions project uses different artistic practices to explore sensory experiences in transplantation, which are often excluded as being relevant sources of knowledge for the field. Jonathan joined the research team over the course of a weekend, facilitating sound walks and sonic immersion in transplant-related clinical areas. Jonathan recorded using a mix of regular microphones and microphones that record inaudible electromagnetic signals from machinery and convert the signals into sounds we can hear. His field recordings have been developed into a soundscape and the recordings and our exploration of them have contributed to the body of research that the Frictions project works with.

November 12, 2022: Day of Recording

Suze: Jonathan, you recorded in a number of different spaces in the hospital where transplant patients and family members transit: acute care spaces like the hospital wards and the intensive care unit, but also everyday spaces like the hallways, the elevator lobby, and the visitor's atrium. Any reflections?

Jonathan: I was prepared technically to go into the experience, but being gowned up next to people suffering, people who might not make it, it was pretty heavy. From the standpoint of recording, it's a weird mix. It's not nice. It's actively brutal, it's mundane, then there are some positive [sound] experiences, all together. The mundane sounds, I think those were the most hopeful part of all of it. [It's like], I'll take boring over precarious. In a lot of ways, it's what I imagine it's like for people in the hospital.

Suze: What other ways do the sonic qualities in the recordings reflect something about the experiences within the space, do you think?

Jonathan: The hospital environment is really distressing. [I mean], people are dying; you should be anxious and distressed. The sonic environment is also stark, sterile. The sound experience in the hospital isn't going to reveal a truth that is easier to handle than that, because it's not easy to handle. The essence of the thing is difficult.

There was a way that recording captured this. The sounds of dialysis—it's a boring thing that takes forever. But it's also transhuman and a miracle. The electromagnetic recordings—it's electrical hail and droning, but then you'd hit two droning things next to each other that are a fifth apart and suddenly it's sonorous, pleasant.

Suze: What did doing the work of field recording reveal for you? Any surprises?

Jonathan: The hospital can be a magic place where magic happens, or it can have so much mistrust and pain. It was surprising to go into everyone's room. I was thinking, "Why is he letting me do [this recording]?" But what's happening to him is, so many people are already doing weird stuff anyway, so it's like, "Sure. Do whatever measurements you want." If you have only a tiny bit of energy for self-advocacy, where do you aim? How you figure out what you push at is very hard, I think.

September 6, 2023: Listening to the Soundscape

Suze: What was the sketching process like, to create the soundscape?

Jonathan: It was interesting. It was about finding a structure, thinking about timing, the narrative arc. It's a mix of electromagnetic [sounds] and actual open air. Together they give depth to one another.

Suze: It's quite something to listen to. It's hard to hear. There are definitely parts that are uncomfortable and unexpected.

Jonathan: It's all unpleasant, even the non-electronic sounds. They make a harsh soundscape.

Suze: I remember when we were recording that you had reflected on how, sonically, the hospital is very sterile. I think I have a sense of that here.

Jonathan: And how do you work with that? There's no sense of new life. The soundscape doesn't give you a sense of what is living. But it has this almost amniotic feel, like you're in a critical, sterile place, waiting to go through the sliding doors.

Suze: Any sense of time, tempo, flow, or temporality that you had when you worked on creating this?

Jonathan: There isn't much in the recordings or the soundscape that gives you a sense of time. There's a stasis that is sonically present. Everything is regulated, monitored, static. It felt like I wouldn't know what time of day it was, sonically.

Suze: I think that's often what it's like when you've been in an acute care hospital setting for any amount of time, too.

Jonathan: I'm surprised with it. "Happy with it," is a hard thing to say. It's a hard listen. But it captures something about disorientation, feeling both overwhelming and underwhelming, and hidden layers. There's this internal, dream-like quality and the unfamiliar—although it's not spontaneous. It's not what you'd expect. The microphone, in recording, sometimes is called the "prosthetic ear." But these tools [like the microphone] only kind of represent what you might be hearing. This is like the transhumanist version, with the electromagnetic signals especially, which speaks, in a way, to what it means and what goes into people getting new organs.

About the Sound Artist

Jonathan Kawchuk is an award-winning wildlife recordist, composer, vocalist, and sound artist. In his artistic work, Kawchuk attempts to capture the resonances of natural surroundings and explore the recursive, interactive, and relational aspects of sound in the field. He has scored many films, including *Memento Mori*, for which he was nominated for a 2017 Alberta Film and Television Award in the category of Best Original Musical Score. Email: jonathan.kawchuk@gmail.com

About the Interviewer

Suze Berkhout is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and an affiliate of the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology at the University of Toronto. She is an early career clinician-investigator and practicing psychiatrist. Her program of research in feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS) utilizes ethnographic, narrative and arts-based methods to explore social and cultural issues impacting access and navigation through health care systems. Suze is also an Editor at *Ars Medica*. Email: suze.berkhout@uhn.ca