

Transcript: Kevin Curtis-Norcross

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**Speaker 1: Troy David Ouellette**

Hi, I'm your host, Troy David Ouellette and welcome to another episode of Media Art Other. This is the podcast where we discover the various practices of media arts professionals who work in everything from sound art and video to artists and curators who explore the curation of media art theory. Media Art Other was generously funded by the Humanities Research Institute at Brock University. The podcasts are intended to enhance our understanding of otherness using media art examples as a platform for expressing differences that include everything from: Identity, Disability Arts, Media Art Design and Interfaces, Environmental Otherness, Indigeneity and Post Colonialism. Each Artist and Curator brings a unique perspective and scholarship to the fields of curation and media art practice. Included in the webpage will be links to the researchers and organizations associated with each guest.

In this third episode I am pleased to present Sound Artist and Researcher Kevin Curtis-Norcross. For those listeners not familiar with sound art I want to firstly say that the term itself was coined in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although, there were examples of collectives and artist working with sound in the 1960's According to Judy Dunaway's paper on the history of Sound Art, the term "began to be used loosely in the avant-garde scene in the 1970s." and subsequently "was used interchangeably with other terms such as sonic art, audio art, sound poetry, sound sculpture, and experimental music (just to name a few)." I will post a number of links in the show notes for further research if needed.

I am extremely happy to have as my third guest Kevin Curtis Norcross.

Over the course of his career he has captured forest ecologies in 18 countries over the past 40 years. From Sweden to central and South America and across Canada - Kevin has documented various ecosystems that draw our attention to the real wonders of the world - those being the life forces of insects, animals and plants that populate and continue to negotiate the changing biodiversity in the Anthropocene. Kevin's recordings are usually done in an acoustically uncontrolled environments (traditionally called the "field") hence field recording, which presents various challenges even to professional sound artists.

In the work of Kevin Curtis-Norcross we get a glimpse of how biodiverse our planet really is because we are following the narrative of the species that make up our surroundings. His acoustic ecology recordings also act as a record of the vanishing sonic environments that have flourished over millennia to be captured in the here and now.

And now I present Kevin Curtis-Norcross...

## Speaker 2: Kevin Curtis-Norcross

My name is Kevin Curtis-Norcross. I was born in Cornwall, Ontario, in 1963, one month after a particularly devastating Atlantic hurricane season, during the burial of American president John F Kennedy. I grew up in the pulp and paper mill city Cornwall, at the Humber River Valley in Toronto, on the flanks of Nose Hill in Calgary, and in the mostly rural city of Woodstock. My father was a teacher, and every summer, my brothers and I would cram into the family car and travel through Canada and the USA. From the back seats and campgrounds, we took in the sights and sounds of flora and fauna and the topographies that housed them.

I studied art at Fanshawe College and went on to earn a Fine Art Degree from NSCADU.

I am, and perhaps always have been, interested in the merging of scientific thought and art — particularly in terms of processes, and I like to think about provocations that come from that. In the months following graduation, I exhibited a piece that I keep returning to, to mine for process and ideas. Titled "Emergence," it used exterior photo and temperature-controlled switches to activate field recorded audio signals in the listening space but only when the conditions were met for the sounds to occur in the environment outside. Temperature, light levels, atmospheric pressure, humidity, etc., all act as regulators in life processes, and by using them as triggers for audio recordings, I can create a relationship of contexts. For example, flies can only fly when their body temperature is 10 degrees celsius or above, so a calibrated temperature switch might trigger the sound of flies, or there is the potential for silence. I was increasingly drawn to this idea of contingency, such as Jacques Monod's Molecular Biological Processes or John Cage's indeterminacy, it being the *interlocutor* in the presentation of my work. After all, our existence is at the behest of it.

After NASCADU, I got a position facilitating in an art studio that served war veterans at Parkwood Institute in London, Ontario. Having a steady income allowed me to travel extensively with the goal to explore and capture different—mostly tropical—ecologies with sketches, paintings, macro photography, dead specimen collection, and most relevantly audio recordings..... sound insertion .....(Danum Valley, Sabah, Malaysia- cicada recording).

These recordings form an audio library spanning 40 years and 18 countries out of which many ideas have sprouted as well as an awareness of very large science-based concepts such as the earth's shifting tectonic plates as shapers of topography, and therefore, of the sounds that occur on them today.

My workplace was situated on the morainal confluence of 2 lobes of a glacier during the Wisconsin glaciation 11,000 years ago. The remnant forest growing there now has mixed hydrology with hydric and mesic habitats. I spent many lunch hours exploring the landscape in its details. It was there when I first noticed dying ash trees (*Fraxinus* sp) and learned of the introduced beetle, the emerald ash borer (*Agrilus planipennis*). Transported to North America through global trade using wood products in the early 2000s, the beetle spread through eastern forests killing ash trees and altering forest ecology along the way.....

Woodpecker populations increased as their nutritional resources, beetle larvae under the bark of the trees, were in abundance. More food for offspring and bigger summer broods. It was a time of plenty for some. I wanted to try to sonically capture this sweeping forest change starting with the trees themselves. I set up an array of narrow piezo sensors in small holes around the trunk, from 17' to the ground, of a dying ash tree to listen to its death.....sound insertion.....

With this "field sound sketch," I tried to capture the beetle larvae circuitously chewing through the cambium layer, the fluid transport tissue of the tree.

There is a global scope of *Fraxinus* sp. depletion and the expanding range of *Agrilus planipennis*.

I traveled around Sweden in 2017 on a field recording course with Jez Riley French and Chris Watson and spent the week recording in the south. I was looking for ash trees to see if the beetle had arrived there. I bound contact mics to the trunks of ash trees, and on a windy day, I made this recording ..... sound insertion.....

Back in my studio, while studying photos and audio recordings, I experimented with a small metal music box mechanism that uses a plasticized strip punched with holes for the score. Still interested in Ash trees and their invasive beetles, the random arrangement of *Agrilus p.* exit holes on the tree trunks gave me the idea of using them as a score for the music boxes. I wrapped a dead ash tree with clear packing tape, the same width as the plasticized strips used in the music boxes, and traced the exit holes of the beetles. After transcribing the marks of the holes into perforations on the strips and looping them, they could be played continuously. I built acoustically resonating boxes out of ash wood for three mechanisms and mounted them on small tables of the same wood. Three people could stand together and play. ....sound insertion.....

The work imposes a sort of cultural filter onto the biology of the beetle and its facilitated global incursion. I thought of this piece as a poignant epitaph to the tree's 11,000-year continuum.

The complexity of interbiotic relationships that have evolved over the 4.6 billion-year history of this planet and its evolutionary pulses provides limitless creative potential. And for me, the provocation of the anthropogenic instability that we impose generates an emotional response. I'm caught between passion for understanding how the world functions and the frustration with how humanity inflicts itself upon it.

It's fodder for my creative process.

### **Speaker 1: Troy David Ouellette**

I want to thank you, our listener, as we looked at the work of Kevin Curtis-Norcross.

If you want to connect with some of the projects that Kevin has been working on please follow some of the show notes and links provided on the Media Art Other podcasting site.

I want to again thank you for taking the time to listen to Kevin's extraordinary journey and achievements and how he has been able to draw our attention to these precious vanishing sonic environments. In many ways Kevin's important work help to establish our place in the world as part of a larger chain. As we learn from the pandemic and from the Emerald Ash Boar - with the luxuries of global trade come the wider consequences of deterritorialized and destabilized ecologies. As Kevin spoke about his last music box work, presented here, he talked about how "The work imposes a sort of cultural filter on the biology of the beetle and its facilitated global incursion - I thought of this piece as a poignant epitaph to the tree's 11,000 continuum." After listening to Kevin's research-based productions I was reminded of the importance of experimentation, field work, and experiential learning. I was intrigued by the way he translated sounds as a kind of sonofication.

I hope you have enjoyed listening to Kevin Curtis-Norcross.

In this fourth episode, I am pleased to present Anderson Wilson Projects – comprised of Curator, Shannon Anderson and Design Professor, Jay Wilson.

Both will speak about their collaborative curatorial process, the artists they have worked with, and talk about their digital web-work produced through the pandemic. This talk shows how they use an organic way of working to generate ideas. Until next time, stay safe and be well.