# The Hear Us Through… Collective: A Student-Driven, Community-Based Cacophony

*Mike Hansen*

**Abstract**

To create an eco-futuristic community-based art project, PhD student Mike Hansen collaborated with high school art teacher June Sulley, and six of Sulley's students, to form The Hear Us Through… Collective, (HUTC). HUTC collectively developed ideas and constructed visual components to build The Cacophony Project – kinetic sound sculptures depicting a dystopian scenario in which the university's protected Arboretum acreage is rezoned for urban development. Prioritizing the mounting important of such protected areas in the face of climate change, the collective constructed works that are relatively eco-friendly, constructed with found, thrifted, and re-used materials. Ultimately, The Cacophony Project became a vehicle of caring that culminated in an expression of the students' environmental rights. This project allows the students a public art platform to express their own climate change stories through publicly displayed kinetic sound sculptures. The result is a kind of eco-futuristic fable. As H.J. Bickham stresses in *The Fable as Literature*, "a fable gets past the garrison of resident assumptions, the mind's defenses, to bring home its point or raise its questions: it is a tactical manoeuvre to prompt new thinking." (Bickham p. xi) In The Cacophony Project, HUTC presented an acoustemological approach to knowing that expanded the understandings of both the participants, and those who viewed the work. Incorporating an auto-ethnography methodology, by developing a Practiced Based Research (PBR) based on R. Lyle Skain's 2018 paper *Creative Practice in Research* model. The research is built on a process of documenting the process of the art works' developmental stages, as well as close scrutiny of my past works, through capturing the development of the sculptures through video recording, and interviews of the participants. Some of this material was included in a documentary video that chronicles and archives the project. These sculptures are a reflection of the reality these students are experiencing in the face of a provincial government bent on destruction of preserved areas in their home city.

**Introduction: The LP as a Locus of Artistic Research and Practice**

I'm a visual artist who creates and exhibits paintings and sculptures. I am also a musician who uses sound as a medium. In fact, I consider sound to be the foundation of my research.

I have been exhibiting sound works since 1992: they are typically participatory. I have a special fascination with (vinyl) records as a medium for art production. In his essay "Noise for the People," Toronto arts curator and writer Earl Miller writes of my use of LPs (long-playing records): "He transforms them into objects whose meaning extends beyond the music played on them… At the same time, by having the records appear to hold no use value, that is, appearing unplayable, he satirizes their commodity status (Miller p.4)."

For me the record is an *objet d'art* that stores much more than just sounds. It is a vehicle for art production outside, as Miller writes, their "commodity status."




**Figure 1** - Examples of Mike Hansen's records as "Objet d'Art".

My practice investigates not only records, but also the machines that play them. By 1992, the record player had been effectively expunged from its decades-long role of providing domestic entertainment. I undertook a project of reclaiming the record player, giving it a new status as an important element of participatory arts practice.

This venerable entertainment unit had been replaced, first by the CD player and then by the virtual (even ephemeral) format, the MP3 (in recent years of course, with renewed interest in vinyl records, both the LP and the record player are enjoying a major renaissance). I chose to reclaim and rehabilitate the record player as an all-important tool for my own art research and production. It is an invention of considerable haptic appeal: a modern object with many moving parts that has been designed in many different forms. At the same time it is a vessel for nostalgia, representing, as it does, a comfortable familiarity in fast-changing times. For many years now, my artistic practice has incorporated the record player and its shell – its shapes and forms – as bases for a number of works that place it at the centre of the act of witnessing, both passive and participatory.

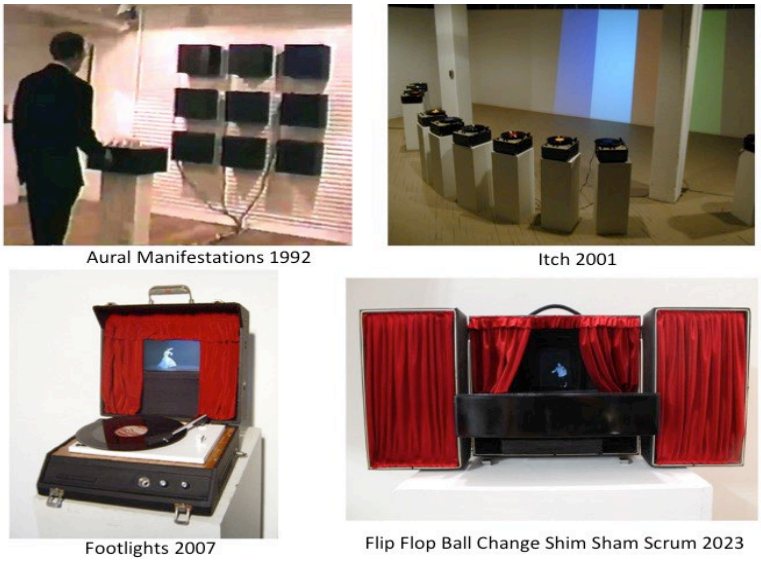



**Figure 2** - Examples of record players used in Mike Hansen's practice.

In our digital times, the information we store is a kind of abstraction: it exists in CPUs and microchips, in a reality separate from our everyday existence. When I look at a vinyl record, however, I see its information by the grooves cut into the object: it is a concrete thing. The vinyl record is a physical object that is capable of holding and distilling information within an aural context. Its content is visible, solid, stored in a foundation of, in most instances, vinyl. It possesses a body, a physical substance that is essential to its operation. It demonstrates that we exist.

The importance of the player and the record is ritual: there is a performativity involved in the vinyl record and its playback. Beverland and Fernandez write that the physicality of vinyl facilitates:

> The notion that performativity is repetitive. This is because it is the repetitive, ritualistic physical interactions between possessor and possession that bind them together. Physical interactions with a material object create strong, intimate connections between the object and a person. (Beverland & Fernandez p. 4)

**I Studied It, Now I Had to Do It!**

My story of building a community through the art collective model reflects the democratic pedagogical ideals of Paulo Friere. His thinking can be fundamental to both the concept of relational aesthetics in forming co-authorship, and to the development of an acoustemological relationship between viewer and object.

In spring 2025 I was in the second year of a PhD program at the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. To complete my coursework for IMPR*6020: Arts-Based Community-Making, I was required to create a community-based artwork.

So far in the semester, we had focused on more conventional academic areas such as pedagogy and archiving, but the course also foregrounded community building, and its importance in fighting oppression. To launch and undertake the project I needed, as a researcher-artist, a definitive research question. As my brain stewed, stirred by the comprehensive readings that I was required to digest over the past year as part of the arts-based community-building class work, I devised a combination of the elements around me. The project came to incorporate a group of students from the John F Ross Collegiate

Vocational Institute in Guelph, as well as an *in situ* exhibition location, the University of Guelph's Arboretum.

The Arboretum is a 400-acre tract of land, largely wooded, that has long been essential both as a site for the university's various conservation, education, and research programs, and as a public park. I began to devise a way in which a protected area used for university research could be developed into a comprehensive project to reflect a research question that examines an unfortunate possibility:

*What would happen if the Arboretum were to be developed?*

The question evolved from a current provincial governmental scandal. The Premier of Ontario, elected through campaigns generously funded by property developers, opened for development nominally protected lands in the province's Greenbelt. If this went through (and it has been stalled by mass protests), would it follow that any desirable plot of land could be confiscated and sold for development projects? How would these practices affect my children's (secondary school-aged) generation and their cohort? At the same time, when natural areas are being increasingly recognized as buffers against the forces of climate change, how would such exploitation of these areas affect the prospects of upcoming and future generations?

Just prior to this assignment, I was invited to produce a whirligig for an exhibition at a contemporary art gallery in my hometown of Hamilton, Ontario. The work was to function kinetically, but as the show took place indoors, during the winter, it would use an electric fan to propel the sculpture. I wanted this work to reflect my practice so I finally was able to design and construct a whirligig that propelled a record player.

**The Whirligig and Folkloric Tradition**

Before I tell the story of the Hear Us Through… Collective – and how these young student collaborators helped improve on my initial concept – let's examine the whirligig and its centuries-long history. According to historian and whirligig enthusiast Ander S. Lunde,

> Middle Age tapestries show children playing with hobbyhorse whirligigs with 4-bladed propellers at the end. George Washington, riding back to Mt. Vernon at the conclusion of the Revolution, brought some "whilagigs (sic)" for Martha's grandchildren in his saddle bags (sic). In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, human figures waving their arms, swords, shovels, and other implements, were popular whirligigs. (Lunde p.8)

The whirligig is seen as a folk art toy, as Lunde continues in their essay, "Essentially the whirligig is a wind toy or wind machine. It twists and turns in the wind, and there is a propeller connected with it somewhere, either as a power source or as a decoration." (Lunde p.8) The whirligig has basically been seen as a decorative accessory. Lunde also expresses the variety of whirligigs and the essential components:

> Historically, there are four identifiable types of whirligigs. Arm-wavers twirl their arms while twisting in the wind. Winged whirligigs, birds real or imaginary, spin their wings in opposite directions while remaining sideways to the wind. Weathervane types always point into the wind; a propeller or other moving part makes them whirligigs… Mechanical whirligigs use propellers to power an activity through drive shafts, gears, and connecting rods. (Lunde p.8)



**Figure 3** - A variety of Whirligigs

**The Hear Us Through… Collective - The Beginning**

Working with the Arboretum, as a non-resident of Guelph, I asked for secondary school recommendations with comprehensive art programs. This fortunately led to John F. Ross Collegiate Vocational Institute and art teacher June Sulley. A wonderful community was formed for this project, made up of five volunteer grade 12-art students along with art teacher June Sulley and myself.




**Figure 4-**John F. Ross Collegiate Vocational Institute

**Evening the Playing Field**

In preliminary discussions with June, I stated that a key objective was to dismantle the hegemonic structure of the classroom; between the elders – June and myself – and the grade 12 students. We both agreed that Friere's educational "non-banking" ideals were best applied through mutual knowledge sharing: student to teacher, teacher to student.

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Friere p. 80)

In my own teaching over the years I have always used this kind of pedagogical thinking, believing it to be a democratic way to create a post-secondary classroom, in fitting with my practice of co-authoring; although, until my PhD experience I didn't know its provenance.

The primary objective of this endeavor is to create agency in all the participants, including myself, through the successful completion of the work. We hope that the work's beholders discover a sense of agency through the messaging presented in the installed artworks. Sara, a grade twelve student in the collective stated; "I think that–what good art pieces do is make them think about something… I hope they come up with their own ideas a little bit. But I really hope that we kinda get the same message across to people."

This process of sharing knowledge is much about an equal footing in the project, allowing all the participants' voices to be heard loud and clear through their contributions to the work. Our strategy to do so was to become a community of dedicated artisans to develop a publicly displayed series of sculptures that will stand up to the outdoors, and to what was becoming a turbulent spring in Ontario.

**The Ups and Downs of Tech and Time**

For the five students, the workshops qualified as the extracurricular volunteer hours that they needed in order to graduate. Our initial meeting took place February 5, 2025, shortly after the start of the high school's winter semester.

It began with a failed presentation of the proposed project. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. The computer didn't work so we couldn't show the PowerPoint presentation. It was the end of the school day, so all the students were restless. I ended up trying to explain the project with assistance of June. Thank goodness for the cell phone as I was able to take the students to my website to view and watch my prototype in action. Out of the meeting ten students volunteered, and in the end five became members of the collective.

The project itself had a tight deadline, as we had agreed with the University of Guelph Arboretum to exhibit April 5, 2025. June and I constructed a timeline with the students. In our first meeting we discussed shared responsibilities: the sounds to be collected, and the aesthetic visual symbols as part of the sculptures to help beholders understand the sounds.



**Figure 5** - Flourishes used to add symbolism.

I also shared the process and timelines needed to physically cut the sounds onto the records need to fulfill the project. We would also need to glean the materials needed to build the whirligigs. All of these issues were solved within a 7-week period, as March break, a week-long student holiday, aka spring break, needed to be taken into consideration. We ended up with a meager 10.5 hours of collective working time.

Once the students had joined the project, I proposed that the group including June and I become an art collective. The students were asked to name the collective and together we became the Hear Us Through… Collective. We named our goal The Cacophony Project.

Here we are:




**Figure 6**- Sarah, Rebecca, Tana, Maggie, June, Mike, Maya

**Methodology**

We used an auto-ethnography methodology, developing our own Practiced Based Research (PBR) based on the model of R. Lyle Skain's paper *Creative Practice in Research* (Skains 2018). The research is built on a process of documenting the process of the art works'

developmental stages, as well as close scrutiny of my past works through capturing the development of the sculptures through video recording and interviews of the participants, concluding in a documentary. My initial thought was to use social media as a documentation tool, though The Brant District School Board where the school is located has a strict policy regarding social media use that prohibited it as a tool for documentation. To replace this, I used my phone to record video of the processes leading to and including both the works *in situ,* and a research presentation. The video recordings were beneficial as the process of witnessing as a form of qualitative data collection. Skains notes that scholar Harold Garfinkel in his 1967 text, *Studies in Ethnomethodology,* favors observing activities… essentially, activities that are familiar and practiced, even those with significant cognitive loads – then making the activities visible by applying a 'special motive' to make them of 'theoretic interest.' (Skains p. 82-97) In this instance, the choice of climate change action through environmentally sensitive kinetic sculptures qualified as a "special motive" re. Garfinkel; we also felt that this messaging could foster public interest in the project.

As shown in the documentary https://www.mikehansenart.com/hear-us-through-documentary, I developed qualitative research methods through interviews with each of the participants in the collective. I formulated open-ended questions that gave interviewees room to state opinions, and to express their thoughts about what effects the project and the resulting artworks might have on themselves, along with the hope of effective messaging to the community at large. My story plays a large role in my research methodologies. My story and history are portrayed through auto ethnography, using a history of my practice through past writings, video documentation and critical critique through public reviews and publications. These descriptions of my works reflect cognitive processes, though the works' development or as Skains points to, as 'long term memory'. (L. Flower and Hayes, Skains p. 82-97)

As I stated in the "I Studied It…" section of this paper, this was a culmination of a two-semester-long class in community arts building. Throughout the process I presented a number of essays and presentations, both to my cohort and to a group of scholars and community members, who critiqued the project and the research. This all concluded with a final paper, a presentation and screening of the documentary to my cohort and professor. I'm happy to say the project got an "A".

**How to Build a Community When You're a Lone Wolf?**

I see myself as the lone wolf artist. I have been working alone for over thirty years, creating works in my studio away from the collaborative ideas of others. My work is largely self-, un-government funded; besides teaching, I have worked menial jobs such as retail sales, or physically difficult jobs such as building and renovation, in order to finance my work.

This solitary work environment has generated a form of self-reliant critique, creating and aestheticizing my autonomous production. This leads to self-directed solutions formed through research, improvisation, and what we might call keeping your wits about you.

At the same time, although I work alone, the idea of collaboration is profoundly important to me as an artist, improviser and educator, and I often create temporary communities through the shared experiences of my participatory works, (I also perform as an improvising percussion and electronics artist, and have recorded with touring UK saxophonist John Butcher and the Hamilton-based ensemble Ghost Variables). A number of my installations and sculptures ask beholders to co-author the works through their participatory actions. Some of these works are performative: the beholder can be asked to scratch a record or walk to the adulation of fans and the paparazzi through the spectacle associated with the red carpet.

**Participation is Key**

Nicolas Bourriaud stresses his philosophy of co-authoring in contemporary art making as a democratization of the aesthetic ideal of "give everyone their chance" (Bourriaud p. 58). This idea of giving everyone the opportunity to play a role is a democratic ideal that is reflected in my participatory sound art works. In her 2012 book *Artificial Hells,* Claire Bishop also examines the act of co-authorship. She argues, "the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*… while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder', is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant.*" (Bishop p. 2)

Through the examination of my practice, and these acts of co-authorship, I was surprised to discover that I may not have been the lone wolf that I considered myself to be. My work allows for democratic actions and the co-authoring that forms a community.

I started to understand community outside of empirical experiences through the Gerard Delanty text, *Community;* specifically the chapter "Postmodern Community," with its ideas of sharing and its constructive nature in community building. Delanty refers to the *Communitas* of Roberto Esposito to help express the notion of the liminal community and its base in reciprocity. Esposito's thinking reflects the Latin term *Munus* or the giving of gifts: "What predominates in the *Munus* is, in other words, reciprocity or "mutuality" (Delanty p. 164).

This concept of reciprocity or mutuality represents a form of co-authoring, as the act of giving and in turn, its reciprocity builds a communal space of shared values and equal input. William Corlett reinforces this in his discussion of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida: "community is neither individualism nor collectivity, but it is based on sharing." (Delanty p. 164)

In my practice, sharing expresses a core value in the act or facilitation of co-authoring and the resulting community built through its outcomes. Co-authoring brings democratic positioning to the forefront through equality of critical thought and democracy. This results in a built community.

**Collective Thinking**

Nevertheless, being asked to create an art-based community project for The Cacophony Project was not in my wheelhouse; it actually frightened me, although the idea of the collective meant a sharing of responsibility, and the nurturing of a democratic space for dialogue, industrious input and communal authorship. As Kim Charnley writes, "The emphasis on group authorship involves a challenge to the bourgeois individualism enshrined in the figure of the artist." (Charnley p. 245). The idea of the collective eliminated a sense of hierarchy and lone authorship in my role in the project. I have to admit, even if it is my idea and research, putting it on the table to be discussed, critiqued, and improved is always a bonus, even to the lone wolf persona I seem to have adopted. As one of the elders in the room, I was able to force myself to sit back and promote an open and free dialogue around the work and its construction. As Bishop writes,

> … advanced art of the last decade has seen a renewed affirmation of collectivity and a denigration of the individual, who becomes synonymous with the values of Cold War liberalism and its transformation into neoliberalism, that is, the economic practice of private property rights, free markets and free trade. (Bishop, p. 12)

I soon found that the student/artist collective was not as new and alien to me as I anticipated since, after all, I had already experience in devising participatory artworks, where I would act as facilitator, sharing authorship with the participants.

John Zarobell's *Global Art Collectives and Exhibition Making*__depicts the Impressionists as possibly the first art collective (Zarobell, p. 38). Grant Kester's *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* puts the collective in a more contemporary context: "Many artists since then have taken the collective idea much further, not only organizing exhibitions but also working together to make art with collective authorship" (Kester p. 38)

The work of the collective is about a formation of community along with aesthetic beauty. Pressure on the artist is relaxed, as the process is about collective thinking and community, as well as building agency in the collective's students. Bishop reinforces this thinking, "Consensual collaboration is valued over artistic mastery and individualism, regardless of what the project sets out to do or actually achieves." (Bishop p. 20)

This project and community engagement reflects my art and research practices. The students and I produced a series of sound-based works. These works followed my research of how to create agency through the creation of sound art works that redefine both noise and sound through acts of co-authoring.

**Noise is Everything to Me**

Noise is defined by what it isn't, such as unacceptable, unnecessary, unwanted. Metaphorically you walk into a restaurant for breakfast and you want a vegetarian meal. On the menu you see a breakfast titled Meatless: it is defined by what it isn't. In this instance meat is the noise.

Now, sound is understood to have context, is identifiable and it works within the environment it is being heard. My practice invites noise to be redefined into acceptable sounds through a participatory creation of the artworks. Through participatory acts of co-authoring, agency is found, as the noises created by participants become sounds. In this project the works are related to the kinetic folkloric art form of the whirligig. The students and I built a collection of whirligigs escaping the folkloric history of the naively constructed wooden sculptures that blow in the wind.

The Hear Us Through Collective spent every late Friday afternoon for 7 weeks to create the Cacophony Project. On our first meeting, I supplied every member including both June and I, with a sketchbook and a sharpened pencil to take notes and sketch ideas.

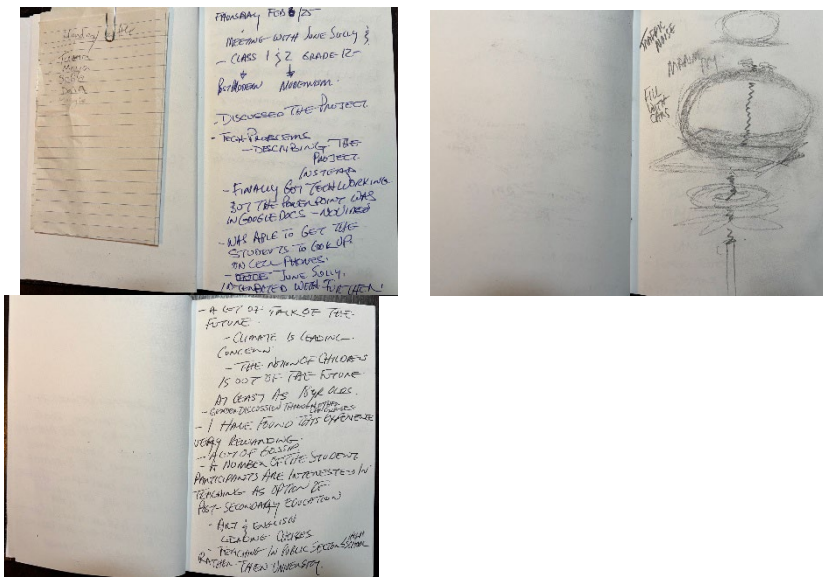


**Figure 7**- Examples of the notebooks; notes and sketches by the members in the collective

At our first meeting, we discussed and decided what themes the works would tackle. We came up with four sound and sculptural concepts. The collective would build an ocular addition to the sculptures, as well as collecting sounds to build the aural themes reflecting the imagery. We decided to portray domestic home building, clear-cutting of the environment, traffic congestion, and overpopulation of humans in this protected area. We discussed the political realities of being a teenager in this time of climate change and possibly the first generation to be wholly affected by climate disaster. Rebecca an 18-year-old member of the Hear Us Through Collective at University of Guelph Arboretum's Research Days presentations validated this;

"Climate change has always been a huge part of our generation; whether we wanted it to be or not it always has been. We have had no say in the matter: from the day we were born it has been a major factor in our lives from politics to education it's always been there. No generation before has to worry the way we do and unfortunately many still don't. We see it as an obligation to speak out and protect what we have left for the next generation. Some don't see the mass issue; they see a few acres of land instead of seeing the beauty of the trees and animals they see room for expansion and want more. By the time I'm thirty there won't be any more to take."

**Aesthetic Values**

June took us to a number of locations through the school where we were able to find objects to help in the building process, as we had decided to use found and thrifted materials. In the school's woodshop, the instructor gave us a table saw blade that we decided to use as the base for our clear cut. He also supplied us with a constructed wood frame house model that became the focus of our sculpture for housing construction. Our depiction of traffic congestion came to be built from children's toy cars. Overpopulation was demonstrated with a replica of an urban crosswalk filled with a variety of dolls walking across it.



**Figure 8**-The Cacophony Project; the flourishes constructed for each sculpture

The student-directed sculptures lent an aesthetic visual component to complement the sounds we collected and produced to complete our messaging. The ocular aesthetic of the sculptures plays an important role complementing the viewer's acoustemological understanding. This idea is being reinforced in Jean-François Lyotard's understanding of a visual aesthetics-based epistemology:

The heavy-duty ones are obvious: to be liked, to be persuasive, and to be just. What I mean to say is that the object … gives pleasure to the gaze; that the object induces a disposition in the viewer to buy into (in the double sense of going there and believing in it) the demonstration, the exhibit, the institution, etc.; that the object is faithful to the thing (institution, exhibit, etc.) it promotes, faithful both in the spirit and in the letter.

-You mean to say that by targeting the pleasure of the eyes...

-Of those eyes that engage thought not in knowing, but in enjoying...

- By targeting this pleasure, the object falls into the realm of aesthetics; by targeting belief, it derives from rhetoric. And by respecting the truth of the thing...

- Or by revealing it...

- The truth of the thing promoted, the graphic object takes on the value of testimony, it belongs to the art of proving, to inquiry, to history, to the establishment of knowledge." (Lyotard p. 33-4)

**Origins of Process**

I have given a brief synopsis of two important elements of my art practice. Both the record player and the record itself are key components in the community-based work our collective constructed. This work incorporates both the kinetic ideals of the whirligig and my passion for sound and its playback.

I have mentioned how the collective expanded on a project I had created a year earlier. I exhibited the prototype to show how it differs from what might be our usual expectations of the whirligig: Pop, Skip, Chirp, the prototype of a contemporary whirligig, is a wind-powered record player. The wind propels adhered fan blades to spin a record. A vintage coned speaker projects the sound. In many ways I feel it is a reinvention of the record player and at the same time, continues my exploration of the record and its place in sound art.

This prototype whirligig plays a record of birds' songs, in response to its urban environment placement in an art gallery in downtown Hamilton. This responds to the sterility associated with a downtown art gallery and its inability to interact with genuine nature in its busy urban space.

Pop, Skip, Chirp was born out a series of experiments that started in 2015 when I developed a (eventually failed) work, Resonant Spin. I attempted to create a kinetic sculpture that would hang from a branch in a tree. Instead of spinning the fan, the wind instead blew it every which way, and the needle just scratched the record instead of playing it.



Pop, Skip, Chirp 2023,
47"x 12"x 12", mixed media

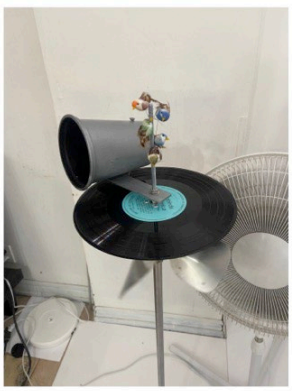


**Figure 9** - Pop, Skip, Chirp, 2023, 47”x 12”x 12”, mixed media, You Me Gallery, Hamilton.

Resonant Spin incorporates a number of the elements later used to create Pop, Skip, Chirp. The latter was a stationary sculpture, so that the record would remain stable and could be spun by the wind, rather than the full unit and the unsatisfactory (but illuminating) results of the Resonant Spin experiments.



Resonant Spin Experiments

**Figure 10**-Resonant Spins prototype, 2015, 20”x 12”x 12”, mixed media.

**Eco Futurism**

I have found that the whirligig’s history represents, through its manufacture, a potential for abstract storytelling. The Cacophony Project was exhibited in the University of Guelph Arboretum, using sounds that would take over the space if the Arboretum were to be developed for urban use. This made-up scenario can be told through the storytelling ability of the Whirligig. The threat may be make-believe; in fact, the University of Guelph held a student referendum to fund the Arboretum, helping secure its status as a research and natural environmental hub for the university and the community. The Arboretum is still under threat, as it is being encroached on by development. Our government’s attempted illegal development of protected lands has become known as the Greenbelt Scandal in Ontario.

Even with funding secured, the threat is real. The present Ontario provincial government is hell bent on securing protected lands to feed the developers who funded their election victory. This was uncovered by the publications *The Narwal* as well as the *Toronto Star:*

> …a prominent Ontario developer paid $80 million for two parcels of land that could not be developed. Totalling nearly 700 acres, they sit entirely within Ontario’s protected Greenbelt. Weeks later, that investment by Michael Rice is set to pay off. The seemingly untouchable swath of fields and trees in King Township, just north of Toronto, is now on the Ontario government’s list of lands it wants to remove from the Greenbelt. (McIntosh et al, 2022).

If Ontario’s most fragile and protected areas are up for development, why wouldn’t the Arboretum? Then I became aware that, in fact, there is a massive development project at the

eastern border of the Arboretum (Vivian, Jun 14, 2024) including apartment buildings, town homes and retail shopping.

Can our style of whirligig be a form of eco-futurism as, through a kinetic wind powered aural technology, we present an unwanted future as a warning? Iovino, Cesaretti and Past bring forth Marinetti's Futurist manifesto:

> Futurism's intuition that subjectivity and objectivity merge through the mediation of landscape indicates at least an aesthetic interest in the environment, whereby human beings and the world in which they live would aim to coexist symbiotically in a new, in-between artistic reality, which is neither the traditional work of art nor the environment.
> (Iovino, Serenella, Cesaretti, Past. p. 216).

**Reuse**

The Cacophony Project's sculptures are primarily constructed of found items. This idea of using the found, or reused, object was born out of previous artistic recontextualisation – such as the scandalous "readymades" that Marcel Duchamp introduced over a century ago – then adapted into the use of what can be seen as garbage; as the old saying goes, one man's garbage is another man's gold. Picasso was also one of the first contemporary artists to incorporate garbage/ found materials or other previously unacceptable media into his sculptures:

> Picasso was famous for transfigurations of the commonplace. He had made the head of a chimpanzee out of a child's toy; a goat's thorax out of an old wicker basket; a bull's head out of bicycle parts; a Venus out of a gasjet – and so why not the ultimate transfiguration, an artwork out of a thing? (Danto p. 46)

Ideas about crossing the boundaries of acceptable art materials also filtered into twentieth century composition. Citing Calvin Tomkins' *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant Garde,* Emilie Mears includes composer John Cage's work in *Recycling As Creativity:*

> Some of the objects Cage introduced as instruments were "automobile brake drums, hub caps, and so on" (Tomkins p. 87-88). Cage insisted that this method would redirect the listener's attention to what existed in the environment rather than search for a meaning generated by the artist. (Mears section16)

Like works by these artists, our work on The Cacophony Project recycled objects in its construction: the speakers are floor pots, the fan blades came from old home fans or HVAC waste. The stands we used are ski poles. The aesthetic decorations were primarily thrifted, found toys and other objects.



**Figure 11**- thrifted found and reused materials

Secondly, the use of these resources animates the sculpture with the spirit of the wasteful social environment that it critiques. In The Cacophony Project, an assemblage of waste creates an artwork as an ironic commentary on the landfill outcome generally associated with objects that are cast away, or taken for granted as everyday items of western society.

The use of detritus to construct their work, according to Gillian Whitely, makes of the artist a *bricoleur* (Whiteley p. xii), a word that in English can translate to handyman or even the label "do-it-yourselfer." In my own career as a working artist this is most apropos since, as explained earlier, I funded my artist life as a handyman. Whitely writes, "Steven Connor comments on *bricolage* as the improvised juxtaposition of incompatible or heterogeneous fragments, often for ironic or parodic effect, as opposed to the principle of unity or 'match'." (Whiteley p.28) In this project, the members of HUTC all became *bricoleurs* as we devised, researched, collected and constructed the work.



**Figure 12**-The Hear Us Through… Collective in the studio

Like the prototype I describe above, our works produced sound in response to the research question demonstrating what could happen within the *in situ* placement. There is more to our collective-based sculptures than sound. As a collective, we discussed how to present the visual component that compliments these aural structures. We needed visual signifiers to add signs to contribute the message being transmitted, be it sociocultural, political, phenomenal and/or geographical. In this case with the University of Guelph Arboretum it became environmental fragility. How can we express through these flourishes our message, and at the same time, make it more than a message?

**Once Upon a Time…The Fable**

As collective members discussed the project in its early stages, we speculated as to how to express a story, to devise a form of eco-futuristic fable: perhaps one that incorporated an anti-technological approach and played with notions of Afro or Indigenous futurism. We discussed how such futurism is portrayed in apocalyptic or sci-fi movies. Afrofuturism is portrayed in *Black Panther* through the technological world of Wakanda where science and tech advancements outweigh those of the white world, and therefore protect the nation's integrity. Similarly in Percival Everett's novel *James*, the African American slaves speak uneducated "slave talk" to the white masters, but communicate among themselves in articulate and intellectual prose. Indigenous futurism is portrayed in the film *Blood Quantum*, where indigenous characters are immune to a zombie like disease that consumes white people but to which indigenous genetics makes First Nations people immune.

What the HUTC's Cacophony Project is developing is a postmodern fable: one that uses the mechanics of the moral through the storytelling associated with the whirligig and the communication abilities of the record player. If the fable is a story of moralistic values,

then must it not also be a literary tool to reinforce the rights of the individual and society as a whole?

H.J. Bickham stresses that the fable promotes critical thinking. It breaches the garrison of resident assumptions, the mind's defenses, to bring home its point or raise its questions: it is a tactical manoeuvre to prompt new thinking (Bickham p. xi). Lyotard writes in *A Postmodern Fable:*

> The fable is realistic because it tells the story of a force which makes, undoes and remakes reality. It is also realistic because it records the fact that this force has already greatly transformed reality and its art and that, except for a catastrophe, this transformation must continue." (Lyotard p. 242)
>
> The possibilities are opened; the Cacophony Project reflects this postmodern view of the fable.

The project reflects acts of caring and rights building through artistic agency and environmental activism. Van Baarle et al state, "artists have investigated what an aesthetics of care could be, and have sought ways to take care of one another during the creative process, even extending that care well beyond the boundaries of their work and of the communities they assemble (Van Baarle p. 1)." The Cacophony Project is a vehicle of caring that culminates in an expression of the students' environmental rights.

This project has given its student participants a concrete platform to express a climate change story. These works were collectively built, and by doing so democracy is reflected in this caring and collaborative environment. Everyone in the collective has had input. Environmentally the students now have a voice presented through the archive, in this instance the publicly displayed kinetic sculptures. This work is built of found and recycled materials emphasizing the need for a constructed system of sustainability, while the aural message of the work secures the story in combination of the visual component.

In my reflection the fables were delivered and built in an abstract way – not through text but with sound and image – to portray what may happen if the Arboretum became an urbanized building site. The purpose of our messenger, the whirligig, is to remind beholders of the threats that may persist.




**Figure 13**- The Cacophony Project's completed works

**Conclusion**

This is a conclusion to a not-concluded project. It can be said to be a conclusion in the process I have presented through the paper, but the thinking doesn't conclude. I'm an improviser in almost all of my processes, from repairing a fence for a client, to musicking, and to my art making. My thinking is continual. How can I open and extend my own thinking as well as my ideas to garner a greater involvement of the participants in the development of these sculptures, and form a greater sense of community?

My practice has evolved around my lone wolf nature of production, where I was able to incorporate co-authoring the completion of my works to create a temporary community through the participants' activation of the works. In the formation of the Hear Us Through… Collective my lone wolf self has been set aside and I have participated in the co-authoring of the works production. The collective is the community, a community built from a cohesive aesthetic ideal and shared message making. The students, the teacher and I all have become a democratic entity that used critical thinking, open communication and respect towards a shared purpose. Our community was to achieve a strong message for the beholders of the sculptures along with a challenge, and hopefully a triumph, for each of us, as students, teacher, the Arboretum and myself. The students in the collective exercised the agency that was developed both within themselves and the community at large through the constructed works. Maya states in the Hear Us Through Documentary, "They (the beholders) will start to realize the affect of urbanization on the environment and how it affects not just us but nature" June Sulley, the art teacher in the collective, summed up the found agency, " …making people just more aware. I think any time you have discussions and or art pieces and or reflections, that's an opportunity for growth."

This was accomplished. The works were displayed at the Arboretum for the month of April into May. During that period of time there was an extreme snowfall, 100 km per hour winds, and extensive rain; the works held up with minimal damage.



**Figure 14**-The Cacophony Project installed at the Arboretum, The University of Guelph

We placed QR codes to accommodate the sculptures for non-windy days. When the works were taken down, each of the QR codes had generated over 200 hits on their sounds for each of the four sculptures. We also edited a short documentary video as an archival tool for the project. *Hear Us Through… Collective Documentary* continues to be watched. There is a possibility of the works being exhibited at The New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA) Gallery in South River, Ontario.




**Figure 15**-The QR codes that active to play the sounds of each sculpture and the documentary

It is not about the achievement of the finished objects, but building a community and working towards collective success. As I wrote previously, agency for both the students, and me, is the overall goal of this project. The goal of this project is not about the product, but practising the strength of creating a work that alters its beholders' thinking by conveying message-making in abstracted forms; like Lyotard, a different or a new sort of fable.

I could see and feel the pride and excitement of the students as the project progressed. Rebecca, the collective's student representative for The Cacophony Project, took the podium at Research Studio at the Arboretum; in her speech she presented the agency this opportunity presented, "Truly it has been such an amazing experience to be a part of. I hope our messages and art will spark deeper thinking and creativity for so many others in the future." These words demonstrate the agency and caring found through the project and the community it fostered in the students and myself.




**Figure 16**- Research Studio - Rebecca from Hear Us Through…Collective Presenting

The Hear Us Through Collective's Cacophony Project lives on through a documentary about the project, and its goals, and through the works themselves (Hear Us Through, 2025). We are in discussions about having them exhibited in other gallery settings. These actions and words illustrate the sustainability of this project, and the power of community through collective art making.

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