

The Receding Edge

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"In a way [this contradiction] is a part of how life is, something grows, something develops, something gets destroyed, and there's a creative moment in all of those, including destruction."

- [Hildegard Westerkamp](#)

At the Edge of Wilderness is a collaboration between composer [Hildegard Westerkamp](#) and photographer [Florence Debeugny](#) commissioned by the [Western Front](#) in 2000, but in the intervening 14 years the work has arguably become more relevant. The work situates us within the artists' impression of BC's late 19th and early 20th century ghost towns. It balances the destruction of wilderness with the beauty in nature's reclamation of those spaces. It shows the cavalier attitudes of those that built and abandoned these once burgeoning industrial operations and settlements. It explores themes of ecological disruption, deterioration, and the imagined memory; themes that have an enriched relevance under the auspices of continued, unsustainable resource development. Canadian society is confronting existential issues highlighted by ongoing and increasing resource extraction such as [leading the world in the deforestation of untouched forests](#), the development of the tar sands in an age of increasing climate change, and the [Mount Polley mine disaster](#). *At the Edge of Wilderness* forces the audience to question this settler mentality that still persists 150 years after the building of some of these ghost towns.

The piece is a 54 minute “slideshow” of roughly 400 photographs, which is accompanied by a soundscape composed primarily of field recordings sourced from Westerkamp's interactions with the ghost towns. It will be presented at Vancouver’s CMC building from September 29th - October 17th, 2014.







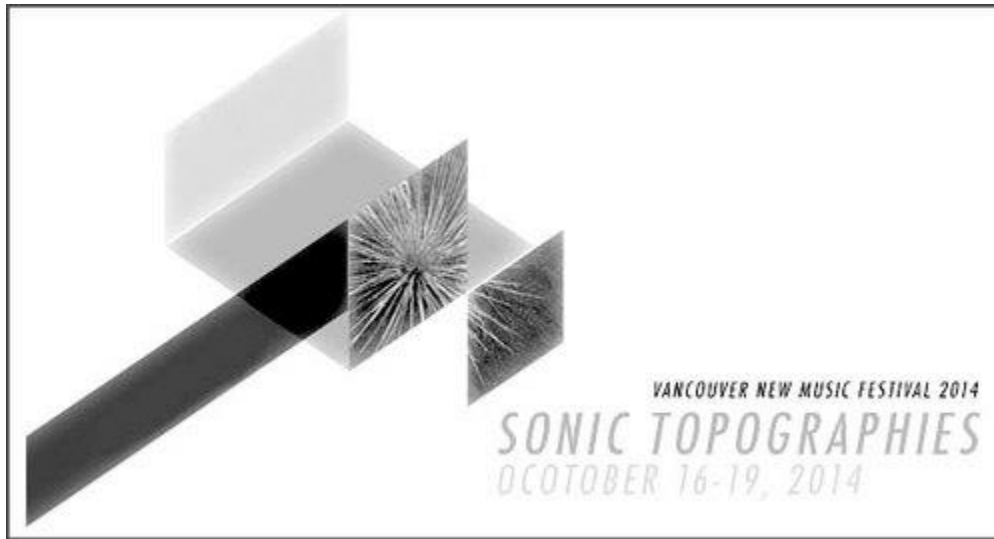
Hildegard Westerkamp is a German-Canadian composer and writer who has spent her career exploring a lifelong interest in listening. She notably conducted her acted as research assistant under [R. Murray Schafer](#), and with Vancouver's own [World Soundscape Project](#) (WSP) at SFU in the early 70s. She was a researcher for Schafer's famous book *The Tuning of the World* (later re-published as *The Soundscape*), and also for World Soundscape Project publications *European Sound Diary* and *Five Village Soundscapes*. During this time, she extended her interest in environmental sound into the studio, and with the guidance of friend and colleague [Barry Truax](#) began her ongoing production of soundscape compositions. Her recorded work is often identified by her trademark voice-over commentary (hear [Kits Beach Soundwalk](#)), which helps to take the listener into the spaces which she is also evoking through the sounds. She regularly conducts soundwalks, wherein participants will join her in walking through an environment and focus on

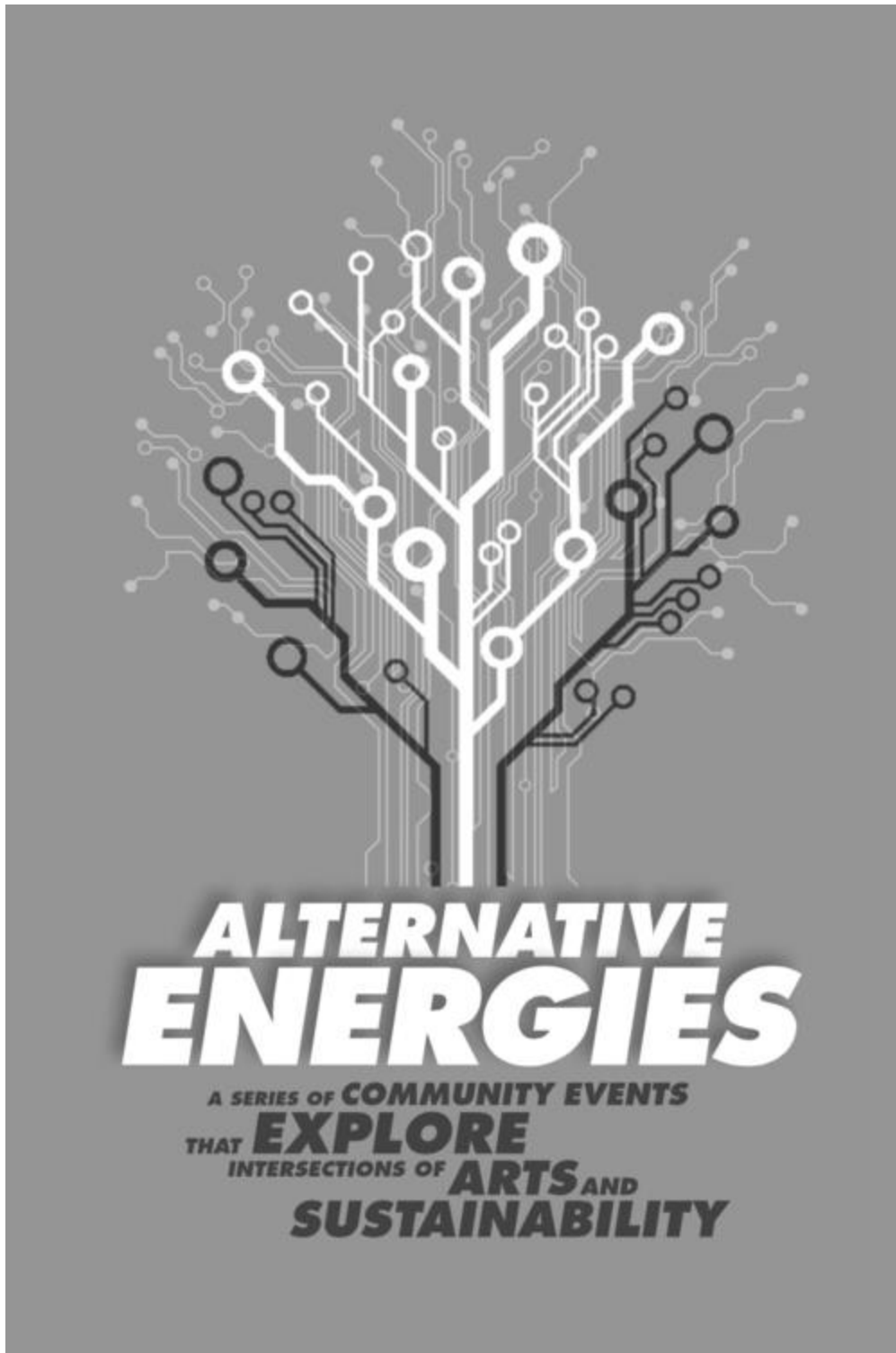
particular environmental sounds in an exercise of deep listening. Westerkamp's compositions will be featured prominently in [Vancouver New Music's Sonic Topographies](#) Festival happening from October 16th-19th, including [Fantasie for Horns II](#) (1979), Like a Memory (2002), école polytechnique (1990), and Liebes-Lied/Love Song (2005).



Florence Debeugny is a Parisian-Canadian who began her career in industrial photography. Not long after her arrival in Canada in 1979 her camera was stolen, and she took this as a sign that

perhaps should take a hiatus from photography. Amazingly, that hiatus lasted for almost two decades, until she casually began taking photos again in the late 90s. This project represented the first serious project of her reignited passion, and its themes have remained perennial underpinnings in many of her subsequent works, such as the industrial abandonment of 2003's [Almost Gone, Remains of Cannery Villages](#) and 2013's [Urban Findings](#). As well as the abstract forms of decay in human-made things in 2012's [Precaution](#) and 2014's [Night Language](#). Florence has been based in Vancouver since 1982.





At the Edge of Wilderness took the composer and photographer on a road-trip through the interior of BC to the ghostly remains of former mining towns, with mineral-rich names such as Marblehead, Granite City, Zincton, and Manganese Mine. The two borrowed an old Volkswagen Van for the trip.

They slept for the week in a cabin that almost seemed preserved and removed from the ghost towns they visited: an off-the-grid cabin, with no running water, and only wood heat. During the days they tripped to the ghost towns between Kaslo and New Denver. These towns were built quickly to accommodate a mineral and mining boom that took place in the area from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, and in some cases were abandoned just as fast either because of resource depletion or depreciation of market values.

“Something is taken out of the ground, nothing is left, people leave.”

On site, the two mostly worked independently. While Debeugny walked quietly through the site and captured images, Westerkamp recorded spoken descriptions (of the environment, infrastructure and her personal reflections) and found-objects that made interesting sounds. “When I found really interesting resonances, I would explore them in all sorts of ways, like instruments... we [threw] things against an old steam-engine... We inadvertently discouraged bears from coming closer because I was making so much noise.” Also featured centrally in the piece are recordings from the conversations between Debeugny and Westerkamp on their impressions of each day's explorations. By preserving so much of the artists' personal experience in the soundscape composition, Westerkamp broadens the intimacy of the experience articulated by Debeugny's photographic depictions. “I would say where I was, speak about some of my impressions, what I saw, in the soundwalking style that I had developed. Where I want to make a connection between the soundscape and the listener who doesn't know the rest, gets the sounds, but not the landscape or the weather.” Instead of telling us facts about the places that she is standing in, she gives us impressions of what she is experiencing and imagining as she is moving through the space. A recurring phrase in the composition is Westerkamp claiming that she likes these spaces. She told me that she “found them magical, like a child who discovers and plays in a junk heap.”

There used to be an old broken piano in one building, those strings that still resonated were out of tune, and many others were obstructed by rats nests. On a visit in the 80s Westerkamp played Bach inventions and other explorations on the rodent-prepared piano and recorded it all on a walkman. The instrument is no longer there, having been stolen and put into a local museum, but Westerkamp notes its vacancy in her commentary within the piece. As though it were an invocation her old recordings emerge, and give the sense of walking into a haunted saloon.

Florence was so inspired after the initial trip to the Kootenays that she independently went on to take more photographs in the Lillooet region, the Similkameen, and in the lower mainland that also ended up in the work.



The conflict implicit in the simultaneous presence of the “ugly” and the “beautiful” is central to the work. “Something happens in that area for 25 years at the most, if we're lucky. Something is taken out of the ground, nothing is left, people leave. There is absolutely no care for what just happened there. It's just left. And the contradiction of the magic on the one hand of seeing that place, grown over by wilderness, and that uncaring way of having left it was, to me, the central idea of the whole project.” In this way, these early ghost towns seem almost quaint in comparison to the scale of resource extraction that we see today. If and when Fort McMurray or Fort St. John are eventually abandoned, it seems unlikely they would slip back into the environment and over grow as these older settlements do. Perhaps, what is important to learn from this project is a sense of the history of the psyche of the Canadian settler-class as seen through the eyes of much more recent immigrants. While the artists could easily have focused Wilderness on British Columbia's history of resource extraction, it instead focuses on the contemporary issues of the waste-sites that these places have become. Because both artists are immigrants themselves, they are perhaps able to move through these post-apocalyptic waste-lands more objectively than those of us with ancestors who may have engaged in this kind of resource extraction. As we develop our ability to extract resources from the land on an exponentially overwhelming scale, we have not concurrently developed our stewardship of the landscapes that we are extracting from, and have instead left them to their trauma in a rapacious fashion.

“I wonder what decays faster, bones or iron?”

Like [Edward Burtynsky's *Manufactured Landscapes*](#), [Watermark](#) and other work, Debeugny's haunting photos manage to capture an organic tranquility in the deterioration of these towns, and nature's reclamation of their materials. She lingers close to abstract forms of rusted-red iron and grey, rotting wood, and then pulls far back to reveal the nearly hidden ruins in the ravines and

treetops. Some photos take us inside the rickety buildings and show us the stunning landscape through their broken windows. The green of living plants jumps out boldly against the grey and rusty backdrops, and adds a vibrant reminder that life returns even to these places.



Westerkamp's composition is awash with the gong and bell-like inharmonic resonances of rusting iron sheets, the sounds of the “water, water everywhere” (as Westerkamp calls it in her audio commentary) that plays on the landscape as rain or river, and lonesome footsteps that crackle with the grit underneath in the forgotten rooms of another era. Only briefly does Westerkamp delve into the more harsh sounds that evoke the forgone industry, at times even drawing upon the collected sounds of the World Soundscape Project's [audio library](#) for literal samples of machinery. These moments feel like memories, or perhaps it would be more accurate to call them ghosts with unfinished business, still haunting the landscape.

For Westerkamp, the cuts into the wilderness made by the development and the eventual abandonment of these extraction-towns are especially appalling. Both artists grew up in countries with only very “tamed” wilderness, and are possibly more sensitive to the sacred fragility of the unsettled places in Canada than most multigenerational Canadians, save for aboriginal peoples. “It's that violence of cutting into the wilderness that really has astonished me coming from a country where the landscape is basically garden and parkland, we don't really have wilderness. You're taught to tend for things as much as possible. Here, we are absolutely aghast at this incredible silence in the wilderness, openness, availability of land, and it looks like we have so much land available. And then certain powers come and cut into it and we don't even know it sometimes... I didn't even know about the Tar Sands [until more recently], and talk about a cut into the wilderness, it's like a cesspool... Canada is really vulnerable, because Canada is still so wild.” She noted that there is currently first nations resistance in remote areas ([Unist'ot'en Camp](#), [Athabasca Chipewyan](#) [my

examples]], but that it's difficult for them partly because the majority of Canadians are urban and aren't confronted by these developments.

"The reality of these junk heaps is ongoing." Hildegard explained further, "It's happening now, and perhaps on a much more lethal level with industry these days. That cut into the wilderness is something that we really don't know from Europe. You can't do that anymore in Europe. You can't just simply, unnoticed do a clear-cut anywhere. Industry cannot simply cut a hole in the ground, and not be criticized or noticed, and [have] something done about it. So this idea of the edge is a very strong one for me," Hildegard explains about the work's title.







In the original incarnation of this installation at the Western Front, the photos were shown with five slide projectors, which had to be housed behind a purpose built soundproof wall in order to prevent sound interference with the aural portion of the work. During some subsequent exhibitions of the work, this proved to be a technical headache, as some enclosures did not allow for sufficient ventilation, and resulted in the frequent burning out of projector bulbs and melting slides ("Not the originals, just the duplicates" Florence assured me).

Though digital imagery was not sufficient at the time to present the images in a way the artists could be satisfied with, it has since become obtainable. It is this revamped digital version of the work, premiered in Berlin in 2013, that will be presented in Vancouver's Canadian Music Centre this October.

The work was originally produced for a Western Front exhibition entitled Industrial Ear in 2000. Curator [D.B. Boyko](#) approached Westerkamp to see if she would find a photographer with whom she would like to collaborate to produce a project on the theme. Immediately she considered exploring ghost towns, due to a fascination she had developed during her time spent exploring them in the Kootenays since the 60s. Only half an hour had passed when by chance Florence Debeugny, a good friend, stopped by Westerkamp's house with a few albums of her new explorations in her recent re-engagement with photography, hoping that Westerkamp would offer her reflections on the quality of the pieces. Hildegard couldn't ignore this serendipity; Florence was her photographer.





When it came to working together, the two had no difficulties whatsoever, which Westerkamp said is not often the case for her. They had a shared vision for the project, which they initially had discussed with one another, but once the work started to come together they didn't need to compromise or even discuss further, as everything came together in ways that only exceeded their expectations. Instead of engaging with an ongoing dialogue they each trusted that the other would bring the right elements to the table with their respective responsibilities.

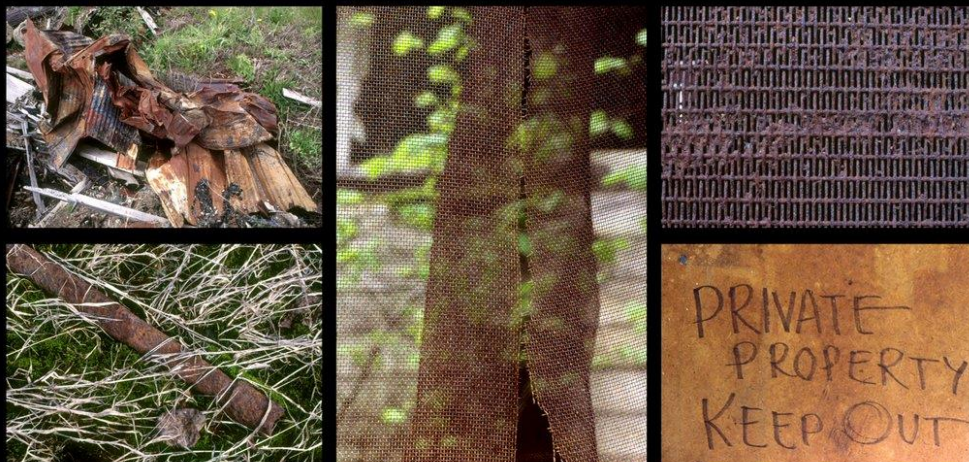
The ease and trust between these two artists is further demonstrated by the process of the assemblage of the finished product. They worked independently of one another, with Florence compiling her slides and Hildegard composing her music, and were ultimately able to foster unanticipated results when their individual contributions were combined. Additionally, the slide projectors were intentionally not in sync with each other or the music, so when the work first premiered they would even go to watch it as spectators in order to watch the work transform in these unforeseen ways.

For Florence, the experience of returning to an older work is still novel. It does seem an apt point to begin re-engagement with selections from her oeuvre, given that ...*Wilderness* marked her first major work of the latter part of her career. Florence has warmed up to the idea though, as "it keeps the collaboration alive." For Hildegard, perhaps partly due to the different expectations of their respective media, the experience is more familiar. Concerning *At the Edge of Wilderness* Westerkamp's feelings are that "there's nothing about it that doesn't still ring true" "on some level, there is no thing as an "old piece."... I find it interesting to listen to older pieces of mine... For some reason I don't feel that sense of age with my work... you see new things in it all the time."



While viewing and listening to the piece, I found that it often lulled me into a somewhat troubling, settled state. Because, despite the fact that the work explores some of the darker aspects of our society, it also is very beautiful. Resonances of metallic sound objects ringing, footsteps on gravel, the watery sounds of streams and the singing of birds; like the sounds of some unknown monastery. Some of Debeugny's photographs depict buildings that upon first glance seem nearly intact, as though some hermit could be living inside. I don't mean to suggest that the work is peaceful necessarily, instead it broods on a feeling of a destruction that we do not directly witness, and instead we must piece together an understanding in the artifacts of its wake. The artists do not impart a sense of anguish or bold emotional pleas; it does not dictate a moralistic and simple environmental argument. Instead it calmly asks us questions (sometimes literally, in the audio commentary) about the relationship of settlers with nature and the land, and allows us to personally explore the disturbing and unsettling implications.

At the Edge of Wilderness has perhaps become only more relevant since its premiere in 2000. Governments and industry have continued to deregulate activities and play PR games when it comes to resource extraction. *At the Edge of Wilderness* reminds us to consider the ecological and cultural implications of our ongoing history of the abandonment of industrial sites and the damaged surrounding environment.



The full version of *At the Edge of Wilderness* will be presented at the Canadian Music Centre - BC Region as a part of the [Alternative Energies](#) series from September 29 - October 17, Monday to Friday, 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM, at the CMC BC Creative Hub (837 Davie St.). Admission is free.

There will be an opening reception on Friday, September 26 from 5:00 PM - 7:00PM



