From Greenland, Disco Bay 2009.
Photo: Julia Barlay

Out into the Sound of what we don't know – an Interview with Jana Winderen

by Jøran Rudi

Jana Winderen creates many-faceted works from her own field recordings and presents them at permanent and temporary installations, concerts and other types of performances. Her material stems from several sources, and she is well-known for her work with underwater recordings from around the world. In this interview, Winderen discusses her holistic approach, as well as her relationship to the issues that are often raised with regard to soundscape works and art expressions.

JR: Jana Winderen, your background is from both the natural sciences and the visual arts, could you describe how the development of your interests have led you to working with soundscape perspectives?

JW: I am not particularly focused on working within the soundscape field, but I am concerned with showing how sounds, echolocation and complex soundscapes exist in water. By also using hearing to gain an understanding of the inhabitants of the sea and their sound environments, we can increase the respect for, and the knowledge of, the animals that live there, and how we influence their sonic environments.

I don't have any difficulties with the word 'soundscape' as such, but to me the term becomes a limitation; a formatting of my work, and I am not concerned with methods, but with content. This is the reason why terminology such as 'soundscape' and 'sound art' does not appear meaningful for what I am engaged in, although I am interested in discussing how one communicates one's work. Every form or situation will entail certain preconceived ideas and historical references, and it is important to be aware of the intentions that motivate the desire to work within a format or medium. One cannot know anything about how something works in practical terms until it has been tried out, and if I don't have anything to say, I don't have a project.

I can start by discussing what it is that has brought me to where I am today; where I easily, perhaps even more so, would read a book on marine biology than a book on soundscape or sound art (although my bookcase is full of those books as well…).

Since I was born, I have spent every summer by the sea, and I have always been concerned with what is happening there. At thirteen I wrote about 'Henry the Herring', who was out and about in order to find Henriette. They were complaining about the oil spills from the humans, about how the salmon's sensory systems were destroyed by pollution, and so on. At that time, I was living by Mjøsa (the biggest freshwater body in Norway), and at that point, Mjøsa was dying. At the end of the eighties, I had decided to become a marine biologist, but following four years of studies at the faculty of mathematics and natural sciences at the University of Oslo, I had to stop due to violent outbreaks of eczema from my practical work with organic chemistry. At that time, I also took evening classes at Strykejernet Art School. Following several journeys around Europe to all kinds of art museums, I decided to leave Norway, and in 1993, I graduated from Goldsmith's College in London with a BA in Fine Arts. Towards the end of my studies, I had decided not to produce more objects into this world, but rather work with existing spaces and immaterial installations. I had started to work with sound, originally from the desire to create silent spaces, and had already started to make field recordings in the city, for example of the Thames. I also worked with sound as a physical sensory entity, the human relationship with the electromagnetic spectrum, and with phenomenology, especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

After I returned to Norway, I worked for several years in Nattjazzen (Bergen) with Jon Skjerdal, and collaborated in several projects with Jørgen Træen, Trond Lossius and later Jørgen Larsson. My work with sensors, contact microphones and interactive installations was probably what triggered my interest in hydrophone recordings.

In 2002, I met Carl Michael von Hausswolff at Ars Electronica, and he was curating the *Sound as Space Creator* at *Disturbances* in Copenhagen the following year, where I was one of the artists. This project later turned into *freq_out,*[1] which I organized in Oslo during Ultima in 2004, in collaboration with Mike Harding from Touch (UK). NOTAM[2] provided the technology, Atelier Nord[3] producer, tools and accounting.

Through Mike Harding I met Chris Watson. I have collaborated with him on several recording trips, and currently with the project *Voices from the Deep*. We follow the migration of the cod from the Barents Sea to the Norwegian Coast. In connection with this project, I have travelled with the Institute of Marine Research in the Barents Sea, and been interviewed for the radio programs *World on the move* and *Shared Earth* on BBC Radio 4. In some way, the circle has become complete, I am doing what I set out to do, working with the inhabitants of the sea.

JR: You express concern for the life conditions in the sea and for how our human activity influences and harms the environment. This gives your work a political dimension, and you become part of the debate about the environment. Does this have any significance for your works; are they becoming less independent somehow?

JW: I look at my artistic work as the totality of all that I am doing. I don't have any wish to be political, but I would like to take part and to be able to influence, for example by showing the public that one actually can work the way I do, that one can pose questions. I am not limiting my interest to one medium such as sound, and at a later point I might be working with other types of expression, for example drawings or film. This is the reason why I won't call myself a sound artist, although I am an artist by profession. Working, for me, is a process of continual exploration.

A while back Chris (Watson) and I made recordings at Lindåspollen north of Bergen, of what we believed was Pistol Shrimp.[4] But these shrimp do not exist as far north as Lindåspollen. I asked a marine biologist in Tromsø who then checked through his network what could have caused this sound. As far as I know, they believe that the sound probably stems from wrasse eating seashells, but I still don't know for sure.

A journalist from Germany had at one point or another picked up that I had said that these shrimp had moved north because of global warming (something I actually never said). He had contacted the Norwegian Polar Institute and asked them whether they thought this was possible. They didn't really, but checked anyway, and actually found that the shrimp had moved further north. So that I, with the unconventional things that I work with, can be part of moving such an issue forward, is perfect. My investigation

of this sound has resulted in the cassette *The Noisiest Guys on the Planet*, which has now been released on Ash International in its second edition.

In addition to playing concerts, taking part in radio programs and making installations, as well as publishing CDs, vinyl records, cassettes and USB memory sticks, I give lectures, and then I work in a more documentary fashion – explaining the different sounds, what it is that has made them, where they are taken from, histories about the places I have been, and so on.

JR: You are making recordings of life forms we normally can't see or hear, in places where few of us have been. Does this mean that your works focus on material that is somewhat secret?

JW: There is nothing secret about what I am doing; I am bringing sounds that we don't normally hear or notice into focus. I do this also with sounds that are outside of our perception, as for example with the sounds that bats use for echolocalization. In those recordings, I have transposed the signals down into audible range. I always bring the Batbox[5] wherever I go, and everywhere I have been lately, there are bats. Recently in Porto, I found several bats that operated in a frequency band of 45,000 Hz.

We humans act as if we understand and can measure everything. But in reality, we have quite limited senses; think for example of the light spectrum that we see. Insects can see light spectra with lower frequencies than we can see, and several animal species can hear both lower and higher frequencies than we can. Fish, for example, clearly make use of both sound and more low frequent vibrations in water for orientation and communication.

JR: Soundscape composition might have several intentions, and elsewhere in the book we can find a description of a span between documentation, reconstruction and transformation. Do you place your works in relation to these types of categories?

JW: I always start with an idea and with what I know about the context and format the work will be presented in. I don't know whether what I do should be called composition, music or visual art; for me it is important that I know what I am doing, not what it is called, and that will have to be sufficient. A composition can

for me be a narrative, the rendering of a story. I use only my own recordings, not material from the Internet or archives, or sounds that have been recorded by others. My recordings are connected to places and people's stories, and of course my own motivation for making them in the first place. But the recordings are not about me, not at all.

Shortly, I am going to the Han river in Korea to make recordings. I know that the river has a lot of traffic, which will then become a part of the recordings and what I will create from them. The sound of traffic clearly becomes a documentary element, but I never try to recreate the environments, because I don't think that you can move such a total experience from one place to another. In order to get the authentic experience, one needs to travel to where the recordings were made. When recording, I often let passers-by, or the people who drive my boat, listen through the headphones, and when I see them smile while they're doing this, it is a very good experience. That is also part of my work, and is one of the many rewards.

JR: We often make recordings with an intention; that they will be used for something, that they can tell us something. The recording technique shows the perspective one listens from. Close-miking, for example, gives a different perspective compared to recordings of larger environments. Also, the choice of microphone, where it is placed, distance to the source, etc. determines much of what one gets. Recording technique can, for example, give a higher level of abstraction that one often finds in electro-acoustic music, where the sounds can be fascinating and very rich, but where it is impossible to hear where the sounds are coming from. Are you working with such perspectives in your compositions?

JW: I am not working strictly with perspectives of that type; the technical setup is not important to me. I listen for the best sounds, and keep listening until I find something interesting. I listen and I move, and I chase the sound. It is very much about listening and concentrating extremely hard during the recording sessions, and often I must look funny when I stand fishing with my cables in the water. It feels like playing, and I can get quite carried away. In some ways, it is like photography; when one concentrates on a composition, one knows when it all clicks. It is the same feeling. Unfocused

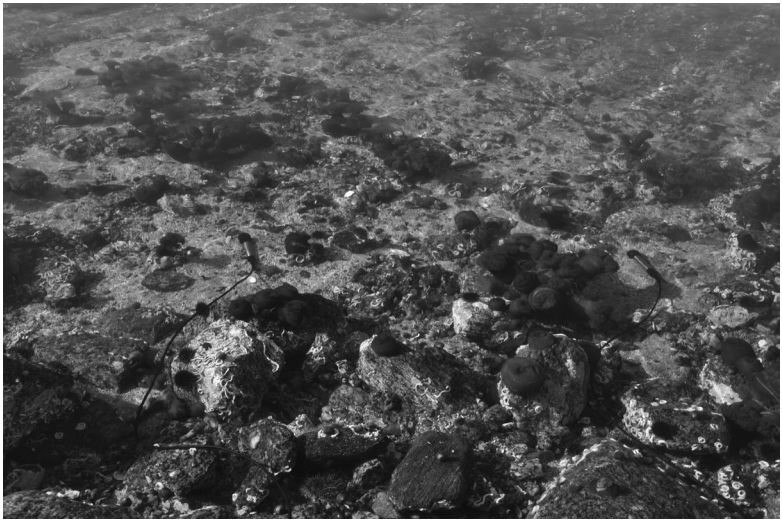
recordings, sound or image, never work, the gut feeling needs to be there. That said, I am not ruling out that arbitrariness can give good results; a recording might just happen to be good. But in my case, this happens so rarely that I have decided to not use randomness as a strategy. It happens, however, that I pursue events that just occur, I am often surprised by what I hear, and then I follow that.

I use the sounds quite untreated, although I process them somewhat when I am composing. I always work with different layers of frequencies and distances in the field, and one can say that much of the composition is done already at that point. I always work with three structural layers, where the first layer represents the large context, the second the topics and actions, and the third the voices and details. I never really process the voices and details. I only clear space and make room for them, to make them come to the foreground.

I use different microphones and setups to capture these different layers, but quite often I use the equipment differently from how it has been designed to be used. For example, I can record ant hills using hydrophones, or a Telinga parabolic microphone to record sounds other than those from birds, or the Batbox to record other high frequencies than those from bats, and so on. One must challenge the technology and be creative, turn things on their head, be critical to the standard software and plug-ins. Technology colors one's work.

One example of an installation where I use the sound just as it was coming in through my hydrophones, a Mackie mixer and four Genelec speakers (and this of course colored the sound to some extent), was a live hydrophone work that I made a few years back near Molde, in a project curated by Sissel Lillebostad. I took the sound into a boathouse, and the visitors could not see the fish or any other animals that made the sounds they heard, but they heard them. They also heard the neighbor that came by in a boat – very loud in comparison with the sounds from the fish – and exclaimed 'What a racket! Poor fish!' We don't think much about the noise levels below the waterline, but they are high, and for some species, they directly threaten their life. I am working with these issues right now. For example, for the Beluga whale this is critical.

What you said about perspectives also works underwater, and by using at least two hydrophones, I can hear where the sound of the fish is coming from. The depth is also significant; the vertical



From Glimma, Hamarøy, 2010.
Photo: Jana Winderen

differences are huge. Sea streams, differences in temperature and salinity also influence how the sound moves. In Mjøsa, for example, I got a unique resonance coming from the shore at 30 meters depth. There was no resonance at other depths, and I have never heard that resonance anywhere else. All places sound different, and in the sea, the variation in depth is clearly audible. Currently, I am using three or four hydrophones at different depths, and I have also started to work increasingly with loudspeaker configurations for playback over four or more channels. My latest installation of this kind involved 50 speakers; *Between Dry Land The Morning Line*, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary in Istanbul. It is programmed by Tony Myatt and his team from the Music Research Centre, York University.

JR: You are involved in several types of expressions for concerts and installations, and you are communicating in several arenas. If you have a wish for the audience, what is it that you wish to leave them with? Is it, for example, attention to ecological perspectives, the structure of the compositions, or the fascination with the individual sounds and timbres? Which aspects of the material are the most important to you?

JW: The sound must touch people. I constantly encounter people through my work, and often get questions and comments. One example is from when I, following a concert with material from the Coquet river in Northumberland (during the AV festival in Newcastle), was asked by a lady from the audience if she could have a recording of the concert, because it reminded her so much of her own experience of the river. Another example is from the recording of the material for this concert, when a bunch of 11 year-old boys passed by and asked if they could listen to the fish. They had some immediate and positive descriptions of what they heard: 'It is so soothing listening to the water'. Many people also tell me their 'fish stories', from their own encounters with fish and marine life. Such experiences are more important to me than singular aspects of the sounds or the construction of the work, but the listening experience is of course also important. It takes time to make the compositions work; it took for example three years to make the CD *Energy Field*, which was released on Touch in 2010.

I connect a sense of calm to water, ice and snow, and I feel at home by the sea, and that is probably not that unusual. Greenland is the place where I have felt the most at home, and I would always want to go back there. But it is an extremely sinister experience to be out in a boat on a pitch black, ice cold Barents Sea, and see the trawl go out and know that if you fall in, you're dead. Or to hang in a glacier crevasse and see the microphone cable disappear down into the darkness… There is something truly existential with that type of experience, and I have a tremendous respect for the forces of nature. Occasionally I have thought that I should be afraid, without being so – what triggers me is not the demand for the adrenalin rush that is common in extreme sports, it is the desire to find out and learn more, out in the world.

1. *freq_out* is an installation that is composed in the gallery space. Thirteen sound artists each compose a piece within their assigned different frequency ranges. In the installation, the 13 pieces are performed simultaneously. (Ed. note.)
2. http://www.notam02.no
3. http://www.anart.no
4. Pistol shrimp use sound to paralyze their prey, by help of a bubble they create with the largest of their claws. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pistol_shrimp, visited Oct. 11, 2010.
5. The Batbox is an ultrasonic bat detector. (Ed. note.)