



Sound Artists In Extremis

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ANYONE WHO HAS TAKEN AN INTEREST in the practice of field recording has probably noticed the extremes that artists have gone to in the past ten to fifteen years to document difficult and remote locations. Some significant CDs to emerge from this burgeoning trend include *Antarctica* (1988) by Douglas Quin; *Baikal Ice* by Peter Cusack (recorded at Lake Baikal in Siberia), *Arctic* by Max Eastley, and *Wind [Patagonia]* by Francisco Lopez. CDs such as these provide an insight into remote and inhospitable environments that are usually inaccessible to the rest of us. The recordings are often evocative, atmospheric and strange as faraway environments are probed for specific signifiers that mark them with a highly unusual sonic and spatial imprint.

As someone who has enjoyed the work of these and many other sound artists investigating similar concepts, I have started to wonder about the logistical and philosophical underpinnings of this very hazardous art practice. What is it about these types of locations that makes them so attractive, and what are the challenges that have to be overcome in order to operate there? On one hand I am curious about the physical and psychological demands that must be met in adapting to environments that can range from extremely hot and humid to extremely cold and dry, not to mention the technical challenges that must be overcome to produce a useful artifact. On the other hand I wonder how truly distinctive some of these remote environments are from those more common and readily available. For instance, how

do we differentiate common atmospheric conditions such as precipitation and wind to arrive at a specific reading of a place different to another? How well does field recording capture the spaces and resonances of a particular location to arrive at a unique experience, or does the experience hinge on a conceptual premise to remove any perceived ambiguity embedded in the recording?

In order to get to the bottom of some of these questions I have asked some of the leading practitioners of location field recording to share their experiences to reveal the rationale behind their practice and what they discovered about themselves when confronted with an inhospitable landscape.

English sound recordist Chris Watson is undoubtedly one the primary reasons that field recording has become such a popular activity amongst sound artists in the last ten years. The CDs that he has published through UK label Touch provide a major reference for many working in the field due to the innovative amalgam of concepts and techniques informing his work. Although Watson is clearly focused on the pure documentation of the natural environment, his work is often dynamic and complex with a great sense of drama present regardless of whether it is a recording of wind, the African savannah or an Arctic ice shelf breaking. I asked Watson what was the most difficult natural environment he has had to work in and the impediments that had to be overcome.

Watson: I find this a difficult question as many environments are challenging in different ways. Deserts of varying types are some of the most difficult whether these are hot, dry and sandy, or frozen glacial plains at the Polar Regions. However if I have to choose one particular location it would be Isla Santiago in the Galapagos archipelago. This is a volcanic island formed entirely by swirls of black lava



David Moore – Double Entendre to 22 November

Polish Art Foundation Biennale 2009 8 November to 26 November

Outskirts - Benalla Festival 5 November to 19 November

David Moore, *Handgun I*, Bronze, 2009

Benalla Art Gallery

Bridge Street, Benalla, Victoria, 3672
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Opening hours 10-5 daily
(03) 5762 3027. Café, 10-4 daily