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Interview with Jana Winderen

 [Tobias Fischer](#)

Jana Winderen's love for the oceans is more than a romantic fantasy of distant harbours and endless planes of water; it is a dark passion leading her into perpetually changing creative spaces, an artistic obsession sparking her imagination and kindling her ambitions. When Winderen claims that she has "always had a great fascination for the ocean", she is, therefore, understating things quite a bit. To her, these liquid expanses are veritable "energy fields", mere surfaces of an untapped terra incognita whose potential we haven't even begun to fathom and whose workings have remained as mysterious as ever. While "a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold the secret of a whole continent", the sea, to put it with the words of Joseph Conrad in "A Heart of Darkness", "is the mistress of Winderen's existence and as inscrutable as destiny". Which is not to say that she were nothing but a dreamer. Equipped with state-of-the-art technology and bespoke, self-built gear, the Norwegian Field recorder

will spend months finding the right places to record, lower her microphones into places few of her colleagues would ever dare to visit and minutely describe the results in her notes. It should surprise no one, then, that she has a lot to tell and that this interview with her has turned out far more exciting than your average Rock star account of broken televisions, groupies and back-stage extravaganza. After all, Winderen may have a penchant for precision - but at the end of the day, she is not a scientist but a storyteller, whose latest full-length "Energy Field" represents a captivating journey rather than a dry academic treatise.



Your field recording trips sound much less academic and quite a lot more like an electrifying experience than with many of your colleagues. In how far is it really an emotional experience discovering these unknown acoustic worlds?

It is a very physical experience, climbing a glacier, being out on a boat in pitch darkness, being awake when most people are asleep, and I will say, also entering into quite dangerous conditions sometimes. I go mostly on my own, it is a lonely thing recording, though you become more alert and sensitive when being alone, I think. A lot of concentration is needed to really focus on listening so intently. I do not go out to find the sounds for the sake of it, but the sounds in that particular place and everything around the sound. I always get surprises, finding sounds by creatures and environments I did not expect. Different depths at different places will sound differently, different ice at different places will sound differently. It depends also on the whole sonic environment, what the environment sounds like.

For more than 3 years you've focused your research on sounds from hidden places. What exactly are these hidden places?

What I mean by hidden places is those which are not easily available to your ears, like 25 meters down in a crevasse of a glacier, deep into a river, ocean or lake; inside an ants' nest, or between the bark and the wood of a tree; listening to worms, beetles or other insects; or the sound of a caterpillar eating a leaf, the sound of cod or haddock communicating with each other, a sea snail dragging itself along a rock... It can be places where I cannot see the origin of the sound, so it becomes like blind field recording - unless the fish swim up to the surface to look at me, which happened once! I am trying to get as long a cable as I can to find sounds as deep as I can in to the ocean. So far I have a 90 meter cable, though I would love to get hold of some wireless equipment and place hydrophones much, much deeper. I am fascinated by uncharted territory - there is not much generally known about sound communication in the oceans between fish, or how the inhabitants of the oceans orientate themselves with sound. I am concerned with the invisible topography of the oceans; invisible, but audible; a soundscape which covers 70% of our planet. So much of it is unknown; we know more about the atmosphere and neighbouring planets than we do about the oceans themselves. I find this quite extraordinary.

What do you find these unheard oceanic soundscapes are revealing?

We are still learning... they reveals a complex and generally unknown sonic world under the surface. It reveals that creatures we did not know could communicate with sound are doing exactly that. You know a female cod chooses its mate according to the sound he makes not according to the size - at least

this is a hypothesis. I believe that creatures under the surface are using the vibrations in the water to a degree we might not yet fully understand. Also the fact that the sensitivity to these audible landscapes, invisible but audible, have developed for millions of years. Some species have adapted to their environment without light for so long. They understand vibrations and sounds in a different way. I also in this sense believe that seismic testing do for sure influence their habitats. Also when something is communicating through sound we gain a sense of it having intelligence - even if I do not like to use the term intelligent as such.

Are there criteria for where to hunt for blind field recordings? Such as local myths or experiences from divers?

Local knowledge is indeed important, but rather than specifically divers, I may read about the history of the place as well as use my own senses when I arrive at the place. You learn pretty quickly from experience. I learn also from local people, like stories and myths, for example about the ravens in Greenland, and then to experience a raven imitating the Greenlandic dogs as it was looking at me, she has obviously understood if she made sounds like the dogs, people like me would turn up with food. I also listen to scientists of course, for example where to find a school of herring, to be able to record them when mating. Local knowledge is essential. I often speak to marine biologists - or when I wanted to record bats near Oslo, I had to give the local bat expert a call to find out where to find the different bat species.

What equipment do you use for your recordings?

I use mainly 2 or 3 DPA hydrophones, a Sound devices 744T hard disc recorder, and 2 or 4 DPA 4060 omnis. Hydrophones are made from the piezo principle; they are specially made to listen to sounds under water. Dolphin EAR/PRO hydrophones are the ones I used before, and still do sometimes, they are also based on the piezo technique, they are much cheaper than the DPAs, but have a lesser frequency response..... You have to invent practical ways to carry equipment, to keep your hands warm. My mother knitted me some excellent special gloves I put on top of climbing gloves, to make practical solutions for attaching your microphones to your recorder while hanging in a crevasse for example... Some of my equipment is custom made. I have had great help from DPA and Rycote for example. I like to invent new techniques, and also new ways of using the equipment I have. I have also learnt a lot from Chris Watson's techniques when we have been recording together, and from his years of experience and choice of equipment, which he was generous enough to share.

In what way do lakes or oceans differ in their sounds? Are there such things as ugly-sounding lakes? Does an ocean sound more interesting in dark depth than right below its surface?

I always get a surprise! Every lake has its character depending on depth, temperature, whether it is covered with ice or close to a city or a forest... The Barents Sea will sound different than the Pacific Ocean. They have other inhabitants, other currents. I always find something unexpected in every recording I do. 30 meters down into Lake Mjøsa, for example, I found a hum... not present at 20 meters, only at 30 meters. In the Hardangerfjord on the west coast of Norway I found a cacophony of fish babbling, feeding and communicating at 04.00 in the morning! In Amsterdam two motors resonated on a the corner of a canal to make an amazing overtone... A boat man in Thailand took me to a riverbed where the fishermen grew a certain plant to attract the catfish, which made lots of sounds... I am not sure about an "ugly-sounding lake". "Ugly-sounding" is a taste issue, not a scientific one. I have not found "Ugly" sounds, maybe because I enjoy listening to them so much. I suppose sometimes the man-made sound from boat motors can make lakes sound "ugly", though some boat propellers sound quite good, although they are far too loud - a real problem of sound pollution.

The oceans sound different at different depths, but you get the sound of shrimp all over! But on the surface you have the sound of smaller fish grazing and speaking, snails moving around, shells moving in the sand... deeper down I hear fish communication. It is also quite amazing that you can hear someone

walking on the ice of a lake 25 meters down in the water under the ice. I have a 90 meter cable hydrophone now, which I am so much looking forward to testing at its full length. I am working on doing vertical recordings with 3 or 4 hydrophones at different depths simultaneously. The salacity, pressure and temperature vary at different depths which makes the sound move at different speeds. I am about to work on an installation piece with this vertical idea of recording slices of the ocean. I have always had a great fascination for the ocean.

When on sea, can you recognize by listening whether cod, herrings or shrimps are communicating under your boat?

I can hear the difference between cod, haddock, herring, pollock, shrimp, snail and catfish. I have recorded 3 different sounds from cod, one for protecting food, one for protecting habitat and one, very, very beautiful rumbling courting sound. They communicate actively, and there is a big chance that you will hear a fish 'saying' something when lowering your hydrophones. At the Institute of Marine Research outside Bergen in Norway, I listened in to trapped cod so I could see them when they made their sound so that I could recognise them in the wild. The cod nudged my hydrophone and made a grunt - it did not look as it was an aggressive thing. I am not sure what they 'say', and the researchers are not sure either, and that is what is so very fascinating! The low rumbling sound from cod is quite obvious though. The female seems to choose the cod with the lowest sound - cod can make sounds down to 20 Hz! They generate sound through 6 drum muscles on their swimbladder. A larger swimbladder and larger drum muscles make a more powerful, lower sound, which is a good sign for the female, who want to mate with a big and healthy male. The males even do a dance with their fins to impress the female, much like birds do! I was surprised to learn that fish have a selection process too; the female is not just mating with any male... I am in touch with the marine biologist at the University in Bergen, and at the Institute of Marine Research there, and also on the Internet, of course. It is helpful to have my background in science to communicate with scientists. It is important to me not to have too much of an outsider's viewpoint

BBC4 recently followed you and Chris Watson to the Barents Sea. How and what did you contribute to their programme World On the Move?

For the BBC interview I told stories about our findings concerning cod communication, about how they migrate from the Barents Sea to the Norwegian coast to spawn, and how some of them even travel half way and then turn back to the Barents Sea as they realise they can not make it the whole way. I also told them about my experiences on the research boat 'Johann Hjort' from the Institute of Marine Research and the marine biologists on the boat. I also talked about my disaster when both my hydrophones were destroyed, realising the strengths of the forces of the waves which smashed my equipment to pieces... We also contributed sounds of the spawning cod we recorded in Lindåspollen at the same time. The programme series 'World on the Move' was following migrating species all over the world for the whole year 2008.

Tell us about former and coming sound installations. How do you make the audience interact and do they interact or rather shy away?

In earlier years I worked with interactivity with the audience in sound installation pieces. I have for example presented an interactive sound installation called The Art of walking on water to 6,500 school children for two and a half years, where sounds were triggered by sensorpads. It was made in collaboration with Trond Lossius and Jørgen Træen. I have also earlier worked with motion-tracking, programmed with MAX/MSP and Soft VNS. I wanted the audience to play with the sounds by moving around in a fixed performance space, for example, the installation 'Hard Rain' exhibited during the exhibition 'The Idea of North' in Halifax, Canada, and in 'Electron' in Breda, Netherlands. Recent works have included multi-channel sound installations where I use several speakers, for example the exhibition 'Sleppet, Grieg07', with the piece "+4°C - from Folgefonna to The North Sea" where I followed the meltwater from the glacier Folgefonna down into the Hardangerfjord all the way into the North Sea.

This spring/summer I did an installation at 'Teleport Färgfabriken', I drilled my way through the ice on the local lake to record the local seamonster! This summer I did a live hydrophone installation where the audience were able to hear the fish outside in the water as they swam past, hunting the smaller fish. I could hear when the fish were on their way into the fjord every day following the tide. I am part of the 'freq_out' sound installation project curated by CM von Hausswolff; we have been making 7 installations around the world since 2003, in Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Germany, France, Thailand, Hungary... I am also part of the live installation project 'Field' with Lasse Marhaug and Mike Harding; we play to an audience of sheep in a field.

One project I am presently doing with Chris Watson is called "Voices from the Deep" (working title) where we follow the migrating cod from the Barents Sea to the coast of Norway to spawn. We are also concerned with soundscapes they migrate through. In March I am part of "Darkness Descends: Norwegian Art Now" in New York curated by Christina Vassallo. Finally, another project is a collaboration with Brandon LaBelle, which we are preparing for an event in Oslo this autumn. Future projects in 2009 include exhibitions and performances in England, Russia, Italy, Sweden and Norway.

Do you expect 'Heated' (the recent CD of your concert in Japan, released by Touch) to have an effect beyond sound, for example, by making your audience aware of usually unheard animal communication and thus heighten their consciousness of the environment?

I do hope 'Heated' will have an effect in this way, that it makes people aware of the population underwater in a different way than what is on their dinnerplate! I have had many people responding: "I'm not sure I will eat cod anymore...", though this is not be my goal, rather to gain respect for the living inhabitants of the oceans and of the vulnerable ecological systems underwater. Oil-drilling being one thing, for example in the Barents Sea, and in the most important spawning areas off the coast of Norway. I also hope Heated will give the audience an insight into my work. It was great to be asked to release this live concert in Japan by Touch. I was touring in Japan with Alog, Alexander Rishaug and Marius Watz in October 2008. This is the first CD I have released. A 7" came out on Autofact last year.

How did „Energy Field“, the full-length follow-up to „Heated“, take shape?

Since Energy Field was my first studio album, it was a new process for me. There were many unfamiliar things for me to consider: working in the CD format, for example, which meant making sound installations on peoples iPods, in living rooms and on their computers and all sorts of headphones, quite different exhibition spaces from what I was used to... I collected material in Greenland, Iceland, and in Norway for this album, including many hours of hydrophone recordings from glaciers, lakes, fjords and ice fjords, and from the ocean, of course. I travelled on many field trips in the last two years to collect this material. My fieldtrip to Greenland was mind blowing; the vast beauty and enormous scale of the icebergs, also being so vulnerable and at the same time so dangerous when they calve and turn into the fjord. I was sitting far too close to the ice fjord, not realising that. Afterwards, on my way back, I saw a sign saying "Do not enter, extreme danger to life" the sounds inside the icebergs were amazing when putting the hydrophones right inside the ice, the compressed oxygen from extremely old ice melting was very powerful.

I travel on my own most of the time; it is important to be able to concentrate while recording. When working with the compositions for the album I carry with me the experience and impressions the fieldtrips provide. My working method is always to log the recordings thoroughly after finishing a recording session. I write notes to the files so I can go back and refer to them. Sometimes I log several times. My little black notebooks are as important as my external hard drives. To work towards the CD album format, is a different way of thinking dramatically and with a time line. It is a great challenge!

Why did you decide against sharing some of these notes for "Energy Field", as has become almost conventional for many other field recording releases?

Because I want to encourage the listener to use their imagination and direct them less... this is not an

academic exercise; I really hope this encourages the listener to find out for themselves. I don't wish to tell them what to do, or where to go or what to look for. They will have their own ideas...

What are criteria for this journey you're creating?

I bring the journey from the actual place, all the physical and emotional experiences in addition to the sounds into the mix. It also really helps to work with the guys at Touch. I am very new to this discipline of making a timeline decided piece, never having made an album before, which is an art in itself, and they have been brilliant in helping me with this kind of thing. Constantly encouraging, never instructing. They are brilliant. It has been a great experience working with them, and such fun too.

A lot of the places you've visited for "Energy Field" can rightly be described as "complex" and "fragile". What kind of information about these ecosystems do you feel these field recordings are capable of conveying in the absence of visual and haptic data?

I agree they are both complex and fragile, but so is many places if you look and listen carefully enough. Which is very important to remember. I have experienced people getting emotionally touched by recordings from these environments through knowing where they are from, and when I tell stories from the particular environment.

As you mentioned you're already using 90m long cables for your aquatic recordings. While you're preparing to go much deeper than that, do you already have some fantasies about what you'll find sonically down there?

It is a sonic environment that has developed millions of years longer than ours, creatures have adapted their physicality and senses accordingly, I believe there will be different layers of audible landscapes further down according to pressure, temperature, current, salinity and the physical structure of the landscapes, mountains and clefts etc. It is extremely exciting, It would be fantastic to record deep down into the Mariana Trench for example. I am hoping to be able to explore the Pacific Ocean too...

By Ed Bendorf & Tobias Fischer

Picture by Julia Barclay

Jana Winderen Discography:

Heated: Live in Japan (Touch) 2009

Submerged (Touch) 2010

The Noisiest Guys on the Planet (Ash International) 2009

Energy Field (Touch) 2010

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