Founder member of Cabaret Voltaire, award-winning wildlife sound recordist with David Attenborough and recording artist for Touch, Chris Watson is an artist with a unique background and sensibility. In 2004 Alan Dunn and Watson worked together on the *Winter’s Tale* project at the Foundation for Art & Creative Technology in Liverpool, collaborating with a community of elderly high-rise tenants. Recording their immediate and surrounding locale at all hours of the day, two new soundscapes were created for the scenes the residents could see from their windows but could not hear. These two pieces were re-fed into each living room free of charge via the internal CCTV system.

The project brought together Watson’s interest in creating portraits of habitats using sound alongside his generous sharing of professional skills towards new ways of listening to our world. Having travelled extensively since first working for *The Tube* on Channel 4, Watson has recorded in some of the most remote and challenging parts of this planet. Dunn invited him to select three photographs from his travel collection to reflect upon the planet’s silence, remoteness, the nature of time, perspective, chaos, complexity and human nature.

CW: It was really interesting when you asked me to select three photographs because even though I chose three remote locations across the world, there is a clear connection in habitats. Although I am a sound recordist, when I go to any of these places, the geographic South Pole, the Pacific Ocean or the Kalahari Desert in the North West Cape of South Africa, the first thing I do is to look. Through my visual sense and then my auditory sense I start to absorb what I consider to be the essence or spirit of these places. I am very much visually guided and the one thing these places all have in common is the distant horizon. Even though the three habitats are radically different and far apart, when you scan them you can see far into the distance and, with the lack of
The other thing I realised from talking to scientists at the South Pole is that there is only one sunrise and one sunset a year.
There is always a narrative element, which articulates the inherent complexity of the sounds. I am becoming interested in how I may start to that is very simple, not complex, although I photograph in that sense. It is a composition like to experience that place. It is not like a any given location. I represent a place as I would judgement not to use any man-made noises in lack of man-made noise and I often make that relationship between the more complex sounds animals or places, but do you think there is a quality well presented sound. It allows us to start to hear it. The very direct emotional response to good it’, the very direct emotional response to good that enables me to record in any of those places and then spatialise it into a three-dimensional audio environment. And this is genuine three-dimensions using third order ambisonics to spatialise a place so for the first time you can recreate a space which has planar (horizontal) sound, which is how we see, but also with height and depth, which is how we hear. It is still a very complex system. I work with Tony Myatt at the University of York to create the hardware for it and that really culminated recently in The The Morning Line project at TBA21 that is currently exhibited in Vienna. The Morning Line is a sculpture by Matthew Ritchie that has a 40-speaker system within it to allow the public to really hear the sounds of any recorded place. The presentation is crucial. In the past, sound has been very poorly presented but galleries in particular have caught up and the public now ‘get it’, the very direct emotional response to good quality well presented sound.

You often refer to the ‘beautiful sounds’ of animals or places, but do you think there is a relationship between the more complex sounds and what we find ‘pleasing’ to listen to?

The commonality of these places is the lack of man-made noise and I often make that judgement not to use any man-made noises in any given location. I represent a place as I would like to experience that place. It is not like a photograph in that sense. It is a composition that is very simple, not complex, although I am becoming interested in how I may start to articulate the inherent complexity of the sounds. There is always a narrative element, which is time. Time is not always regular and I often stretch it if for example. The Vatnajökull piece on Weather Report was a representation of 10,000 years in 18 minutes. I am quite happy to play around with time and this is what many of my compositions are based on. I create a timeline and create simple scores that are based on lapsed time, the seasons or animal behaviour.

I am looking at the moment into doing a piece with a raven roost in Wales in which the sounds happen over about 20 minutes and I am trying to expand it to closer to 60 minutes. It is a way of getting into the rhythm and behaviour and the pattern of the animal. I think this is part of the complexity, this idea of temporal resolution. At the Pole I can hear a hundred years ago. In the Kalahari, insects live their lives much faster than us. We can hear birds and see them and try to describe them but the fact is that, as organisms, we are all living our lives at different speeds. We can hear birds sing but we cannot capture that information with the same resolution as the bird is doing at that moment. The classic example of that is a wren singing. That wren can produce 64 notes in an 8-second song phase. We hear that as a trill. If you slow it down 4 times you can see and hear the individual notes. The scientists at the University of St Andrews with whom I am working can resolve those notes at that speed, which is beyond our temporal resolution. Another wren can separate out all those individual notes and extract information about its sexual status, its position within its habitat and whether or not it has a mate. The raven is similar and for me slowing down is one very simplistic way of working with it. It allows us to start to hear it.

AD: And that is akin to early photographers examining motion?

CW: Curiously enough I have a project with the British Film Institute who have given Mike Harding at Touch some animated films from the early 20th Century by two French film makers and I have one to create a soundtrack for. It is the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly and some of it is slow-motion film, some of it is actual animation and at some stages they even built an actual artificial caterpillar to understand its behaviour and to represent the behaviour. They made a new time resolution as perhaps because the real thing was too slow! It's interesting to see the techniques they used to film that, methods you have to put in place to start to perceive complexity.

AD: Which leads us to a final question of why do you think it has to be so complex? If the wind system and the waves and ravens and wrens are so elaborate and in flux, why do you think we, as part of it, struggle to understand it?

CW: Firstly, I think all these time systems are interconnected. They must be because that is how things work and evolve. Secondly, we are only here for a very small span and are simply not able to understand it. Things are evolving all around us but we do not have the capacity to notice it, or to comprehend the temporal resolution on a daily basis.

Why things appear to be so complex is of course a difficult question to answer. It is like trying to understand the universe. We can understand what we can and we all do our own little bit, but maybe all that does is add to the complexity of it rather than resolve it. And in order to try and find answers at each stage of our development, we do simplify things, it is in our nature. That is, we try to find out what it is, we give it a name, we classify it and then move on.

I do not think we can contain it because in 10,000 years this cafe won’t be here and we find it impossible to imagine what will be here. But there can be no ‘answer’ as it is always evolving and never stops. Even crocodiles are continuing to evolve but we cannot perceive it from our position. We can look back at evolution and recognise it but not observe it up close. So, new perspectives, differing time systems and temporal resolutions do play a part. It is hard to understand temporal resolution when you visit those places but perhaps it is possible to absorb it, to record it from certain perspectives, albeit a simplified portrait.

Chris Watson’s new CD El Tren Fantasma (The Ghost Train) is released by Touch. See www.chriswatson.net and www.touchmusic.org.uk

Audio tracks selected by Chris Watson for Stimulus Respond at www.ollandunnnj.co.uk/stimulusaudio.html

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Pacific Ocean
The Kalahari Desert