Sounds From Dangerous Places: An Interview With Peter Cusack

By Angus Carlyle

Peter Cusack is a sound artist/recordist and musician with special interests in environmental sound and acoustic ecology. He is particularly interested in global patterns of sonic change created by migrations of people who make and create them and by new technologies. In 1998 he initiated the on-going 'Your Favourite London Sound' project, which aims to find out what Londoners find positive in their city's soundscape.

The first question I'd like to ask about the Sound From Dangerous Places project is what, for you, constitutes a dangerous place?

My original idea was that these were places of major environmental damage—not necessarily a place that is dangerous to one personally (although it may be that too). Essentially the project came out of specific journeys that I'd undertaken, particularly one to Azerbaijan. There I went to the oil fields that are just outside Baku, the capital city; these are the oldest oil fields in the world and are consequently one of the most polluted spots on earth. The area, called Bibi Heybat, is beside the sea, so both the sea and the land are saturated with oil. It is also near relatively large towns and villages. Refugees, who are denied land elsewhere, are forced to live and graze animals in the oil fields. Its impact on local people is extremely marked.

What motivated you to explore these places?

Again, it came out of that experience. Despite what I've just said about the pollution and related problems, it is also one of the most photogenic and sonogenic places that I've ever been to. From an aesthetic or artistic point of view it looks and sounds fantastic. The sound comes from the fact that it is still a working oil field, with hundreds of nodding-donkey pumps going continually, each of which hums and squeaks in its own little way. They are often quite close together. So the atmosphere is of working machines humming and squeaking repetitively for as long as they can stand up, and some have been running for decades. So to walk around there is a sonic experience. It is not that far off sounding like a genuine piece of electro-acoustic music in its own right; in fact my recordings of the oil fields have been mistaken for compositions. So it sounds great. It looks great, too, many of the structures have been there for such a long time that they have decayed and fallen into spectacular heaps of metal, either rusty or blackened with oil. The light, too, is special: the sky is blue, the sea is blue and the soil is yellow where it's not black and the various structures are reflected in pools of oil waste. So it is a very beautiful site if you ignore all the social, political and economic things that can be said.

What were the other locations that you have chosen to investigate under the broad theme of Sound in Dangerous Places?

The main issue for me after experiencing the oil-fields was the extreme dichotomy between my aesthetic pleasure at seeing and hearing this place and the knowledge that it was extremely polluted, created health problems for the local people, had a major impact on Azerbaijan's social and political system, the structure of its economy and exerted a wider, global, effect in terms of oil supply. I wanted to see if other dangerous places possessed this dichotomy so immediately I thought of Chernobyl. Another place is the region of Eastern Turkey where the source rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates rise in the mountains. Nineteen dams are to be constructed here. Dams have a devastating impact on local microclimates; in other words, they destroy vegetation and change rain or snowfall patterns making it a dangerous place from an environmental and ecological perspective. It is also a dangerous place from the point of view of there being a low-level war between Kurdish guerrillas and the Turkish Army.

In the UK, as well, there are 'dangerous places'. For example, in North Wales, where fallout from Chernobyl fell, there are still restrictions imposed on farmers in order that they can rid their sheep of radioactive caesium. This is twenty years later and the restrictions will still probably be in place in another 20 years from now. Other aspects of dangerousness in the UK can be located in the vicinity of major military installations, like the American air bases of East Anglia. The interesting thing is that military bases are also people exclusion zones, which means that they effectively become wildlife reserves. So even though the place may be littered with unexploded ordinance, nonetheless, they are havens for wildlife, which is reflected in the soundscape. Another 'dangerous place' I recorded in the UK is the borough of Uttlesford, where Stansted airport is located. It is the borough that produces the most domestic carbon dioxide per UK household. And yet, when you go there, you hear church bells and the usual affluent stockbroker belt cum rural soundscape.

If all dangerous places were characterised by an absence of sound then you could say that dangerous places are associated with a particular, eerily silent soundscape. From what you are saying, it is not as simple as that; dangerous places have very diverse soundscapes.

Yes, that's right. In Turkey, for example, there *is* an absence of sound. With the de-forestation connected to the dams, the wildlife disappears, the land is flooded so there is no low-level farming activity, the bee keeping has to go elsewhere and the villages are inundated so the people and their sounds depart, too. Instead of the roaring of the river you get a gentle lapping of the lake. In Chernobyl, the opposite has happened to the soundscape, the wildlife has come in to replace the evacuated people. Nature seems to have recovered far beyond anyone's expectations and animals that haven't been seen there for a hundred years are now back.

Does the diversity of soundscapes associated with dangerous places pose particular problems for you when you come to present this material?

Very much so, because getting the idea across requires explanation in addition to the recorded sounds themselves. That explanation can be visual or spoken or written. This project has presented me with the challenge of using media that I previously haven't employed; this is as yet an unsolved problem.

One of the other consequences of going to Azerbaijan was meeting Ursula Biemann there. She is a Swiss video artist, more particularly, a geo-political artist, whose interests have been in borders: in the mechanisms involved in the legal and illegal transport of resources and people, in the differences in economic development either side of borderlines and in the philosophical, sociological and cultural issues that underpin those processes. We collaborated on two projects, one on the architecture of Baku as a city and another, *The Black Sea Files*, an exploration of the Baku/Tbilisi/Ceyhan oil pipeline that has been constructed to bring Caspian oil to the west. This is very much her piece—my role was in finalising the video sound—but working with her was extremely valuable in introducing me to areas of geo-political art that I wasn't aware of before.

Looking at such work didn't change the way I hear the soundscape but they did persuade me to make a wider range of recordings, particularly interviews with people. The whole thing has turned me into more of a journalist than I'd ever imagined I'd be! Moreover, these experiences inspired me to conduct much more detailed research into the contexts of the places I was exploring, producing even more material to deal with. So it has been a blessing and a curse, but ultimately a good thing.

How would you relate your Dangerous Places project to your previous work?

Almost all of my soundscape work has been focused on place and the way we respond to place through sound. One of my previous projects, *The Favourite Sounds of London* was quite a detailed attempt to get at what Londoners found positive about the London soundscape. *Sounds from Dangerous Places* is kind of a logical extension from there. It is not quite the same since it is more overtly political and deals with more global structures, yet, because it is me, it still has the sonic bias.

What will happen to the focus on positive sounds that was represented in some of your previous work?

The Favourite Sounds of London was started in 1998 and is now almost nine years old. In 2005, I had the opportunity to do the same project in Beijing. There is also a group originally based in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago who are extending the Favourite Sounds idea to Chicago (http://favoritechicagosounds.com). So similar projects are being pursued in different cities. Because the same questions are being asked, the material is comparable and that has generated a lot of interesting, often unexpected, results. For example, the way that people spoke of sound in Beijing seemed noticeably different from the way that Londoners described their relationship with sound. In China, they were more poetic or metaphorical in their appreciation of what sounds of the city meant to them. This alerted me to the cultural differences that there must be in the way we think and feel about our sound environment. In one sense, of course, those differences should have been entirely expected, but it has taken me fifty years to appreciate the point!

One of the things we are told, from a variety of sources is that as the world globalises, it becomes more homogenous. That may be true of the visual field, if we think about signage, for example, but what about the field of sound?

I would say that the more I travel the more homogenous sounds do seem, although that process is by no means complete and there are vast and interesting local differences which one can only hope are maintained. The most ubiquitous sound now is traffic noise and that sounds pretty much the same wherever you are—although there are local variations even in that. As traffic noise increases and becomes dominant, generally, homogeneity increases and there is a parallel with new communications technologies. There are mobile phones and electronic bleeps of all kinds that you hear all over the world. Traffic also masks out many of the smaller sounds that give places their character.

Music is seemingly becoming more homogenous. Drum machines, for example, have conquered the world and while these may be producing different rhythms, the individual sounds themselves are unfortunately similar. The same can be said of synthesisers.

Do you have a new place in mind that you are looking forward to exploring?

I've decided to stop travelling for a while in order to use the material I've already accumulated. The next task is to create new work from this material.

That said, I'd like to travel the length of the Tigris or Euphrates River. One of the reasons is that these waterways are historic in terms of their relationship with the origins of organised human habitation. Everyone knows of the terrible political situation in the Middle East; yet less known is the issue of water, which in a hot, dry area, is possibly more of a significant resource to the local populations than oil. At the other end of those rivers are the deltas that flow into the Persian Gulf and the Shat Al-Arab; these areas are home to the Marsh Arab peoples, terribly persecuted under Saddam Hussein. The United Nations Environmental Programme has attempted to restore the marshes that, under Hussein's instructions had been drained to twenty per cent of their former size. They have succeeded up to a point. However what impedes more progress in the restoration is now not anything to do with Iraq, but rather with how much water Turkey and Syria allow to flow down the waterways. What interests me is that the watersheds present very clear-cut ecological and environmental systems from source to mouth, which have political, cultural, sociological effects all the way down the line. As a complete, self-contained system it has many interlocking elements that allow one to make general points about the relationship between ecology and human society. These, I think, are the issues of this time; and while these issues can be explored from a variety of perspectives, for me, it is sound that is the way in.

This interview also appeared in Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*, a book edited by Angus Carlyle, published in 2007 by Double Entendre and Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice (http://crisap.org).* *See review on page 48.*

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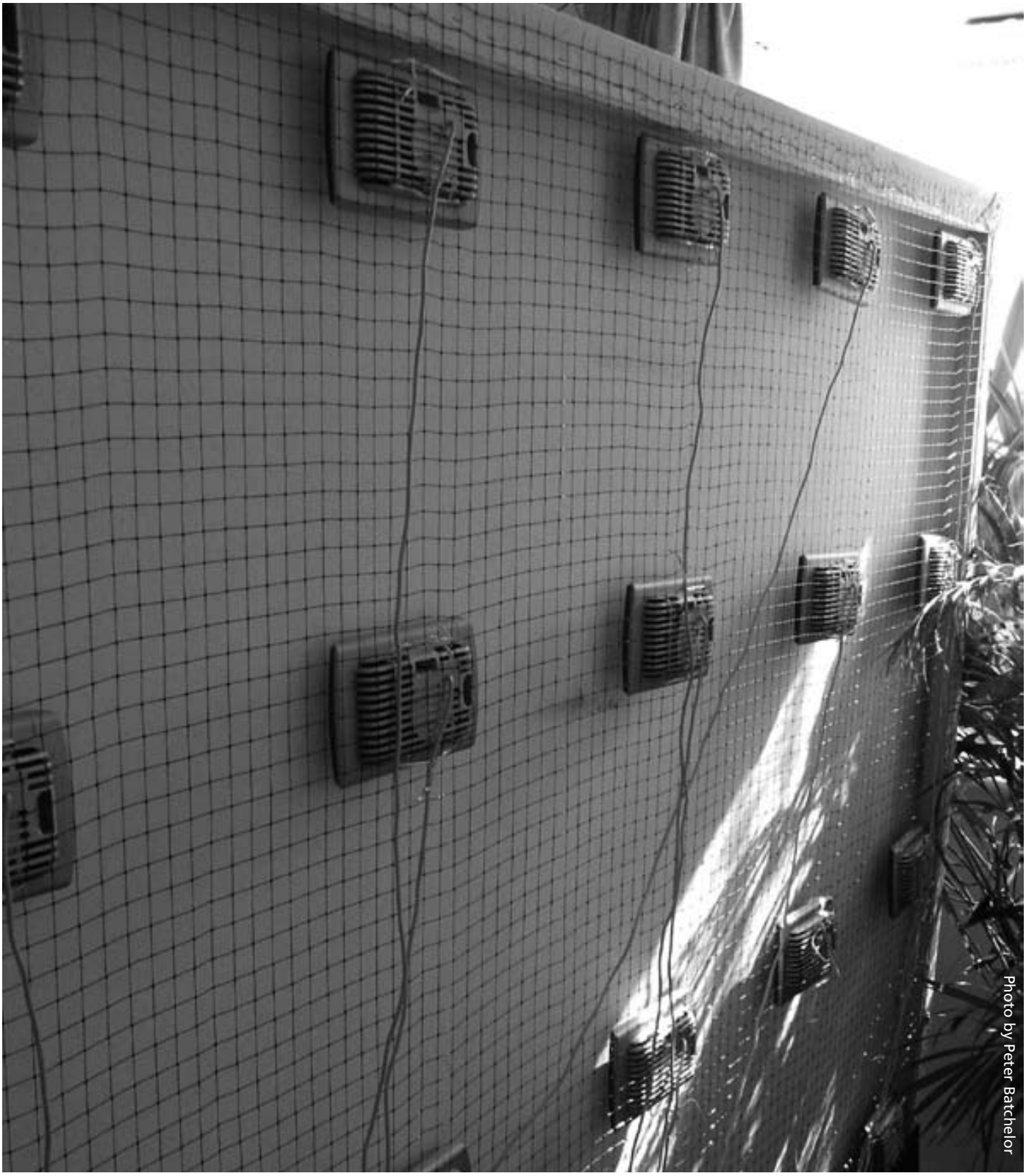

Studies on Canvas (2004) by Peter Batchelor

Peter Batchelor's *Studies on Canvas* (2004) is a fixed medium installation comprising 30 flat-panel speakers behind a blank canvas—essentially a physical acousmatic curtain which obscures a series of sonic 'images'. The work is thus concerned with visual/aural metaphor: as with a painting, the images represent landscapes, scenes, (moving) still-lifes, and the (sometimes imaginary) inner detail of objects. As such they rely heavily on referential material and spatio-behavioral emulation in their realisation. The listener is invited to engage with the work as with a painting, standing back to see the full picture, standing closer to appreciate the inner spatial/textural detail. While the 'frame' represented by the canvas abstracts the material from its purported context, in many ways the idea is to transcend it altogether, creating a virtual window on the real, with the canvas contents being often practically indistinguishable from reality. Ultimately, the work represents a coming together of acousmatic and soundscape compositional concerns and has prompted extensive further investigation into issues surrounding the fabricated aural landscape and trompe l'oreille (see 'Fabricating aural landscapes: the referential and trompe l'oreille in multi-channel installation contexts' (EMS07, **http://www.ems-network.org/spip.php?article289**). *Editor's note: Peter's paper, mentioned above, was the slated to be included in this issue; unfortunately, we didn't have enough space. We are pleased that EMS is making it available.*