

# WHEN THE VISIBILITY OF THE AUDIO MEETS THE AUDIBILITY OF THE VISUAL:

## A Review on Cities and Memory: Sound Photography

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In visual arts, literary arts, and performing arts such as dance, theatre and film, visual elements are effective operators to the perception of an audience who integrates the vision into the consciousness towards the idea transmitted by the creator. In contrast, the understanding of music roots principally in the auditory sense for the sense-making of the audio data. As the visual source-localization are far developed for humans (Schutz 2008: 85), the overwhelming significance of the visual over the audio in the new media is intensified with the rise of online video culture, as the visual may aid the imagination faster and become a more potentially deductive knowledge. Hence, trends of the online video facility often escalate fast from low resolution to high definition, while the improvement on audio properties is usually of less concern.

Hence, audiovisual composition projects like Cities and Memory: Sound Photography lead to two lines of discussion: the visibility of the audio in the absence of the visual, and the audibility of the visual in the absence of the audio. For the case of Cities and Memory, the ideas of visibility and audibility in creative works are parallel, but both the visual and the audio may not be equally complementary to each other.

Founded by Stuart Fowkes, a sound artist and field recordist based in Oxford, UK, Cities and Memory is a collaborative worldwide project for field recordists, sound artists, musicians and sound enthusiasts who contribute sound recordings collected from various cities in the world, as well as sound remixes produced for a specific location through re-imagination. To date, with over 500 sound contributors being carefully credited, it is reported that the audio collection contains more than 2,000 audio sounds mapped on more than 80 countries in the world. Thanks to the network technology in the 21st century, internet users worldwide can overcome spatial and temporal boundaries to freely explore the audio files pinned on the virtual globe, and to be informed of the audio contributors (Cities and Memory 2018d).



FIGURE 1: A screenshot of the mapping of 116 sonic compositions on the virtual globe as responses to the photography works.

Cities and Memory: Sound Photography, the latest venture of Cities and Memory in 2018, employs a new approach that integrates photography as the visual aids to the audio. Aiming to explore the relationship between photography and sound and how sound is used to respond to what people see around them in

today's visually-dominated culture, *Cities and Memory* invited photographers worldwide to contribute photographs of various places in the world. Selected images are to inspire global composers to deliver sonic compositions of various creative methods. They comprise both the surreal imagery of scenic nature and urban landscape through camera filters, and the haunting reality of various human activities through journalistic perspectives on the universal themes in humanity such as solitude, dystopia, death, technology, faith, joy, and the celebration of life.

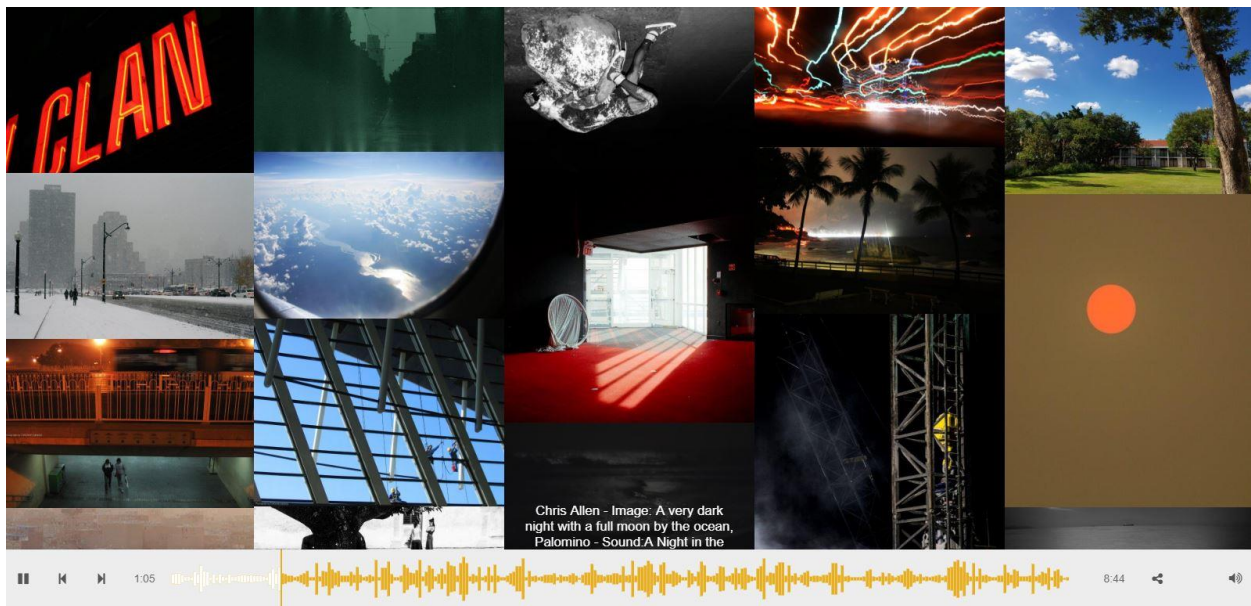


FIGURE 2: A screenshot of the interactive gallery of *Cities and Memory: Sound Photography*. Sound player design is credited to Tim Waterfield at Kennebec.

Inspired by the ethnographic works of the photographers, 116 composers have responded with sonic compositions, which have various durations ranging from 34" to 18'23", by using various creative techniques and sonic components (*Cities and Memory* 2018c): fusing acoustic recordings from the environment, such as of an amplified electromagnetic field (as in Rod Stasick's *Ciradau* (Hemycapnoise Deepseeing)) and of a word phrase in 20 translated languages (as in *Cities and Memory's* *Gratitude*); constructing new sounds by using raw visual data from the photography (as in Stef Merchak's *Dark Energy*); constructing new melodies by using suggestive visual elements as musical notation (as in Gurdy Simm's *Formation*); constructing sonic experience of the location with collections of historical sound recordings (as in Karl Heding's *Terminus*); and integrating audible fairytales through the ages into the sonic composition (as in *Cities and Memory's* *A Stromboli Fairytale*).

Since the visual and the audio of a 'sound photography' work were created separately at different times and by two different artists, an interesting question could be whether the visibility of the audio essentialises the audibility of the visual, and vice versa. Instances are two snapshots in China and India: the former depicts two citizens exiting a subway station near the Tian'anmen Square while a night bus rushing on the road above in Beijing; the latter depicts a scenic view from a ghat in Varanasi, with morning bathers in the Ganges River and a Hindu-styled pavilion in the foreground. Scott Wilson, who composed *Beijing Broadcast* as a response to the former, 'mixes post-processed field recording with captured shortwave broadcasts' that 'pass through lonely bodies' based on the perceivable loneliness in a metropolis (*Cities and Memory* 2018a). Matt Burnett, who composed *Ganges Morning* as a response to the latter, digitally processes a chorus recorded in Berlin instead in order to 'reflect the universal human experience of starting one's day', and ends the composition with a metallic chime sound as 'inspired by the light reflected on the river' (*Cities and Memory* 2018b).

It appears to the reviewer who is also the contributor of both visuals that both audio works are highly experimental with electroacoustic manipulation, but they also correspond stunningly to the visual intent. At a glance, viewers may imaginatively hear the following: a mixed rhythm of forceful vehicles against mellow footsteps as in Beijing, or a drone of water flow with a chanting whisper in the air of Varanasi. As the result, the visibility in Wilson's audio work is unexpectedly arrhythmic, cybernetic, and mystified; Burnett's offering is surprisingly reminiscent to the audible imagination of the photographer, although he digitally manipulates a chorus sampled in Berlin that is not culturally related to Varanasi.

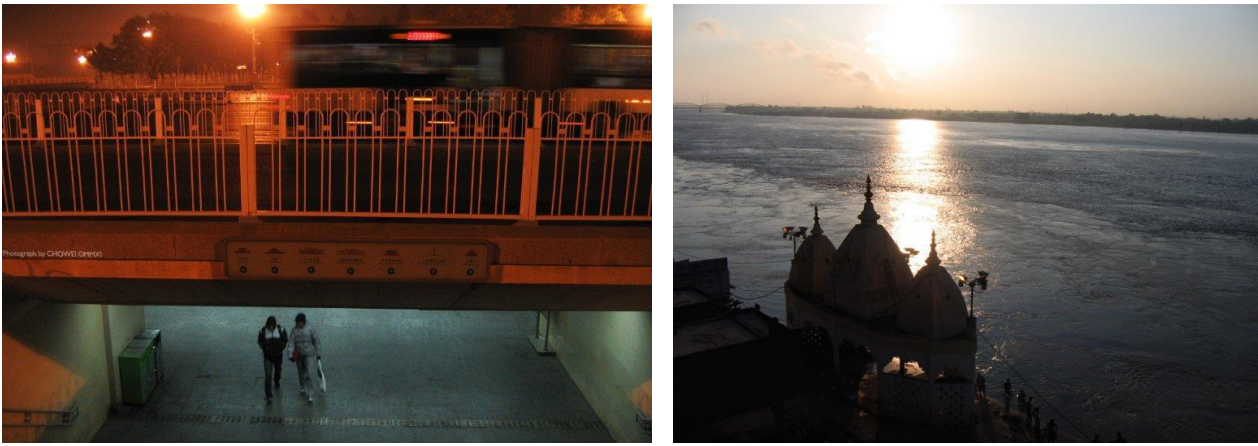


FIGURE 3: Visual sources for Scott Wilson’s Beijing Broadcast (left) and Matt Burnett’s Ganges Morning. Photographs by O.W. Chow (Cities and Memory 2018a; 2018b)

As pictorial media are deemed more commonly recognized as an essential part of cultural identity, it is also of the concerns of ethnographers and visual anthropologists whether digital interactive ethnographies will be developed as an important direction to study humanity (Ruby 2005: 166). Apart from serving as an internet media exposition, Cities and Memory: Sound Photography projects a new question of whether the visibility of the audio and the audibility of the visual could correspond with the imagination and the intent of both interests. Any possible divergence of the expectation in the visibility and the audibility is still a positive sign of progress, but a society lacking of such imagination is not.

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