

Sound-sourcing the planetary nervous system

The sub-zero soundscapes of Tromsø's ambient electronica have sparked a wave of interest in this northerly Norwegian city, 200 miles into the Arctic Circle. Biosphere's Geir Jenssen, Norway's nascent new media hubworkers, and veterans from the Tromsø scene, talk about re-fusing soundscapes in the image of their mountain worlds.

Visible beyond the dramatic ridge across the breath-taking fjord inside which Tromsø sits, are the real, equally breath-taking mountains without end: mountains which continue inland for hundreds and hundreds of miles. When you look out at these, and take in their proximity to this small city it begins to make sense that this should be home of one of the oddest geographical upsurges of techno and ambient music, and that it has spawned the so-called sub-zero soundscapes of the Arctic Circle scene.

There's a marketing cliché surrounding the likes of the ambient outfits; Aedena Cycle, Circular, Information, (though these latter two are now south Norway based) and the most widely known, Biosphere, and it's this: 'These guys are sitting out in complete darkness, with these fields of snow, working on their computers alone', as Oslo-based Rune Grammofon's, Rune Kristoffersen, encapsulates it. There's a truth in this, though to get a clearer sense of what this scene is picking up on, you need to move significantly beyond this.

You have to begin viewing this scene's emergence, as an electronic inflection of the land, sky, and skyline, in which the musicians find themselves – a far cry from the industrial noise scenarios from which electronica often takes its lead. Mix in altitude with this, and human scale amidst the endless mountain-scale, and you will begin to understand the thin air of Information or Biosphere's *Substrata*. As the guy who runs the local record label, Beatservice's Vidar Hanssen, observes: 'There's both the city and the country, nature here is very close.'

Tromsø, (Trom's island) rests on an islet out-crop of rock, large enough to provide home and

hearth for the city's 60,000 population. In winter, by day, the high street, between the recurrent deluges of snow, is brimming with activity. Everyone walks along the snow covered roads. Ski-shops abound, hybridised into hunting emporiums; reindeer-head trophies centre-stage in the window displays. Fur as clothing is accepted here, in the shops at least: animal rights activists would be

looked upon with disbelief and curiosity. With post-oil Norway an unusually rich country, the shops are full of expensive items, and the young look hip and well dressed whilst the even younger are pulled to nursery on circular sledges.



photos Jony Easterby

