

Electrofringe turns ten, celebrating with 5 days of intense activity: more than 100 artists and over 80 events. It's also a time for reflecting back on the success of its self-organising anarchic structure (see Nick Ritar interview) and the major paradigm shifts currently occurring within electronic media. This year's festival has made time for debating the emergent sense of electronic arts' own history and shifting aesthetics whilst substantially broadening out from its all-important base in the know how of technology. Electrofringe 07 embraces issues of access and gets out the geek ghetto with an emphasis on performance-based interactive works.

Ann Finegan gets the low down from interrogatees Ben Byrne, Cat Jones and Alex White, co-directors of this year's festival.

Let's start with the music and a significant new turn. "Folk song writing broken down to electronic form." Ben Byrne describes a shift towards incorporating the folksier elements of electroacoustics. "Not really songs but remnants of what could have been." In this year's Electrofringe international guest Leafcutter John seamlessly mixes haunting love ballads with electronics; Canadian Tim Hecker, known for minimal techno performed solo on laptop, introduces a new focus on big grandiose melody (latest album *Harmony in Ultraviolet*); and French artist Sebastien Roux extends the French tradition of music concrete. The evolution towards melody, and the folksy, signals a reinvigorating paradigm shift within the bunkered in noise/drone sine-tone aesthetics of much contemporary sonic experimentation.

As usual Electrofringe never exclusively does one thing, maintaining its dedication to the multivalent electronic community with a wide range of performances including Heil Spirits, Pimmon (making a rare appearance), Robin Fox, Melissa Agate, Peter Blamey and Darrin Verhagen. The noisy beats end of spectrum for which Electrofringe is known is catered for in the Sunday night closing gig: Passenger of Shit, Mic Mainstream, Autoclave, and Drillbit. The sound panels will extend into post-Cascone aesthetics and an emergent historiography, a taking stock of an awareness of Australian sound history.

Directors Alex White, Cat Jones and Ben Byrne embrace the shift away from the geekier aspects of electronic sound production, indeed, overall of learning-how-to-do things with new electronic tools. Certainly the sharing of know-how has always been a mainstay of the festival's commitment to community service, and that element is still as strong as ever with a dedicated series of workshops on software innovation, database building, and network evolution. However, given that the computer has now become an everyday machine, this everyday level of competence can now accommodate a shift away the geek factor of what-the-computer-can-do to the human-machine interface: performance and interactives

broadened out to a wide range of practices ranging from partnering with Reeldance to works which put sensors on the body (back to the roots of Norbert Wiener's 1960s forays into cybernetic arts - "control and communication in the animal and the machine").

Cat: "Some performances are interactive in a live context, interactive between performer and media, or media and audience; some utilize technology through cross-platform processes." Alex: "Performances as relating to actual human beings, getting beyond screens. It goes back to the festival's emphasis on skills development and participation rather than on presentation."

Extirpation (Adam Synnott and Jason Lam) is an immense interactive digital ecosystem. SpatnLoogie (Kat Barron and Lara Thomas) have created an interactive vending machine. JEDAI (Jam Experiment Dance Interact) switches the audience's role by introducing them to interactive objects through which the audience creates the performance. The Evolution-Mutation-Hybridity programme focuses on wet biology (think SymbioticA, winner at this year's Ars Electronica, for vat-grown frog cells in a physiology lab wired for sonic activity) with a performance from BioHome (Cath Farghergen and Terumi Narushima).

The performance-interactives programme also extends to *ElectroEtre 1 & 2* [from French 'etre' -'to be' (literally electro being)], screen sessions of documented interactive performance works or installations. Cat: "There was an international call-out. It's quite diverse, a good way of introducing audiences to that kind of work without their having to come over." Indeed, in spite of funding constraints, international exchange seems to be steadily gaining ground in a festival which is paradoxically grounded in the local, and which draws its strength from its elastic and flexible networks.

Cat noted: "Another thing is international screenings (including SIGGRAPH, USA). We have a partnership with Japan Media Arts Festival from 2006-2007." Alex: "This is a somewhat tricky thing to balance given the festival's focus on skills development and emerging artists. Though, through a few well-chosen international events as directors we need to open up some channels. Samples of Electrofringe programmes are going overseas." Cat: "An Electrofringe screening programme was part of the Japan Media Art Festival last year and I was on a panel representing Electrofringe next to international festivals SIGGRAPH and Ars Electronica. Last year we had twelve Japanese artists in the festival."

Home-based networking with ANAT's reSkin Wearable Technology Lab workshops has produced *Wear Now*, an exhibition and discussion panel on wearable art and hybrid practice, including materials which react to some form of sonic input. High Tea with Mrs Woo (notable Newcastle designers, the Foong sisters) is featured along with Keith Armstrong, Alexandra Gillespie, Sarah Kettley (from Scotland), Leah Heiss and Cecelia Heffer. Panel members include

Daniel Kotja.

Open source issues and access, a festival staple since its inception, expands this year into providing for communities to set up their own databases. In line with the idea that the whiz-bang moment of online technology is over there's an emphasis on community cultural development. Alex White indicated that the technology now has to justify itself more than ever before. It's not just enough that it is now in place but it has to perform useful, meaningful community service. The Immersion-Inclusion-Interaction section of the programme addresses these issues.

Alex: "We have several workshops and panels on setting up websites and data bases using free software for small community organisations. Thursday's Immersion-Inclusion-Interaction collects several interactive works in one space, as well as the Powerhouse Special Access Kit that allows anyone to make music. It has a custom built keyboard and system. The event has been promoted out to all of the support services in the area, families and community groups. The idea is to explore the untapped potential of electronic arts as an accessible form, including disability and therapeutic practice, and the different roles equipment can play. It's not overtly an artistic project, not just about what you can put in a gallery. Working with interactive, immersive technologies people who have limited opportunities to enact change in their environment or communicate their story can interact and create new modes of engagement. An incredible but simple idea. We're pushing that conversation to happen more among electronic artists. And also for the disabilities service sector to be resourced to move beyond finger painting and so on. We are showing a few artists who are exploring these ideas .

One of the works is a performance with an interactive projection, the performer performs for the whole four hours. The work is interactive both in terms of the tech side but also the performance itself encourages interaction and attempts to rupture the forth wall between audience and performer. That's Alison Curry from Adelaide. And we're also doing a panel on accessible arts and new media exploring these ideas. That's in association with Accessible Arts New South Wales; and I hope will be a conversation starter in both realms." The first artist is Daniel Kotja who 'walks' again in his evocative video work, *Digital Flaneur*.

The second artist is Tess O'Brien. Alex: "She is developing a software and system to teach children who are profoundly deaf to sing using representations of waveforms and touch pads. She rang me up the other day and about ten minutes in she asked me to go somewhere a bit quieter. She's never been able to hear, ever, and yet with a vibration pad and looking at waveforms from her phone she's able to talk clearly. She's exploring and walking within an invisible, ghost world with nothing but second hand data to guide her. She can tell if two singers are out of tune by looking at a waveform. Better than many audio engineers. She is coming to present her research teaching young people in the

Australian Signing Choir who are going to Europe next year. She also advocates for people who can't hear to be a part of music. She writes – 'There's this assumption by people who have hearing that the deaf don't have to be involved in music and singing. That cuts them out of a huge part of culture. It's not necessary. Not being able to hear doesn't stop you from enjoying music.' - When I read her email it blew me away. I hadn't considered the rights and potential of people who are profoundly deaf to be a part of music."

Ben: "As you've heard this year it's about the festival opening up in various ways."

The database projects include two presentations on the extensive online intergenerational Big hART developed Ngapartji Ngapartji, which translated from Pitjantjatjara means "I give you something; you give me something." Alex: 'The idea behind it is that equal importance is given to what people bring from outside as to what is coming from the culture. Equal standing. What's important is for the two groups to be sharing.' There will also be an introduction to the Big hART project model of sustained development from three to five years, and they'll be on a critical discussion panel on the strategic use of electronic arts to empower communities. Alex: "We have to ask serious questions about these kinds of projects, serious questions which don't often get asked because people get blinded by the technology."

Reviving the roots of electronic technology, Radio Locus is a series of cross festival panels around radio, incorporating the Young Writers Festival. Ben: "There will be panels around radio and where radio is at. I think personally we should be moving past ideas of new media. New media technology is well entrenched in society now for well over a decade. Radio is a really interesting medium because it's had such a long history. It's one of those technologies which predates television but is still around and is going through seismic changes about what will it be moving online. So there is a cross festival panel - Is Radio Relevant? - And things like that. But growing out of that radio related project and tying in with TINA (This Is Not Art), which has its own radio station during the festival as well, a programme of five workshops has developed: a couple being run by Young Writers Festival - writing for radio- and some by us in basic radio production, editing for radio, one called Seeking Sound which is about going out and making recordings, and one on actually building radios which is the electronics side, showing people how to do it. This will culminate in all these young people making radios and then placing them around Newcastle to broadcast. So it will be site-specific work. Even though (radio is) online it's demonstrating that there is still value in transmitting in real time and that that can be related to a place."

Ben and Alex: "The other thing we're excited about is the mobile projection programme. (Nick Ritar and Kirsten Bradley will also lead a discussion panel.) Two teams of artists on each of the nights. This town (Newcastle) has changed.

It's different. That's why we're going back to some site-specific projections. People in Newcastle who might not otherwise come to the festival will come across these things. That is why the festival works so well in Newcastle. It's a post-industrial town; there's vacant space in the city. All the shops have moved out to the Westfield; even the mall is abandoned, so taking over that space for the festival works and it's interesting, it gets reactivated."

Further, there's a curated reel called Signal, made up of Australian and international artists who work purely with electrical signals in videos, including Andrew Gadow, Harley Ives, and lowvid (from New York). Audiovisual artist Peter Newman will be showing new label Demux's first release, a lush synaesthetic film, *Paper House*.

Coming online 13 September, two weeks' before the opening, Electro-Online is hosting an exhibition of net art curated by Rachael Kiang. Part festival teaser, this timely exhibition, important in its own right as an assessment of 'where we are now' after ten years of net art, will come on line early to give punters much-needed relief as they stagger through the overload of reading the festival's extensive and tightly packed programme. Go online early (the programme is up already) not only to secure places in the workshops. You'll need several goes to agonise over choices programmed at the same time, or simply just to take it all in. Apologies to all the artists I didn't have the space to specifically mention.

A final note: to give better traction for the community once the festival's five days' of intensity is over Electro-Online also provides a year round programme of events and workshops, particularly to service the Hunter region.