

Productive Anarchy.

Written by Ann Finegan

Given this is Electrofringe's 10-year anniversary, this year's directors suggested Loop speak to Nick Ritar, one of the festival's first directors, for a sense of its history and foundational ideologies.

Our conversation opens with the description of an action crystallizing the humor, raid ethos and creative spirit of the festival. On the outskirts of Newcastle two artists abseil down one side of a large abandoned building and target incoming traffic with the spray painted words "This Is Not Art". On the way home outgoing workers are treated to a different message, " One Perfect Day." That was back in 1998 at a time when Newcastle had much to offer artists, the young and UN or underemployed: empty buildings, aging and underused infrastructure - including vacant shop fronts and council assets on a main street. Better yet, Newcastle was undergoing the kind of economic downturn that encouraged an obliging council to foster any kind of stimulus to bring people back in. Such were the perfect conditions for developing an art festival; the don't-care-what-you-do attitude engendered by economic neglect gave a loose knit group of ten or so anarchic artist types the rent free space of the Octapod in which to transform a community based fringe festival into the multifaceted group of five festivals now successfully running under the banner This Is Not Art.

Damien Frost, Aaron Bristow, Marcus Westbury, Sean Healy and a loose group of others set up the pod originally and ran the first fringe festival (1997). By 1998, the first year of Electrofringe, Nick Ritar had become part of this "seriously disorganised" and strictly non-government group, becoming a co-director in 1999, with Sean the driving force. The first festival was "quite successful" - Enough for local art bodies to want to get involved, and Fringe-Inc (yes, incorporated) got control, leaving the anti-establishment anarchists understandably peeved. The next year, ironically, the fringe festival went bust. Then the anarchists were back, with the electronic component morphing into its own festival, Electrofringe. Given the community ethos, workshops were initially practical - "How to Build A Webpage" - and aiming to empower the people with technology.

Nick puts down the success of their seemingly disorganised, community-first approach: they never sought to make a profit, with eighty-five per cent of funds raised going to pay artists' travel fares to get there, with token payment of fifty bucks a gig. Artists who otherwise would have received nothing were happy to be supported in supporting the festival. The not for profit ethos of "expecting zero" income worked because the festival didn't build up debts. Nick outlined how the risk for mismanagement was also practically nil. Funds for individual festivals were independently raised so the funding pools were smaller; the emphasis on using the funds to bring artists in meant that the money more or

less went out straight away. Any profits from the door were then redistributed back to artists who were playing for 'nearly free.' Equipment was scrounged through networks of friends; invitees with institutional connections could borrow the required stacks of monitors, projectors and the like.

Further, rather than a solo director each smaller festival had two directors. According to Ritar this meant several intense months of ten people squabbling, falling out, falling in, as they decided on frameworks, panels, and who to include from their extended group networks. Decisions were often ad hoc, punts taken through googling artists with interesting work. Nothing stale; no expensive draw cards; selection was about the work. The not-for-profit ethos meant that the battles were fought over artistic merit and emergent practices.

For example, when it came to defining Electrofringe Nick confesses, "We didn't know what it was supposed to be, but we did know this person and what this person did was cool so we asked them and if they knew anybody also doing a similar cool thing... We put out enough feelers."

Another important aspect was that five festivals - arts, young writers, radio, electronic, and independent music - all played to the same audience - and simultaneously - with packed programmes of more than a hundred events and panels, with around seventeen major music gigs. In 1999 they had forty-five artists playing in one pub. Shared support and expertise amongst young creative and politically active people kept costs low; for example, the electronic arts festival did all the electronics for the other festivals.

Ritar (because there was so much choice): "The independent festival events filtered in like-minded people. You made hard and fast friends." There was advantage in Newcastle's location; it was neither Sydney nor Melbourne; for participants it was like going on holiday, not like an invasion of anyone's turf. The festival core was only ten or fifteen people.

Ideologically the festival was "about not putting up limits." Panels were engineered to try and set up some kind of confrontation; major record companies initially came and clashed with independents and open source proponents until they wised up.

In 2000 Sean and Nick were angsting about Electrofringe's future, "We realised that to try to define it will cause it to stagnate." True to their anarchist roots, they decided to hand it over to Joni Taylor and Shannon O'Neil "not telling them how to do anything."

Nick and his partner, Kirsten, whom he met at Electrofringe are back this year, doing video projections as part of Cicada. Did he have a final comment on his time as a director? "There were no benefits of position." Every visit back conjures "the dark black knot of sheer stress". Ten people working on five

festivals till 2 am for three months. No insurance for 150 items of borrowed equipment. But also "revisiting the ghosts of people you love". "One friend won't go back. Three break-ups; three years in a row crying in the gutter."

Passionate costs aside, why did Electrofringe work so well? "Nobody had ambitions. No one thought it would get them a job. If we fought, it was over artistic vision."