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## Artist Talk - “See Hear Now”: Reflections on a Multi- Arts Performance Festival

### Abstract

*This article discusses the author's involvement as a musician and technologist in the multi-arts festival “See Hear Now” held in Townsville-Thuringowa, QLD, October 2005. Aspects of preparation and performance of improvised works and reflections on interaction across art forms are discussed.*

### Introduction

In October 2005 the Music Centre North Queensland (MCNQ) organised a three day multi-arts performance festival at Pinnacles Gallery in Townsville-Thuringowa (QLD), “See Hear Now”. The festival featured collaborations between visual artists, musicians and dancers complimented by discussions about artistic practice, philosophy and technique. According to the festival website, the aims of the festival were:

- encouraging collaboration between artforms and exploitation of the synergies that can develop in creatively stimulating environments
- exploration of the potential of new technology and 'cutting-edge' artistic practice
- challenging the traditional definitions and roles of performer, documenter and audience
- investigating the point at which improvisation becomes composition (from MCNQ <http://home.austarnet.com.au/tcmc/Festival%20diary.htm> [accessed April 7 2006])

This paper will describe and reflect on my involvement in three performances at the festival as a musician and technologist. As these performances were all free improvisations, the paper will focus on preparation (e.g., sound palette creation and Max/MSP programming) and interaction with other musicians and artists.

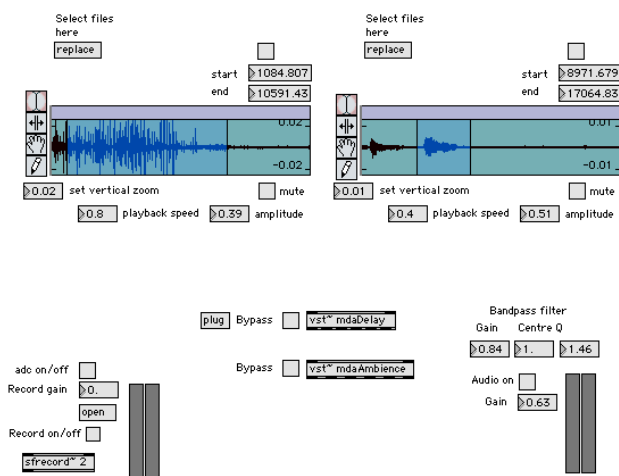
### Performance and Preparation

My first performance featured Ian Brunskill (percussion), Clare Cooper (harp and guzheng), Glen O'Malley (photography) and Mark Bancroft (video). The basic structure (devised by organiser Michael Whiticker) was a 50-minute time frame divided into 10 minute sections alternating between free solo and duo improvisation. The second performance was a 30 minute improvised piece with Ian Brunskill (drumkit), Jess Jones (dancer) and Mark Bancroft (video). For these performances I considered my role primarily as a mixer, improvising with a variety of pre-selected or created sounds. I used a Roland

XP30 synthesiser and a laptop running Max/MSP linked to a keyboard MIDI controller. The Max/MSP patch ran twelve pre-fabricated audio loops created via the manipulation of sounds from my own sample library. The volume and playback speed of each loop was mapped to a key, slider or knob on the MIDI controller. Two VST plugin effects, reverb and delay, were added to the overall laptop mix with some parameters mapped to knobs on the MIDI controller. Various presets and user-defined patches were selected or created on the synthesiser providing further timbral and textural possibilities.

In selecting and creating sounds for the first two performances I sought a range of timbres that I could foresee complimenting or contrasting the other sound sources/performers. These included untreated and treated environmental field recordings, treated vocals, vinyl samples, loops of completed original beat oriented works, and synthesiser patches. However, having not met Clare prior to the performance I had little idea, sonically, of what to expect from her setup. This notion of unexpectedness contrasts my experience of free improvisation with traditional instrumentalists where one can make some generally comforting assumptions about timbre – e.g., the bass player will *probably* be in the lower end of the frequency spectrum.

The final performance was a sixty-minute piece where two life models moved through a series of poses captured by painters with live improvisations from David Salisbury (alto saxophone) and Steven Campbell (double bass). Using Max/MSP I recorded short sections of the audio performance, treated and looped these recordings and sent the results back into the mix. The Max/MSP patch (see Figure 1) was similar to that which I had utilised in creating many of the loops used for the previous performances. I used ‘srecord~’ to capture incoming audio and then use the ‘groove~’ and ‘waveform~’ objects for sample playback and graphic display. Delay, reverb and bandpass filter effects were also applied to the whole output. With manipulation of playback speed and careful selection of start and end points of sampled audio I have found this quite simple patch yields very satisfying results. Furthermore, minimising the possibilities for manipulation enables me to focus attention more fully on the output of my system in the context of the whole performance, a capacity that I view as critical for improvised work.



**Figure 1.** Detail of Max/MSP performance patch.

## Reflections on Interaction

Various levels of mediation and interaction occurred in all the performances. These include the interface between performer and media, the interaction between musicians and the interaction amongst all performers (including dancers and visual artists), and interaction with audience. The different timescales involved limited the potential of cross-media interaction. For example, the immediacy of movement and sound are conducive to moment-to-moment interaction, whereas the results of painting and drawing emerge over a longer timeframe. From my own perspective the most integrated and satisfying interactions occurred with the other musicians, particularly those I have performed with previously. Interaction with the dancers (particularly Jess Jones), whilst still immediate, was not ‘democratic’. In Jess’ case I felt she was responding (or not!) to our lead and that Ian (percussion) and myself would only continue a particular avenue if there was an enthusiastic response. However I believe this is understandable in the context of a first meeting.

The connection between the work of the musicians and the visual artists was one where the former provided a setting for the latter to work in, i.e., a low level of interaction. Contrary to my responses to the dancers, with the visual artists I did not perceive any sense of shift in moment-to-moment enthusiasm and hence did not feel an urge to change or continue what I was doing. Furthermore, from my position in the room I could not see the video projections, nor clearly see the emerging paintings/drawings. Instead, the mere fact that a group of people were engaged in creative activity in a visual mode, helped to provide space for my own creative endeavours in an aural mode.

In order to develop a more immediate and integrated interaction across art forms the semiotic complexities of each need to be absorbed by all participants. Artists working with other media and audience members commented more readily on connections with my non-acousmatic sounds. For example, vocal or clearly recognizable environmental sounds provided an immediate connection for many listeners. This suggests that the notion of shared-meaning provides an important platform

for cross-media interaction to occur. The development of rich and complex interactions, as in the model of a group of jazz musicians with a long history of playing together, takes time. The performances at “See Hear Now” were thus a first step on a long road.