

**SUMUGAN SIVANESAN – PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAVEL GRANT REPORT
SOUNDS UNUSUAL - NORTHERN TERRITORY FESTIVAL OF NEW MUSIC
ALICE SPRINGS 8 – 20 SEPTEMBER DARWIN 25 – 28 SEPTEMBER**

Festival / Workshop / Residency / Exhibition.

Sounds Unusual 2007 was an ambitious, unique and exciting project. Co-ordinated by the ever enthusiastic Robert Curgenvin, it drew upon the resourcefulness of outback communities and the DIY ethos of artist run scenes in the cities. The festival collected and connected artists via a program of performances, events, workshops, field trips and coincidences, that eventually resolved as the collaborative installation “*Intervenience (Island Crossing)*” at the Darwin Visual Arts Association <<http://www.dvaa.net.au>>.

The Festival program ran in Alice Springs from September 8 – 20, then in Darwin from September 25–28. Connecting the two legs was a road trip residency,

The main protagonists were:

Robert Curgenvin – festival director / musician, NT

Katie Hepworth – artist / architect / co-director of the Transit Lounge international artist run exchange, Berlin <<http://www.transitlounge.org/>>, Sydney

Tanja Kimme – artist / co-founder of Diretribe Gallery, Melbourne
<<http://www.diretribe.com.au/gallery/>>

Anthony Magen – acoustic ecologist / landscape architect, Melbourne, championed the Alice Springs leg, whilst Robin Fox – musician, Melbourne, is now, I expect, something of a legend in the red centre. In Darwin, Jason Khan – musician, Zurich, brought an international sheen to the proceedings.

I performed and participated in the Alice Springs leg and made the road trip up to Darwin, but unfortunately not the remainder of the festival.

The festival was took place in artist run initiatives, *Watch This Space*, in Alice Springs <<http://www.wts.org.au/>> and the *Darwin Visual Arts Association* <<http://www.dvaa.net.au>>, as well as a number of unusual locations in between. There was a subtle emphasis on landscape and intervention.

The first event in Alice Springs was *Surreal Estate*, an outdoor concert of new and improvised music at Undoolya Creek, a dried out creek bed, 7 kms out of town. True to its name, one of the more surreal experiences I’ve had was during the set up of this gig. The others has left to get supplies and I found myself in the company of Robin Fox and Anthony Magen, fresh off the plane. Surrounded by luggage and stacks of plastic chairs, we waited out the midday sun, vying for the limited shade, and an incongruously cold bottle of Korean rice wine procured by Anthony; our only relief against the heat!

Over the course of the afternoon, seating was arranged, generators and a four way PA assembled, and fire pits (!) dug – transforming the location into a make shift amphitheatre. And sure enough, as the sun set into a perfect evening, one hundred or so people gathered for an unpredictable night.

Performing first Anthony Magen (wooden chair with microphones), J9 Stanton (singing saw, Alice Springs) and Andrew Nichols (violin, MPC, Alice Springs), played an improvised set of sizzling electronics and sonorous timbres that gradually climaxed as Anthony stripped a wooden chair, surrendering it piece by piece to the fire pit that separated the stage from the audience.

Robert Curgenvan and I played the second set furthering our collaboration that explores resonances and landscapes using guitar and field recordings. I refer to the article *Sounds Unusual is Unusual* by Robin Fox, published recently in Resonate New Music magazine:

“ ... powerful duo that attempted to find the resonant frequency of the space (an impossible task in such a vast, uncontained area, but one that yielded interesting results nonetheless). Curgenvan manipulated field recordings to great effect while Sivanesan used his guitar as a resonating body in conjunction with an amplifier to generate warm feedback and textured noise. The duo took time to build their sound into a wall of shifting sonorous matter. I don't think they found the resonant frequency of the continent, but they certainly filled an unfillable space and evoked a sense of vastness in their broad spectrum approach to sound combination.”

However, the good Dr Fox was always to be the highlight of the evening. Robin is best known for his synaesthetic performances with laptop and laser beam. Tonight, he aimed his laser just above the heads of the audience. It would capture in the smoke from the of fire pits, and briefly fill out into abstract 3D forms in mid air, before shooting off as far as the eye could see down the creek bed and into the overhanging gums. It's impossible to separate the cut up digital sound from the experience, and on the night we were also blessed with a well tuned surround PA. To say it was well received would be an understatement – Robin has single handedly instituted the uncontrollable urge to whoop and cheer into the forum of experimental music in Australia.

Special mention must be made to Rodney Angelo and the *Desert Doof* for their effort and time in making the night a success.

Phase Two

After a day recovering at the desert football grand final, and Robin's departure – Katie, Tanja, Anthony, Robert and I set off on the Tuesday evening for a short field trip in the desert to gather material for a performance at the Alice Springs *Story Wall* – a regular public screening event in the Todd Mall, at the centre of town.

After a couple of days scrubbing around sand dunes, abandoned settlements, strange land formations, and the Ghan railway tracks, we returned on the Friday, in time for Anthony Magen's Sunset Soundwalk. A sound walk is a listening exercise popularised by acoustic ecologist Hildegard Westerkamp, in which the walking trail becomes the score. A small group departed from *Watch this Space*, through the commercial centre of town, eventually colliding with the clamour and chaos of the Alice Springs Desert Festival street parade. We darted out across the dried out Todd River to settle in for sunset atop a rocky outcrop inhabited by kangaroos, overlooking the suburban streets and the back of town.

Anthony took another sound walk on the Saturday afternoon, before leaving on the Sunday, as we prepared our *Story Wall* extravaganza. We had taken a loose assemblage approach, around the idea of negotiating the physical as well as the social landscape of the Todd Mall. Working with two projectors a live camera, live audio collage and an interloper with a roving mic, we gathered a small inquisitive crowd of 20-40 that were attentive and, I think, patient. We were eventually drowned out by the local metal bands playing on the council lawns at the other end of the mall.

On the Monday Robert and I held an improvised music workshop – *Making music without instruments for non musicians*, at *Watch This Space*. Although not as well attended as we had hoped for, it was never the less an enlightening program. Robert and I discussed a variety of approaches to music making and our respective experiences, then took our class on a sound walk, discussing the landscape as a composition; and finally lead a series of improvised exercises with found objects.

The next night found an enthusiastic crowd for the *Flashpoint* improvised music night, again at *Watch this Space*. Locals Amias Lennie (clarinet) and Josh Santospirito (guitar / loop pedal) set the benchmark high—and, on a night that also saw improvised pairings of myself (slide guitar) with J9 Stanton (singing saw), Robert Curgenvan (piano accordion) and Josh S Santospirito (guitar, loop pedal) as well as a surprise performance from the Scribe Sistas – Ella McHenry and Nina Pederson, Mcs/ performance poets from Darwin. It was a informal and impromptu atmosphere that would have probably gone all night, had the bar not run dry!

Phase Three

Despite our relatively hectic pace up until now, the trip to Darwin, proved to be the most intense part of the project. A combination of heat and unforeseeable problems invariably lead to some on road tensions. However having time to reflect across some serious kilometres, some unforgettable locations, and lively campfire conversations left a deep and lingering impression.

From Alice Springs to Tennant Creek, then heading towards Cape Crawford, the landscape changed dramatically from desert to savannah, marked with burnt back bush, wide, flat, arid plains and ludicrously misplaced cows; It eventually gave way to the humidity and lush tropics just north of Katherine and into Darwin. All recorded, photographed, documented and assembled inside our mobile studio – the flat bed of our rental ute!

Sadly, I had to depart as soon as we arrived in Darwin. The others set up camp in the *Darwin Visual Art's Association* to pull together the final installation, and organise the concert at with Jason Khan at Fanny Bay Goal.

<http://www.soundsunusual.com/>

Benefits for my artistic practice

The Northern Territory and it's unique cultural mix is an area I have been investigating for the last few years. Sounds Unusual was an amazing opportunity to meet with many local artists and arts workers, and other members of the community, initiate collaborations and future outcomes.

To meet collaborate and scheme with artists from around Australia involved in similar or sympathetic practices. Strengthen bonds and plan for future outcomes.

The field trips and collaborative exercises with a core group of people established a strong rapport and network spanning Sydney, Melbourne and the Northern Territory (which expands even further internationally). We are in regular contact and keen to work together again.

An opportunity to make new work, and experiment in an open and collaborative forum, as well as to perform and present work to the public.

An opportunity to continue to develop a musical collaboration with festival organiser Robert Curgenvan. We both have similar interests regarding the physicality of sound and the compositional process. We had only played together twice before in Sydney.