

Radar - Field Report

Minneapolis: Building Digital Bridges

By Justin Schell

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The 2006 Spark Festival of Electronic Music and Art, directed by composer Douglas Geers and held at the University of Minnesota School of Music, was hardly your typical academic electronic music festival. Composer J. Anthony Allen, the festival's assistant director, believes, "You can go to plenty of electronic music festivals in the United States, some very good ones. What we want to do is engage all aspects of digital art that we can get our hands on." This year's event offered not only diversity within electronic music, but also varieties of multimedia collaboration. Headlined by Scanner (a.k.a. Robin Rimbaud) and Alvin Lucier, as well as violinist Maja Cerar and saxophonist Brian Sacawa, Spark's five-day program was filled with exposure to the work of visual artists, musicians, composers, scholars, and dancers.



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The festival opened with Scanner's keynote lecture and performance. The Londoner surveyed his work over the last two decades, from his early days of "telephone terrorism"—recording, mixing, and releasing of cell phone conversations—to more recent "responsible" projects, such as composing a new anthem for the European Union, *Europa25*. Scanner's performance was to bring musicians half a country apart into the same musical environment. The transmission arts group free103point9 was supposed to provide a live internet feed of audio and video originating in Brooklyn, which Scanner would manipulate in real time. Something failed, though, and all that came through was a 110 bpm click track, so the small audience was treated to a solo performance. Scanner's set oscillated between ambient and more beat-driven textures and was sprinkled throughout with sound samples that spanned from Vietnam to a snatch of banal conversation between a woman and her personal trainer.

Brian Sacawa, widely acclaimed in new music circles for his innovative explorations of the saxophone, performed on three Spark concerts. The first concert featured works by the Dal Niente Composers Group, a collective formed in 2001. Highlighting Sacawa's embrace of the laptop as a parallel compositional voice, many of these pieces were constructed around the saxophone triggering electronic counterpoints, from the metallic blizzard of Per Bloland's Quintet to an IDM-like barrage of synthetic pulses near the end of Zac Crockett's *Flight to Flow Between*.

In his other concerts, Sacawa explored an expanded electro-acoustic sonic palette. Lei Liang's *Memories of Xiaoxiang* transformed Sacawa's saxophone into a medium for the wails of a grieving wife, her husband killed by an official during the



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Cultural Revolution. The piece concludes with unsettling vocal samples as both the wife and the official lose their sanity. Not everything Sacawa played was as violent as *Memories*, however. *The Capgras' Patience Wanes*, written by Christopher Biggs, was a musical representation of mental illness that nervously bordered on the cartoonish. With all of his performances, however, Sacawa deftly blurred the line between a performer's acoustic and electronic sounds.

Maja Cerar renewed her association with Douglas Geers in her Spark performances. The two performed *Autopoiesis* (literally meaning "self-production") and *Enkidu*. For *Autopoiesis*, Cerar donned luminescent tubing, which a camera and computer subsequently captured and processed before projecting them onto a large screen as the violinist's ghostly double. At points it visually evoked a digital-era *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, with Cerar's ghostly imprint dashing behind her. Able to control the elements of the performance through Max/MSP and Jitter, *Autopoiesis* was one of the best realizations I've witnessed of the multimedia possibilities that new technologies have offered to composers and performers.

The high point of the festival, however, was Alvin Lucier's involvement. The 75-year-old composer's keynote lecture was refreshingly nonchalant and lacked pretension; he mainly talked about his Sonic Arts Union colleagues Gordon Mumma, Robert Ashley, and David Behrman. At the concerts, the pieces performed were mainly for acoustic instruments and wave oscillators. Cerar and Sacawa performed *Violyynn* and *Spira Mirabilis*, respectively. Heather Barringer performed *Silver Streetcar for the Orchestra*, which consisted of the Zeitgeist percussionist exploring the acoustic possibilities of folded metal. Liz Draper performed *A Tribute to James Tenney*, for double bass and two pure wave oscillators. Draper's high harmonics intertwined with sine tones a major second apart, but the steadiness of the oscillators was complicated by a clear D from the Southern Theater's HVAC system. It's hard to imagine, though, Lucier not enjoying this sonic monkey wrench generated by the acoustics of the performance space.

The most poetic moment came with the performance of Lucier's *Nothing is Real*, in which pianist Matthew McCright recorded the melody lines of "Strawberry Fields Forever" onto a miniature tape machine located inside a teapot. After he was finished playing, McCright opened and closed the teapot as the melody played back. Sounding more like a simulacrum than a faithful reproduction, it seemed to memorialize a by-gone era. The simplicity of construction in *Nothing is Real* and Lucier's other pieces reveal and revel in an astonishing level of acoustic enchantment, exploring the sonic possibilities of electronic music performances and the spaces in which they are performed.

There were many other excellent pieces performed at this year's festival, including a digital version of Jonathan Kramer's *Renascence* and Kaija Saariaho's *Petals*. They were part of the Spark Festival's attempts to bridge both academic and popular electronic composition—represented not only in the pieces presented during the festival, but also in the Spark Night Life parties where people from all stripes of electronic music could get together and dance.

These groups are increasingly coming together, according to Allen. "Its like two communities trying to shake hands," he explains, "but not being able to reach far enough. Spark serves as an intervention. We try to get them all in one place at one time and have a celebration."

Justin Schell lives in Minneapolis. He is a first-year graduate student in the Comparative Studies in Discourse and Society at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, where his main research interests are the study of contemporary musical cultures, the relationship between music criticism and notions of historical value,

and the myriad ways that music does cultural work throughout the globe. He previously lived and worked in Milwaukee, where he completed a Bachelor's degree in Music History and Philosophy. And he unwaveringly agrees with Frank Zappa that The Shaggs are better than the Beatles.

