

COOL PERTH NIGHTS

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LYNDON BLUE

DECIBEL PRESENTS 'CAMERA OBSCURA' @ PICA, MONDAY SEPTEMBER 19

September 21



Sight and sound have always been conjoined twins, to the point where a word like “audiovisual” is almost superfluous. The most disembodied sounds carry visual associations: thunder, mysterious and siteless, has lightning close by. And, as John Cage reminds us, true silence is elusive if not impossible: no object or image can exist independent from the world of sound. Nevertheless, a discourse arose around music or sound-as-art that largely disregarded the intrinsic visuality of the art form. Today, more than ever, music shares a symbiotic relationship with visual formats – film, television, video games, advertising – and this, it seems, is the departure point for Decibel’s latest performance. It’s called ‘Camera Obscura’ – the third and final of a series of concerts at PICA in 2011.

‘Camera Obscura,’ of course, refers to a proto-photographic device that projects an image of its surrounding, inverted, onto a screen; the words themselves mean ‘darkened chamber,’ which is exactly what PICA’s central gallery becomes as we enter it on a moist Monday evening. The last time I saw Decibel was at their ‘Pretty Things’ concert in June. Tonight, back in the same space, they pick up where they left off, but with an altogether different focus.

‘Mothlight,’ composed by young New South Welshman Austin Benjamin Buckett, is up first. The piece takes its name from a 1963 film by Stan Brakhage, which is to be projected alongside but, notably, not synchronously. Brakhage’s films were silent and he eschewed soundtracks, so the film will be projected on 16mm film after the piece is performed.

Malcolm Riddoch sits behind one of Decibel’s standard-issue aluminum macbooks, triggering captured audio. A disembodied flute flutters capriciously, a cluster of breathy semitones in quick and erratic succession emanating from a small ring of speakers. The sampled sound is near-identical to that which soon

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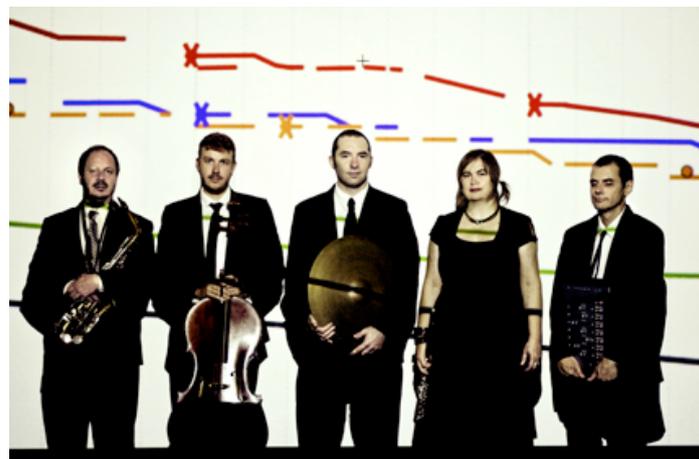
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slippage of sound and sight

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Decibel
photo Lisa Businovski

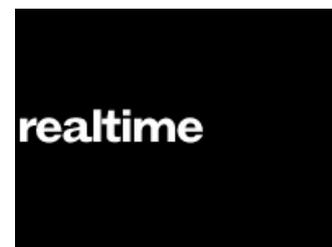


NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE DECIBEL, HAS PRESENTED A NUMBER OF CONCERTS AT PICA THIS YEAR, EACH HIGHLIGHTING SPECIFIC UNDERCURRENTS IN CONTEMPORARY MUSICAL THOUGHT. THE THIRD IN THE SERIES ENTITLED CAMERA OBSCURA, FOCUSED ON THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN SOUND AND SIGHT.

Visuality plays an enormous role in the interpretation of sound, and vice-versa. In film, dance, theatre, games and live music visual and sonic textures intermingle, each feeding the other. The tendency is toward a direct relationship. In film, for example, music is used principally to heighten the emotional content of a scene. However Camera Obscura explored musical works with a more dynamic relationship between sound and image.

The first piece, Mothlight, by NSW composer Austin Buckett is inspired by a Stan Brakhage silent short film from 1963. As Brakhage did not want his silent films to be accompanied by music, the sound and image are isolated from one another. The musicians play flute, percussion and synthesizer tones which flutter, insect-like, about four speakers. A blank screen and large film projector onstage cast the players in a light of anticipation.

After a short pause in the performance the film projector whirs into life and Brakhage's Mothlight plays while the performers sit in silence. The film is gorgeous—red



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silhouettes of moths skittering in grainy handmade animation. We recall the sonic textures, the remembered performance becoming the film's soundtrack. The shimmer of percussion, the whirl of the projector and the quivering moths of the film combine in an insect hum.

The next piece, Talking Board, is a collaboration between Decibel members Cat Hope and Lindsay Vickery. The score is a huge composite image of various drawings and photographs projected onto the screen at the back of the stage, which the performers also face. Four circles representing the four instruments (bass clarinet, bass flute, cello and viola) move about the image instructing players as to which section of the graphic to read. The notation is all asemic—not prescribing any specific meaning in terms of pitch, rhythm etc but rather implies a sonic texture. The conversation between sight and sound in the piece is beautiful. Pollock inspired drippings and alien landscapes are answered by percussive murmurings and velvety drones.

In Talking Board, the score itself is allowed a voice in the performance. The circles move according to their own rules of chance and logic. This creates a mobile form, where no two performances will repeat and the performers are no more certain of the next move than the listener. The shared drama of such a form is a big part of what makes this piece so involving for the audience.

Samuel Dunscombe's West Park, adopts a similar mobility. A fully notated score for clarinet and flute is pulled apart and randomly rearranged. The live sound of the instrumentalists is mixed with field recordings made at West Park Asylum in Epsom, UK. The visual element of this piece is mostly imagined whereas the field recordings are directly referential, describing the world in exact terms. Particularly when such loaded material is used, the sounds conjure instant and vivid imagery. The live instruments heighten the experience, creating an immersive and unsettling event.

Next was recent WAAPA graduate Kynan Tan's piece, Split Mirror Planes featuring four live performers, four speakers and four visual sources (networked laptops whose screens were visible to the audience). The eye is drawn around the space as various flashes and abstract motifs are passed between the laptops. Spatialising audio is by now a fairly common technique in new music but spatialised visual material is something I have not seen before. The sound and images here do not merely reflect one another but rather create a sonic-visual counterpoint, constantly in motion toward or away from each other.

The final piece of the night was White Lines by Marina Rosenfeld, who joined Decibel, playing turntables. The piece uses a film score with two parallel white lines changing width and opacity to direct subtle shifts in sound. The background of the film used much more concrete imagery than the other films of the night, with footage of flowers, cigarettes and churches all tied together by the visual motif of the white lines.

Connotation is a huge part of Rosenfeld's work. The associations of imagery and sound take on more complex meaning when they are juxtaposed. White lines suggest associations ranging from division to purity to cocaine and it is interesting to see how these all play off one another. One particularly intriguing section involved the delicate swelling sounds of percussionist Stuart James superimposed over footage of an 80s glam rock band at full fervour, their teased hair and pelvic thrusts taking on some surprising new connections.

Sound and imagery create a feedback loop. Image directs the way that one hears sound just as sound frames one's reading of imagery. Such relationships have existed forever. What Decibel has done in Camera Obscura is to foreground these relationships. What the audience is left with is a fuller sensory experience: sight and sound as a dynamic conversation.

Totally Huge New Music Festival 2011: Decibel, Camera Obscura, performers Cat Hope, Lindsay Vickery, Stuart James, Malcolm Riddoch and Tristan Parr, with Marina

Rosenfeld supported by Tura New Music, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Sept 19; <http://www.tura.com.au/totally-huge-music-festival/about>

Henry Andersen is a composer and performer of new music, living in Perth. He is currently studying toward a Bachelor of Music Technology and Composition at the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts. Henry's interest in music traverses a wide number of styles and he has been involved in music for live performance, sound installation, dance, film and other mixed media.

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Decibel – Camera Obscura: 19th September 2011, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

By [Oliver Laing](#) September 20, 2011



The Art Deco cathedral that is the main gallery space of PICA, is the perfect setting for New Music ensemble Decibel. The evenings' proceedings were Decibel's final instalment in a trilogy of concerts at PICA throughout 2011. The concert was also part of the [10th Totally Huge New Music Festival](#) that is taking place in Perth until the 25th of September. Camera Obscura tied images and music together, with intriguing visual scores, a screening of the 1963 Stan Brakhage film *Mothlight*, and Marina Rosenfeld's modular piece 'White Lines'; which relied on sensitive improvisation upon the visual stimulus provided by lines of varying transparency and size.

After an introduction by ABC Classic FM's Julian Day of the [New Music Up Late](#) show (who will be broadcasting the concert this Friday the 23rd at 11pm), the first section of the concert focussed on new compositions by emerging composers. Currently playing with Pollen Trio, Austin Buckett's 'Mothlight' begun with snippets of flute played by Cat Hope bouncing around the auditorium, before percussionist Stuart James scraped his twin snares with sandpaper, leading into the screening of *Mothlight*. The projector's hum and the flicker of the red wing/vein/leaf images added a further element to the sparse interplay and signal processing of Decibel. The second piece, by Lindsay Vickery and Cat Hope explored

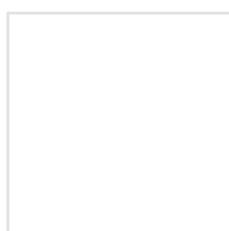
a beguiling (for the audience) score where the brass and strings were instructed what to perform by a “planchette” – circles for the four musicians, that shimmered and swung around a palate of 10 images including genome-like stripes, a homage to Franz Liszt and astronomical themes. At times ‘The Talking Board’ was a somewhat nauseating slide through the visual score, and the small ensemble sounded like they were trapped underground, their instruments being played by a writhing mass of insects. Diverging from this frenetic mode, a window opened out on a field of drones as the circles drifted higher...

Samuel Dunscombe’s ‘West Park’ explored the tensions between the western classical tradition, electronics and sound art, as a vestigial resonance from the interplay between flute and clarinet was subsumed beneath thundery, avian atmospherics. Local composer Kynan Tan’s ‘Split Mirror Planes’ utilised a semi-circle of laptops, ebbing and fading through multiple graphics – a glow of thermoluminescence. From the musicians, microscopic gestures and extended techniques foreground the nuance and understatement of a defiantly lowercase sound.

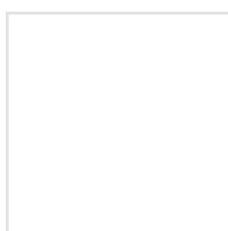
After an interval, the composer of ‘WHITE LINES’, Marina Rosenfeld joined Decibel on turntables, the ensemble augmented their strings, brass and percussion with Malcolm Riddoch on guitar, rather than processing duties. With varying projected images (80s femme hair metal band, flowers, clouds, and a smoking hand), which were overlaid with the aforementioned white lines changing in dimension, informing the performers reactions to the visual stimuli. At times this piece came across like a musical workshop, as the players took turns to improvise. A more collaborative mode was eventually entered into, the smoking hand image was the doorway into the whole ensemble joining as one for a short time, reminding me of Luc Ferrari’s *Cellule 75*; a frenetic vibrato from the strings and a keening, woozy lament from Rosenfeld’s turntables brought the evenings performance to an abrupt end. A sold-out event, the bleachers rapidly disgorged the audience into the subdued atmosphere of Northbridge on a Monday night, planning their next Totally Huge gig.

Oliver Laing

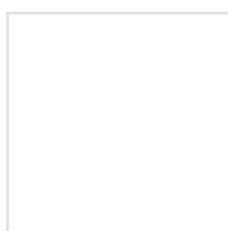
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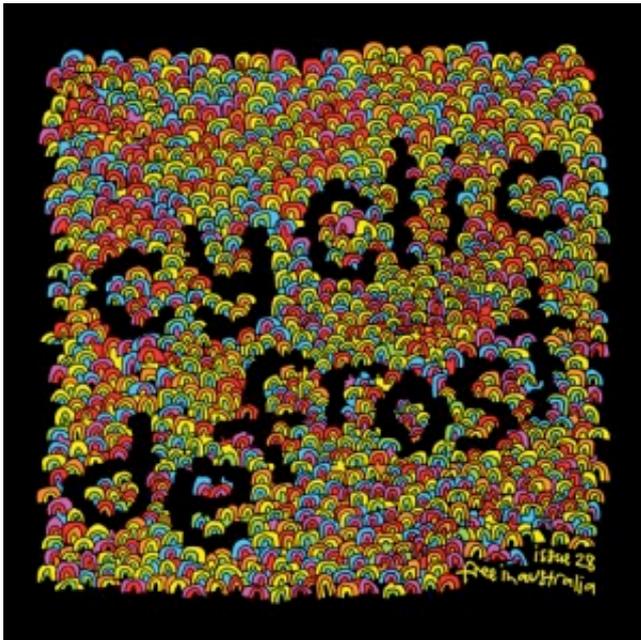


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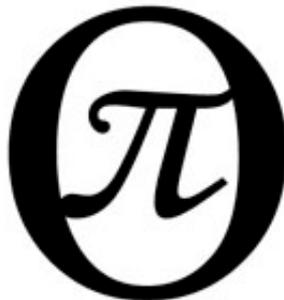
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emerges from Cat Hope's live instrument: the visible, human flutist and the phantom digital one chase each other through the air, dashing among a scant selection of pitches. Stuart James joins on snare drum, creating ashen textures with brushes, and while there is no clear musical dialogue between the percussive and melodic parts, there is a certain formless beauty to the amalgam. The piece concludes with a sustained high pitch, and the projectionist takes his cue to begin. The film gurgles its way to life. 'Mothlight' the film was made without a camera, and comprises moth wings, flower petals and other found objects pressed between two layers of mylar film. Red-brown detritus flashes across the screen with a grotesque poetry. All the while, the hum, rattle and croak of the old projector can be heard, providing an inadvertent but inextricable soundtrack – one which we would normally tune out, but which seems to be afforded fresh dignity and importance in light of the performance.

The next piece is a joint effort from decibel members Lindsay Vickery and Cat Hope. Called 'The Talking Board,' it employs a peculiar and rather fun form of notation. Each performer (there are four) is assigned a coloured circle, which appears projected onto the large screen at the stage's rear. The circles move across a huge map of lines and collaged images, modulating in size, eliciting sounds from their corresponding musicians when they pass over pictorial forms. If I wanted to be unforgivably crude I could liken the technique to, say, Guitar Hero. Sound is produced not according to any consciousness of rhythm or notes, but rather by responding to pairings of objects on a screen. Of course, there's a little more to what's on this screen – including images that pay tribute to Franz Liszt, who's 200 years old this year (happy birthday mate). Nevertheless, 'The Talking Board' is reminiscent of video games, exploring a playful but thought-provoking approach to notation and chance performance.

Soon we encounter Samuel Dunscombe's 'West Park,' which is named after an abandoned mental hospital in London. Like Cat Hope's 'Kuklinski's Dream,' referencing a serial killer and performed on carving knives at their Pretty Things concert, 'West Park,' once again betrays Decibel's penchant for the eerie and the macabre. And, as per all Decibel shows, we experience the genuine synthesis of live acoustic instrumentation and electronic manipulation: here, Hope and Vickery's woodwind work is sliced into fractured chunks of sound, converted to an image for them to re-interpret, and recordings of rehearsals played as musical ghosts over the speakers. Crucially, the relationship between the live sounds and electronica is not superficial or gratuitous – it's an ongoing reciprocity.

That reciprocity extends even more clearly to the visual realm in Kynan Tan's Split Mirror Planes, a work commissioned for decibel and written by the young Perth composer this year. The title nicely poeticizes a curiosity of the piece: while there are distinctive audio and visual elements throughout, their connections are mysterious. We know they are linked, but the relationship is cryptic – one can't readily identify what sounds trigger which imagery, and assumptions about visual signifiers of particular sorts of sounds are turned on their head. Nevertheless, it's a beguiling rather than frustrating work – the stark and haunting soundscape, performed on cello, bass flute, bass clarinet, and percussion, is a poignant counterpoint to the otherworldly psychedelic auroras that traverse computer screens in an enigmatic choreography.

Post-interval, a single piece comprises the show's second half. This is Marina Rosenfeld's *WHITE LINES*. The basic premise of the work is simple. The piece grows from a visual stimulus: superimposed over film and animated footage are two white lines, that vary in two ways – in width, and in opacity. These variations occur constantly and with seeming randomness; performers then respond to the changes. The intrigue arises from the ways in which they do so: the musical parameters which the lines control change from one performance to the next, and depend upon which instruments are on hand. Stringed instruments here seem to swell and adopt various timbres according to the appearance of the lines. Turntables (guest-performed by Rosenfeld herself), woodwind and percussion get in on the action too (an intense drum solo performed by Stuart James, in real-time response to the lines being projected over footage of some hair metal band, proves one of the night's highlights). At first I feel that the footage projected behind the white lines is uncalled for – a distraction, an aesthetic addition inserted to add visual interest in case audiences get bored. But upon the piece's completion it seems apt: the constantly shifting and seemingly irrelevant visuals (flowers, aforementioned glam rockers, clouds, blocks of colour) emphasize that despite the piece's endless malleability and unpredictability, there will always be a constant: those two mighty, imposing white lines, creating a beautifully simple thread of continuity as the piece mutates over the years from one concert to the next.

Despite being visually driven, 'Camera Obscura' was overall more visually – and perhaps sonically, too – reserved than its predecessor, 'Pretty Things.' But 'Pretty Things' featured some ostentatious moves (destroying a piano, punching meat), tonight's performance was no less daring in its creative explorations. The camera may have contributed to an age of mass image reproduction, coinciding with pop music's burgeoning obsession with repetition and formula. But Decibel seem intent on never repeating themselves, constantly investigating new territory, with an ongoing focus on electro-acoustic fusion and unconventional techniques. Sights and sounds may be joined at the hip, but as always, Decibel spurred us this evening to observe that relationship in a fresh, illuminating way.