

Multiplex X: Multiplex Grand Festival

Saturday, July 7, 8:30pm

Sunday, July 8, 8:30pm

The Blinding Light! Cinema

by Colin MacDonald

The proliferation of digital home studio technology has put very sophisticated tools into the hands of a large group of users, and since 1998 the Multiplex Users Group has been presenting performances of live interactive sound and video. These techno-savvy experimentalists even have their own manifesto, which defines the use, misuse, and abuse of technology for the production, manipulation, and destruction of meaning.

The demand for a venue to present experiments in digital sound and video resulted in a three day festival, with the promise of a high level of novelty and invention. Why then was the experience marked by so much boredom? It didn't help that both performances I attended started over thirty minutes late, which did a great deal to dull the level of anticipation. The artists themselves preferred a hip anonymity with aliases like RGB, 833-45, -outhern acific+, and Sinoia Caves, which became convenient shields as things went from bad to worse.

Musically, the technology seemed to be getting in the way, and for all the variety of digital exploration available, a common language emerged that had only a single dimension. To keep the so-called performances interactive, much of the music was an improvised accompaniment to a prepared video image, with short loops of sound samples layered and processed. This one-trick pony was interesting for only a couple of minutes, and lacking a musical structure the

experiments quickly degenerated into tedium. Beats and synths were mixed with a nod to club culture, but in a sit-down theatre the audience couldn't even dance to obscure the fact that the music was going nowhere.

Fortunately, a couple of gems emerged from all of the dross. Local sound designer mpennyfish had the only work with a sense of structure. A wireframe animation loop of a figure doing the shot put was projected in the background, sparsely supported by a soundscape of sine tones. Short collages of small sounds (a creaking door, a squeaky clothesline) interrupted the ambience, and were paralleled by the onstage performer who repeatedly dropped beads into a bowl with a delicate plinking. This ritual act was enhanced by a vocal improv coming from within the audience, which was later revealed to be not a co-artist but a man off the street, a complementary act of god.

A collage of sampled 80's glam rock screams and guitar licks made a case for digital editing, in Gunnar's *Heavy Metal Plunder*, and was good for a lighthearted chuckle. An environmentalist message held the promise of actual content in a piece by artist Freaky DNA, but a plague of computer crashes kept the performance from getting rolling. All in all, there was more effort in letting the technology speak by itself, rather than using it to shape an artistic message. These potential performers need a reminder that tools do not create on their own, and that it is dangerous to ignore the history of music and visual art just for the sake of being experimental.