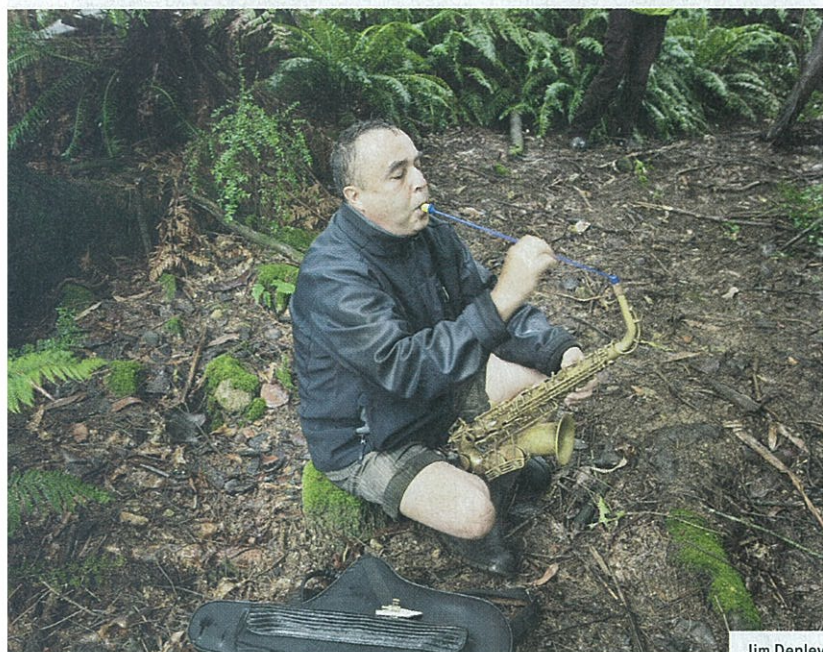


On Location

Live and kicking: festivals, concerts, events in the flesh



Jim Denley

Bogong AIR

Various sites, Bogong Village, Australia
Water is scarce in Australia, but not at Bogong. The alpine village in north east Victoria – the highest village in the country – was the site of Australia's first hydroelectric scheme in the 1930s. The scheme needs only a skeleton crew, and Bogong is now a rather eerie ghost village, which functions only for self-catering tourists. The school, set up for the workers' children, is ideal as sound artist Philip Samartzis's rural base. It's here that he's curating Bogong AIR, in association with Melbourne gallery West Space. Improvisors, sound and installation artists from that city and elsewhere have been invited to research on site for five days, and then present the results at a weekend public event. ('AIR' stands for 'Artists In Residence', although even some Australian artists didn't realise that.) Contributors are meant to come with a blank slate, and assess possibilities on site with minimal preconceptions.

Superb views of Mt Bogong and neighbouring peaks, and the continuous sound of water pouring into the artificial Lake Guy, made for a sublime location. The idea was for site-specific interventions by Jim Denley, Natasha Anderson, Slavek Kwi, Rosalind Hall, Alice Hui-Sheng Chang and Dianne Peacock to be presented in various locations around the lake, but the artists were warned to be prepared for the weather. The rains that power the hydro duly fell heavily and continuously on the first day, moving some projects indoors.

That didn't affect Philip Samartzis's 7.1 sound installation *Crush Grind* in the school hall, the result of a recent visit to Antarctica to chart extreme climatic events. This audio-visual montage drew on sounds of ice cracking, raucous penguins and elephant seals. Samartzis refines his work through public presentations, and he felt that the split-screen visuals needed further editing. (For instance, he had recently made the change of split images non-synchronous.) The immersive sound was almost finished, and this is how he evokes Antarctic grandeur, by giving a glimpse into living conditions on the base, and animal and bird life. Samartzis has collaged field recordings without processing or manipulation, creating an initial ice effect that was magically musical, an eerie rhythmic thrumming in counterpoint to the ebb and flow of the tide. In contrast, the bellowing, farting and snarling of the very sociable elephant seals, tightly packed on the shore, was hilarious.

In his indoor performance, Slavek Kwi, who has operated under the moniker Artificial Memory Trace, presented a zany, lurid, not entirely serious multimedia composition in which strobe lights provided some of the sonic material. Titled *Currents* and created entirely from sounds recorded in Bogong, seeing his figure flickering in the strobes as he waved a flag was a high point – he afterwards confided it could easily be the red flag, but this is a man with a sense of irony honed on life under communism, and it's hard to tell whether he's serious. Now living in Ireland, he went into exile from his

native Czechoslovakia in 1986. Growing up in that repressed society – communist Czechoslovakia, that is – had profoundly affected his artistic experience, and he later explained how he was attracted to sounds that seemed to lack structure, because of the freedom they afforded.

Eric La Casa's contribution had to be held over till the rain eased. La Casa, who wasn't present on site, develops field recordings into musical structures. His watery composition *Spirale 4*, lasting 40 minutes, was written for canoeists to listen to on an iPod while on Lake Guy. The contrast of real-time and prepared aquatic soundscapes was at first disorienting, then engaging and finally relaxing, with the only drawback the danger of cramp in the confined canoe seat.

Other artists coped with the rain as best they could. Architect Dianne Peacock, who produces installations and zines as well as built and 'paper' architecture – that is, 'plans' never intended to be realised – presented her video *Ancient Modernists*, in situ on the footpath through the wall of Junction Dam. Her work interacted physically with the site, re-orienting the vertical and horizontal planes of what she regards as a heroic monument of architectural modernism. The sudden bad weather played a fortuitous role, when water – very unusually – burst over the dam, to create a dramatically evocative sonic backdrop to the strongly delineated images projected on the dam wall.

Rosalind Hall and Jim Denley use horn preparations to transform their saxophone

sounds, Hall placing objects in the bell. She also builds her own instruments, and modifies the reeds she uses.

With the extended vocal techniques of Taiwanese-born Alice Hui-Sheng Chang, they formed a woodland trio whose gentle, bucolic sounds reflected the intense listening of the players. In contrast, Denley challenged the roar of the water at full flood with a clamorous solo performance. In the bowels of the dam wall, Natasha Anderson was more tentative on contrabass recorder.

Denley and Anderson debated at the artists' talks on the second morning, offering opposed views on open air performance. Anderson found the experience at Bogong disconcerting: the Hitler Youth, she commented, had popularised the recorder as an instrument in their woodland activities. Whether you find this an over-reaction depends on how important you think Nazi advocacy was in reviving the instrument, but Anderson's comments provoked an animated discussion about outdoor playing. Denley explained how he had found Bogong a revelation; he normally looks for a quiet outdoors ambience, but here found that he could project against the noise of the water. He wasn't the only artist inspired by the location to find new resources within themselves. With this artistic success, Samartzis will be encouraged in his aim of making the event a regular one. Hopefully, then, Bogongs won't just be bygones.
Andy Hamilton



Listening to Eric La Casa's *Spirale 4* on Lake Guy