

Sensory stimulation

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Artist Chris Doyle in Federation Square last week, photographing people for his Ecstatic City video installation.

locations where the Suitcase Royale guys are crying out headlines, talking to people, looking at stuff, seeing what goes on," he says.

"It can be very funny and it can also provide a refreshing perspective for people, of the city that they know. We always want to make that connection with an audience. It's for them and about them, in a very live moment. We're in this place together and this is what we reckon about it."

The outsider's observation of local stories, pictures, sounds and feelings is a theme that permeates the free interactive element of this year's festival.

The ambient sounds and sights of the street will draw visitors into a free interactive role in this year's Melbourne International Arts Festival, writes Michael Dwyer.

If two strangers approach you in the city next weekend and ask what's news, be nice. Chances are you're part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival. Maybe you just witnessed something as mundane as somebody missing their tram through a cafe window. It's all gold for the Newsboys.

The two guys are Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters of English performance art duo Lone Twin. They'll make your story into a headline for Melbourne theatre trio the Suitcase Royale. In turn, those guys will be standing in old-fashioned street-corner newsstands and shouting about it, probably before the next tram arrives, and possibly while the latte froth is still on your lip.

"It's news as local as you can get it," says Suitcase guy Glenn Walton. "We're basing it on the last days of the newsboys in Australia in the '60s and '70s, that sort of style, that monotonal call over the din of the city traffic."

Fellow performer Joseph O'Farrell says, "Lone Twin's process and practice is very much about going street level, talking to the people of the city. They bring the theory, we bring the street cred."

Londoner Whelan says their outsider viewpoint is crucial to the Newsboys' roving eye on local events. "We'll just be hanging out in the same

Last Friday, New York artist Chris Doyle spent a day in Federation Square photographing and taping passersby for his video installation project, Ecstatic City. After six days of editing and other manipulations, the results will be projected in spectacular scale on the exterior of the National Gallery of Victoria from next Thursday.

"When I first came here I was taken by the fact that Melbourne shares something with New York, in terms of its cafe-pedestrian culture," Doyle says. "I'm really interested and excited about cities in general. I like the way we group together to live our lives; the overwhelming amount of stimuli."

That said, Ecstatic City is "a critique of the way we deal with monumentality, that monumentality is something that is static and dead and tends to be immovable, not changeable. The idea of Ecstatic City is about trying to animate the city, to take monumentality and shake it up. Also that it is not necessarily only about these heroic individuals from the past. Let's look at the everyday amazing thing that happens."

Apart from Doyle's monumental external projections, Ecstatic City is a forum to screen the work of Victorian video artists inside three "miniplexes" outside the NGV. "There's this duality of being an insider (Melburnian), and also of us seeing the culture projected from the outside," Doyle says.

As an artist who spends much of his time "plugged in" to various technological systems, he sees the community aspect of his work as hugely important.

"Technology's impact on our everyday lives is to isolate," he says. "As it becomes more and more refined, this perfectly isolating experience, I find a lot of what I'm trying to do is to reconnect with community."

San Francisco sound artist Alex Stahl is interested in similar connections, but with audio rather than video plugs. He had the idea for Echolocation, a sound installation under Princes Bridge, while he was out here setting up the Pixar exhibition at ACMI last year. During a twilight walk to clear his head, the American tourist was stunned to hear what so many iPod-wearing locals don't: a live symphony of myna birds and rumbling trams.

"I've spent years working on surround sound for cinema and other spaces, but nothing like this," he says. "The thing that got my attention, and that I'm hoping to give back, is not the sound of a single bird but the spatial effect of the hundreds or thousands of them under there. That's true surround sound."

Echolocation comprises nine sophisticated speaker and microphone systems suspended under the bridge, each containing a satellite dish, a bell and a Tibetan singing bowl. Bird calls, passing trams and signals sent from commuters' mobile phones to posted phone numbers will be fed into computers and "modified into more of a musical sound", Stahl says.

"Really, anything goes down there. I have no idea what people are going to do with it and I can't wait to find out. It's a grand experiment."

Whatever it is will culminate in a free concert at the Edge Theatre in Fed Square on Saturday, October 18, with musicians from Canada, San Francisco and Melbourne all feeding into the live experience.

"We're all running around trying to shut out the world so we can think properly, all with our iPods on," Stahl says. "The irony, and the inspiration for this whole thing, was that by going down there and being overwhelmed by this sound, that was the way I cleared my head."

"I think in cities there's a real issue now of forgetting how to hear distance. Everything's so close to us. And the ability to perceive things that are far away, and just getting yourself oriented by sound, that's been lost. So this is about letting that in, rather than pushing it out."

But will all this free ambient sensory stimulation make Melbourne a happier city? Well, it'll cost you five bucks to find out. Panther's Exercises in Happiness offers a more internal perspective on the immediate environment of city life, courtesy of Melbourne artists Madeleine Hodge and Sarah Rodigari.

"We became interested in our societal obsession with happiness, in advertising and in economic policy, all the rhetoric about it," Hodge explains. "We wanted to find a way that we could get people to interact with happiness and the idea of happiness without being too didactic or overbearing about it."

Following installations in Singapore and Britain, the Tape Space in Carlton will be set up as a kind of playground for exercising attitudes and appetites in relation to happiness from Saturday, October 11.

"Come in at any time from 2pm to 8pm, get a scorecard and get directed though the exercises," Hodge says. "Walk around at your own pace and feel free to come and go as you like."

Like any bar, cafe or other public house, Panther offer no guarantees of happiness for your fiver, "although this has the capacity for us to understand its position in our lives, and why we place importance on it, where it fits among our other aims and emotions and things we strive for." Like the other public performance installations at this year's MIAF, the audience participation factor does suggest one conclusion to be drawn from Panther's Exercises in Happiness: "You can't be happy without other people. Which is really nice."

MIAF runs from October 9-25.