

## Mind Altering to Say the Least

Barton McLean

I knew that something was going to be different when I observed that every fourth person in the audience of this small Playhouse on the Rennselaer Polytechnic Institute campus in Troy, New York, at an event on Nov. 17, 2006, was an EMPAC staff member dressed in uniform, and was informed that they were there in case an audience member had an epileptic seizure and was forced to be carried out of the room through fog so thick that you could not see the hand in front of your face.

Little did I realize that this event would be a defining one for me, comparable only to my first encounter with electronic music 40 years ago. Kurt Hentschläger, audiovisual composer of the this event called "Feed," opened a door to the heretofore blocked recesses of my subconscious mind, evoking in brilliant color stunning visual patterns through the use of a combination of intense granular soundscape, stroboscopic light and artificial fog.

The defining aspect of this for me (and for most other audience members) was that this heretofore unseen kaleidoscopic display of pattern, beauty, shape, movement, pulse, and texture was being produced, not by the artist directly (although certainly he was in control of the experience), but BY MY OWN BRAIN.

The work is presented in traditional proscenium protocol, with some pretty hefty tech requirements – specs that are rarely seen in the USA in my own twenty years of full time touring experience: 5000 ansi lumens video projector, 8 channels of sound @ 400 watts/channel, with a 5000 watt subwoofer, 10 Martin "Atomic 3000" stroboscopes (2 independent pulsing circuits of 5 each) 5 color change units for the strobes, and 36 PAR wide beam stage lights. All strobes and lighting are of extremely high intensity, using a total of 50 thousand watts. I present these specs to emphasize how totally immersive this experience is. Hentschläger beams the bright spots and strobes into the fog surrounding the audience, so the audience is totally deprived of all sensory information except the music and the bright lights and colored pulsing, often at different speeds with relation to each other. In my exhaustive interview with Kurt, available in PDF download at his web site at [http://www.hentschlagel.info/portfolio/feed/pdf/SEAMUS\\_Journal\\_Interview.pdf](http://www.hentschlagel.info/portfolio/feed/pdf/SEAMUS_Journal_Interview.pdf) he touches on how he achieves this unusual effect:

*"According to my research ... what happens is a clash between the internal brain refresh cycle (of the visual processing parts of the brain) and the external flicker cycles of the stroboscopes. Once the fog part is under way, the strobes fade in at about 8hz, from there, until the end of the piece, they go up to a maximum of*

*about 24hz. Normally, at the beginning of the fog part, people in the audience will, in terms of brain refresh cycles, have arrived in an alpha state, their brain individually refreshing in between 8-13hz. Now two things seem to happen, A) Generally, stroboscopic flicker in a range between 8-13Hz appears to break down some of the physiological barriers between different regions of the brain and B) The (external) flicker rates of the strobos interfere with the (internal) brain refresh rates of the visual cortex resulting in actual interference patterns. These 2D/3D psychedelic patterns, experienced in such an environment, are differing from individual to individual depending on the respective personal brain refresh rate and other factors linked to imaginative and other predispositions.*

*The intensity of the patterns changes according to increase / decrease in light intensity of the strobos- and the flicker frequency. It also changes with the intersected pulse lights, which temporarily subdue and reignite the impression. Feed uses two independent sections of strobos, which, when set to differing frequencies, creating interference on their own, all of which is constantly “frustrating” the brain’s attempt to properly “see” and thus constantly animating the brain to ever new interpretations of the reality at hand.*

*Generally the brighter the flicker and the more filling one’s entire field of view, the more instantly the patterns emerge. This relies for the most part on the very dense fog, which erases any idea of physical space, depth of space and resets one’s sense of orientation. The fog really brings the flicker to the plane of the retina, allowing no distance or escape from it, the eye is reduced to a basic brightness-, contrast- and color sensor, all the perceived patterns then being “invented” in brain.*

*I worked with flicker in my video work for about 6 years in an attempt to at least somewhat lifting the video off the flat screen and have it pulsating in space. The light element of video becomes equally prominent when using flicker, but still the inherent flatness of projected video remained a source of frustration.”*

“Feed” is in two parts. It begins with floating protohuman androgynous figures suspended in space, gradually changing position and multiplying, all controlled in real time by Hentschlagel, and generated live in sync with the evocative and haunting sound track comprising granular synthesis techniques and software, and all well documented in Hentschlagel’s web site at <http://www.hentschlagel.info> Eventually, as this progresses with its exquisite sense of timelessness, the fog commences, and a gradual transition to the second part described above ensues. At the end of “Feed,” one is totally drained, exhilarated, and energized. I leave with the thought that here is an artist who can be so selfless as to expend so much of his treasure as to empower all of us to reach such a height of artistic experience. Perhaps this is the essence of a creative being.

Kurt Hentschläger is a New York-based Austrian artist working in the realm of sound, video, and other media. His sound work often centers on granular synthesis. "Feed" was premiered at the Venice Theater Biennial

Even before the massive EMPAC (Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center who produced this event) has been completed, it is already producing events of an elegance and sophistication rarely seen in the USA, and will eventually be comparable only to entities such as IRCAM in Paris when it is completed and in full operation next year (<http://empac.rpi.edu>).