

## ISEA 2004: Layers of Performance

Baltic Sea, August 14-22, 2004

<http://www.isea2004.net/>

<http://www.isea-web.org/>

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Aboard flight 18.45, London – Helsinki, people scan each other for the happy signs of genius. And no wonder. According to the unflinching authors of the official introduction to the 12<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Electronic Arts, “ISEA2004 CRUISE is a great party where you can talk, dance, drink, eat, sunbathe and relax with the most innovative group of people that have ever set on sail.” Modest and convincing if you ask me.

“Are we all on the way to ISEA?” asks a leather-clad man across the aisle, squinting at me suspiciously.

“Everybody with a laptop bag basically,” confirms his red-haired neighbor, without raising her head from *Phénoménologie de la perception*.

I stuff my notebook into the locker and sit down to reread the website printouts in an attempt to make sense of the program. ISEA2004, “the biggest ever new media culture event” is open for all but aimed at creative practitioners and researchers. Utilizing three venues it begins with the aforementioned ISEA CRUISE (Helsinki – Stockholm – Marienhamn – Tallinn) featuring Interfacing Sound and Networked Experience themes; continues as ISEA TALLINN focusing on Wearable Experience and concludes with ISEA HELSINKI covering Wireless Experience, Histories of the New, Open Source and Software as Culture. Each venue has a separate program offering a host of overlapping openings, performances, workshops, exhibitions and conference presentations. This awe-inspiring lot of activities is split into logical groups with unique names, catchy slogans and easy-to-read color tags. Events are scheduled with inhuman precision (Minna Tarkka from m-cult has three minutes for her speech while the wordier Nina Czegledy from ISEA takes up five). In an hour, my inability to cope is confirmed beyond doubt and, feeling somewhat crabby, I give up...

Opera is a Baltic luxury cruiser. I have traveled on the kind before: I remember a flock of elderly Finns pulling their handcarts stacked with cheap Estonian booze, slow dancing in the bar, weary

In print and online, NY Arts Magazine, Jan/Feb 2005, Vol. 10, No. 1/2 <a href="http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/">http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/</a> <a href="http://artfairsinternational.com/">http://artfairsinternational.com/</a>
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commuters. I lock my things in an underwater cabin and climb past bars, casinos, tax-free shops, spas and fun-for-everyone centers to the 9<sup>th</sup>-deck Riviera restaurant. It is getting crowded there but mighty waves of electronic sound drown the cacophony of first introductions, impressions and complaints. Rain is horizontal behind panoramic windows, the glass roof is leaking profusely and two women are already in the Jacuzzi. “Must be Australian,” says someone behind my back, “I shall go and bring my towel.”

Two people are fiddling with cables and speakers at the pool (later I read that this is an Underwater Sound installation by Toine Linja). I brought no swimming suit, so I lie prone and dip my head into the water. When I get up, people look at me inquisitively. My face is meaningful but noncommittal. My shirt is soaking wet, my heart is beating with exhilaration and I have a story to tell. It must be art! The problem is I am not certain there was much sound underwater. Was the power on? It is embarrassing to confess but I am just not sure.

Let’s see. If the sound was not even there, my entire internal struggle (to dip or not to dip), my excitement, my casual but colorful explanations about the state of my clothes, the benefits this experience will make to my social status (I hope people see now how interesting and adventurous I am), all of this is just a placebo effect. But what does it matter? Here we have a near-perfect example of interactive participatory art. The art product is in the background while the performative encounter is brought to the fore in a humanly significant and long-lasting way.

Back at home, a friend describes the works she liked at Ars Electronica, another major new-media event. “But most of it was gimmicky,” she says. I nod, “The same at ISEA.”

Why is that so? What makes the difference? What do people mean when they say “content-poor” about interactive digital art? Please argue with me but I think that artifacts and activities become meaningful through contextual response. It is not the pond, or the stone, or the throwing, it is the ripples that are of interest here. Seen as a gesture in a total performance-field, an artwork cannot be “made”, it can only be “staged”. If the staging is unsuccessful, the artwork remains nothing but a technical demonstration.

A festival, as any life situation, is a dynamic structure of nested performative shells that envelop each artwork, paper presentation or informal exchange. ISEA’s glorious and schizophrenic setup makes for a particularly potent brew. But life-places are never inert! Artworks that ignore their environments as neutral are in peril whatever the setting. At ISEA, projects that might have held their own in a white-wall exhibition promptly disappear in the contextual noise.

ISEA's program included hundreds of projects. I have space to describe three that, once "planted", were able to grow and mature quickly, establishing a rewarding symbiotic relationship with their hectic environments.

### **Lifeboat – Tissue Culture**

by Nigel Heyler, Sarah Jane Pell, Ionat Zurr, Oron Catts  
<http://www.life-boat.org/>



*Lifeboat* by Nigel Heyler, Sarah Jane Pell, Ionat Zurr, Oron Catts

The first night's sleep is not a happy one. I share a cabin with people I do not know. At 3 a.m., someone arrives and for good thirty minutes, I lie in my top-level bunk bed and listen to interesting slurping sounds below. Then he is sick on the floor and I stagger out to demand another cabin. Relocated as a matter of course, I feel high on social justice and I set out to explore the ship. The open lower-stern deck is thick with sound; DJs take turns to improvise, people dance and smile at each other as the slow Northern sunrise fills the sky.

By 8 a. m., I am out of breath and climb up two decks leaving the music behind...

"Attention all life forms, this is a lifeboat announcement..." a melodic voice calls from an orange saucer. No one is around. Intrigued I resolve to come back later...

The Lifeboat is popular. I wait, get an appointment (go away and wait some more, listen to the rumors, come back and listen to the other participants' answers, amplified for all to hear), sign a declaration, leave a fingerprint and, finally, get approval to enter.

The experiments begin with a strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree psychological profile test.

“...”

“Stalin was a womanizer.”

“Eh...” I hesitate. Was he?

“Please answer the question.”

“Well, I disagree.” Presumption of innocence for all!

“People are inclined towards promiscuity.”

“Eh, agree.” I wonder if “strongly agree” is right here. Coward!

“The infection of another with a sexually transmitted disease should be an offence punishable under law.”

“What!?” I don’t know. “Disagree,” Excessive government regulation is a danger, I’ve heard.

“...”

“Satan lives in America.”

“?” The audience chuckles. My irritation rises up a notch.

“...”

Once more, the questionnaire statement does not fit with the four-register answer-template and the general tone of the profile test. I “strongly disagree”. I like to think Satan does not exist. Do these questions promote a particular worldview? Are they composed with an underhand purpose in mind? Ought one respond to the unanswerable propositions as offered or attempt to predict the way the system interprets them? Or, on another level, ought one stay within the performance frame as set or break out? As the Lifeboat announcement rightly anticipates, “particular education and social conditions may increase the risk of formation of thought patterns and opinions disassociated with persistent interrogation.” Later I learned that at least one person got expelled from Lifeboat for disrespecting the questionnaire system – a preposterous failure for an art project as an installation but a socially resonant outcome for a performative situation!

As I have my hair pulled out for a DNA sample, my answers are interpreted by software and my personality is plotted as a dot on a four-axis chart where “Ego” is opposed to “Eco”, “Authoritarian” to “Libertarian”, “Red in Tooth and Claw” to “Symbiosis” and “Survivalist” to “Brave New World”. A unique DNA sequence is put together and a mantra is played via loudspeakers. I am told that my decisions are consequential and will determine if the crew terminates the existence of the disassociated life-form sample that has been assigned to me. What? Death? Of what and why? Just don’t ask me. Whatever. I principally don’t give in to this ritualistic blackmailing! As far as I am concerned, I know from the announcement that all is fine:

“living, recently living, partially living, semi-living and the semi-deceased are all maintained in a cultural medium and all cared for onboard the SS lifeboat by both visitors and crew.” So, there...

Well, well. To be honest, I am worried about those disassociated life forms, whatever they are (body cells of an eel bought at Kauppatori harbor market in Helsinki actually). Or, rather, I could be. “But this is only art,” I convince myself. “There is no cause for concern.”

The experience of direct engagement with Lifeboat’s structuralist logic and value-system is nothing short of Kafkaesque. Call me incompetent but the intended “purpose” of the piece remains obscure to me even though the artists spend considerable effort providing elaborate in-role explanations in response to my immediate questions. Instead, my frustration and paranoid suspicion become the real sensual results of the experience that exhibits and exploits the falsities of customary scientific, philosophical, and ideological practices.

I consider interviewing the artists about the motivations behind the idea and decide against it. Firstly, I suspect they would refuse to step out of the performance and give straight-faced answers. They certainly declined to do so when giving a presentation about their project at the ISEA TALLINN conference. Secondly, I think that Lifeboat is a successful project irrespective of the aesthetic intentionality of its authors. The key to Lifeboat’s success is in its performative, theatrical nature, not in the analytical capabilities of its software or the sermonic nature of its direct moral message. The Lifeboat-*system* is nested in the Lifeboat-*theatre*, which is part of Lifeboat-*performance*, and they all are enveloped by the social drama of the ISEA cruise.

This structure includes a whole web of involvements: spontaneous encounters and planned investigations, canned opinions and considered analyses, ideas for collaboration and competing ambitions. I’m having lunch with two well-established artists as the orange-clad Lifeboat crew come into view. The conversation turns into complaints about the grant money wasted on their uniforms, application blanks and the other smart gear. Are such flashy accessories impotent? Then how come you are angry, gentlemen?

Temporal as well as spatial, the performative structure incorporates periods of extended development and integration. Project leaflets, dubious rumors, long queues and cancellations culminate in the stress of public exposure. The lived experience is subsequently integrated into the social fabric via immediate reports to the curious, contemplation, discussions or even magazine reviews. Accepting of its environment, the performance generates and manages its impact as a complete life cycle.

## Sonic Spaces (the kinetics of sound)

by Shawn Pinchback

<http://fn2.freenet.edmonton.ab.ca/~resonate/shawnbio.html>



*Sonic Spaces* by Shawn Pinchback

...The second day in Tallinn, Estonia. I am looking for The Elion Home (a department store, not a classic poet's family house as they tell me later), where Jillian McDonald (Advice Lounge) offers "free non-professional advice from a stranger". In an hour, I've been in a rainstorm, strolled a few times through a handicraft market and memorized a complicated layout of a multi-exit underpass. Ready to give up I go into the Estonian Academy of Arts instead. The information-desk volunteers do not know of The Elion Home. A change of plan is due; I buy a bar of chocolate and sit down to see a presentation at the back of the foyer. The nasty pure-soy substance sticks to the teeth and my attention wanders. In fact, several of us find it hard to concentrate. In a stair recess on the left, an earnest-looking man whirls on his heels holding his jacket in an extended hand. In response to the movement, the sound gets louder and dominates the room. The speaker stumbles. The man stops, embarrassed. The foyer's topology is suddenly rearranged: the presentation resumes but I keep watching the stair recess, my attention divided. Several people walk closer. Some enter the pool of light in the recess and move about apprehensively, probing for reaction. I watch as they explore the place and walk away. Now only two are left. The Sonic Space withdraws into the background until the next eruption.

I do enter the recess later but for a while, I enjoy being on the spectators' side, watching how the others "dip in", explore, observe or stay away. The algorithmically controlled quadraphonic soundscape and its visual manifestations (loudspeakers in the corners, RGB lights of the tracking system, even a project description on the wall) disturb the place rearranging values and meanings. The effect ripples through space and passes from person to person. People's intentions,

acquaintances, habits and immediate requirements are revealed and tempered with. Spatial affordances are made manifest and then redefined. The performer-spectator dualism is shattered into a kaleidoscopic field where the excuse and the reason to act or gaze are given to all. The soundscape acts as a catalyst, rearranging the social dramas of the everyday, casting people in disquieting, unfamiliar roles.



Transitional space: *Sonic Pictures* ↔ *in/e/gress*

## **in/e/gress**

by cAVity, Cat Hope and Anne Walton

[http://www.arte.fi/en/e2004/in\\_e\\_e.htm](http://www.arte.fi/en/e2004/in_e_e.htm)



*in/e/gress* by Cat Hope and Anne Walton

The stair around the Sonic Spaces recess gives a good view down into the foyer and then leads up to an opening. Bright light shines through a plastic-strip curtain that hangs across its frame. A woman comes through the curtain and starts down the stairs. Another approaches and I involuntarily stop to give way even though I already see that this is only a projection on the curtain, a pre-recorded video of people passing through this same opening. I stand at the side and watch embodied and projected people pass by. Behind the curtain, it is dark and many hesitate before entering. A door is intuitively associated with an idea of a boundary between spaces.

Converted into a screen, it suggests a private domain on the other side. The sight of someone else going through, however, serves as an implicit permission to enter. This real space has real traffic and I try to imagine that I've been working in this building for 20 years, walking its corridors, seeing it change, meeting and forgetting people. What would I feel seeing the screen? What dormant memories would re-awaken? What was it like to come to this building the first time so long ago? Did the space behind the curtain feel as private then as it suddenly feels now?

Do you think I am tacking upon this project a meaning it never had? That I have missed the point and my writing is a disservice? Perhaps. I see no need to pretend I understand the projects in this review. In fact, I like them for that. We can hope to understand human constructs organized as coherent systems. But most of the world is not a system. It denies logic. It needs to be experienced to be meaningful. I like what these projects make me do. I walk in search of them, struggle to avoid them, feel excitement (or embarrassment) taking part, talk and write about them or even re-imagine them as other things in other places.

Perhaps some of my praise applies to the projects' impact more than to the authors' intentions. Even if so - let it remain. As encountered during ISEA, these projects accepted life as it really happened. They did not demand undivided attention. Did not impose a tyranny of a preconceived worldview. Rather, they used technology to layer a performative frame on top of the existing patterns of behavior, helping us to think and explore, uncovering hidden potentials of places and establishing new relationships among people.

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Alas, the sleepy university town where I am writing this text has an unwanted healing effect that no one can avoid. Coming back from ISEA I had narcolepsy from sleep-deprivation plus Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder from sensual overload. And I rather liked how I felt. Things are back to normal now and I struggle to feel the excitement and confusion that marked my ISEA week but I still see it in my notes and photographs. I hope you could get some of it from this review. If so, come along next time, San Jose 2006, see you there...