

## **LAST MAN TO DIE (LMTD)**

### **In their own words**

Last Man To Die is an active experiment in the relationship and interaction between three, traditionally distinct, art forms - Theatre, Drawing and Percussion. This experiment takes three artists, each successful in their own disciplines, and through active synthesis and disjunction attempts to generate a new and common expression.

In this experiment each discipline is equal but not equivalent, each has influence and is influenced and each is dependent and independent. We do not limit relationship and interaction of our disciplines to traditional modes of communication, predominately artistic interpretation, but exploit the nature of digital technologies to provide a common language for immediate communication and interaction between the different art forms. Each one becomes a data source for the others.

In examining these modes of communication Last Man To Die is attempting to challenge and question the dichotomy between human 'reason' and 'spirit' in the practice of art.

Our research goals are to develop new technologies for linking our art forms implicitly using custom electronics, new software interfaces and innovative use of computer vision and hearing. Drawing from traditional empirical and transpersonal research methods, as well as fiction and pop-culture, allows for a multi-faceted and holistic exploration of the science and technology based themes.

Additionally, we are each continuing to develop individual creative practices that allow us to both inform and depend on each other's personal artworks and performance. Our ultimate goal is true equality and seamlessness in our cross-artform practice that highlights interaction between each of us and the audience.

Our work explores viewpoints on "Life", scientific, popular, cultural, social and how these might change as a result of emerging technologies that could vastly change the human experience. "Life" provides us with an immeasurable and uncontainable territory for exploration and play, while simultaneously acting as a ground for the tension between the rational and irrational.

'VITAL LMTD' showcased at The Street Theatre for the Made In Canberra season 2009, as well as at the Crack Theatre Festival at This Is Not Art, Newcastle. Drawing on themes from modern science and pop culture, three natural philosophers attempt to question and explore what it means to be alive. A Shelley-ian tea party that swiftly descends into madness, held in the middle of a space-age laboratory. Popular science theory viewed through the looking glass. Each night is different as the actions of the audience and chance help influence experiments into life, reanimation and death.

In December, Last Man To Die joined with video artist/ writer Peter Butz in their most recent residency at C Block, Gorman House- awarded by Canberra Youth Theatre. The culmination of the residency was a quartet of proof of concept showings, demonstrating the new areas explored- including screen performance, video projection, acceleration motors as a means of movement control and infra-red tracking.

Martin: *We planned to extend our techniques for combining and presenting acting, music and visual art using the resources we developed for Vital LMTD... to invert a perception of our work as basically theatre with some music and art. Personally, I wanted to push my particular interests ...augmented instruments, new interfaces for performance, cross-artform performance. I think we were absolutely successful in the first goal. In our showing we presented four pieces each presenting new modes of performance that we hadn't ever explored before.*

*I especially liked these things: In "Chemicools" the audience had an equal role as the artists in catalysing interest during the showing...I hope to develop it in future. "Faces". Wow, somehow we did it and it was sort of working. I'm shocked that we got the idea to such a stage. This was the most exciting and successful integration of video we've managed and the tools and processes we explored will be very useful. Also it was super eerie. Two projectors, audience surrounding the works and performers. The setup had a profound effect on the audience's understanding of the works and our ability to perform them. Above all, we generated ideas and responses to our own work and to each other's perceptions which has been highly educational. No one said being ground-breaking was easy and the two weeks were very intellectually challenging.*

Working in interdisciplinary arts- a relatively "new" field in the strange world of art classification- can be quite challenging. It can be very difficult to break down pre-conceived notions within the viewer, which ends up requiring a fine balance between demonstrative or didactic work and work which appears surreal or bewildering.

Cormick: *I think there is also an element of confusion for people in what falls into what category of art; This confusion is of course the area we are trying to awaken, however the reactions to it can be severe. Many people try to compartmentalise the pieces into different art forms- and then draw conclusions or make demands based upon how they have tried to categorise different elements. This seems a strangely empirical way of dissecting an artwork, and I find it strange that the same sort of empiricism does not usually occur when responding to non-interdisciplinary works. I feel that many parts of the pieces were ambiguous in what art form they sat- for instance my recorded monologues being manipulated by Charles into sound art during a primarily visually based piece with moving bodies. Is the soundtrack music or acting? Are the visuals seen by the audience visual art or performance or dance? I think it entirely valid for our artwork to sit in ambiguity, yet there seems to be so much pressure (even from within ourselves) to categorise and quantify.*

*One early plan we had upon entering the space was to create a type of "gallery space" so as to subvert the feeling of performing in a theatre- but why do we want to destroy this notion? As much as a space has a great impact upon the work being created on presented within it, it is still only a place- "space" or atmosphere in an artistic sense, however, is created by something other than the physical place a work is in and has more to do with the energy of the work. Barrie Kosky stepped forward to criticise our government's funding of more arts venues, when what we need is project funding, and funding for artists to work- their art can just as well be presented in a car park. This sentiment brought me to mind of a director I worked with in my youth, the late David Branson, as he would very often do just that. It has left with me the sense that if the art must be paramount, why*

*expend so much energy upon creating or destroying a sense of venue, or type of venue? The work will generate its own sense of "space".*

*We have explored many different forms of presentation, from narrative, linear, cohesive structures, to fractured and cyclic pieces that work alone, or fit together as puzzle pieces. We want to explore not only what we are presenting, but how it may be viewed. It is an interesting experiment to give this kind of power to the audience or viewer. In this world where art is spoon fed to audiences whose scope of involvement is to sit back and switch off for a few hours, it can be very confronting. Some viewers have complained that they did not know what was wanted of them, they have a profound sense of displacement and need to know 'what is their place in all of this'. What is their place, indeed? Surely they have the capacity to decide that for themselves.*

*Forster: Following our unique methodology, particularly striving towards an unattainable idealism, has raised for us numerous problems with the term art. Does the term art refer to the same Idea within each of the different artistic disciplines? Are each of the discipline specific critical frameworks derived from a shared notion of art? Or is it rather that art is defined by the particular frameworks within which it is considered? Surely not the latter. If this was the case then both art creation and criticism would be reduced to the logic of concepts, never touching the actuality, hic et nunc. Art lives in the here and now. It is only actuality. This is why we stress aspects of spontaneity and chance within our work. Sadly however, it appears that audience and critics alike need to be continually reminded that art is alive in the periphery of disciplines. That it is art that defines disciplines and not the other way round. As such, art criticism shouldn't instinctively seek refuge in the proscribed formalism of any specific artistic discipline, but rather should trace trajectories between all disciplines artistic or not.*

*Cormick: The idea that we should be separate art forms or concepts is as ridiculous and outdated as the concept of the Cartesian split- that the mind and body are separate- yet both these notions have penetrated the subconscious to the point that it is very difficult to not think in this manner. What we have more often noted, however, is that there comes a point in symbiosis where the two aspects become inextricably linked. If a musician expends so much energy in controlling and influencing an actor, they soon become an "actor" also, their art is being expressed through the acting- or rather they become a musician-actor, just as the actor is now an actor-musician. The split dissolves. They are not the same, but they are definitely not separate.*

*Viewers need to be re-educated. They have decided barriers on what is art that should not exist. They have become lost in their complacency and can't see the meaning behind the text. I find it hilarious that the opinions expressed in 'VITAL LMTD' were taken to be our own theories and beliefs. They were ridiculously exaggerated and very clearly triggered by which card won the hand. But the audience often could not get over the idea that what they are fed is truth. The very concept of this scene was to elucidate through lies- sometimes the audience is fed poison just so they can wake up a little. We were shocked that so many took it hook line and sinker. It is a scary concept that these ideas, which we felt to be outlandishly bigoted and inaccurate, could be so easily accepted without comment. Our aim was to make the viewers think, and to think about their place in the universe. It seems we might have to try a little harder.*

Working simultaneously within several art forms can also be very freeing. It explodes many of the "rules" art has stagnated into. Complication, Climax, Denouement? Visual art does not have these. The sense of time is completely reshaped. Music is brought up from mere background or soundtrack and is given a spotlight of its own. Suddenly the sculptures and drawings are allowed to get up, walk around and talk. Time, space, character and structure are viewed in a new light.

Forster: *Working within cross-arts pushes me as an artist into fertile new existential territories. Challenging all that is stable.*

It is, however, just as tempting to fall into a world where all these, often contradictory, rules apply and constrain. And, very often, each viewer brings their own set of rules to which we seem expected to comply. It is the job of the artist to try and free themselves of these invisible bonds. But, to ignore the rules, we must first understand them- why they exist, why they are comfortable, why they do not translate to a different art form. The work becomes an experiment in time, space and form, so that the dissolution of a rule may come from an educated point, and not simply for the sake of shunning rules.

It is very important to note that each work is influenced very strongly by the two elements of "experiment" and "chance". The experiment is to allow us a sense of evolving, learning and play. Suddenly one piece of text does not work where it is- we move it to the beginning the following night. This fluidity allows for the work to be constantly breathing and growing. With the enormous amount of technical equipment in the space- and attached to our bodies- there is always a capacity for something to go wrong. This is then integrated as a living aspect of that night's performance. It is not necessarily a failure. Integrating chance as a controlling factor also has a large impact on the work generated. Often some chance tool- dice, cards, random iphone generator, or audience action- will directly affect what happens. Different texts are learnt, so that whatever number of the die is shown cues that response. Cards cue text, but also affect the text that follows based on their suit and number. Audience choices early in the work affect visuals and character later on- in 'VITAL LMTD' each night the "creature" character was different based upon seemingly innocuous audience choices. Random iphone generators create text to be fed to the actor live at the moment of speech. Due to this, each performance is in some way different from another.

In 2010 Last Man To Die, with the support of ACT Government arts funding, will be further pursuing development and research into new work, as well as continuing their journey into the world of cross-art. Stay tuned for upcoming works at [lastmantodie.net](http://lastmantodie.net)