"Experimental Literature was Really the First Kick:"
An Interview with Scanner by Rebekah Farrugia

England-based musician, artist and minimalist anti-hero: Scanner aka Robin Rimbaud. His eclectic mix of activities place him at the crossroads of academic and pop culture.

His controversial early work used scanned mobile phone conversations which he wove into soundscapes, but more recently his focus has shifted to trawling the hidden noise of the modern metropolis.

In addition to producing compositions and audio CDs, his diverse body of work includes soundtracks for films, performances, radio, and site-specific intermedia installations. He has performed in and created works for many prestigious spaces, including San Francisco MOMA (USA), Hayward Gallery (London), Pompidou Centre (Paris), Tate Modern (London) and the Modern Museum (Stockholm).

His work has won admiration from Stockhausen and Bjork, and in recent years he has worked with Laurie Anderson, DJ Spooky, Derek Jarman, Michael Nyman and Bryan Ferry.

The following was a live internet chat, resulting in an interview, conducted in August 2002. Errors in typing and beaks in thought have been left as they were captured in the transcript of the session.

Rebekah Farrugia: Some of the pages on scanner.com remind me of what some are calling "digital poetry". Was this intentional?

Scanner: Interestingly enough I studied literature at university. So language & narrative have always been of interest. The work was also a reaction against full-colour-explosive-ego-boosting web pages…

RF: How do you envision the relationship between language and sound? In other words, what do you see as the relationship between language as language (in the traditional sense) and language as sound (as used in your musical compositions)?

Scanner: Experimental literature was really the first kick for me and still acts as an inspiration. I frequently look at ubuweb.com for new work. Language as pure sound has always intrigued me, too, even when I was simply using the scanner device to pick up indiscriminate voices from the ether in languages I didn't even understand. It still meant that I could follow the "colour" of the conversation in some manner. I could use them texturally. It's curious today, too, that I make a lot of work for radio broadcast, particularly the BBC here. I create documentaries that take a traditional form of question/answer and twist them in rather unconventional ways.

RF: So do you see a distinction between public and private worlds with the kinds of sounds you use? Are these distinctions you try to break down?

Scanner: I am really interested in access actually. Many of the projects I create I want to be open to as many people as possible. I have taken very private moments from others, in using these phone calls, and also at other times with my own personal diaries.

I created a performance work called "Diary" two years ago that took my very personal words to a wider audience for a temporary moment. I think it's valuable to try to bridge a relationship between the author and the audience. Even projects I'm working on now are exploring these positions. Many public art commissions I create are actively offering an insight into these ideas. It brings about an issue of responsibility that I think is very important.

RF: Does the idea of access ever impact where you choose to showcase your work?

Scanner: I'm more excited always about the chance of work being offered in an alternative space -- as far away as possible. I am keen to work in new places, new locations. That's why collaboration has always been so crucial to what I do. It's a key opportunity to challenge myself and to work with a fresh perspective. Having said that, I try to make works site specific, to reference the locale, to use the language, the accent, the familiar location but in a new way, to make the familiar fresh again. 'Sound Polaroids,' the project I travel with, does exactly this. Capturing the images and sound locally and yet making even the familiar new, taking something very ordinary and making it extraordinary.

RF: I read that you chose the statement "human kind is just a 12"monitor" to close the "low membrane" video because you believe that everything is dissolved into a screen and you're terrified that all we will have or be is a 12" inch monitor.

As someone who works with technology how do you see your artistic creations as fitting into this picture?

Scanner: I have always been intrigued by the screen, you see... how we monitor our lives through it. How you and I are talking here but we are also playing, we are acting in a way, too. There is a theatre to these roles. We consume theatre, information, news, music, so much through a 12" monitor. It can be addictive as you say. As you clearly know I could be anyone here typing this to you.

Trace [a British organization in support of digital work]is very interested in these ideas of MUDs and MOOs. You know where you can occupy a space and imagine you are anyone or anything actually. There has something amazingly liberating about new technology but I wonder...we have had no chance to explore how etiquette can adapt to this -- for example, the use of mobile phone technology, the invasion of others into your personal space. The impossibility of silence or personal space and yet at the same time the ease with which we can close this off by simply hitting the 'POWER' key.

RF: So do you see your work as raising awareness about these issues -- socially commentary-- or something else altogether?

Scanner: I think it's important to consider these issues. I would like the work to always be able to stand alone, to exist without any of these factors having to be explored. I am uncomfortable with the notion at times of having to almost justify a work, yet I think it's invaluable to be able to talk about these issues. I have always suggested that even if you don't like what I do, perhaps it opens up your imagination a little bit, poses a question you may never have considered and so on.

I know that many of works make people 'uncomfortable' but without doubt the work of others that inspires me and entertains me even has an awkwardness about it, a darkness perhaps. I like the idea of taking a person into a place that can even if only temporarily alter their consciousness I suppose, to offer the chance to question, to colour. I certainly never sit down and create music and think "gosh, I'd better make this the most disturbing piece I've ever written." I just think I'm very good at writing positive music in a traditional way. I grew up listening equally to John Cage, Throbbing Gristle, King Crimson, Brian Eno and Supertramp, The Eagles, ElO, Gary Glitter and church music. Something about the melancholia always appealed to me in the best aspects of all this music. The mood has always been important.

RF: Recently you have turned to working with images. What prompted this move from dialogue to images?

Scanner: I still use sound obviously and have very consciously avoided the use of images. As we are such an image-led society, we are incredibly literate in recognising visual culture yet so far behind with sound.

Consider Hollywood where the history of cinema is also the history of sound design yet the role of this artist is always tucked at the closing credits yet their work shapes the image we are consuming.

The images I like to use are often very mundane, relating to a city or a place where I am working or in the case of some commissions…very simple objects referenced in a complex way. For example the work The Collector shown in the Sonic Boom exposition in London back in 2000 was a work that used around 1000 photographs of butterflies -- all static, all dead, pinned to a wooden board in a museum, but I was interested in juxtaposing them into a sequence. The variety of colours and shapes created an alternative rhythm and pulse to the sound I used -- which was a highly amplified recording of butterfly wings. I am just cautious about people being too seduced by an image in a live performance context, so I rarely use images in live performances.

RF: What about taking sound from pictures? I read about the recently developed software that you are using to do this -- "scanning" in this sense.

Scanner: Yes. It's not an answer by any means but a chance to explore the possibilities… where the pixels become the tool brush with which to create the sound. The idea conceptually is beautiful. It still has a long way to go but it's certainly offering a means to almost paint with sound.

RF: Any current projects you would like to speak about? Directions you see yourself heading in?

Scanner: Interestingly for me, my projects are never predictable. They range from the bereavement suite in Garches hospital in Paris where I am creating a soundtrack for the mortuary room to this public art commission in Belfast where I am creating a carpeted space filled with around 25,000 deep blue latex balloons in an immersive work called 'Into the Blue'.

At the same time I am constantly traveling, creating my own live shows, launching a project with the British School of Art at Rome called 52 Spaces, continuing to work with the Random Dance Company in the UK, collaborating with a designer Tonne in the UK, with Kim Cascone in the USA, bringing out the Godard commission of Aphaville 2002 to Montreal and LA and too many other things at the moment. In terms of direction I just simply don't intend to have one. I like the shape of my life in that sense. Rarely a chance to be bored, unless an airline lets me down and leaves me stranded in a terminal for 15 hours as just happened last week on the way to Italy!

RF: I thought the performance you constructed using the look- a -likes was fascinating. What prompted this project?

Scanner: The look-a-likes was very amusing I must say. It's a funny story really. I was interested in the work of Bruce Connor. He is an American artist who had a retrospective over at the Walker Arts Centre in Minneapolis recently. He's from the 1960s. He created films, even for bands like the Talking Heads later on using mostly collage techniques. Anyhow he was offered the chance of being in an art dictionary and when they made a request for a photo he simply sent a picture of a friend along and told them he was 'deceased'!!

He played with the scene and at the same time made the most beautiful assemblages. So I was actually moving home 4 years ago -- the traditional route an artist makes when releasing a CD is to release product/make interviews/tour and I was never interested in this system… and anyhow was very occupied with cardboard boxes at the time so I was speaking to a friend in Miami who (poor soul) looks unnervingly like me and playfully suggested that he play a show for me there as he was so often asked by people at clubs and so on if he 'Scanner' was playing somewhere!

Then I conjured up this concept of having 16 parties in 16 cities on a Wednesday night in May 1999 to promote my CD 'lauwarm instrumentals' which in its own way was amusing

as the title means 'lukewarm' but I had to change it as I had too many complaints from distributors in the USA that it was too 'negative' a title!

So I just changed it to the Dutch/German equivalent which everyone then loved and had to ask me 'what does this mean?' So then these parties happened where I produced 16 x 60 min CDs for each local look-a-like to use at the shows. No one was charged entry so in a sense it played with the facelessness of electronica at the same time.