



The team behind 'Future Dreaming', L-R: Maxie Coppin, Alison Lockyer, Maverick Eaton and Nelson Coppin.

# NEW REALITIES OF THE FESTIVAL CIRCUIT

Fresh from Cannes, Byron Bay Film Festival director and virtual reality producer J'aimee Skippon-Volke outlines how international film festivals are showcasing and supporting immersive projects, and highlights some of the Australian projects succeeding on the world stage.

The world's top tier film festivals have in recent years been embraced – and in some cases nurtured – virtual reality as it's risen and evolved, indicating they recognise the opportunities the medium provides for screen practitioners and storytellers. Driven by technological advances, the immersive realms present a fast-paced landscape and industry for creatives, technicians and festivals to keep up with.

The 2019 Cannes Film Festival jury president Alejandro G Inárritu caused a splash back in 2017 when the festival premiered *Carne y Arena* (*Flesh and Sand*). It was the first VR project to ever be part of the festival's Official Selection, and would later go on to earn the first Special Achievement Academy Award presented in over 20 years "in recognition of a visionary and powerful experience in storytelling."

Cannes' 2019 edition saw VR sit within the Directors' Fortnight, through the delivery of Laurie Anderson and Hsin-Chien Huang's *Go Where You Look! Falling Off Snow Mountain*. The work is made up of three very different poetic experiences – *Aloft*, *Chalkroom* and *To the Moon* – which were presented for exploration as installations inside the cellars of Le Suquet des Art(iste)s, situated in Cannes' medieval district high above the Palais.

The Directors' Fortnight has long been considered a breeding ground for independent film talent; Anderson had her filmmaker debut there in 1987 with her feature *Home of the Brave*.

On Go Where You Look!, Directors' Fortnight artist Director Paolo Moretti stated: "The sensory, poetic and technological dimensions of these three pieces are tightly intertwined and offer new forms of storytelling by amplifying our cinematic experience. It is this singular and fully authorial, approach of virtual reality, that the Directors' Fortnight wishes to highlight, honour and share."

"Laurie Anderson's artistic path is a testament to the Directors' Fortnight's exploratory spirit, and to this 51st edition, aiming to be both an observatory and a laboratory of the evolution of storytelling through moving images, as well as an echo chamber for all forms of creation in this field."

Cannes has further built its footprint in the innovative screen space after the development of NEXT in recent years: a conference and expo space dedicated to new technologies enabling or ready to be utilised by the film industry.

NEXT was the festival's first foray into virtual reality with cinematic 360 (VR's most film-like incarnation) playing a large part in its program and focus through scheduled group 'screenings' of curated content. This year Marche Du Film saw the launch of CannesXR, running alongside NEXT but shining the spotlight exclusively on XR – an umbrella term which includes all the immersive mediums, from augmented and mixed reality, interactive and cinematic VR, and more.

The CannesXR library featured 360 and interactive content but compared to previous years, the buzz felt to be less around content

and more the panels, speakers, on-stage project pitching and – being Cannes – the parties and networking. Some of this could come down to the festival's approach to content; CannesXR remains a marketplace rather than a space for curated content, a very different approach to the other major festivals.

By contrast, the upcoming Venice Film Festival has developed a world premiere policy for VR which sits firmly within their Official Selection (Competition, Biennale College Cinema - VR and Best Of sections). Presented on Lazzaretto Vecchio – an abandoned leper colony on an island in the Venetian lagoon – Venice has become a coveted launching pad for VR experiences. The festival is run by the Venice Biennale and VR programmers Liz Rosenthal and Michel Reilhac both feel that it's the organisations approach to VR – it's as important as film and art in its programs – and the strict premiere requirement cements Venice's importance for VR on the annual festival circuit.

Interestingly, in 2017 Anderson's *Chalkroom* under the title *La Camera Insabbiata* won Venice's Best VR Experience Award.

Last year Venice's selections included part one of *The Unknown Patient*, an interactive installation set in post WWI London from a Melbourne-based team, including director Michael Beets and producers Bethany Jones and Katy Morrison; Breaking Fourth's animated *Lucid*, whose Australian director Pete Short has recently returned to Sydney after years of working in London; and Lynette Wallworth's *Awavena*.

*Awavena* had been developed in association with the Sundance Institute and debuted at Sundance's New Frontier Exhibition in January 2018, Wallworth built a new walk-through experience using back packs and hand controllers for Venice.

"There was an entirely new second part added – a walk through. It was always a dream to do but we simply couldn't do it for Sundance. I also created a third new area called The Leaving Space where people synthesise or process their experience and that configuration is how I show the work now for long runs," she says.

The finished three-section installation as shown at Venice exhibited as sold out sessions at Carriageworks in late 2018 and more recently at ACMI.

Beets says of VR and his Venice experience: "I think having an installation is important: it sets up the tone of a project before you strap on the headset and provides a welcoming space to explore exploration. For the installation we ended up building our own – we delivered sandbags, and crates to the island which is not easy when you're delivering to a small ex-leper colony island off of Venice".

Tribeca has been committed to exposing the power of new technology as a dynamic vehicle for storytelling and is fast becoming one of the more prestigious film festivals for immersive experiences and installations. Australian project *Future Dreaming*, directed by Stuart Campbell (also known as Sutu), premiered in May in Tribeca's Storyscapes – the competition section of Tribeca's

Virtual Arcade, and was included in Forbe's 'Tribeca Immersive 2019 Awesome List'. Sutu has grown a global reputation in the international XR industry as one of the best VR tilt brush and AR artists, splitting his time between the Pilbara, LA and beyond creating VR art for Marvel, Google, Disney and Jean-Michel Jarre.

Tribeca Immersive's Virtual Arcade featured impressive stage lighting and elaborately themed spaces. The team behind *Future Dreaming* took this to another level by adding interaction with the project's cast – four young Aboriginal Australians from Sutu's hometown Roebourne in Western Australia.

As with his RYOT-backed *Mind at War* VR piece developed through Sundance's New Frontier Story Lab, Sutu collaborated with Brisbane VR technicians Charles Henden and Craig Bowler, the founders of Visitor Vision.

Henden says: "The kids were treated as cast members by the Tribeca Film Festival. They met with celebs, gave talks about the film and were spotted around the screenings – welcoming people to the exhibition or helping them get set up to watch the film".

Sutu adds: "The Tribeca crowd were delighted to meet the young cast and also discover that they were actually involved in every aspect of the project's production. They co-wrote the story, co-created the VR art and animated their own avatars using motion capture. The collaborative nature of the project gave it a unique edge."

Lester Francois and Anna Brady of the Melbourne-based StudioBento, the duo behind *Rone*, have had a presence at the last two editions of SXSW; *Rone* premiered at SXSW 2018 and then the pair were invited back in 2019 to host a VR panel.

A world, or even, national premiere is not a prerequisite for either Tribeca or SXSW. Lester says: "Most VR creators aim for the trifecta: a world premiere at Sundance, followed by SXSW and then Tribeca. SXSW accepts all forms of XR content and this year they showcased two audio AR projects that were very successful with the crowd."

Sundance Film Festival's New Frontier was launched back in 2007 with a focus on the intersection of film, art and technology, although VR has played a large part in this out of competition program since Nonny de la Peña's *Hunger in Los Angeles* in 2012. Interestingly, there are no premiere requirements for New Frontier, though it is preferred. The festival also nurtures creatives through its New Frontier Story Lab initiative, though the projects selected have no guarantee of inclusion in the festival line-up.

Byron Bay-based Collective Reality and GreenhouseFX, made up of myself and Osvaldo C. Alfaro, teamed up with Adam Rogers, the executive producer behind SXSW's 2019 Best Interactive Winner *Runnin'*, on installation *Replacing Reality* after meeting at the 2018 Byron Bay International Film Festival. We will join StudioBento at Sheffield Doc/Fest's Alternate

Reality Talent Market, together with Ben Joseph Andrews and Emma Roberts, the Australian team behind AIDC's inaugural Greenpeace VR Commission *Petrichor*, and Media Stockade's Rebecca Barry and Sophie Wiesner who are collaborating with Visitor Vision to create *The Museum of Nasty Women*.

As with their traditional MeetMarket, Doc/Fest's Alternate Realities Talent Market matches projects in development with buyers, commissioners and decision makers from across the UK and the world. This year will see a focus more on teams and talent rather than a specific project, allowing participants to present a slate of projects and examine the opportunities to explore two-way collaboration.

Doc/Fest continues to push the XR envelope and its 2019 program includes the AI driven experiences *Algorithmic Perfumery*, which uses personal data to train an AI system to make an original scent for every visitor, and *Spectre* (commissioned by the festival) from Barnaby Francis (aka Bill Posters) and Dr. Daniel Howe, which engages audiences with a personalised journey that tells a cautionary tale of computational propaganda, technology and democracy, curated by an algorithm, and powered by visitor data.

As festivals continue to strive to push creative boundaries through technological advances and developing unique user-experiences Australian teams seem well-positioned. 📍

Formerly  
Metro Screen



COBBSTAR  
STUDIOS

- Greenscreen Studio
- Production Offices
- Offline Edit Suites
- Rehearsal Space
- Writers Rooms
- Conference Rooms

CONTACT US

www.cobbstarproductions.com  
e: studios@cobbstarproductions.com  
t: (02) 9361 5561  
m: 0431 554 556  
a: Paddington Town Hall, 2 Oatley Rd  
Paddington Sydney, NSW 2021

