

Foto Freo, Ten Years On

As the Foto Freo festival celebrates ten years and has grown into one of Australia's premier imaging events, Alison Stieven-Taylor talks to the original founders about the festival and its future.

From 'Bob's Backyard' to becoming a significant bi-annual event on the international photography festival calendar, Foto Freo's evolution is testament to the passion and commitment of a small group of photographers. Max Pam, Graham Miller, Brad Rimmer and David Dare Parker, along with businessman Bob Hewitt, were tenacious enough not to take "no" for an answer and to push ahead with their vision despite the obstacles.

Over lunch in March in Fremantle; Max, David, Brad and Graham noisily and amiably share with me stories of past festivals. All four have been involved in Foto Freo since its nascent days when the program was planned literally in Bob's backyard. Bob is universally recognised as the festival's father and, this year, was its official director. He's a businessman who, in retirement, is busier now than ever before.

Max says, "Bob's backyard... that was the genesis of it, where we'd all sit around in a big circle". Heads nod in agreement and there is laughter recalling some of the more raucous nights. Graham adds, "You'd have big name photographers and students; everyone talking together... it was intimate... really great."

"Not something you see everyday of the week," suggests David. However, the influx of – and access to – emerging and established photographers from all parts of the globe is one of the primary attractions of Foto Freo. Bob isn't at the lunch because he is frantically running between events, hosting visiting celebrities and managing the politics of sponsors, volunteers and exhibiting photographers. When I eventually pin him down for a chat, it is on the bus to the opening of his new baby, the FutureGen exhibition. But more of that later. In the back room of Fremantle café, Il Cibo, the stories come thick and fast. My trusty recorder



"Despite all the grand plans for future festivals, Foto Freo still lacks ongoing funding that would allow the engagement of a permanent festival director."

struggles to keep up with multiple voices, its meter spiking alarmingly. Laughter is peppered with exclamations of... "Oh God, remember that time when Brad was barbecuing and the smell of burned meat wafted through the screening of Philip Blenkinsop's graphic images of cannibalism..." or "What about when the police were called because we were making too much noise for the neighbours..." or "Remember the slide show in the park, it was blowing a gale and Graham had to hit the projector in time to that wacky music..."

In the mid-1990s when the idea of holding a photography festival in Fremantle was first put to Bob Hewitt, he thought it had merit. He'd successfully run Hewitt's Art Book Shop for years and hosted photography exhibitions, but he was not tapped into the scene. Working with a couple of local photographers, he put together a business plan for a festival with a budget of \$1 million.

The proposal included events that would "wash its face," recalls Bob. "In other words, if it cost a million



LEFT: Foto Freo cofounders (along with Bob Hewitt). From left; Brad Rimmer, Graham Miller, David Dare Parker and Max Pam.

BELOW: Bob Hewitt at the opening of the 2008 Foto Freo festival. Photo by Mindaugas Kavaliauskas.

FAR LEFT: Antoine d'Agata floor talk at the Moores Building Contemporary Art Space, Foto Freo 2006.

him working on them as he was putting them up”.

Along with Blenkinsop's images, the inaugural Foto Freo in 2002 featured photography by Stephen Dupont that was exhibited in a local café. Michael Amendolia's work was on the walls of a local store, but its hanging was cut short when the shop owner's grandmother thought the show over. "She threw Michael's prints into the garbage in favour of putting the family photos back on the wall," exclaims Brad. Bob tells me later, "We needed better venues”.

By the time the next Festival rolled around, he had secured the Maritime Museum, the Moores Building and the Fremantle Arts Centre and all are still primary venues in 2012.

Hard Yards

The first three Foto Freo Festivals were very organic and heavily reliant on everyone pitching in. Graham and Brad recall frequently hanging shows at 2.00 am. "That wasn't fun," they agree. Nor were the early morning airport pick-ups for international visitors – trying to identify someone you've never seen before at 3.00 am in the International Arrivals hall can be tricky when you are already sleep deprived.

David gives a further example of the hands-on approach. "This is the place you will see Francois Hebel, director of Les Recontres d'Arles on his knees helping Antoine D'Agata [a president of Magnum Photos] hanging his pictures on the walls". Graham adds, "Machiel Botman, Francois and Antoine all got blisters on their thumbs that time from pinning photos”.

Max says, "It is always fun once it is up, but if you are involved you do fret over it. Burning the candles at both ends, doing a daytime job as well, you wonder if it is going to work. In the early days the people who came were basically our friends and your friendship is on the line in as much as if it didn't work out you'd look pretty bad". David agrees. "It's a responsibility to your friends”.

All are unanimous that Bob Hewitt put in the hardest yards in those early days and still does. "Bob was working harder than anyone; doing all the technical stuff, the maths and meeting the expectations of sponsors. He had meeting after meeting in that constant



dollars we wouldn't have to raise a million dollars, we could generate enough income to substantially reduce the amount of dough that we needed to undertake the project". But the scheme was too grand and the idea "withered on the vine”.

Take Two

In 2001 there was new political interest in revitalising the west end of Fremantle – which was an area Bob describes as being "moribund" –and this gave the festi-

val a second look-in. This time Bob worked closely with Brad and Graham while David helped out with contacts and Max threw his hand in. Consequently, Foto Freo, the non-profit association, was formed.

Bob wanted a drawcard for the festival, to give it a focal point so Perth-born photographer, Philip Blenkinsop became the 'name' for the first festival. His exhibition was held in The Works, a cavernous venue.

David recalls, "Philip's prints were seriously big for that show and it was a performance watching





FEATURE

Photograph by Kevin Cooper from the exhibition *Old, Sad And Mad* at the 2012 Foto Freo festival. These images were taken at a home for the elderly in Kathmandu, Nepal.

struggle to get funding and having to always justify what you are doing," Max comments.

In 2004 they hit their stride. "That was a great success," Bob reveals. "We all felt pretty comfortable about it."

The pow-wows in Bob's Backyard continued and, in 2006, the Festival put forward its most ambitious program with exhibitions from photographers from Australia, South-East Asia and other countries, as well as a speaking program and the popular audiovisual projections.

As the number of events in the festival has risen so have the expenses. From its humble beginnings in 2002 with a budget of around \$35,000, in 2008 Foto Freo boasted a budget of half a million which was more than double the previous festival's, taking the largest leap in its history. In this capacity Bob has more than proved his



"While the professional arena redraws its boundaries in the digital age, festivals like Foto Freo may take on even greater importance in communicating photojournalism's place to, and in, the new world."



business skills, but he is no slouch in the creative marketing department either.

"I was conscious of the fact that you have to create points of difference [for the festival]. What we have done since 2008 onwards is commission projects and that's made a big difference to us. The Ed Burtynsky project [in 2008] cost about \$130,000 and I funded that without having to go begging to government agencies. In 2010 we commissioned David Dare Parker to do a project called *The Clubs*. This year we have two commissions – Martin Parr's *No Worries* and local photographer Bo Wong's *Fremantle Markets* project. In the next festival I hope to see at least one local, one national and one international."

Future Vision

Even though he's in the thick of the 2012 Festival, Bob is still able to talk about his future vision. He rattles off a number of new initiatives some of which are WA-centric which is a deliberate move, he explains, to gain more exposure in the state and encourage locals to attend.

This strategy is part of his thinking behind mounting, this year, the massive *Divergence: Photographs From Elsewhere* exhibition at Midlands which is a good hour's drive from Fremantle and where more than 60 photographers were on show in the old railway workshops. But Bob isn't content to attract a wider audience from his home state alone. He wants

Foto Freo to be on the radar of future photographers everywhere and that's what his new baby, FutureGen, is all about.

"I want the festival to engage with the younger cohort of photographers who, on the Eastern seaboard in particular, have probably never heard of Foto Freo. But they know about it now because we are using the educational system as our marketing machine and we are really very encouraged.

"There are 12 teaching institutions that are taking part in this around the country. FutureGen I regard as being really quite important and I am hoping it will become a signature event for Foto Freo."





FEATURE

RIGHT: Bangkok-based photojournalist Philip Blenkinsop photographed with his exhibition staged at The Works at the first Foto Freo festival in 2002.



BELOW: Graham Miller and Brad Rimmer prepare to hang an exhibition for the 2008 festival. Photo by Mindaugas Kavaliauskas.



Foto Freo and the Pingyao International Photography Festival have joined forces on FutureGen which is touted as showcasing “the best emerging photo-media talent from around Australia and China”. Two Melbourne photographers – Paul Batt from Monash University and Giles Crook from RMIT – won the top prize in the inaugural event which is a trip to Pingyao in September where their works will be exhibited along with those of the eight other finalists.

But with all the grand plans for future festivals, Foto Freo still lacks ongoing funding that would allow the engagement of a permanent festival director who could relive some of the burden from the shoulders of Bob, the Board and a host of volunteers that ensure the event doesn't falter.

Photography may be facing its defining hour. While the professional arena redraws its boundaries in the digital age, festivals like Foto Freo may take on even greater importance in communicating photojournalism's place to, and in, the new world.

- Alison Stieven-Taylor

Foto Freo 2012 – My Highlights

There were so many exhibitions and events to attend that, sadly, I couldn't get to everything, but of those I did make, there are a few stand-outs.

The open forum discussions with Magnum photographers Martin Parr and Raghu Rai talking about their work, and the panel discussion about the evolution of Indian photography with Australian National Gallery curator, Gael Newton, were fascinating. Having this calibre of seminar program further elevates the festival.

From an exhibition perspective, Raghu Rai's black and white portraits of India – titled *My India* – was my favourite. These intense images capture a culture at a depth that is only possible after years of immersion. Rai says he doesn't want to photograph other places. India is his home and for the past 45 years he has been documenting her... and is still fascinated by what he sees.

Another black and white exhibition worth mentioning is Australian photographer Kevin Cooper's series of portraits shot at Siddhi Shaligram Briddhashram – a home for the elderly – at

Pashupatinath, in Kathmandu, Nepal. Cooper's photographs capture the elderly residents of this ramshackle facility, housed in a dilapidated structure built in the mid-19th century, with honesty and compassion.

The 10x100 Project – an exhibition and a book – features works by Brad Rimmer, Max Pam, Louise Whelan, John Ogden, Lee Grant, Jack Picone, Tim Page, Heide Smith, Marian Drew and Narelle Autio. This project was shot exclusively on the Fujifilm FinePix X100 and the works are, as you would imagine with this group of photographers, an eclectic collection of images that do justice to the claims of the camera's capabilities.

And finally, *The Portrait: Contemporary Indian Photography*, a group exhibition of five Indian photographers – Dileep Prakash, Gauri Gill, Ketaki Sheth, Vidura Jang Bahadur and Bharat Sikka.

Held at the Fremantle Art Gallery, this was a definite highlight, although it is disappointing that sometimes digital photographs can be let down by the media on which they are printed.

