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## Conrad Shawcross: the Ada Project – review

Mofu festival, Hobart

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[theguardian.com](#), Saturday 18 January 2014 08.00 GMT

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Electric dreams ... Conrad Shawcross and Ken Farmer's Ada Project. Photograph: Remi Chauvan/Mona

Still under 40, [Conrad Shawcross](#) is an artist with a heavyweight reputation and his installation [the Ada Project](#) has pride of place at the Mofu festival – a large shed to itself in the main festival precinct. The

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centrepiece is a large robot; a tripod with a trunk and a long, sinuous arm, at the end of which is a probe with a light on the end. It has a twin, back at Shawcross's studio in Hackney, and a mother – a similar, much larger robot Shawcross built for a 2012 collaboration with the Royal Ballet called [Metamorphosis Titian](#).

For Mofo, however, Shawcross and curator Ken Farmer have commissioned four sets of musicians to compose pieces to be performed with the robot. They are inspired by two things; first the movements of the machine, and secondly the life of [Ada Lovelace](#), a Victorian mathematician (and daughter of Lord Byron) who Shawcross tells us developed a prototype computer called the Difference Engine. If it had ever been built, he says, the computer age would have begun 100 years earlier than it did. Lovelace's story ended tragically – she died after ovarian cancer was misdiagnosed by doctors who claimed that she had hysteria brought on by excessive education.

There's a lot for the musicians to chew on, then, and first up are composers [Beatrice Dillon](#) and [Rupert Clervaux](#), who station themselves with a drum kit and laptop between them and the robot – the audience sits in a ring around it. As the robot waves its finger around, casting some interesting shadows on the walls in the process, the pair create an ambient soundwash that becomes more aggressive, with some crashing harpsichord sounds, as the robot starts ominously jabbing its finger around. Finally, the piece ends in a furious drum solo as the robot makes large circles in the air.

One things that's worth pointing out – the light doesn't move quickly enough to create the kind of trails you see in pictures like the one above, which have been taken with a camera on a slow exposure. While the sight is impressive, it's not spectacular.

The second piece of music is by [San Francisco-based sound artist and composer Holly Hendon](#). She takes a still more ominous route, with a somewhat dubstep-inflected piece full of sinister, vocoder-treated voices and rattling percussion, while the robot feints, before grinding to a halt along with the music.

It works OK, but it doesn't feel as imaginative as the following two pieces. First is the Scottish DJ [Mylo \(of Drop the Pressure fame\)](#) and singer Tamara, who have written a song called Ada, Make a Bed For Your Phoenix. They take the long association between

challenged by a saxophone, and ends in a full-on rave

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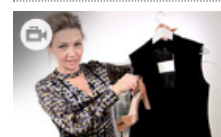
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robots and electronic pop from Kraftwerk onwards and run with it, with an anthemic, synth-laden song that nods to [Giorgio Moroder's work with Donna Summer](#). Tamara sings directly to the robot, arms spread wide. Afterwards, Tamara tells the audience that she believes there is a link between maths and disco, since both are about "losing yourself in ecstasy", and the performance is good enough almost to make you believe it.

There's ecstasy of a different kind in [the final work by Mira Calix](#), sung by soprano [Theresa Duddy](#). As the machine appears to be stroking its own leg, and later on investigating its nether regions, Duddy asks the machine whether it will fall in love with her – and indeed towards the end it does seem to be responding. The whole concept teeters on the brink of ludicrousness, but Duddy's performance and the poignancy of the music make it effective, and ultimately moving. Shawcross's installation is at its best when man and machine are in harmony.

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**Tom I H Rigby**

19 January 2014 6:18am

Nice review. Read it in MAC1 with a plastic cup of Moo Brew in the other hand. Your choice of words - "man and machine" - in the final sentence was unfortunate, considering the subject matter. Oh well - Mofo is a festival of innovation and genius rather than correctness. Mona is a gallery dedicated to the same at the cost of the same. A possible criticism: that this is all a hedonistic, apolitical, bourgeois wank-fest. But to hold with this critique would be a shame. What's happening in Mobart is a challenge to the gallery system that is the subject of so much of contemporary art, and a celebration of what is vital across (a part of) the spectrum contemporary, post-corporate music. Onya, Walshy!



**AlexNeedham** Tom I H Rigby

20 January 2014 5:00am

Cheers for an interesting response. Not sure what you mean by the "man and machine" thing though. And as for it being hedonistic and apolitical, that's an interesting point. Comparing it to other big arts festivals like Documenta, it definitely is, but as you say, the other elements outweigh that. I had a great time – hoping to go back for Dark Mofo.

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