

Soup Fight

No one was surprised to see Robert Ashley and Thomas Buckner stand up to perform at the Kitchen November 18. But it was a shock to see singers Sam Ashley and Jacqueline Humbert walk up behind them on a video screen, live from Santa Monica, the four standing calmly in a row as though they weren't 3000 miles apart.

As the other three crooned softly and echoed a phrase here and there, Ashley read "Empire," the gently funny anecdote about the invention of tomato soup from his opera *Atalanta*. In Ashley's rambling version, Heinz and Campbell battled for the right to sell tomato soup, which indigents originally made during the Depression by adding catsup and salt to boiling water, all free ingredients at most restaurants. As each gesture Ashley made flashed across the continent and back to reappear onscreen two seconds later, he ended: "Look out the window for a moment. Look at the world. This is where we live. This is it."

—K.G.

Cold Fusion

Corporeal Mergers

Context Studios
November 17

BY KYLE GANN

Every now and then, you think you see a page of history turn before your eyes, but you can't be sure until you read further. I enjoy fantasizing the present as history in process, and those moments thrill me when a new movement seems to take off and only I alone am escaped to tell thee. Let it go on record, then, that November 17 saw the birth of totalist-ambient fusion at Context Studios, in the first group improv performance by Mikel Rouse, David First, and Joshua Fried, part of First's Corporeal Merger series. It wasn't an easy delivery: the space, which has only recently started presenting music, is technically primitive, and loose moments abounded. The volume on First's guitar drones was pumped way up, masking his colleagues, the decibel assault finally driving me to finish the concert from the other side of a door. But hey, history ain't pretty up close.

Whatever the concert's failures, it suddenly made sense of recent para-

doxes in the Downtown scene. For example, the reemergence of ambient music following a quiescent period in the '80s. After all the energy Brian Eno put into it, ambient was worth pursuing, but while the Kitchen and Soho Arts Festival have had success with it, it's been difficult to hear how it fits in the new music scene. The new ambient satisfies our desire for incongruous texture and

style juxtapositions, at the same time moving toward a nonvirtuosic, even anonymous aesthetic, as the pendulum swings away from personality-oriented '80s free jazz. It also, though, seems infinitely open-ended, formless, generic in its prerecorded materials, and devoid of articulation. One performance hardly differs substantially from the next. How to incorporate that music into a scene so newly devoted to form, rhythmic complexity, and subtleties of ensemble performance as '90s new music?

In instant playback, the answer Rouse, Fried, and First gave is breathtakingly simple. Each has a strong structural imagination and certain shticks he pursues from work to work. Lo and behold, those shticks aren't mutually exclusive. First plays with the pulsing inharmonicity of guitar drones, Rouse works with repetitive text cycles and complex beat patterns, while Fried has his own vocabulary of pop music samples. Let First provide

the harmonic foundation, then, Rouse the rhythmic beds and text, and Fried the punctuation, interruptions, and orchestration. First's pitch-bending guitar was fairly continuous (too much so, in fact). Rouse came onstage intermittently to intone phrases: "Life in these United States" or "If you don't love me the way I am, then you can go." And Fried wandered around stage with effects boxes, manipulating the outbursts of samples he set off (some of them taken live from Rouse's voice).

If the results weren't as polished as Rouse's opera's, First's ensemble works, or Fried's electronic conceptual pieces, they were the right intensity for ambient listening—in fact, the music could have used a more casual situation, not this audience-versus-stage format. The experiment had more personality and built-in structure, though, than most ambient music does, and from the other side, it loosened up totalism's usual tight rhythmic organization, making it potentially possible for these (and other) composers to perform more often and in more varied situations. And it was enlightening to find that totalism and ambient music are not strange bedfellows but symbiotic partners. ♦



First and Rouse: the right intensity for ambient listening

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