

Downtown Threshold

By Kyle Gann
Off the Wall to Wall

Styles grow up. As musical techniques develop they change focus from picayune questions of note-to-note methodology to the big issues: form, structure, genre, large-scale expressiveness. In the process, music becomes listenable. Serialism made ear-sense once Stockhausen quit his row-nitpicking (in *Zeitmasze*) and generalized the row to a more formal level (*Mantra*). Minimalism shifted gears between Glass's note-counting *Music in Fifths* and his swinging *Akhnaton*. Only American 12-tone music never graduates from college; it's still stuck in a hermetic adolescence of stupid pitch tricks.

And now Downtown improvisation has crossed the threshold. Symphony Space's *Off the Wall to Wall* marathon (March 13) revealed an improv scene that had cast off its early fetishes. (That it occurred during the big blizzard made attendance all the more mandatory.) Curated with John Zorn's assistance, the fest was sort of a Bang on a Can for Zorn's friends, a familiar Downtown trip through his address book. But with refreshing updates: in the eight hours I heard (out of 11, plus an hour of films I skipped), not a single piece trotted out '80s clichés—the predictable crescendo form, the finger-wiggling virtuosity, the randomized pointillism. The composers wielded sections instead of notes, sustained images

rather than frenzied gestures, and epic collages instead of self-canceling intercuts.

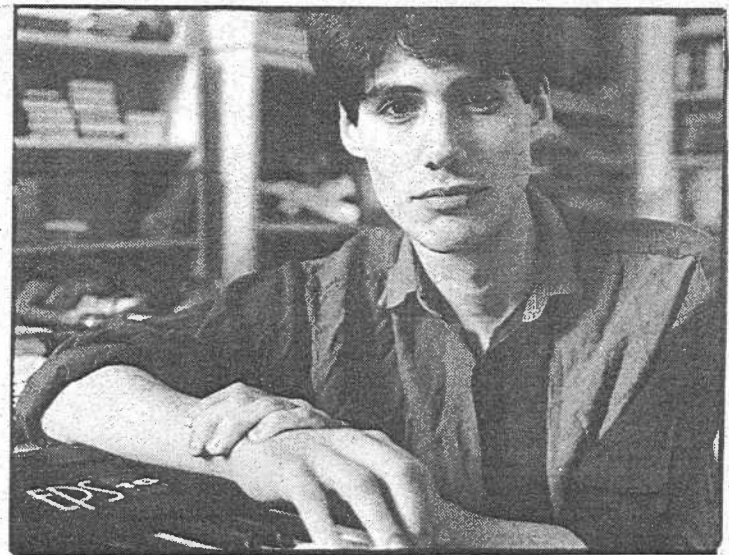
Of many examples, the most high-profile was David Shea's *The Prisoner*. Cutting and pasting his quintet's sound forms via hand motions, Shea drew percussion blasts from James Pugliese, echoed rumbling synth patterns against Zeena Parkins, and folded sampled spoken phrases ("Sleep" and "You're free to go!") into the texture with cinematographic disregard for boundaries. Like Stockhausen's works, the piece was built of moments. Elaborately varied, no two moments were the same length or weight, and they overlapped, sometimes by phasing elements out gradually. Though Shea may not have had a 12-tone row in mind, *The Prisoner* was a serial work nonetheless: the essence of serialism (in Europe, anyway) is the individual shaping of each event along a continuum of possibilities without allowing any perceived regularity or symmetry to ruin the illusion of perfect spontaneity. But unlike '80s group improv, Shea borrowed no serialist riffs. The piece was dark and Downtown, loosely played yet absorbingly subtle.

The same could be said for the unidentified taped music by Zorn behind Sally Silvers's six-person dance *Elegy* (primitively sexual yet elegant in its asymmetry), and also for pieces by a new band called Rough Assemblage, whose core consists of composers Mark Degliantoni, Norman Yamada, and Eric Qin. Degliantoni stacked

moment forms via nicely skewed, sampled quotations. *Ring 'Em*, his final piece, blended low, growling, ensemble noises with gutsy glissandos and drones, abruptly shifting energy levels, and breaking into a quasi-Slavic folk tune. The bass drum rolls and bangs of Yamada's *In Celebration of Year One*, beneath tinkling guitar and triangle, seemed to orchestrate the windstorm outside. Sometimes lacking unity or rhythmic focus, these pieces compensated by their strong, Varese-like timbral images.

One of the best collages came from David Weinstein's Impossible Music consort, who performed on portable CD players behind a table like a budget committee hovering over calculators. Accompanying news announcers and guitar licks, a string quartet cadenced in repetitious frustration, making a music poignantly stuck in time. (Playing only one of three pieces listed, Impossible left us yearning for more.) Dean Drummond's Newband ensemble, which performs on Harry Partch's 43-tones-to-the-octave instruments, was anomalous in its exquisitely rehearsed perfection (the link is their recent Zorn commission). But Drummond, too, had expanded his mini-gestural style to a lovely pitch of melodic expansiveness. His *Dance of the Seven Veils*, if hardly dancelike, was veiled in a halo of pure, attackless tones, a shimmering scherzo as immaterial as Berlioz's "Queen Mab."

Not everything was so new. Anthony Coleman, who'd never fall-



NARYUNG HAN

David Shea: a cinematographic disregard for boundaries

en for improv clichés in the first place, layered jaunty tunes in a counterpoint of ensembles in his *Light at End?* It was the Slavic-jazz version of Ives's *The Unanswered Question*, though cranked out with that old underrehearsed lethargy that can make even fascinating Downtown music difficult to defend above 14th Street. Quite the opposite, Ned Rothenberg is a beautiful, intense, elegant solo reed virtuoso with a too-small bag of compositional tricks—15 seconds into each work you think, "Oh yeah, he's going to do that again." The crowd cheered his improvs wildly, perhaps for his phenomenal circular breathing prowess or because his minimalist gradual processes are easy to follow.

Compare *Off the Wall to Wall* with the Knitting Factory's Tea & Comprovisation festival I reviewed six years ago (involving many of the same musicians), and

you will find it delightful how goals once haphazardly slapped at are now sliced into with surgical precision. It's true that the recent pieces relegated improvisation to a localized role, for to create structures this ornate requires detailed preperformance labor. But while not really improvised, they preserved and intensified the qualities '80s improv sought: discontinuity, nonconstructedness, urban atmosphere, lack of apparent causation, omnivorous quotation of a wide range of noises and musical materials. Gad, do we now have to call this postimprov, by parallel with those creepy tags postserial and postminimal? What do you call a style that has shed the superficial characteristics by which it was first identified, yet still bears the distinct marks of its origins? I don't know, but by leaving improvisation behind, Downtown improv has become more itself than it used to be. ■

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