

Control Freaks

One of the Soho Arts Festival highlights repeats October 27 and 28 at the Club at La MaMa. Joshua Fried's *Travelogue*, in which a singer has to replicate in real time a tape he or she's listening to over headphones and has never heard before, has become a Downtown classic, a frightening theater piece about control and loss of expertise. Now he's expanded the concept to six performers in *Voice Crossing*. At Exit Art, Rinde Eckert, Paula Cole, Elise Kermani, and others listened to headphones, either imitating what they heard or responding to commands. The result was often like watching a family quarrel in an unknown language, as the singers had to face each other, dance, scream, never knowing what would be required next. Fried's cleverness climaxed in the final segment, a canon in which each performer imitated the same tape with different results, frequently with several people babbling in unison.

—K.G.

Downtown on a Shtick

Soho Arts Festival
October 8

BY KYLE GANN

For days following the last Bang on a Can festival, everyone I talked to was trying to figure out how to start a new festival like BoaC, but that would focus on Downtown music. The obstacles seemed insurmountable. And suddenly, the Soho Arts Festival has dropped such an animal in our lap. For seven well-paced hours at Exit Art on October 8, David First's "Sensual Intelligence" series offered the work of up-and-coming composers, each given a generous 60 minutes to do whatever they liked (both conditions an improvement over BoaC). In addition, the record company CRI sponsored two more sets (unfortunately concurrent with the festival) at American Opera Projects, and the previous evening had offered a reprise of the "New York Guitars" program I recently reviewed here. That's 11 intense hours of sonic activity, with plans to expand next year. And with a name like Soho Arts, the organization seems unlikely to move to Lincoln Center and start championing Europeans.

As a musical in-betweener with roots in several camps, First makes a versatile entrepreneur. He presented totalists Mikel Rouse and Ben Neill premiering new work, freewheeling



Mouths that roar: Christina Wheeler and Nina Mankin of Wiremouth

electronic conceptualists like Frankie Mann and Joshua Fried, a women's duo called Wiremouth only recently arrived on the scene, and one artist, Terre Thaemlitz, from the ambient aesthetic that Downtown's been flirting with.

Whether ambient music will gel into a sufficiently well-defined genre for cross-hybridization remains to be heard, and as Thaemlitz noted, listening to it while sitting still is an iffy experiment. Yet I enjoyed Thaemlitz's deafeningly smooth textures enlivened by occasional shrill squeals, as inscrutable in their methods as any musique concrète. Neill went aggressively ambient in his latest CD, *Green Machine* (Astralwerks), but here he gave a preview of a new theater work, with slide projections and dancer Lisa Wheeler, based on Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow Up*.

The artists I hadn't heard before were Wiremouth's Christina Wheeler and Nina Mankin. Their shtick involves vocal loops, electronic effects, and interruptive noises in a basically pop idiom, something like San Francisco's Pamela Z with an added element of mock sisterly rivalry. Hip and slick, they risked being too coy for this avant-garde audience in moments of pretended petulance. But they can

both sing like demons, and funny pieces like Wheeler's litany of repulsive pick-up lines should find them a wide following. Their messages were as obvious as Mann's were ambiguous. She sang her pointed lyrics over utterly flat, Eno-ish accompaniments on cheesy organs and drum machines, in a vulnerable, untrained voice. While it's clear she's angry at the home-for-the-holidays family conflicts she sings about, she comes across as the hurt little girl who blames the whole mess on herself.

Rouse's new *Dennis Cleveland* promises to be the first opera staged in talk-show format, with Rouse in the title role interviewing singers in the audience. For now, he gave us a 40-minute excerpt as a kind of Buddhist Mr. Cool in sunglasses, drawing cosmic meaning from incidents in his actual love life (in one story, the parents of a virgin offer their bed for him to deflower their daughter in, and he can't go through with it). The piece is more steady-state, less articulated, than his *Failing Kansas*, but as rhythmically exciting, and the words would have been clearer if Exit Art weren't so acoustically bouncy. All we need to make this festival a great yearly event is sound baffles. ♦

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