

# It's a Jungle

By Kyle Gann

Ben Neill  
Common Sense

Ben Neill's *Green Machine* raises his art to a new plateau, of showmanship if not technique. Technique comes first, as it ought to, but the showmanship made his ideas clearer than they had ever been before to the capacity crowd stuffed into Paula Cooper Gallery the night I attended, June 23. Surrounded by a semicircle of digital boxes rimmed by a forest of potted vines, Neill blew into, and tapped buttons on, his three-belled Mutantrumpet, which was wired into two computers. Even after he explained the equipment to me the next day, I couldn't tell you where all the noise came from: crickets, thunderclaps, drums beating slow but relentless patterns, bass tones rising in fifths and fourths, bell-like swirls tinkling through the upper reaches of the harmonic series. Behind him were Chrysanne Stathacos's projected images of hair or fiber, reverse-superimposed on themselves to create symmetrical patterns as botanically luxuriant as the music. And every few minutes, a virtuoso trumpet riff betrayed a human presence in this jungle of sound.

Every artist needs to reach, I suppose, a point at which his or her fundamental archetype stands revealed. For Neill the archetype is a primeval jungle, an overwhelming complexity evolved through natural means: natural

rhythms, natural tunings, natural timbres. Similar archetypes appear in the early electronic continuums of Pauline Oliveros and perhaps Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, while Neill's every trumpet blast brought Jon Hassell's ambient, African-influenced jazz to mind. Program notes, however, revealed that all of Neill's rhythm, visual and audio tempos, and fundamental bass tones were related to the numbers 6, 7, 8, and 9, like the themes in La Monte Young's *Well-Tuned Piano*, or the lines in a Nancarrow player-piano canon. Implicit in *Green Machine* was the Renaissance fantasy that even the jungle manifests a hidden numerical order.

*Green Machine* also served, when Neill wasn't playing, as an interactive sound installation with foot pedals for listeners to operate. One pedal drew subtle variations in the sound mix, the other changed the speed with which the blue, red, green, and yellow slide projections changed, from a few seconds on each slide to a rapid flicker. (Like most hip composers today, Neill developed his custom-made gizmos at the Steim electronic studio in Amsterdam.) Colors, tempos, and harmonies were interwoven, but as in most totalist music, you didn't pick up any structural premises by listening. Like the minimalists, totalists limit their materials to a small, clear group. Totalists, though, aren't interested in revealed structure, but in hiding their tricks to create what Mozart called "artless art."

Moments after Neill finished, a new ensemble named Common Sense gave its New York debut at Roulette. Whether the name of the group, which included 10 instrumentalists expertly conducted by Jeannine Wagar, came off as pompous or refreshing depended on the music, which tended toward the latter. Seven of the eight new works by eight composers, most of them from Yale, were postminimal in style, but in a way that continually harked back to the hallowed tradition of New England neoclassicism. Even today, young Yankee composers don't stray far from the aesthetic of Walter Piston and Harold Shapero, although the current generation avoids portentous counterpoint in favor of a lean, Stravinskian homophony. Interestingly, the works by the three women on the program were the most engaging, because each of them chose an idea and followed it through to the end. With the exception of Randall Woolf the men tended to show off, darting from one compositional trick to another. Call it coincidence.

The most entertaining essay was Belinda Reynolds's *Over and Out*, which diffracted a dancelike pattern in 6/8 through a continual variety of meters and tempos with a convincing sense of direction. The romantic melodies over drones and slow piano trills of Carolyn Yarnell's *Sage* ebbed and swelled with subdued anger, like Alan Hovhaness's music but more passionate. Other works by John Halle, Marc Mellits, and Dan Becker generally deployed the postminimal strategy of repeated figures unpredictably varied through asymmetrical rhythms, often calling Philip Glass and Stravinsky to mind at once. Woolf's



Horn of plenty: Ben Neill playing his Mutantrumpet

GRETA NICHOLAS/COURTESY BEN NEILL

*My Insect Bride* was a calculated concert-closer, running a cartoonish theme over a humorously repetitious four-beat ostinato, and with a silly coda involving the sudden wail of a theremin.

The one piece different from all the others was *Le Chant du Soleil—Solstice* by Melissa Hui, a work perfectly at home Downtown. In it, Sara Laimon played a few slowly repeated intervals on piano, Danny Tunick struck three ringing metal bowls meditatively, while Patti Monson and Libby Van Cleve occasionally added grace-noted lines on flute and oboe. Still and introverted in an otherwise rambunctious evening, it was the concert's most disciplined work, the only one whose composer felt every note. Contrariwise, the composer most out of his element was Ed Harsh, whose *accommodating common-places* aimed, he said, at flouting

the stricture against mixing high and low musics in one piece. I listened long and hard, however, for any reference to a vernacular, and all I found was a three-note repeated lick that could have come from a Scott Joplin rag.

That's the second time in a month (Dogs of Desire being first) someone's come to New York to show us how to mix classical music with rock. Thanks, but no thanks. Manhattanites beat that idea to death all through the '80s and found, (1) you don't "dabble" in the vernacular, because to do it well takes as much experience as writing a violin concerto; (2) you don't "mix" classical and rock as an academic exercise, only if what's in your soul comes out ineluctably in-between. What we could use more of, though, is Common Sense's infectious, eager energy and expert writing. May they return soon. ■

TOWER RECORDS/VIDEO

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE