

Pop! Goes the Music

By Kyle Gann

Judy Dunaway/
John Kennedy
Don Malone and
Elise Kermani

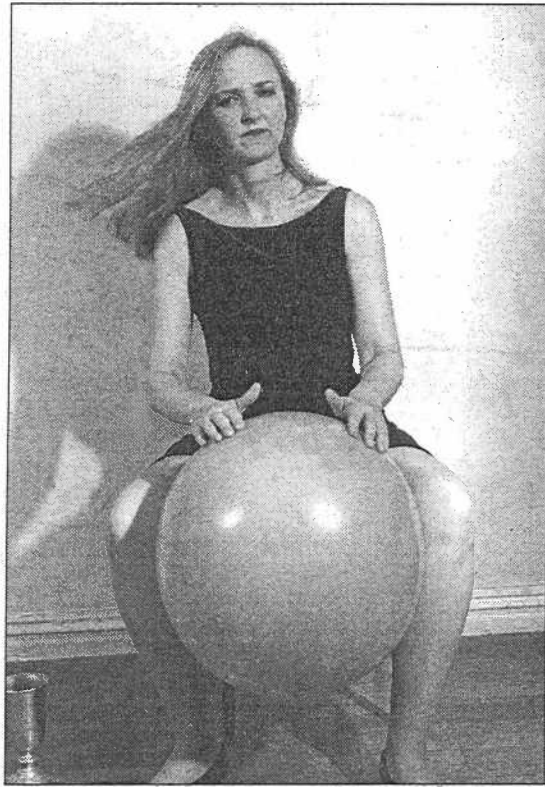
Judy Dunaway performs with balloons. She's not naked when she does it, and it isn't in Times Square, either; I heard her at sweltering, 80-degree-plus Here theater in Soho on July 13. She's good. She stretches the, uh, mouthpiece, I guess, of an inflated balloon to let it squeal, and shapes her mouth as a resonator, somewhat the way Inuit throat singers play off of each other's vocal cavities. The result is a primitive but highly nuanced wail, distant and lonely. Other times, holding a contact-miked balloon between her thighs, she rubs her fingers on each side in patterns that simulate complex, glissanding counterpoint. Close your eyes, as I did for a while, and the amplified, reverbed results sound remarkably like French *musique concrète* from the '60s. In a scene where success often hinges on finding your niche, she's discovered one out a long drive from the main highway.

But—pardon me a minute, I'm from Dallas—isn't there something inherently funny about squeaking balloons? If so, why did everybody in the audience look so serious? Is it because we're so enlightened by Cagean aesthetics that we listen to all sounds with neutral, Zen-like attention,

ignoring the source? Or is it that we sort of voluntarily delude ourselves, the way academic electronic composers tacitly agreed for 20 years to ignore the fact that early synthesizer noises often sounded like farting? Even more troubling, is there a real distinction there? Most of us grow up sharing in the collective, naive approach to music, and those of us who become new music fans and artists vastly expand our consciousness of what can be expressively meaningful. But if your consciousness moves *away* from the naive perspective, so that it no longer includes it—that's a definition of elitism. You can hear more in the music than your Aunt Beulah from Des Moines can, and that's good, but you no longer register aspects that are obvious to her.

I get this feeling at lots of concerts. Cage also pointed out that all music is theater, and the theatrical aspect of performances frequently subverts what the musi-

cian meant to express. I'll be glad to hear Dunaway again, but I wish there had been a little more acknowledgment, on the part of audience and performer, that we were kind of playing a joke on the avant-garde, showing that the sound structures of complex electronic music can literally be reduced to child's play. Either that, or an explicit nod to the sensuousness of holding a big balloon between your legs and caress-



ERIC T. MICHELSON

Blow up: balloon virtuoso Judy Dunaway

ing it passionately. Why should Times Square have the edge over Soho?

Following Dunaway, John Kennedy continued the theme with his *Animals in Distress* for four players blowing on animal calls, though the evocations of geese, raccoons, and other aggressively nonurban phenomena were carefully spaced to call attention to structure. His best work was *Sounds Heard*, a philosophic text piece hinting at, rather than outlining, his musical aesthetic. Over a low, restfully shimmering drone-chord, Kennedy and Rozella Floranz echoed, repeated, and overlapped phrases that you couldn't always make out: "We are all performing," they began. "At this moment you are within a work to be heard in time. . . ." And later, "Music is a strategy running parallel to religion." Meanwhile, quiet rhythmic motives echoed almost subliminally among three percussionists (Charles Wood, Michael Pugliese, Mark Suter), switching by turns from wood to metal to sandpaper. We've got lots of philosophic music, but I had never heard a piece in which the textual manifesto so blurred into the sonic analogy, making the piece abstract, metaphoric, and self-referential all at once. And pretty, too.

I thought Here was hot, but on Leonard Street the Knitting Factory has figured out how to recreate its old, pre-air conditioning days on Houston Street, when the place would fill up with steamy 22-year-old bodies. They've got AC now, true, but when they book a popular group like Trousers in the puny little Alterknit Room, the place swells with sweaty 35-year-olds whose density can raise

every molecule in the space to precisely 98.6 degrees. (At least the 22-year-olds were more fun to watch.) Such conditions prevailed on July 15, hottest day of the summer, when Don Malone, joined by vocalist Elise Kermani of Trousers, offered his first New York gig in several years.

A major player in Chicago's "Downtown" improv scene (though Downtown is uptown from the U. of Chicago there), Malone has graduated over the years from low-tech components to computers. As I entered the oven, he was plinking out "The Star-Spangled Banner" on a small keyboard. The computer started screwing around first the timbre, then the key of the tune, finally fuzzing it into textures in which it was no longer recognizable. (Igor Stravinsky was once almost arrested in Boston for similarly "tampering with public property," but here no police showed up.) In most computer improv the relation of input to output seems pretty random, but Malone so closely defines his parameters that his prickly textures undergo clear, memorable transformations. That made them the perfect, busy but low-key background for Kermani's dramatic flourishes: kissing sounds, fractured narrative, and ecstatic gibberish, echoed and layered with effects boxes into surreal psychological voyages.

Trousers played afterward, with a diffuse energy dotted by brilliant moments, but at this temperature and humidity I don't think I would have stayed to hear my own mother. (No offense, Mom.) The Knitting Factory could stand to realize that some new music draws big enough crowds to justify the main stage. ■

"Bachelor Pad Music"

ENOUGH LIGHT

Up From the Underground