



(Photo by Miguel Arzoo)

Brian Eno
Composer and MCA faculty member

Criticism is 'wishful narcissism'

NEW YORK — When eight Music Critics Association fellows weren't scrambling to make a nightly concert, we were scrambling to make morning and afternoon panel discussions at four locations in or near SoHo.

The panel sessions were held at The Kitchen, the Experimental Intermedia Foundation (better known as Phill Niblock's loft), the Collective for Living Cinema and Loeb Student Center of New York University. They were chaired by Music Critics Institute faculty John Rockwell, Robert Palmer, Tom Johnson, Michael Nyman and Brian Eno.

MOST OF THE PANELISTS participated in "New Music, New York," the festival of contemporary music held at The Kitchen. They were chosen according to panel topic and included Philip Glass, Robert Fripp (formerly of King Crimson), Leroy Jenkins (formerly of the Revolutionary Ensemble), Chris Stein (Blondie), Robert Ashley, George Lewis, Wendy Perron, Charles Dodge, Laurie Spiegel, David Behrman, Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk and others.

The panels, designed primarily for invited journalists and interested auditors, were also open to the public, space permitting. One might have expected the results of that policy. When Eno, Fripp or Stein appeared to talk about mystique, ego and fame in new music or the relationship of rock and experimental music, the masses descended to see and hear their heroes (or enemies, as the case may be).

SOME OF THE EARLY SESSIONS were charged with a fair bit of audience antagonism, if not outright hostility. There were lots of accusations, some arguments and the



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standard "Why haven't you reviewed my album?" outburst whenever the topic had to do with rock music.

Gradually, personal interests and grudges were put aside, and the panels grew more and more interesting.

Palmer's panel on "Improvisation in Experimental Music" brought Ashley, Lewis, and Ms. Perron together for an interesting session. Ms. Perron found improvisation and composition to be essentially the same beast, except that improvisation "does not have the same time for reflection." Ashley saw improvisation as a matter of "preparedness," adding that he found it "hard to tell" when composition turns to improvisation.

PALMER'S TALK ON "Jazz and Experimental Music" was nicely supplemented by musical examples. The ensuing discussion was spiced by critic-playwright Stanley Crouch's impromptu (and somewhat surprising) discussion of cultural nationalism in the arts.

"Criticism and New Music," chaired by Rockwell, was not the stormy session many thought it would be. The New York Times critic suggested that writing criticism is "a kind of wishful narcissism that reflects a shared interest in art and the creative process."

"It is an act like composing," he said.

ENO'S DISCUSSION OF "The Recording Studio as Compositional Tool" was as fascinating for its candor as its information. Obviously bright, Eno is also quite sincere about his work. And he is not one to mince words about issues, experimental music included.

"Experimental music moves me on all levels all the way down to my neck," he said.

The final panel brought together the MCA fellows and Rockwell to discuss the relationship between New York and "the rest of the country" in experimental music. Rockwell showed all the markings of a good moderator by suggesting arguments on both sides of a given question and by playing occasional devil's advocate (a role he much enjoys) with both audience and panelists.

THEN, SUDDENLY, THE INSTITUTE was over — before, it seemed, many of the ideas and new information to come from the concerts and panels had been digested. That responsibility is still with eight fellows who came to New York.

Two final thoughts. By schedule alone, it was a grueling institute. But one expects as much from the experimental music scene in New York.

There might have more attention paid to the topic and methods of criticism — through workshops and discussion — during the institute. Rockwell, for good reason, saturated us with new music and talk about new music. Most of us had not heard much of it live before, and most of us won't again for some time. Still, workshops in criticism specifically directed to the issues of new music would have been valuable. Maybe next year.



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This is the second report from Keith Roether, arts writer for The Tribune, who is one of eight music critics from around the country participating in the annual Music Critics' Institute of Experimental Music in New York.

NEW YORK — "New Music New York," the festival of experimental music, has ended, but not before a remarkable 53 composers presented their works in nine days of concerts at The Kitchen in SoHo.

One may justifiably carp about presenting so much music in so short a time. Much new music depends on duration, which the abbreviated concert format (generally 15 minutes per composer) impeded. Elsewhere, musicians were reduced to solo formats which happen not to be their strong suit.

Nonetheless, the energy and near-faultless organization of The Kitchen's staff in producing this prodigious body of music (not to mention the related panel discussions and workshops extending beyond the concert program) is surely to be commended.

MY MAIN objection — voiced early on in the course of the Music Critics Institute on experimental music — was that new music from the jazz tradition was poorly represented. Robert Palmer, one of the MCI faculty, had tried to arrange for more new music-jazz composers to be on The Kitchen program, but found (happily) most of them working the summer European festival circuit.

What "New Music New York" offered, then, was a broad palette of experimental music vis-a-vis the western European classical tradition.

Electronic music had its representatives, as did no-wave rock. Third World music, by and large, did not.

TO TALK about all 53 composers would be a ponderous and inappropriate task. Still, personal highlights of the festival deserve mention.

George Lewis' trombone solo over a programmed synthesizer showed just how composition and improvisation can combine in a way that hides the seams of that process. His program captured what many others did not — that delicate balance between structure and spontaneity, intellection and emotion.

Laurie Spiegel's taped synthesizer composition and Phill Niblock's combination of tape with live bassoon and oboe were extraordinary explorations into sound as texture and mass. Both filled The Kitchen with an almost visible presence and weight.

PETR KOTIK and Charles Dodge found the essence of Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett's texts, respectively, through very different but equally exciting ways.

David Behrman's electronic piece "Touch Tones," might well serve as a model for the proper musical use of the medium. And Michael Nyman's five-section "Opus Tree," though overly derivative, had its inspiring moments.

Too many performances were flawed by self-conscious theatrical realizations of the works. For

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all of its slick visual magic, David van Tiegham's solo percussion piece sacrificed musical content and continuity. (David Moss would have been a better choice to represent the genre.)

I MISSED Laurie Anderson's closing night presentation, which received nearly unanimous raves. Instead (by lobbying and consent), I attended Julius Hemphill's concert at the Public Theater with Robert Palmer.

Personal biases acknowledged, it was the highlight of nine days of new music. On reflection, it seems seemed also unfortunate that ensemble music like Hemphill's could not be represented at The Kitchen festival.

Clearly it is new; clearly it is found in New York more than anywhere else in the world; and clearly it reflects the strongest musical tradition this country has to offer.

From many things said and not said during concerts and panels, the glaring tendency among many critics and audiences is still to see this music as "all that jazz" — something distinctly separate from new music.

The matter, it seems to me, is not a conceptual one, as MCI chairman John Rockwell suggested. It is a perceptual one, born largely of traditional biases and simple oversight.

IN ADDITION to The Kitchen's program, the MCI fellows took in the Mudd Club and CBGB's to sample no-wave and new-wave rock. The Mudd Club presented Robin Crutchfield, Alan Suicide and DNA; CBGB's had John Cale, founder in the 60s of the seminal Velvet Underground. We wore ear-plugs and listened to our stomachs vibrate.

Next week: a report on MCI panels and general notes on the experimental music session.