

Hard Hit

Seven not-so-silent partners create a ruckus by Deborah Jowitt September 29th, 2006

Say you're a choreographer- dancer-musician and decide to seek out similarly talented colleagues, who've been gigging with small bands that have fierce names. You form a group and start scheduling meetings (not too far in advance, attendance voluntary). At these get-togethers, ideas develop and a collective identity emerges. Before you know it, one of The Kitchen's curators, Sarah Michelson, arranges a season for you there. That, more or less, is Caitlin Cook's story.

Cut to the opening-night performance of *SKINT*. Closeup on the audience. What do we see and hear while waiting for the show to start? A projected videodance by Calder Martin, with mostly blue and green rectangles revolving, merging, and morphing into new shapes. Two guitars, a drum set, amps and other equipment, electric wires, boxes, an orange-pink lounge chair, and a coffee can. Yoko Ono's sweet little taped voice sings "Dogtown" and other numbers over our chit-chat.

The performers frisk into view, most of them wearing white undershirts over funkier gear. (Question for Paige Martin: Is that a nurse's uniform? Probably not.) Cook and Elizabeth Hart hoist guitars. Busy (her first name, not an adjective) Gangnes settles herself at the drums. Emily Powers crouches beside a microphone draped in a white cloth. Jessie Gold and Clare Amory get set to jive around. Martin hides behind a box. Let the feedback begin!

It's evident that planning and coordination were involved. C. Martin's handsome videos develop serenely. Vincent Vigilante's lighting superimposes the performers' shadows on the patterns at opportune times. Andrya Ambro's sound design and performer-operated looping devices take over whenever the wild women briefly abandon their mics and instruments. Rules and structures guide what's mostly improvised, but only a few of these are evident. People spell one another on drums. Waters walks around shaking the loaded coffee can like a maracca, and later, others echo her by holding both hands over their heads in the same way, minus the can. Gangnes and Amory, who've been bending forward over the drums and slopping their sticks over the instruments, suddenly straighten up and launch into a simple rhythm in impeccable unison. Such moments stand out amid the melee.

There are two basic forms of improvisation in performance: the patient and the impatient. An exemplar of the former was the Grand Union back in the '70s. If a member introduced an idea, the others would support and contribute to it until they either drove it into the ground or developed it into a marvel. Impatient improvisers seem constantly worried that an activity is becoming boring, and try to undercut or subvert it. They pounce on a new idea the way a kid in a sandbox pounces on another kid's toy; they lose interest quickly. I'm pleased when Amory falls backward onto the padded chair over and over, spreading her legs in the air; I wish she'd do it about twenty times more. What becomes of the trumpet that Martin blows briefly at a colleague? Only once do the women coalesce from a visual point of view (snuggling up on the floor). That action also lasts but a few seconds. Anyone can grab a guitar and play. Someone's always dancing fitfully, with Martin and Gold the most consistent and decisive. If consensus is present, it's well hidden. We spectators must be content with playful scraps—some clever, some witty, some dopey.

The sound texture, like the visual picture, is dense, but more ferocious. When Powers, who does quite a lot of the interesting vocal stuff, starts whacking a drum slowly with one stick, I think of a guillotine blade descending. Gazing down at a seriously dented tom, I realize that, as the mother of a drummer, I've never empathized with a drum until now. In this rampaging clubland, the most tuneful moment comes when Martin runs beside the metal fence that surrounds the audience, rippling a drumstick along its vertical tubes.

After 45 minutes or so, Cook squats to loop a barely audible "thank you" and then stands to repeats the words louder and to us. The women grin and straggle out without taking a formal bow. The applause is solid but not prolonged. I detect bemused, "what was that about?" clouds forming above quite a few departing spectators' heads.



SKINT

photo: Bryan Leitgeb

Caitlin Cook

The Kitchen

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