

Folk Music For The Nineties

Here's the star." Gen Ken Montgomery aims a flashlight at a kitchen countertop electric icebreaker at the end of his 25 minute cassette concert, Ice Breaker. My ears and brain ring with the sounds of crunching ice as he tells the story of buying it for a \$1.50 in a Cleveland thrift shop. The show consisted of eight speakers, a chair and a listener, everything else was done behind walls and in the dark.

This sort of experience is typical fare for visitors to the sound art gallery, Generator, located on the third floor at 547 West 20th Street. It's also a pretty typical experience for the city which is supposed to have everything. Generator's uniqueness in a supposedly rich arts community is startling to a first time visitor. Although accidental visits are seldom (just a few steps from the West Side Highway, it's not exactly a heavy pedestrian traffic area), intentional visitors usually don't experience what they might have expected.

Montgomery started Generator some years ago, opening out of an Alphabet City storefront. Previously, his interests in sound and experimental music had led to international correspondences with other artists and composers as well as working on a collective record

label. Several trips to Europe had brought him in touch with art galleries that featured sound artists and their installations. "I saw all these kinds of places and every time I came back to New York I got very frustrated because it seemed like there was nothing like that here." This frustration almost drove him out of the city but instead he decided to open his own space to present the tapes and records he had received from his international cohorts. "The original idea was not to have a store but to open my door to the street and find out if anyone would wander by and become interested."

Eventually, as interest heightened, he started having performances in the tiny shop as well as adapting the even smaller basement area into a sound installation space. An artist would create something for the Basement Generator and Montgomery would direct visitors downstairs to experience the exhibit.

"What happened was I had created my own scene of what I wanted to be interested in." Whether people knew or felt anything about sound art before they found Generator, they easily became interested. Besides being a store and exhibition space, the important thing was that Generator grew into a meeting place for artists in the area as well as for people interested in sound.

Community plays a strong role in the new West Side Generator, too. No longer a store (although Gen Ken does have a record of the month club), it is now much more of an artist's space, focusing on installations and performances. "When I started thinking about the artists that I knew working with sound, and some of them had given shows in Europe and other places, and there was no real place for

them in New York, I thought it would be exciting to invite these people to come and do it here." The purpose of the new Generator is to present artists who work with sound in as ideal an environment as possible as well as being a place where people can learn about sound art and experimental music.

Like Art, it's not easy to clearly define sound art. Montgomery offers that "It's art that utilizes sound as a strong, primal element." But so does music. "Sound art is not usually musical in the sense that it's not like a music composition with a beginning and an end. It can have structure, but it tends to be something people don't think of as music. It's sound."

Alternately, it is easy to distinguish between a sound artist and a composer. Sound artists generally work expressively, as visual artists might, and not as structurally creative as a composer. "They take stimuli from their environment and they reprocess it and put it into a creative form. We're



constantly bombarded by sounds and working with sound just seems as natural as working with visuals in a painting."

Sound art seems to have its philosophical roots in the writings of John Cage as well as his predecessor, Futurist Luigi Russolo in the Art of Noise manifesto. Although their methods of discourse were quite different, they both professed the idea that non-musical sounds, whether they came from machines or the wind, could be perceived as music or appreciated aesthetically.

But Montgomery prefers a less abstract description: Folk music for the Nineties. "I felt that folk music was just average people making music. It's personalized, it's about what they're going through and the obvious folk instruments are radios, synthesizers, tape recorders and noise generators. They make tapes for themselves and their friends and, since it is the information age, mail them out."

Sound installations have become the tried and true method for creating non-musical sounds with the intention of being listened to, although not just listened to. "Sound installation is very much an experience you have. When things happen after they're gone, it's really hard to let people know about them. Photographs do nothing, and sound recordings don't really do it either. Not even video can compare to being in this [installation space]."

Some past shows at Generator have been:

"Headspace" by Laura Kikauka - Large containers hang from the ceiling and become activated with sounds, lights and smells when a head enters the space.

"Dolci Mura" by Ron Kuivila - High voltage electricity runs through wires and motors causing spinning antennas to

scratch emery pads and sparks to fly in the dark.

"Man's Angles" by Ken Butler - Homemade instruments and other kinetic artworks, each connected to a single key on a central keyboard which the viewer would play to activate each separate piece.

And, of course, Montgomery's own show which was completely non-visual with different sounds coming from eight sides.

The next exhibit will be by sheet metal speaker builder Chop Shop. At the Basement Generator he had an installation that shook the walls, floor, and ceiling, and the person in it. It's starting April 10. And when you go, get your name and address on the mailing list because performances happen suddenly and Gen Ken doesn't advertise or publicize.

Generator is regularly open from 12 to 6 on Saturdays and 2 to 6 on Sundays, or by appointment. Call 741-0267.

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