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MUSIC

Truth & Consequences

Words and music collide at Non Sequitur '03.

Non Sequitur Summer Festival, Wed.-Fri., Aug. 20-22 at the Bowery Poetry Club. 308 Bowery (1st St.), 212-663-1967.

Poetry exists on the page. Or so I believed until the day that I heard Allen Ginsberg read, shortly before his death. With Ginsberg accompanying himself on harmonium and a sign language interpreter furiously trying to keep up with his racier imagery, all of my senses collided and the words were resurrected. Then I understood the poetry slam phenomenon and that poetry could be transformed into a hybrid of high art and Olympic competition. Ginsberg rewired the focus to place more emphasis on rhythm, timbre and energy. In other words, the musical qualities of the poem.

Enter Jed Distler, poet/composer and artistic director of Composers Collaborative Inc., who created Non Sequitur in 1998, an annual summer event that brings the kindred spirits of poetry, music and theater together to create a series of entirely new works. This year, Distler joins forces with Nuyorican Poets Cafe regular Edwin Torres to curate a production featuring works by three poet-composer pairs and a program of new music played by Nurse Kaya String Quartet (which is actually a sextet).

Presented with the theme "truth or consequences," each team was challenged to respond. Not surprisingly, the results were fiercely independent. Poet Carol Mirakove's intuitive response to the theme involved New Order, and she turned to the web for her fire, typing "truth or consequences" followed by New Order album and song titles into web servers and using the results as source material. The final texts offer non-narrative abstractions that float atop Distler's solid, simple underpinning of open intervals and pure harmonies that crumble into dissonances. The music builds to a dramatic intensity by the final movement (what Distler calls his "rock out piece"), abandoning the mystical for agitated, violent rhythms to which Mirakove has somewhat ironically matched with a text in Esperanto, a utopian language. The strangeness of the language redirects the listeners from trying to find meaning in the words to simply experiencing the sounds of the syllables.

Musically similar, the collaboration between poet Emanuel Xavier and composer Kala Pierson is meatier and more direct in its political intent. One piece, *God in These Ghettos*, is both a political commentary on America and a personal tale of sexuality and self-love. It is clear through Xavier's dexterity and theatricality that he is no stranger to poetry slams, but he does admit that this is the first time he has ever collaborated with a composer on an original piece. For her part, Pierson's main intent seems to be a celebration of his voice and words, both through acoustic parts that mimic his vocal patterns and electronic interludes that slice up and reassemble a recording of his voice to distill its timbral characteristics and emphasize certain important points.

In the third work, Akemi Naito makes electronics the central tenet of her music for *The Liminal Skin*, created with Torres. In four sections, representing each of the cardinal directions, the work incorporates prerecorded electronics, heavy delay and improvisation. Perhaps the most striking moment is when Torres chants a series of alliterated words that emulate the hiss of the electronics that surround it. While the different sections of the work are clearly demarcated by vast stylistic differences, Naito's hollow electronic sounds suspend the work in an ominous soundscape.

With director Arnold Barkus and lighting designer David Lovett adding their talents and the Bowery Poetry Club hosting, the event promises to bring several worlds into the same intimate space.

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