

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT / MUSIC AND ART

Wood Street installations: Using music as context

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MUSIC COMMENTARY

In the arts, context is as important as creativity itself. If you don't agree,

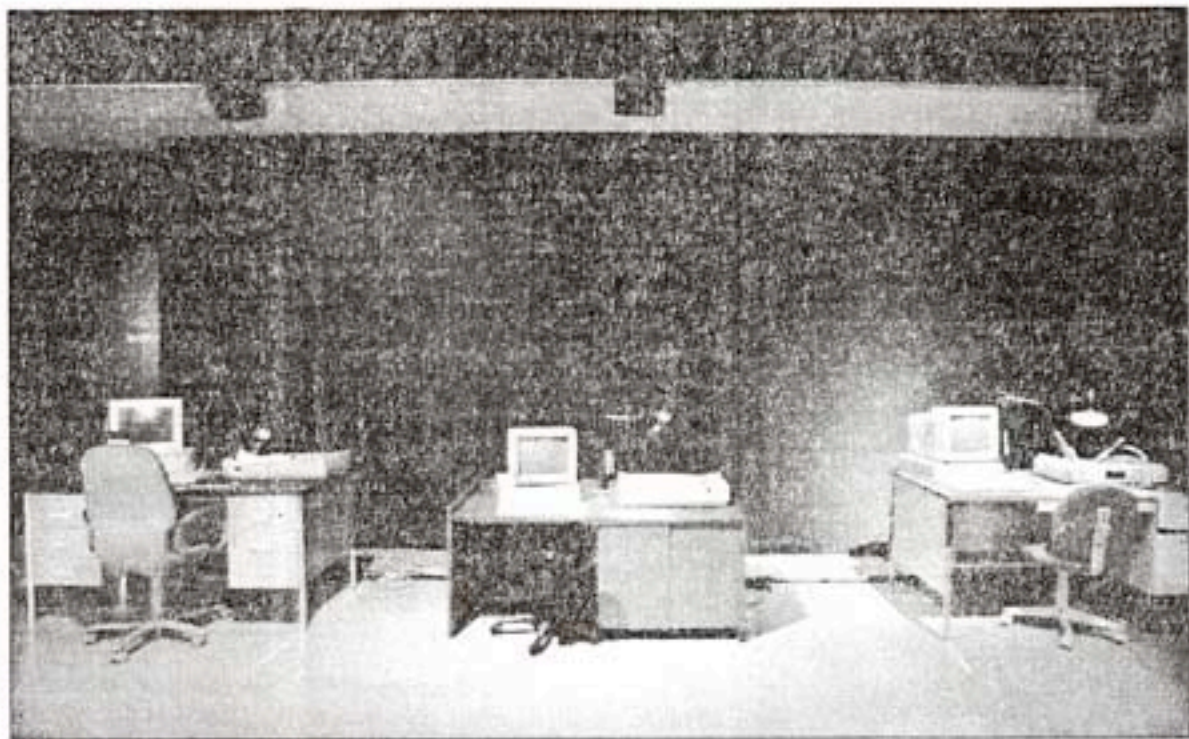
sing a perfectly harmless song such as "Don't Worry, Be Happy" at a funeral and see how it sounds. Labels or no labels, our perception of things varies radically by their placement.

Installation artists have often suffered from skewed public and critical perception. Viewers have been confused because the artists' so-called boundary-crossing works are hard to categorize. Those that combine sound with sculpture raise the particular question, are they music compositions or are they art?

As "Orchestral Maneuvers," the current Wood Street Galleries exhibition of installations incorporating music illustrates, they can be inherently both. But context breaks the tie. If it's in an exhibition space, it's art.

And beside that point, art shouldn't be so limited in what it can contain, anyway. The true revolution of installation art is not that it moves into other genres, but that it realizes art can be more than visual. These types of installations should not even be considered boundary crossing — sound is a legitimate element of the contemporary palette.

Take "Symphony for Dot Matrix Printers: the Office Suite," the first of the Wood Street exhibitions. This fascinating installation transforms an office into a robotic ensemble that regales visitors with amplified and digitally enhanced music played by 12 printers. Mini-video cameras project the printers' movements on a central screen. Created by Thomas McIntosh and Emmanuel Madan — known collectively as [The User] — the piece seeks to examine "contemporary atti-



Annie O'Neill/Post-Gazette

Thomas McIntosh and Emmanuel Madan's "Symphony for Dot Matrix Printers: The Office Suite"

tudes towards technology."

That it does. I used to agonize over these constantly malfunctioning machines, and to think they were capable all along of performing an infectious pop/dance track tickled the mind. It profoundly reminds one that life — technology included — is what you make of it.

However, the piece was not music, in this context, but art using music to prove its point.

If the musical score played by the printers had been composed differently, even substantially, the installation would have the same impact. The same couldn't be said of a music composition such as a Mahler symphony — imagine changing the Adagietto of his Fifth. But if "Office Suite's" score were played without the 12 printers — if they were taken from the room and the music played on a CD — the installation would be unrecognizable. It would cease to broach the same issues of art, technology and society.

The other exhibition is Marina Rosenfeld's "fragment opera 7 — love scene." Although she is a composer by trade, the issues of context apply equally to Rosenfeld. This installation of two turntables, three video projections (one on the inside of a unused baby grand piano) and two posters also makes little claim to being music.

However, it suffered from more mundane problems. For one, the installation is only a segment of a larger piece called "fragment opera."

This multifaceted work incorporates concert performances usually of turntables and classical instruments. But with only a fragment of the fragment, it is impossible to grasp what Rosenfeld is getting at (love for the piano? The dog projected onto it? Who can say?). Videos of winter and summer scenes bookend the exhibit, with the turntables playing subdued, trance sounds.

Rosenfeld, whose "flutescene" for flute and turntable the New York New Music Ensemble recently performed in Pittsburgh, needs to realize that the medium of vinyl LP isn't novel enough to be art itself. Witness her artist's statement for "lovescene." "I've been working with records and record players since I first made a loop on the surface of one a few years ago ... and admired the simplicity and visibility of the LP surface as a vehicle for carrying recorded music."

Where has she been the last half-century?

The overriding feeling one gets is that DJ culture, whether hip hop or techno, has moved far beyond her use of the turntables. Her breaking down of the process is more an academic exercise than good music.

But it can still be art.

"Orchestral Maneuvers," two video/music installations, is at Wood Street Galleries Downtown, through May 12. The gallery is closed Sundays and Mondays. Information: 412-471-5605.