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MUSIC

DUB DAZE

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Rosenfeld and Ben Vida at Fridman Gallery



Marina Rosenfeld. Photo: Canada Choate.

“A FACT OF ANY SUCCESSFUL POP RECORD,” Brian Eno argued in Artforum’s summer issue in 1986, “is that its sound is more of a characteristic than its melody or chord structure or anything else.” The advent of recording technology and synthesizers had by that time already exponentially broadened composers’ sonic palettes, and musical interest was no longer merely in melody, serialization, or polyphony, but in “constantly dealing with new textures.” Over the last three decades, composer, visual artist, and turntablist extraordinaire Marina Rosenfeld has built up a library of dubplates—those rare, prized aluminum rounds coated in laquer and incised with a lathe used as test pressings off of which vinyl for mass-distribution is copied—that store the component parts of her distinct sonic landscapes: tinkling pianos, female voices, sine waves, snaps, crackles, and pops. Snippets of completed compositions also make their way to these soft discs, where, over the course of repeated spins, they warp and their grooves wear down. (Rosenfeld’s contemporary Jacqueline Humphries renders her old paintings into lines of ascii code and silkscreens them on to new canvases in a similarly analogue act of information compression). By scratching and mixing on her two decks, which she describes as “a transforming machine, an alchemist, an agent of both repetition and change,” Rosenfeld deploys her dubplates to myriad musical ends. The sound, while not exactly pop, is always recognizably her own.

This past May, Rosenfeld's turntables met experimental musician Ben Vida's modular synthesizer for a bout of improvisation at Fridman Gallery to celebrate the release of their collaborative record *Feel Anything* (2019). Neither use traditional instruments, and Vida's method is diametrically opposed to Rosenfeld's; while she can only draw on a library of prerecorded samples (the turntable, in her words, "doesn't do more than play what's already there"), he synthesizes each sound live. Stepping out of the crowd, the two took their places behind their respective rigs. In interviews, Vida and Rosenfeld have stressed that while someone has to start the show during their improvised performances, neither artist is meant to lead the other. On this particular night Rosenfeld stepped up, turned to Vida, and asked: "Are you prepared to play?" Nodding in mutual recognition, they were off. Rosenfeld's command of her decks and plates is nonpareil, her easy virtuosity evinced by her calm as she reaches for another acetate or gives the volume knob such vigorous shakes so as to nearly knock her water glass over. Nothing in her expression indicated concern that it might fall. On a matching table situated a few feet away, Vida coaxed indescribable blips and tones from his hulking synthesizer with small tweaks and the manipulation of a riot of colorful patch cords.

For the first fifteen minutes, neither performer glanced up from their instruments. When Rosenfeld and Vida finally acknowledged each other they did so momentarily and tentatively, as if reluctant to admit their complicity in the act

of sound making. Since 1994, when she first staged Sheer Frost Orchestra with seventeen girls playing floor-bound electric guitars with nail polish bottles, Rosenfeld's practice has interrogated both the inter- and intra-personal relationships of her oft-untrained performers and captive audiences and embraced the subjectivity of style. Her interest lies in what the ur-experimentalist John Cage negatively diagnosed as the improviser's tendency to "slip back into their likes and dislikes, and their memory," such that "they don't arrive at any revelation that they're unaware of." Rosenfeld's instrument operates directly through the mnemonic—the unmarked dubplates are musical memory banks most effectively deployed by those most familiar with their contents. Indeed, she often utilizes wispy samples of piano, the instrument on which she was classically trained, as if excavating a repressed youth. If collective improvisation approximates something like a conversation where all parties are speaking at once (Cage compared it to a panel discussion), Vida and Rosenfeld spoke in idioms that acknowledged their pasts as well as the many lives of their instruments. The collision of their sound-worlds, honed through years of performance and experimentation, opens up a new landscape of textures. When and how to start, when and how to end—these are the questions that frame improvisation as well as interpersonal relationships. After about thirty-five minutes of warm, sputtering sonority, Rosenfeld and Vida ended with a look, a nod, and a chuckle at the impossibility of any real conclusion. An enthusiastic audience member called

for an encore. “No,” said Vida. “That feels like the end.” In improvisation, feelings are often facts.

— Canada Choate

Marina Rosenfeld and Ben Vida performed at Fridman Gallery in New York on May 17, 2019, on the occasion of the release of *Feel Anything* (2019).

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