

SOMETHING CALLED MAPLE SUGAR

Jacqueline Humbert

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During the summer of 1975, a series of open-forum, outdoor concert events was conceived and was to become the focus of considerable artistic energy and innovation in collaborative forms by artists, musicians, dancers and others. It was initiated at 9773 Keele Street in Maple, Ontario, and acquired the name Maple Sugar. Most of the participants had not worked with one another before, and what was a new experience for them proved to be a fruitful endeavour. The series ran on a small, personally subsidized budget and relied heavily on the generosity of those involved. The series provided a chance for the multi-faceted Toronto artistic community to draw on each other's talents for creating live images.

One of the interesting forms of artistic expression extensively employed by the participants was that of performance art. This slightly ambiguous term was used to refer to the practice of artists who had most often worked in static media taking up the medium of themselves as their canvas and exploiting personal transformations as a presentational format, making live paintings out of their own ability to portray images. This practice has taken other forms in the past (as evidenced by the lavish multi-media work of many groups of the sixties: guerrilla theater, living theater and happenings). However, this new manifestation seemed to be quite unique and fresh in its style and, possibly, heralded new developments that gave spark to collaborative art again. Many of these new forms were directly an outgrowth of the ability of this series to draw together people with diverse backgrounds in an effort to stimulate more communication and community feeling in the arts than, it was felt, existed naturally.

After the success of the summer series, the project benefited from other homes offered to it at York University, A Space and, finally, the Music Gallery, where some eighteen events were held between early 1976 and late spring 1977. The momentum developed by all these events and the infusion of collaborative spirit among a significant portion of the community of artists working in and around Toronto was notable. The following comprises a list of performers who were involved in the works presented in the Maple Sugar series:

Susan Aaron	John Schweitzer	Marilyn Lerner
Camello Arnoldin	Johathan Shaw	Bruce MacFarlane
Mary Ashley	Kim Smiley	Don MacMillan
Don Austin	Bill Smith	Terrill Maguire
George Axon	Casey Sokol	George Manupelli
Phyllis Ballshine	Valerie Sonstegard	John Miller
Ellen Band	Dug Spitznagel	David M. Moulton
aka A Vi-Breast	Ian Stanbury	Mary C. Moulton
Mary Scott Baron	Students from O.C.A.	Sandra Neels
Mimi Beck	Michael Byron	Nacy Nicol
Bob Becker	aka Rosey Dawn	Selma Odom
David Behrman	William Cahn	Felipe Orrego
Eric Bobrow	Paul Campbell	Juan Pablo Orrego
Michael Brook	Harvey Chan	John Oswald
Stu Broomer	Tina Clarke	Greg Parks
Gordon Hall	Dahlia	Joan Phillips
Judy Hendin	Anthony Davis	Larry Polansky
Jon Higgins	Larry Dubin	Louis Rivera
David Hill & Son	Karen Duplisea	Diane Roblin
Paul Hodge	Claudio Duran	aka D. Sharp
Ann Holloway	Robin Engleman	aka A Vi-Breast
Johanna Householder	David Forrester	Students from York
Rae Huestis	aka Frank Sinatra	Richard Teitelbaum
Jacqueline Humbert	Miguel Frasconi	Eugene Tellez
aka A Vi-Breast	Don Garbutt	James Tenney
aka J. Jasmine	Gail Goldberg	Andrew Timar
Christina Humeniuk	Kim Gordon	Larry Towell
Andy Jerison	Marvin Green	Veronique
Nick Kilbourn	Danny Grossman	Maude Whalen
Wendy Knox-Leet	Jack Gutwilik	Molly Whalen
David Rosenboom	Alyce Haas	Ken Williams
aka Dave Charles	Russell Hartenberger	William Winant
Anna Rovazzi	aka A Vi-Breast	Margaret Wygant
Elaine Rudnicki	John Kuipers	John Wyre
Peggy Sampson	Murray Leadbeater	Gayle Young
Trichy Sankaran	Francis Leeming	

In addition to the artists who presented works on the series were others helping in other ways, such as Michael Brook, who audiotaped most of the events, and Judy Whalen, who photographed most of the concerts. Maple Sugar has accumulated an extensive archive of documentary materials.

Out of this venture grew two major trends in the art. One was an active interest in creating individual works, visual/sonic poetry in real-time situations, such as George Manupelli's tribute to Mr. Bo Jangles entitled, THE FOOT CAN'T DO THAT, which

culminates in a synthetic tap created by having boxed cassette machines, with tapes of a dancer tapping, attached to the performer's feet. Jacqueline Humbert's invented songstress persona, J. JASMINE, and the subsequent body of work created through the use of this persona is another example of the artist using real-time means (in this case music and dazzling costumery) to make images, drawing on the power of the untrained voice as a vehicle for storytelling.

The other major trend resulting from the series was a serious interest in the process of composition of collectively generated presentation formats. These formats arose from an attempt to de-emphasize production of singular pieces that worked by themselves and were identified with single individuals. Rather, we, who by working together developed as a group, became interested in a shift of consciousness and concentration to the new whole that arose out of separate contributions to a coherent train of thought or developing ideology which transcended focus on uniqueness. This type of presentation gave a forum for what seemed a more true representation of the artist's position in a community in the process of evolving ideas collectively. The traditional artist's concentration on the static art object is in direct opposition to the idea of the collective and contributes to the misconceived elevation of the artist as a loner in a unified world. This view seems naïve when considered in the light of our increasing awareness of the interactive nature of all ecosystems, including those that deal with trends in ideas. We can make an analogy to the situation of the yogi who achieves isolation and self-knowledge by retreating for a time into a cave, but who eventually realizes that he reaches a point beyond which further elevation is possible only through his contribution to the evolution of collective social consciousness.

In music, the idea of collective improvisation is well known. However, save for some experimental groups of the '60s, this practice has not been very well refined or expanded to include the visual arts. Many new, younger artists have become interested in exploiting performance for its transient, less static and cooperative qualities. The artist who, in the past was primarily concerned with space or light, has become more and more interested in the dynamic qualities of time, which, of necessity includes the idea of growth from nothing and eventual disappearance.

An example of this type of work can be found in a piece, titled THE NAKED TRUTH, which was performed twice in the series. The piece was a group effort involving, at various times artists George Manupelli, Eugene Tellez, Jacqueline Humbert, Rae Huestis, John Miller, Mary C. Moulton, Alyce Haas, and musicians Michael Byron and David Rosenboom. It was a result of people using their own personal experience or themselves in archetypal image situations, to create a singular, unified experiment in expression. Two women, nude, and lit by small colored lightbulbs sit, rather like bookends on either side of a man, fully enshrouded in dark clothing, who exposes himself to them through a personal story. The two women provide conversational foils to his tortured machismo lament of a love affair gone awry. Another male figure attempts to accompany the story and direct the movement of the piece through playing repeated variations of the old song, "As Time Goes By". He performs as a non-musician on the violin but provides an air of assumption that he is, in fact, a violinist. The two actual musicians, who have an

extensive history of improvising together, provide additional theatrical elements, visual images of themselves and a musical framework for the piece. One plays piano, electronic synthesizer, small percussion instruments, electronically processed recordings of his first violin lessons as a child and choreographed callisthenic routines with amplification of his breathing.

The other musician plays trumpet, high-hat, and drums together. The length of the piece is governed by the central figure of the artist-violinist and two others whose task it is to systematically cover the artist-violinist with crumpled newspaper and wrapping material until he is no longer able to move or continue playing the song. When he is immobilized and everyone's personal image is perfectly exposed, the piece ends.

Another format, which developed from the collaboratively evolved work, was the idea of orchestrating an entire event. THADDEUS CAHILL, DECEASED was the first formally derived piece that Maple Sugar, conscious of itself as a group, created. The nine artists, George Manupelli, William Winant, Jacqueline Humbert, Michael Byron, David Rosenboom, Mary C. Moulton, Ann Holloway, James Tenney, and Camello Arnoldin, broke the concert length down, designing a score as a series of transformation forms they wished to create through simultaneous occurrences: songs turning into others' personal stories, factual data and demonstrations of acoustic phenomena, totally meaningless but engaging information; music uniting and building the energy of the piece; and theater becoming raw extravagance with such moments as "the fire-eating drummer gone wild".

Another example of collaborative work by members of Maple Sugar was, THERE ARE SIXTEEN HOURS IN A DAY, FOUR DAYS IN A WEEK, TWO WEEKS IN A MONTH, SEVEN MONTHS IN A YEAR; THE REST OF THE TIME IS SPENT LISTENING AND IN CONTEMPLATION OF FIRE, by George Manupelli and David Rosenboom. The piece involves the methodical building of two structures by the two artist/composers in the same space simultaneously. One is visual, symbolic – specifically involving the assembly of a three-tiered altar and its ritual adornment with small fires and classic nudes. The other structure is surprising, sonic, dissipating – involving complex wiring for simple sound occurrences and blatant attention capturing through real and illusionary sonic events. The piece exists basically as a duet of energies; two art forms equally balanced in the same place and at the same time – though at times the piece does utilize other artists' ideas within this basic construct.

Maple Sugar exists now as a collective of varying numbers of artists. Some have been invited to and have performed in new music and intermedia events at the University of Illinois in Urbana and Mills College in Oakland, California during the past year. Some of the pieces described here were used as building blocks on which to structure an entire evening's events. We are currently putting together two orchestrated evenings of sonic and visual, real-time art for the Kitchen performance center in New York City, December 8 & 9, 1978 and one event at the Art Gallery of Ontario in April, 1979. All for now.

Note: since the writing of this article other artists have contributed to Maple Sugar events. They include:

Harvey Chao
Helen Hand
Jean Moncrieff

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