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For Six Hours at a Festival, the Sound of Extremes Colliding

‘Hardcore Activity in Progress’ Batters the Knockdown Center

By BEN RATLIFF MAY 18, 2014

“Hardcore Activity in Progress,” a one-night, 15-act concert Friday at the Knockdown Center in Maspeth, Queens, represented an idea. The idea was the sound of extremes — going for it, boundary-testing, hardness — across musical languages. So, for instance, there was the noise band Wolf Eyes, the cello improviser Okkyung Lee, the grindcore group Napalm Death, the rapper Gunplay, the post-minimal piano rhapsodist Lubomyr Melnyk, the free-jazz trio the Thing, and the electronic musician Tim Hecker, presented in overlapping sets, in three different parts of a 50,000-square-foot former door-frame factory.

As an idea, the concert, part of the month of activities put on by the Red Bull Music Academy New York, was not a concession, or an easy sell. It had the allure of a challenge: Single-night, single-venue, can-you-take-it? aesthetic scrimmages like this become landmarks, victories for the cause of listening widely. They don’t happen often enough. However this one turned out, it would be memorable. Right?

It’s still a good idea, but it might be remembered for negative reasons. A flood-warning rainstorm pushed water indoors, where it pooled up near the main stage. A recent ruling by the state liquor authority prevented the sale of alcohol in the building. (That is a loss, because aggressive, not particularly pleasant music — and six-hour, wander-around concerts in stand-up venues — go rather well with alcohol.) There was an unreasonable amount of security for what was more or less an art

experiment.

And the sound at the Knockdown Center was basically garbage: echoey, booming, diffuse, nonsensical. It also wasn't great at last year's Red Bull Music Academy event in the same space, "Drone Activity in Progress," but that concert had a few other things going for it — the novelty of the just-opened space, and the music itself, drone and noise and power-electronics, either carefully conceived or more energetic. Anyway, on Friday, some good sets — by the Thing and Ms. Lee, for instance — were impeded by poor acoustics or competing rackets coming from nearby. And some bad sets were made worse.

It could be argued that the overlapping and bleed-through between two of the three stages, and the aesthetic clashes therein, amounted to the point of the night, the added value. It sounds cool in theory anyway. On Instagram, before his set, Mr. Hecker wrote "Interzone between Napalm Death and Gunplay," and posted a 10-second video with sound, shot from a space between the stages where those two acts were playing simultaneously. That is as good a representation of the concert as this review will ever be. It also restricts the concert to 10 seconds, rather than a quarter of a day.

The thing about self-conscious hardness in music is that it often puts attack before tone. Attack as the main priority can get boring quickly, because it's impersonal; it's rhetorical. Tone is the self, human and complex, the opposite of boringness. The two don't have to be mutually exclusive.

But tell that to Wolf Eyes, who played a kind of hard, dithering Dada, for guitar, voice, electronics and drum machine — a joke that never gets funnier. Or Napalm Death — formulaic, just fine, but monochromatic and rhythmically lumpy. Or Gunplay, whose hardness lived a little in his voice but more in his subjects: money in "Finals," drive-by shootings in "Drop Da Tint." Or Clipping, a trio from Los Angeles, spewing out coldly rapped hyper-syncopations over backgrounds of digital static. Or the singer Yoshiko Ohara, whose solo project is not extreme so much as deeply dull: she sits in a chair, back turned to the audience, harmonizing indistinctly against an ambient jumble.

Mr. Melnyk, after Ms. Ohara and before Napalm Death, had a half-hour to

himself in the building's central space, playing an amplified baby-grand piano on a riser. His set was an outlier and a redeemer; his music, made of wide, rapid, rolling arpeggios, keeps to simple rhythms and comes close to vapidness, but it creates overtones and a sustained high, and didn't have to bother with aggression per se. It had greater concerns.

The same went for possibly the best performance I saw all night: a solo set by the electric guitarist Reg Bloor, who speed-strummed and power-riffed on her Les Paul through a harmonizing pedal, playing loud, structured, harmonically complex pieces, centering on strange chords, sometimes evoking Jimmy Page, sometimes an orchestra. It was committed and complex, and never let up.

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